

**Like Strangers We Trust:  
Identity and Generic Affiliation Networks**

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## **Like Strangers We Trust: Identity and Generic Affiliation Networks**

### **Abstract**

Sociological research on collective behavior provides strong evidence for the sources of collective action and shared attitudes based on overlapping experience. We know, for example, that members of social movement organizations are likely to share similar beliefs. However, a significant portion of the prior research on shared behaviors or attitudes analyzes individuals who do not know one another. This research using large surveys often infers overlapping experience based on generic connections: People in unions generally or church groups generally are likely to hold similar beliefs or engage in similar behaviors *as if* they were in the same unions or church groups. In this paper, I challenge this simple inference by arguing that the generic affiliations we hold contribute to our identity. Specifically, our identities can, in part, be seen as a network of overlapping roles based on generic affiliations. In two case analyses, findings indicate the importance of considering generic affiliation networks when modeling trust and political partisanship. Individuals who share multiple affiliations often appear to be similar to one another along a number of socio-demographic dimensions and report similar attitudes. Conclusions highlight the promise and challenge of relational approaches to social life.

**Keywords:** Identity; Social Networks; Voluntary Associations; Social Trust; Political Partisanship

Two *neighbors* walk into a bar. They belong to the exact same church group, attend the exact same PTA meetings, and are in the exact same literary club. What are the chances that they greet each other as they settle in for a drink? Most sociologists would agree that these two people are very likely to greet each other or send an equally salient message by ignoring one another. In fact, it is likely that they share many things in common if only through these joint commitments. If nothing else, they could probably sustain a substantial conversation based upon their shared experiences in these organizations. These memberships also increase the likelihood that they will agree on broad social issues, while also increasing the likelihood that they will act collectively in relationship to these voluntary associations (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Diani 2009; Glanville 2004).

Consider this slight adjustment to the proposed scenario: Two *strangers* walk into a bar. They each belong to a bible study, a book club, and attend PTA meetings, but in different municipalities. Thus, the probability that they will greet each other is exactly the same as the probability that they would greet any other stranger in the bar. Nonetheless, most sociologists would agree that these shared, generic affiliations provide some link between these strangers. Indeed, work on voluntary associations assumes this link by inferring that generic affiliation – affiliation in a broad category of association, such as a union or church group as opposed to a specific union or a specific church group – operates like face-to-face membership (Cornwell and Harrison 2004; Lee 2008; Paxton 2007). In previous discussions of generic affiliation, people in church groups and union groups, but in different cities are assumed to act *as if* they are in the same church groups or the same union groups in the same cities. Or, strangers act as if they are neighbors. While we may assume that strangers with overlapping affiliations share some similar

experiences, recent (e.g. Baldassarri 2011; Diani 2009) and classic (e.g. Simmel 1955[1922]) research draws attention to the sources of collective action based on affiliation membership and suggests that generic and face-to-face affiliation are worth teasing apart.

In this paper, I describe how generic affiliations differ from face-to-face affiliations and explain how they contribute to shared behavior and belief. Extending social psychological research on identity and networks, I specifically develop the notion that generic group affiliation contributes to the construction of individual identity. In other words, these generic affiliations tell us less about how people interact with one another and more about how identities group together. In this way, generic members are not connected in networks where collective action can be inferred – they are *strangers* after all –, but are connected through similarity analogous to conventional uses of racial, gender, occupational, and other aspects of identity. First, I build an argument for distinguishing generic membership from face-to-face memberships by discussing relational approaches to identity: I situate my discussion in the long, if somewhat complex literature arguing that identities operate as networks. Second, I discuss the previous research on affiliations, trust, and political partisanship. Next, I provide an illustrative analysis of the relationship between generic affiliation and trust and political partisanship using data from the General Social Survey highlighting the relational construction of identity.

## **1. GENERIC AFFILIATION AND ASSOCIATION EMBEDDEDNESS**

The most advanced research on affiliation explores the aggregated connections between groups through individual memberships. Here, a literary group is connected to a hobby group if at least one individual is a member of both. These structures aggregate across populations through generic ties. Generic affiliations facilitate comparison across time and between countries.

Scholars have used generic affiliation networks to explain the effects that union embeddedness has on union decline and on the establishment of good governance practices.

Within the United States, Cornwell and Harrison (2004), for example, find that union embeddedness declines over time. From the 1970s to the 1990s, unions became increasingly more isolated within the affiliation structure despite high rates of membership. Union members are less likely to affiliate with other groups and the groups to which they do affiliate are likely to be less connected. Cornwell and Harrison (2004) conclude that as unions have declined in relationship to other groups they lose power within the United States' "interorganizational culture." As a consequence, unions likely suffer parallel declines in political efficacy.

Following a similar logic, Lee (2007) uses differences in cross-national affiliation structures to evaluate a country's likelihood of adopting good governance practices, such as transparent and democratic state institutions. He finds that union embeddedness or centrality within the generic affiliation network is positively related to good governance. However, he (2007:394) notes, "Although the type of organization does not necessarily mean that members of the associations are affiliated with the same organizations, the associational types have meaningful implications. In a probabilistic sense, members within the same types of associations are more likely to share the same information flows, common resources and goals, and higher levels of confederation." This "probabilistic sense" supports the inferences that generic affiliation operates *as if* members meet face-to-face. People who don't know one another are more likely to "share the same information flows" and "goals" if they generically affiliate with one another, but why?

These studies provide strong evidence of the "meaningful implications" of union embeddedness and affiliation structure, but it is unclear whether the characteristics of face-to-

face memberships can be transposed upon generic affiliations. Consider, again, the bones of generic affiliation: the network consists of the ties between associations through individual's joint membership in generic, unnamed church, literary, hobby, political, fraternal, union, and other groups. The anonymity of these groups prevents the ability to know anything specific about their power, shared objectives, or any number of organizational characteristics essential to predicting political or democratic action. Not all unions or union members, for example, are the same (Schmitt and Warner 2010; Zullo 2012). The salience of union membership in the context of generic affiliation rests on the social psychological implications of the "web of overlapping associations" or roles, as Simmel (1955[1922]) originally described. As union roles grow more separate from other roles based on civic association, the union role has less salience to community members and becomes a less influential source of shared understanding or behavior. For example, as Cornwell and Harrison (2004:878) write, "The lack of widespread shared identity between union members and church members may help us to understand why the efforts of organized labor have been particularly unsuccessful in regions of the South." When a specific affiliation, such as union membership, becomes more isolated from the general affiliation structure, the consequences can be dire indeed as the identity affiliated with the form of membership no longer contributes to the generic common experiences that help connect people to one another and form a basis of shared belief and collective behavior.

Note that this differs substantially from individualized conceptions of identity. Face-to-face networks generate specific, shared experiences that directly contribute to an increased likelihood of collective behavior. Unfair work conditions at a specific workplace, for example, may lead union members within that workplace to strike. Specific overlapping stories about these conditions may operate as a mechanism for this shared behavior as workers relay their

experiences to one another. This may reinforce a specific individual sense of self that one has in relationship to their workplace. We can imagine workers, perhaps, feeling empowered by their collective anger and their shared identity as members of a collective (Dixon and Roscigno 2003). They see themselves as specific members of a specific group. The previous research, with some success, suggests that this process occurs in the aggregate as well: The richness of contextualized and internalized identities transfers onto more generic affiliation. However, many groups do not aggregate so easily. For example, Sierra Club members differ in profound ways from Earth First! members, academic unions differ from fire fighter unions, and so on. Yet, importantly, and as an extensive body of research shows including those described above, these aggregated generic affiliations often do contribute to an increased likelihood of shared behaviors and beliefs.

I argue, here, that this particular puzzle introduced by prior work on affiliation suggests the role for a different mechanism than specific, shared common experiences. Following recent research on networks and identity, I argue that these affiliations contribute to a structural, role-based form of identity. Here, identity is not an individuated, internally narrated sense of self, but a structured network of roles that effectively indicate differences between aggregated groups of people. While structural and individual approaches to identity often overlap and a good deal of important work builds connections between them, this paper focuses on generic affiliations and how they contribute to a structural understanding of identity.

## **2. IDENTITY, EQUIVALENCE, AND AFFILIATION NETWORKS**

The connections generated through common affiliation have long been considered a key dimension of collective behavior. For example, Simmel (1955[1922]:140-141) argues that modernity is defined by greater attachment to affiliations outside of kinship. The “system of coordinates” generated by overlapping group affiliation can “threaten the individual with psychological tensions,” but also can “strengthen the individual and reinforce the integration of his personality.” We may experience stress juggling the obligations of our participation in multiple groups, but we are likely to ultimately benefit from the closer bonds formed with other community members. In fact, to Simmel (1955[1922]:150), an individual is “determined sociologically” the extent to which “groups ‘intersect’ in his person by virtue of his affiliation with them.” Common sense might dictate that shared group membership identifies common experiences and, thus, shared understandings or behaviors. Simmel challenges this simple construction by outlining how each individual’s “web of group affiliations” contributes to core social psychological processes that differentiate individuals from one another and that provide the basis of sociological outcomes – an idea pursued by contemporary social psychological research on identity that separates “person” from “role” identities (Stets and Burke 2000). With this in mind, sociology is well-served by a pivot towards thinking about the relationship between identity and affiliation networks.

Identity, widely seen as playing an important role in social action, remains a contested concept despite decades of clarification by social psychologists and others. Some resolution has evolved through attempts to negotiate the macro and micro properties of identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). Here, individuals possess multiple identities defined as “internalized role expectations” (Stryker and Burke 2000). These internalizations arise from the multiple roles that



individuals are expected to play in contemporary society. For example, empirical work in this vein has analyzed how working mothers juggle multiple roles associated with work and family life (Thoits 1986). The multiple identities defined by these roles often vary by whether they provide a consensual foundation for action or whether identities compete for attention. The employee-parent identity might boost one's confidence when trying to talk to other people who share these overlapping identities, but might serve as a source of stress when trying to juggle work deadlines with childcare duties. Similar to the nuances advanced by intersectional theory (e.g. Collins 1990), we cannot assume that roles viewed in aggregation are equivalent to the web or network of roles that comprises individual identity. Research in the identity theory tradition, however, by and large uses social networks as a metaphor (Walker and Lynn 2013:153) and lacks a more detailed discussion of network properties or theory (see McFarland and Pals 2005 and Walker and Lynn 2013 for exceptions).

Networks provide a conceptual language for evaluating how and whether identities are structured. Networked identities are subject to dynamic competition and/or consensus. In other words, identities are relational, connected to one another, and capable of providing a unified front – by reinforcing our beliefs, for example – or the source of internal conflict. Relational research highlights how the meanings behind many social concepts rely on complex systems. A particular role and its affiliated identity gains greater meaning in relationship to other roles and other identities. Recent social psychological research outlines how this takes place in personal networks. For example, Walker and Lynn (2013) build a careful analysis of how the structure of one's personal networks affects one's relationship to role-based identities. Outlining, in part, how identities gain salience in relationship to other identities, Walker and Lynn (2013) find that the embeddedness of a particular role-based group – such as church or work roles – within a

personal network affects the salience of the associated identity. In other words, identities become more salient – work identity, for example means more – as network members grow more familiar with that identity whether they share it or not. Walker and Lynn (2013) see their work as the tip of the proverbial iceberg and call for more research examining the relationship between social networks and identity.

Moving beyond personal networks, identities exhibit properties analogous to what networks research has called structural and regular equivalence – two important concepts within the social networks literature. Actors within a social movement organization, for example, may draw from structurally equivalent overlapping identities as part of the framework for collective action. Structural equivalence, here, indicates the state of equivalence between actors based on having the “same connection pattern to the *same* neighbors” (Doreian, Batagelj, Ferligoj 2005:78). These “neighbor” connections resonate with the aforementioned research on personal networks and identity roles. Contrasted with these face-to-face connections, regular equivalence captures the generic ties between actors or ties based on having “the same or similar connection pattern to (possibly) different neighbors” (Doreian, Batagelj, Ferligoj 2005:78, see Everett and Borgatti 1994; Hanneman and Shelton 2010; Sailer 1978; White and Reitz 1982). When thinking relationally about shared beliefs or actions, the *type* of affiliation requires a similar distinction: like structural equivalence, actors are connected in face-to-face networks, while, like regular equivalence, generic membership affiliation connects actors who do not know one another.

Structural considerations of social movements emphasize the importance of these distinctions when considering the relationship between identity and group affiliation (see Diani 2013). In his classic analysis of the rise of Nazism in a small Bavarian town, William Sheridan Allen (1965) argues that overlapping group memberships contributed to the recruitment process

just prior to and following the establishment of the Third Reich. Allen states (1965:12) that “instruments of cohesion, such as schools, clubs, and interest groups” were apolitical, but became sources for the diffusion of nationalism. Allen does not specify the type of equivalence contributing to these bonds; however, both face-to-face and generic affiliations are likely to occur in this smaller locale. Direct diffusion likely takes place between co-members in face-to-face groups, while identities pattern through more generic affiliation analogous to regular equivalence.

A similar ambiguity follows Gould’s (1991 & 1995) analysis of the Paris Commune. While previous research sees the roots of the Paris Commune within worker mobilization, Gould uncovers the roots of protest prior to the Commune within the informal and formal networks structuring Parisian life. He specifically finds that multiplexity, or having multiple qualitatively distinct relationships with others, drove protest recruitment. Informal ties through neighborhoods interacted with formal organizational networks within the National Guard to increase the likelihood of “collective self-understandings” or collective identities structuring solidarity (Gould 1995:200). Multiplexity underscores the role that overlapping identities based on face-to-face group memberships play in collective behavior, but tells us little about how identities intersect beyond face-to-face networks. Next, I dig deeper into how generic affiliation contributes to the structural dimension of identity.

## **2.2 Generic Affiliation and Identity**

Social actors possess multiple identities that shape their action and compete for their attention. A working mother trying to spend free time with her spouse provides an obvious example of this competition. The employee-mother-spouse provides three independent, but linked role-based

identities. These identities remain independent because they are unique and interpretable sources of action yet become linked through competing interests. This competition plays out in multiple contexts evidenced in the everyday management of time, but also in more psychological or internal attempts at self-definition. As such, a person is a “bundle of identities” (White 2008a:5). These bundled identities aggregate to form boundaries between groups of people. After all, as Tilly (2005:8) writes, identities “reside in relations with others: you-me and us-them.”

From this perspective, affiliations contribute to this structural dimension of identity. True, a shared face-to-face membership, as in two *neighbors*, can lead to direct and observable action. Extensive literature on social movements (e.g. Passy and Giugni 2001; Oliver and Myers 2003) provides many cases describing how individuals mobilize through social networks to accomplish a collective goal. However, the same assumptions regarding direct action do not apply when discussing associational ties of generic origin, as in the case of two *strangers*. Face-to-face ties connect the former neighborly relationship through structurally equivalent group membership (i.e. ties to the same people). Generic affiliation ties connect strangers through regularly equivalent membership in the form of shared generic identities. These identities are subtle and often overlooked sources of collective belief and/or action (Diani 2013).<sup>1</sup> By themselves they may be loose sources of shared belief relative to more direct ways that individuals overlap with one another, such as in personal networks or through the same, literal groups. Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison White calls the networks comprised of these generic ties “catnets.” Catnets are systems of relations evolved from shared categories. Categories are never singular, but exist in relationship to other groups: “To say category is to mean a system of categories” (White 2008b:4). This system of categories aggregates into a system of networked relations based on the ties, often generic, connecting actors through shared categorical membership. The concept of catnet clarifies the operationalization of generic affiliation by distinguishing categorical systems from systems based on interaction or face-to-face relationships. These systems form one location of identity struggle as aspects of this system are enlivened through dynamic processes dependent upon the moment or issue at hand, for example forming a political opinion or expressing a trusting attitude. Thus, the pockets within a given catnet indicating a clique or community more likely to trust may be less likely to support or believe in some other outcome and so on.

mechanisms for how these identities contribute to shared belief or action are also often subtle and overlooked as well. Yet, role-based identities should not be summarily dismissed in discussions of shared belief or behavior. As described by Walker and Lynn (2013), role-based identities feed off of reinforcing relationships with others embedded in similar arrangements of roles. A similar process likely takes place through more generic relationships based on overlapping identities as identities fall back on one another and reinforce one's sense of self. In other words, identity as roles and identity as self-concepts are distinct, but mutually reinforcing and both dimensions of identity shape the likelihood of shared belief and action.

The tendency towards shared belief or action derives from how identity contributes to the stories that help generate social groups, like social movement organizations (Tilly 2002; White 2008a). Members of breast cancer advocacy groups, for example, may coalesce around issues and/or aspects of identity not directly related to breast cancer, such as sexual orientation and/or political orientation (Klawiter 1999). The stories that these organizations tell about breast cancer will differ accordingly reinforcing homophilous recruitment as potential members respond to the specific organizational frames or "master frames" that build stories across organizations (Carroll and Ratner 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Diani's (2009) work on protest movements helps illustrate this point. In this innovative, structural analysis of protest, Diani builds an argument for considering the informal networks that rise out of membership in civic associations. Specifically, evidence suggests that activist communities taking part in the 15 February 2003 anti-war demonstrations likely coalesced in part around shared knowledge built around recurrent activism. Diani likens this process to the development of "communities of practice" or the collective repertoires that social movements

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<sup>2</sup>Homophily is the tendency for people to associate with others like themselves.

borrow from to establish groups. Pushing a little further, we can imagine generic affiliation as a process whereby generic stories are built around general roles that help structure identity.

In sum, while individuals in generic affiliation networks do not respond to stories in the exact same way as members of face-to-face networks – who have the opportunity to “read” the exact same messages or frames – the ties generated by co-membership in generic groups still differentiate the story-lines constraining the options available to network actors (White 2008a).<sup>3</sup> Identities that include generic church membership, for example, are likely to differ from other identities in terms of overlapping beliefs and/or actions. At the same time, individuals not participating in the generic affiliation network are likely to differ from those individuals who do not have any affiliations: The stories available to these different types of people – people who join versus people who do not join – likely differ in meaningful ways. Previous research on group affiliation helps to specify these differences.

### **3. GROUP AFFILIATION, SOCIAL TRUST, AND POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP**

Previous empirical work on affiliation structures, as mentioned above, has focused on how groups are related to one another through individuals. Shared membership draws groups closer to one another. With face-to-face ties, or when individuals participate in the exact same club, one assumes that group objectives can align, alliances can form, and collective action can occur. With generic membership, or when individuals participate in like-groups, but not the same group, the same assumption often holds as researchers infer a process like face-to-face membership. However, this logic is rarely discussed. By briefly looking at social trust and political partisanship – the two outcomes of interest in our two illustrative cases – we gain

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the individual stories generated in face-to-face groups may have a negative effect on broader role-based solidarity as specific, detailed stories – the kind of stories that helps generate solidarity at the local level – may provide a road block to role-based solidarities.

greater insight into the move from discussions of face-to-face groups to discussions of role-based identity through generic affiliation.

The relationship between associations, social networks, and trust has been explored for some time with more or less overt discussions about identity. Toqueville's now ubiquitous observation that citizens' participation in associations encourages civic engagement and aids the establishment and maintenance of democracy is widely seen as the foundation of sociological thought on trust in democracies (Glanville 2004; Paxton 2002). Popular analyses of the decline of civic engagement and associational participation generated contemporary interest in associations and trust (e.g. Putnam 2001). More recent analyses of political partisanship (Baldassarri 2011) provide further evidence of the role that associational membership plays in civic life.

Affiliation networks structured through face-to-face ties describe a field of connections that actually occur in the everyday world. These networks depict who is connected to whom through multiple memberships in face-to-face associations (Feld 1982). Theorizing an "ecology of affiliation," McPherson (1983) builds a competitive model of association. Associations battle for individuals' time. This battle results in a dynamic network structure. The patterned structure resulting from these networks describes the homogeneity of our relationships (Feld 1982, see Brashears 2008). These findings parallel Putnam's (2001) and others' (e.g. Glover 2004 and Son and Lin 2008) claim that the intensity of our involvement in associations is important to civil discourse, but also points to potential negative outcomes. Research by Glanville (2004) highlights these potential negative outcomes as face-to-face affiliation networks differ in density through proximity in neighborhoods: membership in organizations outside of one's

neighborhood encourages heterogeneity, while densely packed neighborhood associations are more homogenous.

Research using generic affiliations also finds that affiliation membership can have a negative effect on democratic outcomes (e.g. Paxton 2007). However, it is important to recognize that the ties within these aggregated generic affiliation networks are just that, generic. Identifying the structure of indirect connections between members and thereby showing how members differ from non-members, generic connections are no less relevant (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999). Yet, as in the case of union embeddedness, these generic connections may or may not identify conduits of information, places for civil discourse or potential locations where leadership within these groups meets as some have claimed.

Generic affiliation networks most clearly highlight how these generic memberships operate as identities and not merely potential conduits. Wuthnow (2004:165) suggests that “trust can be understood only by paying attention to the ways in which roles are defined and to the norms that tell people whether (and on what basis) trust is warranted.” As individuals push away from different and pull towards similar strangers within a generic affiliation network, we gain further understanding of the role identities generated through generic membership and generic experience.

We would expect that these types of generic affiliation memberships would correspond with a wide range of shared behavioral and attitudinal outcomes beyond social trust as these types of affiliations contribute to identity. Much like political or regional identities, generic affiliation, as an aspect of identity, likely plays a role in other sociological outcomes. For example, generic affiliations influence political partisanship. Baldassarri (2011) captures a nuanced understanding of how generic affiliations affect attitudes in her analysis of political



polarization in the United States. Using the General Social Survey data on generic affiliation, Baldassarri (2011) evaluates the relationship between specific affiliations and the likelihood to report political partisanship. She finds that individuals with multiple group memberships are more likely to report partisanship providing strong evidence that these types of ties based on generic affiliation are relevant in discussions of political polarization; however, we are left to wonder if this process is flat (i.e. simply having multiple connections completes the story) or whether it is structured (i.e. qualitative differences exist between the types of overlaps that one might possess).

In the following analyses, I illustrate the theoretical specification outlined thus far within the context of social trust and political partisanship. Looking at changes in trust and partisanship over time, I will first build a picture of the structure of affiliation for the 1970s and 1990s. I will focus on the identification of communities of overlapping affiliations as I describe below. Next, I model the effect of this structure on trust and partisanship. I offer specific attention to the role that affiliating *at all* plays in this process, the value of considering the affiliation structure, and how these effects change over time as one might expect following the previous research on organizational embeddedness, trust, and political partisanship.

#### **4. DATA AND METHODS**

I use General Social Survey (GSS) data to test the effect of the affiliation structure on social trust and political partisanship. Administered since 1972, the GSS consists of a representative sample of Americans 18 years of age and older. This survey is of particular use for this study and others exploring the effects of generic affiliation on social trust (e.g. Simpson 2006) or political partisanship (e.g. Baldassarri 2011) because it asks a comprehensive set of questions on the

associations to which respondents belong. To observe changes over time, I analyze samples from the 1970s (n=2,416) and the 1990s (n=2,753).<sup>4</sup>

This analysis focuses on the generic affiliation networks derived from the GSS association membership data. The GSS asks respondents to report whether or not they are members of 16 different groups or organizations.<sup>5</sup> Matrix algebra allows for the transformation of a two-mode, persons-to-groups network into a more easily interpretable one-mode, person-to-person network. Here, for example, the two-mode network consists of the associations to which persons belong (respondents populate the rows and organizations populate the columns). Through what network scholars call “projection,” we can see how individuals are connected to other individuals through shared membership in specific associations for each decade (Breiger 1974; Wasserman and Faust 1994).<sup>6</sup> The raw count of overlapping co-affiliation produces a matrix that is deceptively complete due to the size of the union and, particularly, the church affiliation group. Raw affiliation counts, however, tell us little about how the ties are patterned between two actors relative to the total number of possible ties between actors. To capture the pattern of overlapping ties, I use the Dice coefficient which indexes the overlapping connections between two actors relative to the total number of affiliations to which they belong (see Van Ooyen 2001):

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<sup>4</sup> Supplementary analyses on the 1980s reveal similar changes in the associational structure and are available from the author. Conclusions drawn regarding changes in affiliation structure refer to changes from the 1970s to the 1990s and not specifically to the shift from the eighties to the nineties. Given the cross-sectional characteristic of these data, such level of precision can be exaggerated and easily misconstrued. As questions pertaining to trust and affiliation are not asked of all respondents in every year, trust and affiliations do not match between 1994 and 2010 resulting in a reduced sample size for 2010 (n=586). Supplementary analyses for 2010 are also available from the author upon request.

<sup>5</sup> Groups or organizations include church, professional, sport, hobby, literary, school, union, other, service, youth, fraternal, veteran, Greek, political, farm, nationality.

<sup>6</sup> Measurement of two-mode networks has grown increasingly more advanced in recent years despite the ease of interpretation for one-mode networks; however, the theoretical foci of this paper on overlapping identity suggests that the one-mode projection remains most appropriate for this analysis beyond interpretative ease.

$$S_{i,j} = \frac{2n_{i,j}}{n_i + n_j},$$

where  $S_{i,j}$  is the similarity between two actors  $i$  and  $j$ ,  $n_{i,j}$  is the number of shared groups between the actors, and  $n_i$  and  $n_j$  are the total number of groups to which each individual claims affiliation.<sup>7</sup> In sum, I construct networks for each decade where the nodes are people and the ties are a weighted-score indicating the connections between people based on overlapping generic co-membership.

Last, I locate communities of similar nodes/people within each network. I specifically use the Louvain method (Blondel et al. 2008).<sup>8</sup> Unlike some community detection algorithms, the Louvain method does not require a predetermined number of communities, but identifies both the number of and membership in communities based on maximizing the modularity between communities (Newman and Girvan 2004). In other words, the Louvain method divides the network such that each community has more internal, than external ties. Using community detection techniques provides a bridge between relational methods and more atomistic regression techniques. The affiliation structure, then, consists of a series of dummy variables identifying community membership. As respondents with only one affiliation and respondents with no affiliation also populate the dataset, these two categories are included alongside the communities. For the following models, single membership is the reference group. I include single membership as the reference group as a more stringent test of the importance of identity through

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<sup>7</sup> Other forms of analysis, such as principal component analysis (PCA), may provide different results and may be appropriate given different theoretical objectives. PCA and similar data reduction techniques often limit the role of specific variables across classes potentially obscuring the role that predominant variables, such as union or church membership, play in affiliation data. The network technique described allows for a more emergent, less constrained analysis of the generic affiliation structure consistent with the theory described above.

<sup>8</sup> An evaluation of several different community detection strategies using the igraph package in R (Csardi and Nepusz 2006) identified the Louvain method as maximizing modularity for each network (M=.136 for 1970s and M=.126 for the 1990s).

generic affiliation.<sup>9</sup> In sum, I include the communities in ordinal logistic regressions predicting trust and political partisanship.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.1. Dependent and Control

##### Variables

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

	a. 1970s		b. 1990s	
	1970s Variables	Mean	1990s Variables	Mean
The dependent variables are	Social Trust	1.65	Social Trust	1.48
ordinal variables capturing the	Political Partisanship	1.71	Political Partisanship	1.83
extent to which one trusts or	Nonwhite	0.11	Nonwhite	0.15
holds strong political ties. Social	Male	0.47	Male	0.43
trust is measured using three GSS	Age 30-39	0.21	Age 30-39	0.27
questions. Respondents' levels of	Age 40-64	0.38	Age 40-64	0.36
trust are indicated by the number	Age 65 up	0.15	Age 65 up	0.18
of the three social trust questions	Prestige (1970)	38.80	Prestige (1980)	43.10
to which they respond	Education	12.00	Education	13.03
affirmatively: Specifically, if a	Region (South)	0.32	Region (South)	0.34
respondent answered that most of	Religious		Religious	0.34
the time people "try to be	Fundamentalism	0.28	Fundamentalism	
helpful," "try to be fair," and "can	Urban Area	0.23	Urban Area	0.20
be trusted," the respondent would	<b>Affiliation Structure</b>		<b>Affiliation Structure</b>	
have a social trust rank of 3 for	No membership	0.26	No memberships	0.30
	Single membership	0.28	Single membership	0.24
	1. Union-Church	0.12	1. Hobby-Church-Sports	0.10
	2. Sports-Church	0.05	2. Professional-Church-Literary	0.09
	3. Church-Other	0.13	3. Church-School-Youth	0.06
	4. School-Church-Sports	0.06	4. Church-Union	0.11
	5. Professional-Church	0.11	5. Sports-Church	0.11
	N	2,416	N	2,753

<sup>9</sup> Supplementary analyses that change the reference group, which I briefly mention when discussing the results, are available from the author and are by and large consistent with the present analyses.

<sup>10</sup> The results of ordinal logistic regressions are notoriously difficult to interpret leading many to reasonably develop a preference for ordinary least squares regression for ordinal variables. As Long (1997) cautions, however, this approach can produce misleading results. In fact, supplementary models available from the author indicate that these approaches generate substantively different results when analyzing trust and partisanship using the ordinal dependent variables described above.

the trust dependent variable. If the respondent answered in the negative to these three questions, they would rank 0 on this ordinal measure of social trust. Political partisanship, following Baldassarri (2011), is operationalized using the GSS's PARTYID variable. This variable asks the extent to which respondents identify themselves as strongly Democratic or strongly Republican. In the partisanship models, a strongly partisan respondent (either Republican or Democrat) has a partisanship rank of 3, while someone who identifies as an "Independent" has a partisanship rank of 0.

Table 1 presents the means for the independent variables. Following previous research on both trust and political partisanship, I include occupational prestige, race, age, sex, education, urban residence, and religious fundamentalism as control variables in either or both of the models for each time period (Alesina and La Ferrara 2003; Baldassarri 2011; Glaeser et al. 2000; Newton 2004; Simpson 2006).

## **5. RESULTS**

### **5.1. Visualizing Generic Affiliation**

First, we turn to the "web of overlapping relationships," or the networks, generated by individuals' generic affiliations as this network has important consequences for the social and political landscape of the society in which individuals are embedded (Baldassarri 2011:651). Figures 1 and 2 provide a snapshot of how this network has changed overtime suggesting a dynamic and historically-laden process.<sup>11</sup> This historical process has captured the attention of those interested in the sway that associations have had in terms of power and influence in a

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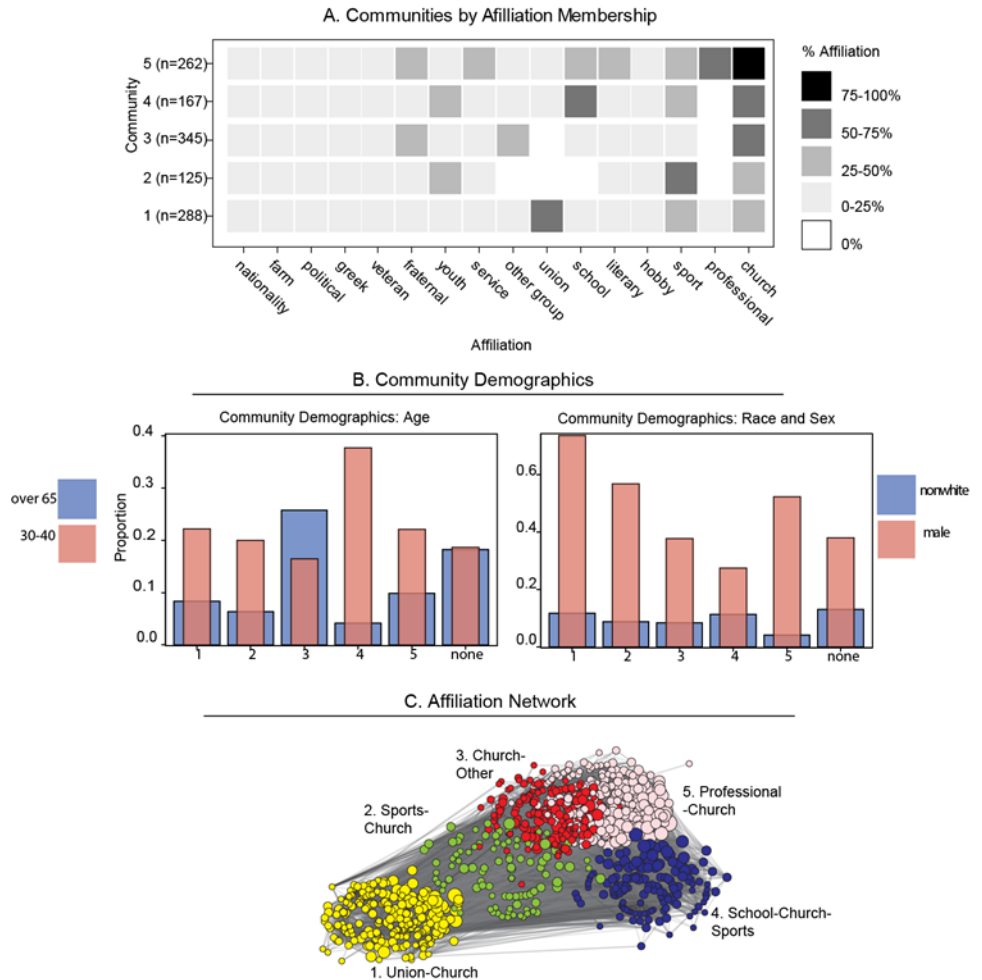
<sup>11</sup> Two different pooled analyses confirm differences in the structure of affiliation between the two time periods and are available upon request.

broader associational field (e.g. Cornwell and Harrison 2004), but also the resources that individuals are able to harness from these associations (e.g. Putnam 2001).

For example, the heat maps in the Communities by Affiliation Membership panels (figures 1a-2a) illustrate how generic affiliation has changed over time. In these maps, the rows indicate the communities located using the Louvain method, while the columns indicate the voluntary groups to which individuals identify in the GSS. The cells are shaded to

indicate the extent to which individuals within a

community report belonging to each voluntary group. Comparing how or whether these communities change over time provides a preliminary portrait of the changing composition of identity during this time period. For example, church affiliation provides the backbone of the affiliation structure for both the 1970s and 1990s: At least three communities in each network have 50% or more individuals reporting church group membership. The density of church



**Figure 1: 1970s Affiliation Structure Profile**

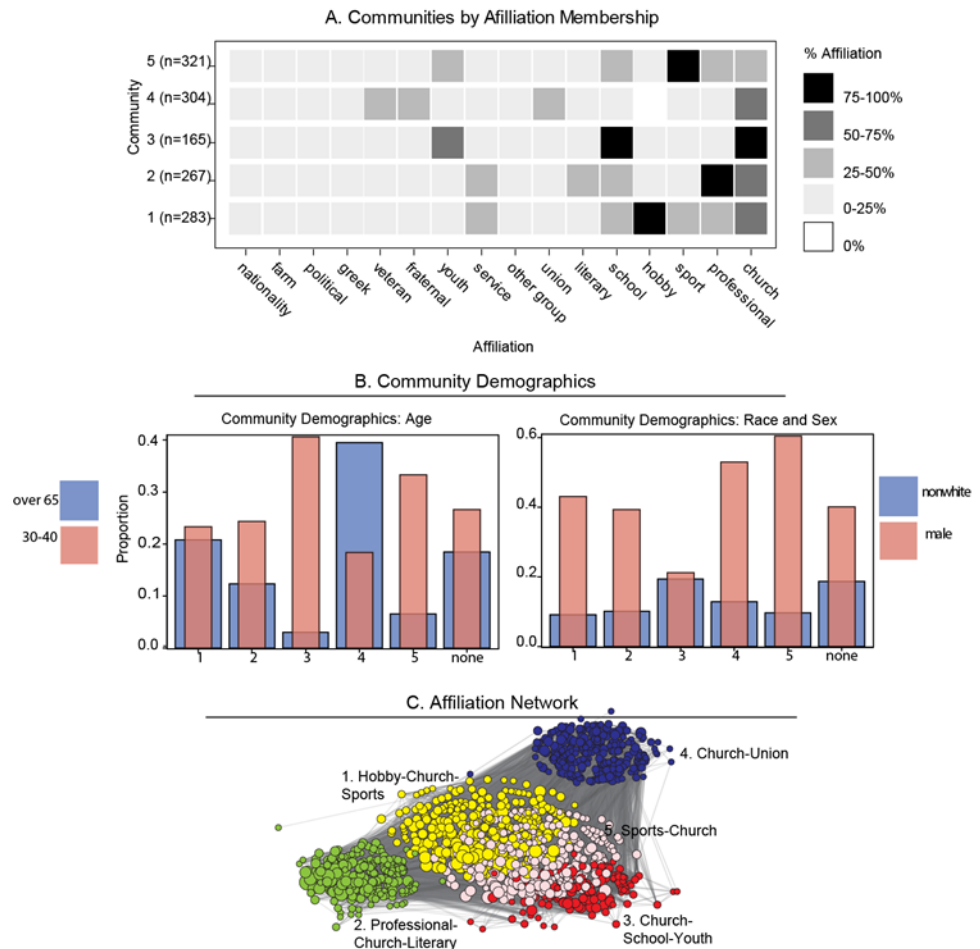
membership within these affiliation networks remains relatively unchanged: Church group attendees combine with other affiliations to tie the structure of affiliation together.

Like church membership, union membership plays an important and dynamic role in affiliation structure.

Church and union membership, of course, potentially stand apart from other types of identities.

Church group membership as an expression of religiosity may

transcend other identities both quantitatively in the extent to which individuals report affiliation, but also qualitatively in the strength of church membership relative to the other memberships within the identity structure. Union membership as partially an expression of work may also differ in amount and in kind. As unions grow less embedded in the voluntary structure (Cornwell and Harrison 2004), how union members *are* connected to other individuals and their attached identities within the affiliation structure becomes an important question for assessing the



**Figure 2: 1990s Affiliation Structure Profile**

potential for collective action. Likewise, the way that church membership connects various types of identity together may have important implications for how shared beliefs and actions may develop.

The heat maps and the networks, figures 1c-2c, provide initial evidence of how union identities are attached to other identities and how these connections have changed over time. First, we can see that in the 1970s only one community, community 1 (the second largest community in the 1970s), has at least 50% union members. While other affiliations are present in this community, particularly the sport and church affiliations, no other affiliation reaches the greater than 50% density. The 1990s community with the largest percentage of union members, community 4 (the second largest community in the 1990s), is just less than 50% union consistent with declining union membership overall from 1970 to 1990. The network figures, however, indicate that union members with overlapping identities via generic membership in other organizations may actually be somewhat more integrated in the 1990s. The union community in the 1970s is pushed further away from the center of the graph than the union community in the 1990s. This latter community also contains greater overlap with generic church membership. Indeed, church affiliation is the largest membership in group 4 in the 1990s. In other words, while the union identity appears to be less pronounced in the 1990s, union membership may be less divisive relative to the generic affiliation structure.

The near ubiquity of church membership across affiliation structure raises some concern about whether this network is entirely determined by church affiliation. Are other differences that likely follow differences in identity otherwise subsumed by church identity within the generic affiliation structure? Figures 1b and 2b provide evidence to alleviate this concern as the communities appear to capture meaningful demographic variations. For example, figure 1b



depicts the variation across communities in the 1970s generic affiliation structure. As one might expect, the community with the largest number of school members, community 4, has the fewest individuals over the age of 65 and the most respondents between the ages of 30 and 40. The community with the most union affiliates, community 1, is the most disproportionately male. These patterns are reproduced in the 1990s affiliation structure: community 3: Church-School-Youth contains the highest proportion of 30-40 year-olds, while community 4: Church-Union has the highest proportion of men – although 60% male in 1990 compared to about 80% male in 1970. Of note, several communities in the 1990s, particularly 3, have around 20% non-white members suggesting that the affiliation structure has become somewhat more racially pronounced in this time period.

These networks also provide evidence of how identities are embedded in a relational structure. As can be seen in Figures 1c and 2c, some communities are more central and others are pushed to the outskirts of the networks. This provides a view comparable to prior discussions about how affiliations line up next to one another (e.g. Cornwell and Harrison 2004). Consistent with this prior research, the communities with union members for both time periods (figure 1c, community 1:Union-Church and figure 2c, community 4:Church-Union) are both more peripheral to a core church dominated cluster of communities. By the 1990s, this core group becomes a little more fractured with an additional peripheral group that is not firstly a church-based community (see figure 2c, community 2:Professional-Church-Literary).

In sum, the heat maps and networks provide initial evidence of the shift in the affiliation network over time. While church membership remains dominant across time periods, we actually see union membership increase connectivity with other types of identities specifically church members by the 1990s. Indeed, this is *not* inconsistent with previous group-level analysis

(Cornwell and Harrison 2004; Lee 2007), but specifies the process of the decline of union embeddedness. Union members may be more likely to not affiliate with any other type of group or be outside of the overlapping affiliation structure altogether. Additionally, the community demographics figures help mollify concerns that the graph is overwhelmed by church membership such that the communities do not indicate meaningful distinctions between groups. In fact, consistent with prior theories of identity, identities based on overlapping group membership correlate with variables associated with identity, such as race, gender, or age. How does position within these communities affect shared behaviors or attitudes?

## **5.2. Generic Affiliation, Social Trust, and Political Partisanship**

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of a series of ordinal logistic regressions modeling the effect of the affiliation structure on both trust and political partisanship. The analyses broadly illustrate the association between the affiliation structure and shared attitudes and behaviors, but in different ways. Moreover, both models change over time suggesting that the generic affiliation structure is dynamic.

For example, we can see shifts in the relationship in generic affiliation and social trust over time. In the 1970s (table 2, model a) the affiliation structure is significantly associated with social trust in the expected direction. First, respondents who are not affiliated with any groups are significantly less likely to express trusting attitudes than those with a single membership. The variables identifying the communities of the affiliation structure are all positive relative to the single membership, except for the second largest community, community 1:Union-Sport. However, the strengths of these relationships do not reach the level of statistical significance for all of the communities. The coefficients for this model indicate that the affiliation structure

generally plays a moderate role in predicting trust relative to the control variables, which are consistent with previous research.

The statistically significant communities within the affiliation structure for this model indicate that church plays a more subtle role in predicting trust than what one might otherwise believe. The communities where the church identity predominates do not universally play a significant role in this model, but they are more likely to affect trust than the communities,

**Table 2. 1970s Ordinal Logistic Models:  
Affiliation Structure and Control Variables on Social Trust and Political Partisanship**

Variable	A. Trust		B. Political Partisanship	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	-2.467	0.224 ***	-1.580	0.192 ***
Intercept	-1.193	0.220 ***	0.338	0.189 +
Intercept	-0.113	0.219	1.628	0.193 ***
Nonwhite	-0.823	0.136 ***	0.790	0.125 ***
Male	-0.196	0.078 *	-0.175	0.077 *
Age 18-29 (reference)	---	---	---	---
Age 30-39	0.317	0.110 **	0.261	0.110 *
Age 40-64	0.491	0.098 ***	0.734	0.098 ***
Age 65 up	0.523	0.131 ***	1.281	0.129 ***
Prestige	0.012	0.003 ***	-0.004	0.003
Education	0.102	0.016 ***	-0.006	0.013
Region (South)	-0.450	0.088 ***		
Religious				
Fundamentalism	-0.304	0.096 **		
Urban Area	-0.325	0.093 ***		
<b>Affiliation Structure</b>				
Single membership (reference)	---	---	---	---
No membership	-0.335	0.102 ***	-0.194	0.102 +
1. Union-Church	-0.009	0.133	0.071	0.133
2. Sports-Church	0.022	0.186	-0.047	0.186
3. Church-Other	0.347	0.128 **	-0.006	0.127
4. School-Church-Sports	0.128	0.172	0.239	0.172
5. Professional-Church	0.336	0.151 *	-0.042	0.146
N		2,416		2,416

+p<.1; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

such as community 1, 2 and 3, that have the fewest church group members. Specifically, community 3:Church-Other and community 5:Professional-Church are most likely to express trusting behaviors relative to having a single group membership. On the other hand, members of the group with the youngest members, community 4:School-Church-Sports is a positive, but not statistically significant predictors of trust. Again, not all church identities are alike as they pertain to trust.

The 1990s model of trust presented in table 3, model a provides evidence of significant changes in the preceding years. First, control variables are significant consistent with prior

research. More importantly

for our discussion, the

affiliation structure is still by

and large significantly

related to trust in a positive

direction. Membership is the

first layer as individuals that

do not belong to groups are

less likely to trust than those

in a single membership.

However, this is not the

whole story. Like the 1970s,

church identity plays an

important, but not

determinative role in trust.

**Table 3. 1990s Ordinal Logistic Models:**

**Affiliation Structure and Control Variables on Social Trust and Political Partisanship**

Variable	A. Trust		B. Political Partisanship	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	-3.049	0.227 ***	-1.802	0.214 ***
Intercept	-1.804	0.222 ***	0.054	0.211
Intercept	-0.681	0.220 **	1.406	0.215 ***
Nonwhite	-0.959	0.110 ***	0.616	0.102 ***
Male	-0.161	0.072 *	-0.052	0.072
Age 18-29 (reference)	---	---	---	---
Age 30-39	0.356	0.106 ***	0.131	0.106
Age 40-64	0.729	0.102 ***	0.385	0.101 ***
Age 65 up	1.056	0.123 ***	0.794	0.123 ***
Prestige	0.003	0.003	-0.001	0.003
Education	0.119	0.016 ***	0.031	0.015 *
Region (South)	-0.432	0.079 ***		
Religious Fundamentalism	-0.174	0.080 *		
Urban Area	-0.059	0.091		
<b>Affiliation Structure</b>				
Single Membership (reference)	---	---	---	---
No memberships	-0.208	0.098 *	-0.318	0.098 **
1. Hobby-Church-Sports	0.195	0.133	0.229	0.135 +
2. Professional-Church-Literary	0.468	0.142 ***	0.132	0.142
3. Church-School-Youth	0.317	0.164 +	0.305	0.166 +
4. Church-Union	0.058	0.129	0.127	0.131
5. Sports-Church	0.152	0.128	0.259	0.129 *
N		2,753		2,753

+p<.1; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

The community with the largest percentage of church members, community 3:Church-School-

Youth does not statistically differ from single membership as it pertains to trust; however,

community 2:Professional-Church-Literary with a high percentage of church members is

positively associated with trust. As union membership becomes more subordinate identities

within the affiliation structure, the community with the largest number of members – community

4:Church-Union – switches directions relative to the community with the largest proportion of

union members in the 1970s: The 1990s community is positive, while the 1970s was negative. Previous literature suggests that the quantitative number of affiliations is the most predictive of trust. However, this analysis suggests that the qualitative differences based on these overlapping identities deserve further attention. Like the research on overlapping groups (Cornwell and Harrison 2004 and Lee 2007), this shift challenges scholars to move beyond questions of whether to questions of how affiliations and the attached identities of group members are embedded in a broader network structure.

The relationship between the affiliation structure and political partisanship provides additional evidence of how networked identities contribute to shared beliefs. Yet, the shifts that occur in the relationship between political partisanship and affiliation are quite different than the simple decline that occurred in the models of trust. For the 1970s (table 2, model b), the affiliation structure is very weakly related to political partisanship. No communities are statistically significant. The No membership identity is negatively associated with a decrease in partisanship relative to a single membership, but does not reach the typical  $p < .05$  cut point for a more conservative evaluation of significance. Changing the reference group does change the results for this model. Specifically, if the reference group is changed to the “No membership” group several of the communities become statistically significant. This suggests that group membership matters, but the affiliation structure does not. Note that the control variables operate as anticipated by the previous research.

By the 1990s (table 3, model b) the relationship between affiliation structure and political partisanship experienced significant changes: For the 1990s model, the membership structure becomes more robustly associated with political partisanship. First, individuals with no memberships are negatively associated with partisanship relative to those with a single

membership. Second, members of the largest community, community 5:Sports-Church are more likely to express political partisanship. Although we must be cautious about interpreting its effect, community 3:Church-School-Youth, which happens to have the highest proportion of female members, is also positively associated with political partisanship. Again, while fewer communities are significant than when predicting trust, the role of generic affiliation indeed changes from the 1970s to the 1990s when predicting political partisanship.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Identities based on generic affiliation affect trust and political partisanship. The importance of group affiliation has been known for some time; however, previous discussions of generic membership have required theoretical elaboration. In this analysis, we see the effect generic affiliation networks have on both trust and political partisanship. These networks and their influence change over time. Analyses, however, indicate that network diversity plays a role in the structure of generic affiliation. The communities comprising this structure are not uniform between or within cohorts although they share some similarities. The emergent nature of the affiliation structure speaks to the diversity of ties between actors through shared generic affiliations. While several simplex (“organized around a single issue”) relations through generic affiliations may dominate an individual’s identity, when speaking of trust or partisanship, multiplexity (engaging in multiple issues) cannot be ignored (Simpson 2006:1626, see also Gould 1991; Padgett and Ansell 1993).

Although generic affiliations may not serve as conduits for civil discussion, they maintain relevance within models of trust and partisanship through their contribution to identity. Relational constructions of identity specify representations of everyday life (Emirbayer 1997).

Identities battle for our attention through direct ties: my status as a subordinate is piqued when my supervisor calls. At the same time identities battle for our attention through the roles generated by generic affiliation: for better or worse, my status as a sociologist connects me to other sociologists whether I know them – “face-to-face” – or not.

In plain terms, this analysis has offered one explanation for what is ultimately a much-used, but taken-for-granted construct. When social scientists ask respondents about their generic group membership, it is difficult to know how they (and in turn how we should) interpret this question. Respondents’ dedication to a group or, in the case of unions and church groups, the extent to which they belong primarily out of custom or familial obligation likely plays an important role in determining the effect of these types of civic engagement. Regardless of the justifications for group membership, this paper describes how, at minimum, these types of affiliation contribute to shared attitudes and behaviors. These issues bring forth opportunities for future research. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data behind analysis, identity, here, is static relative to each individual; however, individual identity is dynamic or subject to change (White 2008a). Recent work on dynamic networks also highlights how changes to identity structures can affect an actor’s role within a dynamic network (Moody 2009). Future research should continue exploring the dynamic properties of identity.

We rely on generic questions in surveys because specific questions about specific group membership would not be practical or even meaningful for a random, nationally representative sample. This represents a weakness for survey research in general. Obviously, shared, overlapping identities would likely be even more influential in predicting trust or partisanship if these identities were indicated by overlapping membership in face-to-face groups: More detailed information about association would provide stronger evidence of the influence of these

identities on social scientific outcomes. This line of research indeed benefits from continued exploration of the relationship between generic role-based identities and identities that evolve through our face-to-face relationships. Nonetheless, survey research often poses a significant trade-off when compared to other forms of research. We often, for example, lose some specificity when asking people about broad classes of behaviors or attitudes. This trade-off warrants careful deliberation about whether we can infer specific processes from generic or general questions. Moreover, this trade-off challenges social scientists to continue developing techniques that allow us to gain more nuanced understandings of individual or group behavior given the limits of survey research. For research on trust and partisanship, this discussion of affiliation networks and identity suggests some solutions by considering the emergent characteristics of networks through community detection. Emergent properties can be located in the unique network of generic ties. While further analyses will undoubtedly continue wrestling with identities and networks beyond well-established community detection techniques, the nascent empirical work on relational identities challenges sociologists to continue thinking about the more abstract and elusive ties that bound society and the actors within it.



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