

# Kindness of Strangers



## KATARZYNA GROWIEC

Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Warsaw

katarzyna.growiec@swps.edu.pl

Dr. Katarzyna Growiec is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Psychology of Personality at the Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities. She completed her PhD on the impact of social capital on trust in society at the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. She works with the Centre for Research on Prejudice at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw.

### **Why, in spite of changes to the political and social system, do Poles continue to distrust their fellow Poles? Is it because most of us put our trust mainly in our family networks, and don't feel we can depend on anyone else?**

What is the relationship between social connections, trust in society, and sensitivity to unethical behavior in others? Comparative data obtained through surveys conducted on representative samples from various countries reveal that family ties in Poland remain some of the strongest among the developed countries. Many studies also show that powerful family ties are correlated with belief in traditional values, stereotypical divisions of male and female roles, strong loyalty towards family, low trust in others, and more frequent corruption-related behavior. Polish society appears to closely follow this model; however, empirical evidence remains low.

#### **Friends versus family**

To start with, we examined links between various types of social connections and trust in society. In order to achieve this, I analyzed data from the questionnaire "Interpersonal Contact" conducted by the Polish General Social Survey (PGSS) in 2001. I focused on questions assessing trust in society: "There are just a few people who I trust completely" (responses on a 1-5 scale) and "In most cases, we can be confident that

other people have kind intentions towards us" (1-5 scale).

In order to define the type of social connections for each person in the study, I used two variables: one regarding their contact with family, and the other regarding contact with friends from various circles (school, work, the army, etc.). This allowed me to roughly define the composition of respondents' social networks. High numbers of friends from different circles indicate that the respondent has what is known as a bridging network, while more frequent contact with family suggests that the respondent has a binding network. The correlation factor between "contact with family" and "contact with friends" is low; this allowed me to define four types of social contact that combine the two basic ones. The first includes people who maintain low levels of contact with family and low levels of contact with friends. The second includes those maintaining high levels of contact with family and low levels of contact with friends. The third group maintains high levels of contact with family and high levels of contact with friends, while the final group includes people who maintain low levels of contact with family but high levels of contact with friends.

Further analysis of the relationships between these types of social contact and other variables was conducted in a binary format (yes-no answers). Respondents scoring above average in terms of "contact with family" were assigned a value of 1, and those scoring below average were assigned 0. Responses to the "contact with family" question were coded the same way. We found that most of the respondents displayed low levels of social contact in general: low contact with family and low contact with friends.

#### **Trusting and lonely**

Next, we considered issues involving trust in society and social connections. The literature suggests a clear link: close family



Jakub Czatowski

ties are accompanied by low levels of trust in other people. Let us turn this around: what is the opposite of family ties? The answer is: closer links with friends and acquaintances. We examined whether binding social networks really do go hand in hand with distrust towards others, while bridging social networks are accompanied by higher general levels of trust. Is there further positive feedback between the type of social connection and social trust – that is, do people who trust others accumulate more bridging capital, which in turn makes them more trusting and more able to continue accumulating it, while those who show low levels of trust limit their contact to close relatives, which maintains their conviction that they can only really trust family members?

During my analysis of PGSS data, I used the following statement measuring trust: “There are just a few people who I trust completely” (answers on a 1-5 scale). I conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the four levels of social contacts as the variables (mainly family, mainly friends, family and friends, rare social contact). Results show that people who maintain different types of

social contact show a statistically significant variance in their levels of trust. Variance analysis results are shown in Fig. 1. Further analysis reveals statistically significant differences in the levels of trust displayed by people with low levels of social contact and people who mainly remain in contact with family, and people who mainly maintain contact with friends. Generally speaking, people with low levels of social contact were shown to be the most trusting among the analyzed groups.

### A friendly world for friends

An analogous variant analysis was conducted for social contact with the variable set as the answer to another statement regarding trust: “In most cases, we can be confident that other people have kind intentions towards us” (answers on a 1-5 scale). In this instance, there is no statistical difference in trust between groups of respondents with different types of social interactions, as shown in Fig. 2. However, further measurements indicated a significant difference in the perception of goodwill of others between people with little social contact and people mainly maintaining

**Poles trust their family members above other people. “Family” includes adult children, their parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins, godparents, etc., forming bridging networks**

Links between social connections and trust in society

social contact with friends. Analysis indicates that people who are in frequent contact with friends are more convinced of the kindness of strangers and a generally positive attitude of society than people with infrequent social interactions.

**Vicious circle**

The results suggest that there may be a connection between social trust and the type of social connections. It may be that distrustful people avoid forming social bonds outside their original group, perhaps by limiting their trust to just that group. Alesina and Guiliano (2010) demonstrated that in societies with low levels of trust towards strangers, trust in family members was higher. People whose social networks mainly included family had fewer opportunities to discover positive and cooperative attitudes of others than those whose social circles also include non-relatives and friends. People who do engage socially with others from outside their primary group have more opportunities to experience positive and cooperative attitudes; they exhibit stronger social trust than those whose networks focus around family members, or those with less frequent social contact.

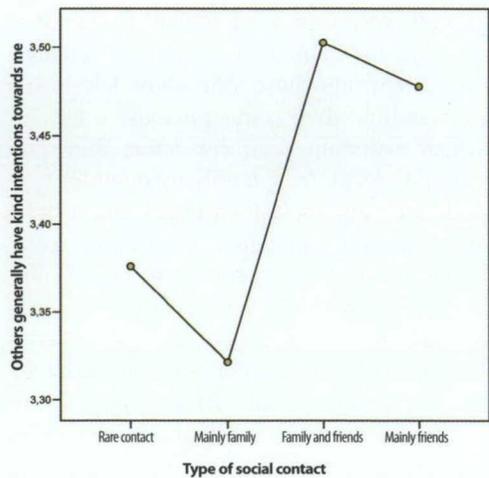
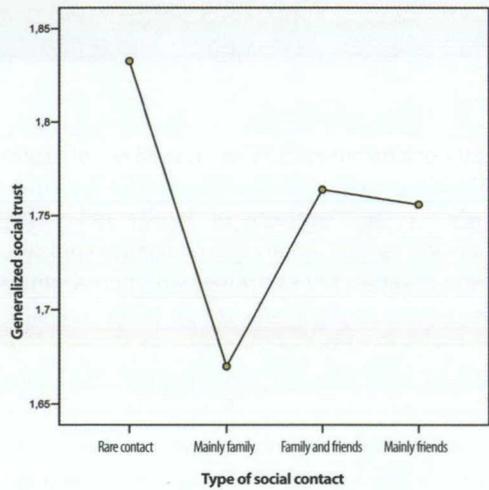
Data analysis conducted in 2011 revealed that respondents with higher levels of trust in society generally had more acquaintances (by one person on average) and friends (by 0.6 people on average). Social trust has no effect on shaping relationships with close family. This suggests that trust is necessary for forming social ties with people from outside the original group, while having no impact on maintaining contact with family members.

The results presented here are an attempt to answer the question: why are levels of social trust so low in Poland in spite of changes to the system? Data obtained as part of the "Social Diagnosis" study conducted between 2000-2011 reveal that social trust has been consistently low. Just 10-13% respondents (depending on the stage of the study) state that most people can be trusted, while in analogous research in Scandinavia approx. 80% respondents claim to trust strangers. Why do levels of social trust remain so low in Poland? Perhaps the answer is that social trust is linked with the social connections made by people, and they can be difficult

to change. People frequently feel no need to expand these networks beyond their family and relatives, in particular since that would require social trust which they don't have; conversely, the reason for their low trust is that their social network maintains their conviction that people from beyond the family circle cannot be trusted and are not needed.

**Familiar and trustworthy?**

However, the complete picture of Poland's society is far more complex. If we look at data from the "Social Diagnosis" concerning sensitivity to immoral behavior in others (such as tax evasion, not paying bills, dishonestly claiming public benefits, riding on public transport without a ticket, and so on), it turns out that increased contact with family appears to make people more sensitive to this type of behavior. Analysis of data collected as part of a study on a representative sample of Poles (N=2500),





Jakub Oczalowski

included in the “Social Diagnosis 2005” set, reveals that powerful family ties go hand in hand with increased sensitivity to others’ immoral or unethical behavior. In terms of family, the relationship between intensity of contact and sensitivity to immoral behavior is even more powerful than in terms of contact with friends or acquaintances, which also shows a positive correlation with sensitivity to immoral behavior. This means that we must question whether strong family ties in Poland really are conducive to lawbreaking and indifference to immoral behavior, or whether the opposite is true and they encourage people to observe social and legal norms. However, we cannot draw conclusions on the cause-effect relationship between the variables on the basis of a single cross-sectional study.

There is another approach to the problem: social connections, trust and morality

are linked to social class (Gdula, Sadura, 2012). Perhaps we should start any analysis of the complex relationship between social connections (such as family ties) and trust in strangers and tolerance for immoral behavior by studying Poland’s social classes. The relationships between the variables seem to take different shape depending on the respondents’ social class. ■

#### Further reading:

- Christakis N.A., Fowler J.H. (2009). *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. Little Brown.
- Dunbar, R. (2010). *How many friends does one person need?: Dunbar's number and other evolutionary quirks*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gdula M., Sadura P. (eds.), (2012), *Style życia i porządek klasowy w Polsce* [Lifestyles and Class Order in Poland]. Warsaw: Scholar.
- Skarżyńska K. (ed.), (2012). *Między ludźmi... oczekiwania, interesy, emocje* [Among People... Expectations, Interests, Emotions]. Warsaw: Scholar.

**People who are in frequent contact with friends are more likely to believe in the kindness of strangers, and a generally positive attitude of society**