



Does relative out-group size in neighborhoods drive down associational life of Whites in the U.S.? Testing constrict, conflict and contact theories

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ABSTRACT

We test whether a larger percentage of non-Whites in neighborhoods decreases associational involvement and build on earlier research in three ways. First, we explicitly consider the ethnic composition of organizations, distinguishing involvement in *bridging* (with out-group members) and *bonding* (only in-group members) organizations. Second, we start from constrict theory and test competing sets of predictions derived from conflict and contact theories to *explain* these relationships. Third, we examine whether relative out-group size affects involvement in different types of voluntary organizations equally. Using data from the 2005 U.S. 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' survey, the percentage of non-Whites in neighborhoods is largely unrelated with associational involvement or perceived ethnic threat. However, perceiving ethnic threat is consistently negatively related with involvement in *bridging* organizations. Simultaneously, a larger percentage of non-Whites fosters intergroup contact, which is negatively related with perceptions of ethnic threat and involvement in *bonding* leisure organizations. Our results shed more light on the relationship between the relative out-group size in neighborhoods and associational involvement as well as underlying explanations for this link.

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1. Introduction

During the past decades, many Western countries have become ethnically more diverse, and they are expected to become even more so in the future (Cornelius and Rosenblum, 2005). Consequently, both politicians and social scientists show more interest in the societal impact of these changes. Whereas scholarly work was, initially, mainly devoted to the consequences of the relative out-group size for intergroup attitudes or out-group derogation (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Quillian, 1995, 1996; Scheepers et al., 2002; Semyonov et al., 2006), in the past decade research started to address the influence on indicators of social capital (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000; Costa and Kahn, 2003; Putnam, 2007; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2010; Vermeulen et al., 2012; Reeskens and Wright, 2013; see also recent review articles by Portes and Vickstrom (2011) and Van der Meer and Tolsma (2014). Focusing initially on the U.S., several studies claimed that people living in ethnically more heterogeneous environments are less trusting, participate less in voluntary organizations and have fewer informal social ties compared to people living in ethnically homogeneous areas. Putnam's research, especially, attracted sustained attention, as

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he asserted the all-encompassing nature of this impact, stating that, in the short run at least, ethnic diversity negatively influences “[...] attitudes and behaviors, bridging and bonding social capital, public and private connections” (Putnam, 2007:151). The breadth of his claim – which he labeled ‘constrict theory’ – triggered widespread debate and controversy.

While Putnam’s claim about the negative effects of ethnic diversity has received only mixed support in the European context (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014), these previous studies have one thing in common. So far, with regard to social ties, a test of the consequences of living in an environment with a larger percentage of ethnic out-group members for ‘bonding’ relations (i.e., with in-group members) has largely been neglected. Putnam (2007) only presented evidence with regard to trust, focusing on in-group (bonding) and out-group (bridging) trust. Other studies either neglected the bonding/bridging distinction, or focused exclusively on attitudinal measures, related (only) to the *out-group*, e.g., out-group trust (Lancee and Dronkers, 2011), or interethnic tolerance (Tolsma et al., 2009). Only very recently, Huijts et al. (2014a,b) addressed the influence of relative out-group size on (behavioral) bonding and bridging *informal* social capital, showing that people living in areas with more ethnic minority members (and, thus, fewer ethnic majority members) have more contacts with ethnic minorities, while having fewer contacts with ethnic majority members.

In this article, we focus on the impact of the ethnic composition of people’s neighborhood on their behavioral involvement in voluntary organizations. This dimension of social capital is often labeled as *formal* social capital (cf. Pichler and Wallace, 2007) and has been linked to numerous positive societal outcomes, e.g., the success of democracy, as well as healthier, wealthier and less criminal societies (Putnam, 1993; Wilson, 2000; Halpern, 2005; but see also Portes and Vickstrom (2011) for a critical review regarding this claim). Our aim is to build on earlier research in three ways.

First, unlike previous studies, we explicitly take into account the bonding/bridging dimension of behavioral associational involvement. The data from the 2005 U.S. ‘Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy’ (CID) survey, which offers the unique possibility to consider whether respondents are involved in (a large number of different) voluntary organizations in combination with the perceived ethnic composition of these associations, is an ideal source for testing whether a larger percentage of non-Whites in neighborhoods for Whites is negatively associated with the likelihood of bridging and bonding social ties alike, as Putnam claims. Should the percentage of non-Whites have contradictory influences on involvement in bonding and bridging organizations, this might explain why earlier studies, neglecting this distinction, found little support for a negative effect of ethnic diversity (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014).

Second, this article focuses on underlying explanations for the relationship between the relative out-group size in neighborhoods and associational involvement. Considering the ethnic composition of voluntary organizations might be essential for further testing the generalizability of Putnam’s and related claims; it might be even more crucial when it comes to understanding *why* living in an ethnically heterogeneous environment might affect people’s likelihood of being involved in different types of voluntary organizations. Two contradictory sets of predictions, derived from conflict theory (e.g., Coser, 1956; Blalock, 1967; Bobo, 1999; Scheepers et al., 2002) and contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Brown and Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Hewstone, 2009) are tested, next to the predictions of constrict theory. Unlike earlier research, we empirically examine the role of intergroup contact and perceived ethnic threat for explaining *bonding* and *bridging* formal social capital.¹ As such contradictory indirect effects might cancel each other out, this might be a second explanation why a direct negative effect of ethnic diversity on associational involvement has hardly been found so far (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014).

Third, this article tries to understand whether Putnam’s (2007) claim regarding the negative relationship between relative out-group size and formal social capital holds for different types of voluntary organizations. In line with earlier studies (Van der Meer et al., 2009; Gesthuizen et al., 2013), we consider three types of organizations (i.e., leisure, interest and activist) that largely differ regarding the goals their members aim to fulfill, and also differ regarding the people they attract and serve. Van der Meer et al. (2009) have shown that for the European context, individual-level determinants have sometimes contradictory influences on associational involvement in these three types of organizations. As this might also hold for the influence of the relative out-group size in neighborhoods, this might be a third explanation for the inconclusive findings of earlier studies predominantly neglecting this distinction (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014). In this study, we explore this differentiation of organizations, which enables us to test the generalizability of Putnam’s claim more profoundly and reduces the risk of counteracting influences of relative out-group size on associational involvement.

Overall, the following research questions are addressed: (1) To what extent does a larger percentage of non-Whites within U.S. neighborhoods affect Whites’ involvement in bonding, respectively bridging voluntary organizations? (2) How can these relationships be explained by mechanisms derived from conflict and contact theories?

2. Theory and hypotheses

Addressing the relationship between the percentage of non-Whites and formal social capital, we focus on the neighborhood level, which refers to people’s direct living environment. As has been argued before, this contextual unit of analysis reflects people’s actual interaction settings and is therefore more likely to affect people’s attitudes and behavior, as compared to more remote levels of analysis, like the country or state level (Stolle et al., 2008; Tolsma et al., 2009). We review three relevant theories that informed our tested predictions.

¹ Two earlier studies addressing the influence of ethnic diversity on bonding and bridging (informal) social capital (Huijts et al., 2014a,b) only considered direct effects, without empirically testing indirect effects of ethnic diversity.

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