

Niels Michalski
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Institut für Sozialwissenschaften
Empirische Sozialforschung
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin

E-mail: niels.michalski.1@hu-berlin.de
Phone: +49 30 2093 4420

Title: The Prevalence of Selfishness as an Impediment for Social Trust

Niels Michalski¹

abstract

Key words: Generalized Trust; Prosocial Values; Self-regarding Values; ESS

The proposed paper examines how societally dominant action patterns affect individual level trust. Experimental evidence from behavioral economics has shown that individuals with self-regarding and norm-regarding preferences coexist (Fehr & Gintis 2007). The same research strand further proposes that prosocial and self-regarding behavior are not simply grounded in differing moral dispositions. Instead, the translation of moral dispositions into prosocial or self-regarding behavior depends on the behavior of others and particularly the dominant patterns of action within a given social context. Moreover, such patterns of selfish or prosocial behavior are themselves influenced by structural conditions, i.e. institutional arrangements (ibd.). Although, generalized trust is an important prerequisite for social cooperation and is associated with various desirable societal level outcomes, cross-cultural research on generalized trust has hitherto not processed the aforementioned findings substantially. This paper aims to address this gap by adapting the central propositions from behavioral trust experiments for survey-based research on generalized trust and by testing their explanatory power empirically. Data from multiple waves of the European Social Survey (2002-2016) from up to 36 countries is used to set up multilevel models to estimate cross-level-interaction effects in order to assess the impact of the prevalence of self-regarding attitudes on the association between prosocial values and generalized trust. Preliminary results confirm the proposition that normative trust beliefs conditionally depend on the prevalence of selfishness. This provides evidence for an explanation about how societies are entrapped in cultures of distrust.

¹ Research Associate at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany.

Template for Proposals for LCSR research projects

- (1) **Key Question:** Focus your topic on one central research question or hypothesis.
What is your question? Why is it worth answering?

The aim of the paper is to examine if and how aggregate levels of selfish attitudes and selfish behaviour hamper social trust. Answering these questions helps us, firstly, to understand mechanisms of building, maintenance and destruction of social trust. Secondly, it further explains why certain societies especially in Southern and Eastern Europe fail to develop democratic and efficient institutions. Thirdly, it serves as an external validation of evidence from behavioural experiments on the societal level with nationally representative data.

- (2) **Specific Contribution:** what knowledge exists concerning this question and to what literature will you contribute? Outlining where the existing evidence is deficient or inconclusive, so that your research fills a gap in the literature.

The proposed paper contributes to the literature on the cultural origins of generalized trust. This literature has ever grown since Putnam stressed its importance within his social capital concept (Putnam 1995, 1993). Despite the large body of literature that has evolved since the middle of the 1990s the puzzle of how generalized trust develops and persists remains and still challenges sociologists, political scientists and economists (e.g. Almakaeva et al. 2017; Sønderskov, Dinesen 2014; Reynaud 2016; OECD 2017; Welzel, Delhey 2015).

The proposed paper builds on insights from behavioural experiments first carried out in behavioural economics which have a profound impact on theories of action substantial to all social scientific disciplines (Fehr, Gintis 2007; Fehr, Fischbacher 2003). Although, generalized trust is an important prerequisite for social cooperation and is associated with various desirable societal level outcomes, cross-cultural research on generalized trust has hitherto not processed the aforementioned findings substantially. The replication of these findings on the basis of large scale survey data contributes to research on the origins of generalized trust, social capital and cooperation. It also provides an important link between theories at the micro-level and macro-level phenomena.

- (3) **Theoretical Framework:** Briefly describe your theoretical framework and its key concepts.

Trust is defined as the belief that results of somebody's intended action will be appropriate from our point of view (Misztal 1996, p. 9f). In its generalized form this trust belief concerns other people in general. In my conceptual framework the trust belief has two sources - rational and moral beliefs. While the rational component is mainly based on experience and the anticipated trustworthiness of fellow citizens, moralistic trust is rooted in an intrinsic motivation to encounter unknown others with trustful attitudes and behavior. However, under cultural conditions which value self-regarding attitudes and selfish behavior such a moralistic trust belief will neither manifest in the overall trust belief, which is measured by the survey question, nor will it translate into cooperative behavior.

- (4) **Core Variables and Hypotheses:** Describe the core variables of your research: what is the major dependent variable and what are plausible independent variables? Specify a number of alternative hypotheses/mechanisms.

The dependent variable will be generalized trust obtained through a confirmatory factor analysis of three indicators from the ESS:

- ppltrst *“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that one cannot be too careful in dealing with people?”*
- pplhlp *“Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?”*
- pplfair *„Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?“*

The central independent variable on the individual level will be pro-social values obtained through a confirmatory factor analysis of two items of the Universalism dimension of Schwartz Human Values Scale (Schwartz 1992, 2012):

- un1 *“She/he thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. She/he believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life.”*
- un2 *“It is important to her/him to listen to people who are different from her/him. Even when she/he disagrees with them, she/he still wants to understand them.”*

The contextual level moderator is the norm of self-regarding behaviour, measured by the share of people with self-regarding attitudes. It will be measured by two items of the Power dimension of Schwartz’ Human Values Scale.

Control variables at the individual level comprise age, gender, education, migration background, ethnic belonging, employment status, family status, religious denomination, confidence in institutions. On the aggregate level I control for Religious Legacy (Protestantism), Post-Socialism, Economic Inequality (GINI), GDP, institutional arrangements.

Baseline Hypotheses:

H1: The stronger the preferences for individual prosocial attitudes, the higher the individual level generalized trust. (Individual Level)

H2: The higher the prevalence of self-regarding attitudes, the lower the level of generalized trust. (Country Level)

Central Hypothesis:

H3: The higher the prevalence of self-regarding attitudes in given contexts the lower the effect of prosocial values on generalized trust. (Cross-Level-Interaction)

- (5) **Analyses and Modelling:** Outline the analytical techniques and empirical models you will use. *How will you test your question? How will you know if you are wrong?*

Multilevel-Random-Slope-Random-Intercept-Models with cross-level interactions will be applied to test the moderation hypothesis.

- (6) **Targeted Data Base:** What comparative or longitudinal evidence would be needed to test your question? What dataset will you use?

Data from multiple waves of the European Social Survey ESS (2002-2016) will be used.

- (7) **Roadmap:** Briefly describe the analytical steps that you will follow.

First, measurement models for generalized trust and value preferences at the individual level will be developed by using confirmatory factor analysis. Second, the bivariate correlations between prosocial values and generalized trust will be calculated for the countries separately to assess variation across countries. Thirdly, the bivariate association between the prevalence of self-regarding values and levels of generalized trust is shown. Fourthly, a multilevel model is applied to test for individual and country level effects simultaneously and control for covariates. Lastly, the cross-level-interaction effect of the prevalence of self-regarding values and the effect of prosocial values on trust is implemented and assessed. Several tests of measurement equivalence and sensitivity of effects will be carried out.

References

- Almakaeva, Anna; Welzel, Christian; Ponarin, Eduard (2017): Human Empowerment and Trust in Strangers. The Multilevel Evidence. In *Social Indicators Research*. DOI: 10.1007/s11205-017-1724-z.
- Fehr, Ernst; Fischbacher, Urs (2003): The nature of human altruism. In *Nature* 425 (6960), pp. 785–791. DOI: 10.1038/nature02043.
- Fehr, Ernst; Gintis, Herbert (2007): Human Motivation and Social Cooperation: Experimental and Analytical Foundations. In *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (1), pp. 43–64. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131812.
- Misztal, Barbara A. (1996): Trust in modern societies. The search for the bases of social order. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- OECD (2017): Trust and public policy. How better governance can help rebuild public trust. Paris: OECD (OECD public governance reviews).
- Putnam, Robert D. (1993): Making Democracy work. Civic Traditions in modern Italy. With assistance of Robert Leonardi, Raffaella Nanetti. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. (1995): Bowling Alone. America's Declining Social Capital. In *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1), pp. 65–78. DOI: 10.1353/jod.1995.0002.
- Reynaud, Bénédicte (2016): Forms of Trust and Conditions for Their Stability. In *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 41 (1), pp. 127–145. DOI: 10.1093/cje/bew001.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. (1992): Universals in the content and structure of values: Theory and empirical tests in 20 countries. In Mark P. Zanna (Ed.): *Advances in experimental social psychology*. San Diego, London: Academic Press (*Advances in experimental social psychology*, v. 25), pp. 1–65.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. (2012): An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. In *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2 (1). DOI: 10.9707/2307-0919.1116.
- Sønderskov, Kim Mannemar; Dinesen, Peter Thisted (2014): Danish Exceptionalism: Explaining the Unique Increase in Social Trust Over the Past 30 Years. In *European Sociological Review* 30 (6), pp. 782–795. DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcu073.
- Welzel, Christian; Delhey, Jan (2015): Generalizing Trust: The Benign Force of Emancipation. In *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. DOI: 10.1177/0022022115588366.