



From the general to the specific: How social trust motivates relational trust



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 April 2015
Received in revised form 2 July 2015
Accepted 28 September 2015
Available online 22 October 2015

Keywords:

Social trust
General social trust
Particular social trust
Political trust
Relational trust
Web-based vignette experiment
Correlated random-effects model

ABSTRACT

When people form beliefs about the trustworthiness of others with respect to particular matters (i.e., when individuals trust), theory suggests that they rely on preexistent cognitive schemas regarding the general cooperativeness of individuals and organizations (i.e., social trust). In spite of prior work, the impact of social trust on relational trust—or what Russell Hardin (2002) calls *trust as a three-part relation* where actor A trusts actor B with reference to matter Y—is not well established. Four vignette experiments were administered to Amazon.com Mechanical Turk workers ($N = 1388$ and $N = 1419$) and to public university undergraduate students ($N = 995$ and $N = 956$) in order to investigate the relationship between social trust and relational trust. Measures of general social trust and particular social trust produced statistically equivalent effects that were positively associated with relational trust. Political trust, however, was statistically unrelated to relational trust. These results support the idea that people rely on schemas and stereotypes concerned with the general cooperativeness and helpfulness of others when forming beliefs about another person's trustworthiness with respect to a particular matter at hand.

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1. Introduction

Trust is one of the rare concepts in the social sciences that catalyzes a range of dynamic social processes, including economic exchange (Arrow, 1972; Coleman, 1990; North, 1990), organizational efficiency (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998), economic development (Tabellini, 2010; Roth, 2009), and institutional quality (Putnam, 1993; Robbins, 2012a). In fact, many scholars consider trust to be *the* foundational building block of modern societies (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995), where social conflict and disorder are commonplace in its absence (Banfield, 1958; Gambetta, 1993). It is imperative, then, for social scientists to identify mechanisms concerned with the genesis of trust.

In the political and sociological sciences, much of our knowledge about the origins of trust (see Bjørnsvov, 2007; Delhey and Newton, 2005; Fairbrother and Martin, 2013; Glanville et al., 2013; Herreros, 2004; Paxton, 2002, 2007; Robbins, 2012b; Wilkes, 2011) is derived from a small number of survey instruments intended to measure *social trust* (Rosenberg, 1956). While consensus has yet to be reached, social trust is often defined as an expectation about the general cooperativeness and helpfulness of individuals and organizations that is open ended with respect to possible matters (Hardin, 2002); this includes such sister concepts as generalized trust (Nannestad, 2008), out-group trust (Putnam, 2007), particularized trust (Uslaner, 2002), and political trust (Levi and Stoker, 2000) among others.

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During the past twenty years, Hardin (1993, 2002) and colleagues (Cook et al., 2005) began to challenge the utility of social trust as a theoretical construct as well as the empirical validity of the survey items used to measure social trust and its related concepts (Delhey et al., 2011; Miller and Mitamura, 2003; Sturgis and Smith, 2010). According to Hardin and colleagues, concepts and measures centered on generalized trustees and unspecified matters for which trust is placed yield few analytical insights into the dynamics of trust. As a result, it has become clear that conceptualizations of trust should move away from trust as a two-part relation—where actor A trusts persons or organizations of general type B (e.g., friends, strangers, institutions) without any constraint on the scope of trust—to a form of *relational trust* consisting of three parts: actor A's beliefs (the truster), specific actor B's perceived trustworthiness (the trustee), and particular matter Y of concern to actor A.¹

In spite of theoretical arguments against social trust and its ancillary concepts, can social trust—broadly defined and measured—influence relational trust? According to Hardin's (2002) *learned capacity to trust* model, relational trust stems, in part, from a person's "optimistic expectations of trustworthiness (p. 118)." These general expectations are rooted in prior experiences (Paxton and Glanville, 2015; Rotter, 1971; Stack, 1978) and "... past encounters with other people (Hardin, 2002: 113)," which manifest as subjective beliefs and cognitive schemas. In line with this model, psychologists have long noted how beliefs and expectations, regardless of their generality or specificity, mutually reinforce each other (Allport, 1954; Bandura, 1977; Festinger, 1957), while contemporary research on social cognition shows that schemas are causally interrelated (Fiske and Taylor, 2013; Kunda, 1999; Moskowitz, 2005). For instance, role schemas are often used as a basis for attributions about person schemas (Fiske, 1998), and self-schemas emerge, to some extent, from relational schemas (Baldwin, 1992).

Based on this logic, there is reason to believe that cognitive schemas concerned with trust in categories of people and organizations should positively affect the trust we form in specific people about particular matters. As theory suggests, people are imperfect decision makers and employ various cognitive shortcuts, such as stereotypes and heuristics, when establishing trust in others (Brewer, 2008; Messick and Kramer, 2001). My trust in you is a function of my beliefs about your trustworthiness—largely derived from my experiences with you—as well as my cognitive schemas about prototypical individuals and organizations. This process implies that the more optimistic a person is about the general cooperativeness of individuals and organizations, the more likely that person is to trust another individual with respect to a particular matter.

Although there is evidence that generalized trust, particularized trust, and political trust are causally interrelated (Glanville and Paxton, 2007; Freitag and Traummüller, 2009; Newton and Zmerli, 2011), existing work has not yet examined whether relational trust can spring from these alternative microfoundations. In economics, scholars have shown that social trust is associated with beliefs in other people's trustworthiness (Sapienza et al., 2013) as well as the behavior and preferences of trusters (Bellemare and Kröeger, 2007; Thöni et al., 2012). Yet, this research has relied on behavioral measures of trust with suspect discriminant validity (Cox, 2004; Cox et al., 2008) and laboratory conditions with questionable ecological validity (Levitt and List, 2007; Guala, 2012). That is, the ultimate source of observed behavior in a laboratory experiment—be it trust, other-regarding preferences or some other social psychological mechanism—is difficult to ascertain, and to complicate matters even further, the experimental conditions in which such behavior is observed rarely occurs in the real world. Therefore, to investigate the link between social trust and relational trust it is necessary to conduct controlled experiments that use self-reports of relational trust solicited under richly detailed conditions simulating real life.

Here, I present data from four studies in which I investigated the influence of social trust on relational trust. I developed two novel vignette experiments of simulated 'car repair' and 'group project' scenarios where unknown outcomes were inherent to the situation. Each scenario consisted of a truster (the participant), a trustee (an auto mechanic or a student), and a particular matter (auto repairs or task completion). Numerous vignette dimensions were administered in each experiment, including randomized values for age, race and gender of a trustee. Participants assessed ten vignettes in total and reported their levels of relational trust for each vignette. Afterwards, participants were asked classic demographic questions and survey items concerned with social trust (general social trust, particular social trust, and political trust), social preferences, age, gender, and the like. The two vignette experiments were administered to Amazon.com Mechanical Turk workers ($N = 1388$ and $N = 1419$) and to public university undergraduate students ($N = 995$ and $N = 956$).

My research design accomplishes two important tasks. First, by using two different sampling methods (purposive and random sampling) and experimental contexts (car repair and group project scenarios) to field four large-N experiments in two separate populations (Mechanical Turk workers and undergraduate students), I minimize type 1 and type 2 errors. As a consequence, my findings are robust to false positive and false negative results, which are a growing concern in the psychological sciences (Murayama et al., 2013; Simmons et al., 2011). Second, with the use of multilevel models I am able to parse within-individual variation in relational trust from between-individual variation. This procedure allows me to identify whether—and to what extent—relational trust originates from characteristics of the situation (i.e., randomized vignette dimensions) and or characteristics of the individual (e.g., personality traits and individual propensities). Decomposing within-from between-individual variation in relational trust to empirically identify sources of between-individual variation have yet to be done in the trust literature.

¹ I thus define relational trust as a belief about another person's trustworthiness with respect to a particular matter at hand that emerges under conditions of unknown outcomes (see Hardin, 2002; Cook et al., 2005).

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