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Probing Trust on the Internet: A Comparison of Liberals and Conservatives

By

Lindsay Pettingill

The GoodWork® Project

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Project Zero

124 Mt. Auburn St.

Cambridge, MA

02138

lindsay_pettingill@pz.harvard.edu

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Howard Gardner, Series Editor

GoodWork® Project

Harvard University

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Abstract: Probing Trust on the Internet
By Lindsay Pettingill

I describe the conclusions of an online “Survey of Trust in Contemporary America” administered during the summer of 2005 to a largely liberal audience and during the winter of 2006 to a largely conservative audience. Results of both studies confirm earlier work (Gardner, 2004a) that documented the decline in trust of traditional media sources and the rise of entertainers, as opposed to journalists, as trusted sources of information. The survey revealed diminished recourse to the media as sources of information; consistently high levels of trust in family members and close friends regardless of the issue; and the ubiquitous use of the internet despite little trust across samples in the information found therein. A comparison of the two samples reveals differences in trust that may have implications for intervention. I suggest that conservatives and liberals may hold different mental models of trust. The results suggest three promising avenues of further research: 1) determining the strategies and criteria used to establish trustworthiness in both traditional and internet media, 2) explicating the primacy of family and friends, 3) examining more closely the relationship between media literacy and trust decisions.

Introduction: The decline of trust in traditional American institutions is well-documented and oft-referenced—so well referenced that one may wonder how society continues to function with seemingly limited amounts of an ingredient so vital to the functioning of a healthy society. Is trust a zero-sum game, with new people, institutions, and ideas gaining the trust voided by those who have lost it; are new forms of trust arising due to the accession of more democratic forms of media; or is American society sliding into the dysfunction that accompanies a trustless community?

The two studies reported here build on a small pilot study completed during the summer of 2004 by Howard Gardner and Jessica Sara Benjamin (2004a). Forty-five individuals from the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area were asked to comment on the state of ‘trustees’ in America. ‘Trustees’ were defined as well-known individuals whose opinions are trusted and therefore looked to for advice and guidance on relevant issues. The Gardner-Benjamin study revealed a number of troubling trends, including an overwhelming consensus that trusteeship has declined and that the media are largely culpable. However, the decline of trustees was met with both praise and nostalgia: praise for the disappearance of the hegemonic trustee, nostalgia for a time when narrow self-interest or partisanship did not color the information we receive and those from whom we receive it.

To investigate these trends further, we devised an online survey. The purpose of the survey was to secure quantitative data on the issues probed in the original study and to explore the impacts on trust (if any) of age, social-economic background, religious orientation, occupation, racial-ethnic background and political affiliation.

Study 1: Liberals and Trust

Methods: The online survey, entitled “Who do you trust”, consisted of 10 questions and a short section on demographic information. (See Appendix A). The 10 questions were grouped into 2 main categories. The first category required respondents to report trust in various sources using a scaled ranking for questions 1-3; a rank-order for question 4; a trust/ do not trust/ irrelevant matrix for question 10. The second category of questions was open-ended and required a typed or ‘free’ response.

The survey, posted from April until September 2005, was dispersed using a variety of web-based methods. As an initial step, project researchers forwarded a link to the survey to their network of friends and associates and asked them to do the same. Next, targeted demographic postings were made to cities on Craiglist.org (grassroots, non-commercial website) in the following American cities: Austin, Boise, Cincinnati, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Miami, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Phoenix, Raleigh-Durham, and San Francisco. Younger and more diverse respondents were solicited via targeted postings on thefacebook.com (online community for college students) to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of California at Los Angeles, and Howard University. Additionally, the survey was posted on bulletin boards at Beliefnet.org (web-

based multi-religious community), Omidyar.net (web-based advocacy and idea network), ivillage.com (website for readers of Cosmopolitan, Redbook, Good Housekeeping), and C-log (conservative web log hosted by Townhall.com, a web-based conservative network).

To encourage full completion of the survey and further dissemination, we offered entry in a drawing for a cash prize for subject's participation. We also offered up to five additional entries in the prize drawing for each respondent who recommended the survey to a friend who also completed it in full.

Results: Our survey received a total of 726 completed responses from 891 respondents for a completion rate of 81%. Based on the aggregate data received, we decided that the most relevant and revealing analyses should focus on age and political affiliation. In the age category, 47.5% of respondents were under the age of 25, followed by 26.1% from 25- 35, 11.2% from 36-45, 11.4% from 46-55, and 3.8% were over 56. For ease of comparison with one additional study (Benjamin, 2005), which ran parallel to this study, we chose to compare the under-25's (comprising 48% of respondents) with all ages over 25 (comprising 52% of respondents). The breakdown of political affiliation (self-identified) was 47% Democrat, 20% Republican and 33% 'Other'. Without the means to assign a political affiliation to the 'undecided' we decided to draw a partisan line and focus purely on those respondents that considered themselves either Republican or Democratic. From this reduced sample, Republicans comprised 30% and Democrats 70%.

In aggregate (regardless of age or political affiliation), the results of the survey reinforce and add clarity to those of the earlier pilot study. Regardless of the issue at hand, the media are not trusted as sources of reliable information; and moreover there is only marginal trust in journalists and politicians as occupational groups. To our surprise, teachers and scholars topped the list in ‘trust in occupational groups’, surpassing doctors who traditionally are found at the top of such lists.

Interestingly, respondents were loathe to name a medium that they found trustworthy, and even when they did, the designated medium was not trusted nearly as well as family members or other close associates. In fact, regardless of the nature of the issue—personal, political, or professional—respondents indicated consistently high levels of trust for family members and friends. Additionally, respondents were much more willing to tell us whom they did not trust than whom they did. Interestingly, this result came not just through the survey itself, but through our attempts to advertise the survey to diverse groups. An experience with Beliefnet.org serves as a telling example.

After setting up an account, I searched for discussion groups that I thought would find our survey of interest and import. Because much of our pilot data indicated that ‘older’ Americans lamented the decline of trust and trustees in America, I announced the trust survey to a group called AGING GRACEFULLY (AG), an over 50 group. Much to my surprise, my announcement for the survey elicited these responses:

(1) how do i know you are who you say you are? are you wanting personal information to sell to foreign governments? how can i be sure that you really say what you are doing with the information.

(2) Here's a link to the study. I suppose you could contact the people listed to see if this is for real -- the only thing that makes me question is the fact they are giving prize money -- seems a little hokey, but it may be legit. I'm with you Frocks!

My response,

This survey is completely legit, I promise - though I appreciate your due diligence! Because it is being sponsored by Harvard, there are institutional codes of conduct and confidentiality that we must maintain, which include not disclosing any information about those who take part in the study, and using responses for research purposes only. If you have any questions, feel free to direct them to inquiry@whodoyoutrust.org, or read more about the Professor heading the study at www.howardgardner.com . Thanks!

met the following counter-responses:

(1) Hmmmm ~ How do we know that you (and others) aren't using Mr. Gardner's name, as well as his prestigious Harvard affiliation as a clever ploy in engaging people like us to take your survey? Apparently we don't! Therefore, I believe it's safe to say you've run across a group of AGers who are not quite as trusting as one might imagine.

*... *just call me a long time skeptic**

(2) Considering the type of medium we are using (the internet) how can anyone be sure of anything we find here??

The responses above indicate high levels of *distrust*, as well as skepticism of our (research) intentions, offering of prize money, Harvard branding, anonymity and lack of accountability on the internet.

When comparing levels of trust within sources of media, we learned that a majority of respondents favored traditional print to web-based news sources. Relatedly, a large gap was revealed between the trustworthiness of printed newspapers and that of internet

sources. Within internet sources, the sites of major newspapers were trusted more than 'blogs' or alternative news sources.

Despite the consistency of most results across party and age lines, analyses according to our independent variables (age and political affiliation) revealed three surprising results. First, when asked to name their most trusted journalist, both Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly cited entertainers (Jon Stewart and Rush Limbaugh, respectively), despite low levels of trust for entertainers (even lower than journalists!). However, younger respondents were more likely to name entertainers (Jon Stewart and Oprah Winfrey) as trustworthy, older respondents preferred established journalists (Peter Jennings [since deceased] and Tom Brokaw). Secondly, though the New York Times was cited across age and political lines as respondents' most trusted newspaper, differences emerged across partisan lines when looking at the 'rest' of the list. Though major papers with a national readership followed the New York Times on the lists of both age groups and Democrats, Republicans tended to trust local papers. Finally, though trust in well-known political figures is low across age and political groups, it proves remarkably low for younger respondents.

Discussion: In addition to providing quantitative support for the earlier pilot study, the current study sheds light on whom and what respondents trust in matters beyond institutions and the political sphere. The independent variables of age and political affiliation had subtle effects on reported levels of trust in different fields, but a much larger and diverse sample is necessary to verify the accuracy of these results and expand our analysis to include more variables. Our sample was limited and not representative

across age, gender, income, occupation, or party lines. A simple explanation for this result could be that our survey served as a proxy for ‘trust’, and those who answered are indeed representative of those who are trusting of online internet surveys. Furthermore, the profile of respondents indicates that young and Democratic women (who made up a majority of our respondents) are more trusting than other groups, that they have more time to fill out surveys, make up a larger percentage of visitors to sites where our survey was linked on, or were simply referred to our site in larger numbers than others. With a larger and more diverse sample, we may be able to overcome these limitations and draw conclusions about the population at large.

The high level of trust for family and friends regarding a complex contemporary issue raises two important issues. First, why are family and friends trusted over established and professional media sources? Possible answers are that intimacy is conflated with trust, or that respondents trust family and friends ‘by default’ due to the well-established lack of trust in the media. A second intriguing possibility is that many of our respondents may not feel adequately informed, but assume that their family and friends *are* and therefore trust those family and friends as ‘opinion leaders’. If so, it would be useful to learn what kind of sources the opinion leaders are consulting. Do they consult media sources or are they too deriving their information from other people? Are these various sources disinterested or biased? Are they professional or knowledgeable, or do such considerations not matter?

Though the idea of opinion leaders is intriguing, most respondents answered ‘none’ to the questions asking them to report which sources of media they trusted. This response seems to indicate that respondents are not turning to ‘opinion leaders’, but rather ‘going it alone’: they have formed their ‘own’ opinions on complex issues. Try as one may, the claim that one develops opinions and gathers information solely by her own prowess and is free from the influence of the media does not survive scrutiny (unless one is an investigative journalist). This raises the question of whether the blind are leading the blind, while also supporting a market-based hypothesis of the reported lack of trust in the media. The lack of trust may be a problem of demand (no demand for trustworthy media) as opposed to supply (no trustworthy media available). If the media are not trusted to begin with, they need not earn trust, but simply continue to sell ‘news’ in some consumable form. So, though respondents may be consuming the media and thereby ‘consulting’ sources, they are doing so with the understanding or belief that the information may not be trustworthy and therefore forming their ‘own’ opinions.

The criteria that are used to determine trust must be examined more closely. Though we have uncovered whom or which sources respondents trust, it is not clear on which bases this trust is determined. Our third study (Benjamin, 2005) sheds some light on this question with its discussion on possible ‘mental models’; but this study is also limited because it focuses solely on young people. A survey of ‘trusted’ websites may reveal elements of trusts in the virtual sphere. For instance, the presence and popularity of ‘close-knit’ online communities may indicate that intimacy is indeed a key component of online trust. However, the popularity of mega-sites like Google or NYtimes.com seems

to indicate that a congeries of factors contributes to trust in a virtual source. It would be useful to disaggregate the different forms of trust manifest in the virtual sphere from those in ‘the real world’. As shown through my experiences with beliefnet.org, virtual exchanges may reveal components that are crucial to establishing online trust in online communities: transparency, accountability, and familiarity (with the messenger). If these components are missing, borders are established in the seemingly borderless world of the internet.

The abysmally low levels of trust for politicians revealed through our survey is nothing new, nor are the low levels of trust reported for journalists. Low levels of trust in politicians could manifest apathy for politics or simply ignorance. Regardless of the reasoning, there is no doubt that democracy suffers when politics is regarded as a farce and journalists as unreliable lackeys. On the positive side, the high level of trust reported for teachers suggests that they are possible sources of intervention. Once we have a more nuanced understanding of the criteria used for establishing and maintaining trust, interventions could be devised for use in classrooms along the lines of the Toolkit, an educational tool developed by the GoodWork Project.

Although we need not give prescriptions for how trust should be determined, it may be useful to compare defining features of trust in earlier times (see Gardner, 2004b)—such as disinterestedness, humility, and expertise—with its prevailing features today in both the ‘real’ world of newspapers, friends, and family, and the ‘virtual’ world of online communities, blogs and news sources. Comparisons may reveal that trust is conceived of in a drastically different manner today. Though relative trust in the internet as a source of

media is currently low, its use is ubiquitous and steadily rising, making it a force to be reckoned with.

Study 2: Trust on the Right

Introduction In this section I describe a follow-up study to Study 1: Liberals and Trust. That study confirmed earlier trends concerning the decline in trust in traditional media sources and the rise of entertainers as trusted sources of information; high levels of trust in family members in friends across issues; and widespread use of the internet despite reportedly low levels of trust in the information found there.

The sample that emerged from initial our web-postings was limited in a number of ways, most notably in terms of representation across party lines, religion, age, and gender. Our sample was largely secular, politically liberal, and young, and therefore of limited utility in determining how Americans think about trust in their daily lives. Because our sample did not reflect the intense partisan divisions that define current US politics, we decided to collect data from a conservative sample.

Methods The survey, entitled “Survey of Trust in Contemporary America”, was a replica of our original trust survey which consisted of 10 questions and a short section on demographic information. (See Appendix). The 10 questions were grouped into 2 main categories. The first category required respondents to report trust in various sources using a scaled ranking for questions 1-3; a rank-order for question 4; a trust/ do not trust/ irrelevant matrix for question 10. The second category of questions was open-ended and required a typed or ‘free’ response for questions 5-9.

The survey was disseminated by 2 major methods. The first built on contact with a professor at Spring Arbor University, a Christian university in Southern Michigan. The professor shared the survey with his students and colleagues and encouraged them to forward it to their friends and family. The second method of dispersion was a posting on the online newsletter *emergent-us*, a prominent Christian blog. These methods yielded 475 total responses comprised of 53% female respondents and 47% male respondents.

For the purposes of our research, we employed no hard and fast definition of ‘conservative’. Instead we used affiliations with self-identified Christian organizations and blogs, combined with a ‘Republican’ political affiliation as a proxy for ‘conservative’. While we recognize that this definition may not reflect the complexity of commingled political and religious identity, we have confidence in the self-identification and affiliation of the networks from which our sample was drawn. This conservative sample was much more representative of the US population on the whole than our original sample in which 72% of respondents were female and 28% were male. The breakdown of self-identified political identification was 43% Republican, 19% Democrat, and 38% other, while the original survey was 19% Republican, 47% Democrat, and 34% other. Without the means to assign a definite party to the ‘other’, we drew a partisan line and focused purely on those respondents who considered themselves either Republican or Democrat. This reduced sample (n=257), was comprised of 70% Republicans and 30% Democrats. This is a reverse image of the original survey, which was comprised of 30%

Republicans and 70% Democrats (n=480). Comparison between the two samples followed readily.

Results Across the categories probed in the survey (occupational groups, personal life, on the job/ at school, contemporary issue), the conservative sample was slightly more trusting than its non-conservative counter-parts. The rating scale we used is as follows: 1=completely trustworthy, 2=moderately trustworthy, 3=somewhat untrustworthy, and 4= completely untrustworthy.

The most pronounced difference in trust was within the ‘personal issue’ category: religious leaders enjoyed a much higher level of trust (1.74) than in the original survey (2.41) for a difference of .66 (the average difference in trust within this category was .15). Accordingly, in the ‘occupational groups’ category, conservatives trusted the clergy more than the original sample (1.86 vs. 2.18) for a difference of .32 (the average difference in trust within this category was .04). While teachers topped the list in the most trusted occupational group (1.85), they were very closely followed in the conservative sample by clergy (1.86), doctors (1.86), and scholars (1.96). Interestingly, the difference in trust between teachers (1.85), scholars (1.90), doctors (1.90) and clergy (2.18) within the original sample was much greater (.33) than in the conservative sample (.11). Athletes and entertainers had much lower trust scores than in the original sample (- .16 and -.29, respectively).

When asked about trust in a complex issue, subjects foregrounded family members, friends, and teachers. We found the same trend in the original sample. Respondents in our conservative sample reported higher levels of trust in friends (.35) and teachers (.62), but all other options were less trusted than in the original sample. Major newspapers, followed by local newspapers and television were significantly less trusted in the conservative sample (-.34, -.31 and -.22, respectively)

Finally, an interesting result emerged from the open-ended question which asked subjects to name the website that they trusted the most. As in the original sample, most people (nearly 50%) indicated that there was no website that they trusted. However, amongst those who did supply an answer, the largest percentage (27%) wrote in various Christian blogs. When these blogs are considered in addition to *emergent village* and *sojourner* (two prominent Christian sites), they represent nearly 39% of answers supplied, compared to the 28% of people who listed BBC, Fox News, and CNN. This trend did not mirror the original sample, in which a clear majority of respondents favored traditional media sites such as the New York Times, CNN, and Google.

Discussion Our conservative sample reinforces many of the trends we found in our original study such as the lack of trust in the media, politicians, and journalists; the reliance on family and friends as information sources; and high levels of trust in teachers. The conservative sample yielded nearly equal percentages of male and female respondents, and was also more representative according to age. Hence, despite the smaller sample, our findings may be considered more robust than the original survey.

As in our original sample, the primacy of family and friends as sources of information is a particularly interesting finding. Key questions arise about media literacy and political change. Do people turn to family and friends because they do not feel competent to evaluate the myriad of information available to them at all times? Are family and friends any more capable of doing so? Our survey suggests that a large majority of people do not trust traditional news sources; it could be that the few who do trust news sources are informing many of their friends. On one hand this intriguing result could reveal the emergence of a new kind of trustee- the opinion leader amongst close-knit friends and family. On the other hand, it could confirm our earlier hypothesis that the blind are leading the blind. Further research is needed to arrive at a more robust conclusion.

The high reported trust in clergy found in this sample reveals a potential site of intervention should materials be developed to build awareness of trust and its determinants. While teachers and scholars are generally deemed trustworthy due to their perceived disinterest, the politicization of religion that is prevalent on talk radio and popular news channels suggests that disinterest may not be a potent factor in determining trust in clergy. This may suggest that distinctive mental models are invoked by conservatives in determining trust.

The finding that Christian websites and blogs are trusted more than traditional news sites is intriguing. When coupled with the lower levels of reported trust in major newspapers and other traditional forms of media than revealed in the original sample, this result could

suggest a reaction to the perceived liberal bias in the media, while supporting the rise of grassroots media. Closer scrutiny of the Christian websites and blogs is needed to determine if these are predominantly news sites or personal blogs with a Christian identification. The analysis of these sites could show either a preference of diary-like blogs or gospel over news information, or news from Christian sources over other sources.

Conclusions:

The survey discussed in this paper, in both of its iterations, has confirmed that institutions and occupations once heralded for their trustworthiness have not retained this privileged status. Politicians and journalists have lost relevance as entertainers are increasingly regarded by younger generations as trustworthy, while newspapers and other media have ceded to the opinions of family members and friends. The internet, though used ubiquitously, is not a universally trusted provider of information. Furthermore, US politics are currently defined by partisan lines. The lines do not seem to be getting any thinner, with the decision to give or withhold trust usually stopping at these lines. For this reason, it is important to delve deeper into the factors that influence trust for conservatives and liberals alike.

What remains to be understood entails further lines of study. We need to uncover the strategies and criteria used to evaluate the trustworthiness of sources, which may vary

based on presence in the virtual or real world. We need sharper tools to understand the reasons for the primacy of family and friends, and we need to investigate further the relationship between media literacy and trust decisions.

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Appendix A

Survey on Trust

Hello and thank you for your interest in this study! This form describes a study of trust in America today. We are interested in learning which well-known people and occupational groups you trust, as well as who you trust in your personal life and on important and complex issues. This study is being carried out by Professor Howard Gardner at Harvard University and funded by the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The study consists of 10 questions: 5 multiple choice and 5 short fill-ins, plus a set of questions about yourself. It should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. In appreciation of your participation, each participant will be entered into a raffle with the chance to win a first prize of \$200, a second prize of \$150, or a third prize of \$100. So that the study is accurate, we ask that you only participate once; multiple responses will not be counted. We appreciate your understanding.

Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to participate, your answers will be used for research purposes only. All of your information will be kept confidential and your email address will not be sold to any third party. The survey will be accessible at www.whodoyoutrust.org through June, and the results will be available for viewing in the fall.

Email Address:

Confirm email address:

a) Age:

- a. Under 25
- b. 25-35
- c. 36-45
- d. 46-55
- e. 56+

b) Gender

- a. Male
- b. Female

c) Ethnicity

- a. White/Caucasian
- b. Black or African American
- c. Asian
- d. Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- e. Hispanic or Latino
- f. Other

d) Annual Individual Income Level

- a. Less than \$25,000

- b. \$25,000 - \$34,000
 - c. \$35,000 - \$49,000
 - d. \$50,000 - \$74,000
 - e. \$75,000 - \$99,000
 - f. \$100,000 +
- e) Religious Identification
- a. Catholic
 - b. Protestant
 - c. Jewish
 - d. Muslim
 - e. None
 - f. Other _____
- f) Occupational Field
- a. Business
 - b. Education
 - c. Social or Public Service
 - d. Retail
 - e. Medicine
 - f. Manufacturing
 - g. Other
- g) Marital Status
- a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. Living with Partner
- h) 5 digit zip code
- i) Political Affiliation
- a. Republican
 - b. Democratic
 - c. Other

1. Which occupational groups do you find most trustworthy? Please rank your choices, with '1' as the most trustworthy. (Choose as many as apply)

- athletes
- business people
- clergy
- doctors
- entertainers
- journalists
- politicians
- scholars
- teachers

2. If you were asked to take a position on an important and complex issue-- such as whether to favor the reform of social security—and you did not feel adequately informed

to whom or to where do you look? Please rank your choices, with '1' as the most trustworthy. (Choose as many as apply)

boss
civic organization (Rotary club, PTA)
co-worker
family member
friend
internet (blogs) PLEASE SPECIFY:
local newspaper/magazine (includes online edition)
major newspaper/magazine (includes online edition) PLEASE SPECIFY:
politician
teacher
radio or television personality or journalist PLEASE SPECIFY:
other _____

3. Who do you trust in your personal life? Please rank your choices, with '1' as the most trustworthy. (Choose as many as apply)

immediate family member
extended family member
supervisor
friend
neighbor
professional advisor (e.g. therapist)
religious leader
spouse or partner
teacher/coach
other _____

4. When you need to decide about something that arises on the job (e.g. how to handle an ethical problem), and you don't have enough knowledge/information to rely on yourself, to whom or where do you look? Please rank your choices, with '1' as the most trustworthy. (Choose as many as apply)

supervisor
co-worker
client
subordinate
well-known figure from the past
current senior figure whom you do know personally
current senior figure whom you do **not** know personally
friend

family member
non-profit institution (e.g. think tank, public interest group)
other _____

5. Check 3-10 well-known people from the list below that you trust.

Madeline Albright
Maya Angelou
Kofi Annan
Lance Armstrong
Bono
Warren Buffett
George W. Bush
Jimmy Carter
Bill Clinton
Thomas Friedman
Bill Gates
Mel Gibson
Alan Greenspan
Peter Jennings
Rush Limbaugh
Sen. John McCain
Michael Moore
Barack Obama
Pope John Paul II
Colin Powell
Condoleeza Rice
Chris Rock
Arnold Schwarzenegger
Susan Sarandon
George Soros
Bruce Springsteen
Jon Stewart
Martha Stewart
Oprah Winfrey

6. Name a well-known figure who has recently earned your trust.

7. Name a well-known figure who has recently lost your trust.

Would you like us to contact you when survey results are available? (Check box yes or no)

Is there anyone to whom you would like to recommend this study? If so, please enter their email addresses below. For each additional person that you recommend who completes the study you will earn an extra entry into the raffle.

(Enter email addresses here)

If you would like to contact us with feedback, please visit the “feedback” link (hyperlink) at www.whodoyoutrust.org.

Thank you for your participation.