

# Conceptualizing and Measuring Sense of Social Trust



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Social trust plays a crucial role in the social life of human beings. It is not only an effective channel for individuals to reduce their psychological complexity and get their own security, but also an effective social integrated force maintaining social order and promoting social cooperation, harmony and stability. Since China's economic society has entered its comprehensive transition phase, the interpersonal trust model built on the basis of familiarity and interpersonal relationships is facing unprecedented challenges. The trust structure of the whole society tends to dissociation and disintegration. Meanwhile, a new type of trust structure based on the spirit of the new social life has yet to be fully established. These two problems intertwine as society undergoes a "confidence crisis". Under this circumstance, in the face of both history and reality, it is urgent to comprehensively and thoroughly analyze the existing studies on social trust, deepen our cognition of the nature of the sense of social trust, and provide a frame of reference to resolve social contradictions and problems caused by the confidence crisis in order to reflect the practical value of our research.

## 1 Concept and Classification of Social Trust

### 1.1 Definition of Trust from the Multidisciplinary Perspective

As early as 100 odd years ago, Simmel, the famous German sociologist, raised in his monograph *The Philosophy of Money* the following question: "How can society be possible?" He regarded trust as "one of the most important comprehensive powers of society." He affirmed, "Without generalized interpersonal trust, society would be

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a mess” (Simmel 2002). In the modern sense, study of social trust started with the systematic and scientific studies on interpersonal trust by social psychologists in the 1950s. Subsequently, scholars of sociology, political science, economics and other disciplines have been involved in and formed the corpus of study of social trust.

### 1. Trust as a personality trait or belief

American psychologist Deutsch (1958) adopted the famous Prisoner’s Dilemma experiment, a precedent to modern research, to study trust. He defined trust as a human response to a situation, affirming that interpersonal trust is affected by different situations. Subsequently, social psychologists adopted experiments and scales to conduct in-depth and multi-angle studies on the occurrence mechanism of trust, including cognition, personality, attitude, motivation, interpersonal, etc., and defined trust as a relatively stable personality trait or belief formed gradually via learning in society. Trust is “a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon”. Namely, trust is “reliance in other people’s words and deeds” (Rotter 1967), “the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other’s vulnerability” (Sabel 1993), “the belief that forms one part of personal traits and owned by an individual”, or that “ordinary people are sincere and kind, and they also trust in other people” (Wrightsmann 1992); trust is a moral character “which is rooted in our hearts, not demands” (Peyrefitte 2005). Although modern concerns about trust stem in the studies on psychology, the micro perspective based on individual interpersonal interactions and individual personality traits makes it difficult to deepen our understanding of trust.

### 2. Trust as an expectation and attitude

With the advent of the risk society, the urgent social problem of the confidence crisis had yet to be addressed as it drew the attention of western sociologists. Since the 1970s, trust problems have been a hot topic in sociology. Luhmann, the neo-functional sociologist, noted that trust is the manifestation of expectations for someone, as well as the basic fact of social life. “Every day, we regard trust as the self-evident ‘nature’ of humanity and the world” (Luhmann 2005: 1), which is a strategy to deal with uncertainty, a social mechanism to simplify complexity. Giddens (2000) regarded trust as an optimistic attitude towards a living environment or future situation for which the individual only possesses incomplete information or is facing uncertain results, and “the extended foundation of time-space that is associated with modernity”. Barber (1983), in his book *The Logic and Limits of Trust*, defined trust as “the expectation of the persistence and fulfillment of natural and moral orders”, which assures a trustee’s willingness to fulfill his or her fiduciary duties. Henceforth, trust has been believed to belong to the macro-social field, highlighting the influences of social structure, institutional change and other factors on trust and their urgent needs for trust. The concept of social trust has grown from there.

### 3. Trust as a social culture

Trust can also be interpreted as a culture established on the basis of custom, tradition and religion and then explained different countries' social development based on it. Polish sociologist Sztompka (2005), regarded trust as a kind of cultural rule, "a gamble on other people's possible actions in the future". Fukuyama (2001) is a typical cultural theorist advocating that trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative individuals, whose behavior is based on common norms also shared by other members of that community, making spontaneous social interaction, group cohesion and political participation possible. Almont and Verba (1963) believed that trust is an important part of political culture, which significantly impacts the growth of democracy. British sociologist Putnam (2001) pointed out that trust is a "moral resource", the characteristic of social structure on which depends an individual, and the core component of ethics, ensuring independent economic development and good government performances. "Trust is an indispensable component of social capital" and "the key factor for the functioning of democracy".

### 4. Trust as a rational choice

The concept of trust as based on the economic assumption that we are "rational men" is regarded as the result of people's rational choices. Limited by access to information and the ability to compute it, trust allows people to avoid risks and reduce the cost of interaction; morally, it is therefore necessary for public economic exchanges. In his book *Foundations of Social Theory*, Coleman, representative of the rational school, pointed out that all successful cooperation is built on interest-based trust investments and the assurance of benefit (Liu and Zhai 2007). Arrow (1972) indicated that trust is the lubricant of economic exchanges and the most effective mechanism controlling contracts, whereas it is itself an implicit contract and scarce and unique merchandise. Gambetta (1988) pointed out that "trust is the assumption that the probability that a person with whom we are in contact will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him". "Trust is a very attractive concept. It implies autonomy and the advantage of self-organization, abandoning the strong supervision of a third party." Actually, trust is "social capital", which can reduce the cost of supervision and punishment. Therefore, trust might result from a calculated emotional lack, whereas both sides are rational "economic men".

## 1.2 Types of Social Trust

Studies on social trust emphasize the exploration of constitutional dimensions, which is an important method to analyze the nature of social trust. Luhmann and Giddens tended to regard social trust as the result of the impact of psychology as well as that of the social system on social relations in the interactive frame. Their classification of

social trust is a dichotomy. Luhmann indicated that in addition to interpersonal trust built upon acquaintance and emotional connection between people, interpersonal trust is most suited for this highly differentiated, modern society. It consists in a complicated and simplified mechanism, in which money, truth, power and other media of generalization play the role of carriers. Following in Luhmann's steps, Giddens further intertwined the concept of social trust with that of risk, believing that the dislodging that results from the separation of time-space in modern society transforms the mode according to which community members mutually interact from "present" to "absent". As risk becomes an unavoidable fact, trust becomes a way to prevent and resolve risk. Trust relationships in modern society are based on a "disembodied" environment, which is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is established on the basis of a pure interpersonal relationship, the other on the abstract system mainly reflected in the trust of various symbolic signs and expert systems. Piotr Sztompka believed that the concept of trust could be divided into social trust and interpersonal trust. Moreover, social trust can be further categorized, as in trust in certain social roles, trust in certain social groups, trust in institutions or organizations, trust in technical systems and trust in the social order.

Zucker and Barber have representatively argued over the trichotomy of the classification of social trust. From the perspective of the trust generation mechanism, Zucker (1986) distinguished three types of trust: the first is reputation, which is based on the understanding of the past behaviors and reputations of other people; the second is social similarity, and can be a credibility factor in terms of family background, race and values because similar social backgrounds usually imply shared specific behaviors, bringing people to understand each other, reach consensus or engage in economic exchanges more easily; the third is social rules and regulations, such as trust generated by the guarantee of professional qualifications, bureaucratic organizations, agencies and various regulations, which Zucker calls "trust in legal institutions". Barber (1983) regarded social trust as an expectation acquired and decided through social interaction, referring to its specific content to classify trust: "The most general expectation is the confidence in the adherence to and the fulfillment of natural and moral social orders. The second expectation is the confidence in the belief that those whom we have interpersonal relationships and social system role contacts with can perform competently. The third expectation is that the belief in the ability of those whom we are in contact with to thoroughly carry the responsibilities and obligations they have been entrusted with, in other words to protect other people's benefit at the expense of their own benefit when necessary." Barber's conceptual system includes generalized trust toward people, trust in skill (qualified for interpersonal relationships and social system roles), and trust in the thorough commitment of entrusted responsibilities and obligations. Such an analysis is very insightful.

From a relatively wider perspective, Lewis and Weigert (1985) regarded trust as a socio-psychological concept peculiarly held by a collective unit rather than an individual, and classified trust focusing on cognition (rational) and emotion (irrational). They argue that trust is a mix of daily emotional concerns and rational considerations. They attached great importance to two kinds of trust, namely affective trust (high

component) and cognitive trust (high component). Relations in the primary group are dominated by affective trust, while relations in the secondary group are primarily based on the cognitive-rational component of trust. With population growth and the differentiation of social structures, more and more social relations are based on cognitive trust rather than affective trust.

Whether the early dichotomy or the subsequent trichotomy, or even the two main types of trust put forward by Lewis and Weigert, basic logics are hidden behind these classification standards: as human society gradually changes from a “traditional” society to a “modern” society, interpersonal relationships also gradually change from identity relationships to contractual relationships; and social trust also changes from being a paradigm based on emotions and acquaintance, to a paradigm based on rationality and contract.

## 2 Studies of Social Trust

### 2.1 Overseas Studies

#### 1. Theories and studies

Studies of interpersonal trust originated in North America along the guidelines of individualist ideas and methodologies in social psychology. Scholars proposed different concepts of interpersonal trust on the basis of their ideas and emphases. Through review and integration, Rousseau et al. (1998) defined trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another”. From this definition arise two problems. First, interpersonal trust mainly refers to trust in another individual or group, disregarding trust in an event or system. Trust is in nature regarded as a psychological state, an expectation, an attitude and an individual behavioral tendency rather than an actual action, which separates the internal process and the external action. Second, trust should be established on the basis of interpersonal interactions over a particular social and cultural background, whereas social psychologists separate trust from social cultural situations and study only in terms of personality traits, abilities and beliefs. In this approach, study of interpersonal trust mainly focuses on the formation mechanism and factors of influence. The main theoretical models are as follows:

#### (1) Individual characteristic theory

Studies of interpersonal trust beginning in the 1950s regarded trust as a stable psychological trait or belief of an object. From this point of view, the establishment of a trust relationship mainly depends on whether the trusting and trustee have personality traits that can be trusted by the opposite party. In terms of the trusting, research mainly examined his/her common and general beliefs and attitudes toward other community members, such as views on human nature, credibility, etc., particularly

treating his/her trust in other people as a stable feature of his/her personality, measuring and studying trust from the perspective of individual differences. Studying from the perspective of the trustee is another important aspect of the individual characteristic theory. Johnson-George and Swap (1982) measured interpersonal trust in intimate relationships from four aspects: the trustee's property, reliability, exchanged privacy, and physical security. Mayer et al. (1995) indicated that three aspects (ability, benevolence and integrity) could be used to examine whether the trustee is to be trusted or not. Mishra (1987) proposed that the trustee should bear the following personality traits: integrity, ability, kindness, honesty, behavioral consistency, loyalty, and motivation. This orientation attempts to analyze the characteristics of the two sides of trust on a deeper level, but ignores other significant characteristics such as the situational factor of trust establishment and the dependence of social interaction.

## (2) **Interpersonal relationship theory**

Interpersonal trust is a socio-psychological phenomenon involving two or more people. Research focuses on the relationship between the people. Lewis and Weigert (1985) are the representative figures of this theory. They contend that trust is an interpersonal attitude jointly decided via rational calculations and emotional factors within the interpersonal relationship and hereinafter proposed that cognitive trust and affective trust were the two important types of trust. Subsequent researchers either followed Lewis and Weigert (McAllister 1995) or proposed new types of trust on the basis of their own perspectives. For example, Clark and Mills (1979) proposed three types: cognitive trust, affective trust and identity trust. Tyler and Degoey (1995) divided the concept of interpersonal trust into instrumental trust and relational trust.

## (3) **Binary interaction theory**

Simpson (2007) put forward the "binary interaction theory" after integrating the "personality characteristic theory" and the "interpersonal relationship theory". He then considered interpersonal trust from many aspects. According to Simpson's theory, individual personality traits as well as the initial trust and security perceived by an opposite individual will affect the latter's decision to enter a trust relationship with the former individual. The conversion of the individual's motives will affect both sides' willingness to make favorable decisions for the opposite side in the interactive situation. Positive decisions on the part of both sides will stimulate the individual's positive expectations of the opposite's side for positive attribution, emotional experience and future interaction, which will in turn affect his/her perceived feelings of the other in terms of trust and security. The factors that impact the development of trust include individual differences and conventional factors. Conventional factors mainly refer to initial trust, motivation conversion, attribution, emotion, expectation, and perceived trust. Variables in terms of individual differences include attachment orientation, self-esteem, self-difference, and interactions with conventional variables.

## (4) **Rational choice theory**

In the hypothesis of the rational economic man, trust is regarded as the result of rational choices, as well as the prerequisite for operational organizations and economic transactions. The theory states that both sides of the interactive relationship

engage in prudent and trustworthy behaviors on the basis of risk assessment. A mutually beneficial trust relationship deepens on the basis of both sides' trustful behaviors, which gradually increases their confidence in their mutual credibility, and makes them willing to take greater risks. Every positive action increases credibility perceived by the opposite side. As interactions go on, the influence of later positive information will gradually reduce. Therefore, according to the rational choice model, the development process of trust forms a classic S-curve (Kramer 1999). The rational choice theory assumes that both sides in the relationship share similar expectations for the development of the trust relationship and that people are completely rational. However, some studies have shown that it is actually not the case (Murnighan et al. 2004; Grimes 2003).

### (5) Motivation attribution model

On the basis of the reflection of the selected models, Weber et al. (2005) proposed a motivation attribution model of trust with two basic theoretical points: (1) Each side in the potential trust relationship may perceive their interactions in different ways; (2) Each side's attributions to the opposite side's behavior are self-interested and largely influenced by their emotional dependence. The individuals in economic interactions of society may look at the potential trust situation from their unique perspectives (Malhotra 2004). The trusting, namely the side that trust their partners first in the trust game, is foremost concerned about risk associated with trust, while the trustee (the trusted side), while determining how much should be paid back to the trusting, makes decisions on the basis of his own benefits. Both sides in the trust game perceive their interactions from different perspectives. When the risks are relatively low, the trusting is more likely to trust their partners, but that possibility does not depend on the trustee's benefits from trust; similarly, when the benefits of the trustee are considerable, he is more likely to give more in return to the trusting, independently of the risk faced by the trusting.

## 2. Progress in study of social trust

Trust is the basis of all social activities of human beings. It has been compared to the "sunshine", the "dew", or a "chicken soup". In traditional society featuring closed environment and illiquidity, people deal with daily social life as they depend on the special trust that contact experience produces. Social changes accompanied by industrialization complicated and further divided society; meanwhile, people became more interdependent. On the one hand, this enhanced liquidity and diversity, expanding life choices; on the other hand, increasing complexity also enhances individual vulnerability. Over such historical background, sociology, politics, economics and other disciplines have successively initiated studies on trust, regarding it as the functional mechanism for simplifying society and an effective method to mitigate risks.

### (1) Functional analysis of social trust

Existing studies show that social trust can make people healthier, happier and more amicable, as well as help them form significant connections with others and

strengthen social cohesion. It is not only a matter of national economic performance and development pattern; it is also closely related to national democratic politics.

**(a) Trust contributes to the sense of ontological security**

In his theory of life development, Erik Erikson considered the “basic trust” that forms through the interaction between toddlers and caregivers as the prerequisite and foundation for the later construction of trust relationships with others and society. Based on this, Giddens (2000) linked the subject and object with practice from the perspective of structuralization and proposed the concept of “ontological security”, which they defined as “the confidence of the majority of people in the continuity of self-identity and the constancy of social and physical environments where they act”; it is the core of the individual mental structure and, together with existential anxiety, constitutes the tension system of the individual mental structure. The stability of the ontological security system is the premise for the normal and orderly lives of individuals. In order to maintain such stability, individuals establish protection mechanisms during their growth, which Giddens referred to as “protective containments”. Among these, the most important is “trust”. The data of the World Values Survey and the US General Social Survey (GSS) show that trust evaluations highly correlate with one’s degree of satisfaction in life, and that distrust is the most powerful driver of anxiety and insecurity. Groups and classes that are poorer, unemployed, discriminated or rejected by society show less trust in others, and thus their mental health is also poor.

**(b) Trust is conducive to the maintaining of social order**

Social order is a common condition for the existence and development of individuals and society, while trust is one of the main tools to establish social order and the strength that promotes social integration. Trust contributes to social order through controlling people’s behaviors to a certain extent, as “showing one’s credibility, and his acceptance and call of trust is conducive to strengthening and popularizing social relations”; therefore “the elements of social control stem from the trust relationship” (Zheng 2001). Instituting social order with force and violence is a clear objective and function of the state apparatus, whereas the legitimacy of such ruling is fundamentally based on the people’s trust in their rulers. In addition to top-down social order, trust among society members promotes reciprocity and cooperation and forms social intermediary organizations among citizens. These organizations have clear boundaries protecting anonymity, involve frequent games between members, and avoid confused conflicts. Within these boundaries there are mutually dependent two-way relations and obligations. Such a trustful order is the cornerstone of a free and prosperous society.

**(c) Social trust ensures economic prosperity**

The relationship between trust and economic behaviors has been of concern for a long time. Smith and Weber have systematically discussed this issue. In the mid and late 20th century, study of trust was carried out from the perspective of social capital. “Trust is a lubricant for socio-economic constructions and operations. Most backward global economic development stems from the lack of mutual trust” (Arrow



1972). A higher level of trust not only helps to accumulate physical capital and promote innovation, but also to improve the return of human capital. Francis Fukuyama systematically analyzed the relationship between degree of social trust and the scale of the economy of a given society. He found that while different societies had their own unique culture including traditions, habits, and customs, social trust was the way and form through which culture affected economy, thus determining the scale, organization model, trading scope and form of a given social economic entity, as well as the scale and intensity of indirect productive activities for profit-seeking. The prosperity and ability of a country depend on a single and permeable cultural characteristic, i.e. the degree of trust inherent in society. In a society with a high degree of trust, firms are relatively large and usually have a long history, while in the opposite case there are mostly small-scale family firms whose operations are often difficult to sustain more than three generations.

#### (d) **Social trust promotes political participation**

The democratic political life is closely related to trust. Almond and Verba argued that the stability of the democratic structure must match that of its corresponding political culture. Trust is an important part of political culture, and has a significant impact on the development of democratic politics. "Social trust facilitates political cooperation among citizens in democratic nations, and without it there would be no democratic politics" (Almond and Verba 1989). British sociologist Robert Putnam regarded trust as an integral part of social capital. The greater trust in a community, the greater the likelihood of cooperation; as citizen networks become more extensive and participation more intensive, citizens are more likely to cooperate for the common good. In northern Italian cities boasting good social capital, people are keen to participate in mass organizations and public affairs; trust and cooperation permeate society, which leads to better government performances than regions with poorer social capital in terms of stability, budgeting, law reform, social services, industrial and agricultural reforms, and other areas. Inglehart (2004) found that the level of trust among the general public is closely related to society's level of democracy, with the correlation coefficient of 0.50.

### (2) **Factors that affect social trust**

Social trust in the organic social system is affected by many factors, which fall on three levels: microscopic, mesoscopic and macroscopic.

#### (a) **Microscopic factors**

The subjective and objective characteristics of individuals are the microcosmic factors influencing their social trust. Uslander (2006) argued that the more optimistic a person is, the greater his degree of generalized trust is. That is because generalized trust stems from optimistic values, which are a mixture of values learned from childhood and from subsequently accepted concepts. The stronger a sense of control a person has, the more that person feels that he is able to control his environment, and the higher his level of social trust is. The level of social trust of residents will also increase with an increase in happiness, leading them to hold positive attitudes towards

strangers. In comparison with objective indicators, subjective factors, such as expectations for the future, a sense of control over one's own future, and anti-authoritarian values, have the greatest effect on trust (Uslaner 2006).

The objective characteristics of residents include educational background, income level, religious beliefs, age and gender. The World Values Survey shows that people with higher levels of education show a high level of interpersonal trust and are more likely to believe that most people can be trusted. The impact of education on trust is not a simple linear relationship: higher education has a greater effect on trust than secondary education and, likewise, secondary education is more important than primary education (Uslaner 2006). Tocqueville (1945) argued that religious beliefs are the basis of "self-interest properly understood", leading people to attach less importance to their material lives and more to helping others, thus increasing social trust levels among believers. Putnam believed that trust was hierarchical in terms of social and economic status, so people with higher social status would demonstrate a stronger sense of trust (Smith 1997). Age is also an important demographical variable affecting trust. The trust of young people in others is lower than that of the elderly. An increase in age increases social trust levels among residents, because both their social status and social experience increase with age (Uslaner 2006). Race also has a strong influence on trust. Both for generalized trust and particularized trust, race has always been one of the strongest determinants and has the greatest impact on life experience (Uslaner 2006). Many surveys in the United States have shown that African-Americans are more distrustful and more likely to be particularized trustees. They are usually young, lowly educated, insecure, lonely, and lack social support. The sense of trust among Asians is also weaker than that among white people. Older and highly educated white people have a higher sense of security for themselves and their neighbors, and a higher level of generalized trust in others and society. Some factors in personal life, such as divorcing or remarrying, seeing one's parents divorce, being victim of a crime, and employment status have no effect on any type of trust. Among objective indicators, race, age and education opportunities are the most important predictive factors (Uslaner 2006).

#### (b) **Mesoscopic factors**

The mesoscopic factors that affect social trust are mainly the subjective evaluation of residents' communities and the objective characteristics of residents. The more similar a community is in terms of language, race and income, the higher the level of social trust is. Brehm and Rahn (1997) pointed out that higher income disparity reduces social trust and safety levels in residential communities. The security of residential communities and the residents' sense of security are two important predictors of trust. Alesina and Ferrara (2002) found that residents of communities with greater ethnic or income differences had lower levels of social trust, whereas residents whose current community is located in the same state as their birthplace have higher levels of social trust. But residents' different nationalities and the time they have resided in their current community have no significant influence on social trust levels. Delhey and Newton (2003) found that residents' satisfaction with neigh-

neighborhood relationships had a significant but not steadily positive effect on their levels of social trust.

(c) **Macroscopic factors**

The macroscopic factors of social trust are mainly that of the overall situation of the society in which individuals live, including their subjective views on society. In general, people from affluent societies show higher levels of trust, whereas people from poor societies show lower levels. According to the analysis of Axelrod (1984) based on game theory, cooperative behavior is a rational strategy in an environment in which people can confidently determine that most people in this environment will return, as confirmed by the World Values Survey (Inglehart 2004). At the same time, in comparison with poorer societies, social trust in more affluent societies also further reflects the influence of relevant cultural traditions; Protestant societies and Confucian societies show higher levels of interpersonal relationships than historically Roman Catholic or Islamic societies, where differences in trust persist notwithstanding economic disparities (Inglehart 2004).

The degree of social equality also has a great impact on trust. In countries and U.S. states with larger income gaps, mutual trust levels among the public are lower. The World Values Survey shows that Portugal has the lowest level of trust, and only 10% of its people believe that others can be trusted; while Sweden has the highest level of trust, where 66% of people believe that others are trustworthy. The “General Social Survey” for the United States shows a fourfold difference in trust among U.S. states, with North Dakota’s level of trust similar to that of Sweden with 67% of people feeling others are trustworthy, while only 17% of people in Mississippi have such a feeling, which shows that low levels of trust are associated with higher degrees of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Eric Uslaner clearly stated that inequality affects trust, and not the other way around; that “trust cannot flourish in an unequal world,” and that income inequality is “the primary killer of trust”; with the increase in degrees of inequality, people become more indifferent, less interactive, and have to resort to self-defense, and thus trust is reduced (Uslaner 2006). As Tocqueville put it, “people are less resonant with those not in the same class as them, and material differences lead to divisions in society” (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Trust in the government plays an important role in fostering trust in one’s fellow citizens (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Uslaner 2006). Brehm and Rahn (1997) argued that trust in the government can lead to generalized trust, because the government provides a social security network for the poor and serves as a buffer and a neutral arbiter against group confrontation, ensuring that everyone is treated fairly. Putnam et al. (1993) also pointed out, “large, hierarchical, irresponsible and centralized bureaucratic governance seems to undermine interpersonal trust” (Inglehart 2004). Based on three surveys in 41 countries in the 1981–1997 World Values Survey, Zak and Knack (2001) found that property right index, contract performance ability, corruption index, and investor rights closely related to the quality of government and legal systems, all improve the residents’ social trust levels.

Scholars hold different views on whether social participation can increase trust. Putnam (1993, 2000), and Brehm and Rahn (1997) found that people who join citizen

groups have a greater sense of trust than those who stay at home. Trust and social connections form a “virtuous circle”: people with a sense of trust join various groups and their social life in turn strengthens their sense of trust (Uslaner 2006). Brehm and Rahn even believed that trust resulting from citizen participation is more easily produced than that leading to citizen participation. However, Eric Uslaner, referring to the “social census” data, found that the relationship between citizens live and trust is more like a “virtuous arrow” rather than a “virtuous circle”, that is to say that people do not have a greater sense of trust when they join a citizen group (Uslaner 2006). Very few types of citizen participation have a guiding role in the promotion of trust, i.e. group participation in the business community, cultural group participation, children group participation, contributions to charity and participation in religious ceremonies.

### (3) Studies on the status of social trust

As countries differ culturally, economically and socially, they also differ in terms of social trust. As a large social survey in the world, the World Values Survey showed that Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States had the highest levels of social trust; Japan, Ireland and the U.K. had moderate levels of social trust; and Spain, West Germany, France, Belgium and Italy had the lowest levels of social trust (see Table 1). The third European Values Survey also found that Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands had a high degree of trust, while Romania, Latvia, Malta, Greece, Poland, among others, all of which experienced social unrest and transformation after the fall of Communism, had the lowest degrees of trust.

Ronald Inglehart pointed out that socio-cultural differences are an even more important factor. Among 18 societies with trust levels over 35%, 13 are Protestant majority, three Confucian majority, one Hindu majority, and only one (Ireland) Catholic majority; and among the 10 societies with the lowest trust levels, there are eight historically Catholic societies, one Islamic society, and one historically Orthodox society. Almost all societies that historically belonged to Protestantism demonstrated higher levels of social trust than Catholic societies. Japanese scholar Fukuyama also views trust from a cultural prospective and links trust with economic prosperity. He believes that religion, tradition and customs generate trust. The high levels of trust between people, especially between strangers, as well as spontaneous social interaction based on this premise, create developed social intermediary organizations, improving the ability of society to participate in competition and national welfare. In some parts of China, France, and Italy, family ties are stronger than other types of social relations, which cause a general distrust of outsiders and leads to the relative weakness and low quantity of intermediate mass organizations between government and individuals, hindering corporate institutional and in-depth development. Both Edward Banfield’s study of Montelgrano (a small town in southern Italy) and Putnam’s comparative study of southern and northern Italy show that trust with family at its core creates disunity amid people. However, in Germany, Japan, and the United States, people have a stronger sense of spontaneous association, and there are numerous communities. Therefore, these societies enjoy networks with numerous

**Table 1** Levels of social trust by country

	1981(%)	1990(%)	1981(%)	1990(%)	1981(%)	1990(%)	1981(%)	1990(%)	1981(%)	1990(%)	1981(%)	1990(%)
	Denmark		Netherlands		Canada		U.S.		Japan		Ireland	
Trust	53	58	45	54	49	53	42	51	42	42	44	47
	UK		West Germany		Spain		Italy		Belgium		France	
Trust	43	44	32	38	35	43	27	35	29	34	25	23

*Data source* [France] Matthew Dugans. (2006). *Comparative Sociology: Selected Collection by Mattei Dogan*. Translated by Li Jie et al. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, p. 194

branches and abundant social capital, potentially reducing transaction costs as well as promoting the maintenance of social order and the development of economy.

## ***2.2 Studies of Social Trust Among Chinese***

The level of social trust in China has attracted wide attention. In the following section, the main aspects of social trust in China have been sorted out.

### **1. Current state**

#### **(1) Overall social trust**

In his analysis of traditional Chinese society, Weber put forward that “widespread mistrust exists between Chinese people”. This statement was cited and extended by Fukuyama, who pointed out that China is a low-trust society, a society lacking generalized trust. However, Inglehart’s “World Values Survey” (1990) found that as high as 60% Chinese people believed that the majority of people were trustworthy, thus ranking fourth in the survey, second only to Sweden, Norway and Finland. This was not only a higher score than most of the Third World countries, but also higher than that of most Western developed countries, including the United States. In 1996, Inglehart conducted the “World Value Survey” again, finding that more than 50% of the Chinese people still believed that the majority of people were trustworthy.

In recent years, China entered a period of social transformation. The “presence” and “face-to-face” commitment which served as the foundation of traditional social trust and the supervision and restriction system are failing, and the institutional commitment of abstract systems has not yet been established. Therefore there has been an upsurge in the occurrence of events related to serious social dishonesty, such as “entrapment”, telephone fraud, “Peng Ci” (fraudulent claims for compensation) and even “swindling acquaintances”, which seriously affect people’s feelings of trust and their behaviors. This being said, what is the present state of social trust among Chinese people? Du et al. (2011) found on the basis of surveys carried out in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou that overall there is a low level of social trust in China. Study done by Zhu (2011) showed that more than 70% of urban respondents believed that society lacked generalized trust; 70% of respondents also believed that China was currently undergoing a serious confidence crisis. 35% of respondents rated the overall level of social trust “relatively low” or “very low”; 54.9% rated it “general”; and only 10% rated it “very high” and “relatively high”. Some scholars supported Inglehart’s findings in his two World Values Surveys, affirming that China was, in general, a country with a high level of trust (Hu 2011).

#### **(2) Individual social trust patterns**

Many studies have shown that relationship assume primacy in the Chinese society, and how closely or distantly people are related to one another determines how much trust they are likely to have in others. Therefore, a “differential” trust pattern forms

between people. Scholars working in China have assessed the trust of different trust objects to explore the current individual social trust pattern. Li and Liang (2002) and Hu and Li (2006) found that urban residents trust their family members, relatives and close friends most, followed by colleagues, leaders, neighbors and friends who have close relationships with them. In the same study, the most unreliable people were found to include Internet friends, manufacturers, and other strangers. Tong Zhifeng's study of rural residents (2006) also supported this conclusion. Wang and Liu (2002) and Wang and Zhou (2009) found that Chinese people put most of their trust in their family members, followed by friends and then acquaintances, and finally strangers for whom they have the lowest level of trust. It can be seen that both in urban and rural areas the current basic trust pattern of the Chinese people is still self-centered and based on blood relationship. At the core of interpersonal trust derived from interpersonal relationships is the emotional recognition of both sides based on their evaluation of cognitive elements such as moral quality, willingness and behavior of the trusted side (Yang and Peng 1999). In addition to interpersonal trust, Zhu (2011) found that people's trust in the government is the most important link in the social trust chain, i.e. the highest degree of trust. The abstract system with symbols established by experts has not been established, in which the trust is put in, and the situation of consumer trust is worrying. Du et al. (2011) argued that industries/departments with a governmental background such as government agencies, public media, public institutions, or departments are highly trusted, or "moderately trusted", while the commercial sector is given the lowest amount of trust, or "basically not trusted".

## 2. Constitutional dimension of social trust among Chinese people

The construction of trust category is mostly based on the "binary construction" paradigm; that is, trust is placed on a single, bipolar dimension, thus differentiating two different "ideal types". In the research of Weber and Luhmann or Giddens, the common internal presupposition is that the two types of trust are completely different and mutually exclusive, almost incompatible. As most studies on the constitutive dimensions of public trust in China are based on the "binary construction" paradigm, Lu (2009), Chen et al. (2011), and Chen (2012), withholding the concept of the binary construction of social trust, defined social trust according to the dichotomy between particularized trust and generalized trust, and conducted study of the relationship between social trust and community participation. Some scholars have also divided social trust into interpersonal trust and institutional trust according to a dichotomy based on Luhmann and Giddens (Du et al. 2011; Zhu 2011). Some scholars propose their own point of view through questioning, targeting and verifying the "dichotomy" paradigm of social trust. Through the subjective evaluation of the degree of trust of different trust objects, Li and Liang (2002), Tang and Fu (2008), Zhang (2009), Hu and Li (2006) proposed the three-dimensional structure of social trust. Wang and Liu (2002) and Wang and Zhou (2009) then developed the four-dimensional structure of social trust which includes social trust, acquaintance trust, relative trust and friend trust as its main categories.

### 3. Construction mechanism of social trust

Chinese people strengthen emotional (or obligational) connections and use the relationship network to build “human feeling” trust, so as to trust others or to be trusted. For example, Qiao (1982) concluded that contemporary Chinese people use six methods to establish and maintain relationships, i.e. inheritance, identification, drawing, digging, cottoning up, and expanding; via interviews in Beijing, Yang (1994) found that people mainly use three ways to develop relationships, i.e. treat, sending gifts, and favor-doing. Zheng et al. (1997) put forward the “infiltration model” in the study of the relationship between Taiwanese enterprises. The establishment of inter-firm relationships is often achieved on the basis of the transition from an objective relationship to a subjective relationship, from initial interpersonal trust to business trust, and then to deeply interpersonal trust.

Obviously, most of the studies mentioned above focus on interpersonal trust. They pay less attention to institutional trust. At present, the rapid changes in Chinese society have had a strong impact on the original interpersonal trust model. In response to these changes, many researchers have begun to explore institutional trust issues, but the results have shown that even when a society becomes more complex, diversified and mobile, people still rely mainly on trust-building methods based on communication experiences and personal characteristics, and rarely on a system-based approach. Whitley (1991) pointed out that Chinese family business owners often strive to develop personal relationships with key affiliates and business partners so as to build mutual trust. Peng (1999) examined trust relationships in the context of doctor–patient relationships and economic cooperation, and found that ways such as using relationship networks, standing treat or giving gifts, as well as emotional methods such as mutual respect and exchanging thoughts and feelings, are mechanisms commonly used by Chinese people to establish and strengthen trust. This shows that institutionalized trust in China is different from that in western countries. It exists in relationship networks and coexists with interpersonal trust in a mutually reinforcing way, rather than a mutually exclusive way.

### 4. Causes and effects of social trust

As a kind of social construction, social trust is affected by many factors, including personal factors, community factors and social factors. Personal factors mainly refer to the objective background and personality traits of the individuals themselves. Some studies have shown that elders tend to have higher levels of social trust (Hu and Li 2006; Li et al. 2008). Social status, such as measured by education and income levels, plays a significant role in social trust: the higher the social status, the higher the social trust (Wang and Liu 2002; Li et al. 2008). Marriage significantly reduces social trust levels among residents (Li et al. 2008). However, social trust levels diverge in terms of gender. Hu and Li (2006) found that social trust among men, especially generalized trust, is higher than that among women; although the study of Li et al. (2008) demonstrated that women are more likely to trust individuals with whom they have a direct or indirect relationship. Where relationship networks are involved, social trust levels are higher. The communal influence theory puts forward



that objective characteristics of the community and individual subjective views of the community are the two main factors affecting social trust levels. Li et al. (2008) found that time of residence and help from neighbors can raise social trust levels.

Trust is considered to relate to social factors such as culture, communication, property rights, community participation, and economic development. Community participation is a social factor closely related to the social trust of residents. In the theory of social capital, of which Putnam is the representative figure, community participation networks are key mechanisms promoting citizen cooperation, and even more the core characteristic of social trust, forming an important framework for the cultivation of social trust. As Chinese society is formed of closed networks consisting of family relationships or quasi-kinship relationships and generalized social trust established among strangers, the mechanism influencing social interaction on different planes of trust has become an important problem. Participation in the activities of social groups has an impact on generalized trust. The more communities one participates in, and the more frequently he is involved in communal activities, the higher level of trust one has in the people whom one engages in uncertain communication or has a weak relationship with, although this has no impact on particularized trust (Hu and Li 2006; Hu 2006; Tang and Fu 2008). Another view is that the relationship between participation in associations and generalized trust among members is very weak (Chen 2012). There is another moderating variable between participation in associations and the strengthening of generalized trust. People may participate in community activities because of prior relationships rather than establish mutual trust after their participation. When there is no expansion of differential relationships, outsiders cannot be included as “one of us”. Therefore, social participation cannot increase generalized trust levels.

Marketization has an even greater impact on social trust. The more marketized a region is, the higher the likelihood of a high evaluation in terms of trust levels is, because a commercially developed society is often a credit society. For China, the high levels of marketization often mean less regulation and more free competition, which are conducive to the establishment of social trust. Transportation facilities and urbanization also have significant explanatory power for trust. Developed transportation is an important condition for people to engage in repeated exchanges. Developed transportation means more convenient communication between people, which reduces transaction costs between people and thus increases communication. This also increases the volume of information shared among people and improves their mutual trust (Zhang and Ke 2002).

Trust can bring many benefits to society. It can promote economic prosperity and growth, improve governance, prevent corruption, improve the quality of education, and promote individual health, social security, and social welfare (Chen 2012). Our analysis of trust functions in China focuses on political participation and economic development. Studies on the effect of social trust on grass-root governance show that generalized trust is conducive to the formation of democratic concepts and values among urban residents, and thus promotes participation in conventional political activities (Liang 2011; Lu 2009). Particularized trust is not conducive to improving the ongoing construction of urban communities (Lu 2009). From the perspective of

its operation mechanism, generalized trust has a positive effect on the governance and performance of community resident committees as it also positively influences the quality of elections, while particularized trust has a negative impact, hinders the establishment of residential committees and negatively affects the quality of elections (Chen et al. 2011). Zhang and Ke (2002) confirmed the effect of trust on regional economic performance. The more a region is trusted, the faster its economy grows. Trust does not only affect economic growth, but also affect the size, distribution and efficiency of enterprises, and promotes the development of private enterprises.

### 5. Changes and crisis in China's social trust models

In traditional Chinese society, family is at the core of trust, whereas blood and geography are considered radius of the trust model. On the latter, Chinese and foreign scholars have already reached a consensus. Weber called it particularized trust; Fukuyama called it distrust or low trust; Luhmann called it "interpersonal trust"; and Chinese scholars call it "ethical trust", "differential trust" and "relationship trust". This kind of trust is derived from affinity and familiarity with specific individuals. It is formed on the basis of personal relationships and acquired achievements. It has the perceptual characteristics of traditional trust based on "human feelings" as well as the rational calculation from acquired achievements (Yang and Peng 1999). Different people engage in different relationships and thus respect correspondingly different rules of behavior. Xue Tianshan pointed out that "Chinese people rely on human exchanges to build trust, as well as the 'courtesy demands reciprocity' concept to guarantee the normal operation of the trust relationship and restrain people's behavior in this relationship, so as to prevent dishonest behavior" (Xue 2008).

As a functional social mechanism embedded in the social system and the cultural and economic structures, social trust is constantly evolving in response to developments and changes in society. Western researchers think that a society that relies on inter-personal relationships to obtain trust is a more "traditional" society, and that as a society changes from being "traditional" to being "modern", people gradually start depending on contracts and equitable systems to obtain trust (Barber 1983; Giddens 2000; Luhmann 2005). With the continuous transformation of China's economy, social structure, mode of thinking and behavior, the market economy has gradually become the dominant mode of production in society; social mobility is also increasing, which make it possible for people to establish wider social contacts. Thus social order is becoming more complex and changeable. Trust stemming in familiarity can no longer accommodate uncertain, insecure and unpredictable events, and thus the social trust model should change accordingly.

At present, however, a grim reality cannot be ignored: the one-way development of China's economy causes its whole society to be dislodged in space and time, transforming it into a risk society, thus causing severe crisis in terms of social trust. The extent and scope of such a crisis is unprecedented, and its harm is extremely far-reaching. Zheng and Huang (2011) pointed out that the trust crisis in contemporary China mainly manifests itself in terms of the public's trust in its government, of the trust between market stakeholders, and of that among members of society. Meng and Wang (2010) argue that the trust crisis mainly manifests itself in the public's distrust

of public power as well as in the interpersonal distrust among people. Li (2006) put forward that the social trust crisis touches upon three categories, i.e. the commercial credit crisis, the interpersonal trust crisis, and the generalized trust crisis. The trust crisis is mainly caused by the failure of the relation constraint mechanism, the weakening of the moral constraint mechanism, and the lack of institutional constraint mechanism. As Zhai (2008) put it, the current trust crisis was a Chinese-style issue caused by today's one-sided economic development in China, which not only failed to establish a new trust mechanism, but also shook the roots of traditional trust. Many scholars have expressed their worries about the state of trust in China, and believe that rebuilding social trust is an important task in terms of further social construction in China (Zhai 2008; Zheng et al. 2011). Society itself can overcome the trust crisis only by making social trust "socialized", making currency and power comply with social requirements, reducing the economic monopoly of the state, increasing social participation in national economic policies, establishing new providing programme for public goods based on social participation, and conferring the right to express views and participate in politics to stakeholders in all social sectors.

### 3 Measuring Social Trust

As there are multiple criteria for the classification of trust, in this section we do not classify and introduce social trust measurement methods in accordance with any unified standard. Here, we mainly summarize and introduce the methods employed in prior studies on trust.

#### 3.1 *Measuring Interpersonal Trust*

##### 1. Experimental paradigm

In social psychology, interpersonal trust is often studied through the manipulation of real or false situations. The most commonly used method is the "trust game method". In this classic paradigm, trust is measured based on the mental state or tendency exhibited by an actor (trusting) willing to entrust his partner (trustee). In the "trust game" study, trusting's impact on the establishment and development of the trust relationship between two parties is indicated in the following aspects, i.e. benefits that the trusting is willing to give to the trustee, trustee's benefits gained from trust behaviors, trusting's intention to take risks, and the risk of trust behaviors.

##### 2. Measuring scale

The measurement of interpersonal trust began with the Interpersonal Trust Scale (ITS) developed by Rotter in 1976. The scale consists of 25 items and 5 grades, with the total score being from 25 to 125 points. The higher the score is, the higher

the interpersonal trust is considered to be. This scale is mainly used to measure the reliability of other people's behavior and commitment (oral and written) in the eyes of those tested. This reliability includes two factors, namely: the trust in a companion or family member, and the trust in people with whom the tested engages in indirect relationships. The Trust Scale prepared by Rempel and Holmes (1986) mainly measures mutual trust of people in intimate relationships, and consists of a total of 18 items, which involves three dimensions, i.e. predictability, reliability and credibility.

### ***3.2 Measuring Trust Objects***

The focus on individual trust patterns nurtures researchers' interest in the trust of trusting people in different types of trustees. The more commonly used research paradigm lists different types of trust objects and let respondents grade them. This method of measurement is used by social science researchers and applied to various large-scale social surveys to study the characteristics of interpersonal trust.

### ***3.3 Measuring Generalized Trust***

Western scholars commonly agree to classify social trust according to the categories of generalized trust and particularized trust. The method employed above for the measurement of trust objects is also that employed for the measurement of particularized trust. For the measurement of generalized trust, western academic circles mostly use the following two indicators: one is the overall degree of trust, which is mainly measured by asking: "generally speaking, do you think most people can be trusted?" Another is the overall degree of distrust, which is mainly measured by asking: "In general, do you think it is better to be as careful as possible with other people?" This is also the most commonly used method to measure social trust for a single topic. The World Values Survey, the European Values Survey as well as other large international social surveys all used this method to measure generalized trust. In addition, multiple items can also be used to measure generalized trust.

### ***3.4 Measurement of Institutional Trust***

In addition to interpersonal trust in specific individuals, trust in abstract systems, government agencies, and industries/sectors are also an important component of social trust. In its main measurement method, trust objects that need to be known, such as government, police, hospitals, nongovernmental organizations and industries, are first listed, then respondents are asked to use an attitude scale to measure these items and assess their trust level in a range from "full trust" to "full distrust".

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