



Spaces of encounter and attitudes towards difference: A comparative study of two European cities



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ABSTRACT

Scholars have been increasingly interested in how everyday interactions in various places with people from different ethnic/religious background impact inter-group relations. Drawing on representative surveys in Leeds and Warsaw (2012), we examine whether encounters with ethnic and religious minorities in different type of space are associated with more tolerance towards them. We find that in Leeds, more favourable affective attitudes are associated with contact in institutional spaces (workplace and study places) and socialisation spaces (social clubs, voluntary groups, religious meeting places); however, in case of behavioural intentions – operationalised as willingness to be friendly to minority neighbours – only encounters in socialisation spaces play a significant role in prejudice reduction. In Warsaw, people who have contacts with ethnic and religious minorities in public (streets, park, public services and transport) and consumption spaces (cafés, pubs, restaurants) express more positive affective attitudes towards them, but only encounters in consumption space translate into willingness to be friendly to minority neighbours.

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1. Introduction

In recent years social scientists have become more engaged with the question how we develop the capacity to live with difference and reduce prejudice. The geography of encounter literature has critically acknowledged the varied forms which such contact takes, ranging from fleeting moments of connection between strangers at bus-stops, in cafés or at the school gate, to the more habitual co-existence of neighbours, and work colleagues (Amin, 2002; Hemming, 2011; Matejskova and Leitner, 2011; Valentine, 2008). Simultaneously, a rich social sciences literature emerged and investigated how ethnic diversity impacts social cohesion (Lancee and Dronkers, 2011; Laurence, 2014; Tolsma et al., 2009) and how inter-ethnic contact affects social relations between people living in more/less diverse communities (Vervoort et al., 2011; Stolle et al., 2013). More recent studies tested the effect of contextual diversity of other spaces, such as associations (Van der Meer, 2015) or schools (Janmaat, 2015), on outgroup attitudes. Yet, to our knowledge, the role of contact in different types of space has not been systematically investigated in one study.

Drawing on literature from human geography, sociology, psychology and urban studies, we aim to “bring contact theory and research closer to the complexities of ‘lived diversity’” (Wessel, 2009: 15). Specifically, this paper broadens the debate on urban encounters by focusing on a wider array of sites that might improve inter-ethnic relations than previous studies. We do

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so by analysing data from a representative survey on attitudes conducted in Leeds and Warsaw in 2012. Through developing statistical models we examine whether encounters in selected spaces are significant predictors of attitudes towards people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Our contribution is threefold. First, previous research on inter-group encounters has predominantly focused on one type of contact, usually the frequency of contact with neighbours. Some authors concluded that future studies should investigate different types of spaces and the availability of meeting places within the neighbourhoods (Vervoort et al., 2011), or activities that span outside the residential area, since experiences in other spaces also exert impact on social life outcomes (Van Kempen and Wissink, 2014). Recent research in ethnic studies examined the importance of inter-ethnic contact in various places, such as social organisations (Achbari, 2015), workplace (Kokkonen et al., 2014) or leisure spaces (Schaeffer, 2013). In our study we analyse the role of contact in these different types of space simultaneously. Space is not merely a ‘physical container’ for social interactions, but it is social and relational, i.e. constructed in social relations (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). As such, we argue that encounters in different spaces have different potentials to become ‘meaningful’, i.e. to “actually change values and translate beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others” (Valentine, 2008: 325).

Secondly, we distinguish between the emotional and behavioural components of outgroup attitudes. The emotional component is closer to the traditional understanding of prejudice as antipathy, e.g. used by Allport (1997[1954]) in his research on contact. While the affective dimension of attitudes indicates the level of ‘liking’ of a group or a person, the behavioural component indicates behavioural intentions and it does not have to be consistent with the emotional component (Blokland and van Eijk, 2010). We compare emotional attitudes towards minority groups with declarations whether people would be friendly towards minority who share neighbourhood space with them.

Thirdly, recognising that debates about inter-ethnic encounters have primarily drawn on research conducted in the United States and Western Europe neglecting the dissimilar nature of patterns of diversity in other parts of Europe, we draw on a comparative study conducted in Leeds, UK and Warsaw, Poland – “Living with Difference in Europe: Making communities out of strangers in an era of super mobility and superdiversity” (2010–2014; see Piekut et al., 2012; Piekut and Valentine, 2016; Valentine et al., 2015). These two cities are distinctively different. Leeds was selected as its proportion of minority ethnic residents is close to the national average (app. 17.5%, 2011 Census). Meanwhile, Warsaw has a history of ethnic diversity interrupted by the war and the communism era (i.e. in the Interwar period every third resident was of non-Polish background or non-Catholic religion; Jasińska-Kania and Łodziński, 2009). Warsaw is nowadays considered to be the most ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan city in Poland, although the size of the ethnic minority population is very low, app. 1%. By comparing these cities we investigate how different urban and socio cultural contexts may refract opportunities of inter-ethnic contacts in different types of space and in consequence differently shape attitudes towards outgroup.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Inter-ethnic contact and outgroup attitudes

Attitudes, as inter/intra-group preferences, could be regarded as one of the dimensions of social cohesion understood as a degree of interconnectedness between individuals (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014). However, outgroup attitudes and social interactions are mutually dependent, as explained in the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 1997[1954]). According to this influential psychological theory, inter-group relations can be improved and prejudice reduced, if intergroup contact takes place in specific conditions: amongst others, people have common goals and the contact is supported institutionally. Yet, even in case of no institutional support, more casual encounters in everyday spaces can improve intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Several empirical studies have demonstrated that the contextual effects of ethnic exposure are important for understanding the dynamics of social relations with the residential area. As the size of minority groups increases, majority members have more opportunities to meet minority group members (Vervoort et al., 2011; Huijts et al., 2014); although the quality of such contacts may be lower in diverse neighbourhoods than in homogenous ones (Lancee and Dronkers, 2011). Hence, the discussion has been mostly revolving around reconciling the ‘contact hypothesis’ and the ‘conflict/competition theory’ and investigating under what conditions ethnic heterogeneity can be ‘harmful’ (Laurence, 2014; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010).

The rich literature on the effects of ethnic diversity and the role of contact usually reports the frequency of contact with neighbours (Huijts et al., 2014; Lancee and Dronkers, 2011; Stolle et al., 2008) or existence of significant relations with outgroup members, such as family ties or friendships (Górny and Toruńczyk-Ruiz, 2014; Koopmans and Veit, 2014). However, within or outside neighbourhood interactions take place in different spaces (Huijts et al., 2014; Laurence, 2014) and people are involved in activities cross-cutting residential zones (Van Kempen and Wissink, 2014). Indeed some studies recognise the ‘spatial’ limitation of previous work. Dirksmeier (2014) noticed that the relationship between inter-group contact and attitudes may be different depending on the specific social space in the city where the interaction occurs (family, work, neighbourhood and circle of friends). Koopmans and Veit (2014) acknowledged the variety in urban encounters by distinguishing between close and distant encounters (friends, acquaintances and encounters with strangers) and positive and negative experiences. Building on this work, we argue that because the nature of encounter is socially produced differently in different types of space, depending whether the encounter setting is more public or private, inter-ethnic contact in different spaces will have a different effect on attitudes towards minorities. We explain our approach below.

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