Maastricht University

An exploration of trust, betrayal, & social identity

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Reflections on doing research

While all chapters tackle aspects of how to better cooperate outside our groups, there are two distinct directions in this dissertation: (i) examining the role of exposure to racial diversity in school during adolescence on electoral turnout and on political views later on and (ii) examining the role of betrayal aversion in discrimination in trust, which prompted questions about the measurement of betrayal aversion and about the effects of institutions trying to diminish the scope for betrayal aversion.
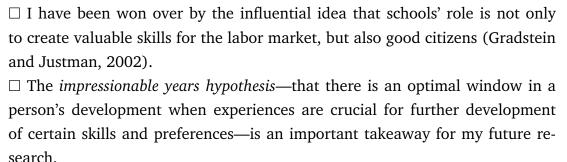
I have summarized the findings and their academic and policy implications in the introduction. In this section, I reflect on the lessons I have learned about doing research more generally. I believe these can be useful to junior scientists.

From the studies on betrayal aversion,

☐ I have learned the importance of using a correct counterfactual. A natural starting point for experimental economists is to assume participants are rational expected utility maximizers and to work out predictions from there. This is a potentially good enough simplification in some cases, but it might not be in others. When it comes to the control game used to gauge betrayal aversion, evidence indicates it is an oversimplification.

☐ Scientists should be modest about what can be inferred from one study, especially when—as is the case in this thesis—findings in one chapter cannot be easily reconciled with those in another chapter. In the experiments in Chapters 2 and 3, I find betrayal aversion at the beginning of an academic year, but not towards its end. The subjects were recruited from largely the same pool and the experiments were similar. Clearly, more research is needed to understand the importance and stability of betrayal aversion.

☐ Topic-wise, doing this research has set me on a path of studying how behavioral ethics, psychology and economics interact. In particular, I have thought,

read and discussed about how people draw conclusions about others' intentions from a situation, how they value these intentions, and how outcomes and responsibility allocation (blame/credit) interact to create perceptions of fairness.

From the study of racial diversity in schools,

☐ I have been won over by the influential idea that schools' role is not only to create valuable skills for the labor market, but also good citizens (Gradstein and Justman, 2002).

☐ The *impressionable years hypothesis*—that there is an optimal window in a person's development when experiences are crucial for further development of certain skills and preferences—is an important takeaway for my future research.

My current research interests combine and further what I have learned from both directions in my doctoral research. Namely, I am designing laboratory (and hopefully later also field) experiments to study spillovers from being exposed to (un)ethical behavior. Ultimately, my plan is to study this in the field, in a school environment. The goal is to evaluate how experiencing ethical behavior in school on the part of the teachers influences active civic behavior later in life, such as the propensity to speak up when observing wrongdoing.