

Trust in Heterogeneous Populations

Trust constitutes an important – yet often subconscious – driving force of social interaction and lies at the heart of society's functioning. With significant developments towards increased societal heterogeneity (e.g. through refugee flows or labour migration), the impact of this development on trust relations deserves special attention. The goal of this project is to develop a dynamic model to explain the emergence and persistence of social trust within and between groups (for example between native and refugee populations).

Through a dynamic perspective on social trust relations by means of agent-based simulations, we aim at identifying mechanisms that strengthen or weaken the emergence and persistence of trust. Such principles are difficult to identify and grasp by classic theoretical approaches due to intricate feedback loops. Simulation allows for an explicit modelling of causal mechanisms and thereby provides an insightful theoretical access to potential influencing factors of social transformation. Once these mechanisms are identified, potential effects of policy measures can be studied within the model world.

Vice versa, simulation offers a chance to explicitly model the aforementioned local interaction processes over time, and to analyse their effects on macro-level societal structures. Crucially, this also allows considering endogenous effects during the development of trust attitudes. A particular strength of the simulation methodology lies in the modelling of social feedback loops, which are hard to capture in standard theoretical and empirical approaches.

A special focus is put on the impact of a community's heterogeneity, and how group size, interconnectedness, alongside with other variables such as mobility and the level of initial trust, impact the emergence and stability of society wide trust.

Preliminary findings suggest that trust-segregation may stem from asymmetries in indirect learning about group trustworthiness: Inferences from other people's behavior towards oneself can offer insights only about one's in-group and can never be obtained about the out-group. Further preliminary findings suggest a strong impact of agent mobility on trust: Lack of mobility tends to produce small areas of low trust more often than under high mobility. Also, high initial trust levels seem to play a major role for the emergence of trust.

In its entirety, the project allows to address highly socially relevant questions like: When does group membership become a relevant criterion for granting individual trust? What is the effect of in-group-trust on generalized trust and vice versa? How resilient are trust-attitudes in the face of sudden exogenous shocks?

Project status: One paper in progress, one DFG-proposal work in progress (with J. Marx)