

# Who Do You Trust? Men And Women Answer That Differently

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Men and women differ in how they decide which strangers they can trust, according to new research.

A study found that men tended to trust people who were part of a group with them. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to trust strangers who shared some personal connection, such as a friend of a friend.

“There are different ways to determine who is a part of your in-group, to decide who you can trust when you first meet a stranger,” said Marilyn Brewer, co-author of the study and professor of psychology at Ohio State University.

“For women, this in-group is me and my friends and family and their friends and family. For men, the in-group is my team or my company or my club. These are the people we feel we can trust.”

The results suggest that men can be as social as women, but in a different way, Brewer said.

“Researchers sometimes claim that men are less socially oriented than women, but our research shows that men can be very connected to other people – they are just connected in a different way.

“Men look for symbolic connections that you get from belonging to the same group, rather than for personal connections that women prefer.”

Brewer conducted the study with William Maddux, a former graduate student at Ohio State who is now an assistant professor at Northwestern University. Their results appear in the current issue of the journal *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

The study involved 147 students at Ohio State. The students were seated in a computer lab where they made online decisions whether to accept a sure-thing payment of \$3 from the researchers or an unknown allocation from a stranger, who supposedly had up to \$11 to distribute as he or she wished.

The participants learned only one thing about the stranger on the other end of the online connection – the university he or she attended. The question the participants faced was how much could they trust this stranger to share their wealth with them, and on what would they base that trust?

The participants actually made the choice three different times. One time the participants were told that the stranger attended Ohio State – the same university as the participants themselves.

In a second trial, participants were told that the stranger attended another university, but one in which the participant had earlier indicated he or she had a friend.

In the third instance, participants were told the stranger was from a university in which the participant did not know anybody.

The purpose was to see which person the participants would trust most to share some of their \$11 – would it be someone who is in the same group as you (in this case, Ohio State), someone who has possible connections to a friend (a university where you know someone), or someone from a university in which you have no connections?

After the three trials, the participants were asked to rate how much they trusted the stranger to make a decision that was favorable to them. They were also directly asked how much money they thought the other person gave them.

Overall, the results showed American college students were very trusting of strangers in this situation, Brewer said. In all cases, more than three-quarters of the students chose to take a chance and accept the unknown allocation from the stranger rather than the sure \$3 from the researchers.

Men and women didn't differ in their likelihood of accepting the stranger's unknown allocation instead of the sure \$3. But the researchers said this probably was related to the fact that women are less likely to take risks than are men.

But there were interesting gender differences in the participants' responses to the questions about whom among the strangers they trusted to give them more than \$3.

Men were much more likely to say they trusted the stranger from Ohio State – part of their group – than they were strangers from other universities, whether they knew someone at the institutions or not.

Women, while they trusted the stranger from Ohio State, were also significantly more likely than men to trust the stranger from a university at which they had a friend – implying a potential personal connection.

The same gender differences were found when participants estimated how much money they expected to receive from each of the three strangers.

“The bottom line is that women tend to trust strangers if they think they are connected to that person in some extended friendship network. Their

network is based on interpersonal relationships,” Brewer said.

“Men showed trust more on a symbolic rather than an interpersonal basis – you're either in my group or not in my group. You can see this in male-dominated groups like the military or football teams -- there's a clear distinction between ‘us' and ‘them.’”

While in this study it might appear that women would trust more people than men – because women trusted both people at Ohio State and at a university in which they had a friend – in everyday life the results suggest women would have a smaller circle of trusted people, Brewer said.

That's because women's in-groups would be based on interpersonal connections, while men are more likely to embrace people from a large, symbolic group, even if they don't have close personal relationships with them.

While it may seem surprising that the participants would trust someone based simply on the fact that they attended the same university – or even just attended a university in which they knew someone – that's a part of American culture, Brewer said.

“At least in our culture, it doesn't take much to activate an initial trust,” she said.

“Americans are willing to trust others at first until they are proved wrong. When we talked to participants after the study they would actually say things like ‘Someone from Ohio State wouldn't let me down.’ That level of trust is important in our society because it allow us to do business with each other and develop new relationships.”

That level of trust and openness is not found in every culture. In a

previous study, Brewer and her colleagues found that people in Japan were, overall, more like the women in this study: they tended to reserve trust for people in which they had some interpersonal connection. They were not as willing to trust people simply based on a shared group membership.

“It is an important aspect of our culture that we are willing to invest that initial trust without a lot to base it on,” Brewer said.

This study, and the previous one comparing Japanese and Americans, were supported by the National Science Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation.

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