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# Attitudes toward immigration and the neighborhood effect<sup>1</sup>

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*While immigration to Finland has been relatively moderate compared to many other European countries, it has increased significantly in recent years. However, it is important to note that immigration is not evenly spread out over the country and like in other EU member states, immigrants in Finland are concentrated to larger cities. Attitudes toward immigration tend also to vary rather considerably within countries. According to Jaakkola, the cities of Turku and Helsinki display the most positive attitudes toward immigration in Finland. While the differences have decreased somewhat in the last few decades inhabitants of rural areas are still generally more reluctant to accept the influx of immigrants than those living in urban areas.*

Since both the presence of and the attitudes toward immigrants vary within countries, contextual explanations have become central for explaining attitudes toward immigrants and other minorities. Primarily two plausible, but at the same time conflicting, explanations for how residential context may affect attitudes toward immigration have been presented. First, according to contact theory, inter-group contact is an efficient means to reduce prejudice and group conflict, in other words, more contact with immigrants will make the majority population more likely to accept them (Allport; Tropp & Pettigrew). Second, inter-group threat theories suggest that residential proximity will induce rather than reduce prejudice due to competition over resources. According to this

line of reasoning, the influx of immigrants will increase competition, especially in the lower socio-economic tiers, thereby producing negative attitudes toward immigration (Blalock; Hjerm). However, previous research has predominantly focused on cities and countries with established and sizeable minorities. It remains uncertain how relevant theories that rely on the presence of immigrants (or other minority groups) are in conditions where immigrants are relatively few and far in between. In this article we, therefore, discuss an alternative explanation, which gauges the influence of living among like-minded people. To what extent do attitudes of our peers, in this case our neighbors, influence our attitudes on immigration? To test the different theories we used a large-N data set (n=2967) on attitudes toward immigration in Turku, Finland gathered in 2012.

## Residential context as an explanation for attitudes

Research on intergroup contact or local intergroup threat has traditionally played an important role in explaining attitudes toward minority groups on a subnational demographic context. Residential proximity provides the opportunity to interact with immigrants, potentially affecting out-group categorization by the majority population. Residential context can affect attitudes toward immigration through

two principal channels, both of which are related to group identity. The first, and perhaps most important explanation is that residential context mediated the frequency of everyday contact between the majority population and minority groups. Second, residential context can affect attitudes toward immigration through in-group consolidation, i.e. attitudes develop or become strengthened as a result of coming into contact with shared views (Schkade, Sunstein & Hastie).

How these mechanisms can shape attitudes toward immigration depends partly on residential segregation. Residential segregation divides population groups into various neighborhood contexts and shapes the living environment at the neighborhood level. Education, occupation and income influence people's choice of residence and this results in certain demographic groups being overrepresented in some neighborhoods while underrepresented in others. Residential segregation also affects interactions between members of minority group populations and members of the majority group population, by reducing contact potential in homogenous areas and increasing it in more heterogeneous areas. The varying levels of contact with immigrants has in turn spurred two distinct theories on how contact with immigrants affect people's attitudes toward immigration.

According to the contact theory, as originally advanced by Allport, inter-group contact is an efficient means to reduce prejudice and ethnic conflict. Since group identity and out-group stereotyping are considered intrinsic to prejudice, limited contact with immigrants would be conducive to the emergence of prejudiced views and to the preservation of social distance between the majority population and immigrants. Attitudes toward immigration would subsequently be explained by the fact that some groups are more likely than others to come into contact with people unlike themselves. Direct contact with minority groups increases affability because increased contact makes it difficult for groups to accept typically negative stereotypes.

Theories of inter-group threat have on the other hand suggested that residential proximity may result in increased prejudice and decreased levels of trust and cooperation due to competition over scarce resources. Group threat theory identifies an implicit or explicit challenge to dominant group's position as the catalyst for prejudice (Blalock; Hjerem). This theory finds support from studies examining individuals' attitudes toward ethnic minorities, which consistently show that prejudice tends to be more pronounced among individuals with low socio-economic status (e.g. low

education, low income, unemployed). Due to residential segregation, low socio-economic status individuals from the majority population also are more likely to share neighborhoods with immigrants. Prejudice would be higher among this group due to a threat generated by the presence of subordinate minority populations. Because the competition in question is more economic than cultural, the proportion of the minority group or groups in a neighborhood is of special importance. In line with this reasoning the majority views a larger minority group as a bigger threat than a smaller one and therefore the effect is more pronounced the more ethnically heterogeneous the neighborhood is.

The contact and threat theories have played a major part in explaining the prejudice by whites toward blacks and other minorities in various areas in the United States, but they are not necessarily as useful in the Finnish context, where immigration is and has been very small scale in comparison and racial conflict is more or less non-existent. Since attitudes on immigration nonetheless are very divisive in Finland there might also be other mechanisms at play.

According to theories on group polarization (Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie), attitudes become strengthened as a result of coming into contact with shared views. Due to the growing segregation in our societies, neighborhoods consist to an increasing extent of people who share similar characteristics. Whether it is of their own choosing or not people have a tendency to affiliate with people like themselves (Mutz), and thereby they are likely to be affected by the general sentiment in their nearby environment.

The neighborhood effect (Miller) proposes that in the first place people choose to live in residential neighborhoods that are dominated by people like themselves. Additionally, living among and interacting with people who think and act alike can strengthen one's existing ideologies and attitudes and make one increasingly likely to act accordingly. Neighborhoods therefore form spatially defined spaces with specific group-based norms and information, all which can encourage or discourage some forms of thinking or action. In these kinds of situations, it is likely both that the ideological minority may be converted to the majority's view and that majority's opinions and attitudes may polarize (Pattie & Johnston). Even if living among like-minded would not be a conscious choice residential segregation makes it more likely for people to meet other people who experience the world in the same way as they do and less likely to meet those with a different perspective.

## Assessing the neighborhood effect in the city of Turku

According to Rasinkangas, the dispersion of immigrants in the City of Turku is not only uneven, ethnic segregation is actually increasing. The influx of immigrants is mostly concentrated to the largest suburban areas. The share of immigrants is the highest in Varissuo (40 per cent are non-native speakers, making it the most multicultural residential area in Finland) and there are altogether five neighborhoods where more than 20 per cent of the population speaks a foreign native tongue as their first language. On the other hand, there are many areas in Turku with very few immigrants. The majority of native-born Finns are actually very likely to reside in neighborhoods that are extremely homogenous when it comes to ethnic composition. Hence, neighborhoods are very different when it comes to interaction between majority and minority populations.

We used a combination of survey and register data. The survey data originates from the recruitment process for an experiment on attitude polarization. In this recruitment process a random sample of potential participants in the experiment was surveyed on their attitudes toward immigration (N=2967). The survey included items on how the respondents feel about the scale of immigration, how they feel about immigrants' adaptation to Finnish society, the economic impact of immigration, as well as about working with or living next to immigrants. The survey also included a few questions regarding basic socio-demographic factors

The benefit of having a large-N survey in a single municipality is that it allows for comparisons of units at the sub-municipal level, areas that are sufficiently small for residents to have shared experience and for the inhabitants to be in frequent contact with other people living in the area. The City of Turku is divided into 134 small sub-areas or neighborhoods. The register data on the small sub-areas in the municipality of Turku were collected by Statistics Finland for the City of Turku in 2012 and includes information on a number of socio-economic variables at the neighborhood level.

## Results and discussion

So what do our findings (Himmelroos & Leino) suggest? Contrary to most other studies on the subject, we do not find much to support the contact nor for threat hypothesis. Some neighborhoods display features that would seem to go in line with these hypotheses, but the evidence does not hold up in more systematic tests of the data. According to our results atti-

tudes seem to be best explained by the neighborhood effect, i.e. the average attitude toward immigration within neighborhoods can be linked to individual attitudes. This finding may seem trivial. Indeed it is quite obvious that individual attitudes within a neighborhood might correlate with average attitude of that same neighborhood. However, what we found is that the general sentiment within neighborhoods remains a strong predictor for individual attitudes even when we controlled for a number of individual and contextual factors. This would suggest that in a neighborhood with more negative attitudes toward immigration individuals are going to be more negative than one would expect based on their individual characteristics and other contextual characteristics. One should note that this relationship also goes the other way, i.e. in more tolerant neighborhoods individuals become more positive toward immigration.

Since our data cannot prove that there is a causal relationship - for that we would need measure how attitudes change over time - we cannot be sure whether it is the neighborhoods that affect individual opinions or whether individual opinions and related values affect where people decide to live. Nonetheless, a strong relationship between average attitudes in neighborhoods and individual attitudes can be quite problematic from a democratic viewpoint. It suggests that strong opinions are related to the fact that people tend to live among others with a similar worldview. A society that is made up of separate opinion clusters tend to foster individuals that have little insight into alternative realities and subsequently little understanding for different experiences or opposing views. Thereby, reducing the willingness to solve problems that affect the whole community.

Our best explanation for the outcomes of this study has to do with the case itself. Most studies where the neighborhood context is used to explain attitudes toward minority groups originate from the United States. Even though immigration to Finland has been growing rapidly in the last two decades, there are still relatively few immigrants in Finland and Turku compared to most parts of the United States. Since there are relatively few neighborhoods with a large ethnic diversity, only a limited portion of the majority population are likely to create meaningful contacts with a member from a minority group based on where they live. Similarly, relatively few neighborhoods have minority groups large enough to present a perceived threat to the majority population living there. For this reason it is perhaps not that surprising that contextual effects are related to general attitudes toward immigration among the majority population, rather than the

type of contact people have with immigrants. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the traditional explanations are relevant for attitudes in specific neighborhoods. Findings from some of the most segregated areas do seem to fit the threat theory quite well, but as we point out above neither the contact nor the threat theory can explain attitudes in Turku more broadly.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See Himmelroos & Leino 2015 and Himmelroos & Leino (forthcoming) for details regarding the findings and methods used.