



# Adolescent trust and trustworthiness: Role of gender and social value orientation



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## ABSTRACT

Trusting others is an essential feature of adolescent development. The aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in trusting behavior using an experimental game and relate these to the underlying social preferences. 206 adolescents (Mage = 15.1 years, 51% girls) performed a series of one-shot Trust Games to measure their levels of trust and trustworthiness. Social value orientation, or the preference to maximize one's own outcomes (proself) or both the outcomes of self and other (prosocial) was assessed using the Triple Dominance Measure. Boys were more trusting than girls, but no gender differences on trustworthiness were found. Prosocials were more trusting and trustworthy than proselves. In addition, gender and social value orientation were independent predictors of trust (but not trustworthiness). These findings show that the higher levels of trust in boys are not the result of a gender difference in prosocial orientation.

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## Introduction

Even from a very young age, boys and girls show gender differences in their social behavior (e.g. Lutchmaya, Baron-Cohen, & Raggatt, 2002; Weinberg, Tronick, Cohn, & Olson, 1999). For example, young girls tend to engage in pretend play with peers, while boys are more likely to play physically with other children (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). When a child reaches adolescence, social behavior becomes more complex and meaningful, but gender differences remain (e.g. Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). In this period the nature of social interaction changes radically due to a range of physical and environmental factors. Adolescent boys and girls have been found to differ in various social characteristics, such as levels of empathy (Garaigordobil, 2009), preference for support-seeking coping styles (Piko, 2001), and levels of conflict and power in friendships (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Jenkins, Goodness, & Buhrmester, 2002). Overall these studies point to a preference for empathy and support in relations among girls and more focus on competition and hierarchy in boys' interrelations. Trust plays an important role in these types of interactions (Good, 1988). Several studies have suggested crucial changes in trust behavior during adolescence (e.g. van den Bos, Westenberg, Van Dijk, & Crone, 2010; Fett, Gromann, Giampietro, Shergill, & Krabbendam, 2012; Sutter & Kocher, 2007), but little is known about gender differences in adolescent trust. This is the topic of the present study.

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Trust can be described as ‘a voluntary transfer of a good or favor to someone else, with future reciprocation expected but not guaranteed’ (Gunthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002, p. 50). Trust behavior not only consists of trusting others but also entails trustworthiness; that is whether a person will repay (instead of betray) the person who trusted her. Without trust social and economic interactions would be virtually impossible. Trust behavior can be measured in various ways. Survey measures can be used to study either specific forms of trust, such as social trust and parent-child trust, or to study the general view on the trustworthiness of others by using statements as “Most people can be trusted” (e.g. Flanagan & Stout, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). Social dilemmas offer an alternative way to measure cooperation skills. Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe (1995) introduced the Trust Game (also known as the Investment Game) to study trust and trustworthiness in an experimental setting. In the Trust Game one player, often referred to as the trustor, starts with a certain amount of money and can decide to invest (a part of) this amount in the second player, often referred to as the trustee. The amount of money given by the trustor is tripled: the trustee will receive three times the amount given by the trustor. In the next phase the trustee has the chance to return any amount of the money back to the trustor. This amount is not multiplied. Thus, in a situation of maximal cooperation the trustor invests the total amount of money and the trustee returns a fair share of the tripled amount (i.e. half) back to the trustor. This way both players take advantage of the multiplication of the money. However, the trustee can also decide not to give back any money and keep the tripled amount, leaving the trustor empty-handed. The trustor’s decision to invest the money is considered a measure of trust while the trustee’s decision to return money is considered a measure of trustworthiness (sometimes called reciprocity). Several studies have demonstrated the ecological validity of the Trust Game in real life situations (Baran, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2010; Darlan, 2005).

In the increasingly complex social world of adolescents, trust behavior is likely to be an essential feature of successful interactions with peers, parents and teachers. Studies using the Trust Game to examine the development of trust behavior from childhood to adolescence, report an increase of both trust and trustworthiness with age (van den Bos, van Dijk, & Crone, 2011; van den Bos et al., 2010; Sutter & Kocher, 2007). However, findings on the development of trust behavior from adolescence into adulthood are conflicting. Three studies find an increase in trust in this period (van den Bos, van Dijk, & Crone, 2011; Fett et al., 2012; Sutter & Kocher, 2007), while one study finds a decrease (van den Bos et al., 2010). One study reports an increase of trustworthiness from adolescence to adulthood (Belli, Rogers, & Lau, 2012) while other studies report no differences (van den Bos, van Dijk, Westenberg, Rombouts, 2011; van den Bos et al., 2010; Sutter & Kocher, 2007).

None of the studies on trust behavior in adolescence have focused directly on the role of gender despite evidence that gender is an important factor in explaining behavior in social interactions (Balliet, Li, Macfarlan, & Van Vugt, 2011; Croson & Gneezy, 2009). Several studies have used the Trust Game to explore gender differences in trust behavior in adult populations (for a review, see Croson & Gneezy, 2009). The majority of studies suggest that men are more trusting than women (e.g. Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010; Buchan, Croson, & Solnick, 2008; Chaudhuri & Gangadharan, 2007; Snijders, 1996), although several studies report no gender differences (e.g. Ashraf, Bohnet, & Piankov, 2006; Croson & Buchan, 1999). As for trustworthiness, some studies report no gender differences (e.g. Ashraf et al., 2006; Kanagaretnam, Mestelman, Nainar, & Shehata, 2009), but when differences are reported these are generally in the direction of women being more trustworthy (e.g. Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010; Buchan et al., 2008; Chaudhuri & Gangadharan, 2007; Croson & Buchan, 1999). Thus, there is evidence that gender plays a role in trust behavior: that is men are on average more trusting and women more trustworthy.

Possible theoretical explanations for these gender patterns have been suggested from both sociocultural and evolutionary perspectives. From a sociocultural perspective, gender differences in trust behavior are the result of gender roles that determine the appropriate behavior for men and women (Buchan et al., 2008). According to social role theory, the female gender role promotes *communal* (interpersonal facilitative, friendly) behavior, while *agentic* (instrumental, outcome-based) behavior is more typical for the male gender role (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Trusting can be viewed as agentic because it may enlarge the own outcomes, whereas trustworthiness can be seen as communal as it is purely altruistic. Within the evolutionary framework, gender differences are seen as the result of adaptive strategies that men and women have developed throughout evolutionary history. In most mammals, females spend more time nurturing and raising offspring than do males. Therefore, females benefit from being selective when choosing their mating partners. The evolutionary view assumes that women consequently have to be more careful in social interactions, especially with strangers. Female selectiveness in mating choice on the other hand has let men to evolve more competitive and risk-taking characteristics (Balliet et al., 2011; Simpson & Van Vugt, 2009). This could explain why men have found to be more trusting and women more trustworthy in the Trust Game. It should be noted that the sociocultural and evolutionary perspectives are not mutually exclusive.

One way to better understand gender differences in trust and trustworthiness, is to focus on the social preferences underlying social behavior. Social value orientation (SVO) is used to describe someone’s preferences when distributing resources between themselves and another. Some people, called *prosocials*, favor maximizing the outcomes for both the self and the other. Other people, known as *proselfs*, try to maximize their own outcomes; (Messick & McClintock, 1968; Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). SVO has been shown to be a good predictor of real life prosocial behavior in various domains (e.g. Van Lange, Bekkers, Schuyt, & Vugt, 2007; Van Lange, Vugt, Meertens, & Ruiter, 1998). In the Trust Game, prosocials can be assumed to be both more trusting and trustworthy than proselfs. Since prosocials have a natural tendency for cooperation, they are expected to give more money in the role of trustor and to return more money in the role of trustee than proselfs. Indeed, the few studies examining the role of SVO in the Trust Game in adult populations have been able to confirm the hypothesis that prosocials are more trusting and trustworthy than proselfs (Kanagaretnam et al., 2009; Snijders, 1996).

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