

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Merlin Schaeffer, October 2011

Ethnic Diversity and Social Cohesion

Immigration, such as experienced by European countries over the last decades, results in an ethnic and cultural diversification of the population. Since more than a century scholars from many social science disciplines have studied the general consequences of socio-cultural diversity or heterogeneity for social cohesion, the latter being understood here as the most general concept describing peaceful co-existence and societal integration. Classical thought forcefully argued that socio-cultural homogeneity is not a necessity for modern societies to be socially cohesive. Urbanization, industrialization, and modernity do not only erode classical forms, but go along with new forms of social integration. Given this background, many scholars argue that the same holds for ethnic diversification as caused by immigration.

Nevertheless, there is a growing literature that proposes possible challenges that are associated with ethnic diversity. Most notable are findings suggesting challenges to support the provision of public goods, which benefit the majority of society such as free education or public safety. The production of such public goods is undeniably an ability that is crucial to any society. Contemporary Western societies rely on public goods production to educate children, support the poor, maintain infrastructure or fight corruption, with each being an example of a public good that has been shown to suffer from ethnic diversity. The political sociologist Kenneth Newton hits the nail on its head, by calling the challenges associated with ethnic diversity “The New Liberal Dilemma”, because on the one hand a key idea of liberal democracy is to accommodate diversity, but on the other hand ethnic diversity seems to cause people to withdraw from public social life. Yet, a rich public social life is one of the foundations of a well functioning liberal democracy. Ethnic diversity seems to challenge the social foundations of liberal countries, among them the willingness to engage, cooperate, share and deliberate.

Undeniably, a diversification, especially in cultural terms, also comes with a lot of positives benefits, such as the capacity for innovation. Challenges and benefits of ethnic diversity do not contradict each other and most scholars, who wrote central studies on the challenges of diversity, emphasize that in the long run the benefits will dominate, while people adapt to ethnic diversity as they did to industrialization and

urbanization. Respectively, most scholars agree that in the long run the problems associated with ethnic segregation of the population, meaning separate lives in different ethnic neighbourhoods with ethnic schools etc., would be much more devastating in their consequences. For this reason, it should be kept in mind that the debate on the challenges of ethnic diversity focuses on short and medium term challenges.

The debate began to receive widespread attention, after it had been shown that in the US, the proportion of tax money spent on education, trash, and welfare declines with the racial diversity of metropolitan areas. Such findings also seem to be very relevant for European countries, which try to maintain high levels of welfare state protection, while facing growing ethnic diversity because of immigration. Such a situation can cause social tensions as in Sweden, where those people living in regions of higher levels of ethnic diversity tend to be less supportive of welfare state spending.

Soon scholars started to investigate indicators such as civic engagement, levels of trust and generalized norms of reciprocity, as kinds of intermediate factors helping to explain why ethnically divided populations produce fewer public goods. According to this inclination, in ethnically divided populations the social radius within which people feel obliged to act reciprocally is smaller, probably even narrowed to the people who are part of the own ethnic group. People are not willing for example to pay large tuition fees, which are also beneficial for children of other ethnicity, even though their own children suffer from poorly financed schools. This means in return that people do not trust others, especially to contribute to the general production of public goods, because they themselves feel no motivation to engage for the wider public. Overall, this is a decline in the potentials for public goods provision. According to a widely cited study by the political scientist Robert Putnam, trust in neighbours, general trust in other people, trust in people of other ethnicity, and even trust to people who are alike are indeed lower in ethnically diverse regions. In ethnically diverse communities people seem to “hunker down”, meaning that they withdraw from public social life. Subsequently, a range of studies has shown negative effects of ethnic diversity on different measures of social cohesion.

There are four arguments, why ethnically divided populations are less cohesive. First, people tend to identify with others who are alike, whereas they are cognitively biased

against people of other ethnicity. This results in lower levels of trust and willingness to engage in more ethnically diverse regions. Second, people tend to associate with others who are alike, which results in ethnically clustered networks. This means in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods people tend to know each other less and miss the means to deliberate about shared norms and values. Third, the more ethnically diverse a population, the more diverse are their preferences and ideas about how community life should look like, which results in disagreements and misunderstandings. Finally, people in ethnically diverse regions speak many different languages, which complicates communication and generally the coordination of collective endeavours.

These findings and arguments have not remained unchallenged, receive a lot of scholarly attention and remain to be contended for two main points of critique. First, it is claimed that the empirical findings show a spurious association, because ethnically homogeneous regions tend to be more affluent. For this reason, some scholars claim that what drives down social cohesion is not ethnic diversity but economic deprivation. Yet, most studies that do find ethnic diversity to be associated with lower levels of social cohesion do account for economic deprivation with statistical means, which questions the general validity of this claim. In other words, researchers only try to compare cities or neighbourhoods with similar socio-economic but different ethnic compositions, which is accomplished by sophisticated statistical techniques. The critique is, however, valid to the degree that indeed economic deprivation seems to be a stronger cause of declines in social cohesion than ethnic heterogeneity. A second common point of critique is that the debate generalizes from the exceptional racial situation of the USA and specific ethnic relations in many developing countries. While there are also studies from European countries finding negative ethnic diversity effects, this critique very much justifies a closer look at the case of the Netherlands.

Ethnic Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Netherlands

Given these points of critique, what does research say about ethnic diversity and social cohesion in the Netherlands? The existing studies generally look at four types of indicators of social cohesion, namely trust, neighbourhood contacts, voluntary work and inter-ethnic tolerance. The concrete indicators may differ slightly as to

whether the frequency rather than quality of neighbourhood contacts or whether general trust in other people rather than trust in ones neighbours is investigated for example.

In the Netherlands, especially neighbourhoods' ethnic diversity is investigated and seen as closely linked to immigration. For this reason, the existing studies refer to the diversity of migration backgrounds that can be found in a given neighbourhoods' population.

In general the findings of existing research are more than mixed and rather question any negative impact of ethnic diversity. While most of the studies do find simple negative associations between ethnic diversity and different measures, these do not survive more rigid statistical tests, which in certain cases even suggest positive effects of ethnic diversity once all kinds of socio-economic conditions are accounted for. Instead the studies suggest that lower levels of social cohesion in the Netherlands are generally due to the fact that ethnically diverse regions are rather economically deprived and that there are more ethnic minority members living in such neighbourhoods, who simply tend to trust less and are less engaged etc. This means, it is not ethnic diversity per se that makes both Dutch natives and migrants withdraw from social life.

Despite this general picture, there are also some findings on negative diversity effects. This concerns especially contacts between neighbours and findings for certain folks. While levels of trust, volunteering and inter-ethnic tolerance do not seem affected, the frequency and quality of contacts both tend to be lower in more ethnically diverse regions. This is especially the case for native Dutch, the highly educated and for those people who live next door to a neighbour of different ethnicity. These findings suggest that while people have favourable views of their ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, so that they trust one another and engage voluntarily, they are still hesitant when it comes to direct personal contact. In addition, there is recent evidence that native Dutch react negatively not to ethnic but religious diversity in their neighbourhood, which results in less trust in ones neighbours and inter-ethnic tolerance.

Finally, there is some challenging evidence from the city of Amsterdam. Here some researchers have shown neighbourhoods' ethnic diversity does not drive down levels of engagement per se. Instead it drives down engagement in leisure organizations

where wide arrays of people meet, but increases the density of culturally and ethnically homogeneous foundations. This finding challenges existing research and poses the question, whether people in ethnically diverse regions do not withdraw from public life, because they engage with others who are alike rather exclusively. More research that looks closely at the kind of voluntary work, civic engagement and neighbourhood contact of people is warranted in this regard.

Which of the different explanations discussed above accounts for the notable few negative ethnic diversity effects? As of yet, this question is difficult to answer. Coordination problems do not seem to be the main cause, since neighbourhoods where migrants have better Dutch language skills do not show any higher levels of social cohesion. Cognitive biases in the form of prejudices are questionable, because levels of inter-ethnic tolerance are not lower in diverse neighbourhoods. This leaves as a explanation larger diversity in preferences and ideas how community life should look like. Yet, it is a general characteristic of democracies that people need to engage in straining negotiations to build cohesive communities.

Empirical Findings on Possible Policy Solutions

A prime interest lies of course in policy solutions to the challenges of ethnic diversity. Given the need to negotiate diverging preferences and ideas of how community life should look like, a couple of studies investigate the role of democracy in the relation between ethnic diversity and social cohesion. Interestingly, the negative impact of ethnic diversity seems to be stronger in democratic countries. The reason possibly lies in an increased tendency for ethnic voting, here meaning a tendency to vote for ethnic parties, in more ethnically diverse electorates. On the one hand, (ethnic) representation might be considered as a value in itself. In terms of public goods production, however, ethnic voting is problematic, because parties feel no pressure to govern well, if they can rely on an ethnically defined electorate. This results in increased corruption and bad government. Fortunately, the better-established democracies of Western countries are less prone to these challenges of ethnic diversity.

Another set of studies, is concerned with multiculturalism and other ways of institutionalizing minority rights, which are seen as important steps in establishing general acceptance and tolerance as the foundation of social cohesion. At least in

cross-national comparisons, there is indeed some evidence that those countries with multicultural policies and strong minority rights face the challenges associated with ethnic diversity to a lower degree and that multicultural policies are in general fostering trust and social cohesion. In the same fashion, voting rights for migrants are emphasized as generally effecting levels of social cohesion in a positive way.

Yet others argue against the accommodation of diversity at least via a strong form of (group based) multiculturalism or federal institutions. According to this position, the emphasis of a common national identity and individual equality irrespective of the ethnic background attenuates negative effects of ethnic diversity, because it makes people realize about their commonalities rather than to emphasize their particular ethnic background. This argument is in line with recent research conducted on the local level of schools in post-war Bosnia. In those schools, where Bosnians and Croats are taught together, both Bosnian and Croat pupils are more likely to share resources and engage in collective endeavours.

The discussion on the best way of diversity management, whether via weak, strong, group based or individual equality based forms of minority accommodation, is still ongoing. Overall, the existing research questions whether there is any general policy solution to challenges of ethnic diversity. But the oldest recipe remains the most promising; direct and personal inter-ethnic contact rather than mere residential coexistence, attenuates negative effects of ethnic diversity by generating tolerance, empathy and knowledge of shared commonalities.

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