Generalised Trust and Organised Group Membership: The More Active the Better?

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Abstract:
Organised group membership has been central in discussions of social capital since generalised 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 (i.e. passive, active or office-holder) in organised groups? The focus of this paper is to investigate whether active membership makes a difference to individuals’ levels of generalised trust. Young Australians and permanent residents aged 16 to 25 (N=283) participated in this study through an online survey. The findings support previous literature, which found members of organised groups are more trusting than those who do not participate in any group. The results also indicate that the active members were relatively more trusting, as were those who participated in hobby groups. Furthermore, organised groups which were organised by community organisers accommodate more trusting people. However, the number of memberships one holds does not affect one’s level of generalised 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. While enjoying the vibrant atmosphere on campus, I wondered: “Does joining an association or club create higher generalised trust?” “Would people in different positions in an organisation have different levels of generalised trust?” and “Which types of group create more trust than others?” This paper intends to investigate the difference in generalised trust levels between young adults who are not members of organised 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 generalised trust will be tested. I will argue that active participation in an organised group generates more generalised trust. In addition, holding more memberships does not guarantee higher levels of generalised trust. Finally, hobby groups and groups organised by community organisers may have a stronger influence on generalised trust than other types of group.

Social Capital, Generalised Trust and Group Membership

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, his research on membership of voluntary groups in the United States created a lot of debate and controversy when he claimed that the social capital among Americans had dropped due to the decline of civic engagement in clubs and associations (Putnam 1993b).

Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988, 1990), Putnam (1993a, 1995a, 2000) and Skocpol (2000) propose that social capital is a collective asset which is created and maintained through civic engagement. It is based on trust and, if it is ‘owned’ by any entity, it is owned by society as a whole. Robert Putnam defines social capital as “the features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993: 36).

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” (2000:19).

James Coleman (1988) has described social capital in terms of a “credit slip” system which is created when the helping process occurs. 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 (1993) and Coleman’s (1988) 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
generalised trust. Green and Brock’s (2005) study focused on how informal social activities contributed to social capital as compared to participation in formal (organised) groups. They found out that organisational memberships were positively related to generalised trust.

Stolle (1988) explored data on associations in Germany and Sweden and suggested that people who participate in organised groups are more trusting than people who do not participate. Furthermore, Stolle (1988) also identified that the length of the participation period plays a role in generating higher levels of generalised 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 (2002) argued that associations such as religious communities which emphasise the common good toward others (i.e. “we” orientated) fostered more generalised trust. A strong “I” orientated group (e.g., 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 (2002) argued that social trust was correlated positively and significantly to the number of secondary associations one was a member of.

On the other hand, Claiborn and Martin (2000) 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 favoured by parents groups), were more important than sport groups (which young people tend to join) in creating generalised trust.

The recent study of Seippel (2006) focused on participation in voluntary sport organisations and its effect on generalised trust and political commitments. Seippel (2006) found that membership in voluntary sport organisations did contribute to higher levels of generalised trust. Furthermore, members who held sporting group memberships and other organisational memberships showed higher levels of generalised trust than those members of sport organisations only or non-sport organisations only.
Previous research on organisational memberships and generalised trust shows contradictory findings. Following Putnam’s theory (1993b) on the relationship between associational memberships and generalised trust, this research aims to provide more empirical evidence: Do different types of memberships (i.e., active member and non-member) in organised groups affect the levels of generalised trust members have? Number of memberships, type of groups, and type of organisers are independent variables used to test this hypothesis.

In this study, the term “generalised trust” is defined as encapsulated trust between individuals: A trusts B to do X (Hardin 2002). A believes B will take A’s well-being into account and act in A’s best interest. For example, A is a tourist and she encounters B in the street. When A asked B to give her directions to a destination, A trusts B to give her correct information because A believes B will act honourably to a tourist like her.

The study

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 sixteen to 25. Flyers, posters, invitation emails and letters were sent to university students, city councils youth centres, churches, city councils sports and recreation centres in Melbourne.

Participants

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.

Procedure

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.
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 generalised trust question, which was adapted from Hogan and Owen (2000): “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)

Generalised trust in this paper was operationalised as the ‘three-part relation’ which is one of the elements in Hardin’s idea of encapsulated-interest (2002): A trusts B to do X. 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, neighbours, 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 the organised groups section of the survey, the first question given to the respondent was: “Now we would like to ask you about organised groups organised by school/college/university/workplace, community, online community, national or international organisations. Are you a member of any organised 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 organiser (school/college/university/workplace, community, national, international organisations or online community).

In operationalising the meaning of ‘membership’, the meaning of being a non-member, active member or office-holder was explained as: a) a non-member doesn not belong to any organised 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 organiser, or webmaster.
How diverse a group was is somewhat a reflection of who has organised it. Groups that were organised by a school/college/university/workplace and that only accept members from the institution are relatively homogenous. Groups organised by community, national, and international organisers encourage people from more geographically diverse places to become members. Online communities as group organisers allow virtual interaction to take place on the internet across national borders.

Analysis

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 ANOVAs were used to analyze the data in order to compare levels of generalised trust among different groups of respondents.

Results

Membership and generalised trust. The initial intention in this paper was to find out whether belonging makes a difference to the levels of generalised trust respondents have. Organised group membership correlated positively with the level of generalised trust, \( r = 0.12, p<0.05 \). Respondents who belonged to organised groups reported higher generalised trust than those who did not belong to any organised 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 generalised 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 organised groups. Those participants who claimed that they belonged to one or more organised groups as a member only (not active or office-holder) were labelled passive members. A respondent who participated as an active member in any groups was categorised 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 categorised 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 categorised as “office-holder”.

In order to find out more details on how these four types of members differed with respect to generalised 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 generalised trust, \( r = 0.55, p > 0.05 \). But being an active member was correlated with level of generalised trust, and active members displayed higher generalised trust levels when compared to non-members, \( t (240) = 2.30, p < 0.05 \). This indicates that the level of involvement in organised groups does make a difference to the level of generalised trust.

**Number of memberships.** The number of organised groups to which participants belonged ranged from zero to six, seven categories altogether (\( M = 1.15, SD = 1.37 \)). I was interested in whether generalised trust was correlated with the number of memberships the respondents reported. A Pearson correlation test showed that there was no significant relationship between generalised 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 generalised trust. Just being a member at all is what matters. Respondents who participated only in one organised group reported that they have higher trust then 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 generalised trust. ANOVA tests also indicated that there were no differences in generalised 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 generalised 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 generalised trust. In fact, people with more than one active membership had similar levels of generalised 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 generalised 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 generalised 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 generalised trust than other groups.

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

Discussion

This study provides evidence that being an active member in an organised group makes a difference to one's level of generalised 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 generalised trust (Putnam 1993; Stolle 1988; Green and Brock 2005; Seippel 2006).

However, it is not as simple as that. For someone to have higher levels of generalised trust, they need to be an active participant. Active members are more trusting, especially those active members who only participate in one organised 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 generalised trust when one feels his or her contribution has been recognised.

Having more memberships does not correlate with having higher generalised 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 organised groups. Thus, belonging actively only to one group is more likely to generate generalised trust.

Hobby group members showed higher levels of generalised 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 characterised by their goodwill for the common group, foster higher generalised trust (Veenstra 2002; Seippel 2006). Thus, I suggest that further investigations need to be made focusing on in-group trust and comparing Hobby group members’ in-group trust and generalised trust. This would enable us to better understand whether in-group trust fosters higher levels of generalised trust (members in my group are trustable thus others are trustable as well).

Groups organised by community organisers 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 organised by the community are more trusting than those who do not join any group. I propose that community group organisers encourage more interaction among heterogenous people and create more understanding between people from different backgrounds yet at the same time glue these people together with common goals. Thus, generalised trust is easier to generate in a cooperative environment (Veenstra 2002). Furthermore, the organised groups often met in the community, giving chances to people from same neighbourhood to interact and provide safer environments to foster generalised trust. However, more detailed empirical work is needed to validate this.
Conclusion

This study supports the macro theory of social capital by arguing that membership is related significantly to generalised trust. Moreover, active members are more trusting, especially if one is only active in one organised group. Nonetheless, more empirical work on the nature of organised group (i.e. diversity and homogenous group) should be carried out to provide a clearer picture of what group features contribute to generalised trust.

References


