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Elective affinities matter as much as ethnicity in multi-ethnic schools

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ABSTRACT

We estimate the relative importance of ethnicity and individual characteristics, such as personality and cognitive skills, in determining social connections by using survey data on seven-year-old children from multi-ethnic schools (N = 453). We find that friendships are based mainly on common play, and are independent of the need to find help for school activity and homework. Friendship networks among children arise on the basis of their sex, but also according to affinity of personality and cognitive skills, as much as on ethnic background. These findings are worth considering when multiculturalism is chosen as the foundation of the immigration policies. Rather than emphasizing what makes the individuals in an ethnic group different, a farsighted policy could try to point to the elective affinity among individuals. However, since differences in individual characteristics may be systematically associated with ethnic background, this finding may point to a lasting reason for a lack of cohesion in multiethnic societies.

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1. Introduction

The implications of ethnic heterogeneity on the economic performance and social cohesion of countries have been assessed for several important variables, such as the economic growth rate, the provision of public goods, the functioning of labor markets, patterns of political participation, paths to democracy and its stability. These analyses have been performed at the national and local level, both in developed and developing countries (e.g. [Alesina and La Ferrara 2000, 2002, 2005](#); [Easterly and Levine, 1997](#)). The issue of the integration of immigrants and their descendants in the North American educational system and, more recently, in most European countries is at the center of a lively debate among scholars and policy makers, and motivates our research.

Social psychologists and sociologists first investigated the role played by ethnic origin as one of the determinants of social cohesion. The consequences of diversity and heterogeneity for social networks have been mostly investigated within the conceptual structure of contact theory, originally suggested by [Allport \(1954\)](#), which predicts that cross-ethnic relationships may improve positive out-group attitudes among individuals. The economics literature on the consequences of heterogeneity stems instead from [Putnam \(2007\)](#) view, according to which ethnic diversity is likely to reduce both in-group and out-group solidarity. In his words, “the more we are brought into physical proximity with people of another race or ethnic background the more we stick to our own and then the less we trust the other” ([Putnam, 2007](#)). Specifically, Putnam claims that ethnic

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diversity reduces, at least in the short run, social capital, which is a broader concept than cohesion because it includes the sharing of social norms and trust.

More in general, the homophily principle summarizes existing evidence with the statement that relations between similar people are established at a higher rate than those among dissimilar people. The principle has found support in evidence derived from many different relationships, such as marriage, friendship, business, career support at work and mentoring. The individual characteristics usually investigated in network formation are ethnic group, sex and gender, age, religion, education, occupation, social class, position in the network, behavior, attitudes and beliefs (McPherson et al., 2001).

We address here a more general question relating ethnicity and similarity. What makes people similar or dissimilar? Homophily for people of the same group may be homophily *per se* (that is, people like other people of the same group because they prefer the same ethnicity, as in Putnam's thesis), or it may follow because members of the same ethnic group are more likely to share certain characteristics (that is, people like others of the same ethnic group because people of the same group are more likely to have similar characteristics). Our question can be made quantitatively precise: if various characteristics are important to establish similarity, what is the relative size of their effect? In societies with growing ethnic diversity, these questions are of crucial importance.

With these research purposes in mind, we have gathered data from 453 seven-year-old children in 21 second grade classes in 7 Italian elementary schools near Florence, Italy. Our survey design was shaped by the need to acquire two distinct sets of information. First, we needed a complete profile of the sample's individual characteristics (personality, cognitive skills, sex, ethnic origin and family background) to be able to impute to each of these characteristics their own separate weights in affecting network formation. Second, a child may be involved in many possible networks with different underlying motivations for each of them. So we need to distinguish among networks, to better understand which individual characteristics affect which kind of relationship. For example, one may assume that a child prefers friends with similar interests, curiosity and inclination, and thus similar intelligence, but will choose someone with higher intelligence when looking for help with the homework.

There are several reasons justifying the analysis of networks among seven-year-old children in Italian schools. First, taking the class as the unit of analysis allows us to study an entire network, so we know not only the characteristics of two or more nodes linked by the relationship investigated, but also those of all the other nodes that may be potentially linked.¹ The same would not be true studying friendships simply by asking a sample of individuals about the characteristics of their friends, because then we would not be able to control for the set of alternative opportunities available to each of them. Second, the choice of seven-year-old children is motivated by the fact that, as reviewed in the next section, social psychology places the age at which racial attitudes become particularly strong at between four and seven years. Furthermore, unlike younger children, seven-year-old children are able to give information about their own individual characteristics: reading and answering a questionnaire and participating in several tests, the children give us a complete dataset coherent with our research questions. Finally, nearly 30 percent of the students in the schools we sample are children of foreign-born parents or of mixed ethnicity couples. This percentage is higher than the proportion of immigrants with respect to the Italian population, but our sample mirrors quite well the immigrant background composition of Italian primary school classes in regions with higher immigration. Students with an immigrant background are mainly concentrated in elementary and middle schools, since Italy is a country where immigration is quite recent. Moreover, immigrants to Italy choose the richest regions, such as that of Florence. Considering all these things, this Italian sample of school children is representative of Western Europe: Italy is now third in terms of the number of foreign residents (4.9 million, Eurostat, 2016), after Germany and the U.K.

2. Background literature

The empirical literature on homophily investigates the predictive power of individual characteristics such as sex, ethnic group, age, cognitive ability and some personality traits, considering each of them in isolation.

The way in which inter-ethnic social relationships change with the age of the subjects is probably one of the most-studied issues in social psychology. By the age of 4 or 5 years, children typically tend to prefer links with other in-group members and view themselves as being similar to them. This in-group preference is typically not accompanied by negative feelings toward or prejudice against the out-group. In the next phase, typically at the age of 6 or 7 years, negative sentiments toward out-groups emerge in addition to the disposition in favor of the in-group (Aboud, 2003; Castelli et al., 2007). Furthermore, cross-ethnic friendships among children are expected to decline as they advance to higher grades of the elementary school and approach adolescence. Friendships become more exclusive, the importance of similarity as a basis for friendship becomes more pronounced, and children form more racially homogeneous cliques (Hallinan and Smith 1989; Hallinan and Teixeira, 1987; Baerveldt et al., 2004; Feddes et al., 2009).

The opposite pattern of development according to age holds if sex is considered. There is extensive theoretical and empirical support for the idea that girls and boys prefer to affiliate with same-sex peers throughout childhood, a phenomenon that declines with age (Franzier et al., 2009). This preference for same-sex peers throughout childhood has been documented

¹ In the network literature, two subjects linked by a relationship are called the nodes of a dyad. In this paper we use the terms node and child, and couple and dyad, alternatively.

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