

Cluster: Youth and education

Project 8: The interplay between ethnic and educational network segregation and opinion polarization

Aim

To examine mutual causal relations between ethnic and educational network segregation and opinion polarization.

Theoretical background

An often-heard claim is that people with different ethnic and educational backgrounds hardly meet and intermingle, because of their increasingly segregated social networks. This claim has resonated strongly with policy-makers and an increasing concern is voiced regarding (political) polarization resulting from network segregation. This likely threatens cohesion within society and the functioning of democracy. Unfortunately, claims on the interplay between deepening social divisions along ethnic and educational lines and increasing (political) polarization are not based on firm empirical evidence. The aim of this project is therefore to theoretically develop and empirically examine a framework that explains the relations between ethnic and educational segregation in social networks and (political) opinion polarization.

The theoretical starting point of this project is that segregation in social networks is the result of the constrained choices that people make about with whom to interact. An important ‘sociological fact’ is that people prefer friends who are similar to themselves. We further theorize that our opinions on salient issues in society are influenced by the interactions we have with others, because, for example, these others provide us with new information, they persuade us, or we simply strive to reduce disagreement within our social environment. The central hypotheses which will be tested in this project are: (1) When subgroups in society become mostly exposed to similar others with consonant views, opinion polarization is most likely to occur; (2) We prefer to interact with others who hold similar opinions with respect to salient issues in society; (3) Because our opinions are related to our ethnic and educational background, ethnic and educational network segregation and opinion polarization go hand in hand.

Research design

This project will use existing panel data on complete interaction networks within the school context among adolescents and egocentric offline and online networks among the adult population (LISS). The PhD candidate will collect primary data as well. The opinions and attitudes this project focuses on are political attitudes (e.g., trust and efficacy, populism, political ideology) and opinions on salient issues within society (e.g., immigration, environment). Note that the salience of issues may vary over time and may differ for adolescents and adults. The dynamics between network segregation and opinion polarization will be analyzed by social network analysis.

Literature

Boutyline, A., & Willer, R. (2017). The social structure of political echo chambers: Variation in ideological homophily in online networks. *Political Psychology*, 38(3), 551-569.

DiPrete, T. A., Gelman, A., McCormick, T., Teitler, J., & Zheng, T. (2011). Segregation in social networks based on acquaintanceship and trust. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(4), 1234-83.

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Location

Nijmegen