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Size is in the eye of the beholder: How differences between neighbourhoods and individuals explain variation in estimations of the ethnic out-group size in the neighbourhood



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we shed light on the various ways in which native Dutch estimate the size of the ethnic minority population in their neighbourhood. We formulate hypotheses on how characteristics of the neighbourhood (i.e. objective group sizes, ethnic segregation, economic deprivation and crime), of surrounding neighbourhoods and experiences of interethnic contact and feelings of ethnic threat shape perceptions of the ethnic outgroup size. We employ individual-level data from the 1Vandaag Opinion Panel enriched with contextual-level data from Statistics Netherlands (24,538 respondents in 3113 neighbourhoods). Great variation in residents' perceptions of the ethnic outgroup size exists both between neighbourhoods and within neighbourhoods. We demonstrate that native Dutch are more likely to overestimate the size of the non-Western minority population than the size of the Western minority population. Larger ethnic outgroup sizes in surrounding neighbourhoods are associated with the sense that one's own neighbourhood also contains more minority residents. In economically deprived and high crime neighbourhoods, residents are more likely to overestimate the size of the ethnic outgroup. Furthermore, people with more interethnic contact and people who experience more ethnic threat provide higher estimations and are more likely to overestimate the ethnic outgroup size in their neighbourhood.

Introduction

As a consequence of ongoing immigration over recent decades, Western societies have become increasingly diverse in terms of people's ethnic background. This process of diversification has triggered a heated political debate in many Western countries about the possible threats posed by ethnic heterogeneity to the wellbeing of their societies (Wickes et al. 2013). In the last few years this debate has also become a central theme in academic research. Social scientists have investigated whether, and under what conditions, high numbers of ethnic minorities in a given environment have negative consequences for social cohesion. There is, however, still little consensus on the impact of the actual (objective) ethnic outgroup size (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014). Researchers have explained the limited impact of objective neighbourhood characteristics by contending that they can only be consequential if

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individuals are aware of them (Harding, Gennetian, Winship, Sanbonmatsu, & Kling, 2011; Wickes, Hipp, Zahnow, & Mazerolle, 2013). In line with this contention, research focusing on the impact of the perceived (subjective) ethnic outgroup size on social cohesion has consistently demonstrated a negative relationship (e.g. Schaeffer, 2013; Hooghe and Vroome, 2015; Piekut and Valentine, 2016; Hipp and Wickes, 2016). Accordingly, it is important to find a better understanding of how perceptions of the ethnic outgroup size are constructed. We asked native Dutch people (N = 24,538) to make an estimation of the size of the total ethnic minority population in their neighbourhood and we set out to answer under which circumstances people perceive more ethnic minorities in their neighbourhood and under which circumstances people are more likely to overestimate the size of the ethnic outgroup in their neighbourhood.

A widely accepted conceptual definition of the Dutch foreign population originates from Statistics Netherlands (Alders, 2001, pp.2; italics in original): “The *first generation* [foreign population] consists of persons who are born abroad and have at least one parent who is also born abroad. The *second generation* consists of persons who are born in the Netherlands and have at least one parent who belongs to the first generation.”. A common classification is subsequently being made between Western and non-Western ethnic minorities, according to country of birth.³ Countries in Europe (with the exception of Turkey) and North America are, for example, considered to be ‘Western countries’. Although it might be counterintuitive, by the Dutch definition, Eastern Europeans are thus considered Western minorities. But the category ‘Western’ also includes persons from Oceania, Japan and Indonesia (including the former Dutch East Indies). Countries in Africa, and Latin America are, for example, considered to be ‘non-Western countries’.

About 10% of the Dutch population has a Western background and about 12% has a non-Western background (Statistics Netherlands, 2014a). The largest groups with a non-Western background are Moroccan-Dutch (19%), Turkish-Dutch (20%), Surinamese-Dutch and Antillean-Dutch (25%). People with roots in Germany and Belgium are traditionally among the largest groups with a Western background (together they constitute 30% of the population with a Western background). From 2004 onwards, migration from Eastern European countries has increased rapidly. Nowadays, people with roots in Poland, former Yugoslavia, former Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Romania make up about 20% of the population with a Western background (Statistics Netherlands, 2014a). There is considerable ethnic segregation between municipalities, and within municipalities between neighbourhoods (Tolsma and Van der Meer, 2016). The question is whether this is also perceived as such.

Existing studies focussing on the perceived ethnic outgroup size examined individuals’ estimations of the ethnic outgroup size either at the national level (e.g. Sigelman and Niemi, 2001; Alba et al., 2005; Semyonov, Rajjman and Gorodzeisky 2008; Herda, 2010; Strabac, 2011) or at the large regional level (e.g. Semyonov et al., 2004). Even though individuals’ perceptions of the ethnic outgroup size are not totally disjoined from reality, these studies consistently showed that people tend to overestimate the ethnic outgroup size at both the national and large regional level. Researchers have explained this finding by contending that estimations of the ethnic outgroup size at the country level, or at the large regional level, are often based on people’s everyday experience (Nadeau, Niemi and Levine 1993). Individuals tend to generalize the situation in their local social context, when asked to make an assessment of the sizes of different ethnic groups at the national or large regional level. Given the presumed importance of the local context, we turn in this contribution to explaining perceptions of the neighbourhood ethnic outgroup size.

In line with the above mentioned previous studies, we expect that native Dutch people will, on average, be capable of making fairly realistic estimations of the size of the ethnic outgroup in their own local residential environment. However, they are likely to be more aware of non-Western minorities than of Western minorities in their living environment, because they can be more easily distinguished by skin colour and cultural behaviours. In this contribution it is our aim to explain why average perceptions and the likelihood to overestimate the ethnic outgroup size differ between neighbourhoods and why residents of the same neighbourhood differ in how ethnic minorities are perceived and why some residents are more likely to overestimate the ethnic outgroup size than others. Furthermore, we will investigate whether actual (objective) sizes of Western and non-Western minorities contribute equally to the (over)estimations of the ethnic outgroup size as a whole.

With respect to between-neighbourhood variations, we argue that, besides the actual ethnic outgroup size in a neighbourhood, ethnic segregation, economic deprivation and the prevalence of crime may affect perceptions of ethnic outgroup size. Furthermore, neighbourhoods are no islands and are inevitably related to surrounding areas and form part of larger municipalities (Sampson, 2012). Differences in perceptions of the outgroup size between neighbourhoods may therefore stem partly from variations in the ethnic, economic and crime composition of surrounding areas. But even people living in the same neighbourhood may perceive their residential environment differently (Harding et al., 2011), because perceptions are shaped by social position (Sampson, 2012). We argue that interethnic contact and feelings of ethnic threat are also likely to be related to how the ethnic outgroup size is perceived.

In sum, the general purpose of this study is to shed light on how individuals’ perceptions of the ethnic make-up of their residential neighbourhood are shaped by the characteristics of that neighbourhood, of their surrounding neighbourhoods, and by their interethnic contact experiences and feelings of ethnic threat. To test our expectations we employ contextual-level data from Statistics Netherlands and individual-level data for native Dutch individuals extracted from the 1Vandaag Opinion Panel, a unique survey carried out among 24,538 respondents. With this dataset, we are able to investigate perceptions of the ethnic outgroup size across the country, covering all municipalities and more than 75% of all neighbourhoods in the Netherlands.

³ We use the term ethnic minorities and foreign population interchangeably. For persons of the second generation, the classification is based on mother’s country of birth. If she is also born in the Netherlands, the background is determined by the father’s country of birth.

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