CHAPTER FOUR

EXPLAINING SOCIAL TRUST: WHAT MAKES PEOPLE TRUST THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS?

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Putnam (1993: 167) defines the core components of social capital as social trust, involvement in social networks or associations, and norms of reciprocity (or civic norms). While associational involvement represents the structural aspects of the concept of social capital, social trust and civic norms form its attitudinal or cultural components (e.g. van Deth 2003: 80).

On the individual-level, trust refers to expectations of future behaviors and is mainly based on beliefs about the trustee’s competence and sense of responsibility (Coleman 1988; Gambetta 1988; Misztal 1996). To trust means to rely on others to meet their obligations and not to be taken advantage of (Misztal 1996: 16ff., 24). Researchers like Braithwaite (1998) differentiate exchange-orientated and community-orientated forms of trust. Exchange-orientated forms of trust deal with expectations of reliability, accountability and competence of the object of trust. Community-orientated forms of trust focus on sharing the same social identity, norms and values, the feeling of being respected and the belief that other people take into account the interests of others when acting (see also Hardin 1998; Tyler 1998). Putnam (2000: 134) characterizes the individual-level consequences of social trust as follows: “I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor”.

On the aggregate-level, social trust is considered an important resource of societies to promote cooperation. “Trust lubricates cooperation. The greater the level of trust within a society, the greater the likelihood of cooperation. And cooperation itself breeds trust” (Putnam 1993: 171, see also Almond/Verba 1963: 227ff). Cooperation, in turn, is considered a basic factor for integration, building and maintaining democracy, economic prosperity and other societal and individual benefits.
In the following, the focus will be on *generalized* social trust in other people as a special kind of trust. This type of “thin” trust is more general than “thick” trust, defined as trust in single persons like friends or relatives. Another important characteristic of generalized trust is that it is horizontal—contrary to vertical trust in political elites or institutions (e.g. Delhey/Newton 2004: 152).

Research on social trust was promoted as a side effect of the extensive debate on social capital during the last years (e.g. Badescu/Uslaner 2003; Cook 2001; Cook et al. 2005; Hardin 2002; Ostrom/Walker 2003; Sztompka 1999; Uslaner 2002; Warren 1999). The ongoing interest in this phenomenon may also result from a “widely shared, though largely implicit, diagnosis of basic problems of public policy and the steering of social coordination, and ultimately the maintenance of social order itself” (Offe 1999: 42).

If social trust is such an important personal and country-level resource, it is important to know about the factors generating it. Most of the empirical analysis conducted so far concentrates on individual-level determinants. However, it is clear that the number of studies analyzing micro-level factors explaining generalized social trust in a *systematic* way, is still surprisingly low (Kunz 2004: 210). One basic result of these studies is that micro-level factors account only for a small part of the variance of social trust. In sum, the explanatory power of these micro models is more or less disappointing (see, for example, results presented in Delhey/Newton 2002; Freitag 2003; Gabriel et al. 2002; Kunz 2004; Zmerli/Newton/Montero 2007). One reason for this could be the fact that none of the individual-level models tested so far integrates variables representing *all* relevant approaches discussed in the literature on determinants of social trust. Therefore, this chapter aims first at testing an integrated micro model of possible factors explaining why people trust others or not, analyzing the effects of as many variables representing different hypotheses as possible.1

The number of empirical studies testing country or macro-level variables as determinants of social trust is even lower than the numbers of studies using a micro-level perspective. The basic results of these studies are that the levels of socio-economic development and wealth, the degree of social

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1 Naturally, there will be some limitations due to the ESS data used here. The questionnaire for the first wave of the ESS contains variables to operationalize a significant part of, but not all of the possible determinants of social trust (see part 3.1 of this chapter).