

Generalized Trust and Organized Group Membership among Young Australians

¹Sheau Tsuey Chong, ¹M.S. Mohamad, ¹S.M. Hoesni, ¹Z.M. Lukman, ¹I. Fauziah, ¹N. Sarnon,
¹S. Nen, ¹N. Subhi, ²Kamaruzaman Jusoff, ¹K. Alavi and ³Aeslina Abdul Kadir

¹School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

²Faculty of Forestry, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang 43400 Selangor, Malaysia

³Department of Water & Environmental Engineering, Faculty of Civil & Environmental Engineering,
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor Darul Takzim

Abstract: Organized group membership has been central in discussions of social capital since generalized trust is believed to be generated through continuous interaction in social relationships. Is this mechanism for social capital generation affected by different levels of involvement by individuals in organized groups? The focus of this paper is to investigate whether active membership makes a difference to individuals' levels of generalized trust. Young Australians and permanent residents aged 16 to 25 (N=283) participated in this study through an online survey. The findings showed that members of organized groups were more trusting than those who do not participate in any group. The results also indicate that active members were relatively more trusting, as were those who participated in hobby groups. Furthermore, members of organized groups that were organized by community organizers accommodate more trusting people. However, the number of memberships one holds does not affect one's level of generalized trust.

Key words: Organized group membership • Social capital • Generalized trust

INTRODUCTION

Putting up invitation posters, distributing flyers and setting up associations or club booths to attract new members is common at the start of new semesters at most universities. The vibrant atmosphere on campus does encourage young people to participate in organized activities. However, whether these activities could benefit the society as a whole is still unknown. Therefore there are a few questions which to be answered in this study: "Does joining an association or club create higher generalized trust?", "Would people in different positions in an organization have different levels of generalized trust?" and "Which types of group create more trust than others?". This paper intends to investigate the difference levels in generalized trust between young adults who are not members of organized groups and those who are and between non-members and active members. In addition, the relationship between the number of group memberships an individual has and their levels of generalized trust will be tested. In addition, holding

more memberships does not guarantee higher levels of generalized trust. Finally, hobby groups and groups organized by community organizers may have a stronger influence on generalized trust than other types of group.

Social capital has become a hot research topic ever since Robert Putnam published his work on civic participation in different regions of Italy in 1993. Moreover, in United States, Putnam's research on membership of voluntary groups in the created a lot of debate and controversy especially when he claimed that the social capital among Americans had dropped due to the decline of civic engagement in clubs and associations [1].

Social capital is proposed as a collective asset which is created and maintained through civic engagement [2-6]. It is based on trust and, if it is 'owned' by any entity, it is owned by society as a whole. Social capital defines as "the features of social organization, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" [4]. According to Putnam "Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and

human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" [5].

Social capital is described in terms of a "credit slip" system which is created when the helping process occurs [3]. When one person helps another it is as if the helper has received a credit slip from the recipient of his generosity. There is a tacit understanding that, at some time in the future, the recipient will reciprocate. Without mutual trust, this system will not function. Following Putnam's [4] and Coleman's [4] ideas on how social capital is created by a group of people who continuously interact and reciprocate, a large literature has paid attention to how voluntary association memberships link to generalized trust. A study focused on how informal social activities contributed to social capital as compared to participation in formal (organized) groups found that organizational memberships were positively related to generalized trust [7].

Stolle [8] explored data on voluntary associations in Germany and Sweden and suggested that people who participate in organized groups been more trusting than people who do not participate. She also identified that the length of the participation period plays a role in generating higher levels of generalized trust: those who have been members longer have higher levels. Following Stolle's work on the nature of associations which was based on "I" orientation versus "we" orientation, Veenstra [9] argued that associations such as religious communities which emphasize the common good toward others (i.e. "we" orientated) fostered more generalized trust. A strong "I" orientated groups such as a newly developing self-help group might discourage cooperation and fail to create social capital (Stolle 1988). Regarding the number of memberships and its correlation to social trust, Veenstra [9] argued that social trust correlated positively and significantly to the number of secondary associations one was a member of. On the other hand, Claibourn and Martin [10] argued that there is no influence on simultaneous levels of trust on membership or vice versa in youth samples. Nevertheless, partial evidence supports the idea that the group membership in parent samples may encourage interpersonal trust. They suggested community-oriented groups, like fraternal and church groups (which were favored by parents groups), were more important than sport groups (which young people tend to join) in creating generalized trust.

Seippel (2006) conducted a study focused on participation in voluntary sport organizations and its

effect on generalized trust and political commitments. He found that membership in voluntary sport organizations did contribute to higher levels of generalized trust. Furthermore, members who held sporting group memberships and other organizational memberships showed higher levels of generalized trust than those members of sport organizations only or non-sport organizations only. Iglie found a negative relationship between associational involvement and attitudes of social and political tolerance in Eastern and Central European countries [12]. Her [12] research reveals that members of homogenous associations who form dense and closed networks among co-members tend to have low generalized trust. This implies that strengthening civic engagement in networks with low generalized trust might create low social tolerance in diverse groups in the communities.

Previous research on organizational memberships and generalized trust shows contradictory findings. Following Putnam's theory [1] on the relationship between associational memberships and generalized trust, this research aims to provide more empirical evidence: Do different types of memberships in organized groups affect the levels of generalized trust members have? Number of memberships, type of groups and type of organizers are independent variables used to test this hypothesis.

Generalized trust in this paper was operationalized as the 'three-part relation' which is one of the elements in Hardin's idea of encapsulated-interest: A trusts B to do X [13]. The subject "A" refers to respondents in this survey, while "B" refers to "most people who respondents might meet in an ordinary daily life, which includes people they know (e.g. family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates, acquaintances) or strangers who one might meet on a train or in a supermarket. "To act in your best interest" covers the action domain that B will take A's interest into account (e.g. B is aware and cares about A's well-being and would not do anything against A).

In operationalizing the meaning of 'membership', the meaning of being a non-member, active member or office-holder was explained as: a) a non-member does not belong to any organized group, b) a passive member pays a subscription, makes donations, or is on a mailing list, but he or she is not any more involved than this, c) an active member is regularly involved in the group's activities, d) an officeholder has a decision-making role in the group, for example, being a committee member, activity organizer, or webmaster.

How diverse a group was is somewhat a reflection of who has organized it. Groups that were organized by a school/ college/ university/ workplace and that only accept members from the institution are relatively homogenous. Groups organized by community, national and international organizers encourage people from more geographically diverse places to become members. Online communities as group organizers allow virtual interaction to take place on the internet across national borders.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This quantitative study used an online survey as the research method. The web-based questionnaire enabled young people to complete this survey at their convenience. The survey sought information from young Australians or permanent residents aged 16 to 25. Flyers, posters, invitation emails and letters were sent to university students, city councils youth centers, churches, city councils sports and recreation centers in Melbourne.

Two hundred and eighty three young people (N=283: 86 male, 194 female) completed the survey between January 2006 and May 2006. Most participants (N=206) were university students. The majority of respondents lived in Victoria (N=267), with the remainder living in other parts of Australia. The majority of the participants (87.6%) were born in Australia and respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21.19. Most respondents (N=232, 82%) claimed that they only speak English at home, but only 65.7% reported that their ancestors were from English speaking countries.

This survey was anonymous and participants were informed of the goals of the study and told they could skip questions or stop at any time when they first logged on. It was a long survey, taking approximately 30 minutes to complete. Only some findings are reported here. In this online questionnaire, respondents were given the following generalized trust question, which was adapted from Hogan and Owen [14]: "Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust most people who you might meet in an average day (including people who you know and strangers) to act in your best interest?" (11-point scale).

In the organized groups section of the survey, the first question given to the respondent was: "Now we would like to ask you about organized groups organized by school/ college/ university/workplace, community, online community, national or international organizations. Are you a member of any organized group?" Then,

participants were asked to report the details of the group they belonged to: a) the type of group, which respondents could select from a list of 15 groups (e.g. sporting or recreation group, religious group, a union), b) their type of membership (member, active member or office-holder) and c) the type of organizer (school/ college/ university/ workplace, community, national, international organizations or online community).

All the completed questionnaires were stored on a secure internet server. The data was then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5 for windows. T-tests and ANOVA were used to analyze the data in order to compare levels of generalized trust among different groups of respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Membership and Generalized Trust: The initial intention in this paper was to find out whether belonging makes a difference to the levels of generalized trust respondents have. Organized group membership correlated positively with the level of generalized trust, $r = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$. Respondents who belonged to organized groups reported higher generalized trust than those who did not belong to any organized groups, $t(282) = 2.07$, $p < 0.05$.

Type of Memberships: In order to find out more detail on which types of membership contribute to generalized trust, I compared the mean scores between four types of group membership: non-member, passive member, active member and office-holder. Non-member referred to those who did not belong to any organized groups. Those participants who claimed that they belonged to one or more organized groups as a member only (not active or office-holder) were labeled passive members. A respondent who participated as an active member in any groups was categorized as active member. For example, Ann participated in a religious group as a passive member, at the same time she was also an active member of an ethnic group. She was categorized as "active member". David, who held three different types of memberships (passive member, active member and office-holder in a union, community and politic group respectively), was categorized as "office-holder".

In order to find out more details on how these four types of members differed with respect to generalized trust, T-tests were carried out. I found that non-members did not differ from passive members or office-holders. Furthermore, there was no relationship between type of group memberships and level of generalized trust, $r = 0.55$,

$p > 0.05$. But being an active member was correlated with level of generalized trust and active members displayed higher generalized trust levels when compared to non-members, $t(240) = 2.30, p < 0.05$. This indicates that the level of involvement in organized groups does make a difference to the level of generalized trust.

Number of Memberships: The number of organized groups to which participants belonged ranged from zero to six, seven categories altogether ($M = 1.15, SD = 1.37$). I was interested in whether generalized trust was correlated with the number of memberships the respondents reported. A Pearson correlation test showed that there was no significant relationship between generalized trust and the number of group memberships, $r = 0.049, p > 0.05$. There were no significant differences between the seven categories of respondents in trusting people in general, $F(6, 282) = 1.58, p > 0.05$. Thus, it appears that the number of memberships does not affect one's level of generalized trust. Just being a member at all is what matters. Respondents who participated only in one organized group reported that they have higher trust than those who did not participate in any groups, $t(187) = -2.22, p < 0.05$.

Active Membership and Number of Memberships: Further examination looked into the relationship between the different types of memberships and numbers of memberships. This analysis showed no ties between these two variables, $r = 0.07, p > 0.05$. Again, the number of memberships does not show any effect on generalized trust. ANOVA tests also indicated that there were no differences in generalized mean scores between non-members, active members who belonged to one group, active members who belonged to two groups and active members who belonged to three or more groups, $F(3, 265) = 2.14, p > 0.05$. However, those participants who held one active membership displayed a higher level of generalized trust, $t(213) = -2.04, p < 0.05$ than non-members. Thus, having more than one active membership did not increase one's level of generalized trust. In fact, people with more than one active membership had similar levels of generalized trust to those who has only one active membership.

Type of Groups: There were 17 types of groups listed in the questionnaire (plus two "other groups" as alternative options). The majority of group members were part of a sporting or recreation group (56%). ANOVA was used to compare the mean scores for generalized trust in four

groups: a) Hobby group members (which consisted of sporting and recreation group, art/music/film/educational group and other hobby group, $N=54$); b) Non-hobby group members (e.g. religious, ethnic, community, politic group, $N=35$); c) Hobby and Non-hobby group members which made up by those participants who belonged to both type of groups and d) Non-members. This analysis showed that there were no significant differences among the groups. However, the Hobby group members reported significant (borderline) higher generalized trust than Non-members, $t(182) = -1.96, p = 0.05$. This suggests that hobby groups that gather young people with common interest may generate more generalized trust than other groups.

Type of Group Organizer: There were five types of group organizer (those who organized or sponsored the groups). They were "school/ college/ university/ workplace", community, national, international and online community. Only groups organized by community organizations had significantly higher mean scores in generalized trust than non-members' scores, $t(227) = -2.23, p < 0.05$. Participants who belonged to other organizations ("school/ college/ university/ workplace", national, international and online community) shows no differences in generalized trust when compared with those who do not belong to any groups. This suggests that the community environment encourages participants to be more trusting.

This study provides evidence that being an active member in an organized group makes a difference to one's level of generalized trust when compared with those who have not joined any group. This finding supports most of the previous research which found that group membership is related to generalized trust [4, 7, 8, 11].

However, it is not as simple as that. For someone to have higher levels of generalized trust, they need to be an active participant. Active members are more trusting, especially those active members who only participate in one organized group. The deeper level of involvement provides more chances for group members to interact with each other. The sense of belonging in one group might encourage the formation of generalized trust when one feels his or her contribution has been recognized.

Having more memberships does not correlate with having higher generalized trust. There was no evidence that participants who have more active memberships will tend to be more trusting. When one belongs to more than one group, it is likely that he or she will have less frequent interaction within groups, but have more chances to

bridge between organized groups. Thus, belonging actively only to one group is more likely to generate generalized trust.

Hobby group members showed higher levels of generalized trust than non-members ($p = 0.05$). The nature of hobby groups encourages people who have common interests to gather and share their interests. They are more likely to be "I" oriented groups and show strong homogenous characteristics in their members. This contradicts previous research which suggests that "we" oriented groups, which are characterized by their goodwill for the common group, foster higher generalized trust [9, 11]. Thus, I suggest that further investigations need to be made focusing on in-group trust and comparing Hobby group members' in-group trust and generalized trust. This would enable us to better understand whether in-group trust fosters higher levels of generalized trust (members in my group are trustable thus others are trustable as well).

Groups organized by community organizers attracted more diverse members from different backgrounds than other types of group. At the same time, this study also found out that the majority of respondents who join groups which are organized by the community are more trusting than those who do not join any group. I propose that community group organizers encourage more interaction among heterogeneous people and create more understanding between people from different backgrounds yet at the same time glue these people together with common goals. Thus, generalized trust is easier to generate in a cooperative environment [9]. Furthermore, the organized groups often met in the community, giving chances to people from same neighborhood to interact and provide safer environments to foster generalized trust. However, more detailed empirical work is needed to validate this.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reveal the relationship between the quality of group membership and generalized trust. The findings supports the macro theory of social capital by arguing that membership is related significantly to generalized trust. Moreover, active members are more trusting, especially if one is only active in one organized group. This implies that young people should be actively involved in any one organized group instead of being passive in multiple organized groups. Nonetheless, more empirical work on the nature of organized group such as

diversity and homogenous group should be carried out to provide a clearer picture of what group features contribute to generalized trust.

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