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Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Department of Sociology
Research Group TOR
Pleinlaan 2
B- 1050 Brussels
Tel. +32/2/629.20.24
Fax +32/2/629.30.52
<http://www.vub.ac.be/TOR/>



SMALL TALK?

THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL INTERACTION, THE DIVERSITY
OF INTERACTION PARTNERS AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Jessie Vandeweyer

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The link between social interaction, the diversity of interaction partners and democratic values

Department of Sociology
Research Group TOR
Free University Brussels (VUB)

1 Introduction

Although recent studies find a modest increase in participation to ‘associational life’ (Elchardus, Huyse et al. 2001; Scheepers & Janssen, 2001), other authors reported a decline in the number of social contacts modern man has (Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Knulst, 1999). Formal and organized forms of participation have relatively held their ground, whereas the importance of informal or ‘loose’ social contacts has diminished. The rapid coming to the fore in everyday life of numerous technological gadgets however allows us to communicate to one’s heart’s content, even with other individuals living across the globe. For instance, the number of people connected to the internet has increased drastically.¹ Nonetheless, it would seem that contacts with one’s immediate surroundings are fewer in number. The fading importance of social intercourse has brought about a certain feeling of anxiety in all layers of society. It is heard in public discourse (“people used to at least talk to each other”), forms the topic of scientific research (Kalmijn, 2001; Waeye & Agneessens, 2001) and even finds its way into concrete policy measures. The Flemish government has only recently, on the occasion of the Flemish regional holiday, taken such an initiative to bring people back together in order to combat the effects of the alienation and feeling of uneasiness in society, called ‘Buren Feesten’ (translation: Neighbors Party).

¹ see: <http://www.insites.be/site3/indexjs.htm> for the results of the Belgian Internet Mapping-study performed by Insites Consulting or <http://www.i->

A common proposition states people are becoming more isolated. The number of men and women living alone has grown over the last ten years (from 10,0% in 1991 to 12,4% in 2001 for men, from 14,0% to 15,3% for women over the same time-period). At the same time a decline in the average size of the household can be reported in Flanders: from 2,58 in 1991 to 2,43 in 2001 (Source: Statistics Belgium). A higher number of single residents does not necessarily give evidence to the supposed diminishing of social contacts in society.² Glossy lifestyle magazines nowadays fill their pages from cover to cover on the subject of 'happy singles', for whom independence combined with a highly active social life are central. It can be expected that single senior citizens are the demographic counterpart for this group.

Today's society implies a higher degree of individual freedom, however according to Fukuyama (in: Scheepers & Janssen, 2001) this has resulted in the loss of 'community'. Herein lies the danger that individuals will more and more position themselves in an egocentric and selfish manner and portray less altruistic feelings. Earlier research has shown the influence the degree of participation in society and integration in social networks has on the values of the Flemish people. Participation to civil society contributes significantly to the cultivation of democratic civil values and skills. Indirectly the integration into society and the feeling of well-being are improved by participation. Democratic attitudes and interaction forms are being directly influenced by the level of participation in a society (Elchardus, Huyse et al. 2001). Social relations, as a standard for integration in a society, also have a positive effect on the feeling of well-being. The absence of a partner or friends – in short a confidential actor – enlarges the chance of health problems. Particularly, the emotional and instrumental support attributed to social networks, are of importance (van Tilburg, 1985, 11).

Anomy posits as the logical counterpart of integration. Used as Srole (1956) defined it, the term refers to, on the one hand a state where the individual no longer feels connected to its community, and on the other hand the problematic character of

nieuws.vuurwerk.nl/archief/557.html for figures on the rising use of internet in the Netherlands.

² Due to the 'ageing' of the society the largest group of people living alone consists of older women.

identification opportunities of the individual with others in the community. These symptoms reveal themselves through a sense of lack of power over the political and societal spheres, the feeling one has no control over one's own 'faith', a sentiment of normlessness and pointlessness of life and a feeling of social isolation (Jacobs, Abts et al., 2001).

Apparently the level of one's social isolation is of relevance. In classical survey-research the level of participation in a society and the integration in social networks is generally established using questions concerning the frequency of contacts with relatives, friends and neighbors (i.e. informal participation) as well as asking respondents about their being active in voluntary associations (i.e. formal participation) (Elchardus, Huyse et al. 2001; Scheepers & Janssen, 2001; Waegel & Agneessens, 2001).

The starting-point of this paper is also to study more closely the relation between social contacts and democratic attitudes. The method for operationalising social contacts (Glorieux, 1993) is the specific angle used in this paper. Not so much participation in its formal or informal appearance, but rather the actual social interaction (i.e. activities that involve talking) will be used as research-unit. The distinction between formal and informal participation will be abolished and replaced by a general measure for social interaction (see: paragraph 2). We analyze which groups score higher on the measure for social interaction and check what that implies for their time-use as well as their having a democratic attitude-pallet or not. Also, a closer look at the diversity of social networks will be controlled for. Whether the effects of having a limited or extended social network on the time-use and value scales result in a differential outcome will be researched.

The hypothesis of this paper is that individuals with limited social interaction and a limited social network show less integration in society, thus experience fewer exposure to the beneficial socializing process of participation in social life. We posit this will result in individuals feeling less connected to society and therefore being exposed to a higher chance of having an undemocratic value pattern than those citizens with an active social life. In other words, it will be analyzed whether the earlier established relation between formal participation and democratic attitudes also holds for social contact in a broader sense with democratic values.

2 Operationalisation

The data from the Flemish time-use survey TOR1999 are used in this paper. In light of this study 1533 Flemish citizens between the ages of 16 and 75 were asked to keep accurate diaries of their activities. Respondents had to report which activity they performed when, where, in whose company, to whom they talked and what their motivation was for performing the activity. In case the activity required travelling, the modes of travelling were also recorded. Apart from this diary, the respondents were also asked to fill out an extensive questionnaire which enables us to link their time-use and their values and attitudes.

Referring to the time-use there can be discussion as to which activities should be denominated as 'social activities'. Commonly, the distinction is made between informal social participation and formal social participation. The amount of social contacts is then operationalised as the time attributed to having a drink, going out to dinner, visiting/receiving visitors, going to a party, talking and using the phone. Formal social participation entails being active in the civil society and volunteer work (Glorieux, Koelet et al., 2001). It will be clear that social contacts are not limited to the aforementioned activities. During working hours, while exercising or performing a household task people can engage in social contacts. The decline in social contacts that is often reported in time-use studies, can also be attributed to the latter activities (having drinks, eating out, visiting, ...) being less popular and making way for other forms of interaction also involving social contacts.

This paper will approach the topic in a different way. Not the nature of the activity will be considered the unit of analysis, but the actual presence of an interaction partner during the activity. The term social interaction will only be used if the activity involved talking with another individual (during the whole time of the activity or only a fraction thereof). Social contacts and social interaction are thus defined as the time in which an interaction partner was present, by measuring the duration of activities in which conversation took place. Therefore the variable in the diary was used where respondents were asked about possible conversation partners during an activity. In

this way both formal and informal participation, leisure time activities, ... are included in the definition of social interaction³.

The variable 'spoken with' was also used in order to determine the diversity of the social network. Depending on the number of different categories of interaction partners during a week, we refer to a limited (only relatives), an average (relatives and one other interaction partner) or a diverse (relatives and at least two other interaction partners) social network.

3 Image of social interaction

The majority of Flemish people's time is being passed in the company of others. During three quarters of the 'waking hours' (i.e. time spent not sleeping) activities are performed in the presence of an interaction partner. Everybody engages in a conversation at least once during an activity in an average week. Most often this is done with resident relatives (= family). On average, 62h56' per week⁴ is spent on activities whereby conversation was carried out with resident family members. Activities in which colleagues, fellow students or customers are the conversation partners take up an average of 24h30' per week. Friends and other persons act as an interaction partner during activities for another 10 hours a week. Non-resident relatives (7h28'), but mostly neighbors (1h45') are being somewhat overlooked as interaction partners. Neighbor relationships can therefore be defined as distant-friendly involving a limited concern where respect concerning privacy constitutes a significant issue. (Mulder & De Bruin (1983), in: Lammertyn, 1990).

In total an average of approximately 83 hours a week, or almost 12 hours a day, is spent on activities that involve talking. To determine whether we can talk of limited or extended social interaction, would be a rather arbitrary decision. Therefore we have divided the Flemish people in four equal categories going from fewer to higher social interaction.

³ The analyses of this paper have also been tested with another measure for social interaction, being the time spent on activities in the company of others. The results were comparable with those presented in this paper.

⁴ Average hours and minutes per respondent.

The 25% of the Flemish population who talk the least during activities, falls victims to social isolation the most. On average a person belonging to this group can count on the presence of an interaction partner for 55h19' a week, this corresponds to about half the time they spend awake. Those who belong to the 25% that talk the most during activities are the aforementioned group's counterparts. In almost twice as many cases will they carry out activities involving a conversation with others. This group of people spends 90% of their time awake, i.e. 106h08' per week, in the presence of others. The two opposing groups distinguish themselves not only by the amount of social interaction; a difference in socio-demographic background can also be found. In table 1 the groups are being discerned by sex, age, family situation, level of education and labor market position.

TABLE 1: SOCIAL INTERACTION BY BACKGROUND FACTORS (ROW PERCENTAGES, FLEMISH POPULATION AGED 16-75)

	Social interaction	
	25% of the population with the least time spend at activities involving talking	25% of the population with the most time spend at activities involving talking
By sex**		
men (n=753)	20,8%	32,1%
women (n=743)	29,2%	17,6%
By age**		
16-25 (n=241)	29,5%	16,2%
25-40 (n=461)	16,3%	31,5%
41-55 (n=408)	23,0%	29,7%
56-75 (n=386)	34,7%	17,9%
By household type**		
Living with parents (n=249)	30,5%	13,7%
Living alone (n=102)	78,4%	3,9%
With partner, no children (n=445)	22,0%	21,1%
With partner and children (n=636)	14,5%	36,6%
By educational level⁵**		
Low (n=565)	30,4%	25,8%
Medium (n=421)	21,4%	29,0%
High (n=319)	18,2%	24,5%
By labor market position**		
Student (n=147)	34,7%	9,5%
Working part-time (n=169)	19,5%	17,8%
Working full-time (n=652)	14,6%	37,3%
Not working/housewife (n=131)	29,0%	14,5%
Unemployed, incapacitated (n=130)	43,1%	17,7%
Retired (n=262)	38,5%	15,6%

Statistical significance of the difference by background factors: ** p<0,01.

⁵ Highest level of education (students excepted): low= max. lower secondary, medium= max. higher secondary, high= higher education (university or other).

In the event of an equal distribution of social interaction over the sexes we should also find 25% women and 25% men in the group of 25% of the population who interact least. In reality, however, this is not the case. Women on more occasions carry out activities without the presence of an interaction partner. With regards to age, it can be shown that mostly the older part of the population (56-75y.) is socially isolated. This also holds for youngsters, but to lesser extent. Respondents in the so called 'busy age', on the contrary, are over represented in the highest quartile. This group is constituted mostly by those people who balance their time around the care for their families, professional labor as well as a social life. Consistent to this pattern we find the highest amount of interaction in the category of partners with child(ren). As could be expected the opposite is true for single people, they perform the most activities in the absence of another person. Also, people who still live with their parents spend more time alone. The level of education does not play a significant role with regards to social interaction. Although the lower educated are over represented in the category with a small amount of interaction, they can also be found in large numbers in the opposing group. Individuals who do not participate or no longer participate to the labor market have lower scores on social interaction. The lack of a labor market position, and the social contact involved, makes for a significant rise in time spent alone. Especially unemployed and retired respondents report activities carried out in the absence of a conversation partner. Paid work is not only an important source of status, social recognition and identity, but also of social contact that protects people from painful social isolation. Institutionalized labor has a very important social meaning for the employee, other sources of social meaning given to life could be the housekeeping and family life, but they can only replace paid work to a certain level (Enhus, Glorieux et al. 1986; Elchardus & Glorieux, 1995).

In short, the level of social interaction is not spread equally over the different layers of society. Women, senior citizens, people residing alone, the lower educated and the unemployed are found disproportionately more in the group of people that talk the least with others during daily activities. Men, people between 25 and 40, respondents with a partner and children and full-time employed workers represent the opposing group.

Using the technique of logistical regression we will now study which demographic section of the community has a higher risk of falling into that quartile of the population that interacts the least during a total week. The column headed by ‘Exp (B)’ indicates whether a part of the community has a higher or lower chance of falling into the category of the least socially interactive as opposed to the reference category. The major advantage compared to the technique used in the previous paragraph is the ability to control for the other variables in the model.

TABLE 2: CHANCE TO BELONG TO THE GROUP WITH THE LEAST SOCIAL INTERACTION, BY BACKGROUND FACTORS (LOGISTIC REGRESSION, FLEMISH POPULATION AGED 16-75, STUDENTS EXCEPTED)

	Standard error	Exp (B)
Sex		
women (ref. men)	0,18	1,27
Age		
26-40 (ref.16-25)	0,35	1,11
41-55	0,37	1,50
56-75	0,42	1,16
Educational level		
medium (ref.low)	0,18	0,85
high	0,21	0,73
Labor market position		
working part-time (ref. working full-time)	0,27	1,75*
not working/housewife	0,31	2,81**
unemployed, incapacitated	0,25	4,84**
retired	0,31	3,09**
Household type		
living alone (ref. living with parents)	0,39	7,05**
with partner, no children	0,33	0,39**
with partner and children	0,31	0,34**

Statistical significance of the difference by background factors: * p<0,05, ** p<0,01.

Nagelkerke R²= 0,264.

After checking for other influences it would seem that sex, age en level of education no longer pose as factors increasing the risk to belong to the 25% of the population that show the least social patterns. Having a full-time job on the other hand reduces the risk of falling into this category dramatically. The part-time employed have a higher chance of belonging to the group that participates the least than full-time employees. People out of work and senior citizens on a pension show the highest risk, especially the unemployed. We also find a disproportionately high number of people living alone amongst the Flemish population that seem to be somewhat alienated from everyday social life. Living as a family (with as well as without children) dramatically diminishes one’s lonely moments compared to living with one’s parents.

We can deduce from this that labor market position and family situation must be seen as having a high impact on the amount of social interaction a given individual has. For now we can posit that social interaction is differentially spread over the population. The level of social participation will evidently also be dependent on the respondent's pattern of social activities. Certain activities lend themselves better to having a conversation or chat than others. Paid labor, for one, usually implies cooperating with another party, whereas activities involved with personal hygiene are considered a private activity. Watching television is an activity that can be performed both alone and with others present. The time-use of groups with a high level of social interaction and those with a low level of social participation will be compared in the following paragraphs.

We will examine whether or not respondents that spend little, or significant, amounts of time talking to others while carrying out activities can be distinguished from each other on the basis of a typical pattern of activities. In the case of an affirmative answer to this question, we are able to predict, based on one's time-use, the amount of one's social interaction in a typical total week. In order to research this matter, we used a discriminant-analysis. This technique allows us to calculate how accurately we can predict a respondent's level of social interaction based on his or her time-use; and also gives an estimation as to which differences in the time-use have the greatest weight in the calculation. Without any prior knowledge we have a 50% chance of classifying someone in the correct group (25% of the population with the highest amount of social isolation or 25% of the population with the lowest amount of social isolation). In the case where prior knowledge does not improve the chance of classifying the cases significantly higher than 50% (the chance based on a pure bed), it will prove difficult to characterize the two distinct social categories based on their time-use. The higher the percentage of correct predictions, calculated with prior knowledge of the respondents time-use, the higher the connection between that time-use and a respondent belonging to a socially isolated group or not. In the following discriminant-analysis, the time spent on 37 detailed categories of activities (see Glorieux, Coppens et al., 2002) during a total week, will be used.

When we try to predict 'belonging' to a social group that partakes, in a little or a lot of social interaction, based on their time-use in a typical week, we classify 82,7% of the

respondents in the right category. For respondents with a low level of social contact, we classify 80,6% right. This percentage amounts to 84,9% for people who are active on the social interaction front. We can consequently conclude that a sizable difference exists in the pattern of activities depending on whether or not respondents spend a lot of time in the presence of others.

TABLE 3: CORRELATIONCOEFFICIENTS BETWEEN THE TIME SPEND AT ACTIVITIES DURING A TOTAL WEEK AND THE 'DISCRIMINATORY FUNCTION' (N=747)

25% of population with the least social interaction (spend more time at)	Unit of discriminatory power	25% of population with the most social interaction (spend more time at)
Sleep	0,56	Paid work
	0,48	
Undefined time	0,33	Travelling to and from work
	0,32	
	0,23	Educating children Travelling related to child care and educating children
	0,21	
Reading	0,16	Child care
	0,16	
	0,14	Making love
New media	0,12	

Wilks' Lambda= 0,57 – Canonical correlation= 0,66. The canonical correlation is significantly different from 0 ($p < 0,001$).

The discriminant-analysis also shows for which activities we can find the strongest differences between groups. The unit of discriminatory power – the correlation between the distinct activity and the discriminatory function – is a figure between 0 and 1. The closer to 1, the stronger and more systematic the distinction between the discerned groups. Respondents that spend the most time talking to others during activities and consequently pass the most time in the company of others, apparently distinguish themselves principally through the extra time spent on paid labor. Wage work weekly amounts to 28h38' in their total time-use, or 8h14' more compared to respondents that fall into the category with little social interaction. People with a low level of social contact spend more time sleeping than others, namely 61h29' a week, compared to 54 hours for the other category; thus already limiting the time for social interaction and participation. The group that interacts the most, discerns itself also, though less powerful yet systematic, through more time spent on commuting to and from work, activities related to childcare and sexual intercourse; as well as less time spent on undefined time (= time for which no activity has been reported in the diaries), reading and using new media (mostly computers).

4 Diversity of the social network

Not only the amount of social interaction, but also the actors with whom interaction occurs, are of relevance to determine the degree of integration. An individual that finds himself in the company of his family during the whole week, but apart from that has little or no other social contact, can be catalogued only as having a limited social network. Based on the cited literature on formal and informal participation, we can expect to find that individuals with a weak social embedding, who hardly ever participate, should be more susceptible to undemocratic values and norms.

In the time-use diaries people were asked to report all possible conversation partners during the process of carrying out an activity. The heterogeneity of a social network will be operationalised as the number of different conversation partners a respondent talked to during the course of a full week. Conversation partners are divided into five categories: relatives (both resident and non-resident), neighbors, colleagues/fellow students/customers, friends or acquaintances and others.

TABLE 4: DIVERSITY SOCIAL NETWORK (N= 1459)

Interaction partners during a total week	% of the population
Limited social network	
family	2,7%
Average social network	
family, friends	11,2%
family, colleagues	6,7%
Diverse social network	
family, colleagues, friends	39%
family, colleagues, neighbors	1,7%
family, friends, neighbors	11,7%
family, colleagues, neighbors, friends	27%
	100%

Respondents are catalogued as having a limited social network when the only category of conversation partners they talked to during the course of the week are relatives. Only a small minority of the population can be labeled into this category, namely 2.7%. 17.9% of the Flemish people was classified as having a social network with an average degree of diversity. We defined an average degree of diversity as carrying out conversations with two categories of interaction partners. The vast majority of the Flemish population (79.4%) however, was found to have a diverse network and talks to at least three different sorts of conversation partners during a typical week. The

typology 'other' conversation partners was added to each category for the sake of methodological convenience. Interactions of this sort are usually very unpersonal, therefore not attributing much support anyway. An additional 37 respondents were not taken into analysis (i.e. 2.5% of sample population), because they showed yet a different pattern of interaction.

It was already shown that certain groups, namely women, the elderly, people with low levels of education and those who do not – or no longer – participate in the labor process (save students), show a lower level of social interaction than other demographic parts of the community. It would appear that it is exactly these groups that come up more in the column with a limited social network (Table 5). Furthermore we must conclude that couples without children are also disproportionately over represented in that category.

TABLE 5: DIVERSITY SOCIAL NETWORK, BY BACKGROUND FACTORS (ROW PERCENTAGES, FLEMISH POPULATION AGED 16-75)

Social network	limited (2,7%)	average (17,9%)	diverse (79,4%)
Total population (n=1459)			
By sex**			
men (n=734)	1,1%	16,1%	82,8%
women (n=726)	4,3%	19,8%	75,9%
By age**			
16-25 (n=242)	1,2%	10,3%	88,4%
25-40 (n=456)	1,8%	14,0%	84,2%
41-55 (n=394)	1,8%	17,5%	80,7%
56-75 (n=367)	5,4%	28,3%	66,2%
By household type**			
Living with parents (n=249)	0,8%	10,0%	89,2%
Living alone (n=88)	4,5%	22,7%	72,7%
With partner, no children (n=426)	3,3%	22,5%	74,2%
With partner and children (n=631)	2,2%	17,6%	80,2%
By educational level**			
Low (n=540)	4,3%	26,1%	69,6%
Medium (n=415)	1,7%	15,9%	82,4%
High (n=314)	1,3%	12,4%	86,3%
By labor market position**			
Student (n=146)	0,7%	8,2%	91,1%
Working part-time (n=170)	1,2%	14,1%	84,7%
Working full-time (n=640)	0,9%	12,3%	86,7%
Not working/housewife (n=125)	8,8%	27,2%	64,0%
Unemployed, incapacitated (n=125)	6,4%	32,8%	60,8%
Retired (n=249)	4,8%	27,7%	67,5%

Statistical significance of the difference by background factor: ** p<0,01.

In light of the small amount of respondents in the category with a limited social network, caution is in order. A look at the respondents with an average social network,

however, shows that it are exactly the same groups that come up more in this category. Youngsters, people living with their parents, people with a high level of education, students and the employed on the other hand can be found more in the category of Flemish people with a diverse social network.

From the logistical regression, that determines the chance to belong to the group with a diverse social network, it can be found that especially the unemployed (both voluntarily and involuntarily), irrespective of sex, age, level of education or family situation, show a lower chance of disposing of a diverse social network. Those with a low level of education also have a greater risk of falling out of the category with a heterogeneous social network, when we check for the other variables in the model (see: Waeye & Agneessens, 2001:139). Sex, age en family situation do not offer a significant contribution to the chance of belonging to the group of people with a diverse network.

TABLE 6: CHANCE TO BELONG TO THE GROUP WITH A DIVERSE SOCIAL NETWORK, BY BACKGROUND FACTORS (LOGISTIC REGRESSION, FLEMISH POPULATION AGED 16-75, STUDENTS EXCEPTED)

	Standard error	Exp (B)
Sex		
women (ref. men)	0,17	0,75
Age		
26-40 (ref.16-25)	0,38	0,99
41-55	0,39	0,91
56-75	0,44	0,60
Educational level		
medium (ref.low)	0,18	1,58*
high	0,21	1,82**
Labor market position		
working part-time (ref. working full-time)	0,27	1,09
not working/housewife	0,29	0,53*
unemployed, incapacitated	0,25	0,29**
retired	0,30	0,63
Household type		
living alone (ref. living with parents)	0,44	0,78
with partner, no children	0,37	0,84
with partner and children	0,36	0,71

Statistical significance of the difference by background factor: * p<0,05, ** p<0,01.

Nagelkerke R²= 0,118.

Where it was found that respondents with plenty or little social interaction clearly showed a differentiated pattern of activities, it would seem that the same relation can not be attributed to time-use and the diversity of the social network at one's disposal. Attempting to discriminate respondents with a diverse social network from those with

an average or limited network based on the reported time-use (37 categories of activities), we only classify 68.7% of respondent correctly. 65.7% of the category with a limited network are discerned in a correct manner, as opposed to 69.4% of those with a heterogeneous social network. As a consequence it must be concluded that the time-use of the two groups differs only moderately.

TABLE 7: CORRELATIONCOEFFICIENTS BETWEEN THE TIME SPEND AT ACTIVITIES DURING A TOTAL WEEK AND THE 'DISCRIMINATORY FUNCTION' (N=1459)

No diverse network	Unit of discriminatory power	Diverse network
Watching tv & video	0,51	
Housework	0,43	
Eating and drinking	0,30	
Undefined time	0,28	
	0,28	Social contacts
	0,26	School
Sleeping	0,26	
	0,25	Other activities
Receiving professional care	0,25	
	0,19	Participation, civic duties, organizations
Educating children	0,14	

Wilks' Lambda= 0,86 – Canonical correlation= 0,37. The canonical correlation is significantly different then 0 (p< 0,001).

The strongest distinction between the groups can be found with relation to the number of hours they watch television and videos, as well as the amount of time spent on household tasks. Respondents with a limited number of different conversation partners on average spend 17h11' per week in front of the television and perform household work during 16h41', whereas individuals in the category with a diverse social network spend 12h49' and 11h56' per week on the respective activities.

The findings that people who are not part of a diverse social network distinguish themselves mainly through their television watching behavior, as opposed to respondents with a broad social network spending more time on social activities, can be seen in the light of the theory of Putnam. He argues that the wide diffusion of television will lead to the diminishing of social involvement (Putnam, 1995). We can also link this conclusion to the overrepresentation of the lower educated in the category with a limited network. People with a low level of education relatively spend a significant portion of their time watching television, whereas the higher educated spend more time on activities in the civil society (Elchardus, Huyse et al., 2001).

5 Social interaction, diversity of social network and attitudes

The level of social interaction and the heterogeneity of the social network differ significantly for sex, age, family situation, level of education and labor market position of the respondents. Furthermore, a relationship can be found between these variables. The more diverse a network, the more activities will be carried out while conversing with other individuals. There also exists a difference in the time-use regarding the amount of social interaction and the diversity of the social network. Now the question remains whether social interaction and the social network one has access to, influence the value patterns of respondents. We followed the hypothesis that having few social contacts and a limited social network – in short a minor degree of societal participation and integration – might lead to an undemocratic value pattern.

In what follows we research the effect of the level of social interaction and diversity of the social network on a number of statements with regards to the community and society as a whole. We selected 10 distinct sets of attitudes and opinions from the questionnaire, that should give us a clear indication of how respondents look out to the world and which values and norms they hold. Each of these attitudes in fact comprises of a set of postulates with which the respondents could agree or disagree. In doing so, we constructed a new measurement-scale from 0 to 100. Respondents who disagreed with every single item, are given a score of 0, agreeing with every question results in a score of 100.

'Future vision' is measured using attitudes on how the respondents see their futures, e.g.: "the way the future looks now, it is hardly senseable to bring a child into the world" or "the best times are already behind us, things can only get worse in the future".

'Economic future vision' comprises of questions concerning items of luxury and financial possibilities one thinks to be able to afford in the next few years.

Questions regarding what the future would bring concerning the number of socially excluded, unemployed, the pension schemes and the income gap were housed under the term "future expectations social security".

Aside from visions regarding the future, we gauged the “level of satisfaction concerning the current private life”. This category of statements entails satisfaction about respondent’s houses, neighborhoods, incomes, jobs, life-standards as well as their general state of health and social contacts.

How safe respondents feel is comprised in the “feelings of personal unsafety”

Under the term “utilitarian individualism” we measure whether individuals always act out of rational selfishness, as well as hold distrusting worldviews.

The “social-catholic discourse” assesses how far people would go to help others.

“Trust in institutions” concerns the level of trust respondents have in the system of justice, the government and political parties.

Finally, we also research the “attitude towards the welfare state” and traditional rolepatterns, e.g.: “the welfare state makes people lazy and uncaring toward one another”.

In the first column of table 8 the distinct attitudes can be found, the second and third columns refer to the social groups we are researching (defined on the basis of level of social interaction and heterogeneity of the social network) and their respective sizes. The fourth and fifth columns report the average scores on the sum scales for the relevant attitudes, before and after controls for sex, family situation, level of education, labor market position and age. It does not lay within the goals of this ANOVA-analysis to give an estimation for the best model for each attitude separately, rather we would like to evaluate whether differentiated value patterns can be found for the different groups. Therefore the explained variance scores (column 6) are generally low. We will only discuss the average scores on attitude scales after controls for demographic features have been performed from now on. This means that the potential differences that are found, can not be attributed to differences in sex, family situation, level of education, labor market position and age. In other words, the earlier reported differences between respondents with a high, or low, level of social interaction and respondents with a broad, or limited, social network can no longer offer account for any differences found in attitude scores in column 5 of table 8.

TABLE 8: RESULTS ANOVA-ANALYSIS ON ATTITUDES

Attitude	level of social interaction/ diversity social network	N	av. score before control	av. score after control	R²	
Future vision (low= negative)	little social interaction	291	57,3	60,0	0,20	
	average	606	64,1	63,8		
	a lot of social interaction	333	67,3	65,5 (**)		
		limited or average network	263	59,2	62,3	0,20
		broad social network	934	64,7	63,8 (-)	
	Economical future vision (low= negative)	little social interaction	277	69,6	70,4	0,06
average		599	76,0	75,6		
a lot of social interaction		329	76,6	76,6 (*)		
		limited or average network	248	73,1	75,0	0,05
		broad social network	924	75,2	74,7 (-)	
Future expectations social security (low= negative)		little social interaction	280	35,9	36,5	0,07
	average	595	40,1	40,1		
	a lot of social interaction	331	40,6	40,1 (**)		
		limited or average network	251	37,4	38,5	0,06
		broad social network	922	39,8	39,5 (*)	
	Satisfaction with private life (low= not satisfied)	little social interaction	293	57,3	57,0	0,04
average		611	60,0	59,9		
a lot of social interaction		336	60,1	60,3 (**)		
		limited or average network	267	59,5	59,9	0,03
		broad social network	940	59,4	59,3 (-)	
Feelings of personal unsafety (low= weak feeling)		little social interaction	290	60,3	57,8	0,13
	average	608	58,2	58,2		
	a lot of social interaction	335	56,2	58,4 (-)		
		limited or average network	263	62,4	59,9	0,14
		broad social network	936	57,0	57,7 (-)	
	Utilitarian individualism (low= weak)	little social interaction	288	34,3	34,9	0,07
average		598	31,5	31,5		
a lot of social interaction		333	31,5	30,9 (*)		
		limited or average network	257	35,3	34,5	0,08
		broad social network	928	31,3	31,5 (*)	
Social-catholic discourse (low= weak)		little social interaction	287	72,0	70,4	0,06
	average	601	71,9	72,1		
	a lot of social interaction	331	71,8	72,8 (-)		
		limited or average network	260	71,4	70,2	0,06
		broad social network	925	72,0	72,4 (*)	
	Trust in institutions (low= weak)	little social interaction	252	42,3	41,3	0,06
average		516	42,8	43,0		

	a lot of social interaction	300	43,9	44,6 (-)	
	limited or average network	209	41,3	41,2	0,06
	broad social network	829	43,5	43,5 (-)	
Attitude towards the welfare state (low= negative)	little social interaction	291	58,0	58,5	0,08
	average	604	60,5	60,3	
	a lot of social interaction	332	60,0	59,9 (-)	
	limited or average network	258	57,3	58,2	0,08
	broad social network	936	60,5	60,2 (-)	
Traditional rolepatterns (low= not traditional)	little social interaction	267	42,1	40,5	0,27
	average	573	37,0	37,5	
	a lot of social interaction	315	36,7	37,1 (*)	
	limited or average network	241	42,4	39,0	0,27
	broad social network	882	36,8	37,7 (-)	

Statistical significance of the difference by background factors: * $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$.

Regarding the level of social interaction, respondents are divided into three groups: little social interaction, average social interaction and a lot of social interaction. The amount of time respondents spend on activities in which they talk to others, apparently runs along the same lines as a number of attitudes. Respondents with a low level of interaction clearly differ from those with an average and high level of social interaction. The more individuals carry out activities that involve talking to others, the more positive their outlook for the future is. This holds true for the general future vision as well as the economic future vision, both are looked upon more positively. The level of confidence in the future of the welfare state will also be higher if one does not belong to the group with few interaction with others. Individuals who spend more time talking to others are generally more satisfied with a number of aspects concerning their personal lives (residence, neighborhood, income, job, standard of living, health and social contacts) than others. Furthermore, they on average show less affection with the utilitarian individualistic discourse than people who are more isolated. Concerning men-women relations they tend to position themselves more emancipating. The above findings suggest that social contacts can improve integration into society. They make people generally feel better, be more open vis-à-vis others and have more confidence in the future. Feelings of uncertainty, distrust and discomfort, that have been cited as reasons of the feelings of uneasiness with society and a large number of scared people, can as a consequence be forced back by

ameliorating social interaction. The hypothesis that states that social interaction in general, like participation in voluntary associations, can lead to a more democratic value pattern is hereby confirmed.

On the other hand, it would appear that the number of interaction partners does not lead to significant differences in value patterns. Still, table 8 can be seen as an indicator for a positive relationship between a more diverse social network and a more democratic value pattern. Respondents are divided into two categories: on the one hand we place individuals with a limited or average social network; on the other hand persons with a broad social network. The latter category feels more involvement with their fellow citizens, does not see people as rational utilitarians and foresees a more positive future for the welfare state than respondents falling into the former group. Therefore we can conclude that interacting with a variety of conversation partners shows a strong affiliation with a positive image of society as a whole and fellow man in particular.

6 Conclusion

The shared sense of unease over diminishing social contacts in Flanders would appear to be unfounded at the present time. The degree of social interaction, measured by the time respondents talk to others while carrying out activities, is relatively high for the majority of respondents. On an average day, three quarters of the waking hours is passed whilst in the company of others. Resident family members are the most frequently used conversation partners. However, activities where friends serve as interaction partners, take up a good ten hours per week.

Not only is there plenty of time in which conversation can take place, the number of different interaction partners, with whom those conversations take place, is high. 79.4% of the Flemish population talks to at least three different categories of conversation partners in the course of a week (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors and others) and can therefore be labeled as having a heterogeneous social network. Only a slight minority of the population (2.7%) has limited contacts, i.e. with relatives and unclassified others.

The majority of the Flemish population can thus be categorized as having a high level of social contact. However, it must be noted that the amount of time spent on social interaction is not equally spread over the population. Women, people over 56, people living alone, people with a low level of education, unemployed and senior citizens on a pension are disproportionately represented in the quartile of the population that converses the least during daily activities. Furthermore these population groups have a more limited number of conversation partners during a typical week. Their social network can be labeled as being limited, in relation to the rest of the Flemish population.

The level of social interaction appears to be linked mostly to labor market and family situation. Respondents that are inactive on the labor market (voluntarily and involuntarily unemployed, people on a pension scheme) carry out less activities in the presence of a conversation partner. This finding once again makes the importance of paid labor as an integrative factor in society painstakingly clear. It is also a logical deduction that people who live alone have a lower chance for social interaction. However, it must be said that even the group with a low degree of social interaction on average spend 50% of their wake-time on activities with an interaction partner present.

The amount of social contacts individuals have, is clearly connected to their activity patterns. The time-use of the quarter of the population with the fewest social contacts can clearly be distinguished from the time-use of the quartile of the Flemish population with the highest level of social contact. The latter spend more time on paid work and activities related to child care (education, nursing and travelling). Performing paid labor usually implies the presence of other parties and therefore social contacts are more frequent. The care of a family also carries constant social interaction. The quarter of the population with the fewest social contacts spends more time sleeping and reports more undefined time in the diaries. These activities evidently reduce their chances of having a conversation. They also spend more time on a solitary leisure activity, i.e. reading. The fact that they also entertain themselves spending time on the 'new media' (computers, etc...) indicates that a part of their verbal communication has possibly been replaced by 'virtual' communication.

Concerning the diversity of the social network, the most important influences are, firstly the work situation and secondly the level of education. The lower educated and non-working therefore have a more limited social network. Coincidentally it are exactly these groups that are more prone to social isolation. They withdraw themselves largely from the socializing effects that participation in societal life entails, which consequently makes their holding a more undemocratic value pattern increasingly probable. Whether or not people have a heterogeneous social network, it is difficult to discriminate their time-use on the basis of this variable. The Flemish people with a limited social network appear more oriented on themselves. They watch more television and video, as well as spend more time on household work. Respondents with a broad social network are on the other hand oriented towards others and are more socially active (participation in the civil society and social contacts). Herein lies a confirmation of the popular theorem of Putnam.

The value patterns of the Flemish population are influenced by the level of social interaction and the diversity of the social networks of which they are part. These measurements for integration in the society practice an autonomous influence on the attitudes and values of the Flemish people (can not be explained by differences in demographic features). Respondents with little social interaction can be clearly discerned from the other categories. They position themselves more negatively on issues concerning their general and financial futures. The attainments of the social welfare state will start to crumble in the near future, according to this group of respondents. They are also less satisfied with certain aspects of their private lives. People with little social contact hold a more distrusting world view and the equality between men and women is of limited importance in their eyes. In other words, it can be concluded that social interaction is of extreme relevance for respondent's views of themselves and the world that surrounds them. Performing activities whereby a conversation can take place makes for a sense of mutual understanding and respect. Insecurities no longer form a major threat, which results in the forming of a democratic value pattern. This relationship probably works in both directions. Respondents with fewer social and democratic attitudes and values will, likely because of this distrusting worldview, avoid intensive social contacts. They will feel less attracted to activities in all kinds of associations which leads to an

overrepresentation of persons with a socially desirable value pattern amongst the members of these associations (Newton, 1999). Self-selection and socialization do not exclude one another, but can rather work interactively (Hooghe, 2001). Flemish people with a heterogeneous network, in any case, report less distrust and adhere more importance on the happiness of others. Further, they have more faith in the social future of Flanders.

The above findings can along the general lines be brought in conformity with the social participation thesis (Elchardus, Huyse et al., 2001) which states that participation in activities of the civil society promote a democratic value pattern and integration into the community and society. The findings are more remarkable for their conclusion that not only formal social participation, but also social contacts in general, can offer a significant contribution to counteract the further 'souring' of society. The specific way in which social contacts were operationalised, namely as the amount of time spent on activities that involved talking, indeed shows that these social contacts go hand in hand with a democratic value pattern.

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