



From neighbors to school friends? How adolescents' place of residence relates to same-ethnic school friendships

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ABSTRACT

This study examines to what extent adolescents' place of residence is related to the opportunities and the preferences to befriend same-ethnic classmates. Analyzing 3345 students within 158 German and Dutch school classes, we find that sharing a neighborhood provides additional meeting opportunities to become friends in class as adolescents are likely to befriend classmates who live nearby them or who live nearby a friend of them (propinquity mechanism). However, this hardly explains why adolescent friendship networks in school classes tend to be ethnically homogeneous. Also, we find no convincing evidence that an adolescent's preference for same-ethnic friends in class varies with the share of outgroup members in his/her neighborhood (exposure mechanism).

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1. Introduction

A consistent observation over time and space is that friendship networks among adolescents are ethnically homogeneous: From weak to strong types of friendship; and from the Netherlands to Belgium and Germany, Israel and the United States, scholars find that adolescents befriend members of their own ethnicity more often than those of other ethnicities (Baerveldt et al., 2007; Eshel and Kurman, 1990; Hallinan, 1982; Wimmer and Lewis, 2010; Windzio and Bicer, 2013). This nearly universal phenomenon can be considered problematic for ethnically diverse societies as social boundaries between ethnic groups are argued to go hand in hand with negative interethnic attitudes, especially for majority group members (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

The most important setting for adolescent (same-ethnic) friendship may well be the school context. It is here where adolescents spend much of their time interacting with peers. Previous studies examined whether same-ethnic friendship in schools depends on individual characteristics such as sex or socioeconomic status of adolescents (Baerveldt et al., 2004; Fischer, 2008), dyadic characteristics such as sharing similar tastes or opinions (Mayer and

Puller, 2008; Smith et al., 2014; Stark and Flache, 2012), and context characteristics such as the percentage of same-ethnic peers in class (Goodreau et al., 2009; Moody, 2001; Kalter and Kruse, 2015). A recent interest in same-ethnic friendship research in this line of possible determinants has been adolescents' place of residence. Because neighborhoods are often ethnically homogeneous and because adolescents often attend schools nearby their homes, the neighborhood's ethnic composition can be held accountable for a potential lack of interethnic friendships in schools: Adolescents might hardly meet outgroup peers in school (Esser, 1986; Huckfeldt, 1983; Karsten et al., 2006; Mouw and Entwisle, 2006; Noreisch, 2007).

Adolescents' place of residence is also argued to relate to same-ethnic friendship choice above and beyond constraining the set of outgroup peers that are available as friends in school. The first argument posits that a neighborhood's ethnic composition affects its residents' same-ethnic friendship preferences. Relying on data of 1589 adolescents in 84 classes in the Netherlands, Vermeij et al. (2009) show that adolescents have a stronger tendency for having same-ethnic social relations in class when they are exposed to fewer ethnic outgroup members in their neighborhood, irrespective of the opportunities they have for same-ethnic friendships within class. In line with intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), they argue that getting to know outgroup members in the neighborhood reduces ethnic prejudice, and as such, stimulates adolescents to befriend beyond the boundaries of their own ethnic group in

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school. We term this effect the *neighborhood exposure effect* on same-ethnic school friendship.

The second argument describes an effect that we term the *neighborhood propinquity effect* on same-ethnic school friendship. The propinquity effect is based on the idea that living in the same neighborhood leads to recurrent meeting opportunities between school peers. In line with Feld's theory of focused organization of social relations (1981), this recurrent meeting in the neighborhood is likely to increase chances of friendship between peers in the school context. When same-ethnic school peers are more often neighbors than interethnic school peers (due to residential segregation), it may consequently explain why adolescents have so many same-ethnic friends in school (Mouw and Entwisle, 2006). In this case, adolescents would not necessarily prefer so many same-ethnic friends, but happened to have befriended these same-ethnic peers due to their neighborhood propinquity.

In this paper we aim to test the neighborhood exposure and neighborhood propinquity effect simultaneously in order to get a better understanding of the importance of adolescents' place of residence for same-ethnic friendship formation in the school class context. Therefore, our research question reads: *How is adolescents' place of residence related to the tendency of having same-ethnic friends in school classes?*

The starting point of this study is to replicate the exposure effect as well as the propinquity effect on same-ethnic school friendship as there is hardly any research devoted to these relations. Replication of the exposure effect is especially important given the conclusions drawn from a closely related field of study: Studies generally find no evidence that mere interethnic exposure leads to less ethnic prejudice or more positive interethnic attitudes because superficial exposure lacks meaningful contact necessary to build positive interethnic experiences (for a review, see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Neighborhood interethnic exposure does not automatically include actual interethnic contact, and as such, the finding that neighborhood interethnic exposure relates to strong positive interethnic contact such as friendship contrasts a large body of research. Therefore, corroboration of Vermeij and colleagues' study is necessary.

Furthermore, we want to test whether the two outlined neighborhood effects work independently of each other: Living close to school peers of a different ethnicity is closely correlated with the ethnic composition of a neighborhood. The exposure effect may therefore not hold when the propinquity effect is taken into account and vice versa. For example, any decrease in the tendency of same-ethnic school friendships with decreasing neighborhood segregation may be due to increased propinquity to outgroup school peers, and not necessarily because general interethnic exposure in the neighborhood reduces ethnic prejudice. In other words: When we observe lower tendencies for same-ethnic friendship in schools among students who live in less ethnically segregated neighborhoods, it is unclear if both propinquity and exposure mechanisms contribute to this observation. Alternatively, one effect may be a spurious effect of the other. The current study therefore provides valuable information on the relation between the ethnic composition of neighborhoods and same-ethnic school friendship by studying the exposure and propinquity effect of the neighborhood simultaneously.

Finally, our study contributes methodologically to the current state of literature in two ways. First, we test our hypotheses using the first wave German and Dutch data from the 'Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries' (CILS4EU) project (Kalter et al., 2014). The CILS4EU dataset contains rich and representative sociometric and attribute data on 9376 students in 493 classes in 244 Dutch and German secondary schools. Not only can we replicate previous work on the subject and extend it to two countries, these data also provide improved measures of

the neighborhood and same-ethnic friendship. Second, we account more fully for interdependencies in tie formation commonly found in (adolescent) friendship networks. Although residential segregation is not as pronounced in Germany and the Netherlands as it is in Great Britain or the United States, residential segregation is an issue of concern in Germany and the Netherlands (Musterd, 2005; Musterd and Van Kempen, 2009). For example, in 7% of the Dutch neighborhoods, immigrants make up more than 50% of the inhabitants (StatLine, 2013). Therefore, Germany and the Netherlands are suitable countries to study.

Previous research has used a varied terminology for the tendency for same-ethnic ties in friendship networks. Some scholars use the term 'ethnic homophily' to refer to the observed overrepresentation of same-ethnic friendships without distinguishing how they have developed (McPherson et al., 2001). Other scholars reserve it for the social-psychological preference for same-ethnic friends only (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010). Also, there are notions of 'baseline' versus 'inbreeding' homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), and 'gross' versus 'net' homophily (Moody, 2001) to tell apart the tendency for having same-ethnic friendships uncontrolled and controlled for a particular confounding concept of interest, respectively. We will use the term 'ethnic homophily' to refer to the theoretical concept of same-ethnic preferences. The term 'ethnic homogeneity' is used to denote the overrepresentation of same-ethnic friendships in social networks that we observe.

2. Theory

Friendship formation in general has been studied extensively and several theoretical mechanisms have been proposed to explain how friendship choice comes about (Wimmer and Lewis, 2010). In general, we follow an established research tradition that argues same-ethnic friendship to be the outcome of the *preferences* for same-ethnic friends over interethnic friends and the *opportunities* to meet same-ethnic peers in comparison to interethnic peers.

2.1. Friendship preferences and the neighborhood exposure mechanism

In line with previous work on homophily, it is argued that adolescents generally strive to befriend similar peers instead of dissimilar peers as they provide social resources, such as moral support and social affirmation (McPherson et al., 2001). Assuming that ethnicity signals or entails specific attitudes, beliefs or interests, it is usually argued that adolescents prefer same-ethnic friendships over interethnic friendships because they expect or find a better match between themselves and members of their group in comparison to members of other groups (Baerveldt et al., 2007; Moody, 2001; Wimmer and Lewis, 2010).

The strength of ethnic homophily, however, is likely to vary among individuals. Whereas ethnic similarity may be an essential friendship requisite for some, ethnicity may not be the characteristic that signals similarity and good friendship to others. The social surrounding, that is the neighborhood, may shape an adolescent's interethnic attitudes in such a way that he/she is more or less willing to choose an interethnic friend.

More interethnic contact in neighborhoods diminishes ethnic prejudice due to increasing opportunities for adolescents to positively experience ethnic outgroup members according to intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954). As a consequence of reduced ethnic prejudice, peers from another ethnic group may be considered to be not too different after all, or at least not different from a negative perspective. For example, consider two students A and B in the same ethnically diverse school class. Student A lives in an ethnically diverse neighborhood and has interethnic contact when

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