Diversity, social interaction and solidarity

Society is becoming more diverse owing to, among other factors, increased cross-border mobility, less-rigid gender roles, improved living standards and individualization processes. The diversity of lifestyles, value systems and experiences has consequences for social interaction, and the self-conception and internal integration of societies[1]; however, its precise impact is in many ways unclear. Intensified research is urgently needed as the effects of diversity are often the subject of controversial political debates.

VALUE OF DIVERSITY IN DISPUTE

Researchers are equally divided as regards the dangers and opportunities arising from growing societal diversity. Some sociologists have voiced doubts about whether individualized and ethnically diverse societies are capable of ever being integrated. In the United States, empirical studies have shown that ethnic diversity can be accompanied by low levels of trust among citizens and in societal institutions[2,3]. However, other studies have shown that regional economic dynamics are improved by population heterogeneity and a climate of tolerance. Here, diversity is linked with creativity, openness and vitality; multicultural towns act as both magnets for the cultural and economic elite, and breeding grounds for new ideas[4,5]. The key difference between these positions lies within the assumed capacity of societies to constructively use the potentials arising from increasing diversity.

To date, knowledge about the factors that affect this capacity, and about how individuals, social groups and societies deal with diversity, is limited. Little is known about how social interactions are affected

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by diversity, how individuals experience diversity, and how it affects their thinking and actions. In particular, there is a lack of systematic comparative research on different constellations and contexts. This is the starting point for several lines of research focusing, for example, on cities as places where ethnic diversity is experienced in a concentrated form. How do people in different contexts experience ethnic diversity? Under what conditions does migration background, ethnic origin or ascription play a role in social interactions? What kinds of interactions occur across ethnic boundaries and when? What role does the immediate spatial context play, i.e. a more homogeneous or heterogeneous composition of the population of residential areas? What significance do these experiences, and direct interactions between people of different origins and lifestyles, have in terms of attitudes towards society?

CONTACT ACROSS BORDERS

Certain assumptions of conflict theory suggest that foreigners are perceived as a threat or that they arouse resentment. An alternative research framework assumes that people in diverse contexts present opportunities that can be utilized in different ways. Contact — in the form of strong and weak ties or even 'fleeting' everyday encounters — is crucial for civilized forms of coexistence in diverse societies. The mechanisms through which heterogeneity interacts with trust or willingness to co-

operate must be investigated more deeply.

Until now, studies have often been restricted to presenting correlations between attitudes or facts without determining whether they are causally related and, if so, what mechanisms are responsible — for example, observing that, in areas with a heterogeneous population, trust in state institutions is limited and assuming that the one causes the other. Interdisciplinary research that integrates ethnological and other social scientific and psychological approaches appears promising in determining mechanisms and causal relations. Contact theory, which was developed within social psychology, is crucial. It assumes that positive, cooperative contact between individuals identifying with different groups can foster positive attitudes in both groups towards the other — and possibly also to cooperation and solidarity generally. Evidence from Northern Ireland — mirrored in studies in the United States and Canada — suggests that where high-quality social contact between different ethnicities occurs, there is a higher level of social trust. In other words, high-quality contact between different population groups can combat negative effects of diversity[6,7].

THE CHOICE OF FRIENDS

Social network research is also helpful in examining diversity within societies. Researchers in this field have identified several factors that determine the shape of personal networks: opportunities for

- For many reasons, society is becoming more diverse in terms of culture, religion, gender-norms and lifestyle.
- Increased diversity will have an impact on social interaction and the integration of societies.
- Diversity is a political concern but, as yet, decision-making does not rest on a sufficient, sound basis of knowledge.

contact, a preference for social relationships with similar people (the homophily principle) and the attraction of social relationships with people of a higher status[8]. To this end, interethnic contact might be facilitated by mixed residential areas. However, if there are ethnic hierarchies, in which immigrants and members of ethnic minorities are trapped at the bottom, this might reduce the willingness of higher-status, long-term residents to engage in such interactions. Furthermore, the way in which individuals define the homogeneity they seek in their social networks needs to be clarified: is it based on a common national or regional origin or religious group, or on interests and lifestyles that have nothing to do with the drawing of ethnic boundary lines?

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Ethnic divisions among people are social and political constructions, and are thus subject to struggles and change[9]. Consequently, the quality and quantity of interactions across social borders are not purely individual decisions. Furthermore, they can be determined by social contexts, including local neighbourhoods and schools with differing compositions. More research is needed to determine more precisely how structural conditions and political interventions shape the ways in which diversity is experienced, and how different actors could thus influence interactions and linkages across borderlines.

In the 1970s, researchers investigated a different 'community question'[10]. At the time, people were worried about the impact of urbanization on personal networks and resultant solidarity. Since then, many studies have shown that the level of solidarity in the supposedly heterogeneous, impersonal cities is no lower than in rural areas. In a similar manner, individuals and social groups who today experience difficulties with increased ethnic and migration-based diversity in their surroundings might find ways to deal with it in a constructive manner tomorrow.

above and left | Diversity is nowadays a normal feature of urban life.

below | How do fleeting encounters that characterize modern city life impact on attitudes?

Top right image: Cate Gillon, Getty Images / Middle image: S. Vertovec, MPI Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity