Age Differences in Trust: An Investigation Across 38 Countries

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Objective. Population aging is a global challenge in the 21st century. As social relationships contribute significantly to older adults’ well-being and trust lays the foundation of constructive social interactions, it is theoretically and practically significant to examine age differences in trust in a worldwide sample.

Method. The current study examined age differences in generalized trust and trust toward family members, friends, neighbors, and strangers, using data from the World Value Survey based on 57,497 individuals from 38 countries.

Results. Age was positively related to generalized trust and trust toward the four target groups across the 38 countries. Age differences in trust toward friends, neighbors, and strangers were also moderated by contextual factors (i.e., income inequality, developing status, and individualism).

Discussion. The results suggest that, across countries, enhancing trust toward others may be one mechanism through which older adults maintain emotional connectedness with others. Future studies are encouraged to investigate the mechanism underlying the age differences in trust.

Key Words: Age difference—developing status—individualism—inequality—trust.

INTRODUCTION

The whole world is experiencing “unprecedented” population aging in the 21st century. By the year 2050, more than 20% of the world population will be more than 60 years old (United Nations Population Division, 2001). Older adults’ well-being is currently a global concern. Many studies have found that social network composition and social interaction patterns change across adulthood (e.g., Lang & Carstensen, 2002) and such changes are influential to older adults’ well-being (e.g., Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Cheng, Li, Leung, & Chan, 2011; Li, Fok, & Fung, 2011). However, although aging is a global phenomenon, few studies have examined age differences in social relationships in worldwide samples. Moreover, despite being an essential aspect of social relationships (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Simpson, 2007; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), the life span change of trust is also understudied in previous aging research. Thus, the current study investigated whether there were age differences in generalized trust and particularized trust toward four different target groups using a worldwide sample from 38 countries. The study also tested whether the age differences in trust were universal or country-specific.

Social Relationships and Trust

Although there is debate regarding the definition of trust (Nannestad, 2008), in the current study, we define trust as how much one believes a target group, or other people in general, to be honest, reliable, and dependable. The self-determination theory argues that relatedness with others is one of human being’s innate psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also suggest that desire for interpersonal attachment is a fundamental human motivation. Findings from the aging literature have revealed that social connections can contribute to older adults’ physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Li et al., 2011; Berkman et al., 2000).

Trust is “the single most important ingredient for the development and maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships” (Simpson, 2007, p. 264). Rempel and colleagues (1985) reported that trust toward one’s social partner was positively related to love and happiness. Trust could also lead to higher interdependence between the two partners, which was critical to a successful relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Moreover, trust was found to affect subjective well-being at the macro level. Björnskov (2003) found that generalized trust was positively related to life satisfaction at the country level after controlling for various
development indices. The association between trust and subjective well-being has also been reported within particular countries, including the United States (Bjørnskov, 2008), Japan (Tokuda et al., 2008), and rural China (Yip et al., 2007).

**Age Differences in Trust**

Previous studies have already examined age differences in many aspects of social relationships. According to the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), older adults prioritize emotionally meaningful goals as the result of limited future time perspective. Supporting the theory in the realm of social relationships, Fredrickson and Carstensen (1990) found that older adults preferred familiar partners who could fulfill their emotionally meaningful goals, whereas young adults preferred novel partners who could potentially bring more future opportunities. Carstensen (1992) also reported that from early adulthood on, people began to decrease interaction with mere acquaintances but increase interaction with family members. Even in the very old age, the number of emotionally close social partners remained the same in spite of the significant drop of total social network size (Lang & Carstensen, 1994). By concentrating more on close social partners, older adults can experience higher social connectedness and enjoy a more trustworthy social environment (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

Previous studies have also examined age differences in other aspects of social relationships based on the socioemotional selectivity theory. For example, older adults were found to show higher commitment to generative activities, such as providing support or instruction to the younger generation or otherwise benefiting the society (Gruenewald, Liao, & Seeman, 2012; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993), compared with younger adults. Older adults also spent more time in different types of volunteer activities than did younger adults (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004). More importantly, the social motive for volunteering increased significantly with age (Okun & Schultz, 2003). Compared with younger adults, older adults were more motivated to participate in volunteer activities in order to strengthen social relationships and keep socially involved. When social relationships did not go well and interpersonal transgressions occurred, older adults were also more forgiving compared with their younger counterparts (Allemand, 2008; Cheng & Yim, 2008). With higher tendency to forgive, older adults can keep their social relationships more intact.

To summarize, compared with younger adults, older adults prioritize emotional meaningful goals. Maintaining social involvement and social connectedness are important means to attain emotional meaningful goals (Lancee & Radl, 2012). Indeed, older adults’ emphasis on interpersonal relationships has been found in studies on social network composition, social preferences, generativity, volunteering, and forgiveness. As an essential “ingredient” for interpersonal relationships, trust toward others is also expected to be higher in later adulthood. However, trust is understudied in the aging literature. As far as we know, there has only been one study in the psychological literature on age differences in trust. Sutter and Kocher (2007) used the trust game to assess trust and trustworthiness in different age groups. They did not find any age differences in trust or trustworthiness across adulthood. However, this study only examined participants’ behaviors toward strangers of their own age group in an artificial setting. It is important to examine age differences in trust more comprehensively and in a more representative sample. Indeed, although not directly examining age differences in trust, some studies from the sociology field reported the trend that older adults tended to have higher generalized trust in other people than did younger adults (e.g., Robinson & Jackson, 2001).

Moreover, according to the life span theory of control (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996), older adults are more likely to use secondary control strategies to change internal feelings or beliefs to adapt to the external world. John and Gross (2004) have reported that older adults used reappraisal to regulate their emotions more than did young adults. In an experimental study, Shiota and Levenson (2009) found that older adults’ ability to implement positive reappraisal was better than young adults’. With increasing physical and cognitive constraints, older adults may encounter more difficulties in completing some challenging tasks by themselves, and other people’s assistance may become necessary in such circumstances. If older adults have more trust toward others, they may feel more comfortable to accept and rely on others’ help. Increasing the evaluation about the trustworthiness of one’s social environment can be a useful secondary control strategy for older adults.

The current study aimed at empirically testing whether age was positively associated with interpersonal trust. In particular, the study distinguished between five different types of trust and examined the association between age and each type of trust. The five types of trust were generalized trust and particularized trust toward four different target groups: family members, friends, neighbors, and strangers.

**Different Types of Trust**

In previous studies, researchers have distinguished between particularized trust and generalized trust. Particularized trust is about trust toward specific targets. Rempel and colleagues (1985) suggested that faith, dependability, and predictability are the three components of trust in close relationships. In contrast, generalized trust is about trusting others in general. Generalized trust has been found to correlate significantly with civic engagement (Putnam, 2000), health status (Subramanian, Kim, & Kawachi, 2002), and economic development (Knack & Keefer, 1997).

In most previous studies, generalized trust was measured by the following question, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you
need to be very careful in dealing with people.” Although being widely used, this question is ambiguous in nature. Respondents can have their own understanding about which target group(s) “most people” represents when answering the question. By merely varying the target group referred to in the question, people’s answer changed dramatically (Nannestad, 2008).

Thus, in this study, in addition to the generalized trust, we examined age differences in trust toward four specific groups, namely, (a) family members, (b) people one knows personally (referred to as “friends” in the remaining text), (c) people in the neighborhood (referred to as “neighbors” in the remaining text), and (d) people one meets for the first time (referred to as “strangers” in the remaining text). As closeness with the four target groups differs (e.g., closer with family and friends, less close with neighbors and strangers), trust toward each target group may serve different functions. Investigating generalized trust and trust toward the four different target groups in a same sample can yield more comprehensive information about age differences in trust.

The Contextual Factors

Moreover, age differences in trust may be susceptible to the impacts of contextual factor(s). First, the “emancipation” theory of trust claims that individualism/collectivism is a key factor influencing generalized trust (Yamagishi, Cook, & Watabe, 1998; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Individualism is found to be positively associated with generalized trust. In societies with more collectivistic values, because people are closely tied within relatively small communities (e.g., family) or cooperation partnerships, they have clear preference for people inside these social groups. Such social norm may make it relatively risky to interact with people outside one’s close social groups and lead to a relatively low level of generalized trust. In contrast, in societies with more individualistic values, opportunities are believed to be equal for everyone and people tend to be less exclusive toward outsiders, which leads to a relatively high level of generalized trust. The positive association between individualism and generalized trust has been supported in studies comparing two specific countries (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994; Yamagishi et al., 1998), as well as in large-scale studies involving multiple countries (Allik & Realo, 2004; Gheorghiu, Vignoles, & Smith, 2009). From the life span developmental perspective, people tend to converge to cultural values while aging (Fung, Ho, Tam, Tsai, & Zhang, 2011; Fung & Ng, 2006). As generalized trust is more functional and valued in individualistic societies, we expect the increase of trust with age to be more salient in individualistic societies, especially for trust toward more general target groups.

Moreover, the developing status and income inequality of a country can also influence the trust level in the society. A higher level of interpersonal trust is found in more developed and economically equal societies (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Knack & Keefer, 1997). In more developed societies, the formal institutions governing justice are more established, so people would trust others more because they are less likely to be treated unfairly. Similarly, in more homogeneous societies, people would identify more with others in the society, participate more in social activities, and think others as more trustworthy (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000). As developing status and income inequality are both significant determinants of interpersonal trust, they are potential influencing factors of the age-related differences in trust. The two factors may also be confounded with individualism in affecting age differences in trust. Hence, the current study examined the potential effects of country-level developing status and income inequality, in addition to individualism, in moderating age differences in different types of trust. However, as the tests are explorative in nature, we do not have specific expectations about how developing status and income inequality would moderate the association between age and trust.

The Current Study

To conclude, the current study investigated age differences in trust, which is an essential but previously overlooked aspect of social relationships in the aging literature. Specifically, we studied generalized trust and trust toward four specific target groups (i.e., family, friends, neighbors, and strangers) across 38 countries using data from the World Values Survey (WVS; World Values Survey Association [WVSA], 2009). We also tested whether age differences in trust would be moderated by individualism, developing status, and income inequality. The hypotheses are the following:

Hypothesis 1: Age is positively associated with the five different types of trust.

Hypothesis 2: The positive association between age and trust is stronger in more individualistic societies.

Method

Data Source

To test the hypotheses, individual-level data about each participant’s age, generalized trust, and trust toward the four different target groups were needed, as well as data about the individualism level, developing status, and income inequality of each country. We obtained the individual-level data from the fifth wave of the WVS (WVSA, 2009), which was carried out around 2005. The survey was administered collaboratively by principle investigators from different countries. The source questionnaire was in English and the questionnaire was translated into the native language(s) in each country following the translation and back-translation procedure. To be representative of the population, full
probability sampling method was recommended although a combination of probability sampling and quota sampling was acceptable. Detailed information about the sampling procedure, response rate, and other technical specifications in each country can be found on the webpage http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSTechnical.jsp.

Then, the country-level individualism score was adopted from Hofstede’s (2001) study. The developing status (i.e., the Human Development Index in 2005) and income inequality level (i.e., the income Gini coefficient 2000–2010) of each country were obtained from the Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2010). After merging these different data sources, complete data from 38 countries around the world were obtained, with a total sample size of 57,497 (see Table 1). Other than the major variables, sex, health, and household income at the individual level were also included as covariates.

**Measures**

**Demographic information.—**The fifth wave of the WVS recorded respondents’ age, sex, health, and household income (see Table 1). The age range of respondents within each country was quite large (usually from late teens to 80s or 90s), providing a good sample for testing age differences. The two sexes were also approximately balanced within each country (0 = men, 1 = women). Health was measured by asking the respondents to rate their state of health on a 4- or 5-point scale (three countries used the 5-point scale, see Table 1), with higher scores indicating better health. Within-country standardized scores were calculated to address the problem of different scales of measurement. Household income was measured in a relative manner, as absolute measure was not comparable across countries given the vast differences in economic development status. Respondents were asked to rate their own household income, relatively to all the other households in the whole country, on a 10-point scale from the lowest income decile (1) to the highest income decile (10).

**Generalized trust.—**Generalized trust was measured by asking the respondents to choose whether they believe “You need to be very careful in dealing with people (0)” or “Most people can be trusted (1)”. Selecting the latter choice indicates a higher level of generalized trust.

**Trust toward specific groups.—**Respondents were also asked to indicate how much they trusted people in each of the four target groups: (a) family members, (b) people you know personally (i.e., friends), (c) people in the neighborhood (i.e., neighbors), and (d) people you meet for the first time (i.e., strangers).

**Country-level contextual factors.—**The individualism score for each country, ranging from 0 to 100, was adopted from Hofstede (2001). A larger number indicated a higher level of individualism. For developing status of each country, we used the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2005, released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2010). We chose the HDI to indicate the developing status of a country because it comprehensively evaluated a country from three aspects, namely life expectancy, educational attainment, and income. The index ranged from 0 to 1, with a larger number representing a higher development level. Lastly, income inequality of each country was indicated by the income Gini coefficient. We adopted the coefficient from the Human Development Report of UNDP (2010) as well. A value of 0 represented complete equality, whereas a value of 100 represented complete inequality.

**Data Analysis**

We conducted Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) to analyze the data (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). To make the data from different countries more comparable and to unify the scale of different measures, we standardized all the individual-level data within countries, including age, health, household income, and trust toward the four target groups. We also standardized the country-level data across the 38 countries, including individualism, HDI, and Gini coefficient. These standardized scores were used in the HLM analyses. In total, five HLM models were examined, testing the five different types of trust respectively.

**Results**

All the descriptive information across the 38 countries is summarized in Table 1. To test age differences in trust, the Level 1 HLM equation was set as follows:

\[
\text{Trust}_j = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Age}_j + \beta_2 \text{Health}_j + \beta_3 \text{Income}_j + \beta_4 \text{Sex}_j + \epsilon_j,
\]

where \(\text{Trust}_j\) represented a specific type of trust for respondent \(i\) in country \(j\). On the other side of the equation, \(\text{Age}_j\) indicated the respondent’s age and \(\beta_1\) was the coefficient representing how age was related to trust. We also controlled for respondents’ health (\(\text{Health}_j\)), household income (\(\text{Income}_j\)), and sex (\(\text{Sex}_j\)) in the Level 1 equation.

The Level 2 equations were set to examine the effects of income inequality, developing status, and individualism level:

\[
\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{Gini}_j + \gamma_{02} \text{HDI}_j + \gamma_{03} \text{Ind}_j + \epsilon_{0j},
\]

\[
\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \text{Gini}_j + \gamma_{12} \text{HDI}_j + \gamma_{13} \text{Ind}_j + \epsilon_{1j},
\]

\[
\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \epsilon_{2j},
\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>IDV</th>
<th>HDI</th>
<th>Gini</th>
<th>Generalized&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Neighbors</th>
<th>Strangers</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Sex&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1421</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>2.82 (0.41)</td>
<td>2.40 (0.54)</td>
<td>1.89 (0.57)</td>
<td>1.39 (0.70)</td>
<td>20.45 (16.86)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>2.00 (0.81)</td>
<td>5.16 (2.98)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>The percentage of people who endorsed the choice “Most people can be trusted” for the generalized trust item.

<sup>b</sup>The percentage of female respondents.

<sup>c</sup>These three countries measured health on a 5-point scale (1 to 5), whereas the other countries measured health on a 4-point scale (1 to 4).
where we specified income inequality (Gini), development status (HDI), and individualism level (Ind) as predictors of $\beta_y$ (i.e., how strongly age was related to trust in each country). If the country-level factors were significant in predicting $\beta_y$, it would suggest that the factors significantly moderated the association between age and trust across countries. We also statistically controlled for the three country-level factors for $\beta_y$ (i.e., average trust level of each country). This HLM model was repeated five times for the generalized trust (specified as a binary outcome) and trust toward the four different target groups (specified as continuous outcomes), respectively. The results were shown in Table 2.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, older age was significantly associated with a higher level of generalized trust, $\gamma_{10} = 0.106$, $p < .001$. Older age was also significantly related to a higher level of trust toward family members, $\gamma_{10} = 0.021$, $p = .017$, friends, $\gamma_{10} = 0.052$, $p < .001$, neighbors, $\gamma_{10} = 0.176$, $p < .001$, and strangers, $\gamma_{10} = 0.075$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 2 was also partially supported. Individualism level positively moderated age differences in trust toward friends, $\gamma_{32} = 0.025$, $p = .006$, and strangers, $\gamma_{33} = 0.059$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the positive associations between age and trust toward friends and strangers were stronger in more individualistic societies. Moreover, the developing status of the country (HDI) positively moderated age differences in trust toward neighbors, $\gamma_{12} = 0.057$, $p < .001$. Compared with less developed societies, the age differences in trust toward neighbors were larger in more developed societies. Lastly, income inequality (Gini coefficient) positively moderated age differences in trust toward strangers, $\gamma_{11} = 0.024$, $p = .001$; that is, age differences in trust toward strangers were larger in more economically polarized societies. Age differences in generalized trust and trust toward family members were not moderated by any of the country-level factors.

**Discussion**

Trust is a fundamental concept reflecting whether people are willing to be connected to their social partners (Simpson, 2007), and social relationships are especially meaningful to older adults (Carstensen, 2006). Thus, the age-related change of trust is an important topic to study in aging research. The current study systematically investigated age differences in trust. We examined age differences in five different types of trust. We also tested the age differences in trust across 38 countries and examined whether country-level factors (i.e., income inequality, developing status, and individualism level) moderated these age differences.

Consistent with our hypothesis, there was a universal positive association between age and all five types of trust across 38 countries. There are two possible mechanisms for the positive association between age and trust. On the one hand, the age differences in trust may be mediated by future time perspective. According to the socioemotional selectivity theory, emotional meaningful goals are essential in later adulthood because of older adults’ limited future time perspective (Carstensen, 2006). Previous studies have found that, in order to keep socially connected with others and the society, older adults report higher level of generative strivings and participate more in volunteer activities compared with younger adults (e.g., McAdams et al., 1993; Okun & Schultz, 2003). Older adults are also more forgiving and more lenient when judging interpersonal transgressions (Cheng & Yim, 2008; Steiner, Allemand, & McCullough, 2011). Trust lays the foundation of close interpersonal relationship and reflects how much people are willing to rely on and be connected with others (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Mohapatra, 2001). Because older adults prioritize emotional connectedness with others as the result of limited time perspective, they may enhance their trust toward others in order to feel more emotionally secure.

On the other hand, positive reappraisal may also account for the age differences in trust. Later adulthood is accompanied by inevitable physical and cognitive decline. With enhanced trust toward others, older adults can rely more on others’ help, instead of struggling to accomplish all the tasks by themselves (Bookwala, 2011). For example, if one’s eyesight becomes too blurred to read newspapers, one can ask other people to read the newspaper for him/her if he/she trusts them. It is a functional secondary control strategy for the older adults to perceive and reappraise others’ behaviors in a more positive way, and consider others to be more trustworthy. In other words, trusting others can be a

### Table 2. HLM Analysis Results Regarding Age Differences in Different Types of Trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Generalized</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Neighbors</th>
<th>Strangers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>$-1.074^{**}$</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini coefficient ($\gamma_{10}$)</td>
<td>$-0.631^{**}$</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI ($\gamma_{12}$)</td>
<td>$-0.102$</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>$0.106^{***}$</td>
<td>0.021$^*$</td>
<td>0.052$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.176$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini coefficient ($\gamma_{11}$)</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>$-0.042$</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>0.057$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.025$^*$</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>0.261$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.074$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.082$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.081$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>0.112$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.054$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.060$^{**}$</td>
<td>0.031$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ($\gamma_{13}$)</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** The five different types of trust were dependent variables. Generalized trust was measured as a dichotomous variable and the other four types of trust were measured as continuous variables. HDI = Human development index.

$p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$
copied strategy that buffers against the detrimental effect of declines in later adulthood.

These two mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and can both be true. Increasing the evaluation about the trustworthiness of one’s social environment through positive reappraisal can be a useful strategy to preserve a higher sense of social connectedness, which is needed when facing a limited future. Future studies are encouraged to investigate more about the mechanisms underlying age differences in trust.

Moreover, although different types of trust were all positively associated with age, the magnitude of age differences varied. The age differences in trust toward closer groups (i.e., family or friends) were relatively smaller than trust toward more distant groups (i.e., neighbors or strangers). One possible explanation is that trust toward closer social partners is generally higher across adulthood compared with that toward less close partners (see Table 1). As a result, the age-related variance in trust is smaller for closer partners. It should be noted that because generalized trust was measured as a dichotomous variable and the other four types of trust were measured as continuous variables, the magnitude of the age effect of generalized trust was not comparable with those of the other types of trust.

The five types of trust also differed in terms of how contextual factors moderated the magnitude of their age differences. The universal positive associations between age and trust were quantified by the country-level factors. Consistent with the hypothesis, higher individualism of a country was significantly associated with stronger positive associations between age and trust toward friends and strangers. Previous studies have found that people enhance their adoption of culturally valued concepts with age (Fung et al., 2011; Fung & Ng, 2009). In more individualistic countries, trust toward friends and strangers in general are more widespread and culturally valued (e.g., Allik & Realo, 2004; Yamagishi et al., 1998). People in these countries might thus value trust to a greater extent with age, resulting in stronger positive associations between age and trust toward friends and strangers. The results are also consistent with previous findings that people with high interdependent self-construal are less selective about their peripheral social partners in later adulthood (Zhang, Yeung, Fung, & Lang, 2011). As these people are less selective about these peripheral partners over time, their social networks might include a mixture of social partners with different levels of trustworthiness. The positive associations between age and trust toward friends and strangers might thus be weaker among these people.

In addition, the positive association between age and trust in neighbors was stronger in more developed countries. In more developed countries, because of more developed social institutions and technologies, people can be relatively independent from the neighborhood. However, in less developed countries, people may live in the same place for generations and root deeply in the neighborhood. Thus, people in more developed countries may have lower levels of trust toward their neighbors than those in less developed countries. However, such differences across countries may diminish in later adulthood as a result of older adults’ increasing reliance on their neighborhood (Yen, Michael, & Perdue, 2009), resulting in larger age differences in trust toward neighbors in more developed countries. Similarly, the positive association between age and trust in strangers was stronger in countries with greater income inequality. Because people tend to trust those who are like themselves (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002), trust toward strangers may be generally lower in countries with greater income inequality. Again, such differences across countries may diminish in later adulthood as a result of older adults’ increasing reliance on the society, leading to larger age differences in trust toward strangers in countries with greater income inequality. These findings suggest that trust is not a general construct. Studying trust toward specific groups, in addition to generalized trust, can lead to richer and more accurate information about the age-related dynamics of trust.

In closing, we acknowledge several limitations of the current study. First, the WVS data are cross-sectional in nature. It is possible that the age differences we found are partially due to cohort effect. People born and raised in older times may have higher trust compared with people born and raised in recent decades. Second, the measures in the WVS are all single-item scales. However, shortening the length of the questionnaire is a usual compromise for such large-scale studies. There are also studies suggesting that single-item measures can be as valid as multi-item measures when measuring relatively concrete constructs (e.g., Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Lastly, the meaning of trust may not be exactly the same in different cultures. However, as trust is so fundamental to interpersonal relationships (Simpson, 2007), we suspect that there may only be subtle cultural variations regarding the concept of trust.

In spite of these limitations, this study is a good starting point for future investigations about the life-span trajectory of trust. We found a universal pattern that older age was positively related to a higher level of trust across 38 countries around the world, regarding five different types of trust. We also found evidence suggesting that trust toward different target groups was different in nature. Moreover, country-level contextual factors (i.e., income inequality, developing status, and individualism level) moderated the positive associations between age and certain types of trust. Future studies are encouraged to further investigate the mechanisms of trust in the aging context across countries.
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