Doctor of Sociology

Ethnic Urban Geographies in Belgium

Processes of spatial inequity and implications for individual life chances

Lena Imeraj

Promotor: prof. Sylvie Gadeyne, PhD

Abstract

Socio-spatial divides between people, although widely observed, are not fully understood. While empirical and theoretical approaches have greatly enhanced our knowledge about socio-spatial reproduction, integration and segregation along socioeconomic or ethnic dividing lines, research that incorporates the underlying social and demographic processes as well as the implications for individual chances remains scarce. This thesis is rooted in a context wherein integration and residential segregation have shifted to the forefront in Belgian and European policy programmes and in the necessity to question whether the political claim that socio-spatial segregation is problematic, undesirable and potentially harmful is defendable. Clear insights into the causes and consequences of changing spatial divides contribute to a sound knowledge and a well-founded vision of sustainable urban development and liveability in the city, allowing for the evaluation of whether action should be taken against further socio-spatial polarisation.

The present research project sets out to investigate the interrelated nature of demographic and social processes and the changing ethnic composition and geographic distribution of urban populations in Belgium. The main objective is to present insight into processes by which cities develop their ethnic (and social) composition, the coming into being of spatial inequity and the potential implications for individual life chances. The focus on processes and implications addresses both academic and policy debates. The research pursues a dynamic approach and takes an explicit multi-ethnic and multi-space perspective by focusing on relevant population groups and urban areas in Belgium. Applying various multivariate and cartographic, geographic information system (GIS) techniques on rich, exhaustive and longitudinal databases, this research shows that any debate on residential segregation will not be prolific if it does not examine how selective social and demographic mechanisms of
(local/ethnic) population change forge enduring inequalities, both spatially and socially.

This study serves the scientific and societal debate by illuminating the role of several important socio-demographic determinants and mechanisms that give rise to changing urban population make-up and geography, and by pinpointing important consequences of residential context for people. To realise these goals, individual-level linked census and register data are used in combination with different quantitative methods of analysis in five empirical research chapters.

The first study uses a novel approach to neighbourhood measurement and shows how spatial segregation of ethnic minorities is group- and location-specific and scale-dependent using individualised neighbourhoods. Ethnic segregation may (or may not) exist at multiple levels at the same time, suggesting that the process of growing spatial polarization is driven both by individual and collective behaviour, migrant group composition, histories of locations and institutional agency within the broader economic, political, cultural and social context.

The second study provides evidence that demographic components of population change, both internal and international migration and natural change, are migrant- and location-specific. The demographic events that contribute to population change vary spatially at the city and neighbourhood level. Moreover, co-ethnics in different cities have deviating demographic experience, highlighting the heterogeneity of co-ethnics. The unequal intensity by which internal migration, natural change and international migration occur in specific ethnic populations present in specific parts of the city tends to reproduce patterns and levels of ethnic residential segregation although some trends of local de-concentration are observed. This is illuminated in the decomposition and spatial visualisation of population change for the city as an entire system and for all neighbourhoods within the city.

The third study demonstrates that residential mobility in general is highly selective but for some more than for others. The unequal educational outcomes across ethnic groups yield different residential mobility paths and outcomes. Dispersal away from poor inner-city areas appears least likely for labour migrant descendants and those having low educated parents, even when having achieved tertiary education. Selective residential mobility – as a function of opportunities and barriers based on achieved, ascribed and inherited factors – further impoverishes the inner-city and perpetuates socio-spatial discrepancies between subpopulations and places.

Focusing on highly educated young adults, the fourth study finds support for the idea that location-specific insider advantages acquired during higher education training can enhance the appeal of a city after graduation, particularly so in the short term and for ethnic minority origin groups who have little access to economic parental resources. The fifth and final study highlights that both residential and family context have a part in determining educational outcomes of young urban residents. On the household level, having a tertiary educated parent has a massive positive impact upon children’s educational outcome only for native origin families. On the neighbourhood level, poor
socioeconomic context shapes the educational attainment of ethnic minorities and natives much in the same way. In contrast, the spatial concentration of co-ethnic community resources has a detrimental impact on educational performance of non-Western ethnic minorities only. Ethnic spatial separation thus fosters differential opportunities to educational success of local residents and may be a crucial factor in explaining difficult structural integration of particular ethnic communities.

In sum, this research project makes a contribution to the extant theoretical and empirical comprehension and knowledge about how population and social dynamics, specific to places and ethnic groups, shape urban population change, urban geographies, spatial fragmentation and individual life chances and outcomes. In so doing, it provides a base for future urban research and policy interventions concerned with urban sustainability and liveability, and social and spatial equality.

Keywords: segregation, social-spatial inequalities, social mechanisms, demographic processes, urban population composition and distribution, Belgian cities