

Diversity, Trust and Social Capital: Examining Community level Relationships

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Abstract. The United States is experiencing increasing levels of ethnic diversity both in our country as a whole and within our communities. At the same time, levels of social capital, sense of community, and civic participation are declining. In 2007, Robert Putnam, a prominent social capital theorist, proposed the “Constrict Theory of Ethnic Diversity” to explain this relationship. Constrict Theory states that increased ethnic diversity leads to lower levels of trust - both in one’s own ethnic group and in other ethnic groups. Trust is one of the major components of social capital, and it is through its relationship with trust that ethnic diversity can negatively affect social capital. This current study tested the Constrict Theory using community level variables. Findings support Putnam’s previous findings, while raising questions about the measurements available to quantify ethnic diversity.

1. Introduction

The field of community psychology works collaboratively with individuals to help them improve their communities and local environments. Over the past decade, the fabric of the American community has changed – our population has become both more transient and more ethnically diverse [1]. How do these changes affect the quality of life in communities across the nation? Social capital indicators are put forth as one of the ways we can assess the state of our communities.

The term social capital refers to the “invisible glue” that holds communities together, enabling them to better function [2]. A commonly accepted operational definition of social capital by Robert Putnam is the “features of social organization - such as networks, norms and trust - that increase a society’s productive potential” [3]. Current research suggests that areas with high social capital are healthier and safer for children, and people live longer [4]. Because of the benefits of social capital to both individuals and communities, it merits looking into conditions that help or hinder its creation.

Specifically, we examined the effects of increasing ethnic diversity on social capital at the community level. This research is based on Robert Putnam’s “Constrict Theory,” (2007) to explain the state of America’s communities. In this theory, Putnam argues that increased diversity does not trigger in-group and out-group division and competition but that increased diversity within a community leads to social isolation, and thus a lessening of trust in everyone, in one’s own as well as other ethnic groups [5]. This lessening of trust leads to lower levels of social capital in a community and has negative effects on the quality of life. Therefore for our analysis we used trust as a vehicle to examine social capital.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance (Describe how you developed your idea)

Data for this analysis was collected through the 2006 “Social Capital Community Survey.” Respondents were randomly selected from eleven communities (n = 4,854) which range in size from 6,543 to 344,284 inhabitants. The eleven communities include an oversampling of Kansas communities (n=5). This oversampling was intended to fill a gap in Putnam’s original research, which largely excluded Midwestern communities. There were between 350 and 750 respondents from each community. Respondents were selected through the random-digit dialing protocol, with an average response rate of 20.4% within a community. Respondents were at least 18 years of age, with an average age of 52.

The goal of this research was to examine the relationships between social capital, trust and ethnic diversity on the community level. To isolate the relationship between trust and ethnic diversity, inter-racial trust (trust in other races/ethnicities) and inner-racial trust (trust in one’s own race/ethnicity) were examined separately. Each type of trust was aggregated separately within a community and those community-wide measures were then correlated with the Herfindahl Diversity Index scores (H; a measure of ethnic diversity) for the communities.

Results showed that both inter-group and inner-group trust were negatively correlated with ethnic diversity within communities. In communities where ethnic diversity levels are high, both inner-group and inter-group trust is low. More specifically, levels of inner-group trust in a community were shown to be negatively correlated with

ethnic diversity, $r = .83$, $r^2 = .69$, $p < .05$. These relationships show that when ethnic diversity increased within a community (lower Herfindahl Index Scores), people trust members of their own ethnic groups less. Community-wide inter-group trust (trust of members of other races and ethnicities) was also found to be negatively correlated with levels of ethnic diversity within a community, $r = .80$, $r^2 = .64$, $p < .05$.

One additional result was the distinguishing of Junction City, KS as a multivariate outlier. Junction City, dominated by the Ft. Riley military base, has high levels of diversity, also has high levels of community wide trust. Drawing from what we know from social psychology, we hypothesize that this is due to the “common purpose” derived from military employment, as well as the military base providing an actual space where different ethnic groups make meaningful contact (for further discussion of these ideas, please see the contact theory literature). [6, 7, 8]

Putnam’s Constrict Theory, that as ethnic diversity increases within a community, both inner-group and inter-group trust decrease was upheld in this study. Therefore increased levels of ethnic diversity in a community do not necessarily bring inter-group racial tensions as often thought [9], rather the increase in ethnic diversity is related to all people trusting each other less. Evidence as to why this lack of trust exists needs to be expanded on, but this study produced moderate support of Putnam’s proposal that ethnic diversity leads to “hunkering down” – less socializing and involvement in community activities.

3. Conclusions

This data suggests diversity and inter-racial contact does not necessarily lead to “bad race relations” but rather to situations where all people feel more isolated. Hopefully these results can be of use to towns and communities across the country in encouraging them to create better built environments to support citizen interaction. Further, the status of Junction City, KS as an outlier points to the potential value in fostering a “common purpose” among community members.

4. Acknowledgements

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