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**From Parents to Presidents:  
Youth Assessments of Trustworthiness at Home and in the Public Sphere**

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## Abstract

Understanding the role of trust in society has important implications in many arenas, not least of which is the study and promotion of democratic practice and civil society. In light of claims of declining societal trust in the United States, we explore the ways in which youth age 15-25 navigate trust and trustworthiness in their everyday lives. We interviewed 63 youth from New England about their trust dispositions toward a variety of targets, from friends and family to politicians and media figures. Our main interest was in identifying and understanding the principal “mental models” that youth employ and consider most important when assessing the trustworthiness of others. We explored this interest through two core research questions. First, to what extent do youth use cognitive vs. non-cognitive mental approaches to assessing the trustworthiness of others? Second, in cases where the cognitive approach is used, what type(s) of evidence—appearance, performance, reputation, or interactions—are primarily utilized?

Findings suggest a paradox in youth’s conceptions of trust and trustworthiness. On the one hand, youth idealize *societal trust* in which a generalized sense of trust exists between fellow citizens. On the other hand, when assessing the trustworthiness of specific targets (e.g., friends, teachers, political leaders), most youth rely heavily on a stringent cognitive “mental model” focused on the actions or performance of the target. Moreover, many youth claim that they only extend trust to those with whom they can engage in direct and ongoing interactions. An over-reliance on the latter model, which we call the *cognitive-interaction model*, may lead many youth to abandon altogether the assessment process for distant figures in the public sphere. We argue that a generalized lack of trust in civic leaders and media figures could imperil the future of democratic practice and civil society.

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## **Introduction**

Trust is a necessary part of virtually every human interaction from the quotidian to the consequential. Whether we trust a family member to be there for us in a time of need, a politician to follow through on a crucial campaign promise, or a stranger in a car to stop for us as we cross the street, a degree of trust makes the tasks of daily life possible.

Understanding the role of trust in society has important implications in many arenas, not least of which is the study and promotion of democratic practice and civil society. Citizens in democratic systems of governance rely on each other to observe the boundaries of trustworthy behavior and look to institutions to discourage untrustworthy behavior through regulations, laws and, if necessary, punishment (Sztompka 1999). As in any society, citizens living in democracies must navigate the challenges of interpersonal trust with their fellow citizens, but are also expected to assess the trustworthiness of the leaders who guide political and other institutions. The ability to make sound trust assessments of individuals both near and distant is important for the well-being of the individual and society.

Of particular interest in the current study are the ways in which contemporary youth navigate trust and trustworthiness in their everyday lives and in the context of democratic society. Historically, this demographic has been under-studied when it comes to research on trust. Moreover, as it happens, the current cohort is coming of age at a time when, by many quantitative and qualitative indices, societal trust is at a low in the United States (Fukuyama 1995, Inglehart 1999) and when trustees—public figures viewed as universally trusted—are difficult to identify (Benjamin 2005, Gardner 2005, Pettingill 2005). Although its effects are still being pondered, the media environment as it has developed since the early 1990's, with its 24-hour news cycle and proliferation of online sources, may hold profound implications for trust in

democratic societies. The moral and ethical lapses of fellow citizens and elected leaders are more readily documented and exposed, creating at least the impression that trust and trustworthiness are on the decline (Hardin 2002). Considering the importance of trust and trustworthiness in the maintenance of democratic societies (Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 2000, Sztompka 1999), understanding how the next generation of citizens and leaders responds to this changing environment is critical.

In the GoodWork™ Project's study of Trust and Trustworthiness, we seek to identify and understand the principal “mental models” youth employ and consider most important when assessing the trustworthiness of family, peers, authority figures, political and media figures, government and media institutions (Davis and Gardner, 2010; Davis et al., in press; Rundle et al., in press). Using the trust framework developed by Davis (2008) as a conceptual grounding point, we analyze our subjects’ responses on two levels. First, we seek to determine the role that cognition plays in youth’s mental models of trust: that is, to what extent do youth assess the trustworthiness of others based on a cognitive or a non-cognitive approach? Second, where the cognitive approach is used, what type(s) of evidence—appearance, performance, reputation, or interactions—are primarily utilized? We define a trust “mental model” in terms of these two aspects—the mental approach and the evidence type(s) used to make a trust judgment.

While no single model explains the full range of youth trustworthiness assessments, we explore in depth what we call the *cognitive-interaction model*, a model that occupies a central role in the trust assessment processes of many youth in our sample. This cognitively-oriented model is based on the principle that one must have direct interactions with an individual before one can grant trust. The cognitive-interaction model holds particular significance for democratic practice. This model may be appropriate for assessing the trustworthiness of individuals with

whom one is close. We argue, however, that its blanket application by a sizeable minority of our sample to more distant figures, such as those in government and the media, with whom most individuals will never have the opportunity to interact, is impractical and inappropriate. A certain amount of distrust toward elected leaders is vital to healthy democracy (Sztompka 1999). Yet an assessment model rooted in unrealistic expectations may cause youth to abandon the assessment process for distant figures in the public sphere with perilous implications for the future of democratic practice and civil society. On a more promising note, evidence that youth desire and idealize trust relative to fellow citizens and society suggests that it may be possible to construct a new basis for trust.

## **Background**

### *Trust and Democracy*

In its most basic form, trust is about the relationships between individuals, but the presence or absence of trust has consequences at much broader levels of human interaction as well—all the way to the national and global. While trust plays a role to some degree in any form of government, it is particularly important for democratic practice.

The relationship between trust and democracy has been described as paradoxical (Sztompka 1999, Warren 1999). On the one hand, the connections among individual citizens who participate together in organized community associations such as social clubs and civic organizations are crucial to social integration, public awareness and action, and democratic stability (Putnam 2000). This “social capital” is grounded in norms of reciprocal trustworthiness between citizens. Furthermore, trust is said to “grease the wheels” of democratic society by reducing the costs of cooperation with fellow citizens in civic or economic transactions (Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 2000). Unburdened by transaction costs in the form of formal

contracts, citizens can partake in “spontaneous association” and enjoy the fruits of trust such as cooperation and innovation. On the other hand, democracy institutionalizes distrust by establishing mechanisms like elections, term limits, law enforcement, and checks and balances, each of which attend to the interests of multiple constituencies (Barber 1983, Hardin 2006, Sztompka 1999). These mechanisms, themselves symbols of distrust, provide accountability to the public by ensuring that, if elected officials act in opposition to the public interest, they will be punished through the ballot box or the courts.

Despite the strong relationship observed between trust and democratic practice, identifying the proper targets of trust in this context presents a challenge. Social capital theory, which stresses the importance of “generalized” trust in the maintenance of strong democratic practice, focuses on the reciprocal trust relationships between ordinary citizens. Putnam (2000) suggests that high levels of social capital may be an indicator of high levels of trust in government. Hardin (1999, 2002), however, argues that fellow citizens are not the proper targets of trustworthiness assessment in the context of democratic society because trust necessitates a knowledge of the motivations of others. In practical terms, he continues, the concept of generalized trust has little real world application; that is, knowledge of the motivations of the vast majority of trust targets, including political figures or other agents of government, is beyond the reach of any individual. To trust these targets without evidence of their trustworthiness would actually be, according to Hardin, detrimental to democracy. Although his formulation leaves seemingly little role for trust in the support of democratic practice, Hardin (1999) posits that it is possible to know enough about the history of a distant individual, group or institution to have strong expectations for how she/it would act in a given situation. This knowledge could provide

enough information to allow for an assessment of trustworthiness, but would seemingly require a very well informed public.

### *Mental Models of Trust*

An individual draws upon a number of variables in making assessments of trustworthiness, some subconsciously. Biographical, socio-cultural, relational and other factors contribute to the individual's internal conception of what trust means and how it functions in a particular situation. These internal conceptions, referred to in cognitive psychology as "mental models," provide an overarching representation of a system or situation that supports understanding, reasoning, and prediction (Markman and Gentner 2001, Perkins 1995). Mental models help people to make sense of themselves, those around them, and the complex ideas and situations that they encounter in daily life. Individuals may hold multiple mental models simultaneously; those models may be contradictory, incomplete or unstable, potentially limiting their utility for explanation or prediction (Norman 1983).

Scholars and researchers from a range of disciplines have long sought to understand the mental models individuals utilize to assess the trustworthiness of individuals and institutions. Debate has been rigorous, particularly regarding the role that cognition plays in the assessment process. As described above, Hardin (2001, 2002) argues that trust is a cognitive notion stemming from intimate knowledge of the trust target and the evidence provided by the target's actions. Hardin describes his conception of trust as one of "encapsulated-interest"—that is, my trust of you is encapsulated in your interest in fulfilling my expectations of trust. Put another way, trust is based on a reasonable expectation, generally gained through personal relationships, in the motivations of others to act in our interest. Coleman (1990) similarly views trust from a cognitive perspective, arguing that rational decision-making based on strategic cost-benefit

analysis best explains the trust assessment process. In the cognitive approach, the proper targets of trust are those individuals whom one knows personally and whose motivations one has the opportunity to assess directly in a particular context. Accordingly, Hardin (2001, 2002) describes trust as a three-part relation, where A trusts B to do X. Without some experience with a trust target or knowledge of how he might behave in context X, he argues that it is impossible to make an assessment of someone's trustworthiness.

Others contend that non-cognitive approaches play an important role in the trust assessment process. Erikson (1964) describes the notion of "basic trust" that develops between infant and caregiver. He theorizes that experiences of trust or mistrust at this early age set individuals on a path toward trusting or distrusting outlooks later in life. Positive experiences produce a more trusting individual, whereas negative ones make a person more cautious when it comes to trusting. Erikson's account frames trust as a subconscious *disposition* gained early in development that becomes part-and-parcel of an individual's character.

According to Becker (1996), non-cognitive trust is "fundamentally a matter of our having trustful attitudes, affects, emotions, or motivational structures that are not focused on specific people, institutions or groups." (p. 44). Jones (1996) argues further that trust is optimism about the goodwill and competence of others regardless of the amount of evidence present in a given context. As such, in the non-cognitive approach trust can be thought of as a two-part relation, where A trusts B—across contexts. These accounts of trust stress the importance of individual disposition in the assessment process and do not limit trust to contexts where knowledge and evidence of others' motivations is plentiful. Rather, non-cognitive theorists believe trust plays an essential role in contexts of *uncertain terrain* or *risk* and lend a sense of *control* when knowledge

about specific trust targets is lacking. The need for trust is eliminated, they argue, where one has complete power or control to enforce expected actions (Becker 1996, Sztompka 1999).

Evidence plays different roles in the trust assessment process depending on whether a cognitive or non-cognitive approach is engaged. Whereas non-cognitive trust is premised on the idea that assessments are based on a personal disposition to trust regardless of contextual factors or evidence, cognitive trust is explicitly based on the presence of observable evidence. Davis's (2008) cognitively-oriented framework (see Figure 1), which draws heavily on the work of Sztompka (1999), hypothesizes the existence of three evidence types that individuals may use to assess trustworthiness.

First, one might assess an individual's trustworthiness based on *appearance*. This criterion can include external characteristics such as bodily control (e.g. health and fitness), dress (Giddens 1991), and civility or good manners (Good 1988). Appearance-based assessments may also take into account the objects or places associated with an individual (e.g. car, house, neighborhood of residence) or ascribed traits (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, race, etc.) (Sztompka 1999). It is generally observed that the more a trust target displays characteristics or assumes stereotypes similar to the trustor, the more likely the trust target is considered trustworthy (Earle and Chetkovich 1995). This state of affairs may be because the actions of those who are like us are more predictable than the actions of individuals with whom we have little in common (Hardin 1993).

The second type of evidence upon which trustworthiness assessments may be based is the present *performance* of the trust target. According to Sztompka (1999: 77), "performance means actual deeds, present conduct, currently obtained results. The past is suspended, 'bracketed,' and one focuses on what the potential beneficiary of trust is doing now." Performance assessment is

by its nature less reliable than reputation-based assessments (as discussed below) because it does not provide opportunity to determine whether trustworthy performance is “continuous, typical and ‘in character’” (Sztompka 1999: 77). If a trustor only encounters a trust target once in her life, or if a familiar trust target acts in a way that is drastically out of character, performance may play an important role in trust assessment. However, in ongoing relationships where further encounters are expected, performance may act as a “place-holder” until more information can be collected.

The third evidence type is based on an individual’s *reputation*, which can either be assessed on a secondary or primary basis. *Secondary reputation* is typically based upon the actions of a trust target as reported by a trusted third party or upon credentials such as licensure, awards, or popularity. For example, if you are new to an area and want to buy a used car, you may rely on a friend to recommend a reliable, trustworthy dealer or you may go with the dealer who won an award for honest business practices from the local chamber of commerce. *Primary reputation* includes first-hand accounts of a person’s past behavior derived from direct *interactions*, and often an ongoing relationship, between the trustor and the trust target.

The mental approaches and evidence types discussed above can suggest broad but distinct mental models of trustworthiness assessment (Davis et al., in press; Rundle et al., in press). From the literature, a total of five models emerge; four are grounded in a cognitive approach and are based on observable evidence—appearance, performance, secondary reputation and primary reputation. For sake of clarity, we refer to the evidence types of secondary reputation and primary reputation as *reputation-based* and *interaction-based*, respectively. The fifth model, grounded in a non-cognitive approach, relies on limited or no evidence; this model would be

found among individuals who have a disposition to trust or distrust others, regardless of current evidence and context (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Theoretical Trust Models**

<i>Mental Approach</i>	<i>Evidence</i>	<i>Judgment based on:</i>
Cognitive	Appearance	external characteristics, mannerisms, possessions, etc.
	Performance	present and observable actions
	Reputation	credentials, popularity, information from a third party
	Interaction	first-hand experience interacting with an individual
Non cognitive	Little to no evidence	disposition to trust/distrust regardless of evidence or context

The models outlined in the above table derive from the literature. In the present study, we ask to what extent empirical research, conducted with youth, supports these models. Our main interest is identifying and understanding the principal “mental models” youth employ and consider most important when assessing the trustworthiness of individual trust targets. We explore this interest through two core research questions. First, to what extent do youth use a cognitive or non-cognitive mental approach to assess the trustworthiness of others? Second, where the cognitive approach is used, what type(s) of evidence—appearance, performance, reputation, or interactions—are primarily utilized?

The semi-structured interview protocol developed for this study allowed interviewers to question youth participants in depth about their experiences of trust, providing a detailed and complex picture of their mental models of trustworthiness assessment. This methodology addresses a gap in the literature identified by Hardin (2002) and Stolle (2001)—namely a lack of empirical research that accounts for the “relational aspects of the choices and commitments of subjects” (Hardin 2002: 198) when they assess trustworthiness. Most research is based on survey data, which ignore individual choice, or experimental games, which largely ignore individual relationships (Yamagishi 2001 is a notable exception). In contrast, this study probes

subjects directly about both of these factors in order to understand the mental models of trust that they employ in their lives.

## **Methods**

Between February 2007 and March 2008, we conducted 63 qualitative interviews with young Americans living in New England. All participants were between the ages of 15 and 25 at the time of their interviews: 40 were high school students and 23 were post high school. Of the post high school sample, 16 were in college and 7 were employed or enrolled in school-to-work programs. This age range allowed us to examine the formation of mental models over the span of time when most people are becoming increasingly autonomous from their families and are accumulating important experiences that shape their moral and psychological development. Overall, the average socioeconomic status of participants was low to middle income, but the sample was diverse in terms of gender (29 male, 34 female), race/ethnicity (31 white, 32 non-white) and geography (24 from suburban and urban areas of Greater Boston, 39 from small towns or cities in Southern Maine).

After filling out a pre-interview survey that elicited demographic information, activities, and media consumption habits, each subject participated in an in-depth person-centered interview focused on the participant's involvements, influences, beliefs, experiences with trust situations, and trust dispositions towards interpersonal relations and more distant figures and institutions. In light of our interest in the relational aspects on the trust assessment process, and as a response to the concerns expressed by Hardin (2002) and Stolle (2001) above, study participants were questioned about their experiences with trust across various targets and contexts. Targets included family, friends/peers, teachers/school administrators, employers,

police, community leaders (such as local government officials and leaders of community-based organizations), media figures, political figures, and institutions such as banks, the media and government. Although a wealth of data on youth trustworthiness assessments in relation to both individual and institutional trust targets was collected, this paper focuses primarily on individuals as targets.

## **Findings**

In this section we explore the findings as they relate to the study's two core research questions. First, we address the question of which approach to trustworthiness assessment—cognitive vs. non-cognitive—youth most often utilize. We discuss the particulars of when and how the non-cognitive approach, and little to no evidence, are used by youth when making trust judgments. Second, we address the degree to which each of the four cognitive evidence types discussed above—appearance, performance, reputation, and interactions—captures the conceptions of trust and trustworthiness of youth in this study. At the end of the section, we examine participants' conceptions of societal trust.

### *Youth's Mental Approaches: Cognitive vs. Non-Cognitive*

In addressing the first question, the extent to which youth participants employ a cognitive or non-cognitive approach to trustworthiness assessment, we find a preference for the former. In the relatively small number of instances where the non-cognitive approach is present, it is often connected to participants' expectations of people who occupy particular roles and their responsibilities. For example, some participants automatically grant a thin level of trust to parents and other family members, teachers, and to some extent police, based on positive expectations for their behavior and motivations as well as perceived expertise in their given domain. For teachers, these expectations are often quite specific; for instance, when asked how

her teachers earn her trust, Sarah age 20 from Maine responds, “Yeah, I guess I trust them – I don’t know. You don’t really think of your teachers as trusting them. They’re there to teach, and so you kind of trust them to teach you stuff, stuff that’s true.” Similarly, youth participants from Maine express a general sense of trust in law enforcement officials and do so “because it is their job” to look after public safety (assessment of police by subjects from Greater Boston will be discussed below). Among all participants, parents are generally perceived as having a broader sense of responsibility toward youth and, as such, a common refrain among subjects is, “I trust my Mom because she’s my Mom.” A small number of subjects also express a disposition to trust supervisors at work and political and media figures based upon their roles as authority figures presumed to be knowledgeable about a specific field or domain.

The cases above represent a limited application of the non-cognitive approach among youth in our study. The literature suggests that non-cognitive approaches reflect a disposition to trust or distrust particular individuals, regardless of evidence or context (Jones, 1996). As suggested in the quotes above, some youth participants do appear to hold a general sense of optimism about the motivations of teachers and police officers with little or no direct, observable evidence to make a trust assessment. For some participants, assessments of trustworthiness were made long ago and therefore a trusting disposition is the default stance, particularly in relation to parents.

At the same time, the non-cognitive approach as defined in the literature does not explain fully the assessments made by youth participants. Our interviews suggest that when youth use a non-cognitive approach, they often refer to the target’s *role*, which could be considered a type of evidence. This evidence is relatively superficial and therefore arguably more non-cognitive than cognitive. In addition, whereas Becker (1996) argues that non-cognitive trust relies on trustful

attitudes that are “not focused on specific people, institutions or groups” (p. 44), the cases cited by our participants clearly demonstrate that, for them, trust assessment takes place with a specific target such as a teacher or parent in mind. Thus, in the absence of observable evidence, our participants may be disposed in some cases to trust a specific person or group based on a perception that the role they occupy implies positive motivations; however, there is little evidence that they offer blanket trust without some consideration of context as suggested under a purely non-cognitive approach.

The findings presented above suggest a relatively small role for the non-cognitive approach to trustworthiness assessment. Youth subjects who use a non-cognitive (or less cognitive) approach tend to take into account contextual evidence, at least superficially, when they are confronted with a trustworthiness assessment situation, as opposed to relying on a general disposition or optimism about the intentions of others. Overall, though, non-cognitive approaches were relatively infrequent; most youth participants in our study favored cognitive approaches to assessing trustworthiness.

#### *Cognitive Evidence Types Used by Youth*

We now turn to the second question, which explores the dominant types of evidence utilized under the cognitive approach. We begin first with appearance-based evidence, then move to reputation- and performance- based types, ending with interaction-based evidence.

In making trust assessments, participants report little reliance on *appearance*. When referenced, appearance-based assessment is primarily engaged in relation to strangers. Its infrequent mention may be at least partly a natural bias of self-reported data, as participants may not want to appear prejudiced toward others as a result of ascribed, stereotypical or “shallow” characteristics. While appearance-based evidence may play a larger role than reported, the

infrequency with which it arose spontaneously by participants suggests that appearance assessments make up a small, or at least highly subconscious, portion of their mental models. Other research methods, such as the social psychological priming methods used by Nosek, Greenwald and Banaji (2007), may be needed to ascertain the role appearance plays in trust assessment.

The *reputation*-based trustworthiness assessment is utilized occasionally; it was observed most often in relation to police and public figures. Unlike their counterparts in Maine, an overwhelming majority of youth participants from Greater Boston distrust or withhold trust from police officers, because they are perceived to be bigoted and biased, especially toward racial minorities. Second-hand accounts about the abuse of police authority circulate widely among the urban youth interviewed and these reports strongly influence their trustworthiness assessments. Regarding public figures, in their interviews only a few participants cite the specific sources upon which they base their impressions. Given the lack of interpersonal contact that most people have with public figures, it is likely that they are turning to secondary sources of evidence such as the news, their parents, teachers, or peers.

An examination of participants' media consumption habits offers insight on how reputation-based evidence affects youth's trustworthiness assessment of public figures. Self-reported pre-interview survey findings indicate that youth participants follow the news with some frequency—62% report watching local TV news daily or several times per week, while 46% report watching national TV news that often. Local print news is read daily or a few times per week by 46%, but national print news is read that often by only 33%. Online news is read daily or several times per week by 52% of participants.

Despite these relatively high numbers, qualitative accounts of their media habits suggest that consumption is superficial, consisting largely of skimming headlines and passively absorbing television or radio news during mealtimes. The lack of specific evidence that participants cite as the basis of their trust impressions toward public figures seems to support this finding. For example, when asked about the reasons they trust or distrust public figures, participants tend to recite stock answers such as “all politicians are liars.” Additionally, as reported by several participants, media education from teachers and parents emphasizes the bias in news journalism. In light of a system perceived to be so lacking in objectivity, youth tend to interpret with skepticism second-hand accounts of the trustworthiness of public figures (particularly politicians) offered by the media. Thus, data indicating a shallow consumption of news media suggest that, when it comes to public figures, reputation-based evidence is not the preferred evidence type when making trustworthiness assessments.

Across the 63 person-centered interviews, *performance* assessment – in which trust is lost, gained or otherwise reassessed as a result of specific actions taken by a target – was most frequently observed. Participants often make performance-based assessments of close authority figures, such as teachers, employers, and police officers. These types of assessments represent, for many participants, pivotal moments in which their trust in a known target is altered in some way. For example, Tanya age 15 from Greater Boston recounts how she lost trust in her teachers:

Last month, at my school there was a stabbing and this boy, he died in the bathroom. And all the teachers didn't know what was happening, so they were like real chaotic and they wasn't telling us what was happening and they didn't show any professionalism. And that made me lose my trust because, as a student

and as somebody who's younger, I really feel like they need to have stability and we need to be looking up to them for – what's the word – like, they need to be the ones trying to stay strong through the situation or whatever, but they were the ones panicking and crying and stuff.

Performance assessments are utilized most often in relation to political and media figures; for example, youth cite the extent to which politicians follow through on their promises as a marker of trustworthiness. However, youth in our sample typically spoke in generalities about such performance markers because they evinced limited knowledge of politicians and the public sphere.

After performance, the evidence type most widely and consistently employed by participants to make judgments of trustworthiness across all targets is *interactions*. That is, many youth in our sample express unwillingness to extend trust to anyone that they do not know, relying instead on knowledge of the person based on past interactions. Absent the opportunity to assess first-hand the behavior of a trust target, participants often take a distrusting stance towards others or they express uncertainty and ambivalence about extending trust—that is, they *withhold* trust. For example, when asked how someone earns his trust, Henry age 17 from Greater Boston says, “Personal relationship, like by knowing them.” Later he asks rhetorically, “How can you trust somebody if you don't know them?”

Interactions evidence was cited across all targets, but to varying extents. A small number of youth rely on interactions to assess family members but over half of participants indicated a strong reliance on interactions to assess the trustworthiness of friends. Rob, age 21, suggests that friends must earn trust through extended experience when he says, “[With] a friend, you definitely have to earn [trust] over time. Like, you just don't open up to some random person

about things. Like, you'll talk. You'll hangout, but it's kind of like you realize who your real friends are when something bad happens or, like, you really need them."

For Rob, assessment of a friend's trustworthiness is a deliberate process that sometimes culminates in a test of the trust target if something goes wrong. More proactive trust tests, in which youth extend trust to friends by sharing a small secret or asking them to perform a low-stakes task, are mentioned by almost one-third of participants. Stephanie, age 16 from Maine, explains these tests in the following way: "Well, there's kind of like -- first stage -- just talking to people and saying like little stuff. And then as you trust them more and more, then you start talking about different stuff that's more important to you." This strategy, which involves observation and experience over time, is based on increasing levels of risk but also has the potential to reap greater levels of trust for the young person and the friend.

The amount of trust granted to close authority figures such as teachers and employers depends on their specific roles and the amount of interaction they have with participants. As noted, teachers and other school officials are sometimes granted a thin level of trust based on their perceived expertise and an expectation of their positive motivations. To earn a deeper level of trust, however, teachers are expected to take a sustained, active interest in their students and display genuine care and motivation to see them succeed. A small subset of participants describes deep trust in at least one teacher stemming from long-term interaction and engagement on a personal level beyond typical school-related topics. Similarly, employers must earn the trust of youth based on certain characteristics. Youth tend to focus on qualities such as competence, fairness, transparency, follow through, caring, having the best interests of employees and the organization in mind. A few participants discuss employers who have earned their trust over an extended period of time.

Given the aforementioned decline in societal trust over the course of the past decades (Fukuyama 1995, Inglehart 1999), it is perhaps unsurprising that youth in our sample are quite guarded when it comes to trusting public figures such as politicians and media figures. Nearly half of subjects express outright distrust, at some point in their interview, of an individual politician or of politicians in general. Frequent characterizations portray politicians as self-interested, out for personal gain, concerned only for people like themselves, preoccupied with power, disingenuous, unlikely to follow through on promises, and inconsistent. In the pre-interview survey given to all subjects, media figures are considered among the least trusted sources to provide information on a complex issue of importance.

For both political and media figures, a great sense of importance is placed on being *transparent* about biases, regardless of whether youth subjects agree with their opinions. For example, one participant says he trusts television pundit Bill O'Reilly to say what he really believes, even if he disagrees with the content of his ideas. While trust here clearly runs thin, when probed more deeply, subjects express a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty about how they rate and assess public figures. For example, Alex age 16 from Maine says, "I don't really trust [politicians], but I don't like -- how do I put this -- I don't trust them but I kind of do because I'm like neutral on this thing because I've never had to experience anything to not trust them. Like I have nothing to trust them for." This withholding, "wait and see" stance is expressed by almost half of subjects at least once during their interview.

When it comes to such public figures, what leads subjects beyond a distrusting or withholding stance? Data reveal that even in contexts beyond their own interpersonal relationships, a third of youth subjects utilize the interaction-based model. In other words, they make trust decisions in relation to public figures based on how well they "know" or

are familiar with the target. As with close figures, many youth appear to value personal experience and direct interaction, as Adam age 23 from Maine indicates:

*Adam:* I have a hard time trusting people that I haven't personally met and dealt with – politicians, just important figures in society – I'm very skeptical of how genuine they come off as, and their intentions, in general.

*Interviewer:* What would it take for someone more distant to earn your trust? If you never get a chance to meet them personally, what would you look for in order to decide?

*Adam:* I don't think I could get to like a deep level of trust with somebody I've never met and interacted with personally.

Youth who do cite a specific public figure they consider trustworthy have usually had interpersonal exchange with that figure, which, for youth and adults alike, is a rare opportunity. Henry mentioned above, for example, says he trusts the local mayor because he met him while working at City Hall during the summer. "I would just talk to him. We'd just talk about anything; he's a regular guy. Like, I actually know him." Not surprisingly, perhaps, participants generally have less trust in national politicians than those more local to them geographically, who, while still distant, seem—and sometimes are—more accessible.

Media figures fare little better than politicians in gaining the trust of youth subjects. This result seems to reflect not only their association with media institutions in general, which are perceived as inherently biased, but also distanced from young people's lives. Remarkably, only a handful of youth could even name a media figure without prompting from an interviewer. When asked about his trust in media figures, the ambivalence demonstrated by Brian, age 16 from Southern Maine, is typical for participants. He says, "I don't distrust them, but I don't trust them either. It's like a different world thing. I don't know that person. They haven't done anything for me to not

trust them. But there's just not this trust there yet." Brian's attempt and failure to associate any individual in the media with his own personal experience clearly impedes his ability to make a trust assessment in this context. The lack of a reference point leaves many youth at a loss to assess media figures in the context of trust.

The data from the person-centered interviews indicate that all five theorized mental models are utilized to varying degrees by participants. The cognitive-performance model is most prevalent across targets, followed closely by the cognitive-interaction model, suggesting that many youth have a preference for direct, ongoing interactions with others (including distant, public figures) when making assessments of trustworthiness.

### *Societal Trust*

While this paper focuses primarily on trustworthiness assessments of specific interpersonal trust targets, data concerning participants' conceptions of trust in relation to their fellow citizens offer insight into how they utilize the cognitive-interaction model in their everyday lives. In the person-centered interview, participants were asked to reflect on trust and trustworthiness in society at large. Specifically, they reported how they and others make trust assessments in relation to their neighbors and fellow citizens, a stance referred to here as *societal trust*. Findings reflect a significant inconsistency between their views on the importance of societal trust and their own behavior when it comes to trusting fellow citizens day-to-day. Whereas youth generally shy away from extending trust to those whom they do not know personally, when it comes to discussing the role that trust plays overall in society, they express more positive feelings about the potential for societal trust. A majority of youth participants place a great deal of importance on societal trust, viewing it as a good that provides security and stability, prevents chaos,

and promotes cooperation. Suzanne, age 21 from Southern Maine, sums up the impressions of many youth participants when she says:

I think trust is incredibly important because I think it's kind of the glue that holds everything together, being able to trust each other and just depend on each other. Like, if we need to depend on each other, then we can, because that's what I think keeps the community strong, is to be able to depend on each other and not have to do it always on your own.

As demonstrated by Suzanne, the stakes inherent in widespread societal distrust seem clear to youth. At the same time, in their own lives they do not want to risk getting burned themselves by placing too much trust in others without specific evidence. They believe that most others make similar calculations. In interviews, participants were prompted with the following: *Surveys indicate that trust among neighbors and fellow citizens in society has been falling over the last few decades. Why do you think this might be?* In response, approximately three quarters of subjects say that levels of societal trust have declined because people do not know or interact with their neighbors as they used to in the past and that there is a lack of shared values or a sense of community. According to Olivia, age 23 from Greater Boston, physical distance has contributed to declining interpersonal interaction and, thus, to declining levels of trust. She says:

People move around so much, it's such a transient society now. I'm just thinking of myself since I graduated college; this is my third time moving. And I think that's pretty common. There are no more neighborhoods, it feels like. Like, nobody knows who their neighbor is. It took me like a year before I realized who was living downstairs from me. Everybody's so busy with their own lives that they don't understand that there is still community.

Olivia seems to lament the decline in community that she observes around her but indicates that even she does not take much time to get to know or even interact with her neighbors. The disconnect between her feelings about the role of community in trust-

building and her own behavior in relation to others is striking yet typical for a large portion of youth participants.

## **Discussion**

The theoretical discourse surrounding the role played by cognition in the trustworthiness assessment process brings to light useful but sometimes too stark distinctions between the cognitive and non-cognitive approaches. For instance, Erikson's (1964) concept of "basic trust," which is the theoretical basis of the non-cognitive approach, takes into account interaction-based evidence with family. But that evidence is assessed while the trustor is very young and largely before she has a strongly developed consciousness. Thus, to say that basic trust is completely non-cognitive is arguably misleading. Moreover, the cases in which youth's assessments most closely approximate a non-cognitive approach often refer, albeit on a superficial level, to the trust target's *role*, which is arguably a type of evidence and an acknowledgment of context. These findings suggest a blurrier line between cognitive and non-cognitive assessment than has been proposed in the literature. Whereas theoretical accounts of non-cognitive trustworthiness assessment discount the influence of context or the specific trust target, data from this study suggest a different picture. When making trustworthiness assessments, participants strongly consider who or what the trust target is even as they express an overall inclination to trust certain categories of people (e.g. parents, teachers) in the absence of direct evidence of trustworthiness.

The sometimes muddy line between the cognitive and non-cognitive theoretical approaches to trustworthiness assessment has led my colleagues and me to raise the following question: Does framing trust and trustworthiness in relation to a binary

cognitive paradigm accurately capture the complex nature of the trustworthiness assessment process? We propose a conceptual and terminological shift away from the cognitive vs. non-cognitive paradigm and toward a framing of trustworthiness assessment in terms of *a continuum of more or less deliberative cognitive processes* (See Figure 2) (Rundle et al., in press). This terminology suggests a spectrum of mental process whereby a non cognitive approach would be closer to the less deliberative end, while a cognitive approach would be closer to the more deliberative end. The theoretical and observed ability of individuals to slide back and forth between mental models, particularly those traditionally grounded in “opposing” approaches, suggests further the conceptual utility in describing trustworthiness assessment on a spectrum. For example, a youth may initially use the non cognitive-no evidence model to make an assessment about a new teacher. Over the course of a year, the teacher may show a genuine interest in the youth and her progress and establish a trusting relationship via the cognitive-interaction model.

Despite the proposed change in terminology, the theoretical models still provide useful ways of describing youth participants’ mental models. The findings highlight the importance of evidence and context in understanding the trustworthiness assessment models of the youth interviewed in this study. Family members are sometimes assessed in a non-cognitive, or less deliberative way, based on little to no evidence. In relation to other figures close to them (such as friends, teachers, and employers), youth more often rely, not surprisingly perhaps, on performance- and interaction-based evidence, which provide them with the most direct personal experience. As physical and interpersonal distance increases between trustor and trust target, practical considerations suggest that these assessment evidence types would decrease in importance and that the reputation-

based evidence would fill the gap. Surprisingly, our findings suggest otherwise. When it comes to distant figures, youth in this study only rarely examine evidence gained through reputation. They most often cite performance evidence (such as the actions of political leaders) as a basis for trust or distrust. This finding is important and suggests that many youth prefer to assess public figures' actions on their own than to rely on others' assessments (through reputation). However, a sizeable minority of participants utilize the cognitive-interaction model, which generally leads them to withhold trust or to distrust in the absence of opportunities for interpersonal interactions. These findings have potentially profound and unsettling implications for the practice of democracy and civil society.

Personal relationships with distant figures are virtually impossible to form and unreasonable to expect, making the utilization of the cognitive-interaction model in this context seemingly futile. One explanation for this preference for interactions on the part of many youth could be the widespread distrust of the media and media figures—after all, it would seem unwise to place one's trust in a politician if the sources providing information about that politician are themselves deemed biased or untrustworthy.

There is also a clear feeling among participants that the ever-increasing amount of information available to them about public figures through the media—some biased, some contradictory—is more than they can ever hope to synthesize and make sense of on their own. As suggested by Hardin (2002), triangulation of information from a variety of media sources seems to represent the best strategy for uncovering the “truth” in such an environment, but the degree to which participants engage in media triangulation or even in deep reading of individual media sources appears to be small and quite inadequate to the task. Media distrust and

information overload may partly account for the less than rigorous process through which most participants seem to examine the information presented in the news and may impede them from coming away with the knowledge to make informed trust assessments of public figures. Thus, while youth report a fairly healthy diet of news media consumption, the impact of this secondary evidence is relatively shallow.

As discussed above, when participants do utilize the news media to assess the performance and reputation of political and media figures, they seek transparency and authenticity in what is perceived as a hopelessly biased political and media environment. Disinterestedness or *objectivity*, traditional markers of trustworthiness in media and politics, are scantily mentioned by participants. Whereas previous generations of Americans may have turned to iconic broadcast journalists like Edward R. Murrow or Walter Cronkite for trustworthy, unbiased information (Benjamin 2005, Gardner 2011, Pettingill 2005), participants in this study believe everyone has a partisan agenda and that there is value in knowing exactly which biases public figures bring to a given issue. While transparency and authenticity can provide a sense of clarity in a complex world, youth participants – even while generally distrusting of the media – do not seem to recognize that *perceptions* of transparency and authenticity can be easily manipulated through the media and actually make the process of trustworthiness assessment even more uncertain.

Youth's ideal conceptions of the traits that public figures ought to have in their personal and professional lives may be misaligned with the actual roles and responsibilities of their jobs. Many participants in this study seek a close, authentic, "insider's view" of these individuals when a more distant, objective, and pragmatic relationship may be more appropriate, useful and reasonable in assessing trustworthiness. In a wider context, the success of political figures such

as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Sarah Palin may be at least partly due to the public perception of them as genuine in their presentations as the “buddy you invite over for a beer” or the “everyday soccer mom.” Identifying oneself with the interpersonal traits of distant figures, as opposed to assessing their actual performance, may make individuals feel emotionally closer to those figures and thus serve as a proxy for the cognitive-interaction trust model. Imbuing youth with a greater sense of the “proper distance” between themselves and distant trust targets may help bring expectations and reality in closer alignment. (Silverstone 2007)

The desire for interpersonal connection extends even to the context of societal trust. The common impression among this group of youth is that in the past “everyone knew each other,” such that trust was easier to extend to neighbors and fellow citizens. According to Putnam (2000), this impression is not entirely unreasonable—the culture of association more common in previous decades provided the organizing structure around which social capital, and therefore trust, could flourish. A large portion of youth subjects seem to value this form of trust building and, given the opportunity, may be likely to participate. However, in light of the extensive use of the cognitive-interaction model across interpersonal contexts, the inevitable distance between an individual and his fellow citizens severely limits the implementation of such a structure.

### **Implications and Limitations**

The current study brings to light a potential challenge for democratic practice. A reliance on a cognitive-interaction model on the part of many youth in our study seemingly pushes political and media figures outside of the bounds of trustworthiness assessment, leaving them with limited means to make decisions on where to get their news and whom to trust as their leaders or reporters. The avalanche of information available in today’s media environment only adds further complexity to the process. Absent opportunities to assess distant figures face-to-

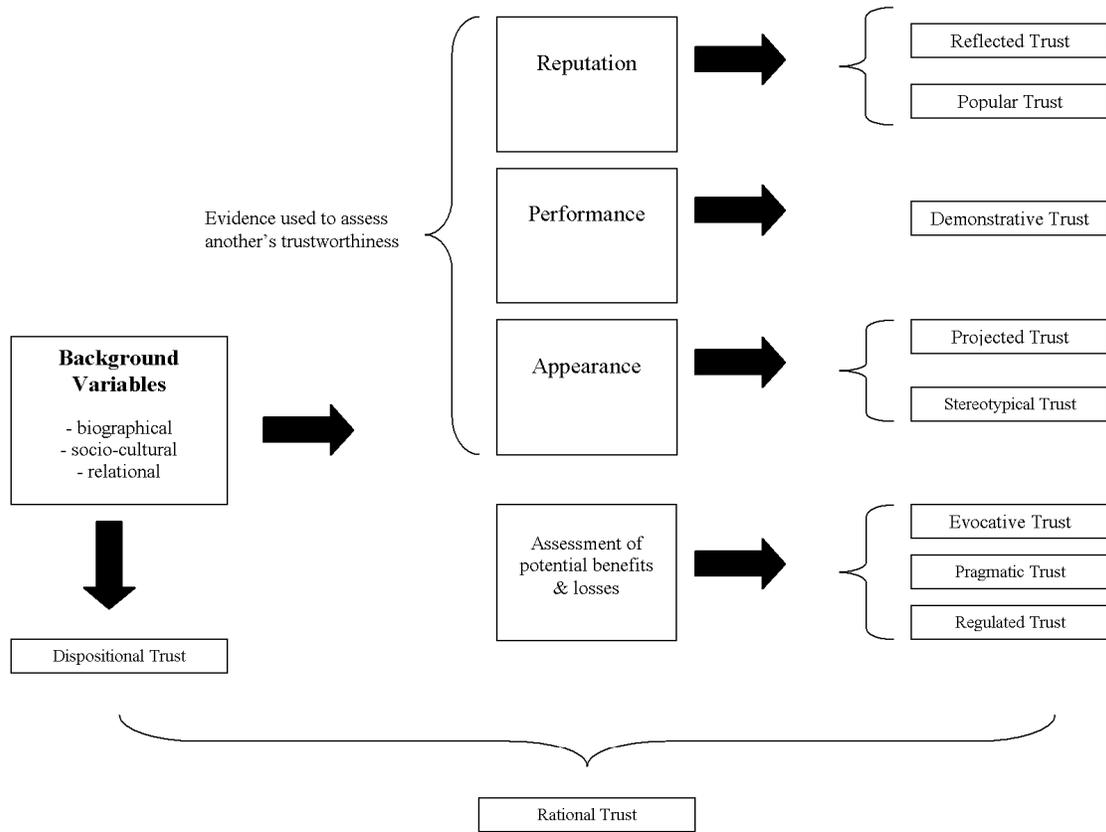
face, young people may indefinitely take a withholding trust stance or abandon the trust assessment process altogether. The critical assessment by citizens of political leaders and institutions is an essential part of democracy (Hardin 1999, 2002), but citizenship and democracy risk becoming mere exercises when individuals disengage from their roles as granters of the public trust. Realignment of the expectations and realities of personal interaction between individuals and distant trust targets could be an important step in restoring a prudent sense of trust in society. Such realignment could be accomplished through a trust assessment model more deeply grounded in careful and critical examination of secondary evidence about distant figures.

Limitations to this study that are common to qualitative research are its diverse but small sample size and a reliance on self-reported data. These factors limit the study's generalizability to larger populations and reduce its reliability. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted with research participants were extensive and in-depth. Accordingly they highlight issues that warrant attention for all who are concerned with trust, citizenship and democracy. While youth have difficulty conceptualizing trust relationships vis-à-vis distant figures like political and media figures, they value trust in close interpersonal contexts and in a broad sense understand its functional importance in facilitating social cohesion. Further empirical work should explore the extent to which these positive feelings about societal trust exist in larger youth populations and whether youth can be helped to recognize that the stakes inherent in societal trust are also important in relation to trust in distant figures.

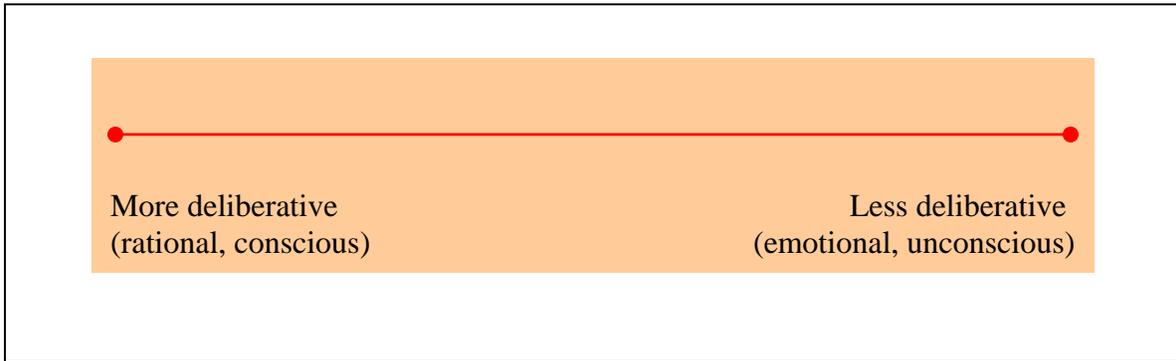
Our research group has developed and plans to test curricular activities that are designed to provide youth with time and space to reflect on their current thinking about trust and trustworthiness, to encourage warranted trust assessments, and to help them consider the stakes involved in trusting across contexts. We hope that through reflection and discussion youth will

be well prepared to make informed and reasonable trust decisions that benefit both themselves and the community at large.

**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Trust Types (Davis, 2008)**



**Figure 2: Continuum of Cognitive Approaches** (Rundle et al., in press)



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