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Education, Tolerance and Social Cohesion

Introduction

In the two previous chapters, we examined the effects of inequality in the distribution of skill and education across adult populations. We found that at a national level there are cross-sectional and over-time associations between educational inequality and a range of social cohesion outcomes. Perhaps surprisingly, educational (and not just income) inequality is important in terms of social cohesion. In this chapter we shift our concern to what many would consider to be another key element of social cohesion – tolerance. Here the relationship between education, equality and social cohesion is not as straightforward as might be expected.

Our argument in this chapter is largely based upon the literature on education, educational inequality and tolerance considered cross-nationally, with some empirical data analysis. We first consider the relationship between education and tolerance in Putnam’s theory of social capital. We emphasize that although at face value the relationships might appear straightforward (that education leads to greater tolerance that in turn is associated with a more cohesive society), tolerance appears to be a highly complex phenomenon. Moving from social capital to theories of social cohesion, we argue that there is an ambivalent relationship between tolerance and social cohesion. In fact, tolerance has not traditionally been a central component of theories of social cohesion. Using some empirical data we show that tolerance is not closely connected to other components of social cohesion.

Putnam (2000) finds that levels of education and tolerance for individuals are related. More highly educated individuals in the US tend to have more tolerant attitudes. Similar assumptions have been made in
studies of other countries (Emler and Fraser 1999; Haegel 1999; Winkler 1999). However, using cross-country analysis of aggregate measures for tolerance and education we find no correlations between tolerance and either levels of education or distributions of skills. That education levels do not correlate here with levels of tolerance may be because other contextual factors (such as societal levels of racism) at the country level overwhelm any associations. The lack of any observed relation between educational inequality and tolerance at the country level may be because education affects tolerance through value formation which is not captured in the measures of distributions of skills in literacy which we use.

Cross-national evidence on education and racial tolerance shows that the specific manifestations of ‘educated tolerance’ (or ‘uneducated intolerance’) are highly country- and context-specific. For example, Winkler (1999) and Haegel (1999) find that in Germany and France, respectively, there are substantial effects of education on tolerance and, in France, that the (supposedly universal) association between racism and authoritarianism is more apparent in ‘educated’ than ‘uneducated’ racists. Peri (1999), on the other hand, finds that for Italy there is only a weak effect from education and that the relation between intolerance and authoritarianism is also rather small. Relationships between education and tolerance vary not only synchronically across countries but also diachronically over time. Societal tolerance is highly situational and may change markedly over relatively short historical periods. After the events of 9/11, for instance, Islamophobia alone amongst other indicators of intolerance rose sharply in the US.

What is tolerance?

Tolerance is a multi-dimensional concept which may cover a wide range of related and unrelated attitudes. Tolerance may be understood, for instance, as acceptance of intra-group lifestyle differences (permissiveness) or it may be understood as openness towards other cultures (as in ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ tolerance). These propensities may not necessarily coincide. Equally there may be relativistic ‘libertarian’ conceptions of tolerance as acceptance of all values, no matter how ‘abhorrent’ to the social mainstream, which are quite different from ‘liberal’ notions that accept value differences but only where they do not transgress certain core values. Libertarian attitudes may involve a general permissiveness towards ‘deviant’ majority group behaviour but not necessarily include attitudes conducive to ethnic or racial tolerance. Research evidence