

## 'Bridging' Social Capital Seminar Series

### Seminar no.3: Diversity and social cohesion

#### **Bridging social capital and managing ethnic identity in diverse communities**

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##### **1. Diversity and social capital: some international evidence**

I start with Robert Putnam's argument based on small area evidence from the US in which he argues:

- In favour of increasing ethnic diversity in modern societies;
- In the short to medium term immigration and ethnic diversity will challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital
- In the long run, however, successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the effects of diversity. The challenge is to create a new broader sense of "we".

In this presentation I want to examine the second claim – that ethnic diversity and social capital are negatively associated at the small area level and question the third –that bridging activities lead to new forms of shared identity by using Northern Irish evidence to illustrate the complexity in the relationship between bridging and identity.

Putnam's evidence suggests that the more ethnically diverse a neighbourhood:

- the less trusting people are of everybody;
- the lower the confidence in local government;
- less confidence in people's own ability to exert influence;
- lower expectations of cooperative behaviour;
- less likelihood of engaging in voluntary activity or in giving;
- fewer friends;
- lower perceived quality of life;
- more time watching TV.

This is true even when controlling for both compositional and contextual variables and controlling for economic inequality

Before returning to Putnam's prescriptions, it's worth comparing this evidence with evidence from elsewhere.

First, some UK evidence: Laurence and Heath (2008) measured the predictors of community cohesion which they define by attitude indicators chief among which is: "to what extent do you agree or disagree that this local area (within 15/20 minutes walking distance) is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?"

(This is not the same as the usual measures of social capital, but is analogous). In a variation of Putnam's findings, they conclude:

- ethnic diversity among settled people is positively related to cohesion – the more diverse a neighbourhood, the higher the cohesion
- the higher the proportion of recent immigrants, the lower the community cohesion;
- inter-ethnic friendships are positively correlated with greater community cohesion;
- The greater the levels of disadvantage, the lower the levels of community cohesion.
- The relationship between the variables is different for different ethnic groups, that is to say, compositional variables do matter.

In Canada, research has found that the extent of ethnic diversity is a poor predictor of the levels of social capital (Aizlewood and Pendakur, 2007). "Scores on social capital indicators tend to increase as community-level diversity increases, but socio-demographic factors have greater explanatory power, particularly age, education and income". This suggests that in a highly urban society like Canada, ethnic diversity is not the place to look to understand variation in levels of social capital. This seems to support the findings of Laurence and Heath for the UK. Diversity can be important for social capital, but it has relatively low explanatory power when set against compositional and contextual variables.

This is reflected in country level data in Europe where the effects of diversity are either difficult to pick up or are ameliorated by other factors. Thus Hooghe et al (2006) analyzed data drawn from the European Social Survey and from OECD data on migration patterns for 21 European countries and concluded that in Europe at the level of the nation state rising ethnic diversity and increasing rates of inward migration have had no significant detrimental effects on social cohesion. In some thoughtful remarks in summer 2007 on the VSSN discussion list, Putnam makes plain that he is not arguing that compositional and contextual variables are not important, but he reiterates his point that even if these are taken into account, ethnic diversity poses a deep and measurable challenge to community cohesion that policy is right to address. His position does not seem that far from that proposed by Laurence and Heath for the UK; the difference lies in the UK problem being identified by recent immigration rather than ethnic diversity in itself. Intuitively this seems a surprising result and I'd be interested in comments. It may reflect well on Putnam's argument that over time the negative impact of diversity weakens to the extent that it can become a strength.

## **2. Bridging and bonding: some puzzles**

There is an argument in favour of viewing the US as exceptional. Putnam himself acknowledges that racial segregation is widespread if not universal at local area level in the US. Banting and Kymlicka (2006) have pointed out that American history of slavery, the civil war and black emancipation cast a long shadow in a way not replicated anywhere else. The UK, as an old colonial power is much more like the Netherlands and similar European countries that had multi-ethnic empires than the USA. But there do seem strong overlaps with Putnam's evidence and it maybe that it is Canada that is exceptional here.

None of this is to deny the importance of bridging social capital as a resource for community cohesion. This debate has been about the relative importance of ethnic diversity as a driver for low stocks of social capital against other plausible contenders. Putnam argues:

It is my hypothesis that a society will more easily reap the benefits of immigration, and overcome the challenges, if immigration policy focuses on the reconstruction of ethnic identities, reducing their social salience without eliminating their personal importance. *In particular it seems important to encourage syncretic, 'hyphenated' identities; identities that enable previously separate ethnic groups to see themselves in part, as members of a shared group with a shared identity* (Putnam, 2007: 161)

Putnam goes on to argue that public policies are required that will create more opportunities for “meaningful interaction across ethnic lines” arguing that such places and activities will enable people to become comfortable with diversity over time (ibid: 164). This seems to suggest that bridging social capital is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the creation of ‘syncretic’ identities and greater inter-ethnic comfort. It is a view that has a high salience in current UK policy, notably in its response to the report of the Commission on Cohesion, Our Shared Future, repeating a core argument of the equivalent Northern Ireland document of two years earlier, A Shared Future. But the Northern Ireland evidence shows that there is something very odd about the underlying assumption.

### **3. Some perplexing implications of the Northern Ireland evidence**

Putnam makes the point that in the US case, just about the only measure not negatively affected by ethnic diversity is membership of voluntary associations. But do voluntary associations necessarily offer the meaningful interaction Putnam is looking for in his policy prescriptions? There are two questions to address here. First is whether what Putnam calls “syncretic” identities do in fact lead to greater ease in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods; second is to ask whether, even if this is the case, the interactions that occur in civil society organizations do have this effect. The Northern Ireland evidence shows that neither is necessarily true.

The evidence comes from a survey of voluntary and community organizations conducted in 2006. There were 365 respondents, a 67% response rate. Free responses by 135 (37.7 %) respondents were analysed along with interviews with community and voluntary sector leaders in 6 neighbourhoods.

We should get one common misconception out of the way first. Northern Ireland voluntary organizations are not in themselves more cross community than are other social structures.

Tables one and two shows the percentages of respondents in Northern Ireland who said their friends or their relatives were the same religion as themselves.

**Table one**

**About how many of your friends would you say are the same religion as you?  
(percentages)**

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>all</b>	15	13	14
<b>most</b>	51	50	50
<b>About half and half</b>	30	30	26
<b>Less than half</b>	3	5	8
<b>none</b>	1	0	1

Note: the question in 2000 was worded as follows: *Are many of your friends the same religion as yourself?*

**Table two**

**Levels of out-group family membership in Northern Ireland 2005 and 2006  
Percentages saying how many relatives are the same religion as you**

	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>all</b>	31	36
<b>most</b>	55	48
<b>half</b>	8	11
<b>Less than half</b>	4	4
<b>none</b>	0	1

Table three indicates the communal affiliation of members of management committees/boards of directors of NI voluntary organizations.

**Table Three  
Communal affiliation of Northern Ireland Voluntary Sector Management  
Committees**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid percent</b>
<b>Wholly Catholic</b>	40	11.2	13.1
<b>Mostly Catholic</b>	69	19.4	22.5
<b>Mixed</b>	80	22.5	26.1
<b>Mostly Protestant</b>	75	21.1	24.5
<b>Wholly Protestant</b>	42	11.8	13.7
<b>Missing</b>	50	14.0	100
<b>Total</b>	356	100	

Note: Wholly Catholic =100% Catholic, Mostly Catholic = >60% Catholic, Mixed =< 60% Protestant/Catholic, Mostly Protestant = >60% Protestant, Wholly Protestant =100% Protestant.

Friendship ties are predominantly in-group, although there is some evidence of friendships being formed across the divide. It is notable how few people had a majority of friends from their out-group. In-group ties are even more strongly apparent within families. Around one third of respondents said all their relatives were the same religion as themselves and around 85% said all or most of their relatives were the same religion as themselves.

The pattern of membership of voluntary organization boards or management committees fits the same pattern; these measures suggest it lies between the degree of cross-community friendship ties and family relationships. It may be that the formal ties of management committees are more constrained by ethnic divisions than are friendships, in that organizations are more constrained by divided neighbourhoods, or it may be an artifact of the data in that 'friendship' is not defined in the Life and Times data and might be widely interpreted by respondents. But the data do show that the structures of individual voluntary organizations do not in themselves overcome divisions and may possibly reinforce them.

However it is also the case that the activities of many voluntary and community organizations do provide a site for cross-community mixing around commonly shared concerns. Indeed it is possibly the most important contribution has been to present issues into the public domain as if they have cross-community support.

Almost all respondents to the survey (96.2 per cent) thought their organizations provided opportunities for people from differing backgrounds to do things together. While the proportion drops to just under two thirds (65 per cent) when it was a matter of encouragement to work on explicit cross-community issues, nevertheless this evidence suggests that the activities of voluntary organizations are an important site for mixing across the ethno-sectarian divide. This was reflected in the 65.7 per cent of respondents who reported cross-community friendships and socializing taking place and low levels of anxiety expressed. Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "People in my organization would feel anxious about mixing with people in the other community". Over 85 per cent of those who responded either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

However, some important caveats must be entered here. Only 30.1 per cent of respondents said that the question of Protestants and Catholics working together was addressed directly in discussions about organizations' work. A larger proportion of organizations addressed equality of access to services, where 60.1 per cent of respondents reported doing so and for the large majority of these (78.1 per cent) it was not at all divisive. These results suggest that the issue of Protestant Catholic relations is most readily addressed within the context of the service functions of organizations, but that there is a resistance to confronting the issue in more general contexts.

There were differences in the responses of the Protestant and the Catholic organizations to these questions. Taken together and comparing organizations that are wholly and mostly Catholic with those that are wholly and mostly Protestant, it is evident that the Protestant organizations appeared to be less likely to engage with issues to do with cross-community working. The summary results are set out in Table IV. They show that a notably higher proportion of the all Catholic organizations both being willing to discuss Catholics and Protestants working together and to address the issue of equality of access to services than was the case for the all Protestant group of organizations. It is perhaps particularly noteworthy that less than half of Protestant organizations reported discussing equality of access to services.

**Table Four**  
**Proportion of organizations indicating a willingness to engage in cross-community discussion by Catholic and Protestant organizations**

	<b>Catholics and Protestants working together: % saying 'yes'</b>	<b>Equal access to services for Catholics and Protestants: % saying 'yes'</b>
<b>All Catholic organizations</b>	<b>41.5</b>	<b>71.4</b>
<b>All Protestant organizations</b>	<b>25.4</b>	<b>49.1</b>
<b>All organizations</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>60.0</b>

Significance levels:

chi sq=6.39, df(1), p < 0.05

chi sq=11.17, df(1), p < 0.01

These findings suggest that whilst there would appear to be a great deal of mixing across communal divisions among all respondents, this would also appear to be done in such a way that explicit cross-community issues are not addressed, in many cases even to the extent of discussing equality of access to services. Furthermore it is clear that the degree to which organizations are embedded in one or the other of the two main ethno-sectarian groups in Northern Ireland may influence the likelihood of addressing cross-community issues in an explicit way. The ethno-sectarian composition of management committees appear relevant to organizational behaviour in ways that are an echo of evidence of generally lower levels of trust among Protestants of the intentions of Catholics since the 'Good Friday' agreement, than the reverse (ARK, 2006).

#### Qualitative data

We found three accounts of how organizations manage cross-community contact.

- Those that denied the relevance of the issue;
- Those that assumed their work had a cross-community impact although no evidence was presented.
- Those that addressed the issue directly.

The second of these was by far the commonest response.

Darby notes that there are three common methods that are adopted to manage relations between the communities in Northern Ireland:

- Avoidance;
- Selective contact;

- Functional integration

Darby means avoidance of contact through managing forays from single identity neighbourhoods carefully – shopping trips, journeys to work and socializing. It can also mean avoiding the issue where contact is necessary, for example the workplace (including voluntary sector workplaces). Tactics of avoidance of this sort are very clearly in evidence; this was sometimes interpreted as a virtue. This is what Darby means by selective contact – contact over one issue but not another. For example, farmers share equipment and time and buy and sell to one another at farmers' marts, whilst ensuring that land ownership almost never crosses communal boundaries. In other words activities can look integrated, but bottom lines are carefully preserved. What we see in much voluntary action in Northern Ireland is functional integration, that is to say people are often ready to work across boundaries around shared interests on the understanding that differences are never discussed. What came across from our research very strongly was a sense of fragility; people were reluctant to address the issue of communal difference in these settings as they were aware that doing so could be very damaging if not handled very carefully. People took pride in "leaving politics at the door" and could be very defensive if challenged about this. It has to be said that this type of cross-community integration has its value. Darby argues that the settings in which this occurs are very robust, able to absorb a fair amount of external pressure and this feature has played its part in keeping the lid on the violence. This attribute of cross-community activity has also been noted by Varshney (2002) in respect to communal violence in India.

But it is not what Putnam has in mind. In these contexts the strength of these structures is precisely related to the way they do not address questions of communal identity

The evidence supports Darby's (1986) insight that patterns of avoidance and functional integration are central to how people in Northern Ireland manage life in a deeply divided society. The qualitative data, in particular shows how in many organizations there are social norms of avoidance that ensure that trust gained within the setting is not undermined by broader issues of general inter-ethnic distrust. In these cases the social capital that is generated is functional for the purposes of the organizations concerned in that they can pursue their missions as they see fit, but does not necessarily develop into generalized norms of reciprocity and trust that cross ethno-sectarian barriers outside those specific contexts.

People develop hyphenated identities like 'Catholic single parent' or 'Protestant pensioner' in these groups but only if they leave the first half of these identities at the door and never acknowledge them. The relative ease and frequency of such cross community collaboration appears linked to the strong adherence to the norm of not referring to ethnic differences for fear of causing offence. It is as if hyphenated identities, far from being a path towards creating new networks of solidarity around both, left people having to choose which half of the duo to adopt depending on the requirements of the network they were participating in at any one time. In this way, high levels of in-group trust may have no particular implications for inter-group trust between Catholics and Protestants as generalized categories.

This analysis suggests a modification to the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital that is normally drawn. The treatment of this distinction in much of the social capital literature tends to assume that it is individual people who move in and out of bridging or bonding

networks, being based on the individual agent. Networks that cross other identity formations are treated as unproblematic. But the Northern Ireland evidence suggests something rather different is going on. The voluntary associations that create cross-community coalitions around specific interests are not necessarily creating bridging social capital at all. Rather, they may be creating new forms of bonding social capital around a specific new identity in a particular field that is durable precisely because it has a weak impact on bridging trust. The evidence suggests that the norms of reciprocity fostered in these settings serve to protect the ethnic formation of individual agents from challenge. The social capital available has utility for the field and for the agents within it whilst they are in it. Its utility may carry over into other fields but only so long as the identity it sustains is not challenged. The distinction between bonding and bridging should thus be drawn around the identities that are defined within specific fields. The norms that shape inter-ethnic shared identities simultaneously create an in-identity and an out-identity; the shared identity and the social capital it generates is only useable insofar as it excludes identities that are not shared.

I think the Northern Ireland case shows that the relationship between bridging social capital and the construction of social identity is much more complicated than Putnam seems to think. Bridging activities do not necessarily lead to bridging identities as people are very adept at managing their relationships with others in ways that preserve their sense of self, splitting off activities that might question these into a separate box. The Canadian example is also relevant in this context. Here the opposite effect seems to be evidenced. Ethnic diversity appears largely irrelevant to stocks of social capital because the political context foregrounds identities that welcome diversity; to be Canadian is to welcome and value ethnic diversity and there is a high general level of trust in government to manage immigration properly.

Both cases illustrate my general point. The relationship between ethnic identity and national identity is subject to forces beyond local impacts. Where these foreground and reinforce ethnic separation through processes of identity formation people will manage their local relationships in ways that seldom call these into question. Where these foreground a shared national identity, particularly one that values ethnic diversity, people will do the same, but with the opposite effect. Bridging social capital has its own value even in cases like Northern Ireland, but identity formation is seldom part of this.

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