

Cover page

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The Role of Individual Differences in Authoritarianism**

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Title page

Diverse Reactions to Ethnic Diversity: The Role of Individual Differences in Authoritarianism

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Abstract

Issues related to ethnic-cultural diversity often make the news headlines in popular media and have attracted extensive attention in the political arena as well as in academic research in psychology, political sciences, and sociology. Political scientist Robert Putnam reported that increased diversity is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including less trust, a decreased sense of community, more prejudice, and more cynicism and mistrust towards politics and politicians. Yet, given that follow-up studies often revealed mixed results, a novel approach to understand the effects of diversity is needed. We address the impact of diversity from a person x context interaction perspective, demonstrating that diversity aggravates the negative attitudes that already exist among certain individuals. Specifically, we review the accumulated evidence showing that particularly those high in authoritarian attitudes are sensitive to diversity, and prone to react with increased negativity to outgroups, politicians, the political system, and democracy.

Key words: ethnic diversity; individual differences, intergroup relations

Main text

Due to ever-increasing globalization and a continuous rise in migration, societies and local communities have become more and more diverse in terms of ethnic and cultural groups. Is such diversity good or bad? Supporters and opponents gladly share their opinion on social media, in online blogs, or at the bar counter. Discord about the issue has increasingly dominated political and public discourse, pitting those who perceive the presence of different ethnic-cultural groups as a threat to society against those who see potential enrichment of society.

In 2007, the renowned Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam conducted a large study on how diversity in the United States affected social trust. He surveyed 26,000 respondents from 40 American communities, revealing that diversity has negative consequences for social cohesion (Putnam, 2007). In particular, in diverse neighborhoods, residents of all ethnic backgrounds tended to “hunker down” (Putnam, 2007, p. 149). In fact, much to Putnam’s dismay, people in diverse areas “act like turtles” withdrawing in their shield: they have lower levels of trust in others (even in members of their own ethnic group), they are typically more cynical about politics, and they show less community cooperation.

Beyond the Debate

With over 1,500 academic citations, the scientific impact of Putnam’s findings is undeniable. His paper was also cited in a brief filed for the high-profile case *Fisher v. University Texas* (2013). This legal case concerned affirmative action processes at public universities, and received ample media attention. In short, Putnam’s work has had a considerable influence on both academic and public debates. Nevertheless, the impact of diversity remains unclear. In their review of over 100 post-Putnam studies, van der Meer and Tolsma (2014) concluded that empirical support for Putnam’s claim is mixed, with several

studies offering corroborative evidence, and several studies presenting null-findings or even opposite effects. As a consequence, scholars have called for a better informed approach to understanding the effects of diversity (e.g., Hewstone, 2015).

We argue that the basis of such a more nuanced approach can be found in the original writings of Gordon Allport, formulated over half a century ago. In his landmark book *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) concluded his chapter on the size and density of minority groups, stating that: “Growing density [of ethnic-cultural minorities], is not in itself a sufficient principle to explain prejudice. What it seems to accomplish is the *aggravation* of whatever prejudice exists” (p. 229; italics added). Unfortunately, research on diversity has primarily focused on its main effects, largely neglecting the idea that diversity may have its negative effects on some people, whereas it may hardly impact others. Only recently, scholars have started to explicitly acknowledge the role of individual differences in the context of diversity (Brune, Asbrock, & Sibley, 2016; Fasel, Green, & Sarasin, 2013; Kauff, Asbrock, Thörner, & Wagner, 2013). The main hypothesis is that diversity is not good or bad in itself, but rather that diversity triggers negative reactions among certain individuals, while others remain unaffected or show positive reactions.

The ‘Aggravating’ Effects of Diversity

When examining the contextual influence of local diversity, it is thus vital to consider how individual differences determine the impact of diversity. Such a “multilevel” approach investigates psychological/individual and sociological/contextual levels of analysis simultaneously, and it also assesses how both levels work together (i.e., interact) in influencing attitudes in various life domains (Christ, Sibley, & Wagner, 2012). This method may not only advance our understanding of how diversity affects people’s ethnic attitudes, but also of a broader range of political and social outcomes, as was proposed by Putnam.

In a series of recent studies, we (Van Assche, Roets, Dhont, & Van Hiel, 2014; 2016) explicitly tested the role of individual differences in the effects of neighborhood diversity (assessed as the objective proportion of ethnic-cultural minority members in the local population). These studies consistently revealed that living in a diverse neighborhood is related to more negative attitudes towards immigrants and members of other ethnic groups, but mainly (or even exclusively) among people who score high on authoritarianism. People high in authoritarianism attach much value to conformity, traditional norms and values, they submit themselves to authorities and react aggressively towards norm violators (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2001). Because diversity threatens authoritarians' view of the ideal arrangement of society, and because they perceive minority groups as undermining social cohesion, increasing levels of diversity make them more prejudiced and increase their mistrust and anxiety towards these groups. Conversely, individuals who do not hold these authoritarian attitudes do not show such reactions to diversity (e.g., Van Assche et al., 2016, see Figure 1a).

Importantly, similar results have also been found over time (Russo, Barni, Cavazza, Roccato, & Vieno, 2019; Van Assche, Asbrock, Dhont, & Roets, 2018). Moreover, the “aggravating” effect of ethnic diversity seems to hold for politically relevant attitudes as well. Specifically, in more diverse contexts, people high in authoritarianism were more politically intolerant (Velez & Lavine, 2017) and showed increased levels of cynicism and mistrust in politics (Van Assche, Dhont, Van Hiel, & Roets, 2018; Van Assche, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Roets, 2019). In turn, this loss of faith in politics and rise in anti-establishment sentiments among authoritarians led to increased support for populist, far-right parties. Again, people low in authoritarianism were not affected by neighborhood diversity (see Figure 1b). Other work reported similar diversity effects for individuals scoring high on variables related to authoritarianism, such as right-wing political orientation (Karreth, Singh, & Stojek, 2015), the

view that the world is a dangerous place (Sibley et al., 2013), and conformity values (Fasel et al., 2013).²

Figure 1a.

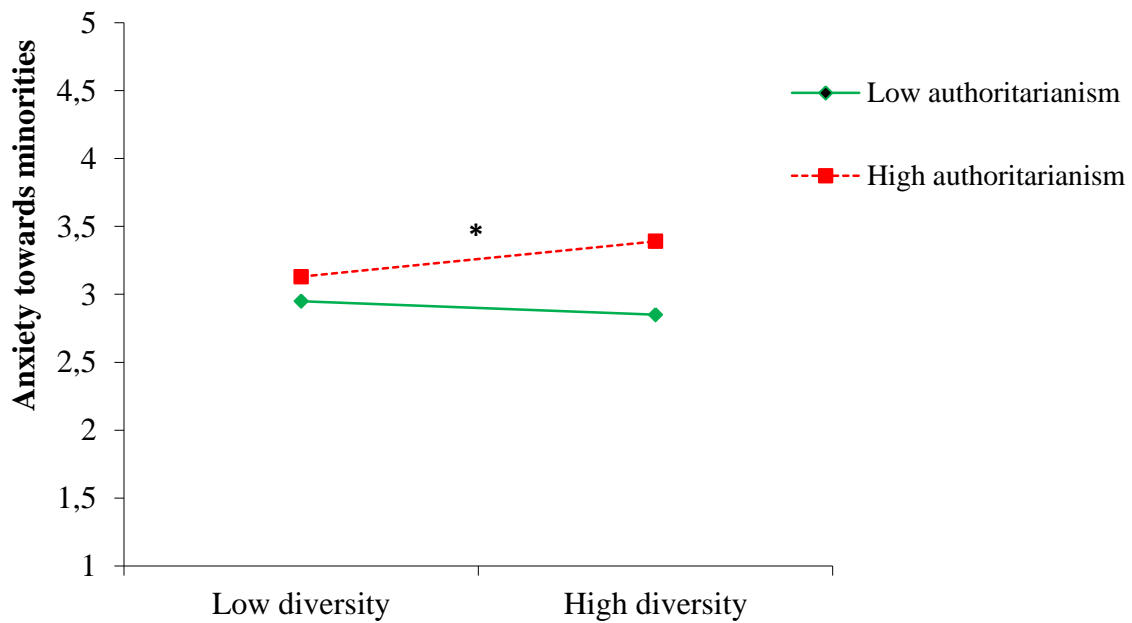
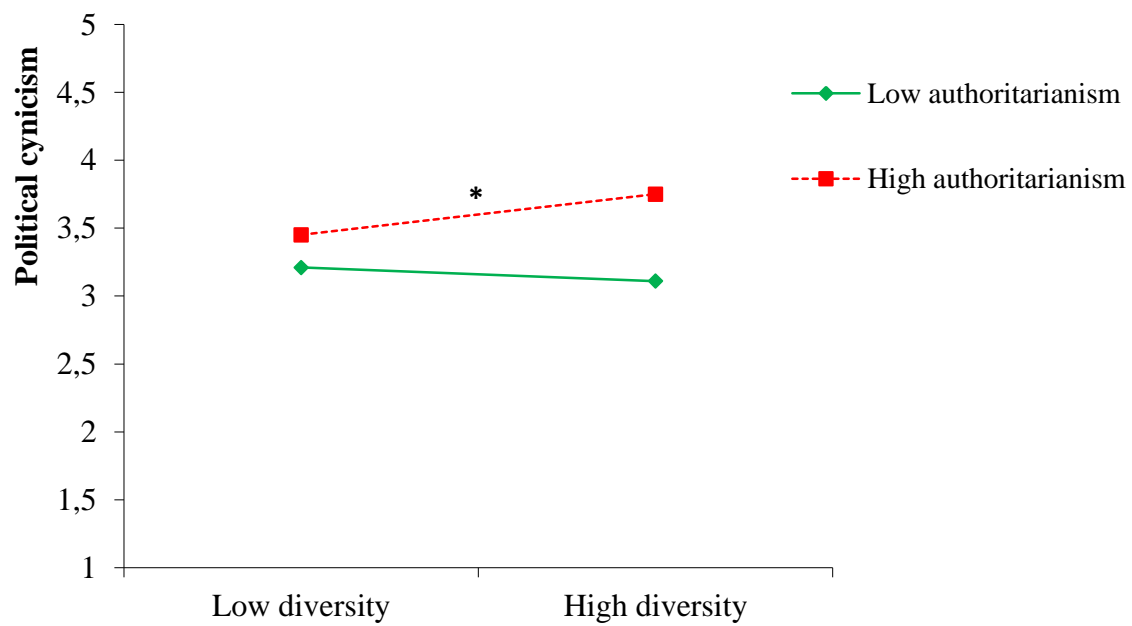
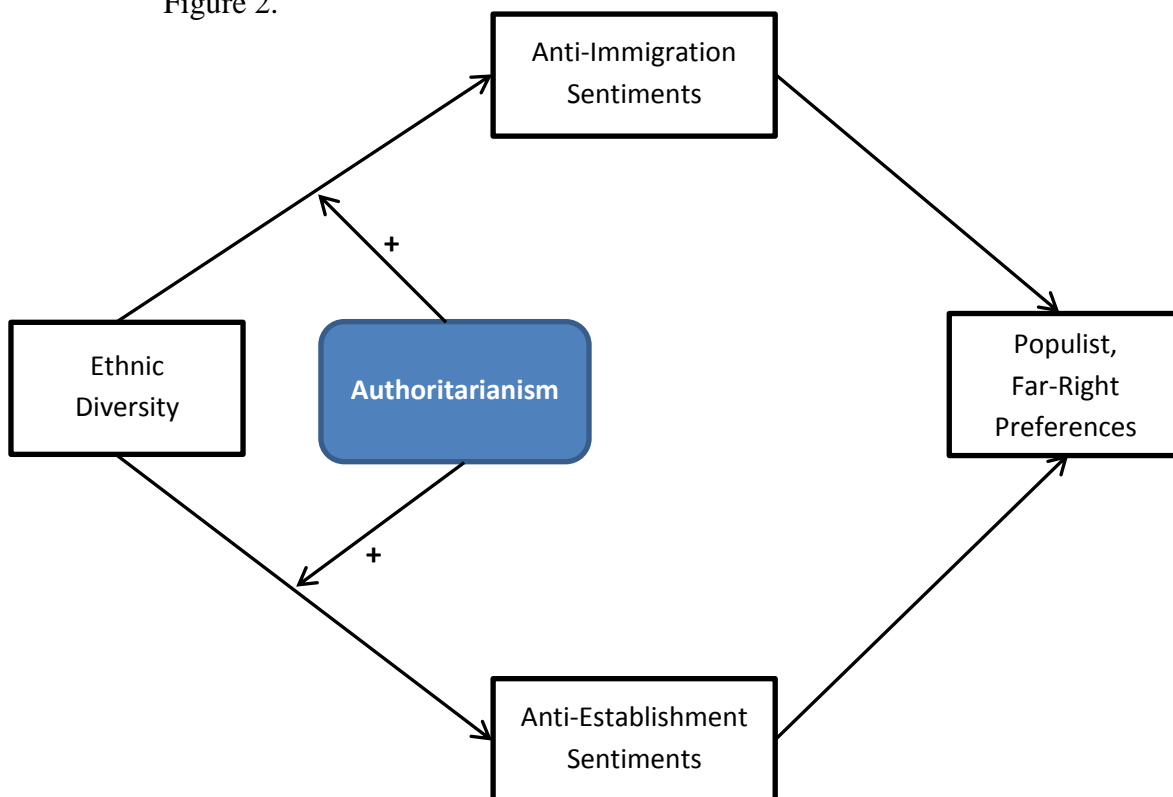


Figure 1b.



Our results show that the work of two renowned scholars - whose contributions are separated by a time lag of fifty years - are pieces that fit together to reveal the broader picture. Allport (1954) suggested that diversity further aggravates ethnic prejudice among people who are already inclined to have such prejudices, whereas Putnam (2007) argued that the effects of diversity spread to multiple domains, including political life. Both insights are clearly represented in our results, demonstrating that the negative effects of diversity only hold for the authoritarian part of the population, but also go well beyond mere ethnic attitudes. In this regard, it seems especially important to acknowledge that diversity undermines authoritarian individuals' confidence in the political system and in politicians, and drives them towards populist, far-right parties. One could thus tentatively argue that diversity poses a potential threat to the current political system, because in a part of the population, it instigates a negative orientation towards political institutions and representatives (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.



Implications for the Diversity Debate

Given the polarizing nature of the diversity issue, a most important question pertains to how a society can deal with diversity, and associated negative sentiments it invokes in a part of its population. Diversity is a challenge, and harmony within multiethnic communities will not happen automatically. It seems vital to consider *how* we approach this heated debate, both in media and in terms of policy-making. Attempts to marginalize the part of the population that reacts negatively to diversity (e.g. calling them “deplorables”), is bound to intensify political cynicism and discontent. However, an increased awareness of the role of individual differences can lie at the basis of better policies which might bring societal solutions and alleviate social discontent. Such policies do not necessarily involve major social-cultural measures, nor are they necessarily costly, but they do involve the management of human relations.

Here also, the works of Allport and Putnam are relevant. Corroborating Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis, numerous studies have shown that contact with other groups reduces prejudice (Hodson & Hewstone, 2012). The necessity of interethnic contact to overcome societal fragmentation has also been stressed by Putnam (2000), who argued that binding, or the creation of encompassing identities, solidarity, and strong social ties, benefits from intergroup contact, resulting in a positive local atmosphere, political stability, and increased social capital. Most importantly, intergroup contact has proven to be especially effective among individuals high in authoritarianism (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Hodson, 2011).

However, living in a diverse neighborhood does not necessarily imply that members of different communities engage in contact (Hewstone, 2015). Moreover, authoritarians typically avoid interactions with outgroup members (Hodson, 2011). Therefore, local authorities may need to invest in non-intrusive interventions that bring together citizens of different background. When intergroup contact becomes normative, authoritarians likely comply with

this norm (Roets, Au, & Van Hiel, 2015; Van Assche, Asbrock, Roets, & Kauff, 2018), and as such, these interventions can further boost positive local norms and social cohesion, even under a potential threat like high diversity.

Extending the Model

Finally, the current model could be extended in various ways. Firstly, diversity can operate at several levels. We largely focused on neighborhood diversity, as most day-to-day interactions take place within this local context. Nonetheless, it would be insightful to examine how local diversity effects relate to diversity at the intermediate (regional) and national level. Secondly, besides looking at ethnic diversity as the sheer outgroup proportion, diversity can emerge in different forms, such as in skin tone, in religious symbols (e.g., the Muslim veil), or in social status (e.g., “culturally similar” immigrants from wealthier countries are more valued; see Green, Fasel, & Sarasin, 2010). Thirdly, research could also jointly investigate diversity and other contextual factors. Most notably, living in dangerous, disadvantaged, and impoverished areas as opposed to safe, prosperous, and affluent areas, may increase threat perceptions and, in turn, increase intergroup hostility (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). Further research investigating such additional factors is needed to advance the understanding of diversity effects.

Conclusion

Our review highlights the importance of applying a multilevel framework to explore the complex issue of diversity while also taking into account the role of the individual. Based on the available evidence, we conclude that diversity in a society is not detrimental to people’s ethnic attitudes, trust and social connection across the board, but it does trigger or exacerbate negative ethnic, political, and social attitudes of right-wing, authoritarian individuals. Therefore, rather than further polarizing the issue of diversity, societies should

invest in policies based on methods that have proven to be effective in reducing negative sentiments in this specific part of the population.

Acknowledgments and endnotes

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² Previous studies have shown that other individual differences such as social dominance orientation also play a role in people's reactions to diversity, but they do so to a clearly lesser extent than social-cultural attitudes like RWA (see Sibley et al., 2013; Van Assche et al., 2018).

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Recommended Readings

- Allport, G. (1954). (See References). The foundational work on prejudice, including Allport's pivotal ideas on the effects of diversity and the potential of intergroup contact.
- Duckitt, J. (2001). (See References). An elaborate discussion of the contemporary authoritarianism concept and research, providing an inspiring theoretical framework.
- Hewstone, M. (2015). (See references). A comprehensive overview of what is known about the diversity debate and the processes underlying diversity effects.
- Hodson, G. (2011). (See References). A highly accessible, brief overview of recent research pointing to the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice among authoritarians.
- Putnam, R. (2007). (See references). A must-read, highly influential article discussing the short- and long-term consequences of diversity in more detail than the current paper.

Figure Captions

Fig. 1. The effect of diversity on anxiety towards minorities (1a) and on political cynicism (1b) for people high (+ 1 SD) and low (-1 SD) in authoritarianism. * labels denote a statistically meaningful association ($p < .05$) for high authoritarians.

Fig. 2. Conceptual model of how diversity triggers anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiments in people high in authoritarianism, which pushes them towards populist, far-right political parties.