ON THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SPATIAL LOCATION; SPATIAL SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION[1]

Gideon Bolt, Jack Burgers and Ronald van Kempen[2]

ABSTRACT *This article gives an overview of the positive and negative aspects of spatial concentration and segregation. We argue that much of the literature is biased; it emphasizes the drawbacks of spatial concentration and segregation of low-income groups in general and immigrants in particular. The opportunities offered by concentration and segregation, which almost always depend on the presence of local solidarity networks, are given less attention. These opportunities are mainly treated in the literature on ethnic entrepreneurs. Much of the literature on the effects of spatial concentration and segregation is based on research in the United States. Thus, we have to be very careful when we apply the results to West European countries. The overview concludes with some suggestions for further research.*

1 Introduction: three hypotheses on the relation between residence and social opportunity

In the literature on the social significance of local communities and neighborhoods[3], two lines of argument can be discerned. The first is rooted in modernization theory and stresses the declining role of communities and neighborhoods in everyday life of people in modern society. The basic mechanism behind this development is supposed to be the increasing spatial scale of social relations. Recently, 'globalization' has become the catchword to refer to this process. As a consequence of the expanding scale of society, social relations are 'disembedded' (Giddens, 1981), detached from a specific local context. More and more, so the argument goes, people are part of what Webber already called 'communities without propinquity' some time ago (Webber, 1963), i.e., 'footloose' relations, associations and institutions. The basic idea is that the expansion of social relations that transcend place causes a decline of local solidarity, the 'eclipse of community' as Stein (1964) put it. The 'neighborhood' loses its relevance as a meaningful 'framework of integration' (Van Doorn, 1955). Modernization, in this line of argument, is basically described as a process of surmounting physical barriers and spatial obstacles to ever wider social circles of interaction and communication (cf. Burgers, 1988). This standpoint, stressing that location is becoming obsolete in modern society, was eloquently phrased by Robert Musil in one of the landmarks of modern fiction, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*: "Die Überschätzung der Frage, wo man sich befinde, stammt aus der Hordenzeit, wo man sich die Futterplätze merken mußte." (Musil, 1978: 9).

The hypothesis following from this line of reasoning is that relations have transcended place and that social life has no clear spatial boundaries. Substantial, meaningful social relations at the level of the neighborhood simply do not exist anymore. The neighborhood is characterized by a segmentation of roles, activities, lifestyles, and timetables of its inhabitants. As far as social homogeneity exists in certain neighborhoods -- and of course, it often does, as any casual observer can easily see -- it is a consequence of the nature and composition of the housing stock which, more or less in a functional way, selects particular types of inhabitants and households. But even then, there seems to be a growing need for social distance and anonymity among residents. In many cases, there is little overlap of the social circles in which residents participate. For many people, the neighborhood is merely the spot where their dwelling happens to be located. Contacts and activities are not usually tied to or confined to the neighborhood. Accordingly, the district and the neighborhood have a negligible impact on the lives of individuals. From this perspective, the neighborhood exerts no influence on the degree of social exclusion and social cohesion.

The second line of reasoning, prominent in human geography and in the field of urban studies, emphasizes the important role neighborhoods and communities still play in everyday life. It is assumed that living in a specific local setting, being located on a specific spot, affects life chances and opportunities of people and institutions. The attention for spatial segregation and concentration finds it origin in the (real or perceived) advantages and disadvantages of different forms of segregation (cf. Friedrichs, 1998) and different forms of concentration and concentration areas (like ghettos and enclaves; see the article by Marcuse in this issue).

The main body of literature tends to emphasize the negative effects of segregation and concentration. The underlying hypothesis is that neighborhoods can operate as a framework for social exclusion. Wilson (1996), for instance, shows that social organization of certain inner-city neighborhoods has come under pressure. This is due to the rising unemployment in these urban districts, the departure of the middle-income groups, the influx of poor households, and the graying and impoverishment of those residents who stay in the neighborhood. His research reveals that people living in this kind of area are relatively well integrated in their own neighborhood. According to Wilson, the problem in these neighborhoods is that the need to make a living while being excluded from the labor market necessitates the adoption of socially not approved and even criminal lifestyles and role models. The consequence is that it becomes more and more difficult for the residents of these neighborhoods to make social and economic advances outside the neighborhood network. According to this hypothesis, the neighborhood reinforces social exclusion and undermines social cohesion at a higher level.

Homogeneity of the social composition of neighborhoods and districts that are characterized by a concentration of deprivation could, however, very well open up opportunities. It could allow residents to develop social networks based on mutual support and solidarity (cf. Portes, 1995). Moreover, social homogeneity could also generate an economic base for all kinds of entrepreneurship. Therefore, we can also formulate a hypothesis that departs from the view of the neighborhood as a framework for social inclusion. Mutual bonds of solidarity among deprived residents can provide accepted roads to upward social mobility. Portes (1995) uses the term embeddedness to denote the reciprocal relations between people who are both socially and geographically close together. These relations form a crucial survival strategy for poor households. The neighborhood provides opportunities in terms of finding a job, starting up a business, participating in informal economic networks, and interacting with all kinds of groups within the neighborhood. In this manner, living in a neighborhood forms a constraint on social exclusion and leads to a strong cohesion, at least within a small social and/or geographical context.

In this paper, we will elaborate the last two hypotheses and give an overview of the literature on the advantages and drawbacks of spatial segregation and concentration. Therefore, we start from the assumption that location matters. We agree with Wilson (1987, p. 61) that "... a person's patterns and norms of behavior tend to be shaped by those with which he or she has the most frequent or sustained contact and interaction." Because many of these contacts and interactions are localized or, in other words, take place in a limited spatial area (like a neighborhood), we can talk about the possible role of the neighborhood in people's lives. Although economic advantage and disadvantage play a major role in discussing the pros and cons of concentration and segregation, social and cultural as well as political and juridical factors should also be taken into account. Together, they can be seen as the ingredients of the 'capital' people can use to realize certain goals. As pointed out by Wacquant (this issue), Bourdieu (1985), and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), capital may be understood as any resource in a structured arena of social action (or field) that allows one to obtain the specific profits that arise out of activity and contest within that arena. The different forms of capital form the guidelines for this paper. We end the paper by offering some suggestions for further research.

2 Negative effects of spatial segregation

As mentioned earlier, the literature on spatial segregation tends to emphasize the negative effects this phenomenon may generate. Generally speaking, it is suggested that segregation and concentration curtail the opportunities for people to participate in civil society. This effect is said to originate from a lack of contacts with relevant individuals and institutions.

Economic disadvantage

Morris (1987) suggests that the spatial concentration of the chronically unemployed may have a devastating effect on their social contacts. In the absence of such contacts, they have no access to information on the availability of jobs. They may even be out of work for that very reason (cf. Hughes and Madden, 1991). Concentration of low-income groups might also lead to fewer opportunities for informal economic activities.

High-income households can generate demand for services that low-income individuals can supply. This applies to housekeeping, odd jobs, cleaning, and child care in particular. Meert et al. (1997) found that there are differences between neighborhoods in Brussels in this respect. In an area with a mixed population (professionals and poor households), the inhabitants to indeed profit from the larger demand for informal jobs. The critical issue here is that a high degree of segregation could inhibit the contact between those who offer this kind of work and those who can perform it. In terms of Granovetter (1973), the 'weak ties', so relevant in terms of offering information about labor market opportunities, are missing in these neighborhoods.

Norms and values

When socially deprived individuals and households live in the same neighborhood, this clustering of poverty, unemployment, and welfare dependency could create a local climate, a neighborhood culture, generating attitudes and practices that would further deepen the social isolation of the local residents. As we already have pointed out, Wilson (1987) has suggested that this mechanism has had severe consequences for the black population in America's inner cities. Those who could afford to move out did just that (see also Marcuse in this issue). This option was not feasible or desirable for everyone, however. Those who stayed had to develop new survival strategies to cope with the changing socio-spatial context. In the American ghettos, the development of alternative survival strategies has already been documented (cf. Anderson, 1991 among others; see also Friedrichs, 1998). This process is a result of the fact that the formal labor market offers less and less opportunity for upward social mobility. The strategies include diverse types of business, informal and formal employment, various kinds of work performed at home, and criminal activities (see also Kloosterman and Burgers, 1996). The identities people develop in the underprivileged enclaves diverge more and more from identities that are appreciated in mainstream society.

Engbersen and Snel (1996) expect that deviant norms towards work can be found mainly in neighborhoods with a concentration of unemployed persons. In addition, alternative 'survival strategies', like informal and criminal activities, are most likely in older, inner-city neighborhoods. The absence of social cohesion in these neighborhoods seems to be the reason for this, while the morphological structure of the neighborhood is conducive to these kinds of activities. There is some evidence to confirm the expectations of Engbersen and Snel. Musterd (1996), for example, found that the social participation of people in neighborhoods with an over-representation of unemployed and low-educated people is lower than the social participation of people outside these areas. In a deprived neighborhood of a small Dutch city, Terpstra (1996) found that the willingness to accept a job was very small, and living on unemployment benefits was accepted as a normal way of life. Informal activities and fraud with unemployment benefits is not considered to be an unjust way to supplement one's income.

Schools

Segregation in the school system has been mentioned repeatedly in the literature as a disadvantage of the spatial concentration of population groups. It has been shown that children with a foreign background have less chance of receiving a good education if they attend a 'black school' than when they go to 'white schools' (Mulder et al., 1993). Furthermore, by living in such areas, it is harder for them to become fluent in the majority language (Ballard, 1990). In a district with a high percentage of immigrant households, most of the playmates will not have a good command of the majority language. The lack of interaction with pupils of the host society may not only hamper the command of the majority language but may also limit contact with the mainstream culture of the host society. According to Glebe (1997), this may lead to intra-ethnic retreat and diminishing chances of integration.

Politics

A high concentration of members of an ethnic group could create favorable conditions for political mobilization (see further in this paper). At the same time, this situation could also have a negative impact. Pinderhughes (1987) has pointed out that a high degree of segregation makes it impossible to form coalitions with other groups, including ethnic groups. In districts where the population is mixed, many other groups might have an interest in expanding certain facilities; here, inter-ethnic coalitions are much more logical (Massey and Denton, 1993). In districts with an ethnically homogeneous composition, political mobilization is often concentrated on racial issues (Pinderhughes, 1987). The lack of contact with upwardly mobile individuals -- a possible consequence of racial and socio-economic segregation -- discourages involvement in social institutions and political activities (see Alex-Assensoh, 1997).

Amenities and the neighborhood

Concentration of poverty can erode the economic base for commercial services. When there is a high degree of segregation in terms of income, the service structure in low-income districts will feel the effects much more acutely than in the event of a low degree of segregation by income (Sarkissian, 1976; Massey and Denton, 1993). A concentration of poverty can have negative effects on the presence of non-commercial facilities as well. This is especially likely when the residents of the area in question are not very capable of standing up for themselves and demanding public facilities as, for instance, health care, police surveillance, adequate schools. Wacquant (1997) refers to this situation as 'organizational desertification' and observes a negative social capital (see also Wacquant, this issue). Indeed, the residents of certain neighborhoods (and of American ghettos in particular) often have no access to financial resources in any form and may have difficulty in getting insurance (Wacquant, 1997).

The concentration of poverty in a neighborhood can set the stage for a decline of living conditions. Homeowners may have no money to invest in their dwelling and landlords may not keep up their properties. This could set off a self-reinforcing cycle of decline. Fewer and fewer people would find it necessary, lucrative, or even possible to invest in their dwellings. In this way, a process of rapid deterioration is set in motion (Massey and Denton, 1993).

Finally: segregation and the development of stereotypes

Segregation and concentration can have another effect. The residents of concentration districts may have a negative image among the urban populace. That could lead to all kinds of self-fulfilling prophesies. Concentration neighborhoods can turn into breeding grounds for misery because they are labeled as such. As Wacquant (1996, p. 125) puts it, such areas become "... isolated territories viewed by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, urban hellholes where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell." Following Sennett (1970), Goldsmith (1997) points out that segregation can lead to a lack of empathy for those who reside in another area. Furthermore, it can lead to an inadequate and superficial understanding based on the papers, hearsay, or television reports. And ignorance often begets intolerance and fear.

As we stated before, the literature tends to emphasize the negative aspects of spatial concentration and segregation. The possible advantages of social homogeneity in neighborhoods and districts are given much less attention. In the next section, we take a closer look at these potential benefits.

3 Advantages of spatial segregation and concentration

Social and cultural advantages

The development, existence, and nurturing of social contacts made possible by the physical proximity of like-minded people can be seen as an extremely useful aspect of spatial segregation and concentration. Social contacts can lead to the emergence and preservation of a culture that is not based on the norms and values of mainstream society but on those of a specific group. The effort to maintain a minority culture entails more than particularistic attitudes and behavior. It is also manifest in the presence of shops, clubs, and religious institutions (Peach and Smith, 1981).

Both classic and recent sociological studies illustrate how a particular culture is maintained within a confined area. We mention two. The first (Dahya, 1974) describes a Pakistani community in Bradford, England. Many of the people who left Pakistan and immigrated to this city ended up in the neighborhoods where many Pakistani were already present. There was a high degree of mutual support within those neighborhoods. People helped one another to find work and a place to live. On the labor market, informal contacts were activated to get jobs for the newly arrived migrants, albeit temporary ones in some cases. On the housing market, the informal contacts ensured that newcomers were able to move in with friends or relatives -- in some cases with vague acquaintances -- at least temporarily.

The second study (Suttles, 1974) describes a neighborhood in Chicago where Italian culture is pervasive. Local residents do their shopping exclusively in Italian stores in the same neighborhood. People help each other fix up their homes. Nearly all the Italians living in the neighborhood go to the same church (modeled after a church in Naples) and frequent the same parks. They wear the same kind of clothes and speak the same dialect. This is a classic example of a community.

Of course, we should be wary of adopting an overly romantic image of the concept of community from the cases described in these two studies. Undoubtedly, not all such neighborhoods are ideal places to live. Regarding countries such as the United States and France, Wacquant (1996, p. 126) warns that "One must be careful not to romanticize conditions in the proletarian neighborhoods and segregated enclaves of yesteryear." The key to understanding these areas is the concept of social networks. Through their networks, people are able to derive benefits from each other and offer support to one and another (see also Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). The interaction can take many forms, ranging from a pleasant conversation over a cup of coffee to using a neighbor's washing machine or freezer all the way to borrowing money at low (or no) interest. According to Healy (1997), it is particularly those with the least power who have the best means of starting and keeping up relations. Indeed, they have no alternative. Incidentally, not everyone within the group will necessarily appreciate the close-knit ties. This is especially true of the offspring of immigrants (Prinssen and Kropman, 1986) and individuals who are annoyed with the social control exerted by their fellow countrymen (Böcker, 1994).

Economic advantages

The literature on ethnic entrepreneurship has made it clear that concentration of ethnic groups can create the economic base for specific types of business. The entrepreneurs who benefit most, of course, are those whose business is geared to the needs of their own group. This sector is known as internally oriented enterprise (see, e.g., Rekers and Van Kempen 1998). An increase in the number of, say, Moroccans in a district could generate greater demand for Islamic butchers and bakers, for special barbers, for coffee shops, and for specific services such as insurance brokers and driving schools. When members of the majority population move out of a particular neighborhood, it is not only the residents who feel the change; the shift in the balance also affects the local business community. When the indigenous population moves away, the indigenous shopkeepers tend to do the same. By vacating the retail premises, they make these shops available to ethnic entrepreneurs. Waldinger (1989, 1997) sees this shift as a key aspect of the opportunity structure for potential business ventures, especially for ethnic enterprises.

As we have already indicated, concentration of an ethnic group makes it easier to maintain ethnic networks. Sometimes, those networks give ethnic enterprises a competitive edge over other businesses. For instance, networks allow ethnic entrepreneurs to find loyal and flexible employees quickly within their own group (Wilson and Portes, 1980). In this manner, newly arrived immigrants can gain the experience and knowledge they would eventually need to start their own business in the future (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). Especially when few opportunities are open on the formal labor market, ethnic enterprise can provide a channel for social improvement (Kloosterman and Rath, 1996; Portes and Zhou, 1996). It should be pointed out that concentration of an ethnic group does not automatically lead to a thriving ethnic business community. There are some important preconditions. These include the presence of immigrants who have some capital and certain entrepreneurial capacities. Another precondition is a keeping up the influx of new labor through continuing immigration (Wilson and Portes, 1980). In addition, ethnic business is promoted when the networks largely coincide with relations of kinship. Relatives generally show a greater willingness to lend money than unrelated persons. Moreover, members of the family make very reliable employees (Sanders and Nee, 1996).

Finally, it should be mentioned that a spatial concentration of an ethnic group may also hinder contact with people from outside the ethnic community, especially when strong ties exist within the community and contacts with outsiders are not very well accepted. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) specifically point at claims on successful people in the ethnic community. In a situation in which an enterprise is thriving, the successful entrepreneur may be more or less morally obliged to hire people from the same community.

Political advantages

The concentration of ethnic groups in a specific number of neighborhoods or districts makes direct political influence on the local level possible (Anwar, 1991). Immigrants and their relatives still have no right to vote on the national level in many West European countries. On the local and district level, they more often have this opportunity. Even without voting rights on the local level, a concentration of people belonging to the same group may attract the attention of politicians, which might at least lead to promises of improvements that are considered necessary by the group (see also: Joyce, 1997).

4 Social exclusion, social cohesion, and the role of the neighborhood: towards a research model

Many of the arguments and illustrations presented above are derived from research in US cities. It is important to determine whether they apply to European cities. It is gratuitous to say that the socio-cultural, political, and economic differences between the US and Europe are too great to permit any comparison. Obviously, segregation in American cities is different from that found in most European cities in terms of its scale and intensity. But this does not mean that the spatial characteristics of European cities are unimportant in terms of social exclusion (cf. Van Kempen, 1997). On the contrary, several sociological studies that were conducted in low-status neighborhoods in the Netherlands suggest that some individuals feel more isolated than others. For instance, some unemployed people can do little more with their minimum welfare benefits than pay for the basic necessities of life. This is particularly true when that minimum amount has to be shared by more than one person. Their social world consists of the family and the immediate surroundings of their dwelling. They have no money for cultural activities outside of the home. And they see few opportunities for upward social mobility and increasing their income. But several studies also demonstrate that this perspective is not shared by all unemployed people; the unemployed form a heterogeneous population (Kroft et al., 1989; Engbersen, 1990).

The situation of the elderly is another case in point. It is all too clear that some elderly persons have a marginal position in society. But that does not mean that they are always socially isolated (Van der Loo et al., 1988; Anderiesen and Reijndorp, 1989).

These sociological studies are interesting and important in their own right. Unfortunately, they do not make a direct connection between social exclusion and spatial segregation. The extent to which the processes and relations described above are found in European cities in many cases still remains to be seen. At present, we do not have enough empirical and detailed research results to answer this question (see Musterd and Ostendorf, 1997; Friedrichs, 1997).

As we may infer from the above, relatively much is known about the role the neighborhood may play in the lives of people who live there. Nevertheless, research that goes deeper into this field could work from the hypotheses presented at the beginning of this paper. It is quite conceivable that within a given neighborhood, a certain hypothesis would be more applicable to a particular population group than to another. Summarizing, the three relevant hypotheses that could direct empirical research are:

1. The hypothesis of heterogeneity and role segmentation: the neighborhood without a social function

Integration at the level of the neighborhood is no more than an illusion. Contacts and activities are not usually tied to the neighborhood. Accordingly, the district and the neighborhood have a negligible impact on the lives of individuals. From this perspective, the neighborhood exerts no influence on the degree of social exclusion and social cohesion.

2. The concentration and isolation hypothesis: the neighborhood as a framework for exclusion

Living in deprived neighborhoods fosters lifestyles and attitudes that hamper inclusion in mainstream society. On the other hand, deprived neighborhoods are labeled as areas of deviance and crime. Therefore, people living there are deemed unfit to perform regular work. In this way, deprivation is socially perpetuated and reproduced by a perverse combination of survival strategies and social attribution.

3. The embeddedness hypothesis: the neighborhood as a framework for inclusion

The neighborhood provides opportunities for survival and even upward social mobility, but not necessarily in ways that are considered abusive by mainstream society. These include finding a job, starting up a business, participating in an informal economic network, exhibiting a certain pattern of activities, being part of social networks, and interacting with all kinds of groups within the neighborhood. In this manner, living in a neighborhood with people in the same social situation and sharing relevant histories and cultural or ethnic backgrounds provides the social, cultural, and political capital that can make the difference in being successful or not in terms of what Parsons (1960) once called 'inclusion in the societal community'.

Notes

[1] This paper was first presented at the COST-CIVITAS Conference on Social Fragmentation, Social Cohesion and Urban Governance in Oslo, 5-7 June 1997.

[2] The authors are indebted to Godfried Engbersen for the formulation of the different frames of reference regarding the possible relevance of the neighborhood.

[3] The definition of the term neighborhood is still open to debate. Often explicit or implicit references are made to census tracts, or zip-code areas. In other cases the definition of the neighborhood is provided by the inhabitant (leading of course to different delineations) (see also: Friedrichs, 1997). In this paper, an exact definition is not so important. In many European countries, the neighborhood is (again, implicitly or explicitly) seen as the area where people carry out their daily activities within walking distance of their dwelling. In general, this is an area of about one square kilometer.

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About the authors

Gideon Bolt is a PhD researcher at the Urban Research Centre Utrecht, Faculty of Geographical Sciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His work concerns the importance of the neighborhood with regard to the migration patterns of Turks.

Jack Burgers is an associate professor of sociology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

Ronald van Kempen is an associate professor at the Urban Research Centre Utrecht, Faculty of Geographical Sciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands.