

Perceived diversity in neighbourhoods is related to more prejudice, study finds

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People who think they live in diverse neighbourhoods are less likely to be accepting of minority ethnic groups, an international research project by the University of Sheffield has found.

Dr Aneta Piekut, of Sheffield Methods Institute, and Professor Gill Valentine, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Social Sciences, investigated how attitudes towards minority [ethnic groups](#) are related to actual and perceived diversity by conducting a survey of communities in Leeds, UK, and Warsaw, Poland.

The study, published in *European Sociological Review* today (Tuesday 3

May 2016), investigated the relationship between diversity and attitudes at a very local level, asking respondents to assess the level of diversity in their neighbourhood to see how well aligned their perceptions were with reality.

The survey of 1,036 residents in Leeds and 1,179 in Warsaw found the actual [ethnic diversity](#) of a neighbourhood did not have a negative effect on how people felt towards minority ethnic groups. On the contrary, in Leeds people living in areas with a higher share of non-white British residents expressed more favourable attitudes towards immigrants and refugees.

However, the level of perceived diversity was negatively related to attitudes towards minority ethnic groups. In both Leeds and Warsaw, people perceiving their immediate residential areas as more diverse were more prejudiced.

In Leeds, the most socially open towards minority ethnic groups were those living in ethnically diverse settings, but who did not perceive their neighbourhoods as diverse. In Warsaw, the results were inconclusive but there was some evidence that the least accepting of ethnic minorities are residents of homogenous neighbourhoods who think they are very diverse.

Dr Aneta Piekut said: "Actual and perceived diversity work differently. Residents of ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in Leeds, and those having everyday contact with people of minority ethnic background in both cities, are more tolerant towards them. Yet, those 'seeing' their neighbourhood as diverse – regardless whether it was actually diverse or not – are more prejudiced."

Using data from 2001 and 2011 censuses for neighbourhoods in Leeds, the analysis tested whether the negative relationship between perceived

diversity and attitudes is the same across the city, or if it depends on the characteristics of neighbourhoods.

"Our study demonstrates that diversity perceptions are spatial and temporal – they depend on neighbourhood context and recent changes in the immediate living area," said Dr Piekut.

The people most prejudiced towards minority ethnic groups were those expressing high perceived diversity and living in areas with a high recent influx of minorities of 'white other' and 'mixed' ethnicity, as well as areas with recent deterioration of life conditions in their neighbourhood – for example, an increase in council housing.

The paper employed quantitative social science methods to talk about sensitive and difficult topics.

"We wanted to start a discussion on why people see diversity differently," said Dr Piekut.

"What are the social and economic factors determining whether we see our surrounding as diverse or not; what is the role of media or the nature of political debates in different European countries in shaping these perceptions?"

The work was part of the project 'Living with Difference in Europe: making communities out of strangers in an era of super mobility and super diversity' – a European Research Council Advanced Investigator Award to Professor Gill Valentine (grant no. 249658).

The study could be replicated in other countries and European cities differing in ethnic diversity experiences. It would increase understanding of how ethnic [diversity](#) and immigration are presented in public debates, which can contribute to distorted perceptions of some populations.

Provided by University of Sheffield

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