Social Trust: Empirical Study of Latent Types.

Social trust according to Pew Research Center "is a belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of others." The importance of social trust in a society can hardly be overemphasized. It is considered an important synthetic force within a society. (Simmel 1950). Among the positive effects of social trust to a nation are social integration, co-operation, harmony and personal well-being. This paper takes a view that social trust is associated with individual social and demographic characteristics and explores the relationships between features such as sex, education, race, age and social trust. The major objective of the paper however, is to identify distinctive subtypes of a national probability sample using their responses to survey items measuring social trust.

Source of Data. This study used data from The General Social Survey (GSS) 2012 conducted by The National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The data was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), www.TheARDA.com. The sample size consisted of a National probability sample of 4,820 individuals.

The GSS 2012 contained three items designed to measure social trust. The items were:

1. Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?

2. Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?

3. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in life?

Results of Data Analysis

Frequency distributions of the three items above showed that 54% of the respondents indicated that most of the time people try to be helpful (Q1) and 58% also said that most people would try to be fair if they got a chance (Q2). However, majority of respondents did not feel that most people can be trusted. For example, 63% of the respondents indicated that "You can't be too careful in life" (Q3).

The relationships between four demographic variables, sex, race, education, age and the dependent variable, trust were explored. The results indicated strong relationships between sex and trust (p. <.00), race and trust (p. <.00), Education/College degrees and trust (p. <.00), age and trust (p.>.00). The data indicate that females, African Americans, individuals with less education (i.e. those who left high school education), and adults between 18 and 29 years are less trusting than males, whites, those with graduate degrees and seniors (65 years and over) respectively.

 To identify distinctive subtypes of the sample or latent types of social trust, the three survey questions pertaining to social trust were subjected to latent class analysis. The purpose was to use a statistical procedure to find a distinct subgroups or latent classes/types from the multivariate categorical responses to the three social trust items. Four different models for the data were estimated. The

Bayesian information criterion (BIC) was used to select Model #2 (a two class model) as the best fitting model for the data. The selected two-class model identified two distinctive groups of the national sample. The model was used to describe how the two groups differ from each other. Group 1 is the Low Social Trust Group. It consisted of 50.7% of the respondents who maintained a) people are mostly just looking out for themselves, b) most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance and c) you can't be too careful in life. Group 2 is the High Social Trust Group. It consisted of 49.3% of the sample. The group maintained that a) most of the time people try to be helpful; b) most people would try to be fair if they got a chance and c) most people can be trusted.

The results of the study have important national implications given a) the significance of social trust for social integration, co-operation harmony and b) the relatively large percentage of the national sample in the Low Social Trust Group.