



## Parenting practices and the development of adolescents' social trust

Laura Wray-Lake<sup>a</sup>, Constance A. Flanagan<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Claremont Graduate University, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Wisconsin–Madison, United States

### A B S T R A C T

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Social trust (ST) (i.e., beliefs that people are generally fair and trustworthy) is a critical disposition for democratic governance. Yet there has been scant research on its developmental foundations. We assess factors related to ST in 11–18 year olds with survey data collected over two years from 1150 U.S. adolescents and their mothers. Adolescents' ST in year 1 and their reports of a positive neighborhood climate predicted ST one year later. Adolescents' reports of family practices were stronger predictors of their ST than were mothers' reports. Regression analyses revealed different factors predicting changes in ST for three adolescent age groups: With ST at T1 and background factors controlled, democratic parenting boosted ST for early- and middle-adolescents. Adolescents' reports that parents encouraged compassion for others boosted ST for middle- and late-adolescents, and parental cautions about other people taking advantage diminished ST among middle adolescents. Results suggest that the disposition to trust others is formed, in part, by what adolescents hear from parents about their responsibilities to fellow human beings and by modeling of democratic parenting.

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In a classic article in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Sullivan and Transue (1999) argue that democratic societies require more than laws and institutions. Democracies also depend on certain psychological dispositions in people, with an ethic of civic participation and tolerance of and trust in others high on the list. This paper concerns social trust in adolescence and the role of family processes in its development. Social trust is the belief that people generally are fair, helpful, and trustworthy and is positively related to many forms of civic attitudes and behaviors. Studies across nations indicate that individuals who endorse this belief also exhibit democratic values such as tolerance and open-mindedness and behaviors such as voting, volunteering, and participating in community affairs (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Phan, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2002; Wallace, 2008; Welch et al., 2005). Although it is likely that the foundations of this basic belief about people are formed prior to adulthood, most of the research on social trust is based on studies of adults.

The current study explores adolescents' beliefs that people generally are trustworthy rather than out for their own gain in a large sample of U.S. adolescents followed over two years. We argue that, to understand the development of social trust in adolescents, we must pay attention to family processes, in particular, the importance of compassion and responsibility for others that adolescents hear from their parents. We examine the relative contributions of mothers' own beliefs about the trustworthiness of people as well as mothers' and adolescents' reports of the values and practices emphasized in their families. With respect to values, we focus on what adolescents hear from parents about how one should treat others, i.e., with compassion (e.g., by being respectful, open-minded, and responsive to their needs) and caution (e.g., by being guarded lest other people take advantage); with respect to parenting practices, we focus on democratic parenting (i.e., the degree to which parents and adolescents respect one another's points of view). In addition, we control for demographic (age, gender, and race/

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 8145710913.

E-mail addresses: [laura.wray-lake@cgu.edu](mailto:laura.wray-lake@cgu.edu) (L. Wray-Lake), [caflanagan@wisc.edu](mailto:caflanagan@wisc.edu) (C.A. Flanagan).

ethnicity) and extra-familial factors (interpersonal trust in friendships and perceptions of a positive neighborhood climate) that may contribute to adolescents' social trust.

Developmental research has focused primarily on interpersonal trust in familiar others. However, social trust extends beyond such interpersonal relationships and taps one's beliefs about people in general. In his discussion of types of trust, Uslaner (2002) labeled the former "strategic" trust, that is, our level of confidence in those we know, and the latter "moralistic" trust, that is, our decision to treat others we do not know as we would wish them to treat us. Unlike familiars, people we do not know are less predictable. We cannot say with confidence that they are fair, honest, and benevolent and so, in making the leap of faith of placing our trust in them, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the possibility that other people may treat us unfairly or dishonestly. Social trust, then, is a gauge of our willingness to give others we do not know the benefit of the doubt. In so doing, we accept them as part of our moral community (Uslaner, 2002).

Research on the developmental foundations of social trust is sparse. However, longitudinal work following high-school seniors into their mid-thirties suggests that social trust crystallizes toward the end of the third decade of life and, except for major disruptions due to negative life events, remains rather stable thereafter (Damico, Conway, & Damico, 2000; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004; Uslaner, 2002). In light of the significance of this disposition for democratic governance, it seems imperative that we learn more about the development of these beliefs prior to adulthood.

Although developmental work on social trust per se is sparse, research has shown that, by the time they are early adolescents, children already hold implicit theories about people. Some early adolescents, labeled *entity theorists*, believe that people's traits are fixed and unlikely to change. In contrast, other so-called *incremental theorists* believe that people are capable of change. The latter group also is less inclined to judge others (Dweck, 1999; Levy & Dweck, 1999) or to stereotype outgroups such as homeless people and is more likely to see similarities between themselves and members of stereotyped groups (Karafantis & Levy, 2004). Although these studies are not specifically focused on social trust, they do suggest that even early adolescents differ in their willingness to give others whom they do not know the benefit of the doubt.

Longitudinal work looking specifically at social trust found that adolescents' beliefs in the trustworthiness of other people are both more positive and more malleable in early adolescence when compared to middle or late adolescence. Early adolescents report higher levels of social trust than do middle or late adolescents and, over the period of one year, even early adolescents' social trust declines. Whereas late adolescents' social trust measured in one year is a powerful predictor of their social trust one year later, there is more change in early adolescents' beliefs about the trustworthiness of others across this same time frame (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). In other words, social trust tends to crystallize as adolescents age. Consequently, parents' beliefs about the trustworthiness of other people should have the strongest impact in early adolescence, when adolescents' social trust is more malleable.

Developmental studies also have shown that capacities to conceive of abstract groups and to differentiate aspects of the social world from one's personal experiences increase between early and late adolescence (Eisenberg & Sheffield Morris, 2004; Keating, 2004). Compared to early adolescents, late adolescents are more likely to distinguish their general beliefs in a just world from perceptions that they are usually treated fairly (Dalbert & Sallay, 2004). Likewise, late adolescents are more likely than early adolescents to distinguish social trust from interpersonal trust in friendships (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). In summary, whereas early adolescents' beliefs about the world and about the trustworthiness of people are less abstract and differentiated from their personal experiences, late adolescents' beliefs are more crystallized. Based on previous research, we examine age differences in social trust, expecting a declining age trend from early adolescence to late adolescence. In addition, we assess the association of mothers' reports of their own beliefs in the trustworthiness of others with those of their early, middle, and late adolescents, expecting stronger associations between mothers and their early adolescent children.

### Parents' roles in the socialization of social trust

Uslaner (2002) argues that our beliefs about other people being trustworthy reflects a moral stand, a commitment to the Golden Rule of treating others as we would wish them to treat us. As such, the foundations of social trust are set early in life through the values we learn in families. In this paper we focus on parent-adolescent relationships and argue that there are three important roles that parents play in the development of children's social trust (see also Flanagan, 2003).

First, they are moral guides, admonishing children about relationships with fellow human beings and how one should treat them (i.e., don't judge people before you get to know them, attend to and respond to other people's needs). According to cross-national work, parental admonitions to be aware of and responsive to the needs of others are consistently and significantly related to adolescents' civic commitments, i.e., the importance they attach to serving their country and community (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998). In addition, research with adolescents in the United States points to significant associations between adolescents' political views and their reports that parents encourage them to be compassionate toward others: Adolescents who reported that an ethic of compassion was emphasized in their families were significantly more likely to see the systemic and structural roots of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness and less likely to blame individuals for these problems (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). Neither of these studies examined the relationship between family values of compassion and adolescents' social trust. However, analyses of trends over several decades among American adolescents showed that, as self-enhancing values (materialism) increased, levels of social trust declined (Rahn & Transue, 1998). In other words, when cohorts of youth adopted materialism as an important goal for their lives, they were more likely to believe that people in general were out for their own gain and were not trustworthy. Based on the extant

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