

# Towards an Intercultural Approach to Social Cohesion

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## Introduction

Within the fields of urban governance and public policy there has been renewed interest in the effect of increasing ethnic and migrant diversity associated with new migration over the past two decades. A paper published in 2007 by Robert Putnam reignited the debate with the claim that immigration and diversity has a universally negative effect on social cohesion. This paper argued that increasing diversity is associated with weaker social networks and an erosion of trust and reciprocity (Putnam 2007). Most of the empirical studies in Europe that have tested Putnam's thesis contest these findings and argue that social contact is not weakened by diversity. It is economic deprivation not diversity that has the most damaging effect and this effect is mediated by mutual support and contact between neighbours (Becares et al. 2011, Gesthuizen et al. 2009, Hooghe et al. 2009, Laurence 2011, Letki 2008). Concurrent to the academic debate on Putnam's thesis, there has been a backlash against policies of multiculturalism in European politics (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) and a move towards interculturalism. This was demonstrated by the designation of 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID). Interculturalism has been described as an 'updated version of multiculturalism' (Lentin 2005: 394), one that gives more prominence to dialogue and communication and to a wider notion of cultural relations which extend beyond ethnic differences to other forms of identity (Meer 2014: 59-64).

While some academics argue that politically interculturalism offers little that is substantively new or distinct from multiculturalism (Meer and Madood 2012), others suggest that a 'soft' form of interculturalism, one that gives greater attention everyday interactions can provide important insights into diversity and social cohesion. This form of interculturalism gives less attention to the role of national politics and more attention to the 'micropolitics' of the neighbourhood and to everyday social relations (Amin 2002). This chapter examines the literature on everyday interactions between individuals and groups from diverse back-

grounds at a local level and presents four types of interactions which may be important sites for intercultural dialogue and communication.

The chapter is structured into three parts, the first section examines the problematisation of diversity and social cohesion in public policy, the second section considers the paradox of multiculturalism in its promotion of both unity and separation and the final section presents forms of intercultural cohesion which provide a focus and framework for further research into social cohesion and diversity.

### **Diversity and threats to social cohesion**

Whilst recognising that there are critical viewpoints on the term ‘social cohesion’, related to the ‘social’ as potentially implying conformity to dominant values, and ‘cohesion’ as implying cultural unity (Arneil 2006) this paper begins with the explicit assumption that human well-being is facilitated by a sense of connectedness to other people. Social cohesion is the most widely researched concept which expresses this human connectedness in the civic and public realms and therefore the concept provides a relevant and useful starting point.

The concept of social cohesion in the simplest terms describes a society which ‘hangs together’. In a cohesive society, “all the component parts somehow fit in and contribute to society’s collective project and well-being” (Forrest and Kearns 2001, p.996). In their analysis of social cohesion, Forrest and Kearns (2001) highlight the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the concept. Social cohesion can be interpreted in both positive and negative terms, and different levels of cohesion can contradict each other in terms of their effects. Territorial gangs and criminal activity can be based on cohesive groups; a cohesive neighbourhood can have an antagonistic relationship to other neighbourhoods and increased cohesion at one level can cause fragmentation and division at higher geographical levels (consider nationalist movements within Europe e.g. Scotland and Catalonia).

Therefore social cohesion is not inherently a good thing from the point of view of policy makers and strong in-group cohesion can coexist alongside strong inter-group antagonism. Social cohesion as a policy goal presents an essential paradox, described here by Kearns and Forrest (2000) in relation to the city:

For some, the city has to be comforting and stable; for others, vibrant and perhaps even slightly threatening. The city of diversity and difference is also the city of division and fragmentation. As cities have become more globally embedded and city life and civic culture becomes more hybrid-

ised and multicultural, this paradox has become more evident and this underlies the increasing policy preoccupation with social cohesion. (Kearns and Forrest 2000, pp.1013-1014)

In 2007, Robert Putnam published a paper entitled “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st-Century”. He chose this title with reference to the American seal ‘out of many, one’ and as a reminder of the historical struggle of the US to create a single, cohesive, nation. The data in Putnam’s research is based on over 40 cases and 30,000 people within the United States. His findings show that, other things being equal, more diversity in a community is strongly correlated to less trust both between and within ethnic groups. Social trust is taken as an indicator of social capital and is measured in terms of how much the respondent trusts other races and trusts their own race.

Putnam (2007) finds a linear relationship between increasing neighbourhood ethnic diversity and social withdrawal:

Diversity does not produce ‘bad race relations’ or ethnically-defined group hostility [...] Rather, 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, p.150-151)

This study, known as “Putnam’s Diversity Thesis”, has been widely criticised for overlooking the exceptionalism of the US in terms of race relations and for failing to fully consider other causes for social withdrawal such as economic individualisation, the digital age, globalisation and fragmentation. Nevertheless, Putnam’s study has triggered a plethora of empirical research examining whether these claims can be substantiated.

On the whole the evidence from Europe rejects Putnam’s thesis. The findings from most European studies suggest that there that economic deprivation ‘drowns out’ any negative effect of diversity on social capital and that the issue is not lack of sociability in the neighbourhood but lack of access to resources such as employment, housing and welfare (Becares et al. 2011, Gesthuizen et al. 2009, Hooghe et al. 2009, Laurence 2011, Letki 2008). A few exceptions that appear to support Putnam’s thesis are studies from the Netherlands such as Gijsberts et al. (2011).

In the UK, Letki (2008) analysed the 2001 UK Citizenship Survey and found that when the correlation between diversity and deprivation is accounted for, ethnic diversity has no effect on levels of informal and formal interaction in the neighbourhood. Behaviours towards neighbours, measured in terms of informal socialising and organisational involvement, are not affected by ethnic diversity. However, there is a negative effect on attitudes towards the neighbourhood in general:

Although people living in racially diverse neighbourhoods do not interact less with their neighbours they declare less trust in them and less satisfaction from living in their neighbourhood. (Letki 2008, p.121)

Part of the challenge in unravelling this contradictory and complex relationship is that empirical studies testing Putnam's thesis are inconsistent in how they measure diversity, deprivation and social capital and therefore some studies emphasise the effect of ethnic diversity more than others. This is because poverty and social disorder are both highly correlated with ethnic diversity (Sampson and Groves 1989). Overall, the findings from Europe tend towards a deprivation hypothesis whereas studies from the US tend to support Putnam's thesis.

Therefore a review of the US and European literature on diversity and social cohesion suggests that ethnic diversity, migrant diversity and poverty are all likely to have a negative effect on trust in neighbours and attitudes towards the neighbourhood. However, negative attitudes do not necessarily affect everyday behaviours. The nature of intercultural relations and civic involvement is likely to depend on the specific context and the extent to which there are opportunities for social contact between groups.

### **Multiculturalism and inter-cultural dialogue**

In 2005, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia found that approximately one quarter of the EU-15's population does not share the notion that "the diversity of a country in terms of race, religion or culture is a positive element and strength" and two thirds of the population are convinced that "multicultural society has reached its limits" (Coenders et al 2005). Across Europe, migration, instead of being perceived as a cultural asset, is increasingly associated with a social and economic threat.

Underpinning this backlash is the argument that that multicultural policies have leaned too far towards cultural tolerance. Multiculturalism is blamed for a sense of moral and cultural disorientation, political correctness and an inability to

challenge and debate cultural practice. By promoting cultural recognition, multiculturalism is also accused of undermining national citizenship. The reaction against multiculturalism has led to careful language from politicians and avoidance of the 'm' word in political discourse. Steven Vertovec, an academic working for the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in the UK, noted that he was asked by civil servants to remove all references to multiculturalism in his reports for the commission (Vertovec 2007a; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

In place of multiculturalism there has been a greater emphasis on promoting all things 'intercultural' (Meer and Modood 2011, Parekh 2000, Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). 'Interculturalism' has been presented in recent political debates as a political alternative to multiculturalism which placing a greater emphasis on communication and common values (Meer and Modood 2011). Meer (2014) summarises four aspects of interculturalism that are cited within the academic debate as marking a distinction between multiculturalism and interculturalism. The first is a greater emphasis on communication, dialogue and openness between different cultures, the second, is a wider definition of culture, beyond the multicultural focus on cultural groups which aligns to an interest in local and civic encounters, third, an interest in the whole population, rather than in specific groups and minorities, and fourth, a greater emphasis on liberal values and protection of individual rights.

However Meer and Modood (2012) argue that the fundamental assumptions of both perspectives are the same. According to Parekh (2000) the assumption of multiculturalism is that human beings are culturally embedded. Human beings are understood as being shaped by culture and therefore cultural well-being is as important as economic well-being in terms of equality and notions of social justice. Multiculturalists argue that cultural diversity is of value to society and provides an asset in itself. Distinct cultural communities cannot be easily assimilated into a single mainstream culture, and assimilation is undesirable. Therefore in common with interculturalism, the multicultural response to cultural diversity is to acknowledge its existence, secondly to proclaim the benefits of cultural diversity and thirdly to realise those benefits through cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue (Parekh 2000, 2004).

Intercultural dialogue relates to an exchange of ideas and cultural perspectives on ways of life and well-being that occurs through participation in political processes. Parekh (2000) describes intercultural dialogue as taking place within the context of 'public values'. These are not common values in the sense of personal, cultural or political values. These are values which support the process and procedures of government, law and justice, and that influence how people conduct themselves in their daily lives. These common values include civic norms and everyday behaviours such as civility, relations between neighbours, queuing

for public services etc. and are underpinned by a commitment to the political process. They form the framework for discussion and the basis for evaluation of contested cultural practices. The outcome of this deliberation may result in changes to the law or enforcement or greater acceptance and accommodation. The ultimate outcome depends on the extent to which public values and cultural values can be reconciled.

Parekh's views are close to those who argue for deliberative democracy and the centrality of intercultural communication and dialogue (e.g. Habermas 1991). However, he emphasises that the space for this dialogue should be expanded to include dialogue between liberal and non liberal views of society and human well-being including the extent to which autonomy of individuals should be valued over social solidarity. From this dialogical perspective, a society where people 'keep themselves to themselves' and avoid contact with other people, is more problematic than one which is antagonistic yet politically engaged. This is a vision of a vibrant and open political community based on rights of citizenship and the struggle for locally negotiated social justice. The political community and participation in it, is an end in itself.

In intellectual terms 'interculturalism' appears to offer no distinct answer to the questions faced by multiculturalism such as which common values to emphasise: commitment to political participation, national citizenship or liberal values (Modood and Meer 2012, Kymlicka 2012, Werbner 2012, Levey 2012). Nevertheless, from a pragmatic perspective a 'turn' to interculturalism may be useful, not in order to provide an alternative to multiculturalism, but to shift the emphasis of multicultural policy and examine more closely its intercultural challenges and assumptions. This is an argument for a 'soft' version of interculturalism (Levey 2012), an intercultural cohesion that focuses on local 'encounters of difference' (Modood and Meer 2012) and emphasises communication and interaction across diverse individuals and groups. This intercultural approach could be positioned, not as a political alternative to multiculturalism, rather as a development of a core aspect of multicultural theory.

### **Intercultural cohesion in the neighbourhood**

Recent studies have shown that despite the national debates over multiculturalism, at a local level, attitudes appear to be more complex and nuanced. Narratives of fragmentation and disorder debates do not necessarily affect everyday interactions such as the informal contacts that facilitate 'good' neighbour relations (van Eijk 2012). Intercultural relations at a local level may be characterised less by a desire for face to face interaction and cultural recognition and more by

a milder attitude of living side-by-side with diversity (Tonkiss 2003, van Leeuwen 2010). The literature on everyday interactions provides evidence of indifference towards diversity and the attitude that diversity is considered to be normal and unremarkable. Van Leeuwen (2010) conceptualises this response to diversity as ‘side by side citizenship’, Noble (2009) refers to ‘unpanicked multiculturalism’, Neal et al (2013) use the description ‘cool conviviality’ and Wessendorf (2010) develops the concept of ‘commonplace diversity’.

A review of the literature in this area for the purpose of planning a PhD research highlighted four forms of intercultural contact at a local level between individuals from diverse backgrounds. These forms are presented and discussed here. See *Table 1*.

Interaction Type	Description	Examples	Core Interaction
Deliberative	Interactions involving dialogue between individuals or representatives of local groups in relation to addressing problems and issues within the neighbourhood. Implies a common interest in neighbourhood issues and local politics	Formal community participation structures, community forms, neighbourhood groups, community councils, tenants and residents groups (see Meer and Madood 2012)	Representation
Transformative	Interactions through situations which require “a need to ‘get along’ as a coping mechanism or to achieve <b>common ambitions and interests</b> ” (Clayton 2009, p. 494)  Similar to ‘growth’ interactions which involve learning from others and expanding perspectives (SHM 2007)	Action based clubs and groups facilitating shared interests, e.g. a political campaign, a community project (for other examples see Amin 2002, Wessendorf 2014)	Group activity

Neighbour	Interactions through the <b>use of common and parochial spaces</b> . Interaction is with people who are known and familiar and living in close proximity. Communication may concern practical issues such as security, cleansing, rubbish and recycling.	Communal relations between neighbours through sharing common spaces such as a back garden, a shared building, or a shared street (see van Eijk 2012; Lofland 2007)	Practical accommodation
Public	Interactions based on contact through <b>shared public space</b> . These may involve face to face contact, eye contact and possibly communication and/or exchange. Encounters may be formal or informal and are often fleeting.	Convivial interactions with strangers and neighbours in the street, examples include cooperative motility, people watching etc (see Lofland 2007).	Sharing public space

*Table 1:* Forms of intercultural contact

Deliberative interactions at a local level are group based, organised, collective interactions which involve dialogue and debate between individuals or representatives of local groups in relation to addressing problems and issues within the neighbourhood. They take place within what Amin (2002) describes as the micro politics' of the neighbourhood, for example public meetings, community forums, formal community engagement and consultation processes, representative structures and social media. The dialogue may involve cross evaluation of cultural practices and intercultural dialogue over the nature and causes of perceived neighbourhood problems (see Parekh 2000). Deliberative interactions are underpinned by representation of group-based interests and this form of contact involves a shared interest in local issues.

The core civic culture that underpins the possibility of deliberative interactions is the culture of political participation. Political engagement is described by Parekh (2000) as essential to inter-cultural dialogue and therefore to the success of multiculturalism. This form of integration is based on a concept of citizenship that consists not only of rights based in law but also on political participation through informal and formal mechanisms such as political representation, involvement in public committees, participation in consultations and forums of



public debate. This involvement may be through intermediate organisations such as trade unions, religious organisations, neighbourhoods and cultural groups (Meer and Modood 2012, Modood and Meer 2012).

The second form of intercultural contact is ‘transformative’ interactions, defined here as based on a shared interest, leisure activity or learning experiences. They may involve inter-cultural dialogue, however that is not their primary focus, neither do these interactions rely on a ‘unitary sense of place’ and concern for neighbourhood problems. The focus of these interactions is on actively engaging in a shared task or enterprise with other local residents, which may or may not involve direct face to face communication and discussion but will require a degree of cooperation and the development of skills, towards a common or collective goal. Amin (2002) describes these transformative contexts as ‘multiethnic common ventures’ and “sites of social inclusion and discursive negotiation” for example community garden projects, community centres, child-care facilities, youth projects (p. 970). Transformative interactions also align to ‘growth interactions’ defined by a Commission for Racial Equality report as having the potential to broaden identities and values, provide opportunities to learn from others, expand perspectives and stimulate curiosity through the sharing of common ambitions and goals (SHM 2007).

This type of interaction occurs through situations that require “a need to ‘get along’ as a coping mechanism or to achieve common ambitions and interests” (Clayton 2009, p.494). These include schools, action based clubs and groups facilitating shared interests, political campaigns, youth and community projects (Amin 2002). The social and relational aspect of the activity may be an explicit objective of the project or an unintentional or indirect consequence. Temporalities of transformative interactions may be a short-term, such as a project to establish a garden or community arts event, or medium to long-term for example regular attendance at an adult learning class, youth group or community space. This is a form of intercultural cohesion that involves learning and developing skills through a common activity and has the potential to change attitudes and identities (see also Wessendorf 2014).

The third form of intercultural cohesion occurs in the context of ‘neighbouring’ between immediate or direct neighbours living in close proximity. Neighbour interactions are defined here as involving face-to-face contact between individuals and families who are immediate neighbours and are known to one another. Contact tends to be informal, focused on a small geographical area and varies in intensity, intimacy and duration. These forms of social interaction are usually based on sharing a common space such as a building, a block within a street of adjoining buildings, or other micro-spaces.

The literature shows that good neighbour relations contribute to a range of positive outcomes in terms of health and wellbeing, social efficacy, child development, crime reduction, security, safety and belonging (Buonfino and Hilder 2010), however, recent studies report a decline in the frequency and intimacy of contacts between neighbours in the UK. Changing patterns of work, increasingly mobility, increased access to transport and commuting, dynamic housing markets and housing tenure, changing household composition and lack of suitable spaces and time are all factors cited as contributing to a decline in neighbour interactions (Buonfino and Hilder 2010, Mayo 2010).

Interactions between neighbours are embedded in the materiality and ordinary spaces of the neighbourhood. One of the critiques of current academic research is that the contextual nature of activities and interactions are frequently overlooked in studies of neighbouring. Stokoe and Wallwork (2003) argue for research to pay greater attention to how spaces are relevant to neighbour relations and how these spaces are made meaningful through notions of 'good' and 'bad' neighbours.

The final form of intercultural contact is public interactions, defined here as involving face to face contact between individuals who are often strangers to each other and who share the same public or street space. Interactions may involve face to face contact, verbal and non verbal communication, and involve the use of body language, awareness or avoidance of others in public space.

Lyn Lofland (2007) provides five principles of social contact in public space. First, cooperative motility - how strangers move through space and cooperate to avoid incident, second, civil inattention - people ignoring each other out of politeness, respect for others and their personal space, third - audience role prominence - people watching in which strangers become an audience to the activities of others, fourth, restrained helpfulness - everyday encounters and exchanges, asking the time, seeking directions, and fifth, civility toward diversity - even handedness and universal treatment, an attitude of politeness and indifference to diversity.

Lofland (2007) and Sennet (2012) argue that civility towards diversity is often deployed in public interactions to avoid social tensions. Civility is also a manifestation of intercultural skills or negotiation and dialogue. For example, Wessendorf (2013) demonstrates the skills of 'corner shop cosmopolitanism' employed by shopkeepers and market traders through the use of different forms of address to infer friendliness and politeness. On the other hand, Valentine (2008) questions the extent to which this emphasis on the civility of everyday encounters is meaningful in relation to overcoming prejudice.

Re-thinking Diversity

Multiple Approaches in Theory, Media, Communities,  
and Managerial Practice

Braedel-Kühner, C.; Müller, A.

2016, VI, 305 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-11501-2