



## Diversity in action: Interpersonal networks and the distribution of advice

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### ABSTRACT

Does diversity beget the active dissemination of social support in the form of advice to others? Previous research by Robert Putnam suggests that individuals in compositionally diverse geographical areas become closed off from their social ties and less trusting of others, which are both antithetical to social support exchange. We argue, however, that studies of compositional diversity are ill-suited to reflect diversity as it is actually lived and experienced in social life. Drawing from the first nationally representative study with comprehensive indicators of interactional diversity in social life, we analyze self-reports of advice-giving across a variety of social roles. Results of regression analysis are consistent: greater interactional diversity is positively associated with advice-giving, whether the target is stranger, neighbor, close friend, or family member. These findings hold independent of important covariates such as reciprocity, sociability, and homophily. This research contributes to a growing literature set on identifying the unanticipated benefits of diversity in modern society. In sum, we call future research to consider not only diversity in structure, but also diversity in action.

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### 1. Introduction

Research on interpersonal communication suggests that advice is a particularly important aspect of social life. It is arguably one of the most influential forms of attempted aid between social ties. While advice is not always solicited or accepted, it can have a sizeable effect on peoples' life outcomes (Cowen, 1982; Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992; Goldsmith and Fitch, 1997; McDonald et al., 2009; Tripathi et al., 1986). As such, there is a long tradition of research on the various rewards and resources obtained by *recipients of advice* including jobs, status attainment, and personal validation (Cross et al., 2001; Lin, 1999; McDonald and Day, 2010). There is also a sizeable literature examining contexts under which *recipients* are more or less accepting of the advice they are given (Feng and MacGeorge, 2006; Goldsmith and Fitch, 1997; Goldsmith and MacGeorge, 2000). While practically all of the previous research examines how individuals' life chances are influenced by the information they receive, advice is a relational exchange process—there is both a *supplier* and a receiver. Yet, very few studies have considered the contexts under which people become more or less likely to *provide* social resources such as advice to members of their social network. Aside from important characteristics of relationships like interpersonal trust (Smith, 2005, 2010) and relationship type (Marin, 2012; Wellman and Wortley, 1990), we know very little about social factors that beget the active dissemination of advice.

In this article, we ask whether or not the characteristics of individuals' social networks influence the likelihood that they provide advice to others. For several decades, research on interpersonal diversity has leveraged clever insights from network theory to clarify how people *obtain* resources through their bridging ties (Granovetter, 1974; Lin, 1999).

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This line of research suggests that individuals who engage in bridging ties (relationships with dissimilar others), are more likely to acquire new resources than individuals whose social networks are homogenous. But might network diversity also be associated with the *active distribution* of non-material resources such as advice? Does network diversity increase the likelihood that people attempt to provide informational or social support to other members of their social circle?

Recent research on neighborhood racial diversity suggests that diversity reduces trust and produces social isolation (Putnam, 2007); both of which are antithetical to the exchange of social support. Robert Putnam argues that while the mechanisms remain unspecified, people in diverse contexts appear to “hunker down” and withdraw from collective life and close friends. Although the effect size is rather small, Putnam also finds a statistically significant relationship between neighborhood diversity and distrust; not only for racially dissimilar others, but also for members of one’s own race. From this perspective, we might expect diversity to hinder the exchange of advice.

However, Putnam was unable to measure the *lived* and *interactional* components of social diversity. It is in this vein that we introduce and explicate a broad, interactional conceptualization and measure of interpersonal network diversity to examine whether *interactional* diversity is associated with providing advice to other members of one’s social circle—including strangers, neighbors, close friends, and family members.

Below, we explain how diversity may be related to the provision of advice. We go on to describe our conceptualization of interactional diversity and how it differs from previous approaches to analyzing diversity. We then move on to examine our research question with data from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), a nationally representative survey of adults from the United States with the most comprehensive measures of interactional diversity in a national study.

## 2. Diversity and advice-giving: composition or conversation as a conduit?

Mark Granovetter’s pioneering research suggested that having weak social ties opens individuals up to disparate sets of knowledge—knowledge which otherwise would be inaccessible (1973, 1983). It is not weakness per se that produces this effect, but the fact that one’s set of loose acquaintances tend to be less homogenous than one’s collection of close friends. By extension, greater diversity in social networks tends to provide more opportunities to accumulate non-redundant information. Some types of interaction, however, may be better suited to this end than other forms. Prior research on diversity has focused on compositional heterogeneity, suggesting that *opportunities* for intergroup contact may be sufficient for learning about and understanding the experiences of others. The racial composition of organizations, for instance, is sometimes treated as a proxy for intergroup contact, and this in turn is used as a predictor of outcomes such as racial attitudes (Yancey, 2001) and organizational cohesion (Yancey and Emerson, 2003).

Putnam’s (2007) research on diversity also employs compositional measures and focuses primarily on racial diversity. He uses measures of racial diversity across census tracts and counties in the United States to examine inter-racial and intra-racial trust. Interestingly, Putnam finds that not only are community members in racially diverse census tracts less trusting of members of other races, but they are also less trusting of members of their own race. Further, he reports that in racially diverse contexts, individuals are less engaged with their friends, neighbors, and fellow community members. Thus, he concludes that compositional diversity does not result in openness or tolerance as some variants of contact theory would suggest, *nor* does diversity result in in-group/out-group division, as conflict theorists suggest. Rather, Putnam argues that diversity triggers social isolation and anomie, which he colloquially calls “hunkering down.” Other scholars who employ compositional measures of diversity across census tracts, counties, and countries reach similar conclusions (Costa and Kahn, 2003; Delhey and Newton, 2005; Phan et al., 2009; but see Stolle et al., 2008; Sturgis et al., 2011).

While we acknowledge that racial composition is an important characteristic of communities and organizations, the current study differs somewhat from earlier research in two important ways. First, we and others argue that conversations are superior indicators of both network effects and the *experience* of diversity (Gurin et al., 2002; Stolle et al., 2008; Sturgis et al., 2011; Pachucki and Breiger, 2010). It may be that compositional diversity within a geographic area makes salient out-group stereotypes, but *conversation* with dissimilar others entails a deeper level of engagement than mere proximity or exposure. Talking enables people to identify both similarities and subtle differences between social groups and provides an opportunity to actively engage with divergent perspectives (Gurin et al., 2002). Both contact theory and the weak ties hypothesis are not predicated simply on the *opportunity* to interact with dissimilar others, but the *actual* engagement with other people.

Second, this study takes a relatively broad view of diversity encompassing race, class, education, religion, family structure, and sexual orientation. Diversity is often framed in exclusively racial and ethnic terms, and while racial heterogeneity is indisputably a crucial element of diversity, it is not the *only* relevant basis of identity, stratification, and lived experience. Indeed, recent research characterizes the benefits of diversity in terms of the complete *breadth* of people’s perspectives and experiences (Page, 2007).

Thus, by actively engaging with others from a wide variety of socio-structural locations, individuals may come to learn new things and become better prepared to distribute advice to other members of their social circle. Conversation across the intersection of class, religion, race and other characteristics can lead to non-redundant knowledge even when the topic of conversation is not explicitly about knowledge distribution or group differences. Out of normal conversations with

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