In the John Skytte Prize Lecture 2006, published in *Scandinavian Political Studies* in 2007, Robert D. Putnam argued that immigration and ethnic diversity in the short to medium run tend to reduce social capital in society. Even tough this finding confirms earlier findings within social psychology, the conclusion is nevertheless surprising from a social capital point of view. As ethnic diversity means cross-cutting ties and increased contact between diverse groups of people, it should be expected to contribute positively to the creation of the preferred bridging kind of social capital (the ‘contact theory’). This theory argues that when we have more contact with people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, we also learn to trust them. On the other hand, heterogeneity can also imply a strengthening of in-group trust and thus rather the bonding kind of social capital (the ‘conflict theory’). This implies that the more ethnically diverse our surroundings are, the more we stick to our own ethnic group, and the less we trust ‘the other’.

What Putnam found, however, was that diversity reduces both bonding and bridging social capital (the ‘constrict theory’). That is, he found that both in-group trust and out-group trust are lower in more diverse settings. Ethnic diversity fosters social isolation and erodes social capital. In summary Putnam stated:

‘… inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbours, regardless of the colour of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television’ (Putnam 2007:150-1).

This paper examines the relative impact of socio-economic inequality and ethnic diversity on social trust. The question is motivated by Putnam’s empirical finding for the U.S. (Putnam 2007) and the debate that has followed in its aftermath. Stolle, Soroka and Johnston (2008) confirmed the finding of a negative effect of diversity on social trust in their study of Canada and the US. However, both Gesthuizen, van der Meer and Scheepers (2008) and Hooghe, Reeskens, Stolle and Trappers (2009) questioned the conclusion about negative effects of ethnic diversity on generalised trust at the aggregate level across European countries, and Letki (2008) in her study of British neighbourhoods concluded that low neighbourhood status is the key element undermining all dimensions of social capital, while the eroding effect of racial diversity is limited.

According to Hooghe et al. (2009:217-218), more studies are required that give “more fine grained information about specific European societies, integrating information from the local community levels where available”. Our study of the Norwegian context meets this demand. The data we use is from a comprehensive survey carried out within three Norwegian city regions (Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger) in November 2007. The data material includes answers from 6,166 respondents who live in these three cities or in the surrounding municipalities (73 municipalities in total). The three cities are further divided into 30 urban districts. In addition we use context information about the municipalities and urban districts, based on official statistics. We use multi-level modelling to analyse the relationship between inequality, diversity and social capital, where we simultaneously include variables at the individual level and the municipality/community level.
Based on the analysis we can conclude that level of unemployment in the community is the main factor explaining variation in social trust in Norwegian municipalities and urban districts. Individuals in communities with high levels of unemployment are likely to have lower social trust than individuals in communities with low levels of unemployment regardless of the level of ethnic diversity in the communities. We can in other words falsify Putnam’s hypothesis in the Norwegian context; ethnic diversity does not cause lower levels of social trust in Norwegian communities, but unemployment does.

References:


