

# Outlook

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## **Two Views on Robert D. Putnam’s “*E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture*”**

Recently, the journal *Scandinavian Political Studies* published an article written by Robert D. Putnam and titled “*E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture.*” Casey J. Dawkins, assistant professor at Virginia Tech, reflects on Putnam’s contribution, pointing out shortcomings with regard to the measurement of diversity, aggregation bias, methodological problems with the regression model, and selection bias. Xavier de Souza Briggs, associate professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, acknowledges gaps in research knowledge but argues that it is time for societies with rapidly growing ethnic diversity to act on a larger scale, pointing out that history offers rich guidance on managing coexistence.

# Reflections on Diversity and Social Capital: A Critique of Robert D. Putnam's "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture"

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## Introduction

U.S. metropolitan areas are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. According to recent population estimates by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 111 of the nation's 361 metropolitan areas lost white population between 2000 and 2004 (Frey 2006). These changes have fueled a lively debate in Congress about immigration reform, in addition to sparking debates at the state and local government levels over the most appropriate way to provide public services to populations with diverse needs.

While many urban policy makers view these trends as opportunities to create cosmopolitan cities offering a diverse array of cultural amenities, Robert D. Putnam finds that increasing diversity may have unintended negative social consequences. His article "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," published in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, links increased ethnic diversity to declines in social capital, which include "social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" (Putnam 2007, 137). This controversial finding generated a flurry of news reports and a lively debate about policy implications. While Putnam argues that his findings point to the need to create new "shared identities" that respect ethnic and cultural differences, others have cited his research to justify tightened controls on immigration (Jonas 2007). Putnam's results also raise questions about the efficacy of a variety of income-mixing and desegregation policy initiatives pursued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development during the past decade, including HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere),

the Housing Choice Voucher Program, and the Moving to Opportunity demonstration initiative.

I argue that these policy debates are premature. I aim to show that Putnam's findings, while provocative, are difficult to interpret given the methodological and conceptual limitations of the study. The most important limitations include the failure to distinguish between diversity and residential segregation, potential biases resulting from aggregation across racial and ethnic groups, methodological problems with the specification of the regression model, and selection bias, which I argue is more problematic than the author acknowledges. Despite these methodological problems, I still commend Putnam and other scholars for tackling this very important topic. A broader goal of my essay, beyond the critique of Putnam, is to suggest how this research agenda could unfold.

### **Summary of the findings**

Putnam's analysis uses the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey of approximately 30,000 people conducted in 2000. The survey is a combination of a national sample consisting of approximately 3,000 observations plus a community-level sample that was constructed from surveys conducted in some 41 U.S. communities. These range in size from small towns such as Yakima (WA) to entire states in some cases. Because every survey response is geocoded, Putnam can match each respondent to census tract and community-level characteristics obtained from the 2000 census.

He begins by presenting bivariate correlations between community-level measures of social trust and ethnic homogeneity.<sup>1</sup> Social trust is measured as the percentage of respondents indicating that they trust either their own ethnic group or other groups a lot, and ethnic homogeneity is measured using a Herfindahl index. In this case, the Herfindahl index is equal to 1 if the ethnic composition of the surrounding community is composed of a single ethnic group and equal to zero if all ethnic groups are equally represented. Regardless of the measure of social trust employed, Putnam finds that higher levels of ethnic homogeneity are associated with higher levels of social trust.

He then goes on to estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models explaining the trust each individual has in his or her neighbors for the entire sample. Because this analysis is conducted at the individual level,

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<sup>1</sup>He suggests in the narrative that ethnic homogeneity is measured at the community level. Yet the axis for this variable is labeled as a census tract measure. Given that the community is the unit of analysis in this portion of the article, I assume that this is a typographical error.

he can match respondents to their average census tract characteristics. This allows him to examine the impact of ethnic homogeneity at the tract level, after he controls for a variety of neighborhood and individual factors. In this more detailed analysis, he again finds that more ethnic homogeneity is associated with more social trust.

Putnam observes that his findings are consistent with a perspective he defines as “constrict” theory, in which diversity dampens both bonding social capital (in-group solidarity) and bridging social capital (out-group solidarity). His theory is not developed beyond its expected empirical outcome, however. Although we are left to wonder why people would “hunker down” and become social introverts in response to increased ethnic diversity, his findings are consistent with a behavioral model where individuals receive a disutility from interacting with members of a different ethnic group. In neighborhoods or metropolitan areas exhibiting higher levels of diversity, the probability of encountering someone from a different ethnic group is higher, so people allocate a smaller portion of their total leisure time to social interactions to minimize the disutility from imperfect matches in social settings. Households may also respond by allocating more time to nonleisure activities, such as commuting, particularly if doing so enables them to reside in areas with lower housing prices, as predicted by the monocentric urban model (Alonso 1964; Mills 1972; Muth 1969).

## **Critique**

My critique of these findings focuses on four issues: (1) the measurement of diversity, (2) aggregation bias, (3) methodological problems with the specification of the regression model, and (4) selection bias. I also consider several other minor issues within these broader categories.

### *The measurement of diversity*

A limitation of Putnam’s analysis is its inability to distinguish between the effects of community-level ethnic diversity and neighborhood-level residential segregation. In the scholarly literature, ethnic diversity is typically defined in terms of a single spatial unit of analysis, usually the metropolitan area or nation. Residential segregation, however, is typically understood in terms of the relationship between ethnic compositions distributed over smaller units of analysis (census tracts, census blocks, or other equivalent local neighborhood units) relative to the level of ethnic diversity observed at a larger scale. In metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, for example, many different ethnic groups are represented in the larger metropolitan area, yet

neighborhoods are composed largely of residents from a single group. Thus, whereas residents have the opportunity to come into contact with a diverse population at the metropolitan level, each person's residential life is shaped largely by interactions with members of a single ethnic group.

There are important reasons to believe that the diversity observed at the metropolitan versus the neighborhood scale could influence social trust in different ways. If social interactions are confined to the immediate neighborhood, then the surrounding metropolitan area may provide a poorly measured proxy for the level of diversity relevant for social interactions. At a minimum, this implies that Putnam's measure of ethnic homogeneity likely exhibits measurement error.

Even if the community is an appropriate geographic unit for defining social relations, it is possible that the more intimate interactions observed at the neighborhood level and the casual interactions observed at the community level may influence social trust in opposite ways. If conflict theory applies, then residents of an ethnically diverse metropolitan area would likely choose ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods to avoid encountering members of another group. In this case, the measure of community diversity would be negatively correlated with neighborhood measures of segregation, and the evidence Putnam presents would support the opposite conclusion that (neighborhood-level) ethnic homogeneity and social trust are negatively correlated.

Another reason to examine local segregation separately from metropolitan diversity is that decisions on intermetropolitan and intrametropolitan residential location are typically driven by very different sets of factors. Households tend to select metropolitan areas for employment reasons. Given a household's choice of employment location, mobility within the metropolitan area is usually shaped by intrametropolitan differences in housing or commuting costs, neighborhood amenities, public service packages, and, often, neighborhood racial or ethnic composition. If preferences for these amenities vary by ethnic group, then residential segregation within metropolitan areas may occur as households sort into communities and neighborhoods offering different local public services and amenities (Dawkins 2005). If residential segregation is driven largely by the Tiebout (1956) sorting process and residents are more satisfied with local public services as a result, then households may have fewer incentives to participate in community meetings and other activities that build social capital. This scenario suggests that the extent of local residential segregation may be more relevant than metropolitan ethnic diversity in shaping social capital.

### *Aggregation bias*

Although Putnam calculates a measure of trust in “other” ethnic groups, he does not examine variations in this measure *across* ethnic groups. We know from survey data, for example, that blacks tend to be more willing than whites to reside in neighborhoods where other racial or ethnic groups are highly represented (Dawkins 2004). By aggregating across ethnic groups in this way, Putnam ignores several important sources of heterogeneity. In the community-level analysis, we are given the average level of within-group and between-group social trust for each community, but we do not know the actual degree of exposure to other ethnic groups experienced by the respondents. For example, the 510 people who responded to the Atlanta Metro portion of the survey could all have resided in the majority-white suburbs and hence experienced a very high level of ethnic homogeneity compared with the average resident of metropolitan Atlanta.

Further, because the community-level analysis does not consider the respondent’s ethnic background, we do not know whether residence in a majority-white suburb equates with a high or low level of exposure to other ethnic groups. Even in the individual-level analysis, which controls for the ethnicity of the respondent in addition to the ethnic composition of the neighborhood, his or her ethnicity is not interacted with the ethnic homogeneity of the surrounding census tract. As a result, we do not know whether whites exhibit different levels of social trust when surrounded by white versus nonwhite neighbors. Because contact theory is ultimately about exposure to *other* ethnic groups and not about exposure to a *variety* of ethnic groups, Putnam’s results are not necessarily inconsistent with this hypothesis. Further, Alesina and La Ferrara (2002) find that ethnic heterogeneity impairs the formation of social capital only when minority groups are too small to form their own separate community groups. This finding points to the need to interact the ethnicity of the respondent with the relative size of his or her ethnic group in the surrounding census tract.

Putnam’s failure to distinguish between different types of ethnically homogeneous and ethnically mixed communities also masks important underlying sources of heterogeneity. An area that is 100 percent white would exhibit the same value on the Herfindahl index as an area that is 100 percent black. Homogeneous white neighborhoods and metropolitan areas exhibit very different regional, cultural, economic, and social characteristics than do metropolitan areas and neighborhoods where minority groups are more highly represented. Also, we know that while many ethnically mixed neighborhoods exhibit stable levels of diversity, many are rapidly transitioning from one state to another, depending on where the neighborhood falls with respect

to the ethnic tipping point. A neighborhood that is 50 percent white and 50 percent black, for example, may be transitioning to either an all-white or an all-black neighborhood. The first type of transition is more likely associated with gentrification, while the second is likely associated with white flight—two very different neighborhood dynamics that cannot be distinguished in Putnam's cross-sectional analysis. Within these two extremes also lie stable ethnically integrated neighborhoods.

### *Specification of the regression model*

The regression analysis relies on an OLS model when an ordered probability model would have been more appropriate, given that the dependent variable is measured on a 4-point ordinal scale. OLS in this case estimates the marginal change in social trust resulting from a 1-unit change in the degree of ethnic homogeneity when other factors are held constant. Putnam's results suggest that moving from 0 to 1 on the ethnic homogeneity scale (the full range of this variable) would result in a 0.18 increase in the 4-point ordinal scale of trust. On its face, the magnitude of this effect does not seem large, since increasing the degree of homogeneity from the lowest to the highest possible value would not raise the index even a single point. This is a misleading interpretation, however, because the 0.18 estimate is based on the assumption that the dependent variable is measured on a continuous scale that ranges from negative to positive infinity, rather than on a categorical scale that is bounded by 1 and 4.

In addition to inaccurate predicted probabilities, particularly at the extremes of the distribution of the dependent variable, statistical significance tests based on the OLS model will be incorrect because they fail to take into account the presence of heteroskedasticity, which occurs when the dependent variable is measured on a categorical scale. OLS in this case also fails to consider the fact that the dependent variable is actually a ranking rather than an interval-level variable. A more reliable estimate would have been obtained from an ordered probability model such as the ordered probit or ordered logit, which estimates the conditional probability of a higher categorical response on the ordinal scale, compared with the next highest category on that scale.

### *Selection bias reconsidered*

If people with low levels of social capital choose to reside in neighborhoods with low levels of ethnic diversity, then Putnam is correct in his assessment that selection bias likely leads to underestimating the impact of diversity

on social capital. In this version of the selection bias story, households that exhibit ethnic prejudice and low levels of trust in other ethnic groups (and perhaps even their own) choose residential location for the explicit purpose of avoiding negative social interactions. As a result, the positive correlation between neighborhood-level ethnic homogeneity and social capital is dampened by the fact that as social trust increases, households become more likely to choose to reside in a diverse neighborhood.

The impact of selection bias is complicated, however, by the fact that a household's allocation of time to social interactions is a function of the total allocation of time to leisure activities, which in turn is a choice variable in the residential location decision. In the monocentric model (Alonso 1964; Mills 1972; Muth 1969), households make trade-offs between housing prices and leisure time lost because of commuting to choose an optimal residential location within the urban area. Without first specifying a model in which households choose residential locations that yield the maximum utility from the consumption of leisure (including social interactions and other leisure activities), housing, and other goods, subject to budget and time constraints, it is impossible to determine a priori the direction of bias resulting from selection effects.

### **Placing Putnam's study in context**

Despite these methodological issues, Putnam's study is consistent with an emerging body of literature that examines the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on social capital and community participation. Studies have shown that socioeconomic diversity is associated with lower expenditures of public goods (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Poterba 1997), particularly on social programs (Lindert 1996); lower participation in groups (La Ferrara 2002); and lower levels of trust (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Glaeser et al. 2000). These and other studies are reviewed in Costa and Kahn (2003) and Putnam.

Counterevidence is provided by an emerging body of literature that finds socioeconomic diversity to be an important catalyst to innovation and inter-ethnic understanding. Jane Jacobs (1969) argues that diversity insulates cities against variations in global economic demand and helps spur innovation by facilitating the sharing of knowledge among diverse industries. Glaeser et al. (1992) find empirical support for this hypothesis. Scott Page (2007) argues that ethnic and cultural diversity among groups of highly skilled workers helps catalyze creative thinking and problem solving. Studies also find that educational desegregation initiatives help graduates interact with diverse

groups later in life (Bowen and Bok 1998). Finally, the literature on racial segregation provides evidence that local spatial isolation carries with it many social costs, including the inability to form bridging social ties linking workers from different social and economic classes.

These two conclusions are not necessarily inconsistent, because few studies have sought to examine the relative costs and benefits of a given pattern of diversity, whether it involves land use, industrial, racial, ethnic, or income diversity. Putnam's findings call for further research on these effects. Several of the studies mentioned earlier also propose creative solutions to the methodological issues I have identified, particularly the selection bias problem.

### **Where do we go from here?**

I conclude with a discussion of suggested directions for further research, based on the limitations of Putnam's study, along with gaps in the literature. There are four areas where additional research is needed:

1. *The interaction between metropolitan diversity and neighborhood residential segregation in influencing the formation and stability of social capital.* The points I have raised indicate the need to distinguish between processes influencing metropolitan patterns of diversity and processes driving residential segregation within metropolitan areas in terms of the impact of each on social ties. There are good reasons to believe that each pattern influences social networks in very different ways, due to the importance of proximity in shaping patterns of social interaction, the differences in the determinants of intermetropolitan versus intrametropolitan mobility, and the differential effects of selection bias at different spatial scales. Future studies should separate these effects and examine their interaction.
2. *The relationship between social capital and residential location decisions.* Putnam's research begs for further understanding of how households make trade-offs among the opportunity for social interaction, commuting costs, and housing costs in deciding on residential location. Social networks may also influence the rate of residential mobility, if households are reluctant to move away from particular locations when local social ties are strong (Dawkins 2006). Further research is needed to understand these complex relationships.
3. *The impact of diversity on within-group and between-group social ties.* I have argued that despite Putnam's claims to the contrary, we still know little about the differential impacts of diversity on the formation of social

networks within and between groups. Understanding these relationships is crucial to establishing the validity of different theoretical perspectives linking diversity to social capital.

4. *Ways to retain the benefits of diversity while minimizing its costs.* The most promising area for new policy research lies in identifying strategies that are successful in promoting the benefits of diversity while minimizing its costs. For example, low-cost strategies such as multicultural festivals, art exhibits, and performances may promote intercultural understanding by facilitating accidental interactions among groups that would otherwise not come into contact. Residential mobility strategies deserve further research, given that segregation itself has been shown to be complicit in a variety of social ills.

Regardless of the strategy, Putnam's findings, along with the literature surrounding the topic of diversity and social capital, call for increased attention to successful cases of diverse interactions. As the nation becomes more diverse, the lessons from these cases will prove invaluable to shaping the "shared identity" Putnam seeks.

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# 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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