



Like strangers we trust: Identity and generic affiliation networks



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ABSTRACT

Sociological research on collective behavior provides strong evidence for the sources of collective action and shared attitudes based on overlapping experience. We know, for example, that members of social movement organizations are likely to share similar beliefs. However, a significant portion of the prior research on shared behaviors or attitudes analyzes individuals who do not know one another. This research using large surveys often infers overlapping experience based on generic connections: People in unions generally or church groups generally are likely to hold similar beliefs or engage in similar behaviors *as if* they were in the same unions or church groups. In this paper, I challenge this simple inference by arguing that the generic affiliations we hold contribute to our identity. Specifically, our identities can, in part, be seen as a network of overlapping roles based on generic affiliations. Findings indicate the importance of considering generic affiliation networks when modeling trust and political partisanship. Individuals who share multiple affiliations often appear to be similar to one another along a number of socio-demographic dimensions and report similar attitudes. Conclusions highlight the promise and challenge of relational approaches to social life.

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1. Introduction

Two *neighbors* walk into a bar. They belong to the exact same church group, attend the exact same PTA meetings, and are in the exact same literary club. What are the chances that they greet each other as they settle in for a drink? Most sociologists would agree that these two people are very likely to greet each other or send an equally salient message by ignoring one another. In fact, it is likely that they share many things in common if only through these joint commitments. If nothing else, they could probably sustain a substantial conversation based upon their shared experiences in these organizations. These memberships also increase the likelihood that they will agree on broad social issues, while also increasing the likelihood that they will act collectively in relationship to these voluntary associations (Carroll and Ratner, 1996; Diani, 2009; Glanville, 2004).

Consider this slight adjustment to the proposed scenario: Two *strangers* walk into a bar. They each belong to a bible study, a book club, and attend PTA meetings, but in different municipalities. Thus, the probability that they will greet each other is exactly the same as the probability that they would greet any other stranger in the bar. Nonetheless, most sociologists would agree that these shared, generic affiliations provide some link between these strangers. Indeed, work on voluntary associations assumes this link by inferring that generic affiliation – affiliation in a broad category of association, such as a union or church group as opposed to a specific union or a specific church group – operates like face-to-face membership (Cornwell and Harrison, 2004; Lee, 2007; Paxton, 2007). In previous discussions of generic affiliation, people in church groups and

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union groups, but in different cities are assumed to act *as if* they are in the same church groups or the same union groups in the same cities. Or, strangers act as if they are neighbors. While we may assume that strangers with overlapping affiliations share some similar experiences, recent (e.g. Baldassarri, 2011; Diani, 2009) and classic (e.g. Simmel, 1955[1922]) research draws attention to the sources of collective action based on affiliation membership and suggests that generic and face-to-face affiliation are worth teasing apart.

In this paper, I describe how generic affiliations differ from face-to-face affiliations and explain how they contribute to shared behavior and belief. Extending social psychological research on identity and networks, I specifically develop the notion that generic group affiliation contributes to the construction of individual identity. In other words, these generic affiliations tell us less about how people interact with one another and more about how identities group together. In this way, generic members are not connected in networks where collective action can be inferred – they are *strangers* after all –, but are connected through similarity analogous to conventional uses of racial, gender, occupational, and other aspects of identity. First, I build an argument for distinguishing generic membership from face-to-face memberships by discussing relational approaches to identity: I situate my discussion in the long, if somewhat complex literature arguing that identities operate as networks. Second, I discuss the previous research on affiliations, trust, and political partisanship. Next, I provide an illustrative analysis of the relationship between generic affiliation and trust and political partisanship using data from the General Social Survey highlighting the relational construction of identity.

2. Generic affiliation and association embeddedness

The most advanced research on affiliation explores the aggregated connections between groups through individual memberships. Here, a literary group is connected to a hobby group if at least one individual is a member of both. These structures aggregate across populations through generic ties. Generic affiliations facilitate comparison across time and between countries. Scholars have used generic affiliation networks to explain the effects that union embeddedness has on union decline and on the establishment of good governance practices.

Within the United States, Cornwell and Harrison (2004), for example, find that union embeddedness declines over time. From the 1970s to the 1990s, unions became increasingly more isolated within the affiliation structure despite high rates of membership. Union members are less likely to affiliate with other groups and the groups to which they do affiliate are likely to be less connected. Cornwell and Harrison (2004) conclude that as unions have declined in relationship to other groups they lose power within the United States' "interorganizational culture." As a consequence, unions likely suffer parallel declines in political efficacy.

Following a similar logic, Lee (2007) uses differences in cross-national affiliation structures to evaluate a country's likelihood of adopting good governance practices, such as transparent and democratic state institutions. He finds that union embeddedness or centrality within the generic affiliation network is positively related to good governance. However, he (2007:394) notes, "Although the type of organization does not necessarily mean that members of the associations are affiliated with the same organizations, the associational types have meaningful implications. In a probabilistic sense, members within the same types of associations are more likely to share the same information flows, common resources and goals, and higher levels of confederation." This "probabilistic sense" supports the inferences that generic affiliation operates *as if* members meet face-to-face. People who do not know one another are more likely to "share the same information flows" and "goals" if they generically affiliate with one another, but why?

These studies provide strong evidence of the "meaningful implications" of union embeddedness and affiliation structure, but it is unclear whether the characteristics of face-to-face memberships can be transposed upon generic affiliations. Consider, again, the bones of generic affiliation: the network consists of the ties between associations through individual joint membership in generic, unnamed church, literary, hobby, political, fraternal, union, and other groups. The anonymity of these groups prevents the ability to know anything specific about their power, shared objectives, or any number of organizational characteristics essential to predicting political or democratic action. Not all unions or union members, for example, are the same (Schmitt and Warner, 2010; Zullo, 2012). The salience of union membership in the context of generic affiliation rests on the social psychological implications of the "web of overlapping associations" or roles, as Simmel (1955[1922]) originally described. As union roles grow more separate from other roles based on civic association, the union role has less salience to community members and becomes a less influential source of shared understanding or behavior. For example, as Cornwell and Harrison (2004:878) write, "The lack of widespread shared identity between union members and church members may help us to understand why the efforts of organized labor have been particularly unsuccessful in regions of the South." When a specific affiliation, such as union membership, becomes more isolated from the general affiliation structure, the consequences can be dire indeed as the identity affiliated with that form of membership no longer contributes to the generic common experiences that help connect people to one another and form a basis of shared belief and collective behavior.

Note that this differs substantially from individualized conceptions of identity. Face-to-face networks generate specific, shared experiences that directly contribute to an increased likelihood of collective behavior. Unfair work conditions at a specific workplace, for example, may lead union members within that workplace to strike. Specific overlapping stories about these conditions may operate as a mechanism for this shared behavior as workers relay their experiences to one another. This may reinforce a specific individual sense of self that one has in relationship to their workplace. We can imagine workers,

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