

Do Conceptualizations and Measures of Trust Reflect a WEIRD Bias?

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Trust is fundamental to the fabric of social relations. It is a key contributor to citizen wellbeing, societal cohesion, democracy, and a well-functioning society (Cook, 2005; Fukuyama, 1996; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1995). Given that trust is a core form of social capital, it is perhaps not surprising that a very large literature has evolved to understand it over many decades. Indeed, a Google Scholar search on “trust” yields over 4 million results and research on trust can be found across many disciplines, including Psychology (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Johnson & Mislin, 2011; Rotter, 1967; Yamagishi, 2011), Sociology (Cook, 2001; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2021), Economics (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 1999; Knack & Keefer, 1997), Management (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer, Davis, Schoorman, 1995), Political Sciences (Fukuyama, 1996; Inglehart, 1999), Anthropology (Geertz, 1962), Philosophy (Baier, 1986; O’Neill, 2002), Religion (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008), and even Mathematics (Marsh, 1994). Discussions of trust can be found in many ancient texts, from the Bible to the Quran, and has been covered by many ancient philosophers, from Confucius to Plato, and Cicero. These texts reveal that trust is not merely a modern concern but a timeless preoccupation among scientists and laypeople alike.

Yet, despite this broad quest to understand trust, the scientific study of trust is surprisingly very narrow. To date, research has primarily focused on *generalized trust* – a broad, dispositional belief in the trustworthiness of others, extended toward strangers and unknown others, regardless of the specific situation (Rotter, 1971; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2021; Yamagishi et al., 2015). Generalized trust reflects a general expectation of goodwill and benign intent in human nature (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), the assumptions that people possess internal traits of

trustworthiness (Yamagishi, 2011), and a dispositional expectancy that people in general can be relied upon (Rotter, 1971). As we discuss below, this view of trust pervades the literature in Psychology and related fields, shaping not only how trust is conceptualized and measured but also the conclusions about which societies or groups “trust” more.

In this chapter, we take a step back and question whether this view of trust fully captures human groups across the globe. More specifically, we examine whether the way we conceptualize and measure trust reflects a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) bias. We first review how trust is predominantly conceptualized and measured in the current literature. Next, we outline prior evidence pointing to a WEIRD bias in trust research. Building on this foundation, we synthesize multiple global datasets using a meta-analytic approach to show that cross-national variations in generalized trust are positively correlated with measures of WEIRDness—operationalized as lower *cultural distance* from the United States, as well as with core characteristics of WEIRD societies. We conclude with implications and future directions for the field.

WEIRD Conceptualizations and Measures of Trust

Generalized trust is marked by three defining characteristics. First, it is impersonal – it is not tied to any specific target but instead extends broadly to a wide and unfamiliar circle of others. This form of trust assumes that individuals are willing to rely on strangers or unspecified others in the absence of any specific information about their background or intentions (Delhey et al., 2011; Cao & Galinsky, 2020). Accordingly, to measure generalized trust, researchers often use abstract survey statements referring to unspecified others (e.g. “most people”) or situations in which people must decide to trust someone without any prior knowledge about them (e.g., anonymous economic games).

Second, generalized trust is unconditional. It reflects an inherent belief in people's trustworthiness irrespective of situational cues (Cook et al., 2005a; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). As such, it is grounded in the assumption that trustworthiness is an *internal trait* – people are intrinsically motivated to act in good faith regardless of the situation. Generalized trust thus discounts the notion that people's trustworthiness can vary depending on the situation or the presence of external incentives.

Third, generalized trust functions as a mental heuristic, representing a default willingness to place trust in others in situations marked by uncertainty or ambiguity. Generalized trust is associated with a “trust-until-proven-wrong” mindset, readily placing confidence in others without demanding prior verification of their reliability or the presence of external safeguards.

Dominant Measures of Trust

Our field's dominant focus on generalized trust is directly reflected in the paradigms we use to measure trust – the microscopes through which variation in trust is observed and studied. Most comparisons rely heavily on a single, widely adopted question, originally formulated by Noelle-Neumann in Germany in 1948: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”. This question effectively captures the three defining features of generalized trust: its impersonal, unconditional nature and its function as a mental heuristic.

Since its introduction to the World Value Survey in 1981, it has become the de facto standard for assessing trust, serving as the primary or sole measure in major cross-national surveys including the World Value Survey, European Social Survey, Latinobarómetro, Afrobarometer, and Asian barometer. These measures have also been used to understand trust across the 50 U.S. states across decades (e.g. General Social Survey). While the use of one

consistent item offers a valuable benchmark across time and space, it also poses a limitation: our understanding of variation in trust both across nations and time rests almost entirely on how individuals respond to this single, abstract item (or similar items) assessing generalized trust.

Another common way of measuring trust is through experiments— primarily using trust games originally designed by Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe (1995) to assess generalized trust in anonymous interactions. The game is typically a two-player, sequential-move paradigm. The first player, known as the “trustor,” is given a fixed endowment and must decide how much of it to send to the second player, the “trustee.” Any amount sent is then multiplied by a predetermined factor, increasing the total before it reaches the trustee. The trustee must then decide how much, if any, of the multiplied amount to return to the trustor. The trustor’s decision is interpreted as a behavioral measure of trust, defined as “*a willingness to bet that another person will reciprocate a risky move (at a cost to themselves)*” (Camerer, 2003, p. 85). The trustee’s decision, in turn, is taken as a proxy of trustworthiness. As shown in a meta-analysis (Johnson et al., 2011), trust games are overwhelmingly implemented in the form of one-shot interactions with anonymous strangers devoid of any context cues. In examining global variation in trust, researchers either employ trust games in large-scale multi-nation studies (e.g. Romano, Balliet, Yamagishi, & Hui, 2017) or test country-level moderators in meta-analyses of studies using trust and cooperation games around the world (e.g. Johnson & Maslen, 2011; van den Akker, van Assen, van Vugt, & Wicherts, 2020; Spadaro et al., 2022).

Are Trust Measures Biased?

Notably, research that has measured trust through the lens of individuals’ default belief in the internal trustworthiness of generalized others—typically unspecified strangers—has consistently shown that people in the United States and other WEIRD (Western, Educated,

Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies show higher levels of “trust” than their non-WEIRD counterparts (Inglehart, 1999; Delahey & Newton, 2005; Fukuyama, 1995; Schulz et al., 2019; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). For instance, researchers analyzing global survey and experiment data on generalized trust found that Western Europeans and their descendants show higher levels of trust toward strangers and generalized others (e.g., Bjørnskov, 2008; Gheorghiu, Vignoles, & Smith, 2009; Schulz et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of trust game studies conducted around the world shows that participants from African countries are significantly less likely to place trust in strangers compared to their North American counterparts in experimental settings (Johnson et al., 2011). These findings are then used to conclude that some groups—namely Westerners “trust” more than others. Yet, how sound is this conclusion?

We argue that the current prevailing conceptualization and measures reflect a pronounced bias in the study of trust. That is, the high levels of trust observed in WEIRD societies may be derived from the very tools that are designed to capture trust as it is uniquely manifested in WEIRD cultural contexts—namely a view of trust that is confined to generalized trust in others’ internalized attributes. As a result, non-WEIRD societies may be mischaracterized as low-trust, not because trust is absent, but because trust is established and expressed differently.

Medin and colleagues (2010) identify this phenomenon as the *home-field disadvantage*, wherein a particular cultural group – typically Western— serves as ‘the starting point’ or the ‘standard’ of research. Such a starting point not only skews sampling of research but also shapes the theoretical frameworks and research questions themselves, reinforcing a culturally centric lens (Gelfand, Severance, Fulmer, & Al-Dabbagh, 2012; Atari et al., 2025). In a meta-analysis of trust games, for instance, over 68% of studies involved samples from North America or Europe (Johnson et al., 2011), even though these regions comprise only 17% of the global population.

Such home-field disadvantage often leads researchers to (erroneously) conclude that the cultural groups that differ from the “default” have failed—in this case, that they lack trust in others.

It is no secret that much of what we know about human psychology relies on theories developed in Western contexts and tested primarily using samples from Western populations (Malpass, 1977; Medin et al., 2010; Medin, 2017; Rad et al., 2018; Trainis, 1982). Furthermore, research using Western samples often disproportionately recruit White American participants and participants with higher education and socioeconomic status (Berinsky et al., 2012). This longstanding observation of skewed sampling has led researchers to label it as a WEIRD phenomenon, where broad claims about human psychology and behavior are made based on this narrow subset of global populations: individuals from WEIRD societies (Henrich, Heine, & Noren Zayan, 2010). In response, coupled with the recent opportunities and new tools, a growing body of research has begun to interrogate how WEIRD conceptualizations have affected our understanding of previously established psychological constructs (Atari et al., 2025; Gelfand et al., 2012; Muthu Krishna et al., 2020; Schimmelpfennig et al., 2024). However, despite this progress, the extent to which the prevailing conceptualizations of trust are grounded in WEIRD assumptions remains largely unexplored.

In the next section, we review and show evidence supporting the WEIRD bias of generalized trust using a meta-analytic approach. If indeed the conceptualization and measures of generalized trust are indeed WEIRD, we should see that, across global datasets measures of trust, levels of generalized trust are positively correlated with a) WEIRDness (measured by *cultural similarity* to the United States) and b) with measures associated with WEIRD societies, most notably, institutional quality, education, and individualism.

The Weird Foundations of Generalized Trust: A Meta-Analysis

Cultural Distance to WEIRD societies. Research has suggested higher levels of generalized trust in some Western societies (Inglehart, 1999; Schulz et al., 2019; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). How generalizable is this phenomenon? One notable recent advancement that enables a systematic examination of WEIRD bias in research was developed by Muthukrishna and colleagues (2020). This method quantifies how “WEIRD” each country is by measuring its cultural distance from WEIRD societies, particularly the U.S.. Since psychological and behavioral research has overwhelmingly treated U.S. samples—especially White, educated Americans—as the default standard for cultural comparison, countries that are culturally closer (i.e. lower cultural distance) to the U.S. is considered as more WEIRD.

Since its introduction, researchers have applied this cultural distance metric to understand how WEIRD-centric conceptualizations or sampling practices influence our understandings of human behaviors (e.g. Atari, Xue, Park, Blasi, & Henrich, 2023; Schimmelpfennig et al., 2024). For instance, Atari and colleagues (2023) showed that there is WEIRD bias in large-language models such that as a country’s cultural distance to the U.S. increases, the similarity between its citizens’ responses and those generated by ChatGPT decreases. Building on this approach, we use lower cultural distance to the U.S. as a proxy of Weirdness to examine the extent to which the prominence of generalized trust is related to a society’s degree of Weirdness.

In addition to cultural distance, the literature has pointed out that several key features of WEIRD societies are associated with conceptualizations and measures of generalized trust.

Education. Prior research has found that nations with higher average levels of education attainment tend to exhibit higher levels of generalized trust (Borogove & Burns, 2015; Helliwell & Putnam, 1999). Education is believed to strengthen cognitive and analytical capacities, enabling people to appreciate and extend trust to unfamiliar others (Borogove & Burns, 2015). In

educated societies, citizens also tend to have stronger institutional trust and civic awareness—factors that promote more inclusive attitudes toward strangers or outgroups and allow generalized trust to develop (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999).

Institutional Quality. Western countries – especially in Northern and Western Europe (e.g. Sweden, Germany)—consistently rank among the highest in the quality of governance (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2024). A growing body of research demonstrates that high-quality, impartial, and trustworthy institutions drive the development of generalized trust (Delahey & Newton, 2005; Freitag & Buhlmann, 2009; Putnam, 1995). Such institutions enforce rules fairly, uphold contracts, effectively deter violations, shields individuals from the risks of others’ noncompliance, thereby ensuring the predictability of outcomes (Martin Angeli, Povitkina, Jagers, & Rothstein, 2023; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). This predictability fosters a sense of security and safety, allowing people to accept vulnerability and extend trust to unfamiliar others (Spadaro, Gangl, Van Proin, Van Lange, Mosso, 2020). Recent experimental evidence suggests that this relationship seems to be causal: experiencing high-quality, corruption-detering institutions in a simulated setting led to higher levels of trusting behaviors toward strangers in a subsequent trust game (Martin Angeli et al., 2023).

Individualism. Seminar work by Yamagishi and colleagues was among the first to highlight the individualistic aspect of generalized trust, showing that Americans are more likely to hold beliefs about the intrinsic trustworthiness of others than Japanese (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). In collectivistic societies, social uncertainty is reduced not through default expectations of others’ goodwill, but through tightly knit, mutually committed relations that provide assurance of cooperation (Yamagishi, Cook, & Watabe, 1998; Yamagishi, 2011).

Building on this foundation, subsequent research has consistently shown that individualism fosters the development of generalized trust by promoting norms of autonomy, weak social ties, and reliance on impartial institutions (Allik & Realo, 2004; Schulz et al., 2019; Talhelm et al., 2018). Individualistic cultures tend to be highly mobile, where interactions with strangers is more common, thus potentially accounting for these differences (Kito, Yuki, & Thomson, 2017). Moreover, Schulz et al. (2019) argue that strong kin-based institutions, which dominate in many collectivistic societies, hinders the evolution of generalized trust. By contrast, historical exposure to the Western Church weakens family ties, paving the way for more individualistic social organization and, over time, greater openness to trusting strangers.

Our Test

Synthesizing these insights, our central argument is that this type of generalized, unconditional trust as measured by the current widely used trust measures tends to be found in Western societies characterized by lower cultural distance to the U.S., higher educational attainment, high-quality institutions, and individualism. While prior research has suggested generalized trust is related to characteristics of WEIRD societies (Bjørnskov, 2008; Gheorghiu, Vignoles, & Smith, 2009; Helliwell & Putnam, 1999; Schulz et al., 2019), such investigations have largely been fragmented—typically focusing on single relationships (e.g. the association between individualism and generalized trust) or employing narrow operationalizations of trust in isolation (e.g. WVS measure only).

To address this limitation, we conducted a comprehensive test of our theory by integrating existing global datasets on trust. If trust is measured through a framework systematically biased toward WEIRD contexts, then we should expect to observe positive associations between WEIRD characteristics and various measures of trust around the world. This approach enabled us

to systematically examine whether WEIRDness (operationalized as lower cultural distance to the United States), along with key features of WEIRD societies—higher education, strong institutional quality, and individualism—is systematically related to global patterns of generalized trust.

Empirical Datasets

To test our theory, we compiled cross-national data on trust from existing large-scale sources, integrating both survey-based measures and behavioral economic game outcomes. We were able to identify five such datasets that measured individuals’ tendencies to trust across more than 30 nations (See Table 1). These include World Value Survey, General Preference Survey (Falk et al., 2018), a subscale measuring trust toward strangers in the Responsibility scale (Talhelm et al., 2018), a large-scale cross-national experiment using Prisoner’s dilemma (Romano et al., 2021), and a meta-analysis of trust game studies from 1995 to 2011 (Johnson et al., 2011). As expected, as evidenced in the measures used in these studies, global investigations of trust have predominantly focused on generalized trust, relying on survey questions of generalized trust and experimental paradigms that assess trusting behavior toward anonymous strangers devoid of context.

Table 1. Measures of Generalized Trust around The World

Variable	Dataset	Type	<i>N</i>	Description
Generalized trust	World Value Survey	Survey	69	Agreement with “most people can be trusted”
Intrinsic trust	General Preference Survey	Survey	77	Agreement with "I assume that people have only the best intentions"
Trust toward Strangers	Talhelm et al. (2018)	Survey	100	Agree with two scenarios about trusting strangers
Prisoner’s Dilemma (Mean investment)	Romano et al. (2021)	Behavioral experiment	42	Mean investment sent in a Prison’s Dilemma

Trust game (% invested by trustees)	Johnson et al. (2011)	Behavioral experiment	35	Mean proportion of first transfer by trustees
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Next, we assembled and developed societal-level variables that are indicators of WEIRD societies.

Weirdness. Following recent research (White & Muthukrishna, 2023; Atari et al., 2023), we operationalized WEIRDness with cultural similarity to people living in the U.S., using two complementary measures of cultural distance. For both measures, we reverse-coded cultural distance to the U.S. such that higher values reflect greater cultural similarity to the U.S. (i.e. greater WEIRDness).

The first measure was the cultural distance index developed by Muthukrishna et al. (2020), which applies the fixation index – originally used in population genetics—to the WVS data to quantify psychological and cultural distances between societies, with any population as the point of comparison (in this case, the U.S.). The fixation index quantifies the distance between any pair of countries based on aggregated measures of various cultural values from the WVS.

The second measure employed a machine-learning–based approach developed by Liew, Hamamura, and Uchida (2025), which classifies participants’ cultural membership based on their responses to large-scale international surveys. Classification accuracy reflects the extent to which individuals from different countries can be distinguished based on their survey responses; higher classification accuracy implies greater cultural difference. We used the classification accuracy between the U.S. and each comparison country, trained on data from the Gallup World Poll (N = 142 countries), as our second measure of cultural distance. The Gallup dataset was selected due to its broad cross-national coverage and standardized sampling methods.

Educational level. Following prior research (Barro & Lee, 2015), we operationalized a society's educational level with the percentage of population who have either completed or partially completed college education.

Institutional Quality. Prior research identifies two key dimensions of institutions for social capital: institutional effectiveness and institutional impartiality (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Based on these dimensions, we operationalized institutional quality using the average of three indexes from the Worldwide Governance Index (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2024): Government effectiveness, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption ($\alpha = 0.97$).

Individualism-Collectivism. Given the limitations of self-report measures in capturing meaningful cross-cultural differences in individualism-collectivism—particularly their tendency to produce inconsistent or weak effects across nations (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002 for a meta-analysis), we relied on the Global Collectivism Index developed by Pelham (2022), which offers a more behaviorally grounded alternative. This index draws on nationally representative census statistics and reflects observable indicators of collectivism, such as the prevalence of multi-generational households, larger family sizes, and lower divorce rates. This index is positively correlated with other well-established self-report indicators of individualism-collectivism such as Hofstede et al.'s (2010) and Gelfand et al.'s (2004) measures (Pelham, 2022). We reverse-coded this index such that higher scores reflect lower collectivism and higher individualism.

The Meta-Analytic Approach

To examine how generalized trust varies with different cultural characteristics across societies, we systematically assessed the association between each trust index and each cultural characteristic. For each cultural characteristic related to WEIRDness (cultural distance to the

U.S., institutional quality, education, individualism), we first computed nation-level correlations between that characteristic and each trust index. We then conducted a random-effects meta-analysis to assess the overall association between the characteristic and trust. By minimizing dependence on any one trust measure, this approach mitigates measurement-specific idiosyncrasies and the limitations of country sample sizes, allowing us to make more robust, generalizable conclusions about the influence of cultural context on global patterns of generalized trust.

We predict that across global datasets with varying measures of trust, there will be positive associations between trust and each measure of WEIRDness. Such positive associations would imply that trust has been conceptualized and measured through a framework systematically biased toward WEIRD contexts.

Results: Is There a WEIRD Bias in Generalized Trust?

The meta-analysis showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between generalized trust and WEIRDness, defined as being culturally similar to the U.S. using a combination of the two cultural distance measures ($r = 0.16$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.28], $p = .009$). Thus, generalized trust was higher in more WEIRD societies in general. For instance, Figure 1 shows a positive association between cultural distance to the U.S. and the likelihood of agreeing to the idea that most people can be trusted.

In addition, generalized trust aligned closely with key features of WEIRD Societies. As shown in Table 2, different measures of generalized trust were generally correlated with WEIRD characteristics in the expected positive directions. On average, generalized trust tended to be higher in societies characterized by strong and effective institutions ($r = 0.37$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.56], $p = 0.002$). Generalized trust is also higher in more individualistic societies ($r = 0.37$, 95%

CI = [0.15, 0.55], $p = 0.001$). The relationship between generalized trust and education attainment was positive but not significant ($r = 0.11$, 95% CI = [-0.02, 0.24], $p = 0.11$).

Figure 1
Countries More Culturally Similar to the U.S. Tend to Report Higher Levels of Generalized Trust in World Values Survey

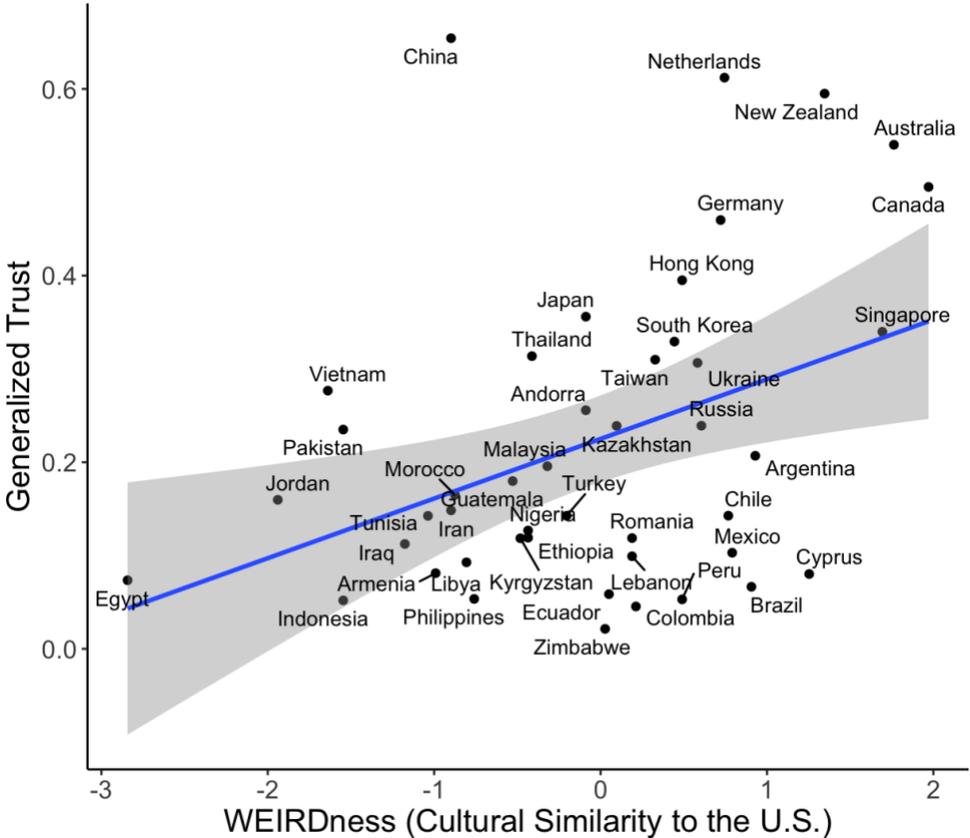


Table 2

Cross-national correlations between generalized trust measures and key characteristics associated with WEIRD societies

Trust measures	Similarity to the U.S. (Muthukrishna)	Similarity to the U.S. (Liew)	Institutional quality	Individualism	Education
WVS: General trust	0.39 ^{**}	0.32 [*]	0.70 ^{***}	0.68 ^{***}	0.14
GPS: Intrinsic trust	-0.16	0.17	0.25 ^{***}	0.19 [*]	0.21
Trust in strangers	0.14	0.00	0.34 ^{***}	0.35 ^{***}	0.02
TG: First transfer	0.21	-0.01	0.29 [*]	0.29 [*]	-0.06
PD: Mean investment	0.32	0.34 [*]	0.14	0.20	0.18
Meta-analytic average	0.16	0.17 [*]	0.37 ^{**}	0.37 ^{**}	0.11

Note. $p < .10$, $p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$. WVS = World Value Survey, GPS = Global Preference Survey taken from Falk et al (2018), Trust in strangers were taken from Talhelm et al. (2025), TG = Trust Game, PD = Prisoner's Dilemma.

Conclusion

Generalized trust— a view of trust that is confined to unconditional, default belief in others' internal trustworthiness— has become the de facto lens through which trust is studied and compared globally. Our meta-analysis demonstrates that such prevailing conceptualizations and measures of trust are deeply rooted in WEIRD cultural assumptions. The more WEIRD a society is, the more likely it is that trust can be found using existing surveys and experiment paradigms. We find evidence that generalized trust may be an idiosyncratic manifestation afforded by high-quality institutions and strong individualism in WEIRD societies. As a result, societies labeled as “low-trust” may not in fact lack trust, but rather establish and express trust differently.

By focusing almost exclusively on a WEIRD form of trust, the field risks mischaracterizing global variation and reinforcing a Western-centric understanding of human behavior. As a field, we call for a globally valid re-conceptualization of trust— one that embraces culturally diverse manifestations, recognizes the complexity of trust targets and contexts, and is

built on understanding of cultural, ecological, and historical diversity. This would allow us to develop new, culturally valid measurement tools that better reflect the full spectrum of trust experiences and more accurately capture global variation. Only through such recalibration can we fully understand how trust operates— and will be able to thrive— across the globe.

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