

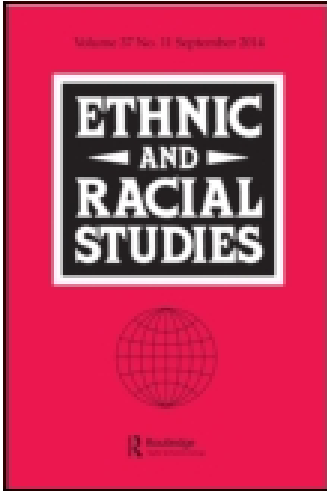
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The perception of ethnic diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments: a multilevel analysis of local communities in Belgium

Marc Hooghe and Thomas de Vroome

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Most of the literature suggests a positive relationship between immigrant concentration and anti-immigrant sentiments. The main goal of this study is to investigate the impact of both perceived and actual size of migrant populations on anti-immigrant sentiments. A representative survey of inhabitants of local communities in the Flemish region of Belgium shows a strong tendency to overestimate the presence of non-nationals. The survey allows us to conclude that respondents living in ethnically diverse communities do not have more negative attitudes towards immigrants. Individuals who perceive more immigrants to be present in their communities are more hostile even after controlling for reported contact with members of immigrant groups. We can therefore conclude that the perceived size of the immigrant group has a stronger impact on anti-immigrant sentiments than the actual presence of ethnic minority groups.

Keywords: anti-immigrant sentiments; group conflict theory; community; Belgium; ethnic diversity

Introduction

In recent decades, migration flows have resulted in an increased level of ethnic and cultural diversity in most societies of Western Europe (Castles and Miller 2003). According to some of the literature, this rise of ethnic diversity has been associated with a rise of anti-immigrant sentiments in at least a number of European countries (Semyonov, Raijman, and Gorofzeisky 2008). A common assumption in the research on this topic is that anti-immigrant attitudes, directly or indirectly, should be seen as a reaction to rising levels of ethnic diversity (Quillian 1995; Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders 2002; Schneider 2008; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2008). The existing body of empirical research, however, does not always support this assumption (Sides and Citrin 2007; Strabac and Listhaug 2008). A prevailing theme in the literature is that anti-immigrant attitudes to a large extent can be understood as a reaction to a real or perceived group threat (LeVine and Campbell 1972; Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Quillian 1995). As natives assume there is a potential conflict with immigrant groups about the allocation of scarce resources like jobs, housing or cultural hegemony, the most likely outcome could be that they perceive the new groups to be competitors on these markets (McLaren and Johnson 2007). Whether the circumstances favouring inter-group competition and potential threat need to be real

(Bobo 1983; Quillian 1995; Putnam 2007; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007; Strabac 2011) or can be imagined is still a matter of debate. Regardless of the threat being real or imaginary, group threat theories where competition for scarce resources contributes to a conflict between minorities and majorities predict a positive correlation between the concentration of minorities and anti-immigrant sentiments among the native population.

The goal of the present study is to contribute to a better understanding of the relation between ethnic diversity, perceived threat and anti-immigrant sentiments, by building on recent community-level data from Belgium. Anti-immigrant sentiments may arise as the result of a combination or an interaction between contextual- and individual- level explanatory characteristics (Bobo and Fox 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). Controlling for relevant individual background characteristics, our goal is to determine whether the presence of immigrant populations is associated with the development of anti-immigrant sentiments.

We aim to contribute to the literature in three distinct ways. First, while previous studies tend to focus on large geographical units, in this study we focus on small local communities, where real contact between different ethnic groups is still possible. Second, the small scale of the communities under investigation renders it possible to include intergroup contact as a variable in the analysis. We do so because the assumption is that prejudice is being reduced as a result of positive interpersonal contacts between groups and it is difficult to test this assumption at the country level. Third, the survey data we are using also include measurements of perceived ethnic diversity. By comparing this assessment with official population figures, we can ascertain whether actual diversity or the perceived level of diversity contributes most strongly to the development of anti-immigrant sentiments. Previous research has shown that ethnic majority residents do not always have a reliable perception about the presence of ethnic minorities, and therefore it is a straightforward assumption that both measurements could diverge and have different effects (Strabac 2011). Majority group members systematically overestimate the proportion of immigrants in society (Herda 2010).

The survey we use was conducted in the northern Flemish region of Belgium, a country with fairly average levels of ethnic diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments for Western Europe (Semyonov, Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2006). In this article, we first briefly review the literature on social and spatial determinants of anti-immigrant sentiments, before presenting the data and methods. Following the results section, we reflect on whether these findings could be generalized towards other contexts.

Literature

Building on the theoretical assumption that hostility, prejudice and discrimination towards out-group populations can be considered as a reaction to (rises in) their relative size of the population (Williams 1947; Blalock 1967), numerous researchers have claimed that anti-immigrant sentiments, ethnic prejudice and discrimination tend to rise with the relative size of the out-group population (Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders 2002; Coenders, Gijsberts and Scheepers 2004; Kunovich 2004; Semyonov,

Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2006). However, the empirical evidence that out-group size is associated with an increase in anti-immigrant sentiments has been judged as inconclusive (Semyonov et al. 2004; Wagner et al. 2006; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2008). One group of studies has demonstrated a positive relation of out-group size with anti-immigrant attitudes (Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Quillian 1995; Coenders 2001; Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders 2002). Other studies, however, failed to provide such evidence (Evans and Need 2002; Semyonov et al. 2004; Coenders, Lubbers and Scheepers 2005; Strabac and Listhaug 2008). Still another group of authors even documented a negative relation (Hood and Morris 1997). This negative relation can be explained by relying on inter-group contact theory resulting in the claim that a larger out-group size provides more opportunities for positive inter-group contact, which in turn ameliorates anti-out-group attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; Wagner et al. 2006; Pettigrew, Wagner, and Christ 2010; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). One of the likely reasons for this pattern of inconclusive evidence might be that two causal mechanisms can lead to opposite results. Supporters of realistic group conflict theory assume that the larger the size of the out-group, the more likely it is that the native population will develop negative attitudes towards these minorities. On the other hand, the contact theory suggests that real-life interaction will lead to positive learning opportunities and will thus reduce anti-immigrant sentiments. Basically, this implies an interaction effect: while the presence of minorities in the community would lead to higher levels of prejudice, this effect could be mitigated if natives interact in a positive manner with the minority group members. In more segregated societies, with little interaction between ethnic groups, we thus expect higher levels of prejudice than in less segregated societies (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2011; Uslander 2011). It has to be noted, however, that the country level might be less appropriate to investigate the occurrence of contact effects, as the geographical scale of a country is simply too large to allow for real inter-group contact. This kind of contact, however, is still possible at a smaller, community level.

Negative attitudes towards immigrants are not only associated with socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and structural characteristics of the communities, but also by the perception of the size of the foreign population (Semyonov, Raijman, and Gorofzeisky 2008). Research has repeatedly shown that most natives have inflated views of the relative size of the minority population (Sigelman and Niemi 2000; Gallagher 2003; Alba, Rumbaut and Marotz 2005; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2008). An increase in the population share of a migrant group is often perceived by majority group members as a source of competition over scarce resources, and hence, as a competitive threat to their own interests. Distorted perception is therefore likely to increase negative attitudes towards foreigners and minorities (Semyonov et al. 2004; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorofzeisky 2008).

Group conflict theory and out-group size

Group conflict theory assumes that competition between social groups over scarce resources and values induces conflicts between those groups (LeVine and Campbell

1972). On the other hand, anti-immigrant sentiments may stem from the perception of the (detrimental) impact of minorities and immigrants on the host society (Bobo 1983; Smith and Dempsey 1983; Enoch 1994; Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Scheepers, Gijssberts and Coenders 2002). Therefore, group conflict theory relates out-group size as a contextual-level characteristic to individual-level anti-out-group attitudes, proposing that a larger out-group size increases anti-out-group attitudes, and it is assumed that this effect is mediated by perceptions of threatened group interests (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; Bobo 1999; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010).

Blalock (1967) introduced an analytical distinction between actual and perceived competition and in his work he linked the group-level phenomenon of inter-group (actual) competition to anti-immigrant attitudes. Within group conflict theory, the proportion of a minority group living within a specific community is of crucial importance. Several researchers have concluded that the size of the out-group is positively associated with the presence of anti-immigrant attitudes (Scheepers, Gijssberts and Coenders 2002; Kunovich 2004; Schneider 2008).

Some of the more recent research, however, has suggested that it is not the actual size of the out-group that contributes to anti-immigrant feelings, but rather the perceived size of this group (Semyonov et al. 2004). In this analysis of German population data, it was shown that the perceived proportion of ethnic minorities is not correlated with the actual proportion, as measured by population statistics; nor is the actual minority proportion related to the majority respondents' attitudes towards ethnic minorities. The only relation that was present in this study was the one between perceived diversity and anti-immigrant feelings. More recent research has confirmed these findings (Weins 2011; Outten et al. 2012).

Hypotheses

This review of the literature leads to the following three hypotheses:

H1: The greater the proportion of migrant groups measured at the community level, the higher the levels of anti-immigrant sentiment among the individuals living in that community.

H2: The greater the number of social contacts with members of migrant groups, the lower the anti-immigrant sentiment.

H3: Perception of the size of the ethnic minority population is more strongly associated with anti-immigrant sentiments than is the actual size of the ethnic group measured at the community level.

Data and methods

These three hypotheses assume that community-level variables have an effect on the level of anti-immigrant sentiments of the individual. Therefore, we need a data set that allows us to connect community-level indicators with individual survey data. First, for attitudinal indicators and socio-demographic control variables, we use the results of the Social Cohesion Indicators in Flanders (SCIF) survey that was conducted in 2009 among a representative sample of the population of the Flemish region of Belgium

aged eighteen and over by means of 2,085 face-to-face interviews.¹ The response rate of the survey was 54 per cent (Hooghe, Vanhoutte, and Bircan 2009).

In the analysis, only the responses of the Belgian-born respondents were included (n=1,910), as it would require a different question wording to investigate anti-immigrant sentiments among respondents who have an immigrant background. We have deleted cases with missing values listwise. Because missing values on income amount to about 13 per cent, we use a categorical variable for income with ‘income missing’ as an additional category. All in all, the sample in the analysis includes 1,816 respondents.

The structural variables available for the smallest geographic data unit in Belgium are situated at the municipal level. Given the fact that the average municipality in the Flemish region has 20,000 inhabitants, this can still be considered a real community allowing for interaction with fellow residents. Thus, we will use the community-level statistical data (n=40) (source: National Institute of Statistics 2011), which were collected at the municipal level.

There is no reason to assume that Belgium would be a strongly deviant case for the study of anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe. An analysis of the European Social Survey (ESS) samples for 2008 and 2010 suggests that the level of anti-immigrant sentiments in Belgium (5.04 on a 0–10 scale) is very close to the average in European countries (5.11). For budgetary reasons and for reasons of comparability, we focus on just one language community in the country: the Dutch language community. An analysis of the same ESS data suggests that the difference in ethnocentrism between the Dutch and the French language community in Belgium is not significant.

Anti-immigrant sentiments

In this study, a three-item scale was used to measure anti-immigrant sentiments in exactly the same manner as in the ESS:

- (1) Would you say it is generally bad or good for the Belgian economy that people come to live here from other countries?
- (2) Would you say that Belgian cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?
- (3) Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?

The three items proved to be a one-dimensional scale, with one factor, eigenvalue 1.94, and 64.51 per cent explained variance. The scale is internally coherent with a Cronbach’s α of 0.73 (Table 1).

Independent variables

In line with the theoretical arguments, the actual proportion of the immigrant population at the community level is the first main variable of interest. The concentration of immigrants is investigated by using several different measurements. We started with the actual size of the broadest group, that is, non-nationals, and narrowed this group further down in order to explore the possible effect of specific

Table 1. Characteristics of the anti-immigrant sentiments scale.

Items	Item average (0–10)	Factor loading	Cronbach's α if deleted
Effect on economy (good=0, bad=10)	5.48	0.82	0.61
Effect on cultural life (enrich=0, undermine=10)	4.53	0.82	0.62
Effect on living place (better place=0, worse place=10)	4.87	0.77	0.69
Cronbach's α	0.73		

Extraction method: Principle component analysis.

Source: SCIF Survey 2009 (Hooghe et al. 2009); $N=1,816$.

immigrant groups: non-EU nationals (Semyonov, Rajjman, and Gorofzeisky 2006), EU nationals (Dustmann and Preston 2007) and incoming migrants (Mayda 2006). Non-EU nationals refers to immigrants from countries outside the EU-15 countries (Schneider 2008). We selected this criterion because previous analyses suggest that in the Belgian context, anti-immigrant sentiments are almost exclusively directed towards this group. In order to investigate any possible ethnic bias among natives, the main non-EU migrant groups in Belgium, namely Turkish nationals and Moroccan nationals, are also investigated separately. Because of non-normality, a log transformation of three community-level variables (the size of the non-Belgian, non-EU and EU foreign national population in the community) was used to approximate a normal distribution more closely.²

Second, we argue that the perceived size of the immigrant population is also important, in addition to the actual size. Therefore, the perceived relative size of the immigrant population in Belgium is also investigated. This variable was measured by asking respondents how many out of every 100 people in Belgium they think are non-Belgian. Third, we investigate the role of cross-ethnic social contact with a measure of having cross-ethnic friendships. Respondents were asked whether they have any friends with a different ethnic background, so the variable we use distinguishes between people who do and people who do not have friends from a different ethnic background.

Control variables

In the analysis, we control for the individual-level variables age, gender, education, income, religiosity, watching television and generalized trust. Age tends to be positively associated with anti-immigrant sentiments (Citrin et al. 1997; Dustmann and Preston 2007). Anti-immigrant attitudes also tend to be stronger among socio-economically weak and vulnerable populations (Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Rajjman and Semyonov 2004). Regarding education, therefore, we include a dummy variable indicating whether respondents have a relatively low level of education (i.e. maximum lower secondary education) (1) or a relatively higher level of education (i.e. at least higher secondary education) (0). Regarding income, we use a variable with four categories, distinguishing between lower-income households (€0–1,999/month),

middle-income households (€2,000–3,499/month) and higher-income households (€3,500 or more/month). The fourth category designates the respondents who refused to provide information on their income.

Generalized trust has been the focus of the social capital school and much of the related work on civic attitudes and behaviours. Previous research has established a strong negative association between generalized trust on the one hand, and ethnocentrism and anti-immigrant feelings on the other (Hooghe, Reeskens and Stolle 2007).

In research on anti-immigrant sentiments, it has been found that mass media are an important factor because of their major role in influencing public opinion about ethnic minorities (Fitzgerald, Curtis, and Corliss 2012). Perceived threats and ethnocentric attitudes are often shaped by negative mass media portrayals of minority groups. Media presentations of immigration-relevant issues can be an important source of social bias (Law 2002). The negative role of television has been attributed especially to commercial stations as being a contributor to the cultivation of a less civic-minded value pattern (Hooghe 2002). We therefore include the number of hours that respondents spend watching television every day and their preference for a commercial station as control variables. On the municipality level, we control for community size (i.e. the number of residents in the municipality) and use a dummy variable indicating whether respondents live in a ‘cosmopolitan’ city (i.e. one of the two largest cities in Flanders: Antwerpen and Ghent). It is important to take these community-level factors into account, because it is possible that a ‘deprovincialization’ effect occurs in the larger urban centres (Verkuyten, Thijs and Bekhuis 2010). Descriptive statistics of the available measures are listed in Table 2.

Method

The nested structure of the SCIF survey research design, combined with the community-level data, is addressed by using multi-level models. This allows the simultaneous modelling of the effects of individual-level and community-level predictors (Snijders and Bosker 1999; Hox 2002). With multi-level modelling, variance explained by attributes of the context and variance explained by attributes of the individual can be distinguished and standard errors are estimated correctly. We centred all individual-level variables (but not the dummy variables) on the overall mean. We have tested cross-level interactions to evaluate whether the effects of the perceived proportion of non-Belgians and of having cross-ethnic friendships differ between communities. We therefore included random slopes for the perceived proportion of non-Belgians and for having cross-ethnic friendships in the respective models that test the cross-level interactions.

Results

Actual and perceived diversity

If we want to compare the effect of actual and perceived diversity on the development of anti-immigrant attitudes, it is important to note that both measurements differ

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of variables used in the analysis (40 municipalities; $N=1,816$).

	Min.	Max.	M / Proportion	SD
Individual-level parameters				
Anti-immigrant sentiments	0	10	4.96	1.86
Perceived% non-Belgian	1	99	28.03	17.36
Friend with other ethnic background	0	1	0.36	
Age	17	84	47.28	17.96
Female	0	1	0.52	
Lower education level	0	1	0.27	
Income: 0–1,999	0	1	0.28	
Income: 2,000–3,499	0	1	0.34	
Income: 3,500-upwards	0	1	0.26	
Income: Missing	0	1	0.12	
Religious attendance	0	1	0.50	
TV – average hours a day	0	18	2.43	1.58
TV – prefers commercial station	0	1	0.35	
Generalized trust	0	10	5.40	1.79
Valid N (listwise)				
Community-level parameters				
% non-Belgian	0.68	22.86	5.41	5.08
(log)% non-Belgian	-0.39	3.13	1.31	0.85
% non-EU	0.14	8.77	2.05	2.16
(log)% non-EU	-1.99	2.17	0.25	0.98
% EU	0.54	21.94	3.35	3.93
(log)% EU	-0.62	3.09	0.78	0.86
% Turkish	0	2.02	0.38	0.58
% Moroccan	0	2.53	0.36	0.66
% Inflow	0	1.80	0.39	0.32
Community size ($\times 1,000$ residents)	5	478	68.62	115.71
Cosmopolitan city	0	1	0.12	

Source: SCIF Survey 2009; National Institute for Statistics of Belgium 2009.

strongly. Official figures show that about 6 per cent of the Belgian population does not have Belgian citizenship status. Taking into account that a large group of the immigrant population has acquired Belgian citizenship status, this would suggest that something like 12 per cent of the total population should be seen as belonging to an immigrant group. On average, however, the respondents in the survey estimated that 28 per cent of the Belgian population consists of non-Belgians. In line with previous research (Herda 2010), it can therefore be observed that respondents overestimate the presence of ethnic minorities. Additional analyses show that there is a significant positive relation between actual diversity at the community level and perceived diversity, but the relation is of modest size, and actual diversity does not appear to be a better predictor of perceived diversity than factors such as being younger, being female and having more (commercial) television consumption, which are all related to higher levels of perceived diversity (Table 3).

Table 3. Multi-level model for perceived percentage non-Belgians.

	Model 1		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Community-level parameter			
% non-Belgians (log)	3.073	0.739	***
Individual-level parameters			
Perceived% non-Belgians	–	–	
Friend with different ethnic origin	–0.701	0.810	
Control variables			
Age	–0.133	0.025	***
Female	8.575	0.740	***
Lower educational level	2.889	0.926	**
Income (ref.–lower income)			
Middle income	–2.203	0.997	*
Higher income	–3.286	1.143	**
Income missing	–1.519	1.342	
Does attend religious services	0.380	0.755	
TV – hours watched daily	0.981	0.259	***
TV – prefers commercial station	5.770	0.832	***
Generalized trust	–1.288	0.212	***
Community size (× 1,000 residents)	–0.001	0.014	
Cosmopolitan city	–0.684	4.995	
Intercept	29.610	2.310	***
Random part			
Individual-level variance		241.09	
% individual-level variance explained		16.9	
Community-level variance		6.28	
% community-level variance explained		43.5	

Source: SCIF Survey 2009; NIS 2009.

Note: Entries are the result of a multi-level regression analysis in SPSS, with ‘perceived% non-Belgians’ as the dependent variable.

Significance levels (two-tailed): **p* <.05, ***p* <.01, ****p* <.001.

Multi-level findings and interpretations

We have already noted that the intention of the current article is to use various community-level indicators in order to assess the impact of diversity on anti-immigrant sentiments. In order to avoid multicollinearity, however, it proved to be impossible to include all these indicators simultaneously. Therefore, these community-level indicators will have to be introduced in distinct models, and we first start with the description of the individual-level model, which will serve as a control for all future multi-level models.

As a starting point, a baseline model of the multi-level regression analysis was fitted (Table 4). The analysis shows that 3.31 per cent of the variance in anti-immigrant sentiments can be attributed to the community level. This limited level of intra-class correlation already suggests that the size of the immigrant group in one’s society cannot be the main driving force for levels of anti-immigrant sentiments. It

Table 4. Multi-level regression null model for anti-immigrant sentiments (40 municipalities; $N=1,816$).

	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Fixed part			
Intercept	4.985	0.069	**
Random part			
Individual-level variance	3.356	0.113	**
Community-level variance	0.115	0.043	*
Intraclass correlation	3.31%		

Source: SCIF Survey 2009.

Note: Entries are the result of a multi-level regression analysis, with anti-immigrant sentiments as the dependent variable.

Significance levels (two-tailed): * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

has to be noted, however, that 3.31 per cent cannot be neglected either, and therefore we pursue with the multi-level analysis.

Turning to the results of our main analysis in Table 5, it becomes clear that anti-immigrant sentiments are not significantly related to ethnic diversity at the community level, given conventional levels of significance (Model 1). This is in contrast to our first hypothesis, and with most of the literature on this topic, suggesting a positive association between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments. Interestingly, the second model in Table 5 shows that there is a modest but clearly significant positive association between the perceived percentage of non-Belgians in Belgium and anti-immigrant sentiments. This means that anti-immigrant sentiments are higher among those who provide higher estimates of the percentage of non-Belgians living in the country. Including the perception, there is even a very small negative relation between the actual percentage of immigrants in the community and anti-immigrant sentiments.

In the third model of Table 5, we investigate the possible impact of inter-ethnic contact. The results show that having one or more friends with a different ethnic background is associated with lower levels of anti-immigrant sentiments, as predicted by our second hypothesis.

When we include cross-ethnic friendship in the third (full) model, the negative relation between the actual percentage of non-Belgians in the community and anti-immigrant sentiments is not significant. As already noted, the non-significant relation between diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments is quite unique in the international literature. One of the ways that we could explain our finding is the fact that in diverse communities, the odds are higher that members of the majority group will have positive contacts with members of the minority group, and that especially among those who have positive contacts, levels of prejudice are negatively related to actual diversity. Conversely, the actual size of the non-Belgian population may lead to more anti-immigrant sentiments, especially among those who perceive high levels of ethnic diversity. Therefore, we have tested cross-level interactions between community levels of diversity on the one hand and perceived diversity and inter-group contact on the other, as can be seen in Models 4 and 5 of Table 5. These interactions turn out not to be significant. This means that we do not find any evidence that the relation

Table 5. Multi-level regression models for anti-immigrant sentiments (40 municipalities; N=1,816)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Community-level parameter															
% non-Belgians (log)	-0.111	0.073		-0.141	0.074	γ	-0.103	0.070		-0.096	0.070		-0.147	0.076	γ
Individual-level parameters															
Perceived% non-Belgians				0.010	0.002	***	0.010	0.002	***	0.006	0.005		0.010	0.002	***
Friend with different ethnic origin							-0.666	0.082	***	-0.667	0.082	***	-0.845	0.167	***
Cross-level interactions															
% non-Belgians * Perceived%										0.003	0.003				
% non-Belgians * Friend ethnic origin													0.134	0.105	
Control variables															
Age	0.016	0.002	***	0.017	0.003	***	0.013	0.003	***	0.012	0.003	***	0.013	0.003	***
Female	-0.030	0.076		-0.117	0.079		-0.142	0.078	γ	-0.136	0.077	γ	-0.141	0.078	γ
Lower educational level	0.360	0.096	***	0.330	0.095	***	0.299	0.094	**	0.304	0.094	**	0.298	0.094	***
Income (ref. = lower income)															
Middle income	-0.019	0.103		0.003	0.103		-0.010	0.101		-0.015	0.101		-0.013	0.101	
Higher income	-0.099	0.118		-0.066	0.118		-0.113	0.116		-0.117	0.116		-0.114	0.116	
Income missing	-0.032	0.139		-0.015	0.138		-0.016	0.136		-0.027	0.136		-0.014	0.135	
Does attend religious services	-0.100	0.078		-0.105	0.078		-0.118	0.076		-0.112	0.076		-0.118	0.076	
TV – hours watched daily	0.080	0.027	**	0.069	0.027	**	0.058	0.026	*	0.057	0.026	*	0.059	0.026	*
TV – prefers commercial station	0.632	0.086	***	0.573	0.087	***	0.553	0.085	***	0.547	0.085	***	0.557	0.085	***
Generalized trust	-0.350	0.022	***	-0.336	0.022	***	-0.328	0.022	***	-0.326	0.022	***	-0.327	0.022	***
Community size (x 1,000 residents)	0.000	0.001		0.000	0.001		0.000	0.001		0.001	0.001		0.001	0.001	
Cosmopolitan city	-0.335	0.484		-0.328	0.493		-0.370	0.458		-0.427	0.451		-0.411	0.460	
Intercept	5.879	0.231	***	5.866	0.231	***	6.277	0.230	***	6.255	0.230	***	6.317	0.232	***

Table 5 (Continued)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
Random part															
Individual-level variance	2.580			2.555			2.469			2.445			2.458		
% individual-level variance explained	23.1			23.9			26.4			27.1			26.8		
Community-level variance	0.055			0.059			0.048			0.046			0.042		
% community-level variance explained	52.2			48.7			58.3			60.0			63.5		
Variance random slope individual parameter										0.000			0.051		

Source: SCIF Survey 2009.

Significance levels (two-tailed): ${}^{\dagger}p < .010$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: Entries are the result of a multi-level regression analysis, with anti-immigrant sentiments scale as the dependent variable.

between the actual size of the non-Belgian population and anti-immigrant sentiments is more negative among those who have cross-ethnic friendships or perceive low levels of ethnic diversity. This suggests that inter-group friendship and perceived diversity do not help us to explain the negative relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Turning to the control variables, our analysis mostly confirms the results of previous studies. The level of anti-immigrant sentiments is higher among those who are older, have less education, watch more television and prefer commercial stations, and have lower levels of generalized trust. We do not find evidence for effects of income and religiosity. The media seem to be an important factor, as both the time spent watching television and a preference for commercial television stations are positively related to the level of anti-immigrant sentiments. At the community level, we find no relations between community size or living in a cosmopolitan city and anti-immigrant sentiments. The main finding from the previous model is that there is no significant relation between the percentage of non-Belgians at the community level and anti-immigrant sentiment. To determine whether this is caused by the specific operationalization of the ethnic diversity measure we used, we also test different diversity measures in additional analyses. Table 6 thus shows the results from nine different multi-level regressions in which every model includes all the individual-level variables of the corresponding models (Models 1–3) in Table 4. The results listed in Table 6 provide further evidence that there is no significant (positive) relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments. We only find some very small negative relations in the second model, which does not take inter-group contact into account. This allows us to conclude that people living in more diverse communities do not tend to have more negative attitudes towards immigrants, as group conflict theory would predict.

Table 6. Effect of different diversity-related community-level parameters in Models 1–3 (40 municipalities; $N = 1,816$)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
% non-Belgians	−0.012	0.012		−0.015	0.013		−0.012	0.012	
% non-Belgians (log)	−0.111	0.073		−0.141	0.074	γ	−0.103	0.070	
% non-EU	−0.026	0.065		−0.053	0.067		−0.006	0.063	
% non-EU (log)	−0.103	0.074		−0.138	0.075	γ	−0.079	0.072	
% EU	−0.013	0.013		−0.016	0.014		−0.014	0.013	
% EU (log)	−0.095	0.066		−0.117	0.067	γ	−0.094	0.063	
% Turkish origin	−0.098	0.141		−0.140	0.144		−0.061	0.136	
% Moroccan origin	0.083	0.129		0.040	0.133		0.099	0.123	
% inflow	−0.083	0.192		−0.088	0.197		−0.096	0.193	

Source: SCIF Survey 2009.

Significance level (two-tailed): $\gamma p < .010$.

Note: Entries are the result of a multi-level regression analysis, with anti-immigrant sentiments scale as the dependent variable. Models include all variables that are also included in Model 3 of Table 5.

As stated in our third hypothesis, one of our main goals in this analysis was to ascertain the difference between the effect of actual and perceived diversity. Our models demonstrate the importance of the perceived size of the migrant group in predicting anti-immigrant sentiments. How people perceive the presence of migrants has an important impact on anti-immigrant sentiments. The relation between the actual concentration of foreigners in the municipality and ethnocentrism is not only less strong, but even absent. The results reveal that higher proportions of foreigners (either non-Belgians, non- EU-15 citizens or EU nationals) in the community are not associated with higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiments among the natives.

Discussion

In this article, we investigated the impact of both perceived and actual ethnic diversity on the level of anti-immigrant sentiments. In line with most proponents of the group conflict theory, it was assumed that both diversity measures could have a positive effect on the level of anti-immigrant sentiments. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this was not confirmed by our results. While the perceived level of diversity is indeed positively related to anti-immigrant sentiments, the actual diversity measures turned out not to be associated with these sentiments. In more diverse communities, natives clearly do not have a more negative outlook on migration and this observation runs counter to most observations based on forms of the conflict approach. A first possibility to explain why levels of anti-immigrant sentiments are not higher in more diverse communities would be to look at the increased potential for inter-group friendship in these diverse communities. However, we did not find evidence for a mediation (suppression) effect or a significant interaction effect between the level of ethnic diversity in one's community and having inter-group friendships. This means that we do not find evidence for a negative indirect relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments by increased positive inter-group contact. Neither do we find evidence that the relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments is only negative among those who have cross-ethnic friendships and positive among others. Another possibility that remains to be investigated is a self-selection effect. Given the fact that ethnic minorities tend to concentrate in the inner cities, those with high levels of anti-immigrant sentiments are more likely to move out of the inner city, to relocate themselves in mostly homogeneous suburbs. The end result of this process of geographical self-selection is that the natives that do remain in the city centre, or are attracted to inner cities, are characterized by lower levels of anti-immigrant sentiments. As a third possibility, it should be noted that the absence of a positive relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments may be related to the size of our communities. The empirical evidence for a positive relation between actual diversity and anti-immigrant sentiments mainly comes from cross-national studies, while other studies that look at diversity at the community level have also found no relation (Semyonov et al. 2004). This suggests that perceived ethnic threat may be more salient at the national level than at the community level. It also implies that, at the national level, interaction with ethnic minority members most likely does not play a role in the development of anti-immigrant sentiments, while it is more likely that this interaction does occur at the level of the municipality.

On the other hand, we could establish a positive effect between the perceived size of the ethnic minority group in Belgium and the level of anti-immigrant sentiments. However, in this case, too, extreme caution is necessary if our goal is to establish any causality. First of all, it has to be remembered that the perception of diversity is only weakly related to actual diversity as most native actors arrive at a huge overestimation of the presence of foreigners in the country. The logic underlying the current analysis was that the perception of reality (even if it is not based on actual facts and figures) could contribute to the development of specific attitudes. Different approaches, however, are just as likely. Actors with a hostile attitude towards ethnic minorities could be more likely to overestimate the presence of non-nationals, because in their perception of what goes on in society they are more likely to be focused on these specific groups. It could even be argued that both measurements refer to the same latent concept, as obviously those who worry about cultural and ethnic diversity in society are more likely to pay more attention to this topic in their day-to-day observations of their community. Actors who are not concerned at all about diversity simply have fewer reasons to focus on this aspect of reality on their observations about the community in which they live. It is important, therefore, that in future studies we should be able to determine more clearly what the conceptual status of this perception is. On the one hand, it is partly reality driven, but simultaneously it does reflect underlying attitudes held by the respondent. While it is clear that the perceived size of minority groups and anti-immigrant sentiments are related, it remains to be investigated how exactly this perception is being constructed.

Conclusion

The current analysis demonstrates that perception is important, and maybe even more important than social reality. The fact that we find a strong relation with media use even might lead in the same direction as actors who spend a lot of time in front of the television set, obviously also use media content to make sense of their society, even if they do not have any direct observations about what goes on in the community they reside in. It has to be noted in this regard that this specific study was limited to the Flemish region of Belgium. While this country is not exceptional with regard to the presence of ethnic minorities, it has to be noted that this region might offer a specific cultural context. Since the 1980s, the extreme right Vlaams Belang party has been quite successful in this region, and it has consistently used a discourse about the negative social impact of the presence of non-nationals. This discourse might be associated with a general outlook where the perception is that Belgian society is being 'flooded' by the arrival of immigrants. It remains to be ascertained, therefore, whether our conclusion ('perception matters more than reality') is also valid in other cultural contexts, where a different discourse on the consequences of ethnic diversity prevails. It is important therefore, to investigate the effect of both real and perceived ethnic diversity also in other cultural contexts.

Notes

1. Following a cluster analysis, forty municipalities in the sample were chosen. For a detailed explanation, see the Technical Report (Hooghe, Vanhoutte and Bircan 2009).
2. It has to be noted that official population records only keep track of current citizenship status. A large proportion of immigrants (and their descendants), however, have acquired Belgian citizenship status and they are therefore no longer present in the official population records. However, a study from the Flemish regional government has demonstrated that these groups live in exactly the same communities as the ones who do not have Belgian citizenship status (correlation is 0.99).

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MARC HOOGHE is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Leuven. ADDRESS: Political Science, University Leuven, Park Street 45, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. Email: Marc.Hooghe@soc.kuleuven.be

THOMAS DE VROOME is a PhD candidate in the Ercomer Department at Utrecht University. ADDRESS: Ercomer, Utrecht University, Utrecht, 3508 TC, The Netherlands. Email: T.M.deVroome@uu.nl