# The Good, the Bad, and the Long-Term Implications of Social Diversity

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## Abstract

Demographic trends reveal that modern societies have become more heterogeneous in terms of their ethnic composition. Concerns about social diversity and its implications have received critical scholarly attention, and it has become a prominent topic in several social sciences. The recent but already impressive amount of published research has examined the impact of social diversity (e.g., ethnic, religious diversity) on societal variables such as economic performance and neighborhood trust. However, results from this body of work have been contradictory and a lack of consensus in diversity research has undermined the impact of science on policy. To address this concern, we propose a time-focused perspective in which seemingly contradictory theoretical perspectives can be integrated to provide a coherent account as to why social diversity can potentially yield both negative and positive outcomes. This perspective is discussed in light of its implications for diversity politics. A successful management and planning of these unprecedented demographic changes will dictate the quality of people's lives.

There is a long history of migration around the world, but with changes in the global economy and increased availability of communication and transportation networks, the number of migrants has dramatically increased over the last decades. Modern societies are now in constant flux and have become more diverse than ever before. In 2000, the United Nations estimated that a total of almost 173 million people were living outside their country of birth, whilst in 2017 this figure increased by 67% reaching a total of 258 million individuals (United Nations, 2017). Europe hosted the largest share of these immigrants (a total of 78 million), a figure that accounted for 30% of the world's immigrants in 2017. Outside of Europe, the United States and Canada hosted 50 M and 8 M immigrants, respectively, with foreign-born residents being vital for these societies as they compose 15% of the total population

in the United States and 22% in Canada (United Nations, 2017). Moreover, the United States Census Bureau anticipates that in the next 40 years, the size of the White population will increase by only 7.4%, whilst the Black population will grow 70%, and that of Asians and Hispanics by more than 250%—so-called (ethnic) "minorities" will become "the majority." It is undeniable that our societies are changing—these demographic shifts are having a major impact across all spheres of life, including the workplace, neighborhood environments, schools, and nations.

   Not surprisingly, multiple social sciences have been concerned about the impact of diversity on societies, the consequences of multiculturalism, and the adaptation of immigrant populations. And indeed, it is critical to use the knowledge generated by the social sciences to develop analyses that will be of practical benefit to leaders and policy makers responsible for managing both the opportunities and the challenges of diversity. However, the transfer of scientific knowledge into society has faced its own winding path. Despite the increasing effort of social scientists to contribute to issues of public policy, the lack of consensus in diversity research has undermined the impact of science on policy (Eagly, 2016). To address this issue, we propose a novel perspective in which seemingly contradictory theoretical perspectives can be integrated to provide a coherent account as to why social diversity provides a context promoting, potentially, both negative and positive outcomes. We will do so by presenting a time-focused perspective, where fragmented (and often contradictory) pieces of extant scholarship are not theorized as opposing ideas, but instead, as different time points of an evolving temporal continuum of intergroup relations. In the following sections we consider, first, the negative, and then the positive reactions to social diversity. We then outline a time-focused perspective on the effects of social diversity and, finally, consider the implications of our approach for diversity politics.

## THE NEGATIVE REACTIONS TO SOCIAL DIVERSITY

Scholars across the social sciences have highlighted the fact that changes in social diversity are not always well received by societies and individuals. Some argue that diversity is likely to result in ethnic competition (Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002) and perceived threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). These negative outcomes are thought to emerge because societies are seen as having limited resources. Thus, increasing heterogeneity (e.g., through ethnic or religious diversity) should lead to group competition over power, housing, and jobs, which, in turn, worsens overall intergroup relations. Other researchers contend that diversity leads to fragmented social norms, which generate communication difficulties, often resulting in exclusion and anomie (Seeman, 1959), or, even without animosity, people simply display

homophily, preferring those who are similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

These factors can perhaps explain why some research has found that social capital (i.e., aspects of social networks such as social norms, trust, and collaboration) is lower in communities with high ethnic diversity (Putnam, 2007). This could also be the reason why ethnic diversity has been associated with intergroup conflict (Esteban, Mayoral, & Ray, 2012) and with lower economic performance (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005), social trust, civic engagement, and political participation (Kesler & Bloemraad, 2010). However, a careful meta-analysis of relevant research has shown that the putative effect whereby diversity drives down trust is much more limited than Putnam argued, being more typical of the United States than of Europe, and more likely to be found on measures of trust in neighbours than other measures of trust (ingroup members, outgroup members, or trust in general; see van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014).

At the individual level, these negative findings have been substantiated by empirical work studying interactions in the lab between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Results from this research have shown that intergroup (compared with within-group) interactions can lead to a threatened social identity (Shelton, Richeson, & Vorauer, 2006) and heightened anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1989). Just anticipating such interactions can induce concerns about being negatively viewed by an interaction partner (Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). During intergroup interactions, individuals have reported wishing to avoid those who are different, which is detrimental for them and society at large (Plant & Devine, 2003). There is now a compelling body of work demonstrating that, at least initially (we return to this point, below), intergroup interactions can exacerbate intergroup bias, producing heightened stress and anxiety, less positive emotions, and outgroup avoidance (for a meta-analysis, see Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012). These effects have been demonstrated with behavioral, self-report, and physiological measures (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Richeson & Shelton, 2003).

## THE POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY

Socially diverse contexts offer opportunities that have been associated with positive intergroup relations. One of these is the greater opportunity for intergroup contact, which has long been argued to improve intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954). Work over more than 60 years has demonstrated that positive intergroup contact reliably reduces prejudice (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Hewstone & Swart, 2011), intergroup anxiety, and perceived threat (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Savelkoul,

Gesthuizen, & Scheepers, 2011; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). These findings have been validated by multiple studies and meta-analyses (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008) and together constitute one of social psychology's most important and well-established contributions to improving intergroup relations. Intergroup contact is effective in improving intergroup attitudes because it equips people with the social skills and resources to appraise interactions as non-stressful (Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007), and reduces anxiety while increasing perspective taking, trust, and empathy with outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Another beneficial effect derives from the fact that positive experiences of intergroup contact promote, in turn, more intergroup contact contributing to more positive intergroup relations (Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009).

Research conducted at the Oxford Centre for the Study of Intergroup Conflict has been exploring the role of intergroup contact as a function of variation in ethnic diversity. Part of this work has examined intergroup contact and social integration in state schools in Oldham, Greater Manchester (UK). Using longitudinal surveys, social network analysis, and observational methods, relations between 11–18-year-old White-British and Asian-British (primarily Muslim) students in mixed, segregated, and recently merged schools were studied. Results from this fieldwork demonstrated that intergroup contact in school reliably improved intergroup attitudes by boosting trust, enhancing positive behavior toward outgroups, and reducing prejudice (Hewstone *et al.*, 2018; Schmid, Hewstone, & Al Ramiah, 2014). In parallel ongoing work, members of our lab have examined the effects of ethnic diversity on intergroup contact, perceived threat, and trust using large-scale national surveys in England and Germany, sampling respondents from neighborhoods of varying degrees of diversity. Findings revealed that ethnic diversity promotes intergroup contact, which in turn promotes trust in both ethnic out-group members and neighbors by lowering perceptions of threat (Schmid, Ramiah, & Hewstone, 2014). These findings suggest that any perceptions of threat that might have emerged with increased ethnic diversity were offset by positive intergroup contact, and negative effects were suppressed by more positive ones. This is consistent with a recent perspective contending that anxiety, stress, and other negative outcomes of intergroup relations may be dissipated with time (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015).

The positive effects of contact, moreover, are not restricted to the effects of direct face-to-face intergroup contact. We now know that there are reliable effects of extended contact—that is, there is a prejudice-reducing effect if one's in-group friends have out-groups friends (Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe,

& Ropp, 1997; for a recent meta-analysis, see Zhou, Page-Gould, Aron, Moyer, & Hewstone, 2018), and extended contact earlier in time promotes more direct contact later (Wölfer *et al.,* in press). Even more broadly, the aggregate level of contact in the neighborhood where one lives has a prejudice-reducing effect over and above the effect of one's individual level of contact (Christ *et al.,* 2014).

In sum, the potential negative and positive consequences of diversity are evident in the very nature of intergroup contact, which can, of course, be either positive (the focus of research for 60 years) or negative (a more recent focus). It is, moreover, logical that diverse contexts offer greater opportunities for not only positive but also negative contact, and that while positive contact improves, negative contact worsens intergroup relations (Barlow *et al.,* 2012; Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014). Yet, research also shows that positive contact is much more frequent than negative contact, so we may expect a net benefit of contact in diverse settings. A focus of current work is to simultaneously explore the additive and interactive effects of both positive and negative contact over time.

## A TIME-FOCUSED PERSPECTIVE ON THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY

It is clear that, under some circumstances, social diversity can have negative implications, but it is also apparent that intergroup contact can mitigate negative effects of diversity. In the social diversity literature, diversity is typically approached as a construct having a linear direction toward outcomes. Here, we would like to depart from this reasoning and propose that the effects of social diversity are dynamic. They should be dynamic because threat and anxiety are likely to be triggered only by recent and rapid increases rather than stable levels of diversity. Moreover, the beneficial effects of intergroup contact should only be apparent in the long run, after short-term, periodic increases and decreases have been considered (a point acknowledged by Putnam, 2007, although the focus of his article remained on the negative sequelae of diversity). For these reasons, it is critical to have a time-focused perspective to understand reactions to social diversity and its consequences. To account for this dynamic perspective of diversity, longitudinal studies are required and, so far, empirical work in this field has predominantly been cross-sectional. Another limitation of previous work emerges from the fact that little empirical effort has been made to explain the mechanisms underpinning such effects, making it impossible to evaluate how negative and positive effects may push or pull in either direction (Ramos, Hewstone, Barreto, & Branscombe, 2016).

## WHY SHOULD INITIAL REACTIONS TO SOCIAL DIVERSITY BE NEGATIVE AND NOT POSITIVE?

Human nature may dictate negative reactions to changes in social diversity, especially if they occur abruptly or at a fast pace. We are thought to have evolved with a preference for homogeneity and stability (Caporael, 1997) and a tendency to approach outgroups with a certain degree of uncertainty (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Relatedly, as noted earlier, it has been argued that humans follow the principle of homophily (McPherson *et al.*, 2001). These tendencies could perhaps have evolved from a survival instinct given that unknown others could be friend or foe, prey or predator, and caution in new encounters could dictate one's survival.

History from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is consonant with these ideas. It shows that rapid ethnic change is often associated with calls for immigration restriction and support for ethnic nationalism (Kaufmann, 2017) and, in fact, recent political events in the Western world demonstrate a similar path (e.g., rapid changes in migration in specific locales have been associated with support for Brexit in the U.K.; Economist, 2016). In line with this perspective, one of our recent studies analyzing data from more than 100 countries and 20 years of data shows that an increase in religious diversity is associated with lower reported quality of life all around the world. This effect occurs irrespective of political and cultural ideology and is spread across different continents, suggesting that it may be a typical human reaction to these demographic changes. However, our results showed no negative long-term implications of religious diversity for people's quality of life. Taken together, these results indicate that despite initial negative reactions to increasing religious diversity, these tend to dissipate with time.

## WHY SHOULD INITIAL REACTIONS TO SOCIAL DIVERSITY DISSIPATE WITH TIME?

As much as we are ready to react with initial negativity to social diversity, we are also equipped with the potential to benefit from intergroup experiences. Biology and cultural anthropology argue that human beings evolved and fared better than other species because of this ability. It is argued that intergroup contact brings a variety of benefits that cannot be attained by intragroup interactions. First, there is biological advantage in gaining genetic variability through new mating opportunities (Glémin, Ronfort, & Bataillon, 2003; Moore & Ali, 1984). Second, intergroup contact allows individuals to acquire more diverse resources and knowledge (Bar-Yosef, 2002; Stringer, 2001). A notable example is evidence of tool use in paleoarcheology. Whilst *Homo sapiens* used sophisticated tools made from materials extracted from distant regions, Neanderthal sites from the same era revealed more rudimentary tools with materials from local areas, along with evidence of cannibalism and violence (Ambrose, 2010). *Homo sapiens*

obtained materials by contact and trading with foreign populations and, for this reason, was more adapted and gained reproductive success over the Neanderthal who fought outgroups. The ability to benefit from intergroup experiences has been maintained, in present times, and similar phenomena occur in organizational settings. Research has shown that, for example, diverse compared to homogenous teams tend to achieve better and more creative solutions (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004).

Our argument is that, in contexts of increasing diversity, benefiting from these experiences is, however, contingent upon overcoming an initial phase of negative reactions (e.g., perceived threat, heightened intergroup anxiety). Thus, in society at large, in neighborhoods, communities, schools, and even workgroups, changes in social diversity can, initially, be perceived as threatening and this can be a natural response of human beings who evolved from environments thousands of years ago where survival was paramount. And, of course, some time is needed to overcome this initial resistance and start paving the way for more positive outcomes. Research we are now conducting using European Social Survey data, including a total of twenty European countries, provides some evidence of the timeframe of these processes (Ramos, Bennett, Massey, & Hewstone, 2018). Our findings suggest that increasing social diversity is associated with negative outgroup attitudes, but also with greater intergroup contact that emerges as a function of these demographic changes. However, from the moment that diversity increases, it takes at least 8 years before intergroup contact reaches a quantity and quality sufficient to neutralize initial negative effects associated with these demographic changes. This 8-year timeframe is, of course, just a reference from European data and may be different in other world regions. Nonetheless, the relevant messages from this finding are that we may not reap the benefits of diversity immediately, and that understanding this timeframe is critical for the appropriate public policy response to address diversity issues.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSITY POLITICS

One interesting aspect concerning these processes is that political leaders have long realized that individuals feel threatened by changes in the demographics of their societies and some use this to gain political support. In this context, threat is typically triggered by a few steps. One initial step is to follow a narrative that defines specific group boundaries, with the goal of shifting, for example, political discussion about immigration into an intergroup discussion (e.g., nationals of a country are portrayed as "us" versus the immigrants who are portrayed as "them"). After this intergroup context has been made salient, overemphasizing demographic changes (e.g., in

terms of ethnic, racial, or religious diversity) should trigger perceptions of identity and cultural threat, consonant with the initial processes described in our time-focused perspective. Semyonov, Raijman, Tov, and Schmidt (2004) showed that only the *perceived*, but not the actual size of the outgroup population was associated with greater perceived threat and exclusionary outgroup attitudes. To capitalize on this strategy, the solution of closing the borders (to curb immigration flow) is introduced and rapidly gathers support from those who were threatened by demographic changes. Interestingly, this is a remarkably powerful narrative that proved to be successful in recent political decisions such as the British referendum and the 2017 presidential election in the United States. Perhaps the reason why these narratives are so powerful is that they trigger our most primary survival instincts along the lines we discussed above. In agreement with our reasoning, areas that are already diverse with stable levels of diversity are less susceptible to the apparent allure of these narratives. This is, for example, the case for London, one of the areas in the UK less supportive of Brexit (Economist, 2016). Other forms of political influence whereby this threat response can be triggered include the mainstream media. This was, for example, witnessed when the so-called refugee crisis hit European countries. The extensive media coverage of this topic led to great public awareness and heated discussions in the news, social media, and political debate.

   Another reason why such narratives are so powerful relates to the fact that for the layperson (and for social scientists) it is easier to establish causality when consequences occur right after a given event and, for this reason, the notion that social diversity can, in the long run, result in positive outcomes is more difficult to grasp. In this respect, we believe that education should play a major role. This is particularly important (but not exclusively, the same is true for Japan) for most European societies, which are relatively homogenous, are declining in population, and with the present birth rates will have to receive greater flows of immigration to maintain their workforce. In line with our reasoning, steep increases in immigration rates will trigger negative reactions to social diversity. It is therefore extremely important to plan ahead. The successful planning of this issue is very likely to dictate the quality of people's lives in the near future.

A FINAL NOTE

Our perspective on diversity can also be used to understand inconsistencies in the field. Extant work has been limited to cross-sectional studies and, thus, depending on which snapshot of the intergroup relations time continuum a particular study investigates, it may reveal opposing effects of diversity. For example, after a rapid increase of ethnic diversity, we should be more likely to

observe negative effects on intergroup variables such as a lack of trust in out-groups and support for policies restricting immigration. In contrast, a study conducted in a period of stability should reveal lesser or no effects of ethnic diversity on most intergroup variables. This is perhaps one of the reasons why there has been a great lack of consensus in work investigating the effects of ethnic diversity on trust (for a review of these inconsistencies, see van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Understanding how these processes unfold has critical implications for social policy, as it would allow the promotion of factors that harness the protective aspects while targeting the pernicious aspects, helping to turn diversity into a valuable asset in a globalizing world.

We argue that negative reactions to diversity should attenuate with time. However, it would be a mistake to assume that nothing should be done to improve the integration of immigrants or the conditions of ethnic, racial, and religious groups living as minority groups around the world. These groups typically face social barriers, prejudice, and discrimination, which together have deleterious consequences for their health (for a review, see Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), which has personal as well as economic costs. And of course, when political leaders intervene in these processes, they have the power to escalate initial negative reactions to the level of intergroup conflict (e.g., as an extreme example, this is what happened under the Nazi regime with its portrayal of the "Jewish threat"). Our reasoning also points to the significance of appropriate integration measures. Societies or communities promoting high levels of segregation of minority groups are more likely to escalate negative reactions to diversity, given that they are slowing down the mechanism (i.e., intergroup contact) that mitigates these negative reactions. Our message is one of cautious, research-based optimism; understanding that human beings have the ability to benefit from diversity can contribute to better planning and help societies to capitalize on these inevitable demographic changes associated with globalization and global inequality.

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