Disentangling the relation between young immigrants' host country identification and their friendships with natives

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ABSTRACT

Immigrants who strongly identify with the host country have more native friends than immigrants with weaker host country identification. However, the mechanisms underlying this correlation are not well understood. Immigrants with strong host country identification might have stronger preferences for native friends, or they might be more often chosen as friends by natives. In turn, having native friends or friends with strong host country identification might increase immigrants' host country identification. Using longitudinal network data of 18 Dutch school classes, we test these hypotheses with stochastic actor-oriented models. We find that immigrants' host country identification affects friendship selections of natives but not of immigrants. We find no evidence of social influence processes.

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1. Introduction

Ethnic and cultural diversity caused by immigration ranks among the main social issues in many Western societies. Especially in formerly ethnically homogenous Western European countries, the coexistence of a native majority group and various emerging immigrant minority groups poses challenges for both the native population and citizens with an immigration background (Azzi et al., 2011). The social distance between members of the native majority group and ethnic minorities is large in many Western European countries (e.g., McLaren, 2003; Semyonov et al., 2006). And while research has long demonstrated the potential benefits of interethnic contact for improving interethnic attitudes (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), even among students in ethnically mixed schools, interethnic friendships still are comparatively scarce (e.g., Baerveldt et al., 2004; Moody, 2001; Quillian and Campbell, 2003; van Houtte and Stevens, 2009; Vermeij et al., 2009).

Against the background of these persisting ethnic boundaries, descendants of immigrants face the additional struggle of combining their parents' ethnic identifications and the host country's national identification (Phinney et al., 2006; Verkuyten and Martinović, 2012).[1] In this struggle, friends with the same ethnic background and friends who are natives of the host country seem to play a defining role in immigrants' ethnic identification. Immigrants' friendships with natives and the strength of their identification with the host country have been found to be related empirically; adolescent immigrants who strongly identify with the host country tend to have more native friends than do immigrants with weak national identification (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2011; Leszczensky, 2013; Phinney et al., 2006; Sabatier, 2008).

Previous research has put forward different theoretical mechanisms that may account for the association between immigrants' friendships with natives and their identification with the host country (see Leszczensky, 2013). *Selection* mechanisms suggest that immigrants' national identification may affect their friendship choices because similarity on salient attitudes is an important predictor of friendship choices (McPherson et al., 2001; Stark and Flache, 2012) and identity captures salient attitudes (Deaux and Martin, 2003; Syed and Juan, 2012). *Influence* mechanisms, by contrast, suggest that having many native friends may

[1] In this article, we use the terms "national identification" and "host country identification" interchangeably. We further use the term "immigrant" in a wider sense, including children of immigrants who have been born and raised in the host country.

increase immigrants' national identification (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2011; Phinney et al., 2006; Sabatier, 2008). Longitudinal data are needed to assess whether having native friends affects immigrants' national identification, or whether immigrants' national identification affects their friendships with natives. The very few existing longitudinal studies, however, have yielded mixed findings. Whereas Leszczensky (2013) finds no evidence of either selection or influence processes, the results of Munniksma et al. (2015) suggest a bidirectional causal relation. The findings of Rutland et al. (2012), by contrast, indicate that the causal arrow might run from identification to friends, but not the other way around.

Besides using different methodological approaches and samples, a major reason for the inconsistent findings of prior longitudinal studies might be that none of these studies uses a *longitudinal social network approach*. Such an approach might advance the understanding of potential selection and influence mechanisms underlying the association between immigrants' host country identification and their friendships in three ways. First, prior studies focus on friendship choices made by immigrants but neglect the *friendship choices of natives*. We argue, however, that natives' preferences for whether or not to engage in interethnic contact are crucial for the formation of friendships between immigrants and natives since they shape immigrants' opportunities to befriend natives. Immigrants' national identification might then not only affect immigrants own preferences for interethnic friendships but also how similar natives perceive them to be and, therefore, how likely they are to befriend them (e.g., Verkuyten and Thijs, 2010; Verkuyten et al., 2013). Second, whereas most studies assume that native friends influence immigrants' national identification, existing studies contain no information about self-reported *identification levels of friends*, or of other people like classmates or colleagues (for an exception see Syed and Juan, 2012). It is therefore still an unanswered question whether native friends increase immigrants' identification *per se*, or whether immigrants generally adjust their own identification towards that of their friends, *irrespective* of their friends ethnic backgrounds. Third, it is questionable whether earlier longitudinal studies that rely on ego-centered network data adequately met the methodological challenges of *separating selection from influence mechanisms*. Using longitudinal data on complete social networks, by contrast, allows us to estimate stochastic actor-oriented models (SAOM) that are able to statistically assess the effects both of selection and of influence mechanisms (Snijders et al., 2010; Steglich et al., 2010). SAOM are uniquely suited for testing our hypotheses because they provide not only the statistical means to separate selection from influence mechanisms but also those to control for competing friendship mechanisms such as relational or proximity mechanisms. Whereas SAOM have been applied to explain why friends are similar to another regarding a variety of behaviors and opinions (e.g., Veenstra et al., 2013), they have not been used to analyze the interplay of immigrants' national identification and native friends.

Our study thus extends past research by analyzing the relation between interethnic friendships and national identification of adolescent immigrants, using longitudinal social network data. Adolescence is especially suited to analyze the interplay between friends and identification because identity formation and peer relations are crucial, yet fluctuating, elements of adolescence (Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Crosnoe and Johnson, 2011; Giordano, 2003; Meeus, 2011; Steinberg and Morris, 2001). Specifically, we investigate whether immigrants' identification with the host country determines friendship choices of both immigrants and natives while simultaneously examining if, and how, friendships in turn affect immigrants' national identification.

2. Potential mechanisms underlying the association between immigrants' host country identification and native friends

To explain the association between immigrants' host country identification and their friendships with natives, previous research has put forward different theoretical arguments in favor of both directions of causality that can be assigned to either selection or influence mechanisms (see Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Leszczensky, 2013; Kandel, 1978). Most studies on friendships and identification either acknowledge the possibility of a bidirectional causal relation or assume that selection and influence operate simultaneously in the first place (see Leszczensky, 2013). In what follows, we present different selection (2.1) and influence mechanisms (2.2), derive from them four related hypotheses, and discuss existing evidence.

2.1. Why immigrants' host country identification may matter for friendship choices of both immigrants and natives

From a dynamic intergroup perspective (Brown and Zagefka, 2011), it is essential to account for both groups involved in the potential formation of cross-group friendships. We therefore discuss the role of immigrants' national identification in the *friendship choices of immigrants* as well as in the *friendship choices of natives*.[2]

2.1.1. Immigrants' host country identification and friendship choices of immigrants

Similarity on salient dimensions like ethnicity, sex, or values is a key predictor of friendship choices (McPherson et al., 2001; Stark and Flache, 2012; Smith et al., 2014). This is because interactions with similar others can generally be expected to provide a better basis for mutual understanding, to have lower transaction costs, and to be more rewarding (see Leszczensky and Pink, 2015; Völker et al., 2008, 327). Thus, it is not surprising that adolescent immigrants tend to show stronger preferences for coethnic than for interethnic friends (e.g., Brüß, 2005; Leman et al., 2013; Phinney et al., 1997; Verkuyten and Kinket, 2000). This ingroup bias, however, might be less pronounced if immigrants strongly identify with the host country. Collective identities, such as national identification, are meaningful systems of beliefs related to the fundamental norms and values that are shared by a group of people (see Deaux and Martin, 2003; McFarland and Pals, 2005, 105; Verkuyten and Martinović, 2012). Immigrants with strong host country identification may be more interested in having native friends since they feel more similar to them than do immigrants who do not identify with the host country. This view is in line with the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), which states that a superordinate group identity, like a shared national identity, reduces biases at the subgroup level. Accordingly, our first selection hypothesis is:

Selection-Hypothesis 1. Immigrants who strongly identify with the host country show a stronger tendency to befriend natives than immigrants with weak host country identification.

While ethnic ingroup bias is well established, few studies have investigated, let alone demonstrated, effects of group identifications on immigrants' friendships. In a study by Syed and Juan (2012)

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[2] Our theoretical discussion focuses on assortative mechanisms, i.e., mechanisms referring to friendship choices based on individual attributes like identity. Of course, we acknowledge the importance of alternative tie-generating processes such as proximity or relational mechanisms (see Rivera et al., 2010; Wimmer and Lewis, 2010), and we control for such mechanisms in our empirical analysis.