

**Do Ethnically Diverse Classes Reduce Ethnocentrism?
A Two-Year Panel Study among Majority Group Late Adolescents in
Belgium**

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Abstract

Contact theories on the development of ethnocentrism assume that interaction with ethnic minority representatives will reduce prejudice. We test this assumption among a representative sample of Belgian late adolescents (n=2,828), taking the class level as interaction context. Given an average class size of 13 pupils/class, it can be expected that within the class room an intensive interaction between pupils occurs, thus providing an ideal setting for testing the contact hypothesis. The Belgian Political Panel Study (BPPS, 2006-2008) allows for longitudinal multilevel analysis, tracing effects over time. The analysis shows no significant effects of diversity as such on ethnocentrism. The perception of ethnic and cultural tensions at school, however, is associated with the strengthening of prejudice two years later on. A dating thermometer question had a significant relation with diversity level, but this more personal question too reacted strongly to the presence of ethnic tensions. We conclude that there is no mechanical effect of diversity in class rooms, but that this effect is dependent on the perceived quality of the intergroup relations, in line with the contact theory as developed by Allport and Pettigrew.

Keywords: ethnocentrism, adolescents, contact hypothesis, schools, Belgium

SUMMARY

Introduction

There is quite some empirical research available on the relation between ethnic diversity and the occurrence of ethnocentrism among adult samples. Contemporary versions of the contact theory predict that positive contact experiences with ethnic minority groups will be associated with lower levels of ethnic prejudice among the majority group (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The empirical evidence on the relation between ethnic diversity and ethnocentrism, however, is far from conclusive: while some studies document a positive relation between diversity and ethnocentrism, other studies fail to detect such a relation. A weak point of studies into the effect of diversity is that they fail to include the possibility of segregation. Even when societies are ethnically diverse, they can be highly segregated, which would imply that interaction between the various ethnic groups within society remains limited. An aggregated measurement of diversity on the national level therefore does not seem to be a valid operationalization that can be used to test the contact hypothesis.

In this article we propose a short-cut to arrive at a more valid test of the contact hypothesis, by focusing on the class room context. Adolescents on average spend seven hours a day in the class room and while segregation patterns within the class room have been documented (Moody, 2001; Mouw & Entwistle, 2006), some form of contact between various ethnic groups in the same class context can hardly be avoided. If contact with ethnic minorities would lead to lower levels of ethnocentrism, we would expect this process to occur within the class context, especially if class size remains rather limited. To express it differently: the aggregation level of studies into the impact of ethnic diversity outside of social psychology thus far has often simply been too high. The focus tends to be on neighbourhoods, cities or even entire countries, but this kind of aggregation level does not inform us about real interaction opportunities (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000). By focusing on the class context it can be assumed that diversity almost inevitably leads to inter-group contact.

Focusing on schools has other major advantages. First of all, in a European context, there is simply more ethnic diversity among the age group of 16 to 18-year-olds. As a result of

demographical patterns and immigration flows, the ethnic minority population in most Western European countries is characterized by a young average age level (Hooghe, Trappers, Meuleman & Reeskens, 2008; Parsons & Smeeding 2006). Young Europeans therefore are much more likely to be confronted with ethnic diversity than an older or rural population is (Ford, 2008). Multicultural attitudes, or the tensions associated with interethnic contacts, are therefore much more likely to occur among this age group (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002).

Furthermore, we also know from political socialization research that during adolescence and late adolescence basic political and social attitudes tend to be formed, and one can assume that those attitudes will remain relatively stable in subsequent stages of the life cycle (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Ingelhart, 1997; Reinders, 2003). It has been shown in the United States that among white adults that have experienced desegregated schools there was an enduring and stable positive effect on their attitudes towards Afro-Americans, controlling for other relevant variables (Wood & Sonleitner, 1996). Both direct and indirect contacts with members of outsider groups have been shown to be related to lower levels of ethnic prejudice (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner & Stellmacher, 2007).

Finally, schools are a good research setting since ethnocentric prejudice can be studied in a valid manner among adolescents. Studies have shown that children from the majority group evaluate other children from the majority group in a more negative manner if they befriend children from a minority group. This indicates that among children peers can already erect barriers for intergroup contact and that in some cases an “us versus them” distinction is already present and is reinforced by peer group pressure (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009). We know furthermore from experimental data on European 18-year olds that their level of ethnocentrism is predictive for avoidance behavior towards persons from a minority ethnic background (Dejaeghere & Hooghe, 2011).

All this evidence suggests that schools and the adolescents that are enrolled in schools offer a prime context to investigate the development of ethnocentric attitudes. Since we can rely on the results of a two-year panel survey, it is possible to gain better insights in

the causal mechanisms involved in the process, especially with regard to the impact of context variables on the formation of individual attitudes. More specifically, we will rely on the results of the Belgian Political Panel Study (BPPS 2006-2008). In this panel study, respondents are followed over time, and this allows us to assess whether experiences with diversity have an effect later on with regard to the development of ethnocentrism. In this article we first briefly review the literature on the development of ethnocentrism, with a special emphasis on the relevance of the contact theory for adolescents. Subsequently we present data and methods before discussing our main findings.

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Measurements

Previous studies have shown that in a Western European sample different forms of racism can be seen as exponents of one latent concept, and therefore they can be measured in a onedimensional manner (Coenders, Scheepers, Sniderman, & Verberk, 2001; Kleinpenning & Hagedoorn, 1993; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Zick, Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008).

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Results

Ethnocentrism

If we look at the first model in Table 4 we can observe that in the null-model, more than 19 percent of the total variance of the dependent variable is located at the class level, suggesting there is quite some between-class variation in the level of ethnocentrism. We see that adding the individual level variables in Model 2 reduces the total level of class variance by almost half, suggesting the occurrence of composition and concentration effect simultaneously. Girls score lower on ethnocentrism, and respondents with high educational goals also tend to be less ethnocentric.

When we turn to the effect of class level variables in Model 3, the most striking element is the absence of a significant effect of the percentage of non-European students. It seems that by itself diversity has no significant effect on ethnocentrism. But it can be observed that the perception of ethnic tensions at school is significantly related to a higher level of

ethnocentrism. It is important in this regard that the presence of racial tensions was measured in 2006, but apparently two years later this still has an effect on the ethnocentrism levels of the 'white' students. In the final model we add the 2006 score of the dependent variable and this model therefore investigates the change in ethnocentrism levels between 16 and 18 years. This variable clearly has a strong effect on the ethnocentrism score two years later on, suggesting that ethnocentrism can be considered as a stable attitude. Again the absence of a significant effect for the diversity of the classroom is noticeable. The racial tensions variable, on the other hand, remains significant. This suggests that the perceived quality of relations between ethnic groups in class has an effect on the evolution of ethnocentrism in late adolescence. This finding lends support to the assumption developed by Pettigrew that only a positive intergroup interaction is conducive to reducing ethnic prejudice. When the contact is experienced as negative this might even strengthen prejudice, as our results indicate.

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Discussion

Diversity has become a fixed feature of social life for most young people in Western Europe. To a large extent, interactions between ethnic groups takes place in schools and classes and in the current analysis we have seen that the intraclass correlation for ethnocentrism is quite high, indicating that the class context obviously plays a role in explaining the development of ethnocentrism among the age group of 16 to 18-year-olds. Somewhat surprisingly, however, no significant relation was found between ethnic diversity on the class level and levels of ethnocentrism.

Pure numbers clearly tell only part of the story. The way ethnic groups within a school interact with one another is more important. A negative assessment of the quality of intergroup relations is significantly associated with higher levels of ethnocentrism two years later. If the atmosphere is positive between groups, this is associated with significantly lower levels of prejudice. Schools where there is a high level of diversity offer good opportunities to counter ethnocentrism according to our analysis, but this has to be framed within a positive intergroup climate. The lesson to be learned from this analysis is that there is not a single mechanical effect of ethnic diversity at the class or

school level. Whether this is also the case for other interaction contexts (like the work place, neighbourhoods, associations...) is something that needs to be determined by future research. The rather pessimistic assumption that high levels of diversity almost inevitably would lead to intergroup competition and hence to ethnocentrism was not supported by our results. However, the opposite phenomenon does not occur either. If schools or education systems want to develop a policy aimed at reducing ethnic prejudice, it is crucial therefore to try to influence the quality of the interaction between the various ethnic and cultural groups at school. We have to acknowledge here that our respondents were first sampled at the age of 16, and maybe at that age patterns of ethnocentrism have already fully developed. Research among younger age groups could determine whether at a younger age there is a relation between diversity indicators and ethnocentrism.

In most of the available studies, authors try to detect a general pattern in the relationship between ethnic diversity and ethnocentrism, but as we have seen in the introductory section that results are rather mixed in this line of research. The current analysis offers some indications on why these results do not tend to be conclusive. Diversity as such does not seem to have an automatic or mechanic effect on the development of attitudes. The effect rather seems to be dependent on how the quality of the interaction is being assessed by participants. The fact that this perceived quality still has a significant effect two years later only adds strength to the relation that we have found in this regard. On a speculative note, therefore, it might be claimed that not the level of diversity as such should be the main object of study. The fact that in our study both majority group members and members of ethnic outgroups tend to have exactly the same assessment of the quality of intergroup relations, already suggests that these relations indeed can be studied in a reliable manner. Rather than focusing on levels of diversity, the question is to determine how interaction actually occurs, as was already predicted in the writings of Allport and Pettigrew, and the current analysis only provides support for their hypothesis. Once these intergroup relations are being perceived as antagonistic, a further deterioration of tolerant attitudes apparently is difficult to avoid.