

**The Danger of a Single Question; Problems of The Generalized Trust Question in Trust  
Research**

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## **Abstract**

Accurately and reliably measuring trust presents difficulties in social science research. Survey measures, like the generalized trust question, are often employed to measure respondents' belief in the trustworthiness of unknown others. The generalized trust question appears in the literature as “Generally would you say that most people can be trusted?” with the response options of “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people,” (Putnam, 1995; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Delhy & Newton, 2010, Rapp, 2016). This paper argues that the poor phrasing of the generalized trust question leads to differences in question interpretation, and unreliable and inaccurate measurements of trust, and so claims from prior research using the question should be reevaluated and alternative measures of trust should replace the general trust question. The vagueness of the question leads to differential interpretations where some respondents may be considering people they know rather than basing their answer on how trustworthy they believe unknown people to be, or interpretation may depend on the size of the respondents social circle and the response options conflate trust with caution. Combined with the question’s poor predictive validity for behavioral trust, research which relies on the generalized trust question should be redone with alternative measures of trust that avoid the generalized trust question’s pitfalls.

Measuring, defining, and understanding the impact of trust is a challenge in the field of social science research. Trust is often measured with survey measures, especially by one measure known as the general trust question which is phrased as “Generally would you say that most people can be trusted?” with the response options of “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people,” (Delhy et. al 2011). The general trust question has been used as a single item to assess generalized trust in major global surveys like the General Social Survey or the World Values Survey. The use of a single question to measure something as ambiguous as generalized trust is fraught without considering the flaws of the question. I argue that the poor phrasing of the generalized trust question leads to differences in question interpretation, and unreliable and inaccurate measurements of trust, and so claims from prior research using the question should be reevaluated and alternative measures of trust should replace the general trust question. To assess the validity of research using the generalized trust question, this paper will analyze the phrasing issues in the generalized trust question, assess its ability to predict behavioral trust, review three claims from research to determine how the flaws of the question impact the conclusions, and finally, propose alternative methods of measuring trust.

### **Definitions**

For this paper the following terms will be used as they are defined here: The generalized trust question, generalized trust, generalized other, specific trust, attitudinal trust, behavioral trust and social capital. First, the generalized trust question appears in the literature as “Generally would you say that most people can be trusted?” with the response options of “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people,” (Putnam, 1995; Knack & Keefer,

1997; Delhy & Newton, 2010, Rapp, 2016). Second, generalized trust (also mentioned as macro-level trust) refers to the belief that strangers or anonymous other people can be trusted (Ahmed & Salas 2009). Third, the generalized other refers to how a person conceptualizes the characteristics of their society or how they might expect a hypothetical person from their society to act (Sturgis & Smith 2010). Fourth, specific trust (or micro-level trust) is trust in individuals in one's social circle based on past experiences with them (Ahmed & Salas 2009) Fifth, attitudinal trust refers to the belief that unknown strangers can be trusted, this reflects a person's belief about the moral condition of their society while behavioral trust refers to an action in which a person willingly places themselves in a situation to be vulnerable to another person's actions (Glaeser et. al 2000). Sixth, social capital is the social relationships, networks, and associations that allow society to function (Knack & Keefer 1997). Generalized trust is one aspect of what is considered to be social trust.

### **Phrasing Issues of the Generalized Trust Question**

There are several studies which critique the issues of the generalized trust question (Sturgis & Smith 2010, Delhy et. al 2011, Miller & Mitamura 2003). First, Smith & Sturgis question if respondents are considering a generalized other or something else when they think of 'most people'. Previous research suggests that most people are thinking of a generalized other which constitutes their beliefs about how trustworthy their society is (Sturgis & Smith 2010). To this point, Knack and Keefer (1997) found a low correlation between trust in family and levels of generalized trust, suggesting that people are not thinking of their trust in family when answering the general trust question. However, Sturgis and Smith (2010) aimed to understand how a minority of respondents who did not consider a generalized other understood 'most people'. To assess this, Sturgis and Smith (2010) administered the generalized trust questionnaire to one group of participants and the trust in neighbors scale to another group of participants. The trust in neighbors questionnaire asks respondents how much they trust specific groups of people such as