

Cross-societal experimentation on trust:
Comparison of the United States and Japan

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It is generally believed that Japanese society and, in particular, business relations in Japan, are characterized by a high level of trust. Collectivist preferences for ingroup harmony and mutually cooperative practices in Japan are believed to lie underneath the high level of general trust, particularly in comparison to the individualistic and competitive pursuit of private *vis-à-vis* collective goals in American society. At the same time, insightful social observers such as Alexis Tocqueville (1945) and Francis Fukuyama (1995) characterized American society as having a high level of general trust. Fukuyama argues that strong family ties in societies such as China, France, and Southern Italy prevent trust from developing beyond the confines of the family; whereas a lack of strong familism in such countries as the U. S., Japan, and Germany breeds general trust that extends beyond the narrow confines of the family.

Either characterization—American as non-trusting and Japanese as trusting, or of both as trusting societies—is not consistent with empirical findings, however. Past research comparing the U. S. and Japan has repeatedly demonstrated that the level of general trust is much higher in American society than in Japanese society. First, Toshio Yamagishi and Midori Yamagishi (1994) demonstrated in a cross-societal questionnaire survey that the average level of general trust (i.e., trust in others in general) is higher among Americans than among Japanese. Although this survey did not use nationally representative samples, another more representative study conducted by the Japanese Institute of Statistical Mathematics (Hayashi et al, 1982), using representative national samples, reports a similar cross-national difference. According to this study, 47 percent of the American sample (N = 1,571) responded to the question; “do you think you can put your trust in most people, or do you think it's always best to be on your guard?” with “people can be trusted.” In contrast, only 26 percent of the Japanese sample (N = 2,032) gave the same response. Similarly, 47% of the American sample, compared to 19% of the Japanese sample, in response to the question; “would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?” stated that people try to be helpful.