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Personality traits and the propensity to trust friends and strangers

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ABSTRACT

Research on the foundations of social trust mainly concentrates on the evaluation of one's social environment. Empirical evidence focusing on the psychological origins of social trust is quite rare and the findings of these few studies remain inconclusive. Two innovations are proposed in order to systemize the knowledge about the foundations of social trust. First, we propose using a trust measure that is sensitive to different categories of trustees and refers to a realistic situation. Second, we argue for a broad conception of personality, rather than focusing only on selected attributes. Using data from a unique Swiss population survey, we show that the impact of personality traits on trust in strangers is stronger than on trust in friends. While conscientiousness and openness, in particular, are important traits for the development of both trust in friends and strangers, agreeableness is related to trust in strangers.

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1. Introduction

Trust is seen as an essential prerequisite for cooperation, with numerous studies showing that a high level of social trust promotes an inclusive, open society, stimulates economic development, promotes democratic stability, fosters societal happiness, general feelings of well-being (Barber, 1983; Delhey, Newton, & Welzel, 2011; Ermisch, Gambetta, Laurie, Siedler, & Noah Uhrig, 2009; Herreros, 2004; Kramer, 1999; Stolle, 2002; Sztompka, 1999; Uslaner, 2002). Regarding the foundations of social trust, there are two general theoretical perspectives on how trust is formed (Bauer, 2015; Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; Glanville & Paxton, 2007). The first perspective stresses

that a person's trust is basically an evaluation of his or her social environment and is grounded in experiences of trustworthiness in social interaction (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 2002). Drawing on past experiences, an individual can infer other persons' probable future behavior. Various studies show, however, that trust changes only rather slowly at the societal, individual levels, thereby calling into question the role of later life experiences. Against this background, a second perspective holds that trust is generally a stable propensity (Sztompka, 1998, p. 20; Uslaner, 2002, 2008, 2013). Following this second perspective, individual differences in personality traits developed early on may be responsible for differences in trust between individuals.

The bulk of the research on the foundations of social trust, however, mainly concentrates on evaluations of one's social environment, while empirical evidence on the psychological origins of social trust is quite rare. What is more, the empirical findings of these few studies remain inconclusive. Mondak and Halperin (2008) find only a

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relationship between the trait of agreeableness and generalized trust, but not for other traits (see also Anderson, 2010; Dohmen, Falk, Huffman, & Sunde, 2008). By contrast, Dinesen, Nørgaard, and Klemmensen (2014) show that all personality traits affect generalized trust. Hiraishi, Yamagata, Shikishima, and Ando (2008), again, find that agreeableness and extraversion are related to generalized trust. Oskarsson, Dawes, Johannesson, and Magnusson (2012) establish that generalized trust is related to extraversion, personal control, and intelligence. Couch and Jones (1997) find a negative association between shyness, jealousy, and suspiciousness and different measures of trust. Finally, Uslaner (2002) points out that generalized trust is positively related to optimism and a sense of control. Much of this inconclusiveness can most likely be ascribed to the heterogeneity of research designs, particularly with regard to varying and less accurate indicators of the two main concepts and the evaluation of single traits rather than an encompassing model of personality.

It is here that this investigation has its starting point. Relying on data from a representative sample of the Swiss population we evaluate how personality traits are related to social trust. The scope of our unique data allows us to make *two important contributions* to the understanding of this relationship. First, in order to systemize our knowledge about personality traits and social trust, we propose using a valid trust measure that is sensitive to different categories of trustees. To date, the most frequent approach is to ask respondents how much they trust most people. Recent methodological studies have however shown that respondents do not interpret these general questions in a consistent manner (e.g., Freitag & Bauer, 2013; Torpe & Lolle, 2011; Sturgis & Smith, 2010). While some respondents predominantly think of people they know personally, others think of people in general, including strangers. To address the fact that respondents have different “trust targets” and situations in mind, we argue for measures that are sensitive to the degrees of familiarity—that is, whether the persons in question are friends or strangers. Empirically, we apply a new variation of the widely known “wallet trust” question in order to capture these different trust targets¹.

Second, we draw on the Big Five personality traits as characteristics that may potentially explain the propensity to trust. Although there is no fully encompassing means of conceptualizing and measuring an individual’s personality, strong consensus has emerged in psychology that a Five-Factor Model (FFM) provides an appropriate and comprehensive way of measuring personality traits (Mondak, 2010; Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; McCrae & Costa, 2008). When explaining social trust based on personality traits, most scholars tend to rely only on attributes. This approach limits the ability to generalize findings and to compare work across studies (Mondak, 2010, p. 12). Our

results reveal that conscientiousness and openness, in particular, are important traits for the development of both trust in friends and strangers. Moreover, agreeableness is related to trust in strangers.

The remainder of our article is structured as follows: In the next sections we present the dimensions of social trust and discuss the possible influence of the Big Five personality traits on social trust. In the third section, we elaborate on the methodology used and subsequently subject our hypotheses to systematic empirical testing. The most important findings are summarized and discussed in the fourth section. Finally, a conclusion completes the article.

2. Dimensions of social trust

In the 1960s, Niklas Luhmann (1979, p. 1) bemoaned a “sparse literature [...] that focuses on the subject of trust.” That complaint has since been addressed; trust has moved up from a bit player to center stage in contemporary political sociology (Kramer, 1999, p. 594). Despite the growing attention to the notion of social trust, research on trust has also produced a great deal of conceptual confusion as well as scholarly disagreement (Bauer, 2014; Freitag & Bauer, 2013, p. 25; Nannestad, 2008). In general, social trust can be described as an expectation that people will behave with good will, that they intend to honor their commitments, and that they will avoid harming others (Glanville & Paxton, 2007, p. 231; Barber, 1983; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994)². Fundamentally, a social trust attitude that is not related to any specific situation may be expressed as *A trusts B*. *B*, the target of trust, may be replaced by individuals or groups of individuals belonging to the universe of “everyone else” (Offe, 1999, p. 44). Consequently, the question arises as to whether this trusting attitude is a coherent syndrome or if there are different forms of social trust depending on its target. While in the former case individuals are expected to display the same level of trust regardless of the target of trust, in the latter case, they are thought to display different levels of trust toward different targets.

Accordingly, a first idea holds that trust is a one-dimensional coherent phenomenon (Omodei & McLennan, 2000; Whiteley, 2000). On the basis of principal component analyses, Whiteley (2000, p. 450), for example, argues that across a large number of societies, trust in both people we know and in people we do not know build a single factor. In his analyses, trust in the “family”, in “fellow national citizens”, and in “people in general” are all elements of a single concept. In general, however, trust research works with a multi-dimensional conception of social trust. The literature mainly identifies two distinct kinds of trust, namely particularized trust and generalized trust (see Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Oskarsson

¹ For example, questions on so-called “wallet trust” are modeled after an experiment wherein wallets containing 50 US dollars were dropped in 14 Western European and 12 US cities. The number of returned wallets was used as a measure of how trustworthy residents are (Knack & Keefer, 1997; Stolle, Soroka, & Johnston, 2008, p. 62).

² Scholars agree that it is necessary to differentiate between political and social trust. Political trust refers to trust in political institutions (e.g., parliament, government, etc.); social trust is an attitude that people have toward one another (Newton, 2001). This article is exclusively concerned with social trust, and we use ‘trust’ throughout to refer to ‘social trust’.

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