

# On Half-Blind Men and Elephants: Understanding Greater Ethnic Diversity and Responding to “Good- Enough” Evidence

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## Introduction

Social researchers who aim for the three R’s—rigor, relevance, and responsible use of their work—have a tough row to hoe. The response to Robert Putnam’s (2007) recently announced claims about the relationship between diversity and community is a vivid reminder of this. Medical researchers, who also diagnose and prescribe, seem to be forgiven (or readily ignored) when new studies with simple headlines (on the importance of a particular kind of diet for preventing heart disease, for example) complicate or contradict the findings of earlier studies. And the major limitations of most medical studies are routinely sidelined, if they are mentioned at all, in the media and in popular debate social researchers must often struggle to convey to the public, in plain terms, exactly what they found, sometimes by emphasizing what they have not found, and also what caveats are essential to avoid misusing the findings. Even if a researcher succeeds in this struggle, there are no guarantees about responsible use. Not only will partisan advocates select the parts of the story that suit their political agendas, but every listener or reader will filter the story through a frame of reference grounded in personal experience, ideological attachments, and even—as we are discovering more and more—distinctive brain habits. No clinician will be there at the “end” point, assigned to guard against misusing the research. And many a storyteller along the way will commit the grave (to a scientist) sin of claiming that the researcher “proved” it was true.

These risks are all the more serious when social research tackles some of the most charged issues of our time, including rapidly increasing ethnic diversity in the United States and most other wealthy nations. But we cannot afford to shrink from the most controversial issues as a result or, worse yet, examine them within tiny communities of specialists who speak an arcane language known only to the initiated. In the proverb of the six blind men sur-

rounding an elephant, each man, feeling only the tusk or the trunk or some other part, thinks that his part reveals the nature of the whole. The problem is not that the blind men have dared to speak, but rather that they have not *judged* their findings appropriately or managed to *combine* their insights into a valid portrait of the elephant. In social research, we are, at best, half-blind: Even the most carefully conducted studies have important limits and multiple blind spots, and we all have interpretive lenses that limit what we can see, so the effort to judge as well as combine is all-important.

In the hope of contributing to that effort, I respond to Robert Putnam's findings about the relationship between ethnic diversity and community, variously defined, and to his interpretations of those findings as well. I also respond to Casey Dawkins's thoughtful critique of Putnam's study as a guide for policy. I will develop three main arguments:

1. *Understanding the larger, interpretive argument about growing diversity is as important as critically reviewing the empirical results.* Returning to the proverb of the blind men, it is one thing to give a valid description of a tusk and another to make valid inferences about the elephant. These are different kinds of intellectual tasks, and Putnam's major investment in the issue of ethnic diversity warrants a thoughtful response on both levels.
2. *It is time for societies with rapidly growing ethnic diversity to act on a much greater scale, despite gaps in research knowledge.* Recognizing methodological limits and informing the agenda of future research, as Dawkins does, are important steps, but so is acting on results that are good enough to warrant action. Much smart policy making is about acting in time on good-enough information. Global warming illustrates this at the extreme, because the costs of action that has been too long delayed, like the costs of inaction, could be catastrophic. This realization shifts debate to which forms of large-scale action would be wisest and away from whether large-scale action is required. Likewise, there is a serious question about how much longer we can afford to test the idea that perhaps population diversity is not a significant strain on solidarity or that it is a front for the real culprit of segregation or a diversion from the real problem of deep economic inequality. Dawkins stops short of drawing these false dichotomies, but the risk of denial needs to be acknowledged.
3. *Managing coexistence is not a new challenge, and history is a much richer guide than today's charged debates encourage us to imagine.* As Putnam has emphasized in all of his work on social capital over the past

15 years—from *Making Democracy Work* (1993), which looked back to medieval Italy, to *Bowling Alone* (2000), which examined at length the Progressive Era in the early 20th century, to the latest article on diversity—history is an invaluable source of lessons on how habits of community develop, persist, and come to shift. History, if critically understood rather than romanticized, is a guide not only to what growing diversity means for our changing societies, but also what we can and should do about it. But our mental model of relevant history tends to be narrow and foreshortened. For example, we are fortunate if discussion includes the last great wave of immigration in American history, as it should. We rarely think to take the long view, comparing modern, liberal Western societies—as diverse places of incorporation, conflict, and cooperation—with very different kinds of societies, including the incredibly diverse ones that predated the modern era. That wider range can be an even more powerful source of timely lessons, as I will explain.

### **The results and the larger argument**

Dawkins focuses on the empirical results that underlie Putnam’s core claim that greater ethnic diversity leads people to “hunker down” (137) or withdraw from community life. Beyond highlighting an association, Putnam argues that the evidence is sufficient to point the causal arrow. Dawkins rightly underlines, and Putnam himself acknowledges, the risks in making such a causal inference based on nonexperimental, cross-sectional data—that is, a large survey with all of the strengths and weaknesses of survey research. Valid empirical results are the basis for any larger argument, to be sure, but understanding the full argument is important as part of interrogating the results. I will do both briefly.

Putnam’s argument has three parts:

1. Increased diversity, driven largely but not exclusively by immigration, is both inevitable and desirable.
2. In the short to medium run, diversity strains trust and associated habits of community.
3. In the medium to long run, successful immigrant societies *create* broader identities to dampen the strains and realize diversity’s many positives, but *this does not happen all by itself*.

Putnam is asking us to consider that it is not enough to celebrate diversity’s wonderful potential—what columnist Daniel Henninger (2007) referred

to in a *Wall Street Journal* article on the study as the tendency of diverse communities to be “yeasty and even creative.” Facing up to the work of *realizing* that potential is vital, too, if we are to build the public will that is required.

It is important to note that only the second argument is based directly on Putnam’s survey analyses and that, even then, it extrapolates from those analyses to posit a broader idea about where, in the motion picture that our changing society represents, his snapshot has caught the action—namely, “in the short to medium run” of the second great wave of immigration. This is an important frame for current debates about diversity and its implications, but we should bear in mind that the relationship between the empirical results and all three of the arguments, even the second one about the strains of diversity, is broad and expansive.

Second, let me turn to those results and to Dawkins’s critique of them. The Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey has a nested structure: It is a random sample of adults embedded in a nonrandom sample of “communities.” Some of the latter are cities, some are large counties or metropolitan regions, and some are entire states. This geography was dictated by philanthropic sponsors interested in benchmarking patterns of community and civic engagement in their target areas. Dawkins is right that basing and reporting claims about the make-up of “community” on correlations gets tricky when the data are structured in this way. Putnam’s text and the fine print (technical notes) must be read carefully to follow the reporting on neighborhoods (measured as census tracts), for instance, versus larger locales.

For these reasons, in a recent study of the determinants of interracial friendship based on the same survey data, I selected only “communities” that comprised coherent city-regions and ran multilevel models to disaggregate variation within those city-regions (for example, between civic “joiners” and nonjoiners or by the degree of racial mix in the respondent’s census tract) from variation across city-regions (Briggs 2007). It is true that the geocoded data allow us to attach individual respondents to any agglomeration we like, but aggregations of respondents do not necessarily make up communities, and models that analyze variance within versus across city-regions (through multilevel equations) are much more straightforward to interpret. They also allow us to create community-level predictor variables from the survey data—on attitudes and behaviors, for example—and not just the census.

But in offering alternative explanations for Putnam’s results, Dawkins relies on several conjectures that run counter to the empirical record—a record that Putnam knows quite well. For example, it is true that more ethnically diverse metropolitan areas tend to be more segregated at the neighborhood level (Logan 2003), thus making it difficult to disentangle diversity

effects from segregation effects, and that partly because of advances in transportation and communication technology, important social interactions are less and less likely to be centered on the residential neighborhood (Sampson 1988, 1999; Wellman 1979, 2001). In simple terms, the evidence is that most neighborhoods in the United States are *not* communities in the sense of being cohesive social worlds. Yet the immediate neighborhood can shape our perceptions.

It is perfectly possible for metropolitan diversity to encourage segregation by neighborhood, for most “intimate interactions” (as Dawkins puts it) to lie *outside* the neighborhood, and yet for diverse neighborhood make-up to negatively affect social trust. What is so compelling about Putnam’s results is their robustness: The so-called hunkering effect appears to carry across a wide range of these measures and at multiple levels of aggregation. Moreover, the fact that it appears to be generalized—to apply to how whites view other whites and blacks view other blacks, not just how each racial group views the other—is striking. Lower social trust is a generalized feature of life in the city as opposed to small towns (Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2002), but the variation in trust among city contexts in Putnam’s study is striking and begs for closer analysis.

So do selection effects, as Dawkins emphasizes. We know that settlement patterns are anything but random and that interpretations of context effects must address this issue most of all. It is not enough to dismiss the possibility of significant selection effects, as Putnam does when he writes, “[A] self-selection interpretation of our results would require...that ethnic minorities and immigrants would selectively choose to move into neighborhoods in which the majority of residents are most irascible and misanthropic” (2007, 153). The results might instead reflect the fact that many of these places are neighborhoods in transition. They are often either (1) mostly white areas becoming more nonwhite, wherein common patterns of disinvestment and political resignation by the incumbent whites, together with avoidance by prospective white in-movers, help make those places more accessible to minorities; or (2) gentrifying, mostly nonwhite areas taking in white renters, who are the nation’s main integrators on that front. In this context, it is important to remember that such renters tend to lead lives separate and apart from their minority neighbors (Ellen 2000).

Putnam’s models do suggest a robust association between ethnic diversity and hunkering but not one that is very large in terms of the variance explained. For several reasons, I am less concerned than Dawkins appears to be that Putnam’s results are spurious or mere artifacts of method, although I agree with much of the advice Dawkins presents and also with his overall

emphasis on taking residential choices more seriously. It need not be the case, for example, that ethnic minorities tend to choose places that happen to be hunkered down; we have a long history of selective in- and out-migration as diversity increases in ethnically identifiable neighborhoods.

Further, there are dangers, as Dawkins highlights, in failing to consider relative group sizes (the focus of group threat theory since the 1960s) and also in lumping all minorities together, or even lumping them together with whites, in heterogeneity indexes. Differences in racial status as well as the history of race relations suggest that this is never the place to start. This is why I separately analyzed each dyadic friendship direction (white-to-black, black-to-white, white-to-Hispanic, etc.) when using Putnam's data (Briggs 2007). I observed empirically that it was true that certain patterns—for example, the strong association between workplace socializing and having a friend of another race—are positive and robust for all racial groups in reporting friendships with members of the other racial groups, while other patterns do not have that universal trait. That was not something to assume a priori by aggregating all interracial friendships as though they were of a kind.

The biggest question ahead for analysts, however, is about selection: Can sorting across municipal jurisdictions, and also within them across neighborhoods, adequately explain the consistently negative association Putnam finds between diverse make-up (at multiple levels of aggregation) and lower community engagement and solidarity (through a wide array of measures of trust, perceived political efficacy, engagement, and more)? One straightforward way to test this would be to apply the sort of sensitivity analysis that Harding (2003) applies to observational data on neighborhood effects. He asks, in effect, “How *big* would selection effects need to be to explain the correlations we observe?”

### **Acting when information is “good enough” and acting in time**

I believe that it is high time to behave as if Putnam and others are right about the basic prescription—that despite the gaps in research knowledge and the shortcomings of even the most careful studies, we need to be acting on a much larger scale to make unprecedented diversity work in changing societies. Any sensible person would want to act on a problem (or opportunity) in time to make a difference, but acting prematurely, as we all learn young, can be very unwise. So how can we know when the time is right? Complex social problems do not present with a right time. There are better and worse times, and there are costs to inaction as well as action. Our best hope is to pick and manage the different risks, keep our eyes open (keep

learning), and make midcourse corrections. We should try to keep a level head about the results we obtain, avoiding the pitfalls of boosterism—as in, this is the *only* way to move ahead, and damn all the critics and competing ideas—which creates sacred cows and thwarts learning. Given how charged the debates about diversity have become, this will not be easy.

The key, in this instance of incomplete information and in others as well, is acting on the apparent challenge in ways that generate more learning. This is not a plea for a particular kind of social engineering, but it does suggest that we should understand how much leverage different kinds of creative social action are or are not likely to have, as I explore in the final argument.

### **The road ahead: Lessons of a wider, longer history**

We should, by all means, learn from the process of incorporation that helped define the last great wave of immigration in our history. And the near-hiatus in immigration between 1924 and 1964, combined with the effects of surviving the Great Depression and fighting the Second World War in the interim, are important parts of that process. In global parlance, the United States is a modern “settler state” that immigrants later joined in great numbers, not a nation of immigrants from the start. Like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, other Anglo-centric settler states undergoing a new wave of large-scale immigration, we can learn much from critical reflection on this immediately relevant past as well as from dialogue among nations. Scholars who are now transforming *assimilation theory*, which was constructed mainly to explain status attainment and social incorporation in the United States after the first great wave of immigration, are using this history routinely (see, in particular, Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 2007; Perlmann 2005; Portes and Rumbaut 2006).

But why stop there? European nation-states that are not modern settler states also reflect long histories of incorporation, conflict, and identity-making among disparate groups (Collins 2001). Other societies that predate the modern era likewise have much to teach us. These include the ancient Roman Empire, which incorporated a huge array of cultural and linguistic groups through the linked engines of commerce, public administration, and conquest, and the medieval Islamic Empire, which stretched from Persia to Spain and organized an unprecedented accommodation among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, again with economic exchange and the machinery of government playing important, bridge-building roles.

These were, of course, autocratic, not liberal-democratic societies. But I believe that taking the wider and longer view is important because more far-

ranging historical comparisons offer more analytic power, despite the corresponding challenges. We learn more about what it means to be human, and to manage age-old differences, by looking back through the ages, beyond the most obvious recent reference points. We appreciate the scale of our challenges and opportunities more if we consider a wider range of significant historical shifts, and doing so is part of deciding what to do with Putnam's advice—if we think the case for action is indeed good enough. Further, when we take a wider history into account, we disabuse ourselves of naïve faith in the power of positive attitudes alone, such as appreciating diversity or fostering tolerance.

Using comparative-historical analysis, I have posited a three-part theory of how societies have managed coexistence going back not a century but two millennia (Briggs 2004). The first mechanism is *boundary shift*, through which outsiders over time become insiders (“they” become part of “us”). The incorporation of European immigrants into the white American mainstream is the best-documented example (Alba and Nee 2003), but history offers other examples of how political and military imperatives, the structuring of economic exchange, and the extension of the rule of law shifts boundaries. The Romanization of the ancient world is a case in point. Putnam is right to call for creating “a broader sense of ‘we’” (139), and history is an even richer guide to how to do that than most contemporary observers have acknowledged.

The second mechanism is *tolerance*, which is a willingness to live with differences, not to be confused with active respect for others or the motivation to make the most of diversity. Tolerance helps buffer societies through the shocks of transition and is probably a precondition for shifting boundaries. It is an essential counterweight to the powerful psychological tendency to favor members of our own group and therefore helps curb animosity toward other groups (Brewer 1999). But it is a thin reed on which to base cultural, economic, and political life over the long haul. It does not, in and of itself, construct shared institutions or the wider sense of “we.” I believe that Americans have too much faith in the ability of tolerance alone to guide their response to much higher levels of ethnic diversity. Putnam's study suggests some reasons why tolerance falls short in the context of withdrawal from community life.

The third mechanism is *cross-cutting obligations*. Because each of us bears a variety of identities that are important to us, not just an ethnic one, we can forge connections that reflect a variety of roles and motivations we all bear (Simmel 1923). Most so-called bridging relationships are, in fact, probably cross-cutting ones (Briggs 2007): They can bridge on a key dimension

of *difference* (e.g., race or class) by bonding on another dimension of *shared identity* (e.g., political ideology or the social role of parenting). While ethnic identity remains an important source of meaning and, yes, also of division in human life, the good news is that we are not loyal always or everywhere or only to ethnic groups.

Cross-cutting obligations or loyalties are the protective webs of diverse societies, founded on intergroup friendships and looser ties—some of them business relationships, others more civic in character—and reining in the multiple strains of life in diverse settings. They represent a more far-reaching resource than tolerance when social boundaries persist—when “they” remain “other,” at least on the ethnic dimension—but a productive life of *engagement* among groups can be forged anyway. The key is forging and expanding the institutions that structure our social lives and thereby organize the connections.

The main problem is that we have not yet created adequate institutional mechanisms for constructing cross-cutting ties and shifting social boundaries appropriately. Ancient Rome had the imperial army, a truly remarkable institution that welcomed diverse contributors and conferred status through a central role in the day-to-day administrative life of the society, not just on the war-making frontier. The medieval Islamic empire—the progressive one headquartered in Spain—built far-flung trading networks and academies that translated the works of ancient Greece and Rome into Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin, thereby incorporating a variety of ethnic groups into its intellectual and political life and indirectly helping to stimulate the European Renaissance.

In this broader historical perspective, what forms of incorporation do we have? The military, as Putnam notes, is a partial 20th-century success story, especially for blacks, but that mechanism has a limited role to play. And, sadly, we do not yet require any form of national service. The workplace, as we are discovering more and more, is an important hub of connection across social borders in a nation with declining civic habits (Briggs 2007; Estlund 2003; Saguaro Seminar 2000). But the workplace also has functions, such as organizational self-interest, that compete with civic life and notions of good citizenship. We cannot expect the workplace to be our main civic connector or school of democracy.

With some exceptions, religious institutions have historically been very ethnically segregated in the United States. Putnam and others are investigating the ethnic diversity and other features of a remarkable, and still poorly understood, cultural phenomenon: evangelical mega-churches.

Primary and secondary schools have been getting more, not less, ethnically segregated for over a decade. They are also very segregated economically. Higher education faces a mixed future in the form of more diverse student populations but persistently unequal access to quality schools. This is particularly distressing, since schools, because of what they organize in the way of activities and where they touch us in the life cycle, are prime grounds for forging broader identities and friendships.

Finally, neighborhoods are simply not institutions; they do not naturally connect people in meaningful ways, despite the way real estate developers market the idea of community. Community building at the neighborhood level can be a part of the national response, but it seems unlikely to be the road to large-scale incorporation of diverse peoples unless we dramatically transform the types and functions of neighborhood associations, which tend to center on the interests of small numbers of activist homeowners.

The promising targets, for now, lie in organizing around the shared public concerns that can motivate us to collective action (but often do not) and the shared material needs that we pursue together in workplace projects (which, bounded by the authority structure of employment, are often more immediate). The first highlights the importance of engaging the public, inclusively defined, in problem solving through deliberation, advocacy and debate, and collaboration. Not only does civic withdrawal make this harder to do overall, but if the past is prologue, immigration will continue to play two distinct and complicating roles.

On the one hand, it overwhelmingly brings in goal-oriented people who, working with those who are already here, can actively become a public that recognizes itself as such—in the way John Dewey (1927) proposed—and strengthen the nation in the process. On the other hand, immigration is also a source of competition, conflict, and practical challenges that must be addressed: Should fiscal policy treat immigrant gateway cities differently? How should labor protections work for native-born workers versus newcomers and employers? How should we ensure security while protecting the civil liberties that help define us as an open society? And so on. Public policy and voluntary public action will need to complement each other, be more purposeful about forging interethnic bridges, and function at a much larger scale to address growing diversity.

There are many reasons to debate Putnam's results as well as his much broader arguments. But to me, there are no good reasons to behave as if diversity does not pose significant strains. Knowing that diversity brings enormous potential is not the same as realizing that potential. The latter project is urgent and must not be deferred until the science is more complete.

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