Increasing levels of ethnic and racial diversity in industrialized democracies have given rise to growing concerns about community and social cohesion in Europe and North America. There are worries that ethnic diversity may threaten the ties that bind civil society together (Putnam 2007). Sceptics of diversity seem to believe that diverse societies create problems. Accordingly, the assumption is that they are more likely to breed ethnic conflict, less likely to develop into stable democracies, less likely to enact a solidaristic social welfare system and less likely to foster widespread generalized trust. While some of these earlier concerns have been refuted, pessimism continues to linger, especially within the broader public debate. Indeed, the acceptance of cultural diversity is relatively low across Europe, and the rise of far-right parties in some European countries has been partly fuelled by widespread anti-immigrant sentiment (Sniderman et al. 2000).

Concerns about the potentially negative impact of diversity have also emerged in academic debates. Levels of generalized trust, for example, are lower not only among minorities themselves, but also among majority populations living in diverse surroundings (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002). Robert Putnam (2007) has recently argued that in the short run racial and ethnic diversity is likely to reduce various aspects of social capital, defined as the norms of trust and reciprocity that characterize healthy communities. His study finds that in racially diverse areas in the USA, citizens tend to trust each other less and are less able to cooperate with one another to address shared problems. He even finds that trust in one’s own group members (e.g. the trust of Blacks in other Blacks) is reduced when facing social diversity. Several other studies confirm these insights in the US context (Alesina and La Ferarra 2000, 2002; Hero 2003). This kind of research leaves the impression that changing demographic realities in the USA are going to make democratic politics more difficult.

This chapter summarizes this debate and examines why it has recently stagnated. Some of the issues to be addressed include the one-sided focus on neighbourhood or regional ethnic diversity, and the related lack of integrating actual measures of inter-ethnic contact, and the little attention paid so far to considering the broader context in which diversity is experienced. We also propose a new approach to studying social cohesion that is relevant in diverse societies, discuss examples of research and end with suggestions for a research agenda.
The state of the research on diversity and social cohesion

The research on the consequences of ethnic diversity seems to create some puzzling results. According to some studies, when different ethnic or racial groups are brought together, the result is heightened intergroup conflict (Blumer 1958; Giles and Buckner 1993). According to this view, conflict results in part because ethnic or racial groups struggle over the same socio-economic resources or for cultural dominance. Thus majorities see out-groups as a threat to their own in-group, and as a result both in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice arise (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The ‘conflict’ or ‘threat’ hypothesis suggests that, as localities become increasingly diverse, out-group hostilities are likely to emerge. This phenomenon is found especially in less privileged areas and in the absence of meaningful contact (Oliver and Mendelberg 2000).

The empirical evidence for this thesis, however, is mixed. While some studies indicate that the ethnic diversity in areas is accompanied by lower levels of trust, out-group attitudes and social solidarity (Soroka et al. 2007a), other research turns up no relationships (Hooghe et al. 2009) or even positive effects (Stolle and Harell 2013). A recent meta-analysis that examines 90 articles on the topic finds that about 26 articles tend to support Putnam’s findings; however, the same number of studies reject his findings (25), and 39 studies provide mixed or neutral findings (Van der Meer and Tooms 2014). In short, the results do not seem to show any consistency and cannot really be generalized. We believe that there are several reasons for this unstable result, and these are discussed below.

Measuring diversity

One of the fundamental challenges to the study of the relation between diversity and social cohesion is related to the theorizing about which aspect of diversity actually matters. For example, in many of the discussed studies, diversity is tapped at various levels, at the contextual level, sometimes in countries, regions, states or provinces, counties, cities and census tracts. Clearly the variance in these contextual units of analysis will cause some of these diverging and inconsistent results (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2012). Moreover, studying diversity in these geographical units means that diversity should work mostly based on its visibility and its perception. Such measures of diversity do not take into account actual social interactions. While diverse regions or contexts usually offer more opportunities for inter-ethnic contact (Joyner 2000), this opportunity for contact is not always pursued or, in some cases, even likely. In other words, the puzzle about diversity may not be as much about the presence or absence of minority groups as such, but about the level of segregation in each area (Uslaner 2012) and variance in inter-ethnic social interaction patterns. If the most diverse areas and neighbourhoods are also the most segregated, then the potential for intergroup contact to counteract group conflict is minimized. Therefore, including inter-ethnic contact into the analyses is a fundamental goal.

Studies on the relationship between diversity and social capital, however, have not sufficiently integrated the insights of the contact hypothesis, which claims that positive interactions between people of different ethnic backgrounds can help to establish inclusive intergroup feelings (see Hewstone 2009). This is particularly surprising as the essence of the social capital literature has been that social relationships have value. In its early formulation by Putnam (2000), there were high hopes for so-called bridging contacts with people who are different from oneself. These beneficial contacts between people of different backgrounds were expected to happen, for example, in voluntary associations where people also learn to cooperate and trust each other. In
turn, these experiences of positive interaction across lines of difference were hoped to generalize to the broader society.

Contact theory is obviously not an invention of social capital scholars. It has a long history and has provided extensive evidence that inter-ethnic contact matters for lowering prejudice and negative out-group attitudes (Allport 1954; Hewstone 2009). Yet, the psychological literature on the contact hypothesis has not received the attention it deserves in this debate.1

Research so far has shown that the inclusion of contact does not fundamentally change the overall effect of neighbourhood diversity (Stolle and Harell 2013), however, it can overpower the weak and unstable effects of neighbourhood diversity on trust in some contexts (Semyonov and Glikman 2009). For example, people with inter-ethnic contact are not susceptible to negative effects of increasing contextual diversity (Stolle et al. 2013). Clearly, considering just neighbourhood diversity cannot possibly capture the myriad ways in which diversity is actually experienced. There is promising research, then, that intergroup contact can, at least to a degree, counteract the negative effects of living in a diverse context.

One of the major challenges of taking contact more seriously, of course, are issues of endogeneity. There is a strong correlation between prejudice (or lack thereof) and having diverse friendships, but the direction of causation presents a real problem. While the relationship is almost certainly reciprocal, researchers need to invest in designs that attempt to capture the direction of effects. Longitudinal and experimental studies are promising avenues for this (as an experimental example, see Veit and Koopmans 2014).

We also need to make sure we do not neglect the substance of interaction. Not all interaction is equal. Some interactions occur in hierarchical relationships (e.g. a citizen and a police officer) while others are between relative equals (e.g. between neighbours). Other interactions include shared commitment to an outcome (e.g. working together in a sports team or on a community project), while yet others may be more adversarial (e.g. competing for community resources or those in a court of law). Without research that includes both measures of contact and context, we cannot begin to disentangle the effects, and this is key in making sense of the conflicting results that plague the current debate.

The importance of the broader context

While we believe strongly that we need to dig down into the nature and quality of contact that occurs in diverse contexts, we also think that it is equally important to look up into the broader context in which such interaction is embedded. Two societies with equal proportions of immigrants distributed in similar ways across regions may still vary greatly in terms of how such diversity is experienced. One society may have a long history of living with such diversity, with policies in place that promote a positive view of diversity and a relatively friendly discourse in favour of diversity animating public debates. Another may have recently experienced large and new waves of immigration and a hostile political climate. Such contexts can matter greatly to how the average citizen thinks about others in society and how she experiences diverse interactions. In a society where diversity is normalized in everyday life, interactions with people from various backgrounds are more likely to be positive, and hence more likely to promote positive outcomes for social cohesion.

In other words, diversity is not experienced in a vacuum. There is a political discourse and nation-wide (or at least region-wide) value system that influences and shapes whether and how diversity might affect social cohesion (Laxer 2013). One particularly promising avenue for exploring such political discourses is by looking at how political parties are framing the issue of diversity. An article by Helbling et al. (2013) examines party discourses on national and...
immigration issues. The analysis shows that diversity on its own does not have a negative effect on generalized trust. Rather, it is the combination of the higher proportion of foreigners and the political mobilization of immigration in national party discourses which diminish generalized trust. The more often political parties mentioned the topic of immigration in a diverse country, the more this became threatening to trust in society.

Party discourses are not the only way to examine the context in which diversity is experienced. Policy contexts also provide important evidence about the larger norm environment, especially in countries that have a longer history of managing diversity. Canada is a good example. While it is often considered unique when compared to the European context because of the perceived success of multiculturalism, we cannot simply dismiss it as an outlier. Rather, it provides a good case for studying just how much the norm environment can matter. Canada has a very diverse population, with about one in five of its residents (20.6 per cent) being foreign born, the highest percentage in the G8 (Statistics Canada 2013: 6f.). The population is ethnically diverse and relatively young, meaning that in the past 40 years, the ethno-cultural makeup of Canada has changed drastically, largely due to immigration. While it would be a mistake to argue that there has not been any tension, the official discourse has largely been welcoming and open to diversity and immigration, which is reflected in both the policy climate and in public opinion. The principle of multiculturalism was adopted by the Canadian government in 1971, enshrined in the constitution in 1982, and, since the 1990s, Canadians have been increasingly supportive of immigration and ethnic diversity (Harell and Deschâtelets 2014). Today, then, we expect a very different norm environment than, say, what existed in the 1960s or even the 1980s, and this should condition the diversity–social cohesion nexus, especially for the youngest generation.

This assumption is based on the idea that diversity can become normalized and that, when it does, diverse interactions are less likely to evoke threat and distrust. While Putnam’s (2007) work is often cited to show the negative effects of diversity, he also suggests that, over time, these effects may diminish. This may be particularly true for younger generations that come of age in such environments. Younger generations in diverse and multicultural societies should be more immune to increasing diversity around them compared to generations who were socialized into a homogeneous time period with little government policy in place that supports immigrant integration and recognition of ethnic diversity.

Our previous work speaks directly to this generational effect by looking at how diverse social networks affect younger Canadians compared to the older generations (Stolle and Harell 2013). We argue that the different norm environment in which young people have grown up creates more opportunities to experience positive inter-ethnic contact and, as a result, will promote the generalization of positive intergroup experiences that can be measured by variables such as generalized trust. We find that, for older generations, contextual diversity and even diverse social networks have negative effects on trust. In contrast, diverse social networks among the younger generation consistently benefit them in terms of trust. In other words, we find asymmetrical effects with young Canadians not experiencing the adverse effects of diversity in their surroundings and benefiting positively from their inter-ethnic contacts. Again, such an approach combines contextual diversity with actual contact and considers how both can influence attitudes across generations. Furthermore, it embeds these findings within a specific norm environment in the Canadian context that we argue may not necessarily be generalized to other countries where the broader norm environment is not favourable.

Taking the norm environment more seriously may also help to account for the variance in country-level findings. As we discussed before, the negative effects of increasing diversity are not found everywhere, although they seem more likely in the United States compared to other areas of Western democracies.
These conclusions, however, are challenged by other recent work. With data spanning three decades, Dinesen and Sønderskov (2012) find that immigration-related diversity at the municipality level depresses generalized social trust in Denmark; and so does Schaeffer (2013) with data from 55 cities and regions in Germany. Similar findings are reported for the Netherlands by Lancee and Dronkers (2011) for contact with neighbours. In Canada, results are mixed. While Canadians who live in ethnically diverse environments are also less trusting overall (Soroka et al. 2007a), their attitudes of social solidarity are completely unaffected (Soroka et al. 2007b). Overall the tally collected by van der Meer and Tolsma (2014) shows that 50 per cent of US studies, but only 25.6 per cent of European studies (and only 11.1 per cent of European cross-national studies) and 16.7 per cent of Anglo-Saxon studies outside of the USA and Europe support the negative relationship between diversity and trust.

In sum, there is not only variation in the results for the relationship between diversity and social cohesion based on contextual data, but also this variation is unequally distributed between North America and Europe. While US neighbourhood studies often find that diversity negatively shapes the views of others and out-groups, the results from European cases and in Canada are less homogeneous. This calls for a more nuanced consideration in cross-national research that does not rely simply on aggregate percentages of foreign-born statistics. This nuance can be achieved by looking at how diversity emerged over time and how both the public and the state have reacted to it at key periods. Our analyses of the divergent effects of diversity on different generations suggest the potential for such an approach. More generally, we see several ways to contextualize aggregate measures of diversity. One way, as Putnam (2007) himself has suggested, is to look at changes in rates of diversity rather than simply the proportion. Another avenue of research is to focus more on heterogeneity (defined as the presence of multiple groups) rather than simply the White–other dichotomy. Along with changing rates of immigration, understanding what makes up a given country’s diversity may be equally important. Countries in which immigrants originate in a particular place (especially when those immigrants tend to have lower socio-economic status than the receiving country and are more culturally distinct), might experience more negative reactions compared to a situation where diversity is spread out over multiple groups (and when these groups are not socially disadvantaged). Finally, the types of immigrants who enter the host countries matter (e.g. whether they be primarily family reunification, asylum seekers or economic class immigrants), as does the level of illegal immigration into a country. This is especially important because we know people perceive immigrants differently based on where they come from and their socio-economic status, and to a lesser extent whether they are bringing families with them (Iyengar et al. 2013).

Revising the measure of social cohesion: the way forward

Another major reason for the divergent results is the use of different dependent variables across various studies. While they all are meant to capture some aspect of social cohesion, social capital or social solidarity, they range from various types of trust, out-group attitudes and neighbourhood feelings, to problem solving in the neighbourhood. While these are certainly relevant aspects of cohesion, the literature on the concept of social cohesion has not yet addressed how to redefine social cohesion in a time of immigration and diversity. Early work tended to view social cohesion very narrowly, and it was almost synonymous with the idea of a community defined by shared characteristics, often of an ascriptive nature (such as blood ties, ethnicity or some inherent national identity) (Harell and Stolle 2011).

There is little room for diversity in such conceptions, making ethnic and racial minorities a priori a challenge to community, or at best placing the burden to conform unfairly on their
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shoulders, with little consideration of how majority values or culture may need to change to incorporate new groups of citizens. While a minimal set of shared liberal democratic values may be necessary (Stanley 2003), serious discussion and caution is required to make sure that the values set up as desirable do not exclude those who are perceived to be visibly or culturally different from the dominant society.

Social cohesion must, therefore, be defined in such a way that it includes larger attitudes that are not assimilationist in nature. One way to do this is to extend the concept of social cohesion to include larger attitudes such as generalized trust and tolerance rather than focusing on adoption of majority culture, which some of the literature in this area has done. It may also require focusing more closely on network actors such as the density of social networks in an area. The questions that arise in this context are related to the equal access to these beneficial networks, as well as to a focus on how equally spread values such as generalized trust are. A focus on the spread of values is all the more salient, given recent concerns that it may be inappropriate (or impossible) to expect generalized trust from marginalized members of society toward members of the dominant majority (Arneil 2006). In short, while measures of generalized trust and out-group trust have been widely used in studies on social cohesion, we suggest that the gaps of trust between minority and majority groups are of equal if not higher importance.

For these reasons, we believe that future work needs to be careful not only in defining the nature of diversity (level of analysis, causal mechanisms and norm environment in which it occurs), but also in how we define and operationalize the concept of social cohesion. Social cohesion, in effect, is about how well people get along with each other and, importantly, on what terms interaction between people take place. Many social arrangements may lead to an equilibrium which may define a somewhat stable set of social relationships that could be considered a community, but in our view social cohesion should be defined by a set of social relations that are characterized by people’s ability to collaborate with one another to solve collective issues and to conduct dialogue in a way that does not privilege one social group’s identity or perspective over another. Given the limitations with current conceptualizations of social cohesion, we propose a refined definition of social cohesion as cooperative relations among individuals and groups of individuals that are based on mutual recognition, equality and norms of reciprocity. We see such relationships as defining a socially cohesive community and necessary for both the peaceful and democratic functioning of localities, states and even supranational communities. This relational view of social cohesion takes as a starting point that for a political community to be cohesive, it must be inclusive.

Social cohesion as primarily a relational concept can be observed at two key levels of analysis. At the macro-level, we argue that socially cohesive societies are characterized by structural equality across salient social groups. At the micro-level, socially cohesive societies are characterized by extensive and overlapping networks among individuals. We view the two levels as being causally related, and we argue that a society characterized by large structural gaps among groups is unlikely to foster extensive and overlapping networks. When both the relationship among groups is relatively equal and relationships among individuals are extensive and bridge salient social cleavages, we assume that people from various social groups are likely to hold a number of facilitative values that support and reinforce these relationships. We argue that the focus should be specifically on facilitative attitudes that reinforce non–hierarchical relationships and the capacity for shared conversations about issues facing the political community. Instead of promoting a totally shared normative framework or identity, we suggest that certain values are embedded in egalitarian relationships and are required in order for differently situated social groups to be able to cooperate and communicate with each other to address shared issues. In particular, we focus on norms of mutual recognition, democratic equality and reciprocity.
Such a definition of social cohesion puts the emphasis on how social diversity is experienced, and the norms and values – at both the micro- and macro-level – which are required for these interactions to be positive. By recognizing the limits and contradictions in the current research agenda, we believe that moving forward with a theoretically rich account of diversity and social cohesion is the only way to proceed.

Notes
1 There are exceptions, for example see Semyonov and Glikman (2009).
2 Of course, when contact is taken into account, more positive effects emerge overall.
3 We have developed this framework in more detail elsewhere (see Harell and Stolle 2011).

References


