

‘More Community!’ Does the Social Capital Hypothesis Offer Hope for Untrusting Societies?¹

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ABSTRACT

Academics, politicians, and commentators influenced by the idea of social capital make a general claim that enhancing the social capital of the community can restore trust. Trust is produced, they argue, by group membership and participation, intimate connections, and consultation. But we argue here that the kind of relationships that many social capital researchers describe as trust are quite distinct, and that we should not expect that straightforward ‘more community’ solutions will be effective in building greater trust. We use data from the Middle Australia Project to specify regression models that predict three kinds of trust — trust in neighbours, trust in others, and trust in government. We find definite limits to the explanatory power of measures that could be described as social capital indicators for the latter two types of trust. We consider why social capital measures do not confirm the intuitions of social capital-based research and propose some alternative ways of looking at the problem.

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Introduction

'Restoring trust' and 'building trust' are by now familiar themes, especially in the influential current of Third Way politics. Societies fearful of crime, suspicious of governments, and pressed for time are apparently much less trusting than they once were. A glance at scholarly evidence points to the ebbing of trust. Robert Putnam points to four decades of declining trust in other people in the United States (2000, p. 140). At the same time, public confidence in governments and politicians is dropping away (Norris 1999, p. 6; see also Burchell & Leigh 2002). An untrusting society is adynamic: people are frightened of each other, spend time and money protecting themselves against social risks and hazards, and economic development is stunted or distorted.

A group of thinkers in think tanks, universities, and in politics argue that the problem of low trust is produced by falling social capital. Social capital is the community's stock of civic hardware — including groups, associations, and opportunities to participate and learn — that leads us to trust others and institutions, to take risks, and to develop. Advocates of the social capital idea think of it as a kind of glue that binds us together alongside our economic and political institutions. The practical implication of the social capital idea is that building trusting communities will cure social ills (Cox & Caldwell 2000, p. 49). Long forgotten, trusting communities can succeed where governments are too clumsy and markets too ruthless and selfish.

The idea that communities build trust is appealing. It is straightforward and offers some practical solutions but we suggest here that it probably cannot be sustained. We reach this understanding by looking at some of the initial claims researchers made about the relationship between social capital and trust, highlighting insightful later criticisms. These criticisms focus on the problem of assuming that associational life offers a panacea to low trust. The source of the problem is confusion arising from an overly general concept of trust. Trusting neighbours and trusting the government both involve an expression of confidence and mutual expectation but they probably depend on different social and political foundations. We develop three regression models based on evidence from the Middle Australia Project data to show that trust in neighbours, in others in general, and in governments are explained by quite different factors. The implication for the social capital research program is clear: building trust through strengthening communities is a valuable idea but we should be cautious about overgeneralising this claim.

Social capital: The 'more community!' solution to the problem of low trust

Social scientists attached to the idea of social capital argue that trust is produced by social capital. Communities that get on, know each other through groups and associations, and remain dynamic possess a lot of social capital and in turn generate a high degree of trusting interaction. Sociologist James Coleman (1990) coined the

term 'social capital' to describe how the institutional and associational foundations of society determine social performance, economic success, and trust. Robert Putnam excited the academic and political worlds with a further discovery based on his study of Italian regional government. He argues that civic association produces trust. In contemporary America, he speculates that low trust is strongly related to the decline in associational life measured by the rate of group membership and participation, and Americans' reliance on formal institutions (2000, pp. 134–147). Putnam finds evidence of declining trust in others everywhere: the rising crime rate, and increased spending on public and private security (2000, pp. 143–146). The costs of low trust are substantial. Putnam cites evidence that in societies with higher levels of general trust, people are more likely to comply in paying their taxes (2000, p. 347) and governments operate more effectively (2000, p. 346). Involvement and participation are key factors. For example, education improves when parents volunteer in classrooms and make sure that children complete their homework (2000, p. 346). Elsewhere Putnam makes a general claim that 'social trust has long been a key ingredient in the ethos that has sustained economic dynamism and government performance' (1993, p. 170). Francis Fukuyama has made even stronger claims about the effects of trust on economic performance, which he in turn locates in society's store of social capital. He offers a compelling defence of the function of social capital in market democracies: capitalism and democracy both depend on trust to be effective and high trust depends on our stock of social capital. Putting it bluntly, Fukuyama writes that 'The concept of social capital makes clear why capitalism and democracy are so closely related' (1995, p. 356).

Whether directly stated or implied, social capital thinkers point to reviving trust in communities to soothe the ailments of weak social, political, and economic institutions. Calls for 'more community' generally mean encouraging participation through greater associational membership, more opportunities for input into decisions, and greater community consultation. But will building up community associations and community life alone offer a panacea to the apparent ills of an untrusting society?

Two kinds of revision to the social capital line of argument have emerged from friendly and sceptical critics. The first kind of revision accepts that types of trust may be quite different. Claus Offe sums it up well when he states that personal interaction is too narrow a basis to understand trust in societies 'in which mobility and the need for cooperation with and reliance upon strangers is a prominent feature' (1999, p. 55). Putnam acknowledges, in recent work, that trust in government and trust in other people must be kept theoretically distinct (2000, p. 137). Russell Hardin also doubts that we can conceive of trust in people and trust in organisations as the same (1999, p. 38). He asks whether declining trust in government might not be a negative consequence of declining community spirit, but instead a sensible response to contemporary circumstances (1999, pp. 38–40).

The second kind of revision qualifies the assumption that a ‘thick’ associational life is automatically virtuous. Racist groups, for instance, are thick associations, may promote trust among members but raise mistrust and fear of and among others. Onyx and Bullen speculate that at least two forms of social capital emerge from our associational forms: an inward-looking and localised form that is potentially distrusting of outsiders, and generalised, impersonal social capital that is perhaps positive but generates no strong sense of community (2000, pp. 124–5). Other qualifications to arguments about the benefits of association are necessary. Evidence suggests that socio-economically advantaged insiders have the benefits of associations but less advantaged people do not (Johnston & Jowell 1999, p. 193). In this way, group activities may ‘bond together’ and assist the winners in society rather than create ‘bridges’ for the losers (see Jowell 2003).

Perhaps the worry that trusting a neighbour and a government are not really the same thing drives ambivalence towards the social capital hypothesis. If they are different, then different explanations and solutions — and ones other than associational membership — might need to be taken seriously. Sociologists have made progress in the distinguishing of different types of relationships and the resources we put into maintaining them. A long line of sociologists including Emile Durkheim, George Simmel, and Charles Cooley have variously tried to understand how relationships are reshaped and then sustained under the impersonal conditions of life in modern societies. In recent times, writers like Mark Granovetter (1973) have extended this research by looking at the strength of ‘social ties’ in explaining social action.

Sociological research offers us a few more resources to distinguish between types of relationships, and therefore the kinds of expectations, norms, rules and activity that regulate them. Our expectations of family members, friends, and politicians are necessarily different, not only because modern societies depend on complex systems that are regulated by trust in highly impersonal and abstract processes, but also because families, neighbourhoods, and governments are expected to provide very different things. We would expect that damage to trust in a close personal relationship or in a government, for instance, to occur along different fault lines, with different consequences and remedies. In a complex, differentiated society, we would not expect to find automatic symmetry between the causes of and solutions to loss of personal trust and the causes of and solutions to loss of trust in government or in neighbourhood safety.

Is trust in neighbours, strangers, and governments the same thing?

If the most fundamental position attached to the social capital hypothesis is correct, we would anticipate that some measure of associational behaviour such as group membership would shoulder the explanatory burden for trust across the social spheres. We take three measures of trust — trust in neighbours, trust in other people generally, and trust in government — and test explanatory variables by developing

regression models based on Middle Australia Project data.² To simplify matters, we use a measure of civic association — group membership — as one of the independent variables. For the strong version of social capital argument to hold, we would expect civic association to predict trust across the three measures we examine below.

Dependent variables

Three dependent variables capture three dimensions of trust we are interested in testing. The first dependent variable is a scale that measures personal trust in neighbours. Measuring personal trust like our trust in neighbours is difficult — Uslaner, for instance, thinks that there are no good measures for this form of highly particularised trust (1999, p. 126). To approximate a measure of personal trust, we use a scale of items in which respondents are asked to report their potential reliance and implied trust in their neighbours (see the Appendix for the items in the scale and its robustness).

The second and third variables are straightforward items that measure trust in people generally (strangers) and trust in governments respectively, data for both of which are readily available from the Middle Australia Project. The respective questions are: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’³ and ‘How much do you trust the Government in Canberra to do what is right? Do you trust it almost always, most of the time, only some of the time or almost never?’⁴ These questions are used very commonly in international studies of social attitudes; for example, four longitudinal

² The Middle Australia Project was funded by an Australian Research Council grant and directed by Professor Michael Pusey at the School of Sociology, University of New South Wales (see Pusey 2003). The study drew a stratified random sample from Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing Collectors’ Districts, in major cities only, based on Bob Gregory and Boyd Hunter’s analysis of change in household income over fifteen years. Collectors’ districts were selected below the top ten per cent and above the lowest twenty per cent of household incomes, comprising a broad ‘middle’ Australia. The districts were also stratified on the basis of whether household incomes were rising, remaining steady, or falling over the fifteen year period. A final sample of 403 responses was obtained from the response rate of twenty per cent. Each respondent completed a lengthy questionnaire and a one and one half hour interview in their home. The length of the questionnaire and the requirement that respondents agree to be interviewed in their homes probably contributed significantly to the low response rate.

³ The frequency distribution for this question is: Most people can be trusted ($N=184$), Can’t be too careful ($N=191$), Don’t know ($N=1$), Missing cases ($N=27$).

⁴ The frequency distribution for this question is: Almost always ($N=5$), Most of the time ($N=123$), Only some of the time ($N=199$), Almost never ($N=65$), Missing cases ($N=11$). We collapsed the categories of this variable together to form two possible answers; More trusting ($N=128$) and Less trusting ($N=264$).

studies using the question on trust are presented in Putnam (2000, p. 140); and the World Values Survey, in Inglehart (1990). The first measures trust in general or trust of people we may not have met or do not know well. In other words, it measures 'thin' trust (Putnam 2000, p. 137). Uslaner finds this question a good measure of trust in strangers, or generalised trust (1999, p. 126). Trust in government is an impersonal measure, but distinct from general trust in that it involves organisations and institutions rather than strangers.

Independent variables

To test some of the possible factors that explain different types of trust, we developed a number of scales to include as independent variables in regression analysis (see the Appendix for full details). The first set of scales attempts to gain a handle on various dimensions of social capital. A *community belongingness* scale measures the respondents' connection to their neighbourhood. An *associational membership* scale measures the number of associations, clubs and societies of which respondents are members. The second set of scales measure other factors we think have a bearing on trust; these scales measure the 'insider status' of respondents. As we have suggested above, feelings of confidence in the impersonal world can be generated by our status and opportunities for participation that are not socio-economically neutral. A *job prestige* scale measures feelings about occupation. A *confidence in public institutions* scale measures perceptions of the effectiveness of a range of public and private institutions. Finally, a *class worldview* scale measures perceptions about the distribution of economic power. We deemed two other scales relevant to our analysis because they give some sense of how respondents view the behaviour of others in their communities and society at large. These are a *welfare* scale, which measure attitudes towards welfare benefits and welfare recipients, and a *crime* scale, which measures the respondents' perceptions of various crimes in their local area.

With the three dependent measures of trust (in neighbours, others, and the government), we tested the explanatory power of the scales using regression analysis.⁵ For simplicity, we present only the most significant independent variables. Non-significant independent variables that were tested have not been included.

⁵ Due to the format of the dependent trust variables, Model A — which measure trust in neighbours — was specified in linear regression form. Models B and C, which measure trust in others, and trust in governments to do the right thing, were specified in logistic regression form.

TABLE 1:
Three regression models that explain the trust in neighbours, others, and government

	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>
Dependent variable	Trust in neighbours (scale) ¹	Trust in people in general	Trust in government
Regression model	Linear	Logistic	Logistic
Constant	0.10	-0.13	1.45 ^{****}
Community Belonging scale	0.50 ^{****}		
Confidence in public institutions scale		2.22 ^{****}	4.63 ^{****}
Welfare scale		-0.64 [*]	
Class worldview scale			-1.44 ^{****}
Age	0.08 [*]		0.02 ^{**}
R^2	0.26 ^{****}		
Nagelkerke's R^2		0.15 ^{****}	0.40 ^{***}
Model Fit	$F = 67.86^{***}$ (2.12) (Durbin Watson)	$p = 0.86$ (Hosmer & Lemeshow)	$p = 0.87$ (Hosmer & Lemeshow)

^{*} $p < 0.1$, ^{**} $p < 0.05$, ^{***} $p < 0.01$, ^{****} $p < 0.001$.

¹ Collinearity diagnostics: Tolerance = 0.97, VIF = 1.03. Constant in model is unstandardised.

Regression results

Table 1 presents our regression results. Model A suggests that the *community belongingness* scale best explains personal trust in neighbours. The scale measures the extent of neighbourhood attachment. Age was a very weakly predictive factor in explaining higher trust; in other words, older people tended to be more trusting. Curiously, *associational membership* did not predict higher trust in neighbours. This means that multiple group membership did not translate into more trust, as social capital models might predict. This suggests that the kinds of personal trust that we invest in immediate environment including the people in our neighbourhood might be influenced by factors other than 'community building' associational life.

Model B suggests that *confidence in public institutions* and holding affirmative attitudes towards *welfare* help explain trust in others. Again, we found that the social capital scales (community belongingness, associational membership) did not explain this type of trust. We infer from the significant independent variables that generalised trust in others is connected to our confidence in the intentions and activities of strangers and institutions, whether they are police officers or people in need.

Model C shows that trust in government is best explained by both *confidence in public institutions* and holding a *benign class worldview*. Feeling confident in the performance of institutions, which reveals a sanguine perception of impersonal institutional life, equally confers trust in government. At the same time, the *class worldview* scale predicts that the more respondents perceive the world as economically — and unfairly — unequal, the more likely they were to have low trust in government. This may be in part because respondents interpret the trust in government question to be about the current (Liberal-National Coalition) government and not about governments in general. But other studies have suggested that socio-economic worldviews influence trust in government. The broader point is that measures of social capital do not seem to explain trust in government.

The ‘more community!’ solution: Generalising the worldview of the winners

We find some evidence of a distinction in the factors that explain personal trust (trust in neighbours) and impersonal forms of trust (trust in others⁶) and trust in government. The lack of explanatory authority established by the associational membership scale⁷ — the most accessible measure of the ‘more community’ social capital argument — is our central finding. The Middle Australia data supports our argument that the mechanisms that determine trust in impersonal relationships do not, in the first instance, derive from our associations or our community life. Our results suggest that respondents differentiate between their local and intimate

⁶ There is controversy among social survey researchers about the question ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted’ or that ‘you can’t be too careful in dealing with people’. Some scholars treat it as a measure of personal trust (Damico et al. 2000). Others use it to assess general trust. Putnam notes that the meanings of responses to this question are ‘murky’ (2000, p. 137). We see good reasons to consider this question a *composite* measure of trust that encompasses both personal and impersonal aspects of trust. When we refer to ‘most people’ it is unspecified as to whether the respondent is being asked to talk about intimate relationships or other relationships which are more institutionally mediated — or even random. Many relationships in which people deal with ‘most people’ are as consumers, clients of a welfare state, employees, and in other institutionally mediated situations. It is not surprising, therefore, that variables that attempt to measure class perceptions of the distribution of economic power and job prestige provide a marginally better explanation for this type of trust. This is because substantial class differences in experiences of mediated relationships are translated into differences in trust. To illustrate, we don’t think it is far fetched to imagine that our dealings with other people in shops, at work, in banks, and so on will be structured by broader factors. Hence while the concept itself is ‘murky’ we suspect this is because it taps into a broad range of relationships between citizens and their involvement in public life and with private institutions.

⁷ The absence of any effect attached to the *associational membership* scale may arise due to the inability of the Middle Australia Project to account for the size, density, and diversity of networks (see Stone & Hughes (2002) for a consideration of these factors). In either case, the simple advocacy of the ‘more community’ view seems misplaced.

spheres, and the broader world of impersonal action and forces. As socio-logical theory points out, trust in impersonal institutions and in strangers is a highly mediated experience, and therefore is not consonant with our more immediate sphere of influence. In his detailed study of the links between social trust, political trust, and social capital, Newton points out that the inter-relationships are 'more complex and indirect than appears to be the case at first' (2001, p. 202). Merely advocating deeper community associational life may miss this complexity.

Are we surprised that people confident in public institutions are more confident in strangers and government? We think that this result is not such a surprise. If our experience of abstract institutions is positive, affirming, and reinforcing of trust, we are likely to grant trust. If our experience is negative, we withdraw trust. 'Insiders' with status, resources, and opportunities do not see institutional life as obstructive or untrustworthy (see also Newton 2001, p. 204). This is possibly because they have the most resources to benefit from institutional life in the first place. Perhaps individuals with strong class worldviews mistrust governments for the same reason: their experience of government policy does not lend itself to the view that the government is doing the right thing.

That trust in government and strangers cannot be explained by associational density or social capital measures of other kinds is telling. Put simply, community-building exercises promoted in political rhetoric that encourage the 'third sector' or 'more community!' solutions for the disadvantaged (often instead of government intervention or creating employment) may do little or nothing to change the prevailing climate of low trust and pessimism. Policies that restore the credibility of public institutions may depend on how they treat marginalised groups or those who feel disempowered in politics, at work, or in the community.

The 'more community' option is probably not a solution to the problem of low trust because we cannot find any strong evidence that points to the density of associational life as being critical for trust, especially in strangers or governments. Part of the problem lies with the dangers of assuming a simple linear relationship between associational life and trust. Newton makes it clear that:

it is difficult to sort out the complicated cause-and-effect relations between membership of voluntary associations and trust. It seems at least as likely that trusting people tend to join organisations as the other way round. The relationship is likely to be reciprocal, but the strongest path probably runs from trusting to joining associations. The argument for this supposition is as follows: we know that social winners tend to be trusting, and that joiners of voluntary organisations are often winners with comparatively high income, education and social class. It seems more likely that the background and experience of being a social winner encourages both joining and trusting (2001, p. 207).

We are not saying that associational membership confers no social benefits. But if the cause-and-effect involved in the social capital hypothesis is reversed, the solution is not ‘more community!’ but more of the social resources — opportunities, income and education — that make people willing and able to participate in their communities. Getting it wrong perhaps only confirms the worldview of the winners. Resources that restore confidence in governments and communities are necessarily very wide-ranging; including anti-corruption initiatives, ensuring viable public transport systems, countering racism and prejudice, and reducing the unequal experiences that abstract market and bureaucratic resources present to the already disadvantaged. Public institutions — including the economic system — and governments have a responsibility to lift their own game, and not to expect that overstretched families and communities with few resources can make up for the inequality of market distributions and the deficiencies of public programs.

Appendix: Scale items and robustness

We evaluated the scales (set out below) using a ‘scale reliability analysis’ test, which determines whether we can consider the responses to each question to follow a similar pattern, tapping into one underlying concept or ‘latent’ variable (DeVellis 1991, p. 9). Once the scales were formed, we converted each into true values between -1 and 1 for consistency. We formed the associational membership scale by a simple addition of the number of associations to which each respondent belonged. If a sufficient value of the test statistic, Cronbach’s alpha, is obtained then we can add the values of the questions together to form a single scale. We can then treat this scale as a real number series and perform more complex statistical procedures in order to test the degree to which the variables predict each type of trust. Low alpha values indicate that responses to the questions are too diverse and would not form a consistent scale. The alpha values we obtained, between 0.82 and 0.92 , are all in the optimum range (DeVellis 1991, p. 85).

Community belongingness

- I would be really sorry if I had to move away from the people in this neighbourhood.
- I have a lot in common with the people in this neighbourhood.
- People in this neighbourhood make it a difficult place to live in.
- I am good friends with many people in this neighbourhood.
- I have little to do with people in this neighbourhood.
- People in this neighbourhood are very willing to help each other out.
- If I no longer lived here, hardly anyone around here would even notice.

Scale from 1 ‘Strongly agree’ to 5 ‘Strongly disagree’. Standardised item alpha = 0.86 .

Trust in neighbours

Do you know your neighbours well enough to:

- Have a child minded for an hour in an emergency?
- Have a child minded regularly?
- Borrow five dollars until you go to the bank?
- Borrow something else?
- Water the garden for you if you are away?
- Feed your pets if you are away?
- Have a talk with you if you're feeling down?
- Get small items of shopping for you if you are ill?
- Keep an eye on your home for you if you go away?

Standardised item alpha = 0.88.

Associational membership

Are you a member of any of the following:

- Union?
- Professional association?
- Other association (eg. farmers, Country Women's' Association etc.)?
- Political party?
- Church or religious group?
- Tenants' association?
- Residents' group?
- Sporting club?
- Drama / music / art etc. club?
- Group dedicated to some cause (eg. environment, civil liberties, consumer protection etc.)?
- School council or any other group related to your children's school?
- Service club (Rotary, Apex, Lions etc.)?
- Social club?
- Other group (please specify)?

No. of memberships added together.

Job prestige

Is your job ...

- High prestige — Low prestige?
- Gets much respect from others — Gets little respect?
- Well regarded by the public — Not highly regarded?
- Greatly esteemed — Gets no respect?

Scale from 1–9. Standardised item alpha = 0.92.

Confidence in public institutions

How much confidence do you have in:

- Banks and financial institutions?
- Federal Government in Canberra?
- Australian political parties?
- The public service?
- Major Australian companies?
- The Australian political system?
- Australia's future as a nation?

Scale from 1 'Very great deal' to 6 'None'. Standardised item alpha = 0.82.

Class worldview

- Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers.
- Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth.
- There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.
- Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.
- A few rich people get too big a share of the nation's wealth.
- Employees will never protect their working conditions and wages without strong trade unions.
- Major public services and industries ought to be in private ownership.

Scales from 1 'Strongly agree' to 5 'Strongly disagree' and 'Don't know'. Standardised item alpha = 0.87.

Welfare

- The welfare state makes people nowadays less willing to look after themselves.
- The welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other.
- Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to.
- Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help.
- Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another.
- If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet.
- It is everyone's own responsibility to find a job for themselves, and nothing to do with the government.

Scale from 1 'Agree strongly' to 5 'Strongly disagree' and 'Don't know'. Standardised item alpha = 0.89.

Crime

How common or uncommon are each of the following things in your area:

- Graffiti on walls or buildings?
- Teenagers hanging around on the streets?
- Drunks or tramps on the streets?
- Vandalism and deliberate damage to property?
- Insults or attacks to do with someone's race or colour?
- Homes broken into?
- Cars broken into or stolen?
- People attacked in the streets?

Scale from 1 'Very common' to 4 'Not at all common' and 'Don't know/refuse'. Standardised item alpha = 0.89.

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