



# FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

**Ronald van Kempen**

Utrecht University

The Netherlands



# **FROM THE LOCAL NEIGHBOURHOOD TO THE GLOBAL WORLD**

## **THE RELEVANCE OF THE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOOD IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION AND MOBILITY**

**Ronald van Kempen**

Utrecht University

The Netherlands





# The question

Is the place where one resides relevant for social and socioeconomic outcomes (e.g. social mobility)?

How much does place matter?



# Hypothesis

*Research that puts the neighbourhood central in the analysis is increasingly dangerous, because the place where one resides is increasingly becoming less important*

*Instead of a focus on residence, we need a focus on activities to find out how people are influenced*



# The neighbourhood was important

- So many interesting descriptions about life in neighbourhoods, like Herbert Gans (1962) about Boston and Gerald Suttles about Chicago (1968)



# The neighbourhood is still important

- For poor people, anywhere in the world
- For minority ethnic groups
- For elderly
- For young people



# About neighbourhood effects

- Can impoverished areas make their inhabitants worse off (Friedrichs 1998)?
- In general: there are neighbourhood effects, but they are small
- Main premise: where people reside is important...





# The developments

- Declining relevance of the neighbourhood (old literature)
- Increasing importance of ICT
- Transnationalism
  - minority ethnic groups
  - expatriates and gentrification



# Declining relevance of the neighbourhood (old literature)

- Merton's (1957) cosmopolitans
- Neighbourhood is becoming less important (Webber, 1963; Stein, 1972)
- No clear boundaries of social life (Keller 1968)
- Fischer (1982): personal networks are not bound to particular area; see also Wellman



# Declining relevance of the neighbourhood (old literature)

## Conclusion

The neighbourhood is not so important, so why should we put it so central in our research?



# Increasing importance of ICT

*“Electronic communications form a fundamental part of the growth of post-Fordist production regimes around the world and have contributed to a massive, planet-wide round of time-space compression that has reconfigured the structure of social relations and the rhythms of everyday life”*

(Warf 2001, p. 319)



# Increasing importance of ICT

*“The (...) problem is the fact that the traditionally reliable correspondence between activity on the one hand, and geographic location and time on the other, can no longer be taken for granted in the ICT age”*

(Couclelis 2009, p. 1558)



# Increasing importance of ICT

## Conclusion

In the ICT age it becomes a useless exercise to focus on neighbourhoods, because the place where one lives is not important anymore



# Transnationalism and minorities

*“We can no longer assume that minority ethnic families are a localized unit, set on a trajectory of assimilation into the nation state in which they are living.*

*Rather, families are increasingly likely to maintain transnational connections, which complicate the link between place of residence and ideas of local and national belonging”*

(Phillips 2007, p. 1142)



# Transnationalism and minorities

*“... contemporary migrants participate simultaneously in different spheres of life in the areas of both origin and destination at multiple geographical scales, and (that) they identify with and are able to hold multiple allegiances – to territories, ethnic religious communities, and families across national borders”*  
(Ehrkamp & Leitner 2006, p. 1593)





# Transnationalism and minorities

## Conclusion

Research into segregation and concentration might indicate that minority ethnic groups more and more segregate in particular urban areas.

But the relevance of this result disappears when we take the wide activity patterns of members of this group into account.



# Transnationalism and the rich

- British expatriates (Beaverstock)
- Gentrifying neighbourhoods as translocal spaces (Rofe)



# Transnationalism and the rich

## Conclusion

If activity patterns of people are so widespread and if the local is only one aspect of the lives of individuals, the relevance of the neighbourhood may be seen as not more than a starting point for research



# In addition...

- Research into restructuring areas indicates that there is not much contact (Atkinson, Briggs, Bolt, Kintrea, Van Kempen, Kleinhans, etc.)
- Maybe places within the neighbourhood are more crucial than than neighbourhoods themselves (Phillips)
- The importance of work
- The importance of school
- The importance of the home (children's geography)



# An idea?

*“The time may be coming for research into ethnic segregation to shift its gaze to incorporate spheres of interaction (e.g. work, virtual spaces and social networks) that transcend residential space”*

(Phillips 2007, p. 1153)



# The same idea...

*“Focusing on just one socio-geographical space exclusively very much ignores the potential moderating effects brought by the exposure to other population groups in other relevant spaces”*

(Wong and Shaw 2010)



# And again...

*“... we have to be much more careful in thinking how ‘context’ should be measured and move towards a more flexible and fluid approach to exposure assessment”*

(Cummins et al. 2007, p. 1830).



# In the end: a simple idea

- People do have their residence, but also elsewhere they are exposed to other groups (Wong and Shaw 2010; Newsome et al. 1998).
- People maintain their ties not only by face-to-face contacts in the street, but also by phoning, writing, driving, railroading, transiting and flying (Wellman 2001) and of course by using ICT.
- Thus a focus on the place of residence alone is too narrow to find out how people's lives actually are organized and where the contact opportunities and actual contacts do take place.
- Effects on (e.g.) social mobility can only partially been found in the neighbourhood.







# Thanks for your attention

Ronald van Kempen  
Utrecht University  
The Netherlands

[R.vankempen@geo.uu.nl](mailto:R.vankempen@geo.uu.nl)