



Social Trust in Iran: A Hobbesian Explanation

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates social trust- trust in other citizens- and its determinants in two cities of Iran. For this purpose, a model based on institutional theory of Rothstein and Stolle (2008) and Putnam's social capital theory was designed and tested. Variables extracted from the first theory include: feeling social security, discrimination experience, attitude toward corruption and institutional trust. Variables extracted from the second theory are membership in formal groups, membership in informal groups, components of socioeconomic status (education, income and job rank), using mass media, age as well as city of residence. Through cluster sampling 1200 individuals were randomly selected to contribute to the study. The results clearly indicate that the institutional theory is stronger to explain social trust than social capital theory. That is to foster social trust in a society primarily it is necessary to control destructive factors so that nurturing factors of trust are effective.

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Introduction

From the ancient time up to now, the subject of stability and change in societies has attracted many thinkers. As fathers of sociology viewed, social stability and solidarity were narrowly connected with the social trust (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Moreover, social trust, the most important components of a broader concept, social capital- has been related to the social change and development during the recent decades (Coleman 2002, p.111).

According to Newton (2001, p.202) "... trust involves risks,..., but it also helps to convert the Hobbesian state of nature from something that is nasty, brutish and short into something that is more pleasant, more efficient, and altogether more peaceful. Social life without trust would be intolerable and, most likely, quite impossible".

Therefore, social trust can be studied in the framework of both static and dynamic sociology. This is so because, on the one hand, social trust makes others' actions predictable and this feature is essential for social order and on the other hand, it is a kind of social capital alongside physical and human capital and may help socioeconomic development. Iran as a developing society is facing with these two challenges – social order and development.

Along with the expanding process of urbanization in contemporary societies, the need for thin trust is more sensible in the unknown atmospheres of cities. It is indispensable for every citizen to interact with many strangers in everyday life: in shopping, taking a taxi, mailing a package, going to a physician and so on.

Iran, as a developing country, has undergone many social changes and transformations under the modernization process during 20th century. The process of modernization challenges the traditional social order and through this clash new social order arises. In such a society thin trust is of primary importance for us because of its common feature with social order in the sense that both of them are implied with predictability: when A trusts in B, A predicts that B will not act contrary to his interests in the future. In the second place, social trust as the main

element of social capital has been viewed as a significant factor for socioeconomic development.

National surveys on Iran society have been rarely administered. One of these surveys indicated that after Denmark and Sweden Iran had the third place of high social trust (Inglehart et al 2004, table A165). Inconsistently other native studies which seems to be more valid have warned about the decline of social trust in Iran (i.e. Rafipoor 1999; Sharepoor 2001; Azad Armaki 2004; Azad Armaki and Kamali 2004; Kashi and Goodarzi 2005).

The objective of this article is to study social trust and its determinants in two cities of Iran. Drawing on Putnam's (2000) division, this article distinguishes between *thin trust* and *thick trust*; however, the focus will be on the former. While thick trust refers to trust in people with whom we have had interaction and therefore we know them, the object of thin trust is strangers. It is thin trust that attains essential role in dealing with risks in modern societies (Seligman 2000, p.8). As Uslander and Badescue (2002, p.11) assert, these two types of trust are not translatable to each other.

Theoretical framework

For the founding fathers of sociology trust was mostly considered as an equivalent of solidarity. With the emergence of functional-structural school in sociology, the analysis of trust and its role in the construction of social order, shifted to a new direction (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984, p.20-21). Among neo-functionalists thinkers, Luhmann (1979, p.48) posits trust as a "communication media" with the function of "reducing complexity" of social systems. Alexander (2001, p.195-6) addresses trust in his discussion of civil society. He construes the discourse of civil society as a binary discourse which occurs at three levels: motivations, relationships, and institutions. Trust, for Alexander, is characteristic of relations of people whose orientation is democratic. Belau as an exchange theorists, distinguishes between economic exchange and social exchange. While social exchange "entails unspecified obligations", economic transaction "entails a contract in which the exact quantities to be exchanged are stipulated" (Belau 2002, p.107). Belau argues that from the two, only social exchanges can

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generate trust in social relations through their “recurrent and gradually expanding character” (Ibid, p.108). Among the rational choice thinkers, Hardin articulates the notion of “encapsulated interest” which implies that the truster “might encapsulate” the trusted interests in his/her own, for various reasons “among the most important socially is that the “truster wishes to maintain his/her ongoing relationship with trusted (Hardin 2003, p.83). Hardin(2006, p.23) regards trust as a three-part relation: A (as a truster) trusts B (as a trusted) to do X. Based on the origins of social trust, theories are divided into two types: society-centered approaches and state-centered approaches (Rothstein and Stolle 2008). Scholars such as Putnam and Fukuyama, (1995) who believe that social capital can be explained primarily by society, belong to the first approach. The central focus of these theories which are rooted in Tocqueville thoughts is that it is historical and cultural experiences of a society that determine the amount and type of social capital among its citizens. The main mechanism for generation of social capital in this approach is frequent interactions among individuals in the form of membership in informal and especially formal associations (Rothstein and Stolle 2008, p.3). In the second account, it is argued that to nurture social capital in a society, the essential role of government institutions must be taken into consideration (Ibid, p.5). After some criticisms of and modifications in this approach, Rothstein and Stolle (2008) articulated a theory which defined causal mechanism between institutions, operation and generalized (thin) trust. In the present study, we applied Putnam’s theory as an eminent one from the society-centered approach, and Rothstein and Stolle theory as a modified version of the state-centered approach. What follows aims at describing the concepts and variables we have derived from these theories. In the most abstract level, Putnam (1993) argues that the more interactions and relationships of individuals with other citizens, the more social capital and trust. This proposition leads Putnam to pay attention to the predictors such as membership in formal and informal associations and he argues that television causes the decline of civic engagement because it “keeps people of all ages in their living rooms” (Putnam 1999, p.151). Putnam (2000, p.137) points out that “in virtually all societies *have nots* are less trusting than *haves*, probably because *haves* are treated by others with more honesty and respect”. Also, perhaps *haves* are more able to cope with the risks of trust in other people than *have nots*. The other variable emphasized by Putnam as a determinant of social trust, is “generational replacement” (Putnam 1999, p.150). He believes that generalized trust is “influenced by personal experiences and social customs early in life”- the formative years. (Putnam 2000, p.138). The basic role of these years was formerly emphasized and consequently articulated by German sociologist Karl Mannheim. In *the problem of generations*, Mannheim (1968, p.291&298) argues that the first world view that a person acquires, remains more or less unchangeable all the life and is shaped under the influence of generational features.

Schumann and Scott (1989, p.377) found out people, at all ages; tend to report events and changes from their youth – adolescence and early adulthood. The size of city is another factor influencing social trust. Putnam argues that inhabitants of bigger cities suffer from more crimes and distrust compared to “small-town dwellers” (Putnam 2000, p.137). Given these notions and the fact that Iran has experienced macro fundamental changes and generation creating phenomena such as revolution and war throughout three recent decades, generation will be an independent variable in our model.

Thus, variables including generation, using mass media, membership in formal associations, membership in informal groups, components of socioeconomic status – income, education and job rank – as well as city of residence, were adopted from Putnam discussions.

Another applied theory in this study is *institutional theory* of Rothstein and Stolle (2008). They argue that a combination of efficiency and fairness of order institutions matters for generalized trust. Their central reasoning is that the particular duty of order and law institutions is “to detect and punish people ... who break contracts, offer bribes, and therefore should not be trusted”. Therefore, if citizens think that these order institutions operate fairly and effectively “they also have the reason to believe that the chance of people getting away with treacherous behavior is relatively small”. Hence, they believe other citizens are reliable because they have good reason to avoid uncooperative acts (Rothstein and Stolle 2008, p.9). Rothstein and Stolle (Ibid, p.10-11) define four causal mechanisms between institutional functioning and generalized trust: Institutional fairness and efficiency (a) influence the individual’s agent perception of his/her security. Fear of others leads to distrust; (b) determine the individual’s inference from those who are responsible of guarding public interest.

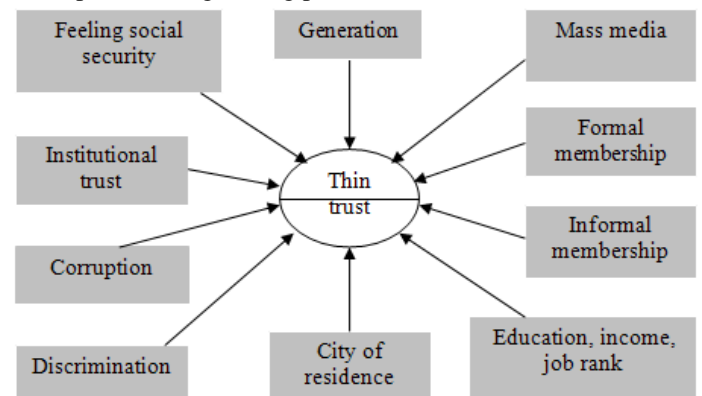


Figure 1. Causal Model of the Research

If officials are not reliable, other people can certainly not be trusted; (c) “shape the observance of the behavior of fellow citizens, as institutional fairness sets the tone”. A corrupt system sends signals to citizens to involve in corruption. As a consequence people involved in corruption do not trust in each other (d) may cause discrimination among citizens when they contact them directly. Four variables were adopted from the institutional theory: feeling social security, institutional trust, attitudes toward other citizen’s involvement in corruption, discrimination experience in relation to institutions.

It is notable that Putnam’s division of social trust into thin and thick is parallel to the Rothstein and Stolle typology of *generalized* and *particular* trust. According to the above considerations, the experimental model was represented as in figure 1.

Operational Definition of Variables

Generation: Given the two great social phenomena in recent decades – Islamic Revolution in 1979 and imposed war between 1980 and 1988 – we distinguished three generations: people at the age of 18-29 or young generation after war, people aged 30-54 or generation of Revolution and War, and people at the age of 55-65 or pre-revolution generation (Chitsaz Ghomi 2007).

Mass media: The number of hours per week a respondent uses media including: national TV, international TV, radio, Persian magazines and books, foreign magazines and books, newspapers and internet.

Membership in formal groups: Sum of memberships in nine voluntary formal associationsⁱ inside the country.

Membership in informal groups: The number of hours a respondent spends talking with neighbors, friends and family members (Paxton 1999, p.107).

Security: How much does the respondent feel physical, economic, social and environmental security? Four items were designed to measure this variable.

Institutional trust: The sum of scores attained by a respondent answering the question that how much he or she trusted in 21 governmental institutionsⁱⁱ.

Corruption: How much does the respondent feel that other citizens are involved in corruption in relation to institutions? The Likert scale to measure this variable consisted of 8 items.

Discrimination: How much has the respondent experienced discrimination in relation to institutions? This variable was measured by 3 items.

Social trust: In the present study, thin trust or generalized trust in other citizens has been measured by nine itemsⁱⁱⁱ adopted from literature review and in the form of Likert scale. Thick trust has been measured through four items including trust in family members, relatives, friends and neighbors.

Research Methodology

Research Context

Mashhad and Sabzevar, two of the most populous cities of Khorasan Razavi, were taken as the target population: Mashhad, 1689169 persons and Sabzevar, 149327 persons. Mashhad is the capital of the province and the second densely populated city of the country after Tehran. Sabzevar is the second most populated city in this province. These two cities represent the cultural and demographic features of the eastern parts of Iran. Moreover, these two cities are distinctive in terms of the level of renovation and development and this can be of vital importance in a study of social trust.

Subjects

Two samples of 600 individuals at the age of 18-65 were selected through multistage cluster sampling. The size of samples was determined based on Lin table. Given the reliability of 4 per cent, the parameter in population assumed to be 50 per cent and confidence interval of 95 per cent, it was 600 for Mashhad and 597 for Sabzevar^{iv}. The sample can better be specified in terms of the following figures and factors:

1. Sex: 51.2 % are male and 48.8% are female
2. Employment: 53.5% are employed and 46.5% are unemployed
3. Marital status: 32.7% are single and 67.3 % are married
4. Place of birth: 82.7% are born in cities and 17.3% are born in villages
5. Average age: 32.4
6. Average years of education: 11.9

Instrument

The instrument is a questionnaire which aims at operationalizing thick and thin social trust. The questionnaires were administered by skilled researchers. Before administering the test the reliability and validity of the instrument was established. An analysis of pre-test showed an Alpha Cronbach of more than 0.7 for all the scales. The face validity and content validity of the scales were confirmed by sociologists and university professors. Moreover, the construct validity of questionnaire was determined by using factor analysis (KMO=0.67) and incompatible items were deleted.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered under uniform conditions by experienced researchers in the field. Data

collection started in April 2008 and ended in June of the same year. SPSS was used to determine descriptive and inferential statistics. Inferential analysis included Student T-test, Analysis of Variance, Pearson-Product Moment Correlation, and Multivariate Regression Analysis.

Results

Table 1 illustrates Pearson coefficients between all interval independent variables and thin trust. This univariate analysis indicates that all the four independent variables adopted from institutional theory have significant relationships with thin trust but three variables extracted from social capital theory – formal membership, informal membership and using mass media - have no significant relationship with dependent variable. Furthermore, the direction of three is in contrast with the theoretical presuppositions. That is, education, income, and job rank have negative effect on thin trust while in Putnam's theory it was presumed that *haves* trust in others more easily than *have nots*. It is remarkable that the Pearson coefficient for the significant relationship between thick and thin trust is 0.333. As table 2 illustrates, the highest score of trust mean belongs to the old generation. Moreover, regarding F, the means of thin trust among three cohorts are significantly different; however, significance of Bonferoni test shows that the difference of trust mean between old generation and that of other two is significant. That is to say, there is no significant difference between young and middle aged cohort in their thin trust. As we move from old cohort to young one, thin trust scores decline.

Table 3 depicts the mean of thin trust among inhabitants of smaller city – Sabzevar is significantly higher than larger city residents – Mashhad. Although apparently this finding is in accordance with theoretical presupposition, as it will be discussed, putting the finding in the frame of a long process of modernization, it denotes different implications.

Table 4 shows the result of multiple regression using stepwise method for thin trust. As it can be seen, four of all independent variables were used in the model in order: institutional trust, corruption, security and discrimination. The relationship of corruption and discrimination with thin trust is negative. The Determination Coefficient – R² – is 0.47. The four variables used in the model belong to the institutional theory.

This test was repeated for the other dependent variable thick trust. As the table 4 depicts, five independent variables were used in the model and explained just about 12 per cent of variance of thick trust. The fact that the explained variance of thin trust is higher than that of thick trust implies the theoretical model that was applied in this study has been appropriately chosen. While all variables used in the previous model of thin trust belonged to the institutional theory, just two variables of the theory were used in the model of thick trust and the rest were extracted from social capital notions. Furthermore, all the five variables influence thick trust positively.

Discussion and Conclusion

As it was represented in table 1, the relationship of education and income as the constituents of social status with thin trust was negative. This result is contrary to Putnam's theoretical presupposition^v. It seems that the direction of influence of these variables on thin trust depends on the context of institutional order in broader society. Although *haves* are more receptive to the risks of trust, in the high risk conditions they avoid to trust other people. Seemingly, people with higher education and income have more knowledge about the ongoing social reality. If the social reality is risky and hazardous, they are better able to perceive it relative to people with lower education and income and therefore avoid trusting other citizens.

Table 1. Correlation Tests between Interval Independent Variables and Dependent Variable

Independent variables	Pearson coefficient	Significance level
Security	0.437	0.000
Institutional trust	0.579	0.000
Corruption	-0.534	0.000
Discrimination	-0.421	0.000
Formal membership	0.095	0.002
Informal membership	0.030	0.357
Mass media	0.020	0.538
Age	0.079	0.012
Education	-0.113	0.000
Income	-0.061	0.05
Job rank	-0.047	0.136

Table 2. Analysis of Variance of Thin Trust among Generations

Factor(Generation)		Mean	Sig of Bonferoni test	F	Total Significance
Young	Middle-aged/ Old	77.08	1.000 0.008	4.55	0.011
Middle-aged	Young/Old	77.65	1.000 0.020		
Old	Young/Middle-aged	83.05	0.008 0.020		

Table 3. T-test of Thin Trust between Two Cities

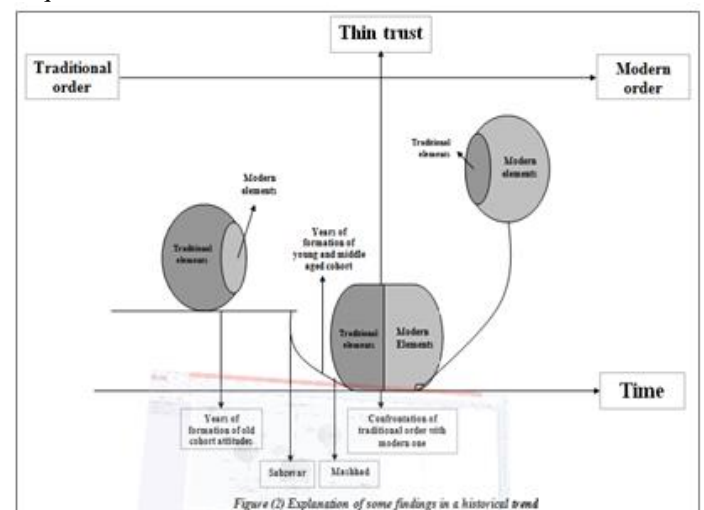
Independent variable		Mean	T	Significance
City of Residence	Sabzevar	78.54	1.97	0.049
	Mashhad	76.83		

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis for Independent Variable-Thin Trust

Dependent Variable	Step	Variables	B	β	R ²	Sig	Std. Error of B
Thin Trust	1	Institutional trust	0.351	0.361	0.362	0.000	0.033
	2	Corruption	-0.756	-0.262	0.440	0.000	0.098
	3	Security	0.797	0.184	0.469	0.000	0.132
	4	Discrimination	-0.425	-0.073	0.473	0.026	0.190
Thick Trust	1	Security	1.149	0.175	0.049	0.000	0.245
	2	Informal membership	0.134	0.176	0.082	0.000	0.026
	3	Age	0.233	0.122	0.095	0.000	0.065
	4	Institutional trust	0.195	0.133	0.106	0.000	0.055
	5	Education	0.140	0.109	0.117	0.002	0.044

Having more resources has a positive influence on social trust as long as the social conditions seem to be secure so that the risks and costs of trust is not very high. Hence, resources are two-sided phenomena which nurture trust in safe states and destruct it in unpredictable and risky conditions. As table 2 shows, the older generation had significantly higher level of thin trust than younger generation. Also the older generation had lower education than the other two cohorts. If we assume education as an index of modernization, it seems that as the process goes forth, the level of thin trust declines. This reasoning seems logical if we pay attention to table 2, in which thin trust in Mashhad as a more modernized metropolis is lower than that of Sabezvar as a less developed city. The result of multiple regression for independent variable of thick trust showed that five variables were used in the model and explained about 12 percent of thick trust variance. The biggest β belonged to the informal membership. That is, the more people spend time to talk with family members, friends and neighbors, the more they trust familiar people. To account for the influence of age on

thick trust, it can be said that as people become older, they attain acquaintances rises^{vi}.



The other variable which had a positive correlation with thick trust was education. This is so while its relationship with thin trust was vice versa. Perhaps more educated people have more skills to find more suitable friends, mates and manage the family and neighborhood relations more easily. But as we noted above, this knowledge acts negatively in relation with unfamiliar citizens in the risky institutional conditions of broader society. The entrance of variables related to social structure such as social security and institutional trust into the model of thick trust denotes that the structural conditions of broader society provide a context in which trust in familiars become possible. A comparison of the results of multiple regression for thick trust with that of thin trust, leads us to conclude that determinants of these two types of trust are different. Three evidences verify the claim: First, the value of determination coefficient (R^2) is dramatically different for the two models; second, the variables entered into each of these models are various; and third, the relationship of education with thick trust is reverse to that of thin trust.

Given the above findings and also the decline of social trust in current generations relative to older cohort whose formative years were synchronized with less diffusion of modernization process and the lower mean of thin trust of Mashhad inhabitants as a more modernized metropolis relative to Sabzevar more interactional experiences and knowledge thereby their friendship gets deeper. As a result, their trust in residents as a less developed city, it can be articulated that in a historical process of development, the studied society approaches a situation like the Hobbesian natural state. That is a historical point in which the clash between traditional and modern order occurs and probably every society experiences it^{vii}. After this stage, new order becomes dominant and generalized trust begins to grow. Figure 2 illustrates this discussion schematically. The presupposition of the figure 2 is that some essential elements of traditional society constitutive social order, contradict the elements of modern society. Putnam (2000, p.135) states that "social trust is a valuable community asset if – but only if – it is warranted." It appears that the place and role of institutional theory is articulating the condition of "if – but only if" in the quoted statement. If social trust is not warranted, talking about voluntary associations and trust making interactions among citizens will be futile. It is the institutional arrangements of society that primarily guarantee social trust. This will not take place unless distrust becomes institutionalized in the architecture of political system through democratic principles (Sztomka 2002, p.16). As Sztomka argues, "most of principles constituting democratic order assume institutionalization of distrust, which provides a kind of backup or insurance for those who would be ready to trust...the more institutionalized distrust, the more spontaneous trust" among citizens. He calls this as the *paradox of democracy* (Ibid, p.16).

Based on the object of trust as the third part of trust relations (Hardin 2006, p.23), we distinguish between two types of trust. The first is a type of trust which should be warranted by institutional order and the second is a trust which is created in voluntary associations and encouraged by civic norms. The former is more basic than the latter and virtually is the precondition of the second type. The first one is almost referred to the actions which are object of law while the second type may not be included under the law. For example, in a risky institutional condition of a society, you distrust other people about usurping your piece of land, because law is not exerted rightly whether for lack of efficiency or fairness, but in a society which democratic institutional order has long been established,

you may doubt your coworker whether he will compensate if you do his tasks when he is absent from the office. There exists the core reasoning of the rational choice approach of Hardin in the heart of the institutional theory of Rothstein and Stolle. Hardin argues that the truster encapsulates trustee's interests in his own for various reasons. Among the most socially important ones is that he wishes "to maintain" his "ongoing relationship" with trustee (Hardin 2003, p.82). In risky conditions similar to the natural state of Hobbes, the rational choice account can be articulated in this way: I do not trust you because if you betray my trust, there is no effective or fair political order to take my right. The dominant orientation of actors in these conditions is similar to the Rotter's (1980) description of low-truster who says "I will not trust a person until there is clear evidence that he or she can be trusted" (Rotter 1980). The social state which is addressed to in social capital theory is better described by high-truster manner of Rotter's research who says "I will trust a person until I have clear evidence that he or she can't be trusted" (Ibid, p.215). This is what Offe argues that just "after the methodical invalidation of reasons of distrust", universalized trust remains (Offe 1999, p.56).

As Porta remarks, trusting acquaintances is easier than strangers because in the state of familiarity, fear of punishment in later indispensable interactions and keeping their fame (Porta et al 2000, p.311) and also knowing each other makes them avoid betrayal acts. This warranty which exists in the structure of thick trust relations must be exerted in the structure of generalized trust in big society. This is not feasible unless the democratic mechanisms, in which institutions exercise law effectively and efficiently, are well established. Democracy provides citizens with a general knowledge implying that dishonest men cannot escape easily from the law punishment. In sum if effective institutions, through rightly wielding law, control the wolf-side of human beings, actors relieve of the distrust and insecurity resulted by the possibility of being hurt by other people. It is in this context that developing voluntary associations and civil networks, bring about the growth of altruistic side of man. Democracy acts like a cage in which the wolf nature of man is imprisoned so that the angle side becomes free. The coincidence of the noted notion with the description of word *trustee* seems very interesting – a prisoner who is given special advantages because of good behavior (Hornby 2005).

Suggestions for Further Researches

The findings of the present research show that the institutional theory explains thin trust in the studied society better than social capital theory. As it was discussed, it is related to the level of institutionalization of democratic order in a society. It seems that the explanatory power of social capital theory is higher for the study of more democratized and developed societies while institutional theory is more fit to the developing countries. Therefore, it is suggested that while choosing theoretical framework to investigate social trust, researchers consider the societies' level of development. The other suggestion relates to enforcing generalizability power of social capital theory. Results of this study depict that the elements of social status do not function similarly in all social contexts. That is, the relationship between education, income as well as job rank and thin trust is not necessarily positive. When social contracts are weakly guaranteed by inefficient institutions, actors with higher education and income avoid trusting strange citizens because they recognize these risky conditions better than low educated and low income people. It seems that the concept of *level of knowledge about existing social reality* can improve the explanatory power of social capital theory. In the conditions

of institutionalized democratic order *have* trust more easily than *have-nots*; however, in risky conditions of less institutionalized democratic order, *have*s avoid gullibility (Yamagishi, et al 1999) and realize that it is not rational to trust in strangers. More specifically, those with higher income and education are more likely to trust. But whether they trust or not depends on the social context. If the circumstances are risky, such as the conditions in Iran, these people trust less so as to know the social reality more deeply. Since social context determines the effect of variables such as income, education, and professional rank, we cannot generalize the findings of studies undertaken in developed countries that have undergone democracy to less developed countries. Thus further studies need to be undertaken to explore a varied effect of context.

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For example membership in art associations, sport associations, political parties, religious and charity groups, scientific associations, Islamic associations, cooperatives, etc.

ⁱⁱ The institutions includeⁱⁱ education system, police, courts, offices of electricity, water and telegraph, post, hospitals, universities, parliament, guardian council, elites council of leader, national mass media (T v and radio), banks, city council, government, municipality, newspapers, traffic police, governor office.

ⁱⁱⁱ These items are: nowadays people keep their promise; people' actions and words are different; people are honest while selling their goods; people are fair and just; one must be cautious in entering into transactions with strangers; we must not give much of our personal information to others; people are truthful and frank; people seek only their own interest in their relationships, people trust each other much less than before.

^{iv} The population of Mashhad and Sabzevar is 2766258 and 231557 respectively (National census, 2011).

^v The negative impact of education on thin trust was a finding of Azad Armaki and Kamali's study (2003). The sample of that study was 28 cities that were the capitals of provinces all around the country.

^{vi} Thick trust is in the area of actor's agency so that one's knowledge and experiences affect his/her decisions about choosing friends and the extent of interactions with them; however thin trust in strangers is out of actor's agency.

^{vii} Clearly a modified and nonlinear modernization theory is the background of our analysis which has particularly been presented in Figure2. For this we have focused on some variables indicating modernization level such as city of residence and generation. Mashhad is much more modernized than Sabzevar.