



# Ethnic/racial homogeneity in college students' Facebook friendship networks and subjective well-being

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## ABSTRACT

We examined the relationship between subjective well-being and the ethnic/racial homogeneity of the Facebook friendship networks of first-year college students. We coded each participant's "Facebook friends" into European Americans or not. Participants reported their life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and felt understanding and misunderstanding. Among European American participants, having a more homogeneous friendship network was associated with higher life satisfaction and positive affect, as well as lower felt misunderstanding. Political conservatism was also marginally associated with having more homogeneous friendship networks, as well as marginally higher levels of life satisfaction but did not mediate the relationship between them. Among non-European American participants, we did not find any relationship between the homogeneity of friendship networks and subjective well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning strive to create an environment in which people from varied backgrounds can come together in order to receive an education and feel part of a larger community. Much research has shown that ethnically/racially diverse learning environments can be beneficial (see Page (2007) for review). A majority of such studies have, however, focused on cognitive outcomes. Little research has examined the relationship between ethnic/racial diversity and well-being in such contexts. While some research suggests that exposure to racial and ethnic diversity should have a positive association with well-being (e.g., Antonio et al., 2004), Putnam (2007) recently found that residents in ethnically diverse US communities trusted their neighbors and their in-groups less than those who lived in more homogeneous communities. Because general trust is positively associated with subjective well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), this suggests that there may be reason to expect a negative relationship between ethnic/racial diversity in people's social networks and subjective well-being. In the current research, we will address this question by investigating the relationship between the homogeneity/diversity of the friendship networks and the subjective well-being of a cohort of first-year college students using the popular social networking website Facebook.

### 1.1. A diversity of findings about ethnic/racial diversity

A sizeable empirical literature has documented the positive effects of racial and ethnic diversity on a variety of cognitive and

performance outcomes. For instance, racial diversity of the student body has been shown to be associated with various positive educational outcomes in colleges (Chang, 1999). In another study, Antonio et al. (2004) randomly assigned participants to a racially diverse or racially homogeneous discussion group; those in the diverse group scored higher on a subsequent task involving integrative complexity. Organizational behavior research has also shown a positive effect of racial diversity in work group productivity (Richard, Murthi, & Ismail, 2007). Finally, multi-cultural experience has also been shown to be causally related to creativity (e.g., Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008).

It should be noted, however, that some null or negative outcomes of racial diversity have also been reported. For instance, Rothman, Martin Lipset, and Nevitte (2003) pointed out methodological flaws in previous positive findings regarding racial diversity in higher education (e.g., social desirability, selection bias), and argued that racial diversity was associated with more interracial conflict. Similarly, diversity in work groups led to interpersonal conflict and undermined group performance in some research (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; see Swann, Kwan, Polzer, and Milton (2003) for a moderating effect of positive perceptions among group members on the relation between diversity and group task performance). Racial diversity of employees was also associated with a higher rate of turnover, and a negative change in profitability over time in fast-food restaurant chains (Sacco & Schmitt, 2005).

A recent study by Putnam (2007) revealed another "downside" to diversity in the domain of general trust and social capital. Putnam analyzed a large, nationally representative survey involving roughly 30,000 respondents living in 41 cities across the US. Results showed that residents in ethnically diverse communities

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(e.g., Los Angeles, CA) trusted others, including people of their own race, less than did residents in a less diverse communities (e.g., Bismarck, ND). Furthermore, residents in diverse communities also talked with their neighbors less, joined voluntary associations less, and participated in community activities less frequently than did residents in homogenous communities. The negative associations between diversity and most social capital measures held true even when wealth of the city, the mean education level of the residents, residential mobility, crime rate, and various other factors were statistically controlled.

Putnam (2007) theorized that residents in ethnically diverse communities tend to “hunker in” to their own small inner circle and trust others less. He also speculated that this may be an initial (i.e., short-term) reaction to being in a diverse environment. In the long run, then, there may not be a negative association between ethnic diversity of the community and the level of trust among residents.

In sum, Putnam’s findings provide an intriguing, if not disturbing, picture of the role played by ethnic diversity in community residents’ general trust and civic engagement. Considering the positive correlation between general trust and life satisfaction found in a large-scale meta-analysis (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), Putnam’s findings give rise to a prediction that racial and ethnic homogeneity in the friendship networks of college students will be positively associated with subjective well-being. Given that well-being during college years has been shown to predict future occupational success (e.g., Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), it is important to gain a better understanding of the relationship between these two variables.

### 1.2. The current research

We examined the relationships between the ethnic/racial homogeneity of the social networks of college students and the students’ subjective well-being. Our study attempts to extend previous research on this topic in several ways. First, we analyzed the ethnic/racial homogeneity of the public, self-declared social networks of a cohort of first-year college students by coding each participant’s “Facebook friends” into European Americans or not. This enabled us to minimize the potential for study-related self-presentational biases (e.g., over- or under-estimation of the number of diverse friends by our participants). It also enabled us to get a “big” picture of the diversity of participants’ friends—on campus and at other schools.

Second, whereas previous research (e.g., Putnam, 2007) has focused on the contextual effect of racial/ethnic homogeneity on the construct under study, we have focused on individual differences in the racial/ethnic homogeneity of participants’ friendship networks, namely how individuals create homogeneous or not-so-homogeneous friendship networks within the same overall environment. First-year students at University of Virginia live in freshman dorms, eat in freshman dining halls, take large lecture classes with other incoming students, and are bombarded with the same invitations to participate in extracurricular activities. The day-to-day environments of first-year students should be relatively similar. Thus, individual differences in the degree of ethnic/racial diversity/homogeneity of On-Campus friendship networks should reflect individuals’ choices and preferences.

Third, we assessed several individual difference variables that could be associated with the degree of ethnic/racial homogeneity of friendship networks such as political conservatism and lower levels of openness to experiences. This allowed us to test whether the observed relationship between ethnic/racial homogeneity of friendship networks and subjective well-being could be accounted for by these variables.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were ninety-three first semester, first-year undergraduates (class of 2009) at the University of Virginia (35 male). The age of participants ranged from 17 to 19, with a mean age of 17.98 ( $SD = .42$ ). In terms of ethnicity, 8 (8.6%) were African-American, 17 (18.3%) Asian, 48 (51.6%) European American, 3 (3.2%) Latino, 2 (2.2%) Middle Eastern, and 14 (15.1%) were categorized as “Multi-Ethnic.” All participants received partial fulfillment of their course requirement in exchange for participation.

### 2.2. Procedure

A majority ( $n = 73$ ) of the participants in the current study completed several well-being and personality measures as part of a mass testing session at the beginning of their first semester at college in September 2005 (Time 1). In addition, as part of the current study all participants completed numerous self-report measures via the web at in the last quarter of their first semester at college (Time 2). Finally, all participants gave consent to have their Facebook profile and Facebook friend pages retrieved and analyzed. The web pages containing participants’ On-Campus Friends and Other-School Friends were retrieved and saved at the end of their first semester at college (Time 2).

### 2.3. Materials

At Time 1, participants completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985;  $\alpha = .82$ , possible range of 5–35), and the Felt Understanding (1 = Not at all to 7 = A lot in the past month: understood, appreciated, validated;  $\alpha = .87$ ) and Felt Misunderstanding scales (1 = Not at all to 7 = A lot in the past month: alienated, misunderstood, ignored;  $\alpha = .73$ ), (Oishi, Miao, & Krochik, 2007; possible range of 3–21 for each). In addition, we assessed Big Five personality traits (Brody & Ehrlichman, 1997; extraversion  $\alpha = .83$ ; neuroticism  $\alpha = .87$ ; agreeableness  $\alpha = .78$ ; conscientiousness  $\alpha = .77$ ; openness  $\alpha = .64$ ; the possible range of 1–5), as well as religiosity (0 = Not at all Religious to 6 = Extremely Religious) and political conservatism (1 = Very Liberal to 7 = Very Conservative). At Time 2, all participants completed the SWLS ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988;  $\alpha = .83$  for PA,  $\alpha = .79$  for NA).

### 2.4. Procedure for coding Facebook friends for ethnic diversity

Participants’ Facebook friend pages (which display 50 friends to a page) were retrieved and saved at the end of their first semester at college. This included their friends who were attending University of Virginia (“On-Campus Friends”) ( $M = 117.18$ ,  $SD = 59.67$ ). In addition, participants’ friends at other colleges (“Other-School Friends”) ( $M = 126.83$ ,  $SD = 64.56$ ) were saved separately. Given the timing of the retrieval (i.e., after only one semester at college), we presumed that the majority of the latter individuals were likely to be friends and acquaintances from the participants’ high school.

The primary goal of the coding was to assess the racial/ethnic diversity of the participants’ friends by coding the identifying information (i.e., photographs and names) of the individuals who were publicly declared to be part of their social network. We recognized, however, that determining specific ethnicity from this information alone was likely to be quite difficult (if not impossible). Because ample social psychological research suggests that accurate judgments about broad race categories can be made via use of even minimal visual information (e.g., Ambady, Bernieri, &

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