

## Trust, Identity, and Civic Hope

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*This article concerns the phenomenon of trust—in others who are familiar and in humanity in general. I make a case that the foundations of both forms of trust are rooted in formative experiences. Trust springs from the sense of security we develop in early nurturing relationships. In friendships and peer relationships we learn about loyalty, accountability, and the reciprocity between trust and trustworthiness. However, trust among friends is an insufficient basis for social trust. To nurture a faith in humanity, children need to interact and cooperate with people who are different from them and values of equality, tolerance, and empathy have to be high priorities in their families.*

Social trust reflects a positive view of humanity, the belief that, as the three classic items used to measure the construct put it, “most people” are fair, helpful, and trustworthy. Widespread endorsement of this belief is considered important in a democratic society in which authority is vested in the people. When there is a general expectation that people will follow the rules, there is no need for heavy handedness by the state. Furthermore, high levels of social trust reflect a cooperative spirit and a willingness to participate in governance. Democracies rely on such an active citizenry, one that cares about public issues and holds the government accountable to the people (Putnam, 2000). Finally, social trust is important to a diverse democracy because it extends the radius of “others” who are included as members of the public beyond the narrow enclaves of family and friends.

Scholarly interest in the phenomenon of trust has increased of late, especially among political scientists and sociologists concerned that, as a society, we may be experiencing a deficit in trust (Putnam, 2000). Trend studies point to declines in the stock of social trust over time. In 1960 when Almond and Verba (1963) first asked whether “most people can be trusted,” 58% of Americans endorsed this view. By the mid-1990s, this figure had declined to one third although recovered to a high of 40% in 1998 (Uslaner, 2002). The declines in trust are due in large part to generational replacement: Like other contemporary adults, the younger generation (those between 18 and 25 years old) has less confidence than in the past in institutions such as the government or the press, but they also are less likely than their elders to feel that people in general can be trusted (Smith, 2000).

It is reasonable to assume that the foundations of trust are rooted in formative experiences. Yet, developmental perspectives have been missing from the scholarly discussions of trust. The aim of this article is to bring developmental thinking to bear on this topic. I have drawn from a somewhat scant literature to make a case that the bases for trust are rooted in family and peer relationships. Recognizing that generalized trust of strangers is qualitatively different from trust in people we know, I contend nonetheless that the foundation for both forms of trust are rooted in formative experiences with family and friends.

I argue four points. First, that the sense of security or basic trust that evolves out of the child’s earliest relationships is the origin for her sense of confidence or trust in herself and the basis for her belief that the world of “others” is a benevolent place worth exploring. Second, that in relationships with peers and especially friends we learn what it means to trust and to be trusted. We learn about loyalty, reciprocity, accountability, and freedom. Third, that relationships with familiar others or with people who are similar to us are an insufficient basis for developing social trust. To nurture the belief that people in general are fair, helpful, and trustworthy, young people need to interact with people who represent a broad range of others. Finally, that we will be more disposed to trust unknown others to the extent that values of equality, tolerance, empathy, and compassion are integral to our identities and to the extent that our families extend the boundaries of humanity to whom those values apply. Before expanding on these themes, some definitions are in order. What do we mean by trust?

Trust is a multidimensional construct that is fundamentally relational. It concerns oneself and some other or others whether they are intimates, strangers, or more abstract institutions or groups such as the government, the church, or humanity. The essence of trust is the belief that others are fair, that they will

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not take advantage of us, although they could. The latter point is essential to the phenomenon of trust. That is, trust is premised on freedom. Because the behavior of others is not under our control, trust is an act of faith, never fully certain.

Personal experiences help us distinguish people who are trustworthy from those who are not. This is an important part of growing up insofar as trust untempered by some skepticism, is naive, trust in the absence of good judgment is gullibility (Rotter, 1980). Perhaps the best evidence is provided in national data on social trust among African Americans and in racial socialization literature. Whereas African American adults contend that most other Black people can be trusted, their trust in White people is much lower (Uslaner, 2002). According to racial socialization literature, it is normal for African American parents to be proactive in preparing their children for a world where not everyone will have their best interests in mind. One of the most common themes that Black parents report is of warning their children that some people may judge them before they get to know them (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). As they reach adolescence, African American youth hear more cautions from their parents about people outside their networks, especially if the parents themselves have experienced incidents of prejudice at work (Hughes & Chen, 1997). Thus the social trust of African American youth is likely to be tempered by preparatory socialization meant to protect them from the realities of racism.

In the social capital literature, a distinction is made between thick trust, also referred to as strategic or particularized trust, and thin trust, or between bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2002). Thick trust is rooted in and reinforced by regular contact and dense networks with people we know. Social trust is thinner but extends the boundaries of those we consider fair, helpful, and trustworthy to a wider circle of humanity, to people we do not know. Among adults, social isolation is inversely related to both kinds of trust, but thin trust is not necessarily reinforced by the trust we feel for familiar others (Uslaner, 2002). In fact, the very processes that reinforce the solidarity and trust we have for similar others can be a barrier to contact with others who are different (Portes, 1998). Nonetheless, I contend that, from a developmental perspective, youths' experiences in community-based associations are the foundation, the starting point for the formation of trusting dispositions. It is in these organizations that they mix with other members of the community, develop a collective identity, learn about loyalty and the reciprocity between trust and trustworthiness, transcend narrow self-interest, and appreciate how their own interests can be realized in the interests of the group.

## Developmental Foundations of Trust

Trust springs from the sense of security we develop in early nurturing relationships and is molded by the values with which we are raised. Erikson (1950) referred to the infant's earliest relationship with those who care for her as the foundation of trust, "the ontological source of faith and hope." The sense of basic trust is a "pervasive attitude toward oneself and the world derived from the experiences of the first year of life" (p. 96). He emphasizes the importance of a feeling of continuity between the emerging sense of a distinct self with the broader community of which the infant is a part. The child learns to trust his or her own instincts because the world is a predictable place and others who inhabit it are basically benevolent, they have the child's best interests in mind. The reciprocal relation between trust and trustworthiness is learned even in this preverbal period. Erikson described it thus: "By trust I mean an essential trustfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one's own trustworthiness" (p. 96). When early experiences do not engender a basic sense of trust, self-doubt, and feelings of insecurity become more integral to the self.

In principle, a peer is an equal, and in relationships with peers we learn many of the dimensions of trust. First, that it is meaningless without freedom, our own and others, and that, because each party is free to choose, both parties in a relationship risk being disappointed. Second, we learn about the dynamics of cooperation and the relationship between trust and trustworthiness because peers, especially friends, hold one another accountable to their word. Reliability is one of the bases of interpersonal trust (Rotenberg, 1994). Keeping promises adds order and predictability to a relationship. Being true to our word means doing the things we said we would do—because we value our friendship and because we hold ourselves to a moral standard of dependability. When we break a promise, we lose face—with friends and in self-respect. According to Deutsch (1958), the trustworthy person is aware of being trusted, cognizant of this standard of his character and therefore bound by the trust invested in him.

There are qualitative differences in the depth of intimacy and vulnerability in our relationships with friends versus peers and in what we learn about trust in friendships versus peer relations. Reciprocity and symmetry in friendships are the qualities that allow the relationship to grow (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). Because friendships are based on reciprocity and cooperation, they tend to be more egalitarian than peer relations (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Although friends do compete, disagree, and fight, the importance of the relationship means that competition and dominance is less likely in friendships than

in peer relations and the desire to resolve differences is stronger among friends than nonfriends (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Qualities of faithfulness, loyalty, and intimacy are more characteristic of friendships than of peer relations (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). In friendships we learn to take an "others" perspective and develop our capacities for empathy and compassion (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986).

Yet, because our friends are typically people who are like us, these relationships may not be a basis for developing social trust. In fact, the bonds of trust between friends may be reinforced by stereotyping outgroups as less trustworthy. For example, elementary age children are more likely to trust peers of their own race and to believe that same-race peers would be more likely than peers of an opposite race to keep promises and tell the truth (Rotenberg & Cerda, 1994). Similarly, children's same-sex friendships are maintained by trust that results both from sharing secrets with one's friends and from beliefs that peers of the opposite sex would not keep secrets (Rotenberg, 1986).

Nonetheless, in friendships we come to value certain virtues (loyalty, reliability, empathy, a cooperative spirit, honesty, and authenticity) as standards to live by. If the virtues learned in friendships become integral to identity, then, compared to loners or social isolates, youth who have had close relationships with friends should be better prepared to extend the boundaries of those they trust to a larger segment of their community.

### Trust, Social Capital, and Engagement in Civic Associations

In research with adults, the relation between trust and civic engagement has been described as a "virtuous circle," that is, reciprocal and reinforcing. People who trust others are more likely to get involved in community organizations and the disposition to trust others is increased by such engagement (Putnam, 2000). However, whether this is truly a reciprocal circle is contested.

Putnam (2000) argued that the stock of social trust in the United States has declined because fewer Americans are spending time associating with fellow members of their communities. Whether in civic, political, or social affairs, according to Putnam, we are *Bowling Alone*. Social connections, according to Putnam, build social trust. Others point out that people with trusting dispositions are more likely to join community groups or organizations but that there is, at best, a small boost to trust that results from membership in most organizations. Stolle (1998) found an

increase in trust after people initially join an organization but no increase in trust associated with longevity in an organization. Some types of organizations may increase trust, whereas other types of organizations do not. For example, social trust is enhanced when the organizational membership is more diverse and when members have weak rather than strong ties (Stolle, 1998), and involvement in charitable giving or volunteer service in the community is associated with higher levels of social trust (Uslaner, 2002). However, there is little evidence that spending time in interest-based groups with others who are like oneself increases a belief that "most people are fair, helpful, and trustworthy."

Nonetheless, from a developmental point of view, when concepts of self, others, and the relationship between them are still evolving, I would argue that participating in community-based organizations is formative of trusting dispositions. In our studies, we have found that, compared to youth who are not involved in any community clubs or extracurricular activities at school, adolescents who are involved in at least one club have higher levels of social trust (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, in press). Compared to their uninvolved peers, they are more likely to say that most people in their community are benevolent, care about making their communities a good place to live, pitch in to solve community problems, and are open and welcoming to newcomers. In addition, youths' images of the police (although lower in general than their images of most others in their communities) are more positive if the young people are engaged in some sort of group or organization. Compared to social isolates, those youth who are involved in at least one club are more likely to feel that the police are helpful and mete out justice fairly. Likewise, analyses of cross-national data indicate that, across seven countries, there is a linear relation between social trust and youth engagement in extracurricular activities or community groups. Although levels of youth involvement in community clubs and extracurricular activities varies between countries (with higher involvement in community activities in the longer term democracies), across all countries, teens who spend no time in such activities are less likely to trust others (Buhl, 2001). Why?

One answer is that in the absence of encounters with real people, one is left to invent schema about others, and have no reality check on these views. For example, Rotenberg (1994) found that people who are lonely are less likely to trust others and to believe that others trust them, despite the fact that this view does not correspond to the actual reports of peers who are close to them. Youth who spend their free time alone are likely to watch a good deal of entertainment television (Larson, 2001). At least one study of early adoles-

cents has shown that television viewing is inversely related to youth's level of trust in parents, teachers, peers, and the wider social world (Ridley-Johnson, Chance, & Cooper, 1985). In contrast to the misanthropic view of others presented on much entertainment television, involvement with others in community-based organizations will at a minimum introduce young people to a range of trustworthy and not so trustworthy, but nonetheless, real people.

Another answer is that by belonging to community-based groups, young people develop affective ties to a group that is larger than themselves and feel a sense of group solidarity. Community-based youth organizations tend to be more egalitarian in structure than the other settings of development such as families or schools. In contrast to families and schools where relationships of power and authority are essentially asymmetrical, in youth groups the status of the members is roughly the same. On such an equal footing, youth can take chances to trust others and be trusted by them. The group and its goals, not the individuals, are of primary importance. Experimental studies have shown that, to the extent that individuals identify with a group they are more willing to forego individual gain to enhance the collective good (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In addition, in prisoner's dilemma studies, a sense of group identity or solidarity is the one consistent factor that increases cooperation even in the absence of rewards or expectations of future reciprocity (Dawes, van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1990).

### **Transcendent Selves: A Sense of Place**

We have argued that in these community-based organizations youth experience what it means to be part of the whole, to have a collective identity, one that transcends the self. By participating in community organizations, young people may develop a "sense of place," a feeling that they are an integral part of the community. When a sense of place is integral to identity, it becomes part of us no matter where we may reside thereafter. Such a transformation of the self would help to explain what Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) described as "the puzzle of participation" in civic and political affairs. Civic participation flies in the face of rational choice theories that hold that individuals are smart to be free riders, that is, not to spend their time and money on civic affairs because they will reap the benefits of collective goods whether or not they participate. However, we have argued that participation in community-based organizations and extracurricular activities nurtures a civic ethic in young people (Flanagan et al., in press). By engaging in such groups youth learn that "bearing the

cost becomes part of the benefit" (Verba et al., 1995, pp. 100–103).

Opportunities during the adolescent years to participate in organizations should nurture trusting dispositions in younger generations and thereby initiate the "virtuous circle" of participation and social trust. However, not all associations are alike in their civic benefits. As Portes (1998) argued, social capital has its downsides when the strong internal bonds of trust within an organization or group are maintained at the expense of including newcomers or outsiders. From developmental studies we also know that it is typically not until late adolescence that adolescents learn to integrate and resolve *different* points of view (Selman, Watts, & Schultz, 1997), which may be an artifact of age-grading, residential segregation, and tracking practices that result in rather homogeneous everyday encounters for the typical adolescent. Opportunities for intergroup relations and heterogeneous encounters may be particularly beneficial in the formative years, however. Analyses of national data sets reveal that, for youth but not for adults, out-group trust or positive views of others who are different from oneself, is positively related to generalized or social trust (Uslaner, 2002).

In this regard, community service may provide a unique opportunity for building social trust in younger generations. Compared to other forms of civic and social engagement, voluntary community service is associated with higher levels of hope, optimism, and trust in adults (Uslaner, 2002). One explanation for this association is that the experience of service results in feelings of efficacy in making a difference (Wuthnow, 1998). However, service that is meant to address public issues or that puts youth in contact with people whose needs are not being met by society, is a distinct experience with others in their community. Compared to interest-based groups that are the typical venue through which youth engage with others, community service introduces youth to others they would typically not encounter (Flanagan et al., in press) and may extend the moral community to whom they may feel a sense of obligation (Youniss & Yates, 1999).

Face to face encounters with individual members of stereotyped groups (the elderly, the homeless) may increase social trust because youth learn, as one teen in our studies put it, "they aren't so bad." Metz's (2002) longitudinal research provided convergent evidence. He found that, after a year of working in projects that served the needs of the poor, high school students were less likely to blame individuals for being poor and more likely to see the systemic bases of poverty. In other words, they got to know "the poor" as people and were more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. I hasten to add, however, that stereotypes could also be reinforced if

the service program is poor in quality or opportunities for guided group discussion and reflection on the service encounters are lacking. In community service, youth may also learn how their fates and the fates of others they are serving are intertwined. As one young person in our study reflected, "You should help people in need because someday you may need the help." We have interpreted such reflections as evidence that youth are developing an understanding of the "social contract," that is, that citizenship involves sharing with fellow citizens the burdens or responsibilities as well as the benefits or rights of living in a political community.

### Trust, Values, and Identity

Democratic faith is the decision to believe that a world of democratic trust is possible because we can see it in each person sometimes. It is the decision to believe in what people can be on the basis of what they are sometimes. It is the decision to believe that each polity and each person contains the possibility of a democratic version of itself. (Lummis, 1996, p. 155)

Trust, especially social trust in strangers, can never be certain. It would never be possible to make a rational calculation about whether it is prudent to trust people we do not know. Yet individuals differ in their disposition to trust people they do not know and for some there is a stubborn refusal to do otherwise. Repeated evidence from prisoner's dilemma studies indicates, that even under anonymous conditions, between one quarter and one third of the participants in these experiments decide to cooperate and refuse to take self-interested action because they choose, as they put it, to do the right thing (Dawes et al., 1990). Why do some people insist on cooperating with others, on having faith in humanity, on believing what people can be on the basis of what they are "sometimes"? In this final section I discuss the importance of a world view or stance toward others and the relation between trust and values as the standards we live by.

Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Scuidler, & Tipton, 1985) worried that individualist values have eclipsed commitments to community in the value priorities of the American middle class. However, based on her interviews with middle-class Americans across the adult age spectrum, Jensen (1995) found that whereas the moral language of young adults tends to focus on individual rights and interests, among midlife and older adults, concerns for individual rights are balanced with a language of community. Is there cause then for concern about younger generations?

As noted in the introduction, the declining levels of trust revealed in trend studies are due in large part to generational replacement, to the lower levels of trust in youn-

ger generations. Rahn and Transue (1998) provided a compelling explanation linking the declines in social trust to patterns over time in the value priorities of American youth. Their analyses of national trends among high-school students revealed that, as materialism became a more central life goal for youth, levels of social trust declined. This suggests that, if maximizing one's own advantage over others is a primary goal of identity, in a world of limited resources, others pose a threat. Social vigilance, guardedness, and suspicion about others who could gain a competitive edge quite naturally follows. "They" (like me), are no doubt out to win, to beat others, and therefore, they (like me) cannot be trusted. At a more macrolevel, social trust declines when economic disparities increase in a society (Uslaner, 2002).

Values are core beliefs about ourselves, standards we use to evaluate our behavior and assess whether it is consistent with our character (Rokeach, 1972). As the standards we live by, values help us define personal goals and are important determinants of how children reason about moral issues (Eisenberg, 1985). Schwartz (1996) provided a framework for conceptualizing values as either concordant or oppositional to one another. He argued that values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence are opposed and that whenever we prioritize one, we compromise the other. When personal achievement or social dominance are high priorities, caring for others is compromised and vice versa.

We have borrowed from Schwartz's framework in our studies of adolescents' values as correlates of their political views. In this work we have conceived of family values as a way that parents frame or interpret the world for their children and particularly the way that parents interpret relationships between oneself and others in the world (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). To measure this dimension of family values we have employed two constructs labeled *social responsibility* and *social vigilance*. Whereas the former reflects a family ethic of compassion, of giving others the benefit of the doubt, the latter emphasizes guardedness about others who may be out for their own gain and the dangers of being overly kind. These family values are correlated as would be expected with the degree to which adolescents themselves endorse self-interest and materialism versus public interest and the common good in their personal value priorities.

We have found that both familial and personal value priorities are consistently and significantly correlated with youth's emerging political identities—with their attributions for unemployment, poverty, and homelessness (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999); with their ideas about what democracy means; their attitudes towards immigrants; and what it means to them to be an American (Flanagan, Gallay, & Nti, 2002). Put succinctly, social responsibility and compassion are consistently and positively related to endorsement of a civic republican tradition that links

one's own interests to the common good and emphasizes the democratic ideals of equality, social justice, and concern for others. In contrast, youth who endorse self-interest and materialism and who are less trusting of others, tend to invoke the liberal tradition (individual rights, freedom, and personal achievements) in their conceptions of democracy and in their definitions of what it meant to them to be American and are more likely to hold individuals accountable for being poor, unemployed, or homeless (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). In other words, they are less likely to give members of these groups the benefit of the doubt.

Other work goes further in suggesting that self-interest untempered by concerns for others or the common good, is corrosive of democratic values such as tolerance and inclusion. For example, among high-school and college students, a preoccupation with self-interest is associated with negative stereotypes of African Americans (Katz & Hass, 1988) and with xenophobic attitudes among German students (Boehnke, Hagan, & Hefler, 1998). In Boehnke et al.'s work the key ingredient is the degree to which winning and feeling superior to others is at the heart of an individual's identity. McGowan and McGowan's (1991) study of trust and student athletes is relevant in this regard. They found that athletes who were starters for their teams were less likely to trust others when compared to their non-starter teammates. It seems likely that, whereas the identities of the former group were intimately connected to winning, the identities of the nonstarters were not.

I hasten to add that I am not arguing against achievement or even competition as healthy components of youth development. Rather, I summarize this work and echo Tocqueville's (1848/1969) observation that democracy in America thrives on self-interest properly understood, that is, realized in the public or common interest. Without a connection to some common good, freedom can become an isolating preoccupation with the self and ultimately a hazard to democracy (Bellah et al., 1985).

In his book, *Radical Democracy*, C. Douglas Lummis (1996) distinguished private from public hope. The former reflects optimism about one's own future and that of one's loved ones, the latter a belief in the possibilities of democracy, a faith in the collective will of the people to improve the world. What can we do to add to the stock of public hope? We can provide ample opportunities for youth to appreciate how their fate is connected to the fates of others.

In this regard, the capacity to empathize may well be the basis on which trust depends. Although empathy is biased towards others who are similar to the self, that bias can be reduced by teaching children to consider how their actions may affect others (Hoffman, 2000). As children mature, such socializa-

tion is likely to generalize to others in the world one does not know, to acts on their behalf, and to a benevolent view of humanity in general. Studies of activists in the Civil Rights and antiwar movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Dunham & Bengston, 1992; Franz & McClelland, 1994) and of those who sheltered holocaust survivors during World War II (Oliner & Oliner, 1988) confirm that compassion, empathy, and social responsibility were core family values that motivated their actions. Not surprisingly, intergroup contact and friendships with members of different social classes was also part of the socialization experience of citizens who chose to harbor holocaust survivors (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Social trust is a capacity for cooperation but also reflects a motivation, a willingness to believe in others not on the basis of all the evidence but on the basis of what they are sometimes. In the stubborn refusal to accept misanthropic views of humanity, social trust is a source of civic hope.

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