Neighbouring the different: Social interaction in a Warsaw subarea

Ewa Korcelli-Olejniczak [1, CDFMR] **Filip Piotrowski** [2, CDFMRP]

Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization , Twarda 51/55, 00-818 Warsaw, Poland; [1]e-mail: eko@twarda.pan.pl (*corresponding author*); [2]e-mail: piotrowskif@twarda.pan.pl

Abstract. In the paper patterns of social interaction are examined, as shaped by an inflow of new residents to an inner-city subarea characterized by a low socio-economic status and featuring ethnic homogeneity. The empirical material is derived from a set of semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors with the area's inhabitants, and with representatives of local governance arrangement and initiatives. The analysis is based on the concepts of social hyper-diversity, social networks, the concept of place and the research on gentrification. Sub-categories of residents are distinguished by referring to both functional and emotional types of social relations they enter into. The findings point at the formation of networks of integrative nature, mostly such that are supported by the use of common urban space, across the social categories identified, but also to limits and obstacles to social integration, both general and those specific to the case study area.

Contents:

1. Introduction

Contemporary cities are the main arenas of social change where international migration, intense spatial mobility and changing lifestyles present a challenge to the sustainability of what is traditionally understood under the notion of community in the sense of Tönnies' '*Gemeinschaft*' (Tönnies, 1887). The paper focuses on evolving patterns of social relations as observed in Praga Północ – a Warsaw inner-city district that is undergoing social diversification attributed to social upgrading – an early-stage gentrification, but also an inflow of less affluent people, including ethnic minority members.

Social interaction in the area is mainly determined by socio-economic, demographic, as well as lifestyle diversity presenting a challenge to social cohesion and community integration. The socio-economic context in which these processes are embedded, related to the systemic change in East and Central Europe, defines their specificity (Kovacs, 1998; Węcławowicz, 2004; Kovacs et al. 2013; Korcelli-Olejniczak, Piotrowski, 2017; Korcelli-Olejniczak et al., 2017).

Although there is a rich body of literature on the relations between ethnic diversity and social capital (Alesina, Ferrara 2002; Putnam, 2007) or social cohesion (Letki, 2008), the links between social diversification and the evolving local identity or place attachment have received relatively limited interest (Riger, Lavrakas, 1981; Dekker, 2007; Pinkster et al., 2014). This gap is still more pronounced in the case of the post-socialist city.

In an attempt to address this problem, this paper aims at the identification of patterns of local social interaction in a Warsaw inner-city subarea, one that is exposed to the phenomenon of social diversification. The main research question pertains to the interdependence between the area's social change and indications of community integration. We ask whether the ties and the networks identified (Granovetter, 1973, Larsen et al., 2005; Middleton et al., 2005) constitute a suitable background for integration and social cohesion within the area (Hickman et al., 2008), whether the newcomers tend to form territorially and socially isolated enclaves, as documented in the literature on gentrification processes (Butler, 2003; Jackson, Butler, 2014), or, alternative-

ly, whether there is an indication of links developed across the different social groups.

The paper consists of five sections. The introduction is followed by the presentation of the conceptual background and methods on the basis of which the data have been collected (section two). Section three depicts Praga Północ as the case study area, while section four, referring to the specificity of the area, discusses social groups which were distinguished in the research as carried out in the district within the framework of the EU 7 FP DIVERCITIES project. Special focus is put on the interaction between the groups selected and the social networks they establish in the neighbourhood. In the final section conclusions are made pertaining to the aims of the paper.

2. Conceptual background and methods

The discussion concerning social networks focusses on categories of social ties (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, Wortley, 1990) and on social network types and quality, with a distinction made between bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Gitell, Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001; Middleton et al., 2005). Social ties feature strong, weak and absent ties referring to relationships between individuals within a community. Whereas strong ties are typically established between family members and friends, weak ties are characteristic for relations between acquaintances, professional contacts, etc. In addition to these, the category of absent ties refers to situations in which physical proximity is not accompanied by a particular social interaction. The bonding social capital refers to relationships within homogeneous networks. On the contrary, the bridging capital emerges in diverse communities which are internally differentiated according to socio-economic status, ethnicity, age or lifestyles. The linking social capital is a measure of contacts which community members establish with public and private actors.

In contemporary cities, social relations are exposed to the phenomenon of hyper-diversity. The latter notion indicates that urban communities are not only diversified in terms of ethnic, demographic and socio-economic status, but also with regard

to different lifestyles, values and attitudes (Tasan-Kok et al., 2014) which are superimposed upon the traditional division lines. These trends can be observed in the post-socialist city context, while they are typically accompanied by a relatively low degree of ethnic diversification. Hence, the applicability of the term hyper-diversity in research on post-socialist cities is rather limited. When studying social networks in a post-socialist city, however, such traits as delayed change in the domain of social practices and structures (Sykora, Bouzarovski, 2011) or the underdeveloped relations based on trust and reciprocity (Tölle, 2014) need to be considered.

It is often claimed that in a socially diversified area, bonds between individuals and groups weaken and the physical rootedness becomes less evident (Gusfeld, 1975; Badyina, Golubchikov, 2005), while community engagement decreases (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, the concept of place is reflected upon here as it refers to the questions of community, local identity and the appearance of local attachment (Tuan, 1977; Crow, Allen, 1994; Corcoran, 2002). As Tuan argues, space becomes place while getting familiarized, when values are assigned to it, when it receives meaning. It might not be territorially fixed, but it has to have an identity. In the present-day city, where networks of functional interactions and nameless forces interconnect different spaces (Jałowiecki, 2010), the human need for embeddedness and local identity is still evident. A sense of emotional attachment (Lewicka, 2008) often provides psychological balance, supports the feeling of belonging and adjustment (Dekker, 2007), allows one to preserve individual identity (Hay, 1998) in an era of value 'liquidity' (Bauman, 2000), and may constitute a facilitator of involvement in local activities (Vorkin, Riese, 2001; Brown et al., 2004; Korcelli-Olejniczak, 2014) while developing ties to the new area of residence.

Out of the large body of literature devoted to urban gentrification phenomena (see, for example: Glass, 1964; Van Kempen, Van Weesep, 1994; Van Weesep, 1994; Butler, 2003; Lees et al., 2008), three aspects seem to be of special relevance. The first concerns the identity and the role of gentrifiers, the second, the relations between the demand and the supply-driven gentrification and the third, the phases or stages of the gentrification process. Gentrifiers are usually identified with members of

the so-called urban middle-class (Smith, 1987), the core consisting of the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), although some researchers expand this notion to include other dimensions of diversity, such as gender (Rose, 1984), sexual orientation (Castells, 1983; Rothenberg, 1995) or ethnicity (Taylor, 2003; Pattillo, 2007). The genesis of gentrification is usually sought either in the sphere of supply and production (Smith, 1970) or demand and consumption (Ley, 1983). It seems, however, that in most cases both aspects play a certain role and are often related to the specific phase of gentrification. In the literature, three to four stages of gentrification are identified (DeGiovanni, 1983; Caulfield, 1994). They are related to specific sub-types of individuals and groups settling in areas, and factors that attract them to an area.

The paper draws on the above concepts while investigating the process of early-stage gentrification as it takes place in the district of Praga Północ in Warsaw. The groups introduced *a priori* to the study, i.e., new and old residents (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Elias, Scotson, 1994; Butler, 2003), as well as some qualitative subgroups identified in the course of the analysis and constituting its outcome: *ex-territorials* (Pinkster et al., 2014), *parents* (Ouředníček et al., 2012), *dog-owners* (Wood et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2010) or *students* (Smith, 2005) were *related* to in the literature by other authors and applied in an analogous or moderately different meaning. The general structure of this typology, however, including the identification of the subgroups among *new residents*, as well as the distinction made between *functional relations* and *emotional perception of and relation to the area of residence* are outcomes of the present analysis. The latter is related to the behavioural and emotional aspects of interaction between humans and space which create a feeling of belonging and identity (Altman, Low, 1992; Forrest, Kearns, 1999). With respect to behavioural interaction, the perception of the functional aspects and the types of activities undertaken are considered in the analysis, whereas regarding emotional interaction, relation to place and the meaning of places are investigated.

The *a priori* distinction introduced between the groups of *old* and *new residents* is based exclusively on the length of residence, where the *old residents* are those who have lived in the area at least

since 1989 and/or are off-springs of such residents. The empirical section is based on a qualitative study undertaken within the DIVERCITIES project. The research was conducted in the district of Praga Północ in Warsaw. The survey study was based on semi-structured interviews with fifty residents of Praga Północ and was carried out in the period of September–December 2015. A snowball approach was adopted for the study. In order to select a possibly wide range of individuals, multiple entry points into the local community were used. At the same time, the key aim was to sustain balance in terms of the number of old and new residents. The purposive sample included representatives of both groups which were chosen so as to be diverse in terms of age, gender, level of education, income and family status. Ethnicity was an additional criterion, though only scarcely represented in the sample due to considerable ethnic homogeneity of the area under investigation. The interviews with the residents of Praga were analysed using the NVIVO software.

3. Praga Północ – the case study area

The analysis focuses on the old part of Praga Północ, one of 18 administrative units of Warsaw (Fig 1). The area is characterized by intense social problems, unemployment (150% of Warsaw's average), and the largest share of population on welfare benefits at city level. Culturally and socially diverse in the pre-war period, the area was intentionally excluded by the city authorities under socialism and had degraded into what Musil (2005) refers to as 'historic slums'. Over the years, Praga has succeeded in maintaining its local specificity—a provincial, slightly outdated atmosphere. Currently, it is undergoing social upgrading, or early-stage gentrification, associated with an influx of pioneer population groups, such as artists, students and younger people in general. The new residents of Praga play a diversified role in terms of community integration. A distinctly positive function can be prescribed to artists as local activists and integrators.

Owing to the availability of low-cost premises, Praga also attracts some rather non-affluent members of ethnic minorities who chose to live in the area. These are essentially migrants from post-Sovi-
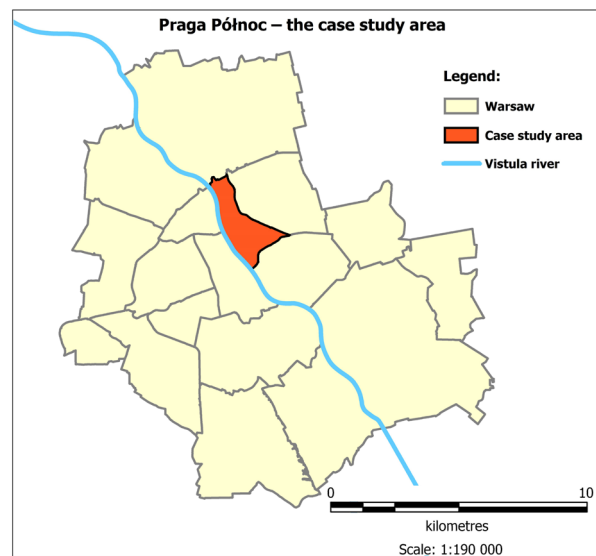

Fig. 1. Praga Północ – the case study area
Source: Developed by the authors

et countries: Russians, Ukrainians, Chechens, Azerbaijanis, but also some from the Balkan region and southern Asia. Due to its social problems, but also unique development potential, Praga has recently gained interest on the part of city authorities and has been subject to public and private investments, as well as urban revitalization programs that aim at the modernization and extension of both the technical and the social infrastructure.

4. Population groups in Praga Północ

As indicated earlier, the process of social diversification in Praga Północ, one of Warsaw's 18 administrative districts, is generated predominately by internal migration, residential mobility and the related gentrification process. Therefore, in order to capture the relevant diversity dimensions, the 'length of residence in the area' was chosen as the initial selection criterion. The two key qualitative groups introduced – the *old residents* and the *new residents* relate to classifications and distinctions already applied in research (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Elias, Scotson, 1994; Butler, 2003). Apart from the length of residence in the district, we found that the two groups usually differ from each other with respect to the level of cultural capital, values, lifestyles, reflected by the sense of belonging to the place of residence, the feeling of attachment and a

shared set of values, referred to as "*unwritten rules*" concerning mutual relations. The *old residents* tend to develop strong bonds within homogenous social networks, based on tradition, local identity and mistrust towards strangers, especially new residents. As expressed by a representative of this group, the mistrust is associated with the fear of change and danger with respect to the established and familiar world: "*These new people, they have money coming from who knows where. You cannot simply afford a 100-sq. m flat when you are twenty something*", says an elderly woman. *Old residents* recall the social and moral status of pre-war Praga, the feeling of community belonging and the sense of place (Fig 2). The recent inflow of newcomers is seen to bring moral decay and a change of social values to a much greater extent than the 'socialist period' which, in the *old residents'* opinion was mainly responsible for physical degradation.

The *new residents,* though in general referred to as gentrifiers, are a diversified group in terms of basic demographic and socio-economic indicators, as well with respect to local integration patterns. *New residents* develop bridging social networks in terms of age, family status, profession or nationality, but usually maintain contacts with people of similar educational and socio-economic status. According to the way they function within their neighbourhood, four general subgroups can be distinguished. Analogous subgroups and roles have been identified by other authors: *the engaged, the alienated (*or lonely, isolated, see: Middleton et al., 2005), *students*

Fig 2. The old residents' familiar world
Author: Filip Piotrowski

(Smith, 2005), and the *ex-territorials* (compare: Pinkster et al., 2014).

The engaged are people involved in the problems of their surroundings and develop a specific kind of belonging. This makes them the most place-adjusted out of all *new residents*. Their place awareness, local engagement and the need to act for the sake of the neighbourhood makes the above group differ substantially from three other subgroups. The most distinct among those are artists and members of NGOs focused on supporting social inclusion. Conversely, *the alienated* are people who feel isolated and insecure (Middleton et al., 2005). The *ex-territorials*, as illustrated by evidence in other cities (see for example: Pinkster, 2014), are those who develop practically no physical or social relations within the neighbourhood. Some of them live a life within gated residential estates, drive their children to schools and work outside the district. They consider the area to be stigmatized—deprived, poor and uninteresting in general. In the interviews given, the representatives of this group focus on the intended temporary character of their residence: "*We have nothing in common with this place*". Against other categories, *students* are spatially more mobile, often treat Praga as a temporary place, where they rent inexpensive flats.

Although *old residents* also differ in terms of well-being or education, they are generally a more homogeneous group with respect to local integration patterns. Their sense of belonging to the area of residence and strong ties among family members and friends make them an integrated group, though with a diverse attitude toward newcomers. It can be generally characterized as prevailing distrust or disinterest, but there are also examples of openness and friendliness *vis-à-vis new residents* or the expressions of 'otherness'.

4.1. Between the *old* and the *new residents*

The occupation of a single area by two diverging population groups: *the new* and *the old residents* features a divide concerning mutual relations, the development of local identity and physical rootedness. While sharing physical space and infrastructure, the two groups differ with respect to ways of perceiving and using these resources and facilities. Although

not to an extent as that identified by Butler (2003) in his study, the low level of trust is in some cases manifested by the physical fencing of residential buildings occupied by *new residents*, when people of higher economic status see positive aspects of being cut off from public space and the diversity outside. Other *new residents* feel simply indifferent toward socializing with their neighbours (see: Pinkster et al., 2014). The routes of everyday activities seem to cross with those of the *old residents* without extreme conflicts as, at first sight, the relations are characterized by disinterest rather than antagonism, a lack of understanding rather than rejection.

While the representatives of both groups treat each other as strangers, the process of becoming neighbours (Sandercock, 2000) in the social dimension is much more complicated than just physical proximity. The *old residents* show more distrust towards newcomers, and fear of what they bring. On the other hand, they feel more integrated as a group, which also finds a reflection in a specific social solidarity (Goodhart, 2004), and the relation to the place where they live. This is noted by more recent residents: "*A guy was elected to the district council from our building. He has a criminal past, but he got elected as he is from here. The community has decided that he would have influence on things, a native Praga boy with muscles and a 'rich' vocabulary*", says a middle-aged woman, a *new resident*.

The *old residents* perceive the newcomers as not 'assimilated' yet, which means that what they expect from anybody moving into their neighbourhood is to comply with local social rules. *Old residents* often misunderstand the behaviour of the newcomers as it is different from their own. An elderly woman expresses this in an interview: "*the people who have lived here for years have somehow consolidated, developed a feeling of attachment (…), the behaviour of those new people is still questionable*". A natural feature of old Praga, according to *old residents*, and some more established in-migrants, is the area's lack of anonymity, i.e., the way people address their neighbours or even unknown people in the streets: "*Praga*", says a local artist, resident for over 20 years, "*Praga, cultivates its good traditions. Even if you meet someone in the street here whom you don't know, you say hello*". It is often pointed to in the interviews that people who have recently moved into the district don't respect these rules. The dis-

tinct difference in social behaviour compared to other parts of Warsaw is pronouncedly illustrated by a *new resident*: "*if someone in Praga doesn't say hello to a neighbour, this means he or she has a reason. Just in contrast to other anonymous places in the city where people need to have a reason to say hello*".

The above has an effect on social networks established by the two groups – the *old residents* create bonds and maintain deeper relations with neighbours and family; the *new residents* with weak ties that connect "*acquaintances, not friends*" (Granovetter, 1973), establish bridging networks usually including diverse representatives of the group and outside the place of residence.

4.2. Cross-cutting groups as unaware integrators

The findings presented in this section show that there are some aware integrators among the inhabitants of the study area, who are mainly *new residents* described as *the engaged*. The analysis conducted has also allowed us to identify various qualitative groups of inhabitants that form the framework for the development of bridging networks. The latter are directly based on functional relations among people or, indirectly, on the attitude towards the area of residence which is often a source of place attachment. We relate to these groups as cross-cutting groups, which include both *old* and *new residents* and assume that they play the role of unaware local integrators. The groups referred to are: *parents*, *active retirees*, *dog owners* and *wanderers*.

Parents' neighbourhood perception is typically connected with daily activities concerning childcare, the everyday way to school and kindergarten, after-school activities, parks and playgrounds. The following statements are characteristic: "*The trip we make to school every day draws the boundaries of my neighbourhood*" (woman in her 40s), "*My neighbourhood is the playgrounds I visit with my kids here nearby, I go to the Praski park, we use the space from here to the railway tracks*" (man in his late 30s). Next to performing other daily activities, they stress that their role as *parents* is more related to the neighbourhood than other roles and activities. Their most frequent space of encounter is in playgrounds, where both *new* and *old residents* meet.

Active retirees are people who spend most of their time in the vicinity of their homes—mainly in parks and shops nearby. It is where they meet other people. In their perception, the neighbourhood is smaller than that of younger persons: *"I walk through the park when I go to my daughter's café. This route is my neighbourhood"* (woman in her late 50s). *Active retirees* usually develop strong ties within networks comprised of family, neighbours and friends. Due to their activities, interests and time capacity, however, they are also open to other people.

Dog owners are people who share a specific perception of their neighbourhood, seen from the perspective of walking their dogs. They represent different social categories but highlight the role of the place of residence. They refer to the boundaries of their neighbourhood, the people they meet and places they visit, which seems a socially integrative activity: *"I would call my neighbourhood the dog route, thanks to my dog, I learn to know Praga, the closest areas, the people and the areas with nicer architecture a bit further away"*, says a young woman who recently moved to Praga.

Wanderers are not a homogeneous group. Two subgroups are especially relevant here. The first comprises middle-aged or elderly people who have a lot of free time or walk around the neighbourhood for health reasons. These are typically *old residents* who know the district well or such that have moved back to their childhood area after a long time of absence. Their motives are the desire to be active or do anything: *"I am a walking type, I walk all around the place, like a dog, sniffing here and there (…)"*, says a woman in her late 50s. The other group are newer residents, mostly young people who like exploring their neighbourhood. Due to their interest in their area of residence and time devoted to it, *wanderers* develop a specific place attachment.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we present empirical evidence concerning patterns of social interaction in a socio-economically diverse inner-city district of Warsaw. The qualitative study was focused on differences between two general groups, *new* and *old residents*,

considering the dissimilarities between and within the groups, and the way in which inter-group networks are established or otherwise fail to emerge. According to the analysis, the *old residents* are mostly physically rooted and socially bound. The newcomers are much more heterogeneous in this respect. Their activities are spatially more extensive, sometimes ex-territorial.

When analysing the behaviour of the area's residents, we find that the main obstacle to the development of bridging networks by members of various social groups is a different interpretation of sources and foundation of such networks. This is analogous to the way Sandercock (2000) portraits the integration challenge between various ethnic groups - strangers in spite of being neighbours. Still, our findings indicate that some kinds of social ties and networks identified in the study area, including *absent ties* which were defined by Granovetter (2005), are to some extent of integrative nature. Whereas everyday activities, such as child-care or dog walking can bring together people of different origin and socio-economic status, a certain local attachment can also develop via one's own interests and obligations executed locally.

Tendencies toward the emergence of socially and territorially isolated enclaves, the phenomenon considered to be characteristic for areas undergoing the gentrification process, as presented by Butler (2003) and Jackson and Butler (2014), were relatively rarely encountered in the analysis conducted. This seems to be related to the composition of the incoming population which is characteristic for the early stage of the gentrification process. At that stage, as argued by Caulfield (1994), the inflow consists mainly of representatives of the so-called marginal segment of the middle class, people who are attracted by relatively low housing costs and the specific local ambience. Our findings confirm that the inflow to Praga includes some social activists, in particular artists who associate both their personal and professional activities with the area and who play the role of local integrators.

A question can be posed whether the observed patterns of social interaction may lead to community integration in the future. A positive answer can be supported by three arguments. Firstly, the involvement of the aware integrators, i.e., activists, artists and organizations (*the engaged*) builds some

bridging and linking networks in the area. Second-ly, the use of common space, common facilities, as well as mutual interests are a specific resource that may support integration *(active retirees, dog-owners, parents)*. Thirdly, the interest in local space and its tradition, as expressed by both *old* and *new residents* (e.g. *wanderers*) may generate some place attachment which, as put by Corcoran (2002) can constitute a resource to be mobilized in facing present challenges, i.e., the foundation underlying social integration.

We anticipate, however, that what is denoted as social integration symptoms here may be of a transitionary character once the gentrification process enters its later phases dominated by economic factors with a supply-oriented basis. Such basis was seen by Smith (1979) as the main force in the gentrification process. This turn may be signalized by some recent conspicuous real estate investment projects carried out in Praga Północ, as well as an entry of non-residential functions and the consequent transformation of land use patterns. Actually, in Warsaw's downtown area it is already the predominant phenomenon (see: Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz, 2015).

One question that remains open pertains to the variety of factors responsible for the social integration and disintegration patterns as witnessed in diversifying subareas of post-socialist cities. In order to meet this challenge it is required to apply a comparative perspective which would involve areas characterized by different built environment, social composition, as well as various features of the gentrification process.

Acknowledgements

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