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Introduction: „Neighbourhood Effects Studies on the Basis of European Micro-data“

The beginning of neighbourhood studies can be dated to the begining of the 20th century when the first studies based on theoretical approaches related to a social ecological approach were undertaken at the University of Chicago. At this time it was difficult to disentangle context effects from effects due to the composition of the residents of a particular context. Meanwhile, new statistical methods and better data allow us to distinguish much better between these two effects. At the beginning of the 21st century neighbourhood studies are an important field in social sciences. The neighbourhood focus is increasingly an important issue in explaining a variety of outputs and outcomes in various disciplines and research questions. The availability of better micro-data allowing us to take neighbourhood effects into account are another reason for this. However, European countries still offer very different micro-data sets in respect to neighbourhood research. On the one hand, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries describe and define the neighbourhood on a very small regional level, while other European countries are still far behind the Scandinavian countries, although they make some progress in respect to the data they offer.

Given these challenges for neigbourhood research it was the aim of a conference, which took place in spring 2007 at the Humboldt University of Berlin, to bring together Europe's „Neighbourhood Effects“ researchers, and to encourage further analysis of the existing European data by looking at research in different countries, undertaken in different academic disciplines. The conference was jointly organized by CMPO at the University of Bristol, the Georg-Simmel-Zentrum für Metropolenforschung, at the Humboldt-University Berlin and the Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) at the DIW Berlin.

This special issue summarizes some of the papers presented at this conference, to make sure that the spirit of the conference – to encourage further neighbourhood research – is lasting. These contributions deal with methodological issues and data problems on the one hand, and on the other hand, almost all of them focus on one particular research question embedded in the neighbourhood context.

The papers presented at the conference nicely illustrate the problems and the rich potential of neighbourhood studies at this time. As Galster reflects, it is now widely known that identification of causal relationships is difficult.

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Other papers acknowledge this and grapple with the implications. On the other hand, the conference highlighted that all over Europe exciting new datasets are becoming available with neighbourhood identifiers and characteristics. There is no single message to emerge from the conference other than this: neighbourhoods are potentially important in peoples' lives, and the data are becoming available to document and understand this.

This volume starts with three contributions which deal with more general questions of neighbourhood research taking national studies as examples. The first contribution by *George C. Galster,* deals with six major challenges which confront researchers attempting to quantify accurately the independent effect of neighbourhood context on individuals. Galster describes these challenges, prior attempts to meet them, and their respective shortcomings. Moreover, he suggests some promising approaches, techniques and finally data improvements to deal with theses shortcomings. Essentially he sets out his agenda for future neighbourhood research initiatives which might not only be discussed on the European level.

Roger Anderson's contribution summarizes some of the basic questions that appear both in the neighbourhood effect literature and in planning practices and policy discourses. He draws on a series of studies using Swedish data. The paper attempts to answer questions on the strength of the relation between housing mix and social mix, on the relation between the population composition of neighbourhoods and residents' social interaction, on the relationship of social opportunities of individual residents and their neighbourhood context and to the extend in which this is produced through local social interaction. He also addresses the questions: what population mix matters, what scale matters and what time span matters.

Jürgen Friedrich's contribution deals with the impact of neighbourhood characteristics, such as poverty rates, on the attitudes and behaviour of residents. His contribution explores the feasibility of three existing large German date sets for such a purpose. He concludes that the data cannot be regionalized in a sufficient manner, so he describes an alternative strategy, a „puzzle strategy" to combine data from different existing data sets.

The following set of contributions focus on one particular question of neighbourhood research and try to answer this based on one particular national micro-data set. The contribution by *Gundi Knies, Simon Burgess* and *Carol Popper* is based on German micro data. It is an example of a study making use of new attempts by the provider of micro-data to improve their data sets for neighbourhood research. The authors test whether people's life satisfaction depends on their relative income position in the neighbourhood. They find no negative and no statistically significant associations between neighbourhood income and life satisfaction, but they find positive associations between neighbourhood income and happiness.

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The contribution of *Mai Stafford, Amanda Sacker, Anne Ellaway, Steven Cummins, Dick Wiggins* and *Sally Macintyre* is an example of a neighbourhood study from the field of health research. Using obesity as an example, they theorised a model of the potential causal pathways linking neighbourhood characteristics, through diet and physical activity, to obesity. Using data from England and Scotland, their structural model highlights certain neighbourhood characteristics which are important for understanding the increasing problem of obesity and others which are of no significant importance.

Another set of contributions focus on segregation issues, one important part of neighbourhood research. The study by *Danuta Biterman, Bjorn Gustafsson* and *Torun Österberg,* investigates certain issues of economic and ethnic segregation from the perspective of children in the three metropolitan regions of Sweden. Their main focus is on child income. They find that residential polarisation and ethnic residential polarisation increased, while they report a relatively large overlap between economic and ethnic polarisation. They conclude that increased returns to parental education have forcefully contributed to larger economic polarisation among children in Swedish metropolitan regions.

The contribution by *Wenda van der Laan Bouma-Doff* focuses on the associations between ethnic concentration and labour market participation. This research is based on a data set on the four largest ethnic groups in the Netherlands and the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood. Based on this data she investigates whether ethnic minorities living in ethnically concentrated neighbourhoods participate less in the labour force, and if so, which mechanisms are behind this relationship. The results show that, Moroccans living in such neighbourhoods show a lower participation rate. This relationship might be explained by the fact, that Moroccans are a highly marginalized, stigmatized and discriminated ethnic category, as a result of which they are confronted with barriers on both the housing *and* the labour market.

The contribution by *Anita I. Drever* takes another approach, in contrast to other research on segregation. Her research does not focus on the effects on minority residents of living in an ethnic neighbourhood, but rather she explores how living within an ethnic neighbourhood affects members of the dominant ethnic group rather than the minorities that define it. She uses micro-data for Germany. Her results indicate that Germans living within ethnic neighbourhoods are for instance less well off financially than their peers in other parts of the city. The analysis did not however suggest that Germans living in ethnic neighbourhoods have fewer social contacts, or that they are more likely to be unemployed. Indeed, Germans living within ethnic neighbourhoods reported levels of satisfaction with their housing and standard of living equal to Germans elsewhere.

Finally, it is our pleasure to thank the participants of the conference, and the authors and referees of this Special Issue. We thank the Volkswagen Founda-

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tion for their financial support of the conference, without this it would not have been so successful. And last but not least we want to thank Gundi Knies, who substantially contributed to the success of the conference, in the phase of its preparation, during its processing and post-processing.

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