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# Social Trust and Value Similarity: the Relationship between Social Trust and Human Values in Europe

Mai Beilmann\* & Laur Lilleoja

## Abstract

The purpose of the current paper is to test whether value similarity may foster social trust in society and whether people have higher levels of social trust when they emphasise the same values that prevail in their country. The relationship between social trust and human values was examined in a sample of 51,308 people across 29 European countries using data from the European Social Survey round 6. Results suggest that value similarity is more important in generating individual level social trust in countries where the overall levels of social trust are higher. There is a stronger positive relationship between value similarity and social trust in Scandinavian countries, which have high social trust levels, while in countries with a low level of social trust, congruity of the personal value structure with the country level value structure tends to decrease the individuals trustfulness.

**Keywords:** social trust, human values, value similarity, European Social Survey.

*Without the general trust people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate, for very few relationships are based entirely upon what is known with certainty about another person, and very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as, or stronger than, rational proof or personal observation. (Simmel 2011, [1900])*

## Introduction

Social trust is often considered the glue that holds society together and facilitates cooperation between people. Luhman (1979), for example, describes trust as an essential social lubricant that makes cooperation possible and contributes to the maintenance of social order at the micro level. There is a growing amount of empirical evidence in the social sciences to support this view. Social trust, which is often considered one of the key elements of social capital (Putnam, 2000, 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2008; Whiteley, 2000), has been found to be a relevant factor of development at country and community level: It has a positive effect on economic performance and growth (Neira, Portela & Vieira, 2010; Uslaner, 2002; Whiteley, 2000), health (Rostila, 2007; von dem Knesebeck, Dragano & Siegrist, 2005), lower suicide rates (Kelly, Davoren, Mhaolain, Breen & Casey, 2009), crime reduction (Akcomak & ter Weel, 2011; Whiteley, 2000), political trust (Gabriel & Walter Rogg, 2008), good governance and the effective state (Uslaner, 2002; Whiteley, 2000; Zmerli & Newton, 2008), happiness and wellbeing (Inglehart, 1999; Putnam, 2000).

Several theorists (Putnam, 2000; Whiteley, 2000) have defined social trust as the willingness to trust others, even total strangers, without the expectation that they will immediately reciprocate that trust or favour. They have emphasised that social trust relies on an expectation that altruistic behaviour will be repaid sometime in the future by someone else. Delhey and Newton (2005) define trust as 'the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if this is possible' (p. 311). Following Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994) we may conceptualise

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social trust as a kind of optimism towards the trustworthiness of others. This implies that one is likely to cooperate with another until there is no proof that this person is unreliable. However, social trust is more of an individual trait than a relational construct for Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994), whereas for Putnam (2000), Whiteley (2000), and Delhey and Newton (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Newton, 2004) it is more like a social norm that we learn from our social environment. Their views are somewhat similar to Uslaner (2000, 2002), who argues that we learn trust at an early age from our caregivers, and our tendency to trust or distrust people does not change much over a lifetime. There is also evidence that at the individual level social trust is influenced by a wide range of socio-economic and contextual factors, such as income (Putnam, 2000, 2002), education (Hooghe, Marien & de Vroome, 2012; Neller, 2008; Putnam, 2000, 2002), age (Putnam, 2000, 2002; Yukel & Ekici, 2014), marital status (Yukel & Ekici, 2014), religion (Neller, 2008), settlement type (Alesina & Ferrara, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Yukel & Ekici, 2014), employment status (Lindström, 2009), and occupational prestige (Hooghe et al., 2012). Beilmann and Realo (2012) have suggested that people who share particular cultural values may be more trusting. To conclude, there is no agreement on the origins of social trust at the individual level (Newton, 2004).

It is possible to conceptualise that trust is not the characteristic of individuals, but a feature of the social environment, and that people 'live their life in a climate of greater or lesser trust' (Newton, 2004, p 21). According to this view, we become trusting by experiencing trustworthy behaviour in our daily life, and consequently, the individual responses to the standard trust questions are evaluations of the society in which we live (Newton, 2004, p 21). Some people are more trusting because they have lived in a social environment that generates trust.

Indeed, as Meulemann (2008) indicates the implications of social trust are rather different at the individual and group level. A climate of trust and the acceptance of the norms of cooperation are beyond doubt beneficial for a group, community or country, but the individual does not profit directly from being trustful. However, the individual benefits from a climate of trust in his/her community because the norms of trust facilitate cooperation with other people, even total strangers. It has been recognised that it is very difficult to create social trust in places where it does not exist, since anyone who tries to cooperate in a society lacking social trust will simply be exploited (Whiteley, 2000). Therefore, the existence of community or country level social trust seems crucial for generating individual level social trust.

Despite extensive research, there is also no absolute agreement on the origins of social trust at the national level. The important factors for generating high levels of social trust at country level are found to be modernisation (Newton, 2004), democracy (Stolle, 2003), a high level of political rights and civil liberties (Stolle, 2003), a low repression level (2003), social equality (Bjornskov, 2007; Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004; Stolle, 2003), strong universalistic welfare state (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003; Stolle, 2003) a trustworthy state and good governance (Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004; Stolle, 2003), ethnic homogeneity (Bjornskov, 2007; Newton, 2004), Protestant tradition (Bjornskov, 2007; Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004), and individualistic values (Allik & Realo, 2004; Hofstede, 2001; Realo, Allik & Greenfield, 2008; Realo & Allik, 2009). Newton (2004) has hypothesised that levels of social trust may be higher in smaller countries because those countries are more homogenous in social composition and have fewer cleavages.

It has been claimed that differences in trust levels may be driven by cultural and historical differences between countries (Bjornskov, 2007; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002) and indeed, trust levels vary considerably between countries (Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004; Schmitt-Beck, 2008). There seems to be a considerable gap in social trust between West and East Europe, and North and South Europe. Traditionally, the most trusting societies are the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden), followed by the Netherlands, English and German speaking countries (Neller, 2008). The low trust societies are in the Southern and Eastern parts of Europe (ibid). Post-communist societies are less trusting than others (Bjornskov, 2007). Nevertheless, despite the

differences found between different regions in Europe, it is important to keep in mind that European countries are rather similar to each other when compared to other regions in the world (Gabriel & Walter Rogg, 2008).

## Human Values and Social Trust

The effect of values on the generation of social trust has been researched both at the national and at the individual level. The relationship between social trust and individualism–collectivism has been a popular topic to study, for example. At the national level, it has been shown by different authors that countries where people believe that most people can be trusted are also more individualistic, emphasising the importance of independence, personal accomplishments, and freedom to choose one's own goals (Allik & Realo, 2004; Hofstede, 2001; Realo et al., 2008; Realo & Allik, 2009). However, findings are more controversial at the individual level. Dakhli (2009) showed that individualism–collectivism has an effect on trust, but Beilmann and Realo (2012) demonstrated that the relationship between individualism–collectivism and social trust is more multifaceted at the individual level, and we cannot expect the relationships between values and social trust to be the same at the individual and national level.

This paper relies on Schwartz's (1992) conceptualisation of human values. Schwartz has defined values as desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance in serving as guiding principles in people's lives. According to his original theory, every individual value in any culture is locatable under ten universal, motivationally distinct basic values – hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, security, universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, power and achievement – all of which form, based on their interrelationships, a universal circular structure.

More similar value types are close to each other, and conflicting values appear on opposite sides of the circle. Pursuing one type of value will always result in conflict with oppositional types of values (Schwartz, 1994). Based on this opposition, value types also form two bi-polar contrasting higher-order dimensions: self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence and openness to change vs. conservation value types (Schwartz, 1992; 1994).

This paper analyses whether value similarity may foster social trust in society. Siegrist and colleagues (2000) postulate that values have an influence on social trust. They claim that people tend to trust people who share similar values. Similarly, Newton (2004) claims that 'the more others are like us in terms of social identity and characteristics, and the more they share our interests, the more trustworthy their behaviour towards us, and ours towards them. If trust is built upon common bonds, then the more homogeneous a society the higher the trust, and the more it is divided by deep cleavages and social differences, the lower the trust' (p. 23). Therefore, there is reason to believe that people find it easier to trust total strangers if their values are similar to the prevailing values in the society. Previous research has demonstrated that it is rather beneficial for an individual to hold similar values as their reference groups because people are likely to experience a sense of well-being when they emphasise the same values that prevail in their environment (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). It can be hypothesised that a similar link may be found between social trust and values. More precisely, this paper will test whether people have higher levels of social trust when they emphasise the same values that prevail in their country.

The role of similar values in generating social trust has been tested before only in the context of social trust in institutions and persons related to a technology (Siegrist, Cvetkovich & Roth, 2000). As far as we know, the link between social trust and value similarity has also never been empirically tested on nationally representative samples (Siegrist et al., 2000) used a student sample for their empirical analyses.

## Method

### Data

The European Social Survey data from round 6, collected from 29 European countries in 2012, was used for this research. The European Social Survey (the ESS; [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)) is an academically driven social survey that maps long-term attitudinal and behavioural changes in over 20 European countries. The ESS provides comparable data for nationally representative samples collected to the highest methodological standards across countries. Answers on social trust and human values measures were available from 51,308 respondents (Table 1). Females made up 54% of the participants. On average, respondents had completed 13 years of full-time education ( $SD = 3.99$ ). The sample sizes varied from 730 (Iceland) to 2,901 (Germany) individuals per country. The survey was representative of all persons aged 16 and over (no upper age limit) residing in private households in all participating countries. The sample was selected by strict random probability methods at every stage, and respondents were interviewed face-to-face.

Several authors have used European Social Survey data before to analyse social trust in Europe. Following the example of Hooghe & Vanhoutte (2011), Kelly et al. (2009), Olsen & Dahl (2007), Poortinga (2006), Schmitt-Beck (2008), von dem Knesebeck et al. (2005), and Zmerli and Newton (2008), our Social Trust Index was composed of three indicators:

- (1) Trust: “Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” (A3: 0—*You can’t be too careful ...* 10—*Most people can be trusted*);
- (2) Honesty: “Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair?” (A4: 0—*Most people would try to take advantage of me ...* 10—*Most people would try to be fair*);
- (3) Helpfulness: “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?” (A5: 0—*People mostly look out for themselves ...* 10—*People mostly try to be helpful*).

An index was computed based on the average of the standardised scores of these items. The overall standardised alpha of the 3-item measure was .78 with an average inter-item correlation of .539 (Table 1).

### Value similarity measure

Human values are measured using Schwartz’s value scale, which consists of 21 indicators (Appendix 1). The ESS value scale demonstrates configural and metric invariance, allowing researchers to study relationships among values and other variables across countries (Davidov, Schmidt & Schwartz, 2008). To assess the similarity of individual value preferences with the central value profile of a given society, an individual level Value similarity measure was created. For each individual, a ranked order of values for all the 21 value indicators was estimated, which were then correlated with the value hierarchy based on country-level average scores. The Spearman correlation coefficient of each calculation was then used as a Value similarity measure for each respondent. The described procedure has been widely used in personality research for measuring profile similarities (Furr, 2008), but it has also been used for measuring self-other agreement in personal values (Dobewall, Aavik, Konstabel, Schwartz & Realo, 2014). The country-level value similarity is calculated as a mean of respondents’ value similarity measures.

All respondents, who had six or more missing values on the human values module, were eliminated from the analysis as suggested by Schwartz (2004). For respondents with five or less missing values, the missing values were imputed, using the Multiple Imputation (Predictive Mean Matching) procedure in SPSS.

**Table 1:** Sample size and Descriptive Statistics of Social Trust Index and Value Similarity Measure

Country	Abbreviation	N	Social Trust Index M (SD)	Cronbach $\alpha$	Value Similarity Measure M (SD)
Albania	AL	969	3.83 (2.11)	.52	0.41 (0.24)
Belgium	BE	1,806	5.17 (1.61)	.71	0.47 (0.23)
Bulgaria	BG	2,063	3.62 (1.98)	.78	0.49 (0.28)
Cyprus	CZ	1,064	3.70 (1.93)	.77	0.55 (0.24)
Czech Republic	CY	1,842	4.69 (2.04)	.84	0.35 (0.33)
Denmark	DK	1,600	6.83 (1.47)	.73	0.46 (0.22)
Estonia	EE	2,281	5.42 (1.78)	.72	0.50 (0.26)
Finland	FI	2,136	6.42 (1.46)	.73	0.53 (0.23)
France	FR	1,929	5.00 (1.59)	.65	0.54 (0.22)
Germany	DE	2,901	5.36 (1.62)	.69	0.53 (0.20)
Hungary	HU	1,904	4.90 (1.93)	.81	0.41 (0.27)
Iceland	IS	730	6.34 (1.53)	.68	0.55 (0.20)
Ireland	IE	2,484	5.62 (1.88)	.77	0.45 (0.28)
Israel	IL	2,216	5.28 (1.84)	.69	0.33 (0.29)
Italy	IT	845	4.60 (1.90)	.73	0.49 (0.25)
Kosovo	XK	979	4.18 (2.07)	.67	0.48 (0.26)
Lithuania	LT	1,956	5.18 (1.80)	.79	0.35 (0.30)
Netherlands	NL	1,785	5.98 (1.46)	.72	0.48 (0.23)
Norway	NO	1,594	6.58 (1.40)	.71	0.47 (0.21)
Poland	PL	1,767	4.29 (1.81)	.65	0.50 (0.28)
Portugal	PT	2,042	4.02 (1.82)	.76	0.45 (0.26)
Russian Federation	RU	2,253	4.69 (2.03)	.70	0.34 (0.32)
Slovakia	SK	1,761	4.02 (1.98)	.82	0.41 (0.36)
Slovenia	SI	1,152	4.95 (1.96)	.75	0.49 (0.24)
Spain	ES	1,809	5.10 (1.69)	.69	0.56 (0.23)
Sweden	SE	1,793	6.17 (1.58)	.73	0.51 (0.22)
Switzerland	CH	1,448	5.94 (1.56)	.68	0.51 (0.20)
Ukraine	UA	1,984	4.50 (2.22)	.85	0.34 (0.33)
United Kingdom	GB	2,182	5.65 (1.57)	.72	0.47 (0.25)
All Groups		51,308	5.14 (1.97)	.78	0.46 (0.27)

Source: authors' compilation from ESS 2012 data

Human Development Index (HDI), GDP, Democracy Index, and Gender Inequality Index (GII) (included into ESS multilevel data file) are employed at the country level of analysis. To ensure representative results while computing country-level mean scores, the post-stratification weights (included into ESS data file) were used.

## Results

Table 2 describes correlations between social trust and the congruity of individual and society level value hierarchies in a full sample and based on gender, age and educational level.

At the overall level, the correlation between social trust and value congruity is extremely low (0.055). The correlation is slightly weaker among men than women. When comparing different age groups, the correlation is stronger among 35-64 year old respondents and weakest among the oldest

**Table 2:** Correlations between social trust and value similarity

		All countries	Scandinavia	Western Europe	Eastern and Southern Europe
All		.055**	.144**	.072**	-.045**
Gender	Male	.050**	.127**	.060**	-.038**
	Female	.059**	.137**	.083**	-.054**
Age	up to 24 years	.039**	.111**	.040*	-.048**
	25-34 years	.054**	.118**	.042*	-.024
	35-49 years	.073**	.100**	.071**	-.024
	50-64 years	.078**	.138**	.103**	-.021
	65+ years	.035**	.135**	.099**	-.019
Education	Primary	.005	.151**	.037**	-.051**
	Secondary	.046**	.125**	.070**	-.040**
	Tertiary	.116**	.117**	.098**	.013

\* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level; \*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Source: authors' compilation from ESS 2012 data

age group. Larger differentiation can be seen when comparing the strength of the relationship across educational levels (Table 2). Therefore, education seems to have an effect on the relationship between value similarity and social trust.

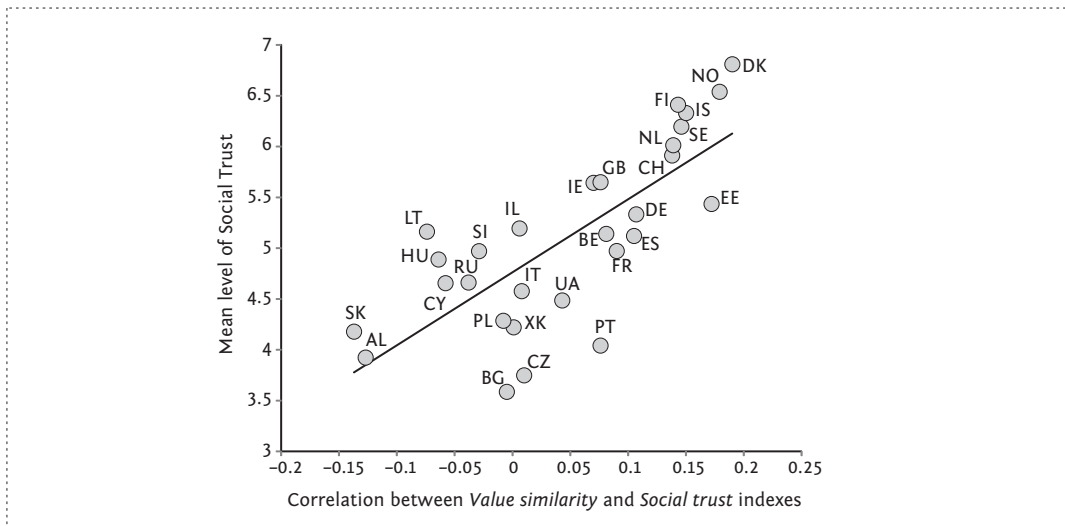
As the correlations were extremely low at the individual level of analysis, we continued with comparing the correlations in different countries. It is known that the level of social trust differs significantly across European countries, which can also affect the relationship between social trust and value similarity. Figure 1 compares correlations across countries and the overall social trust level.

The correlation between personal level value similarity and social trust varies across European countries from -0.14 to 0.20, while at the same time the overall trust seems to have a strong linear association with the correlations between value similarity and trust. The correlation between countries' mean value similarity and mean social trust is 0.754.

The correlation between value similarity and social trust is strongest in Denmark (0.2), which also has the highest level of social trust (6.8). Other countries with strong correlation between value similarity and social trust are Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, and Estonia. All of these countries, except Estonia, have a social trust average of 6 or more points out of 10. Interestingly, in countries with a very low level of social trust, the correlation between personal level value similarity and social trust is non-significant or even negative, which means that, for example, in Slovakia and Albania the congruity of personal value structure with the country level value structure tends to decrease the individual's trustfulness.

As the overall level of social trust is strongly related with countries' development in general, the correlation between value similarity and social trust is also expectedly highly related with HDI (.637\*\*), with GDP (.708\*\*), with Democracy Index (.716\*\*), and with GII (-.583\*\*).

To better understand how the relation between value congruity and social trust is spread in regions, we present a comparison of the correlations between trust and value similarity in 3 groups, which are formed based on the level of social trust (Table 2). The first group consists of only Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland), all of which have a trust score above 6 points out of 10. The second group consists of countries with an average trust level between 5 and 6 points – the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, Ireland, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Belgium, Spain and France. With the exception of Estonia, Lithuania, and Israel, all these countries belong to Western Europe and are highly developed. The third group consists of countries where the



**Figure 1:** Correlations across countries and the overall social trust level

Source: authors' calculations from ESS 2012 data

average social trust level is below 5 – Slovenia, Hungary, Russia, Cyprus, Italy, Ukraine, Poland, Kosovo, Slovakia, Portugal, Albania, Czech Republic and Bulgaria. All these countries, with the exception of Cyprus, Italy, and Portugal, belong to the Eastern Europe.

As expected, the value similarity and social trust are most strongly related in Scandinavian countries, while in the second group the correlation is exactly twice as weak and for Eastern and Southern Europeans slightly negative.

For Scandinavians and Western Europeans, the relationship is slightly stronger among women, which is also true in the Eastern and Southern European context but in the opposite way. While for Scandinavians and Western Europeans the value similarity relates more among older respondents, in the Eastern and Southern European context there is a significant correlation only among the youngest age group, which means that for most of respondents there is no connection between these two measures. The effect of the educational level is maybe even the most interesting – among Scandinavians, the correlation is highest for respondents with primary education, while for Western Europeans the tendency is the opposite; for Eastern and Southern Europeans among respondents with primary and secondary educational level, the correlation is significantly negative, while for highly educated respondents it is non-significant.

## Discussion and conclusions

It has been claimed that people tend to trust people who are more like them and share similar values (Newton, 2004; Siegrist et al., 2000). As this suggests that people find it easier to trust total strangers if their values are similar to the prevailing values in the society, this paper analysed whether and how value similarity may foster social trust in society. Our results suggest that the relationship between value similarity and social trust is stronger at the country level than at the individual level. As the relationship between social trust and value congruity is extremely weak at the individual level in all groups, this relationship should be tested on different samples before any extensive conclusions are made.



Significant cross-country differences were found. There is stronger positive relationship between value similarity and social trust in Scandinavian countries, which have high social trust levels, while in countries with very low levels of social trust the congruity of personal value structure with the country level value structure tends to decrease the individuals trustfulness. To understand better how the relation between value congruity and social trust develops at society level, three groups of countries were compared with different social trust levels. As expected, the value similarity and social trust are most strongly related among Scandinavians, while for Western Europeans the positive relationship between value similarity and trust is weaker, and for Eastern and Southern Europeans slightly negative. Therefore, our results suggest that value similarity is more important in generating individual level social trust in countries where the overall levels of social trust are higher.

One possible explanation for this is that certain types of value structures foster social trust at the individual level, and there are higher levels of social trust in countries where such types of value structures prevail among inhabitants. This hypothesis needs to be tested empirically in further research. It is obvious that if that is the case, people in high trust societies who share prevailing social-trust-generating values should be more trusting, whereas people in low trust societies who share prevailing values that do not enforce social trust ought to be less trusting. As the people in low trust societies, whose value structure favours trustfulness and are more trusting, differ in terms of their values from the majority in their society, the absent or even negative relationship between social trust and value similarity results in those countries.

This raises the hypothesis of virtuous and vicious circles. If some value structures lead to more social trust, it generates a virtuous circle in some countries: most people in those societies are socialised into values that support social trust. As they grow up to trust other people in a generally trusting society, they experience from an early age that trusting other people pays off and their values, which favour trusting other people, as well as the belief that other people can be trusted are both reinforced by the experience. In countries where the prevailing value structure does not foster generation of social trust, a vicious circle starts revolving. People in those countries are socialised into values that do not enforce trusting strangers and acquaintances, and as they live in a low trust society, their belief that other people cannot be trusted is reinforced by the experience because anyone who tries to cooperate in a society lacking social trust will simply be exploited, as Whiteley (2000) has suggested. As a result, people whose value structure favours trustfulness form only a minority in those societies, and it is very difficult to turn the vicious circle into virtuous circle. This hypothesis of virtuous and vicious circles needs to be tested, of course, in further research.

However, this explanation is in accordance with the suggestion that the political and institutional settings and the historical and religious backgrounds are relevant for the generation of social trust (Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004), and the findings in this study that the overall level of social trust is strongly related with countries' development in general (e.g. human development, GDP, democracy, and gender equality). It has been demonstrated before that prevailing values in the society are the outcome of the current political and social situation as well as the historical, cultural and religious background of the country (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Rohan, 2000; Schwartz, 1999). It seems logical that values may translate the past and present experiences of the society into social trust levels.

The novelty of this study lies in fact that the role of similar values in generating social trust has been tested so far only in the context of social trust in institutions and persons related to a technology (Siegrist et al., 2000). The key point of this study is that the link between social trust and value similarity was tested on a nationally representative sample. However, it would be relevant to test in the future whether similar patterns in the relationships between social trust and value similarity prevail outside European countries as well. European countries are rather similar when compared to the rest of the world (Gabriel & Walher Rogg, 2008), therefore, our results should not be extended to the whole world. Nevertheless, based on the European data it seems likely that certain types of value structures are sustaining social trust at the individual level, and there are higher levels of social trust in countries where such types of value structures prevail among inhabitants.

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#### Notes

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**Appendix 1:** The list of items for measuring human values in European Social Survey questionnaire

- (1) Important to think new ideas and being creative
- (2) Important to be rich, have money and expensive things
- (3) Important that people are treated equally and have equal opportunities
- (4) Important to show abilities and be admired
- (5) Important to live in secure and safe surroundings
- (6) Important to try new and different things in life
- (7) Important to do what is told and follow rules
- (8) Important to understand different people
- (9) Important to be humble and modest, not draw attention
- (10) Important to have a good time
- (11) Important to make own decisions and be free
- (12) Important to help people and care for others well-being
- (13) Important to be successful and that people recognize achievements
- (14) Important that government is strong and ensures safety
- (15) Important to seek adventures and have an exciting life
- (16) Important to behave properly
- (17) Important to get respect from others
- (18) Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close
- (19) Important to care for nature and environment
- (20) Important to follow traditions and customs
- (21) Important to seek fun and things that give pleasure

Source: ESS 2012