



Can competing diversity indices inform us about why ethnic diversity erodes social cohesion? A test of five diversity indices in Germany

Merlin Schaeffer

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany

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ABSTRACT

An ever-growing number of studies investigates the relation between ethnic diversity and social cohesion, but these studies have produced mixed results. In cross-national research, some scholars have recently started to investigate more refined and informative indices of ethnic diversity than the commonly used Hirschman–Herfindahl Index. These refined indices allow to test competing theoretical explanations of why ethnic diversity is associated with declines in social cohesion. This study assesses the applicability of this approach for sub-national analyses. Generally, the results confirm a negative association between social cohesion and ethnic diversity. However, the competing indices are empirically indistinguishable and thus insufficient to test different theories against one another. Follow-up simulations suggest the general conclusion that the competing indices are meaningful operationalizations only if a sample includes: (1) contextual units with small and contextual units with large minority shares, as well as (2) contextual units with diverse and contextual units with polarized ethnic compositions. The results are thus instructive to all researchers who wish to apply different diversity indices and thereby test competing theories.

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1. Introduction

Following the seminal studies of *Alesina et al. (1999)* and *Putnam (2007)*, there has been a growing debate on the supposedly negative relation between ethnic diversity and social cohesion over the last years. Particularly European researchers have shown an interest, given the implications of such an association for European countries that have experienced growing diversification because of immigration. Is there a threat to the high levels of trust (e.g. *Gundelach and Traunmüller, 2013*), civic engagement (e.g. *Vermeulen et al., 2011*) and support for redistribution (e.g. *Stichnoth, 2012*) that characterize European countries?

The literature on ethnic diversity and social cohesion provides a rich set of empirical findings, but the overall picture is inconclusive (*Portes and Vickstrom, 2011*). The two existing quantitative reviews unearth patterns such as that the “main evidence for negative diversity effects is found for intra-neighborhood social cohesion” (*van der Meer and Tolsma, 2011, p. 30*) or that “North American studies tend to provide more confirmatory results, which cannot be said about studies from developing countries or cross-national comparisons and probably neither for Europe” (*Schaeffer, 2012, p. 44*). Against this background arises the necessity to study why ethnic diversity should result in lower levels of social cohesion. Only if we understand what it is about ethnic diversity that undermines social cohesion, we can postulate hypotheses about the conditions under which we should expect ethnic diversity to reduce social cohesion and under which conditions we should not. If for example ethnic diversity was about communication and coordination problems, as *Habyarimana et al. (2007)* propose, we would not expect a strong ethnic diversity effect in countries where immigrants tend to speak the native language, such as France.

E-mail address: merlin.schaeffer@wzb.eu

Even though a number of plausible theoretical explanations have been proposed, most studies provide no evidence for the supremacy of one explanation over others. This situation makes it hard to judge the overall inconclusive findings. Attempting to fill this gap, some researchers have recently started to investigate more refined and informative measures of ethnic diversity than the commonly used Hirschman–Herfindahl Index. Desmet et al. (2009) for example test a linguistically weighted index of ethnic diversity, and Baldwin and Huber (2010) an index of economic inequality between ethnic groups. Such studies yield suggestive evidence on the relevance of certain theoretical explanations, be they concerned with communication problems or unequal resource allocation as in these examples. Unfortunately, the few existing, pioneering studies all engage in cross-national comparisons, while the earlier discussed research on the effects of ethnic diversity has generated mixed results particularly on the sub-national level of European countries (e.g. Savelkoul et al., 2011; Gijssberts et al., 2011; Tolsma et al., 2009).

This paper reports about the merits of comparing competing diversity indicators in sub-national analyses, i.e. the aim is to investigate whether different theories on why ethnic diversity should result in lower levels of social cohesion can be tested against one another, by comparing the explanatory power of rival diversity indices. As such, the paper tries to answer both substantial as well as methodological questions. I make use of the German sub-set of the Ethnic Diversity and Collective Action Survey (Schaeffer et al., 2011) with its roughly 7500 respondents, who live in one of 55 theoretically and randomly sampled German cities and regions. In particular, I compare the explanatory power of the following indices: First, the common Herfindahl–Hirschman index of ethnic diversity and an ethnic polarization index are taken as operationalizations of *cognitive biases*. Second, a culturally weighted ethnic diversity index and an index of ethnic group-based income inequality are treated as indicators of *asymmetrically distributed preferences*. Finally, a measure of average migrant host-country language skills is used as an indicator of *coordination problems*. As dependent variables, I investigate trust in neighbours and collective efficacy as indicators of neighbourhood social cohesion.

However, while I find negative associations between the indicators of social cohesion and ethnic diversity, the competing indices are empirically indistinguishable and thus insufficient to test different theories against one another. By conducting follow-up simulations on these results, I can identify the general conditions under which competing diversity indices become meaningfully different from another: If the majority share is too large in even the most diverse cities and regions, and if the sample does not cover contextual units with diverse and contextual units with polarized ethnic compositions, the competing indices are indistinguishable even from the mere percentage of minorities. Substantially this implies that much of the (European) research on ethnic diversity and social cohesion might actually be about majority responses to minority concentration and disclose little about diversity effects per se. The conducted follow-up simulations indicate, however, under which conditions the various indices do indeed become telling and are thus instructive to all researchers who wish to apply different diversity indices and thereby test competing theories.

2. Theoretical background

The central aim of this paper is to test different theories on why ethnic diversity should result in lower levels of social cohesion, by comparing the explanatory power of competing diversity indices. Following Chan et al. (2006), but focusing on neighbourhoods rather than whole societies, I understand the concept of *social cohesion* to encompass feelings of shared commonalities, trust, reciprocity and solidarity that generate a social environment in which people produce and share public goods and undertake collective endeavours. Testing theories on ethnic diversity and social cohesion by comparing the explanatory power of competing diversity indices, requires a discussion of different theories, but more importantly it requires linking these theories to different diversity indices.¹ Which index should be regarded as operationalization of which theory? The literature discusses roughly five explanations of why ethnic diversity should drive down levels of social cohesion. Two of these explanations focus on cognitive biases that are associated with mere **categorical differences** of “us” versus “them”. Particularly sociologists and many political scientists see these cognitive biases as being rooted in feelings of *group threat*, whereas economists and social psychologists rather refer to *in-group favouritism*. Two other explanations take actual **cultural differences** into account. Probably because of Deutsch’s (Deutsch, 1966) heritage, who emphasized the importance of shared language for nation states, it seems to be particularly political scientists who are among the few who see *coordination problems* as explaining lower levels of social cohesion in mixed contexts. Economists on the other hand frequently discuss *asymmetrically distributed preferences* and the inability to agree on shared goals as potential explanation. Much less attention has been paid to explaining negative diversity effects by ethnically clustered networks that result in lower levels of *social control* (e.g. Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). This paper is no exception to this trend, because constructing an index of network density from data of randomly sampled individuals is not straightforward (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Table 1 gives an overview of the explanations and the linked diversity indices (for further explanations see below). In the following, I will discuss the first four theoretical explanations in more detail and link them to a set of five diversity indices.

2.1. Ethno-categorical diversity

Most studies that investigate ethnic diversity employ indices that rely on publicly available data of a population’s national, racial or ethnic composition. I propose to call these indices indicators of *ethno-categorical diversity*, because they

¹ A thorough discussion of and introduction to diversity indices in general is given by Rao (1982) and Greenberg (1956).

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