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Residential mobility and the relationship between ethnic diversity and social cohesion

The last decade witnessed a big increase in the number of studies on the supposedly detrimental effects of ethnic diversity on social cohesion. Should this claim hold true, increasing immigration would lead to a retreat from social life and social cohesion to erode. But does it hold? Most previous empirical studies found a positive relationship between the level of ethnic diversity in geographical units and inter-ethnic social cohesion and not the presumed negative effect of ethnic diversity.

An often heard *post hoc* explanation for the observed positive relationship between ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic social cohesion is ‘white flight’, or more generally, selective residential mobility; residents not satisfied with the ethnic composition of their neighbourhood, municipality, region or even country decide to move to other regions which do satisfy their criteria. Thus, ethnic diversity is harmful for inter-ethnic social cohesion but this relationship is not observed because people have left the region where they lost trust in ethnic others. Unfortunately, it is difficult - if not impossible - to rigorously take selective residential mobility into account in (cross-sectional) empirical studies.

I use agent-based simulation models to derive hypotheses on under which circumstances selective residential mobility could have affected the relationship between ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic social cohesion, as observed in cross-sectional surveys. My simulation model builds on Schelling’s segregation models (have a peak at: www.jtolsma.nl/movie.wvm). I allow linear preference functions to vary across residents (I did this by varying the beta parameter in McFadden’s choice function). To allow for selective residential mobility, agents most (or least) unhappy with the ethnic composition of their neighbourhood have the highest chance to move. I use both the beta parameter in McFadden’s choice function and agents’ current unhappiness (with the ethnic composition of their neighbourhood) as indicators for inter-ethnic social cohesion.

In this presentation, my aim is to convince the audience that previous studies on the relationship between ethnic diversity in geographical units and inter-ethnic social cohesion are not informative. Based on my simulation models, I would expect that residential mobility (random or selective) will cause this relationship to be close to zero or slightly positive. In neighbourhoods where diversity is high, inter-ethnic cohesion is high as well as a result of residential mobility.