Cultural Integration and Differentiation in Groups and Organizations

Michael Mäs[1], Andreas Flache[1], and James A. Kitts[2]

1: Department of Sociology / ICS, University of Groningen
Grote Rozenstraat 31, 9712 TG Groningen, The Netherlands
2: Graduate School of Business, Columbia University
704 Uris Hall, 3022 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, United States of America

Abstract. Experimental and field research has demonstrated a pervasive tendency toward pairwise conformity among individuals connected by positive social ties, and work using formal models has shown that opinions on connected influence networks should thus converge toward uniformity. Observing that diversity persists even in small scale groups and organizations, we investigate two empirically grounded mechanisms of social differentiation that may account for this persistence: First, actors may dislike or disrespect peers who diverge too much from their own views, and may change their opinions or behaviors to distance themselves further from those negative referents. Second, when surrounded by similar others, actors may try to maintain a sufficient sense of uniqueness by exploring new opinions or behaviors. Using computational experiments, we demonstrate that these two mechanisms lead to different patterns of polarization, radicalization, and factionalism and also investigate the conditions under which integration occurs. In closing, we discuss the implications for cultural dynamics in organizations.

Keywords: Social Influence, Social Differentiation, Polarization, Clustering, Organizational Culture, Opinion Dynamics

1 Introduction

Extensive research has documented the importance of organizational culture, but we are only beginning to understand the processes by which organizational cultures emerge, persist, and sometimes change or split into subcultures. Organizational cultures often prove to be remarkably stable, despite membership turnover, change of leaders, shifting social networks, or disruptive external forces. Enriching our understanding of the basic dynamics of organizational culture will foster theoretical advances with important practical implications, especially in preparing for challenges such as organizational change, growth, or merger.

To provide a rigorous microfoundation, we focus here on the dynamics of cultural influence in a simple, stylized model that allows us to generate testable predictions about the conditions of cultural consensus, cultural diversity, and polarization of cultures in organizations. Our analyses focus on the effects of "social differentiation", the tendency of individuals to adjust their opinions and values in order to increase differences to others. Social differentiation appears to be a critical assumption in models that seek to explain cultural diversity and has been supported by empirical research. However, we show that existing models are based on two different conceptualizations of social differentiation. Using computational experiments, we demonstrate that these conceptualizations imply critically different patterns of polarization, radicalization, and factionalism. In addition, they generate cultural diversity under different initial conditions.

Most relevant research has employed formal theory to account for the emergence and persistence of cultural groups, showing how a population of agents with arbitrary opinions and social relations may over time develop a coherent collective culture. This work has overwhelmingly built on one of the starkest regularities in the social world: the tendency of social ties to connect individuals who are similar in attributes, attitudes, or behaviors. This observed lawlike regularity of differential attraction or homophily has inspired prominent"first principles" for models of local cultural emergence. First is the tendency for actors to build positive ties to interaction partners who are similar to themselves [1]. Second is social influence, the tendency for common attitudes or behaviors to diffuse among friends and other close relations [2]. This combination of differential attraction and influence creates a self-reinforcing dynamic in which similarity increases conformity between interaction partners and conformity increases similarity of interaction partners. Such positive feedback leads to a local homogenization that some have presented as an explanation for the emergence of "cultural norms" [3] in social networks. Furthermore, such models have been used to understand the maintenance and stability of culture in organizations [4–6] as well as the integration of multiple cultures, such as following a merger of two organizations [7, 8]

Although the core dynamics of homophilous choice and conformity have received much empirical support, and they provide a convincing account for cases of cultural integration and homogeneity, they leave us instead with the opposite puzzle of explaining cultural diversity in densely connected groups. If homophilous attraction and conformity are such general forces, how may we ever explain the maintenance of distinct cultural subgroups [9–12] in contact with one another? In fact, it has been proven [13, 14] that positive influence operating on a fully connected graph (where each actor is connected to each other by at least one influence path) will under a broad range of conditions eventually result in a 'monoculture' where all individuals have the same opinions or attitudes. These models fail to explain why social groups and organizations often harbor a diversity of views, given that formal and informal networks are almost guaranteed to be connected and are often dense.

The most intuitive explanations for diversity posit exogenous factors that hamper cultural convergence or even create diversity. These "top down" accounts assume, for instance, that physical barriers, social and political cleavages, or boundaries between divisions of an organization somehow prevent social influence from flowing freely throughout the population [15]. It has been similarly shown that conflicting political parties or media may exert influence on individuals' cultural attributes and interfere with cultural convergence [16].

In contrast to approaches that rely on exogenous barriers or influences, research has also shown that cultural diversity can result from "bottom up" self-organization within a population of agents. Applying the principle of homophily to an extreme case, some scholars [17, 4, 12] assume that if two actors have disjoint cultures (share nothing in common), they then have zero propensity to interact with one another, creating a cultural boundary that operates like a geographic boundary. These models are then able to generate persistent diversity. In this case, the same local convergence that would lead to homogenization on a connected influence network can actually lead a network to disintegrate into disconnected components, where local influence paradoxically maintains cultural differences rather than erasing them. Once the members of two cultural subgroups have become too dissimilar to influence one another, their cultures evolve along divergent paths. This type of model thus incorporates both tendencies that are evident in cultural dynamics - on the one hand, the drive toward uniformity within local relations, and on the other, the persistence of diversity in the greater population. While much of this work has modeled opinion scales as discrete, other studies combined homophily with continuous opinion scales [5, 18, 19]. These so called "bounded confidence models" showed that global diversity does not depend on the assumption that opinions are discrete, so long as influence can only occur between individuals who are sufficiently similar.

Further research has shown the bottom-up theories of cultural diversity to be extremely fragile. Recent work [20, 21] relaxed the assumption that cultural traits are entirely determined by influence from neighbors and allowed a small probability of random perturbation of cultural traits. If this noise is sufficiently low, occasional overlap between distinct cultures due to random distortions leads to the eventual collapse of cultural diversity. But if noise is sufficiently high, mutation is introduced faster than conformity can reduce it, leading to cultural turbulence that precludes the formation of stable subcultures. The window of conditions that allows cultural diversity in between these two regimes is exceedingly small and all but vanishes in larger populations. A second problem with these explanations of self-organized cultural diversity is that they rely on the assumption that cultural influence is entirely precluded when interacting agents are too dissimilar. Even slight influence between agents who are highly dissimilar is sufficient to eliminate cultural diversity based on homophily and conformity alone, a result that has been obtained for models with discrete as well as with continuous opinion spaces [22, 23].

We focus on two solutions to the problem of self-organized cultural diversity, which were inspired by theories of social differentiation in classical sociology [24–26] and social psychology [27–29] .

The first approach invokes "distancing" as a key driving force of social differentiation, drawing on balance theory [30] and cognitive consistency theories [31] from social psychology. Just as homophily suggests that actors form positive ties to similar actors and conformity suggests that actors change their opinions to better fit their friends, distancing theory posits that actors form negative ties toward peers that are very different (xenophobia) and then change their opinions to increase cultural differences toward those negative referents. This argument has been addressed by a range of formal modeling studies [32–34, 11, 35, 36], has been studied in extensive experimental research [37–39], and has been applied to social influence through networks in real-world organizations [40].

The second conceptualization of social differentiation postulates that individuals strive for a sufficient feeling of uniqueness [28, 23, 41]. Specifically, individuals who feel similar to too many others adjust their opinions and behavior such that they become more distinct, a notion that is also reflected by the theory of "optimal distinctiveness" [27] in social identity research.

While both accounts offer plausible"bottom-up" explanations of social and cultural diversity, they have not yet been systematically compared. To address this lacuna, we present in this paper a formal framework that incorporates both social distancing and striving for uniqueness. We show how both conceptualizations of social differentiation can generate persistent and robust cultural diversity, even within a relatively small and fully-connected network where classical models would predict uniformity. We further demonstrate that the two conceptualizations of differentiation lead to radically different patterns of cultural diversity. Populations of individuals that tend to dislike and thus distance themselves from dissimilar others tend to split into two factions with diametrically opposed opinions, so the entire group is polarized. This is because distancing implies that once sufficiently dissimilar subgroups have formed, members of subgroups strive to increase differences to the members of the other subgroup. Individuals, therefore, tend to develop increasingly extreme opinions. By contrast, striving for uniqueness leads subgroups to seek no more distance from each other than is sufficient to satisfy their desire for uniqueness. Striving for uniqueness creates subgroups with significantly different opinions. However, once these subgroups have formed, opinion differences remain relatively moderate.

Lastly, we show that distancing and striving for uniqueness imply different predictions about the conditions leading to cultural diversity and integration. On the one hand, social distancing increases social diversity only in populations where cultural variation is strong already at the outset of the process. In populations with small initial diversity, individuals perceive few others who are sufficiently dissimilar to generate negative ties and thus motivate distancing. As a consequence, the integrating force of social influence by similar others dominates and opinions move towards consensus. On the contrary, striving for uniqueness is strongest when many individuals hold similar opinions, implying that cultural diversification occurs mainly when there is low cultural diversity.

In closing, we discuss the implications for dynamics of cultural integration in organizations, as well as ways to test the boundary conditions under which the two kinds of social differentiation may shape cultural dynamics in organizations.

2 The Model of Social Differentiation

Our agent-based computational model builds on the key assumptions of classical social-influence models [13, 14, 42–47] supplemented with assumptions about social differentiation, conceptualized as either distancing or striving for uniqueness. In the model, each member of the population is represented as an agent i that holds an opinion $o_{i,t}$ which varies continuously between zero and one ($0 \leq o_{i,t} \leq 1$) and can change over time. The social influence and differentiation process is modeled as a sequence of simulation events. At each event t the computer program randomly picks one of the N agents and updates this agent's (i) current opinion $o_{i,t}$ such that after the update a new opinion $o_{i,t+1} = o_{i,t} + \Delta o_{i,t}$ where the magnitude and direction of the opinion change is obtained as

$$\Delta o_{i,t} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{N} (o_{j,t} - o_{i,t}) w_{ij,t}}{\sum_{j=1}^{N} w_{ij,t}} + \xi_{i,t} \,. \qquad (1)$$

Equation 1 includes three key processes that previous models of cultural differentiation have considered: social influence, distancing and striving for uniqueness. The influence weight $w_{ij,t}$ represents the degree to which agent i is influenced by agent j and varies between -1 and +1 ($-1 \leq w_{ij,t} \leq 1$). A positive weight implies that j has a positive influence on i, so i's opinion is "pulled" towards the opinion of j. This reflects the mechanism of social influence that has been central to early models of cultural consensus formation [13, 43, 44, 47]. However, weights can also have negative values, in which case the opinion of agent i is "pushed" away from j's opinion. With negative weights, equation (1) implements social distancing. Finally, equation (1) contains a noise term $\xi_{i,t}$ to implement "striving for uniqueness". Specifically, we assume that the less unique an agent's current opinion is in the overall opinion distribution, the larger is the (random) perturbation $\xi_{i,t}$ that leads the agent away from her current opinion. The denominator in (1) normalizes influence to ensure that all agents have a fixed capacity to be influenced, apportioned among peers by the tie weights.

Equations 2 and 3 define the influence weights $w_{ij,t}$. Implementing homophily, we assume that the influence $w_{ij,t}$ that j has on i depends on their opinion distance ($dist_{ij,t} = |o_{i,t} - o_{j,t}|$). To be more precise, equation 2 implies that the weights are more positive (or less negative) the more similar i and j are. Parameter c ($1 \leq c \leq 2$) allows manipulating the balance of social influence, from positive-only to a mixture of positive and negative influence. If $c = 1$, then influence weights can have only positive values and thus only positive influence operates. If $c = 2$, social distancing (negative influence) is as strong as positive influence. If c is between those values then agents are influenced positively ($w_{ij,t} > 0$) by similar others and (to a lesser extent) influenced negatively ($w_{i,j,t} < 0$) by dissimilar others. The value $1/c$ represents the critical opinion distance at which influence shifts from positive to negative.

$$w_{ij} = (1 - c \cdot dist_{ij,t})^a \quad if \quad dist_{ij,t} \leq \frac{1}{c} \tag{2}$$

$$w_{ij} = -1(c \cdot dist_{ij,t} - 1)^a \quad if \quad dist_{ij,t} > \frac{1}{c} \tag{3}$$

In the case of positive influence ($c = 1$), agents are strongly influenced ($w_{ij,t}$ approaches 1) by peers that are very similar to themselves, and influenced very little ($w_{ij,t}$ approaches 0) by dissimilar agents. When $c = 2$, agents are strongly influenced by very similar peers, strongly negatively influenced ($w_{ij,t}$ approaches -1) by very dissimilar peers, and influenced little ($w_{ij,t}$ approaches 0) by peers that are moderately distant. Parameter a ($a > 0$) allows us to vary the shape of this weight function. In the case of positive influence, high values of a imply that influence diminishes more rapidly with opinion distance, so agents are influenced predominantly by the most similar peers and pay little attention to other peers. In the case of equal positive and negative influence ($c = 2$), high values of a imply that agents are strongly influenced by very similar and also (negatively) by the most dissimilar peers, and pay little attention to the rest.[1] Fig. 1 illustrates the value of $w_{ij,t}$ resulting from (2) and (3), under different values of a and c. For illustrative purposes, we have chosen here values of a that are different from those employed in the computational experiments reported further below.

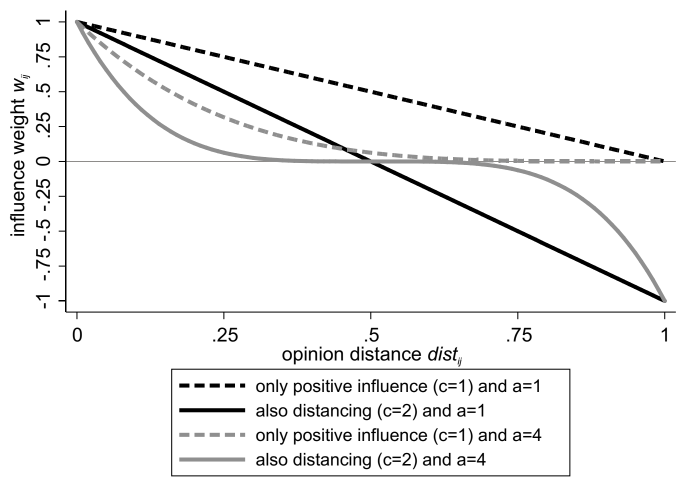

Fig. 1. Examples of weight functions for different values of parameters c and a.

[1] Digital computers may fail to distinguish very small numbers from zero [48], an error that would be consequential here in that it would erase the distinction between weak influence and no influence. To avoid such problems with floating point inaccuracy, we assign a minimum on positive weights at 10^{-5} and assign a maximum on negative weights at -10^{-5}. We thus conservatively ensure that weak ties are not mistakenly treated as null ties by the computer.

Striving for uniqueness. The second conceptualization of social differentiation assumes that agents adjust their opinions or behavior when they feel indistinguishable from many other individuals. Whereas distancing implies opinion changes away from the opinions of dissimilar others, striving for uniqueness does not specify the direction of the opinion change. Accordingly, we follow the lead of earlier modeling work [23, 49] in including noise $\xi_{i,t}$ in updating opinion.

Specifically, a random perturbation is drawn from a normal distribution with an average of zero and a standard deviation specified in (4). This implies that striving for uniqueness can result in positive and negative opinion changes with equal probability. Also, small opinion changes tend to be more likely than large changes, incorporating the assumption that greater opinion adjustments imply higher cognitive costs [31, 50].

$$\xi_{i,t} = N\left(0, s\sum_{j=1}^{N} e^{-dist_{ij,}}\right) \tag{4}$$

Equation (4) thus determines the amount of randomness that is added to the agent's opinion, depending on how unique agent i is in the population. If agent i holds an opinion that is very similar to the opinion of many other agents then it feels a stronger need for uniqueness and the standard deviation of the added noise is high. If, however, an agent holds an opinion very different from its peers, it is not driven to increase uniqueness and the standard deviation is low.

We included a parameter s ($s \geq 0$) that determines the overall degree to which individuals value uniqueness. If $s = 0$, agents do not strive for uniqueness at all. The higher the value of s, however, the stronger is the striving for uniqueness in the population.

Note that distancing may result in opinion values that are outside the defined range of the opinion scale ($0 \leq o_{i,t} \leq 1$). If an agent's opinion would otherwise exceed the range, we assign the extreme value of the range, 0 or 1.

Possible equilibria. Whether model dynamics can reach a state of equilibrium or not and also the number of possible equilibria depends critically on the values assigned to parameters c and s. The model has two possible equilibria if there is only positive or zero influence ($c = 1$) and no striving for uniqueness ($s = 0$). The first equilibrium is characterized by perfect opinion consensus, a state where all agents hold exactly the same opinion[2]. In the second equilibrium, the

[2] It is commonly believed that positive influence models invariably produce consensus on connected networks. Even as we add that the network must be strongly connected (i.e. paths allow influence to flow in both directions for all dyads in the population), this may not be strictly true in discrete time for certain network structures if the influence weight is high enough. The lack of convergence is obvious if influence weights ($w_{ij,t}$) are allowed to exceed 1.0, of course, but even $w_{ij,t} = 1$ will yield stable limit cycles that prevent convergence for certain network structures. See [6] for an explanation of the general problem. This is not a danger here because influence weights in our model are strictly determined by similarity; that is, if $w_{ij,t} = 1$ then the agents' opinions are already identical and no influence is possible. Thus stable limit cycles cannot prevent convergence.

population consists of two factions of maximally dissimilar extremists. Under this condition, opinions cannot change because pairs of agents with nonzero influence hold identical opinions, which implies that opinions remain unaffected. Influence weights between maximally dissimilar agents take the value zero and do not result in opinion changes as well. This replicates the familiar pattern observed in the literature, where uniformity is a strong attractor of the influence dynamic, but distinct subcultures can exist if they are maximally different and have zero influence on one another. We do not further investigate this case here.

If there is distancing ($c > 1$) and no striving for uniqueness ($s = 0$), then multiple equilibria are possible. As with the case of positive influence, global consensus is a locally stable equilibrium; that is, perturbations in the neighborhood of this equilibrium will be self-correcting, and the opinion distribution will return to consensus. Second, this version of the model also implies equilibrium when there are two maximally antagonistic subgroups of extremists. Each extremist is negatively influenced by the agents that adopt the opposite opinion and therefore sticks to the extreme opinion. Unlike in the positive influence case, this polarization equilibrium can be locally stable, and the model will return from small perturbations to the purely polarized state.

Third, the model with distancing and no striving for uniqueness implies that multiplex equilibria can emerge. These equilibria are characterized by opinion distributions with two maximally extreme subgroups and at least one subgroup of moderate agents. In such constellations it is possible that the negative (distancing) and positive influences on the opinions of moderate agents neutralize each other in such a way that agents do not adjust their opinions. For example, assume a population that consists of six agents and is split up into four subgroups, with one agent on each pole of the opinion scale ($o_{1,t} = 0$ and $o_{2,t} = 1$) and two subgroups with moderate opinions ($o_{3,t} = o_{4,t} = 0.375$ and $o_{5,t} = o_{6,t} = 0.625$). Assume furthermore a linear weight function ($a = 1$), and strong distancing ($c = 2$, see Fig. 1). In this setting, the two extremists are attracted by two moderate agents. However, this "pull" towards more moderate opinions is overruled by the negative influence of those three agents with very different opinions. As a consequence, the extremists stick to their extreme opinion. Each of the moderate agents is positively influenced by one extremist and negatively influenced by the other. These two influences "pull" the opinion of each moderate towards the nearer extreme. In addition, each moderate agent is positively influenced by the two moderates who belong to the other moderate subgroup. These influences "pull" towards a more moderate opinion with the same strength as the influences of the two extremists, but in the opposite direction. As a consequence, a multiplex equilibrium with more than two co-existing subgroups can arise with distancing, but in the absence of striving for uniqueness.

If there is striving for uniqueness ($s > 0$), then (4) implies that opinions are always exposed to random fluctuations. However, as has been demonstrated by Mäs et al. [23], the model can reach a dynamic equilibrium, where opinion distributions remain qualitatively similar over a long period of time. Furthermore, if opinion distributions happen to change due to random fluctuations, the system tends to return to a similar state as before the disturbance. Results presented in this paper (cf. Fig. 3) further demonstrate this dynamic.

3 Results

3.1 Ideal-typical Simulation Scenarios

To begin with, we show a number of typical simulation scenarios that demonstrate the most important differences in the outcomes that the two conceptualizations of social differentiation generate. All of the models presented include a population of 100 agents subject to social influence and homophily, but the differentiation mechanism may be either distancing or striving for uniqueness. Fig. 2 shows an illustrative simulated trajectory for the model with distancing, but not striving for uniqueness ($c = 2$, $s = 0$). Fig. 3 shows the model with only striving for uniqueness ($c = 1$, $s = 0.00025$). In both scenarios, we compare initial opinion distributions that differ in initial variation in opinions.

We know from previous work that both mechanisms can in principle generate persistent social diversity [11, 23]. Here, we are interested in how the variance of the initial opinion distribution affects the degree of social diversity that can be sustained under each of the two differentiation mechanisms. Therefore, we test conditions where diversity is possible under either mechanism of differentiation. Most importantly, we set a very steep weight function ($a = 100$) because earlier modeling studies [23] demonstrated that this is a critical condition for the formation of distinct subgroups in the uniqueness model. In the uniqueness model, much smaller values result in the formation of a single stable cluster of agents. On the other hand, for much higher a values, the model predicts highly fragmented opinion distributions without any stable cluster formation.

Each panel of Fig. 2 and 3 shows a line graph where the trajectory of the opinion of each agent is represented by one line. Under both model versions, the social influence process implies that often agents who hold relatively similar opinions from the outset quickly move to identical positions in the opinion space, and then their lines overlap. This is why the initially scattered opinions of agents quickly collapse into a much smaller set of opinions in both models.

Fig. 2 focuses on the distancing model ($c = 2$) without striving for uniqueness ($s = 0$) and compares influence dynamics that start with a low (panel A) or a high (panel B) initial opinion variance. For the simulation run shown in panel A, we started with a truncated normal opinion distribution with an average of 0.5 and a small standard deviation of 0.1. Accordingly, initial opinion differences in the population were very small, resulting in mainly positive influence weights in the population. Agents with moderate opinions were positively influenced by all others. Only pairs of agents that held opinions near the opposite extremes of the initial opinion distribution had negative influence weights (distancing). However, even these relatively extreme agents were mainly influenced positively by agents with moderate opinions. These positive influences dominated distancing tendencies and the extreme agents then developed moderate opinions. Panel

A shows that early in the influence process several subgroups of agents with similar opinions formed. Because of strong homophily, the social influence between agents that belonged to different clusters was weak but eventually led to a steady decrease in opinion differences between subgroups. The model reached a state of equilibrium when all agents converged to the same opinion.

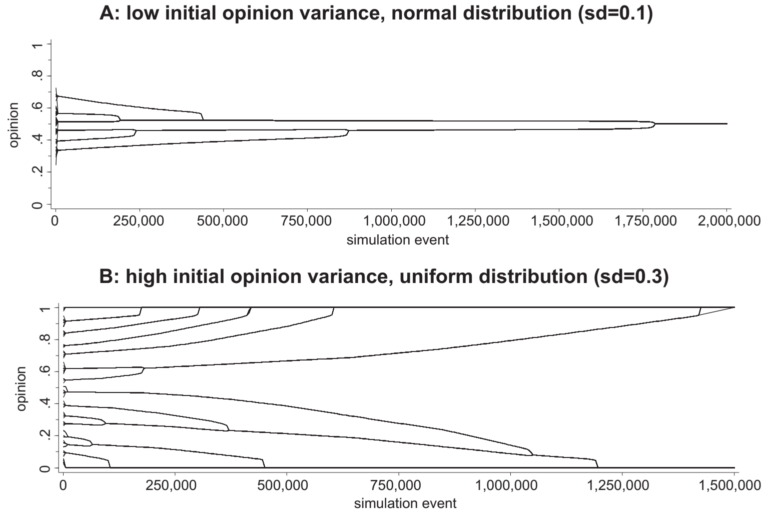

Fig. 2. Ideal typical simulation runs with distancing and without striving for uniqueness ($c = 2$, $s = 0$).

Panel B shows that the outcome of the influence process radically differs if there is initially more opinion variation. For this simulation run, we used the same parameter values as for the run shown in panel A. However, we assumed that the opinion was uniformly distributed in the range (0,1) at the outset, leading more agents to begin with very extreme opinions. In the run shown in panel B, several distinct subgroups formed very early in the influence process, but the extreme agents developed even more extreme opinions over time. This happened because agents with extreme opinions were exposed to influences from multiple agents with very different opinions and tended to distance themselves from those with opposing opinions. Also agents with moderate opinions formed clusters in the early stages of the influence process. Once these subgroups had formed, moderates hardly adjusted opinions because they were exposed to positive influences from agents with both higher and lower opinion values. But as more agents adopted extreme opinions, the moderate agents were also increasingly exposed to negative influences. The figure shows that this resulted in shifts towards extreme opinions also for those who initially maintained moderate positions. Eventually, this process reached equilibrium with two maximally extreme and mutually dissimilar subgroups.

Fig. 3 depicts three ideal-typical influence scenarios of the model version with striving for uniqueness ($s = 0.00025$) but without distancing ($c = 1$). The scenario shown in panel A started from perfect consensus. Under this condition, positive social influence did not result in opinion adjustments. However, the opinions of the agents were minimally unique. Our implementation of the striving for uniqueness in (2) implies ongoing substantial perturbations from the initial consensus. Panel A in Fig. 3 shows that these individual opinion perturbations led to a strong increase in overall opinion variation and to the formation of two distinct clusters (e.g. after about $200,000$ simulation events).

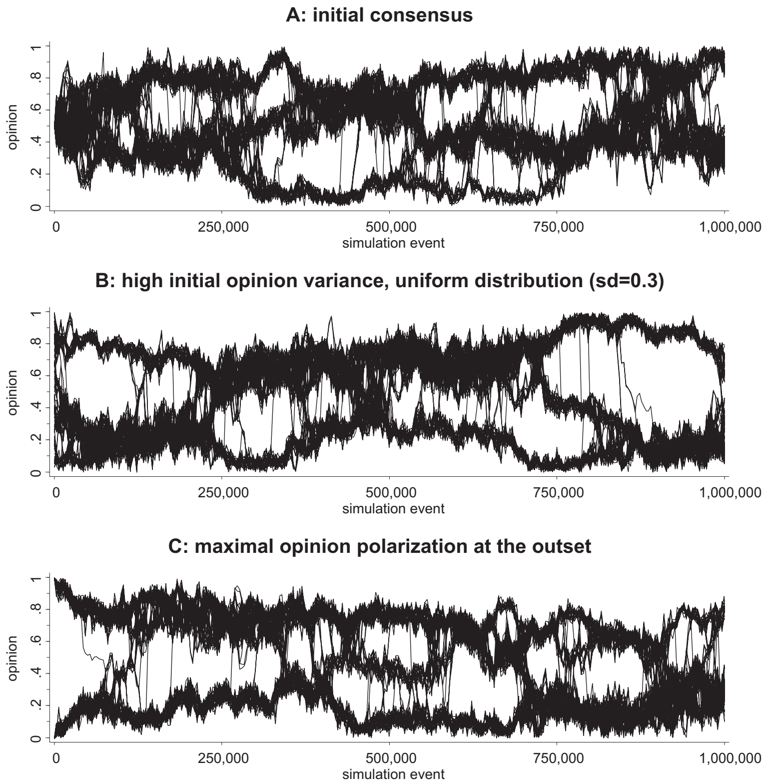

Fig. 3. Ideal-typical simulation runs with striving for uniqueness ($c = 1$, $s = 0.00025$).

Once distinct clusters had formed, the composition of each cluster remained temporarily stable. This was because members of each cluster were relatively unique, as there were sufficient opinion differences compared to the members of the other cluster(s). Nevertheless, there were still small individual perturbations from the subgroup consensus, according to (4). Because of the strong social influence among the members of an opinion cluster, these small individual perturbations could aggregate to substantial collective opinion changes of all cluster members. It was therefore possible that the members of distinct clusters developed similar opinions and drew the clusters to merge. Once this occurred, the uniqueness of the agents who belonged to the merged subgroup decreased, leading to an increased striving for uniqueness and to the development of new distinct subgroups.

The simulation scenario shown in panel A of Fig. 3 demonstrates that the interplay of social influence and striving for uniqueness can create a cyclical fusion and fission of subgroups, which we can call 'factionalism'. In other words, the system tends to develop opinion distributions that consist of several distinct subgroups. However, no distribution is stable because small individual opinion perturbations can lead to fusion of subgroups into larger masses which then break into smaller subgroups again.

Obviously, the differentiation dynamics shown in panel A of Fig. 3 differ substantially from those shown in panel B of Fig. 2. Most importantly, the distancing mechanism (Fig. 2) implies that if dynamics do not end in perfect consensus, the population eventually includes two factions with extreme opinions.[3] However, Fig. 3 suggests that the striving for uniqueness mechanism generates clusters with nonextreme opinions.

Another crucial difference between the two conceptualizations of differentiation becomes apparent upon comparing the three simulation scenarios of Fig. 3. Panel B shows an ideal-typical simulation scenario that starts out with a uniform opinion distribution. In panel C the initial population consisted of two equally sized and maximally dissimilar subgroups. Even though the three simulation runs shown in Fig. 3 started with very different initial opinion distributions, the system always eventually produced the same fusion-and-fission dynamic with similar opinion distributions. This apparent robustness to initial conditions contrasts starkly with Fig. 2, which demonstrated that the initial distribution of opinions can have a substantial effect on outcomes under the distancing model.

3.2 The Computational Experiment

Aim and design of the experiment. The comparison of the ideal-typical simulation scenarios supports that the two conceptualizations of social differentiation imply fundamentally different opinion dynamics. To investigate this conjecture more rigorously, we conducted a computational experiment to see for both versions of the model whether the initial opinion distribution has an impact on the opinion distributions that appear in equilibrium or, for the model with stochastic perturbations, after 25 Million simulation events.

To investigate the effect of the initial opinion distribution, we assumed that the initial opinion of each agent was randomly drawn from a beta distribution. We experimentally manipulated the parameters of the distribution α and β from very low values (yielding low variance in opinions) to very high values (yielding

[3] We show below that the model may in this condition generate multiplex equilibria, where two extreme factions are accompanied by moderate subgroups. While interesting, these outcomes are very rare and vanish in the presence of noise.

strongly bimodal opinion distributions). Intermediate values of α and β yield approximately normal and approximately uniform distributions of opinion as special cases. We did not include initial distributions where all agents hold exactly the same opinion (perfect consensus) or where the population consists of two maximally distinct subgroups (perfect polarization), considering that these distributions are the equilibria of the model version with negative influence ($c > 1$) and no striving for uniqueness ($s = 0$). In order to generate a sufficient number of experimental conditions with a low, moderate, and high variance, we assigned values to the shape parameters of the beta distribution, α and β, according to Equation 5 and varied the value of m from 1 to 25.

$$\alpha = \beta = 2^{(26-m)/5} - 1 \tag{5}$$

Fig. 4 provides five examples of the opinion distributions that result from this procedure, showing that $m = 1$ results in a very small initial opinion variation with a standard deviation of .06 ($\alpha = \beta = 31$). On the opposite extreme, a value of $m = 25$ leads to an almost perfectly polarized opinion distribution with a very high standard deviation of .44 ($\alpha = \beta = 0.15$). For all experimental conditions we conducted 100 independent replications. Like in the ideal-typical simulation scenarios, we set $N = 100$ and $a = 100$.

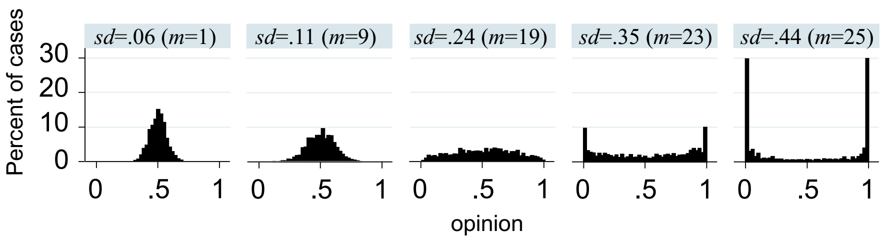

Fig. 4. Examples of the initial opinion distributions used in the simulation experiment.

Outcome measures. We used three outcome measures to describe the opinion distributions in the computational experiment. First, we assessed the level of *factionalism* by counting the number of clusters in the distribution of opinions. To identify clusters, we sorted the N agents according to their opinion and defined a subgroup as a set of agents in adjacent positions such that each member of that set was separated from the nearest other member of the set by at most 0.05 scale points. This allows us to identify subgroups of agents with very similar but not identical opinions, which is the appropriate approach for a system in which randomness prevents two agents from having fully identical opinions.

Second, we assessed for each opinion distribution the average *extremeness* in order to test our expectation that differentiation under the distancing mechanism will lead to greater extremity of opinions than differentiation under the uniqueness mechanism. Extremeness was measured as the average distance between an agent's opinion and the mid point of the opinion scale. The resulting value was doubled, normalizing the outcome measure to a scale that ranges from 0 to 1. An average extremeness of 0 indicates that all agents hold an opinion of exactly 0.5. The maximal average extremeness of 1 obtains when all agents hold maximally extreme opinions (0 or 1).

Finally, we used a measure of *polarization* to quantify the degree to which the population splits into mutually distant but internally homogeneous subgroups. Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of the distribution of pairwise opinion distances. Similar to the extremeness measure, we normalized the measure to a scale from 0 to 1. This measure reaches its minimal value of 0 when all agents adopt the same opinion. Its maximal value of 1 obtains if the population is evenly divided into two diametrically opposed subgroups. Thus, polarization implies extreme opinions, but extremeness does not imply polarization.

Results of the computational experiment. Fig. 5 reports the effect of the standard deviation of the initial opinion distribution on the result of each differentiation process. Circles indicate average values of the outcome measure for the model with distancing. The dashed lines show local polynomial regression lines, describing the relationship between initial opinion variation and the respective outcome measure for the distancing model. Triangles and solid lines report the same statistics for the model with striving for uniqueness.

The solid lines demonstrate that the initial opinion distribution does not have long term effects on the outcome of the differentiation process in the uniqueness model. Panel A shows that the model with striving for uniqueness generated about 2.2 subgroups on average, regardless of the initial opinion distribution. In addition, panel B shows that these subgroups held relatively moderate opinions on average, and panel C shows that opinion polarization is also relatively low.

The outcome of our experiment is radically different when the differentiation process is driven by distancing (see the dashed lines in Fig. 5). Panels A and B show that for initial opinion distributions with a low standard deviation, distancing dynamics tend to generate consensus on moderate opinions. However, higher initial opinion variation resulted in higher extremeness and polarization of opinions. Panel A shows that the average number of subgroups reaches a maximum of about 2.2, indicating that several runs ended in a multiplex equilibrium. To examine this pattern in closer detail, Fig. 6 displays the exact distribution of the number of subgroups.

The size of the bubbles in Fig. 6 indicates how many simulation runs ended with the respective number of subgroups. In addition, if a bubble represents fewer than 100 runs, the number below or above the bubble reports how many runs ended with the respective number of subgroups. As the figure shows, in conditions with a very low initial opinion variation, all 100 runs per condition ended with opinion consensus. However, as the initial opinion variance increases, more runs end with two distinct subgroups. If there was an intermediate level of opinion variance at the outset, several simulation runs ended in a multiplex equilibrium. However, only very few runs ended in multiplex equilibria when the initial opinion variation was very high.

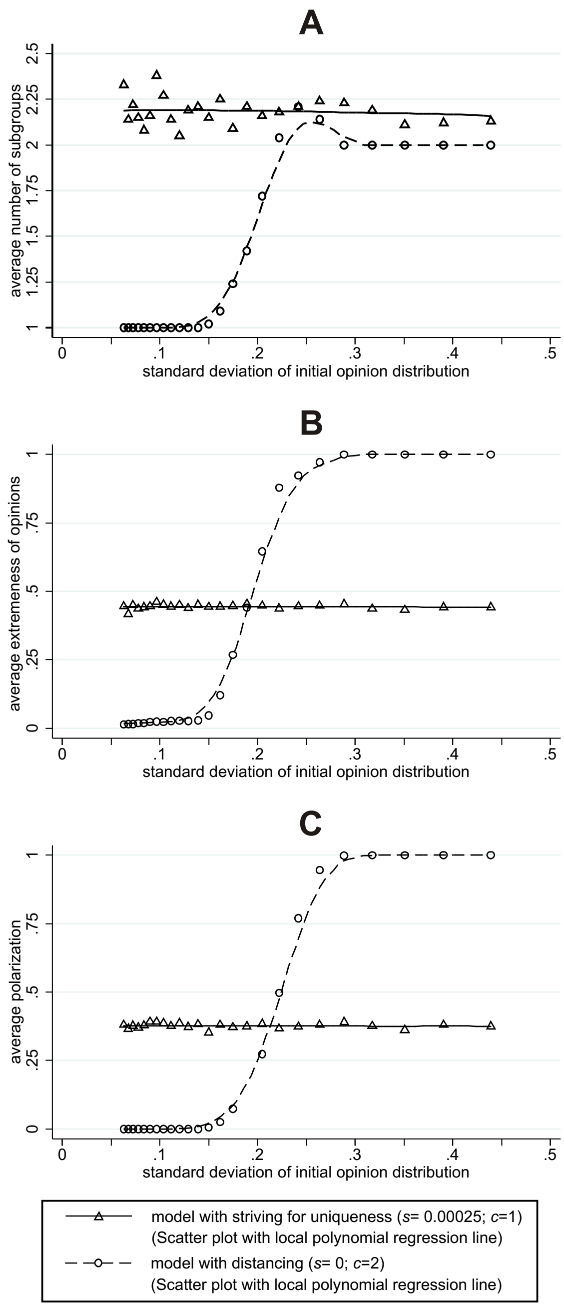

Fig. 5. Results of the simulation experiment.

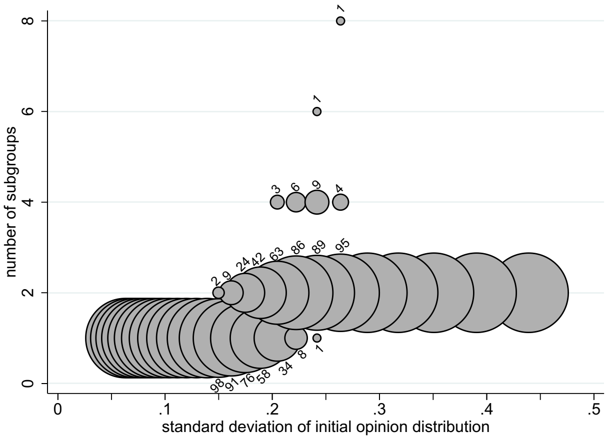

Fig. 6. Number of subgroups generated by the distancing model ($c = 2$, $s = 0$).

4 Summary and Discussion

Classical models of opinion dynamics show that the fundamental mechanism of social-influence - i.e. individuals' tendency to shift their opinions towards those of interaction partners - creates an inexorable march toward cultural homogeneity in connected networks. This contradicts the high degree of persistent diversity that we observe in many social settings, such as in relatively small scale organizations where formal and informal networks are almost guaranteed to be connected. This has led researchers to develop extensions of the classical models to explain emergence and persistence of diversity.

In this contribution, we focused on social differentiation, a recently proposed bottom-up explanation of persistent cultural diversity in strongly connected networks. In particular, we distinguished two alternative conceptualizations of social differentiation - distancing and striving for uniqueness - which operate together with social influence. Distancing implies that individuals tend to form negative ties to others that are very dissimilar, and then differentiate themselves from those negative referents. Striving for uniqueness holds that individuals tend to change their opinions when they perceive that they are not sufficiently different from others. We presented a formal model of social influence dynamics that incorporates both conceptualizations of social differentiation and studied differences in the implications of the two mechanisms.

Our computational experiment demonstrated that these two representations of social differentiation imply radically different patterns of cultural diversity. When individuals distance themselves from dissimilar others, the population may split into two factions with diametrically opposed opinions at the extreme ends of the opinion spectrum. However, striving for uniqueness leads to multiple subgroups with moderate opinions.

In addition, we demonstrated that the two conceptualizations of differentiation imply opposing predictions about the boundary conditions of cultural diversity and integration. On the one hand, distancing increases social diversity only in groups where cultural variation is strong already at the outset of the process. Otherwise, the population approaches uniformity in the long run. On the other hand, striving for uniqueness implies that the degree of cultural diversity in a population is unaffected by the initial distribution.

Both basic processes - distancing and striving for uniqueness - have been independently supported by previous empirical research. It may be that certain individuals are more driven by one force or the other, and it may be that certain situations lead one process or the other to exert a stronger influence. In order to identify different implications of the two conceptualizations of cultural differentiation, we use only a simple stylized model that allows us to examine each of these processes in isolation, and we otherwise hold the situation and the personality of agents constant in our experiments. We recommend that future research should examine both the individual-level and the group-level or situational factors that may moderate the processes that we investigate here.

Of course, distancing and striving for uniqueness may operate interactively in many cases. Our study suggests that this interaction may be quite complex. Remarkably, implications of an integrated model version are very difficult to intuit, as the two differentiation mechanisms have very different implications. For example, distancing implies the development of radicalized subgroups with highly homogeneous opinions and behavior. This, in turn, should motivate individuals who seek to achieve a high level of uniqueness to deviate from their subgroup's consensus and suggests that several individuals who belong to an extreme group will develop more moderate views. However, actors with relatively moderate opinions who are exposed to groups of extremists most likely seek to distance themselves from members of one of the extreme groups and will therefore tend to develop more extreme opinions and values again. Future modeling work is needed to understand the exact implications of the cultural differentiation based on both mechanisms acting in parallel, a research problem that can be tackled based on the formal model which we have presented here.

This paper offers insights into basic processes of cultural influence and differentiation in networks. Although we focus on general, abstract lessons here, a deeper understanding of structural conditions of consensus, clustering, and polarization would be useful to managers or anyone with an interest in how people work together. Empirical research [51] has found that work teams with nonroutine tasks perform relatively poorly when there is no disagreement between team members, suggesting that social differentiation on task-related opinions might be beneficial for work teams as it might trigger inspiring discussions. However, our results suggest that social differentiation in the form of distancing leads to polarized opinions, which has been found to ignite conflicts on work related opinions and hinder team decision making [51–53]. We have demonstrated, on the other hand, that social differentiation based on striving for uniqueness can lead to moderate degrees of diversity. This might create sufficient opinion differences for stimulating discussions and, at the same time, implies enough opinion overlap for efficient team decision-making. Somewhat counter to intuition, this suggests that an organizational culture that supports individuals' striving for uniqueness might actually increase performance of work teams with nonroutine tasks.

Acknowledgments. The research of Andreas Flache and Michael Mäs has been supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, NWO (VIDI Grant 452-04-351). James Kitts acknowledges support from the National Science Foundation (BCS-0433086 and IIS-0433637).

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