

Estrangement in Diversity

Heterogeneity and the Level of Trust in a Neighborhood

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In the past few years, many empirical studies proved that ethnic and cultural heterogeneity in society can present a challenge to social cohesion. Based on one larger survey in the USA, the results of which Robert Putnam published in 2007, inhabitants of culturally heterogeneous regions are more socially withdrawn than residents of ethnically homogenous areas. They have fewer friends and are more wary of strangers. They are also more pessimistic about the willingness of others to serve in favor of the community's benefit, for example, to use less water in times of water shortage. Study results also show that real engagement – like voter participation, making donations and volunteer work – is less pronounced amongst residents of ethnically heterogeneous areas than amongst those who live in homogeneous ones.

What are the reasons leading to social withdrawal in heterogeneous communities? In scientific literature, various reasons are discussed for this frequently lower level of cooperation in heterogeneous groups. To begin with, the lower degree of trust and lacking readiness to cooperate in heterogeneous contexts can be explained by individual preferences. When people with different cultural roots consider other things worthy of striving for or maintaining, then the probability of cooperation decreases.

In addition, fears, prejudices and aversion to members of different ethnic or cultural population groups, as well as the tendency to prefer representatives of one's own ethnic group (in group favoritism), endanger social cohesion. Another explanation concerns possible problems considered more frequent or more likely to occur in cooperative projects within culturally heterogeneous groups, like for example, problems in coming to an agreement because of language barriers, different experiences or norms of behavior.

Another hurdle could be reduced social control in heterogeneous communities. The old adage "birds of a feather flock together" can be empirically proven. People tend to maintain contact with other people who are similar. So, most people have friends with a similar social and cultural background. Thus, denser networks in ethnically homogeneous communities exist that enable social control and as a result contribute to ensuring that enough people participate in projects together. Social freeloading – in the sense of profiting from the contribution of others without contributing oneself – is thus not only more easily discovered, and thus a risk to one's own reputation, but is also punished.

Most empirical studies on the subject are based on large national and international surveys. Though surveys are able to determine a frequent and mutual occurrence of two phenomena that cannot only be coincidental; the well-known question of causality – whether the chicken or the egg came first – cannot, on the other hand, be answered with certainty. In addition, in surveys only attitudes, behavioral intentions and past action can be asked about. This information is, however, often distorted. Consciously or subconsciously people often present themselves more positively, or more social, than they really are. This is where experiments offer one way out: scientific examinations in which people are purposefully exposed to varied stimuli (test conditions), whereby other circumstances remain constant. Differences occurring in comments or behavior can be traced back to the various stimuli because of the random assignment of

Summary: Experiments offer evidence that the level of trust is lower in ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods than in homogeneous ones. The experiments also show that there are reasons for this lower level of trust. The causes, however, are neither a result of ethnic prejudice nor conscious discrimination against members of other ethnic groups. Rather, it is the perception of differences (especially in norms and values) that gives people a general sense of insecurity.

people to the test conditions. The real goal of the measurements is kept hidden from the participants.

We used these advantages of experimental studies in two experiments in order to highlight more closely the relationship between cultural diversity and social cohesion. The first experiment on trust amongst neighbors was part of a Germany-wide telephone survey. Two questions were to be answered. First: Do residents of ethnically heterogeneous districts trust their neighbors less than residents of homogeneous regions? If that is the case, can the lower level of trust be traced back to the perception of cultural heterogeneity? In other words: Can trust in neighbors be negatively influenced by directing the respondents' attention to their cultural heterogeneity? Participants in the telephone interview were asked to guess the probability of their wallet (containing money and their address) with its original contents being returned if they had lost it in their neighborhood. Amongst the approximate 4,000 people surveyed, on average trust in neighbors was neither particularly positive nor negative.

Upon closer examination it was shown, however, that trust varies and that is in the degree of the ethnic heterogeneity of participants' residential district. In areas of greater ethnic heterogeneity, people gave significantly lower estimates of the probability of having their wallets returned including contents. To answer the question of causality of this phenomenon (the question whether ethnic heterogeneity erodes trust rather than other associated characteristics and the assumption that diversity reduces trust and not the other way round – if high trusting people would prefer more homogeneous neighborhoods), the participants were given different details about the composition of their neighborhood. All participants were told: "Places of residence are different. In some locations residents are very similar; in others they are very different from each other." A quarter of those surveyed were left with this very general description of diversity. For all others, the type of diversity was described more precisely.

To one quarter of survey participants, it was added: "...because they come from different countries – some are for example of German origin, some originate from Turkey and others from Italy". For the second quarter, the following comment was added about religious diversity: "...because they have different religious beliefs – some are for example Christians, some Muslims and others Atheists". For the last quarter surveyed, comments were added about the diversity of generations: "...because they belong to different generations – some are for example still very young, some are middle-aged and others are already elderly".

Subsequently, it was analyzed to what extent variations in people's trust were contingent on the mention of different types of neighbors' heterogeneity. It was shown that the reference to neighbors' different countries of origin or different religious beliefs had a slightly negative influence on the trust of those surveyed. When attention was directed toward different stages of life, however, this had no effect on the expressed trust. As noted above, people who actually reside in ethnically heterogeneous areas trust their neighbors less. The causality of this relationship, namely the hypothesis that the perception of ethnic heterogeneity erodes trust rather than other types of diversity, could be empirically confirmed by the additional loss of trust among residents of actually diverse neighborhoods when the ethnic or religious diversity within ones neighborhood was experimentally emphasized.

Now it is entirely possible that this reduced trust in residents of heterogeneous areas rests only on mutual prejudices. Besides that, it is questionable whether expressed trust based on personal attitude says something about real behavior. To address this problem, there was a second experiment. Over 2,000 stamped and addressed letters were dropped on sidewalks throughout Berlin, as if someone had lost them. Two questions were to be addressed. First: In which areas were more "lost" letters picked up by passers-by and deposited in the next mailbox, in ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous Berlin neighborhoods? Second: Is there a relationship between the return rate of letters from particular religious or ethnic organizations with the religious or ethnic groups in resi-



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dence? To answer the second question, the supposed ethnic or religious identity of both sender and recipient of the letters was thus varied experimentally.

There were four types of letters: letters from an Islamic cultural foundation (religious minority condition) and a Turkish cultural foundation (ethnic minority condition), that were each addressed to a Mr. Kadir Gökdal, and letters from a Christian cultural foundation (religious majority condition) and a neutral, non-descript cultural foundation (ethnic majority condition) that were each addressed to a Mr. Johann Kolbe.

These letters were distributed in equal numbers dropped on sidewalks throughout Berlin. It was recorded how many of the letters were picked up by passers-by and deposited into mailboxes and thus reached their designated recipient. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the letters reached their destination. In terms of the question concerning the willingness of forwarding a “lost” letter, it was shown that letters from ethnically heterogeneous areas of Berlin like Tiergarten or Wedding were less frequently forwarded than from ethnically homogeneous ones. The reduced willingness to forward is not only exclusively observed in ethnically heterogeneous areas: In poorer parts of the city, like Kreuzberg or Märkisches Viertel, fewer letters were picked up than in better-off areas; in the East less than in West Berlin.

In terms of the question of the influence of recognizable religious or ethnic affiliation of sender and recipient it turned out: Letters from religious and ethnic minority organizations addressed to a person with immigrant background were forwarded just as often as letters from a Christian or neutral cultural foundation addressed to a person with a German name. In addition, we checked to see if letters from an Islamic cultural foundation were more frequently forwarded from parts of the city in which many residents come from Islamic countries (Arab countries or Turkey). Along those lines, letters from a Turkish cultural foundation dropped in neighborhoods with a high percentage of Turkish residents and letters from a Christian or neutral cultural foundation dropped in parts of the city with a high percentage of German residents without immigrant background could have reached their recipients more often. If this were the case, the preference of representatives of one’s own cultural group could explain the different rate of return from more or less heterogeneous parts of the city. Our results, however, do not confirm this. The letters dropped in Berlin neighborhoods with residents of different ethnic backgrounds were forwarded less frequently, independent of the cultural identity of the sender and recipient.

In total, the results of both experiments show that ethnic heterogeneity in a society weakens social cohesion. This not only affects perception (meaning the expressed trust in neighbors), but also the actual behavior. The lower trust of residents of heterogeneous neighborhoods seems, at least in part, to be justified.

The results also suggest that this phenomenon really is to be traced back to individual perception of religious and ethnic heterogeneity. Evidence on the impact of prejudices or the unequal treatment of representatives of different groups could not, on the other hand, be found. More so, it seems the perception of heterogeneity promotes social withdrawal independent of the counterpart’s cultural identity, thus weakening social cohesion. How this withdrawal can be explained must be examined in future studies. Ultimately – and this is important to emphasize – the results of the second study give occasion for optimism. Without any sort of personal benefit, and independent of the ethnic or religious identity of the sender, passers-by forwarded two-thirds of the lost letters. Thus, one can rely on neighborhood communities.

Reference

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