

The Sociology of Trust
by
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<a> INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers sociological perspectives on trust. The notion of trust is integral to the discipline of sociology and can be traced back to some of its classical works (e.g., Durkheim, 1984 [1893]; Parsons, 1937; Weber, 1951 [1915]). In the modern era, trust has arguably become even more prominent, possibly due to the increasing substitution of power relations inside formal organizations by economic relations in open markets, which rely to some extent on actors' willingness to trust each other in order to function effectively (Cook & Hardin, 2001).

Sociologists have argued that trust brings a number of social benefits, such as reciprocity (Hayashi et al., 1999), solidarity (Molm et al., 2007), equality (Smith, 2010), and democracy (Choi & David, 2012). In general, trust is often viewed as the glue that holds society together (Castelfranchi & Falcone, 2010).

It should therefore come as no surprise that trust has become a popular topic in numerous subdisciplines of sociology, including economic sociology (Granovetter, 1985), social psychology (Simpson & Willer, 2015), and immigration (Portes, 1995). Despite some differences in their underlying assumptions and conceptual emphasis, scholars in sociology and beyond have increasingly converged on a common general definition of trust. Namely, trust refers to the willingness of one actor (the trustor) to make himself or herself vulnerable in a particular way (trust domain) to another actor (the trustee), while presuming that the trustee will not exploit that vulnerability (Schilke et al., 2021, building on Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

Despite this consensus on the definition of trust, the field of sociological trust research has remained relatively fragmented, with different scholars focusing on different forms of trust. In particular, sociological trust research appears to be divided by a focus on either generalized trust or particularized trust. Even though both of these camps have made significant progress in understanding where these respective forms of trust originate, there remains a significant lack of cross-pollination as well as a missing middle ground. Thus, to enable cumulative progress in advancing knowledge of trust, we discuss a framework that aims to integrate disparate streams of research so as to allow future trust research to move beyond the generalized–particularized dichotomy. The framework makes an important contribution to trust research by adding greater conceptual precision while directing attention to neglected categorical forms of trust.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. After offering a brief overview of existing insights into generalized and particularized trust, we elaborate our integrative framework, which we hope will facilitate a better understanding of different forms of trust. We then use this framework as a springboard to offer a number of recommended directions for future trust research.

<a> GENERALIZED AND PARTICULARIZED TRUST

The first camp of sociologists has studied *generalized* trust, which is sometimes also called propensity to trust (Mayer et al., 1995) or social trust (Hardin, 2002). This form of trust encompasses a large circle of unfamiliar others, an abstract level of analysis, and/or a large number of different trust domains. This concept has attracted significant attention, because scholars have observed that the level of generalized trust has been declining over the years (Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 1995), with potentially detrimental consequences for society. Relevant

antecedents to generalized trust include (1) social learning, (2) reinforcement learning, and (3) biological factors. The social learning view suggests that people make trust decisions based on their experiences, both during childhood (Erikson, 1964) and later in life (Hardin, 2002), which influence their decisions about how much to trust others. The reinforcement learning account, in contrast, is less focused on learning about others than on learning about oneself; it proposes that as people get to know their own identity, they come to view themselves as either a trusting or a non-trusting person (Kuwabara, 2015). Researchers interested in the biological sources of trust augment socialization-related arguments with studies on the genetic foundations of trust (Reimann et al., 2017). Much of the sociological research on generalized trust has employed data from surveys conducted over time, such as the General Social Survey and the World Values Survey.

The other camp of sociological researchers has investigated *particularized* trust—also known as relational trust (Cook, 2005) or knowledge-based trust (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Particularized trust encompasses a narrow circle of familiar others, a micro level of analysis, and/or a specific trust domain. Theoretical arguments in the research on particularized trust have been dominated by the encapsulated interest account, which assumes that trustors try to anticipate whether the trustee will encapsulate their own interests and will thus not exploit them (Cook et al., 2005, also see Brewer, Ellis, Pitães, & Torres, 2022 on trust and anticipatory thinking). As a result of these considerations, trustors decide to what extent they will make themselves vulnerable to the trustee. Among the most frequently studied antecedents to particularized trust are (1) the shadow of the past, (2) the shadow of the future, and (3) the broader social network. Particularized trust can stem from the history of interactions between exchange partners (sometimes referred to as the ‘shadow of the past’; Swärd, 2016), as the

partner's behavior in past interactions can serve as an important cue regarding this partner's anticipated trustworthiness in the current situation (Blau, 1964). In addition to looking at the past, some focus more on the value of the future relationship (or the 'shadow of the future'; Molm et al., 2000, building on Axelrod, 1985), since a partner who values maintaining the relationship likely can be trusted to a greater extent than a partner for whom the future relationship is less meaningful (Raub & Weesie, 1990). Finally, beyond the immediate dyad, the broader network in which the trustor and the trustee are embedded can be a source of particularized trust as a result of reputational concerns and information transmitted through indirect ties (Coleman, 1990). Experiments are the most frequently used data source in the study of particularized trust in sociology.

<a> AN EXTENDED FRAMEWORK OF THREE TRUST RADIIUSES

While the generalized–particularized divide has become somewhat institutionalized in sociological trust research (Delhey et al., 2011), we propose that much theoretical precision and leverage can be gained by abandoning this dichotomy in favor of a more fine-grained and multi-dimensional approach advanced in our framework (see Figure 1).

---Insert Figure 1 about here---

There are two noteworthy aspects to this framework that depart from the current state of sociological trust research. First, the framework embraces Fukuyama's (1995, 2001) idea of a "radius of trust" as a more gradual (vs. binary) concept that goes back to Harrison (1985). The radius of trust can be understood as "the width of the circle of people among whom a certain trust level exists" (van Hoorn, 2014, p. 1256).¹ This definition indicates that the generality of

¹ Note that the radius and the level of trust should be thought of as distinct concepts. The latter represents the strength of trust (i.e., the extent to which an actor is willing to make himself or herself vulnerable), while the

trust can range from very narrow to very wide at the two extremes, but in most cases it will fall at an intermediate point in between. Around the midpoint of this radius is categorical trust, where trust is neither limited to a specific actor or single domain nor generalized to virtually everyone or every occasion. Although social categories have a central place in sociological inquiry at large (Zuckerman, 1999), it is striking how little is known about categorical trust (at least relative to generalized and particularized trust). We will return to this gap in our suggestions for future research.

Second, the generalized–particularized dichotomy suffers from considerable ambiguity. The radius of trust is not unidimensional; rather, it can in fact pertain to three different parts of any comprehensive trust conceptualization: the *trustor* (the actor doing the trusting), the *trustee* (the actor being trusted), and the *trust domain* (the issue or activity in which trust is placed). The radius of the *trustor* can fall anywhere on a continuum ranging from a particular individual to a small group to an organization or institution to a society at large (Cook & Schilke, 2010).² Similarly, the *trustee*'s radius can range from trust in a specific individual to trust in categories (such as family members, coworkers, organizations, or institution) to trust in “most people.” Finally, the *trust domain* can be very particularized and pertain to a single interaction only, or it can be broader (encompassing several interactions within the same domain) or even virtually complete (encompassing every type of activity). Importantly, the radii of each of these trust

former is defined as the width of the trust circle (in which the given level of trust can be either low or high). In their insightful empirical investigation, Delhey et al. (2011) investigated the “amount of trust” as an interactive combination of radius and level, but we will not further elaborate on this notion here. Further, for the purposes of our discussion, the radius of trust is treated independently of qualitative differences in trust, such as affective and cognitive trust (McAllister, 1995) or ability-, benevolence, and integrity based trust (Mayer et al., 1995). We leave it to future research to develop theory on how particularized, categorical, and generalized trust may systematically vary in terms of such properties.

² In this chapter, we focus on individuals as the lowest unit of analysis that sociologists tend to study, even though neuroscientists have shown that lower-level investigations into the neural basis of trust can be very fruitful (Krueger, 2022).

components can vary independently, making it necessary to move from a one- to a three-dimensional model in order to avoid under-specification.

Taken together, we recommend that trust scholars be very clear about their respective focus by situating their work in the three-dimensional space shown in Figure 1. This model clarifies that the radius of trust is gradual and multidimensional (rather than binary and uniform, as portrayed in much of the prior research). Beyond enhancing precision, this framework also directs attention to a variety of research avenues that should provide plenty of opportunities for future trust scholarship.

<a> FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although sociologists have made substantial headway in improving our understanding of trust, much remains to be done. We start by outlining future research directions that directly build on our extended model elaborated above before addressing a variety of other topics that we believe have the potential to significantly advance knowledge of trust (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1: Avenues for future research

#	Topic	Exemplary research question
1	Radius of trust as a construct	What determines the width of the circle of trust?
2	Interrelationships between highly particularized and highly generalized trust	(When) are these two trust archetypes positively vs. negatively connected?
3	Categorical trust	Can homophily and/or group status explain trust?
4	Cognitive, affective, and moral foundations of trust	Which emotions affect trust directly and indirectly through cognition?
5	Trust outcomes	What are the positive and negative consequences of trust?
6	Contextualized trust accounts	What are relevant contingencies to the effectiveness of different trust production modes?
7	Digitization and trust	What are the differences (if any) between trust in humans and trust in autonomous technological systems?
8	Trustworthiness	What is the role of reciprocity norms in trustees' decision to be trustworthy?

First, we call for research that advances the conceptualization and measurement of the radius of trust as a construct in its own right. Earlier empirical research has often left the trust radius unspecified, leaving it up to the study participants to make their own assumptions, which can lead to issues in measurement accuracy (Delhey et al., 2011). Further, the trust radius construct should be integrated into theoretical models that explain under what circumstances we can speak of a more versus less generalized trustor, trustee, and trust domain. For instance, with regard to the trustor, interorganizational trust can reside at both the level of the individual boundary spanner and the level of the organization as a collective actor (Currall & Inkpen, 2002; Lumineau & Schilke, 2018; Schilke & Cook, 2013). However, we know very little about the factors that determine which of these two levels is more meaningful or salient in a given context.

Second, we need better insight into the linkages between coexisting forms of trust that vary in their generality. Are the extreme forms of highly generalized trust and highly

particularized trust positively connected? The intuitive answer seems to be yes. However, authors such as Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994) suggest that Japanese people tend to be low in generalized trust but high in particularized trust, indicating an inverse correlation. In a similar vein, Latusek and Cook (2012) argue that the presence of strong particularized trust may crowd out the need for generalized trust. They suggest that this may be the case when trust or confidence in societal institutions is low, especially in governmental and legal institutions.

Third, we see much potential for more research on categorical trust. Among relevant categories, family background, gender, and national origin have received some attention in trust research, building on Zucker's (1986) notion of characteristic-based trust production (also see Schilke et al., 2017 on trust production modes). Many more relevant categories come to mind that have not yet been investigated with respect to trust issues. Future research into categorical trust could usefully link trust research with sociological theories of homophily (McPherson et al., 2001) and status (Berger et al., 1980). The sharing of group membership may indeed underlie many trust judgments, as actors may favor, and may feel more comfortable trusting, ingroups over outgroups (Cialdini, 2021; Foddy & Yamagishi, 2009). Some social categories may be attributed greater status than others, with status often being linked to perceptions of greater trustworthiness (Blue et al., 2020). Beyond such ideas related to the radius of the trustee, we also need categorical accounts regarding the radius of the trustor and the trust domain. How do we determine which categories of trustors should be put into one bucket, and what types of activities do actors generalize to when forming their trust perceptions? And, which activities warrant trust related judgements?

Fourth, above and beyond the question of trust radii, we recommend further insights into the cognitive, affective, and moral foundations of trust. Most sociologists have focused on

cognitive trust models, such as the encapsulated interest account, and there is certainly much room for future research to increase the transparency of the assumptions and the specific cognitive mechanisms in these models. However, we also need a better understanding of affective and moral reasons to trust. Emotions have been argued to play a key role in trust formation and recovery (Schoorman et al., 2007), but we need to better understand which types of emotions should feature prominently in trust theories (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Kugler et al., 2020) and whether their effects are direct or mediated through cognition (such as in Schilke et al., 2015). Further, beyond its instrumental and emotional aspects, trust and/or trustworthiness may be viewed as a moral virtue in of itself (Uslaner, 2002), to the extent that a trustee's virtuous disposition may potentially even outweigh encapsulated interests in explaining trust (Robbins, 2016). In short, we need richer accounts of trust that augment cognitive considerations with affective and moral ones.

Fifth, we advocate for further scholarship into the consequences (rather than the antecedents) of trust, which remains conspicuously rare in the field of sociology. Most investigations have taken the positive social outcomes of trust for granted. However, recent discussions of potential limitations and liabilities of trust indicate that trust is not a panacea and can come with important downsides (Neal et al., 2015). The trade-off between the benefits and the disadvantages of trust requires greater acknowledgment and more empirical investigation. In this respect, we recommend investigations into the optimal levels of trust under various conditions (Wicks et al., 1999). When are actors able to accurately calibrate their trust—that is, neither over-trust and risk exploitation, nor under-trust and forego valuable relational opportunities (Schilke & Huang, 2018)?

Sixth, while trust research may have matured to a point where it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify brand new main effects, we see plenty of opportunity to develop more contextualized accounts of trust. By this, we mean investigations that go beyond the generally accepted view that trust is highly context-specific (Rousseau et al., 1998) to identify concrete situational contingencies that affect the relevance of different origins or consequences of trust. The objective of such investigations would be to build a more generalizable theory of context—one that would point us to the conditions that should be taken into consideration when developing and assessing models of trust production and outcomes (Sasaki & Marsh, 2012; Schilke & Cook, 2015). Such an approach would provide greater confidence regarding the types of effects that are likely to hold in virtually any setting and those that are more confined to particular situations (de Jong et al., 2017). Comparative empirical approaches, including cross-cultural studies (Schoorman et al., 2007), will provide important new insights in this regard.

Seventh, following up on our previous point, how does the increasing digitization of society impact trust patterns? More than forty years ago, Luhmann (1979) speculated that the increasing complexity of modern technology would increase the demand for trust—but that the very nature of trust was also likely to be affected. Although trust has traditionally been thought of as existing between human actors, people increasingly have to decide whether to trust autonomous technologies (Lyons, 2022; Puranam & Vanneste, 2021), such as robots (Wagner, 2022) and blockchain-based systems (Lumineau et al., 2021). We need to know whether extant theories of trust still apply in these interactions with non-human entities.

Eighth and finally, there is considerable room to complement our knowledge of trust with more research focusing on trustworthiness. While these two constructs have often been conflated, they are conceptually distinct. Whereas trust refers to the trustor's willingness to make

himself or herself vulnerable, trustworthiness refers to the trustee's willingness to avoid exploiting this vulnerability and to act in a reliable and truthful manner. Many investigations in sociology focus on trust, with much less attention to trustworthiness. For instance, most experimental studies employing the trust game are interested primarily in the first player's decision to send money rather than the second player's decision to reciprocate. This singular focus is unfortunate, because sociology is well equipped to theorize conditions that enable reciprocity, such as norms and rituals (Gouldner, 1960; Krishnan et al., 2021; Nardin et al., 2016).

<a> CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have taken stock of the sociological trust literature and how it has substantially advanced knowledge of both particularized and generalized trust. In an effort to achieve greater conceptual precision and point to new theoretical approaches, we have elaborated an extended framework that brings these two forms of trust together. Based on this framework, but also moving beyond it, we have presented an agenda of eight future research directions that we believe have considerable promise. We are excited to observe how research on trust, both within sociology and across disciplines, will continue to produce intriguing insights into the functioning of social relationships in various settings over the years to come.

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