



SPATIAL INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE

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INTEGRIM ONLINE PAPERS

1/2014

“The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 316796”

Spatial integration of migrants: a brief overview and critique

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There has been of late a tendency for migration scholarship to address migrant integration in terms of its different fronts rather than as a single and generic process. As multifaceted as the idea of integration is, its study would - it is argued - benefit from paying attention to the various dimensions of the phenomenon and to the multiple areas where integration might be aimed. Thus, we have witnessed an important growth of research strands concerned with (measuring, for the most part) immigrants' integration with regards to the labor market, education, health system, political participation and so on. This partial retreat from a grand narrative of integration may be traced back to the field's critique on the concept of integration *tout court* being overly normative or one-sided (Schinkel 2013).

One of the many kinds of integration which is often referred to is that of spatial integration. Researchers concerned with the spatial aspect of immigrants' integration have mostly investigated migrants' access to housing, residential choices, residential mobility, and, more generally, residential patterns and their effects on migrants' economic opportunities and sociabilities.

It may come as a surprise, though, that despite the spatial integration term's recurrent appearance in many publications and reports, its definition is usually simply assumed or derived from its opposite, that is, the *lack* of spatial integration. Thus, in this line of thought, the formation of immigrant ghettos or the concentration of immigrants in deprived areas of the city, for instance, would mean a lack of spatial integration. But while researchers have relied on this commonsensical perception of what problems related to spatial integration might look like, there has been no theoretical effort to provide the term with a working definition.

Because no comprehensive definition has been given to the concept and also because research on the relationship between residential patterns and social integration has been inconclusive (INTEGRIM 2013; Ruiz-Tagle 2013), the idea of spatial integration has been used in a somewhat vague manner while *space* is usually approached rather as a proxy for socio-economic integration in general in detriment of its materialities and physicalities.

In this paper, I would like to take another approach to the idea of spatial integration. Rather than trying to provide a new frame for studying residential patterns, I challenge here the assumption that whatever it is that we talk about when we talk about spatial integration should be limited to the residential aspects of immigrants' experiences. For the first part, this paper will question the strict focus on residence taken by migration scholarship and the extent to which it proves to be insufficient in the light of contemporary urban dynamics. Secondly, I will briefly present two alternative ways of investigating spatial integration that do not rely on an exclusive focus on residence, namely time geography and the accessibility approach. Finally, I will introduce a third approach based on the notion of practiced space which I believe opens up new avenues for thinking immigrants' spatial integration.

Residence: a stabilizing device or a fixing device?

The existing literature dealing with the perceived lack of spatial integration has consisted of studies concerned with residential patterns and their spatial distribution. These works have focused on the empirical cases of residential segregation or concentration, housing problems, or processes of ghettoization. Beyond the absence of a clear-cut definition of spatial integration, most of these studies rely on a reductionist idea of space where *spatial* means only *residential*.

Evidently, attention to the residential aspect of immigrants' spatiality is not problematic *per se*. Within this scope of analysis, scholarship has called attention to crucial topics such as housing market discrimination, social effects of neighborhoods' ethnic composition, neighborhood effects on immigrants' socioeconomic opportunities among other themes (Miltenburg 2011; Ruiz-Tagle 2013). What I take issue with is the simplification of spatial into residential.

Before any theoretical attempt of definition, let us take a closer look at the idea of spatial integration. It seems consensual to say that what is to be addressed here is the relationship between immigrants and the territories where their social lives take place. What is less evident, though, is why such territories have been traditionally conceived only as the residential territory, that is, the neighborhood.

This residential simplification or bias might be explained in many ways. From social sciences classic privileging of *Gemeinschaft* over *Gesellschaft*; a common tendency in migration

scholarship for groupism, that is, taking immigrants who share a common ethnicity, religion or national affiliation automatically as groups, therefore the ubiquitous presence of the ‘immigrant neighborhood’ unit of analysis (Brubaker 2002); or even an allegedly sedentarist bias in Western thought anchoring and fixing people into bounded definitions of space (Gupta, Ferguson 1992; Sheller, Urry 2006).

For the time being, suffice it to say that it is clear that people’s (of immigrant background or not) spatial presence transcends the limits of the residential area. It has always been so, but perhaps contemporary urban dynamics have made such a reduction an aberration. As Ford timely points out, “residence is a concept that stabilizes, by fiat, a necessarily uneasy relationship between mapped territories and an increasingly mobile and unknowable population” (2001:213).

I believe that the discrepancy between the stabilization provided by the concept of residence and the actual spatial experience people have in everyday life has grown too great to be left uninterrogated. By conflating people’s spatial presence with the residential sphere, scholarship risks presupposing a much more stable and fixed spatial being than the typical urbanite actually is. Take for instance current horizontal expansion of metropolitan areas, growth of surrounding cities, along with spatially widespread distribution of social housing – they all entail an important need (and use) of public transport, extended everyday journeys in the city, just as commuting also increasingly becomes part of immigrants’ daily lives.

The argument here is of a methodological order. If ever, for a number of reasons, the attention to the neighborhood space was justified, the *exclusive* attention to it has dangerously turned residence/neighborhood *from an object of study into the very unit of analysis*. This change from being part of our empirical data to being one of the lenses of our analytical toolkit (Brubaker 2002:165) imposes into the realities studied a preconceived shape which might have been disallowing scholarship to grasp whatever it is that lies beyond the residential setting.

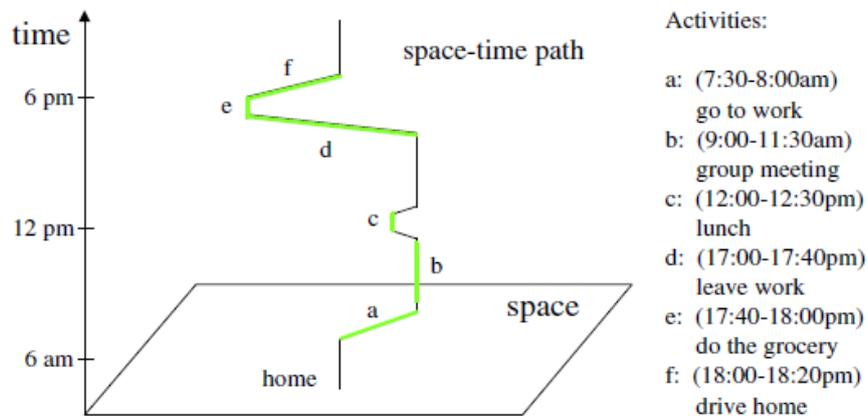
It seems thus paramount to develop a framework of analysis that would not rely on an aprioristic privileging of the residential circumscription, just as it should not privilege any other bounded space in particular, as doing so would only replace one methodological bias for another. As the next section will show, scholarship has advanced alternative modes of grasping the spatiality of city dwellers normally by adding mobility to the spatial equation.

Spatial behavior and access: alternatives to the residential approach

Time geography

Torsten Hägerstrand was not proposing a model for investigating immigrant spatial integration when he first proposed the foundations of time geography in the mid-1960s. As he himself stated, time geography was to be concerned with “the fate of the individual human being in an increasingly complicated environment or, if one prefers, the question of quality of life” (1970:7). By looking at people’s activities and dislocations, Hägerstrand set out to outline the many paths described by individuals within a time-space frame of analysis.

His many detailed accounts of individuals’ movements over time periods were meant to typify people’s spatial behaviors as a way to investigate how constraints of many kinds “determine how paths are channeled or dammed up” (1970:11). These activity-space patterns (see image below) were rapidly appropriated by urban planners and transportation specialists for the valuable information they contained: in collection, they showed where people were at and how long they stayed in specific places.



Source: Chen et al. 2011

As Flowerdew (2004) points out, the study of time constraints shed light on resources’ uneven distribution, which confirmed several hypotheses about spatial behavior based on class and gender differences, for example. Hägerstrand’s approach also called attention for its nuanced accounts of individuals as spatial agents rather than deriving its conclusions from large aggregates of models of mass probabilistic behavior.

Although time geography perspective benefited from not relying on a residentialist blinder and was able to depict individuals' spatial habits regardless of length or distance limitations, I believe it fails to serve as a model for spatial integration analysis for one important reason: the way movement is represented. In a space-time path such as that of the image above, movement – that is, the actual bodily dislocation of persons across the materiality of space – is reduced to a line on a graph. The operation that metamorphoses the complexity of the spatial experience into an abstracted trace simplifies precisely that which is at the center of the spatial integration concern. Therefore, if we are to scrutinize the many ways people engage with space and endow it with the textures of lived experience *in situ*, time geography may hardly function as a working perspective as it is rather interested in the tabulation of people's spatial patterns of activity.

Accessibility approach

For one thing, the notion of accessibility set in motion the classic mode of conceiving immigrants' spatial integration and segregation. If at some point scholarship was interested in examining how deprived or privileged immigrant neighborhoods were in terms of the urban resources and facilities they contained (such as hospitals, social welfare offices, schools, public spaces etc.), the accessibility approach dynamized such research program by assessing the degree of ease in getting from one place to another regardless of their location within or beyond the neighborhood's limits.

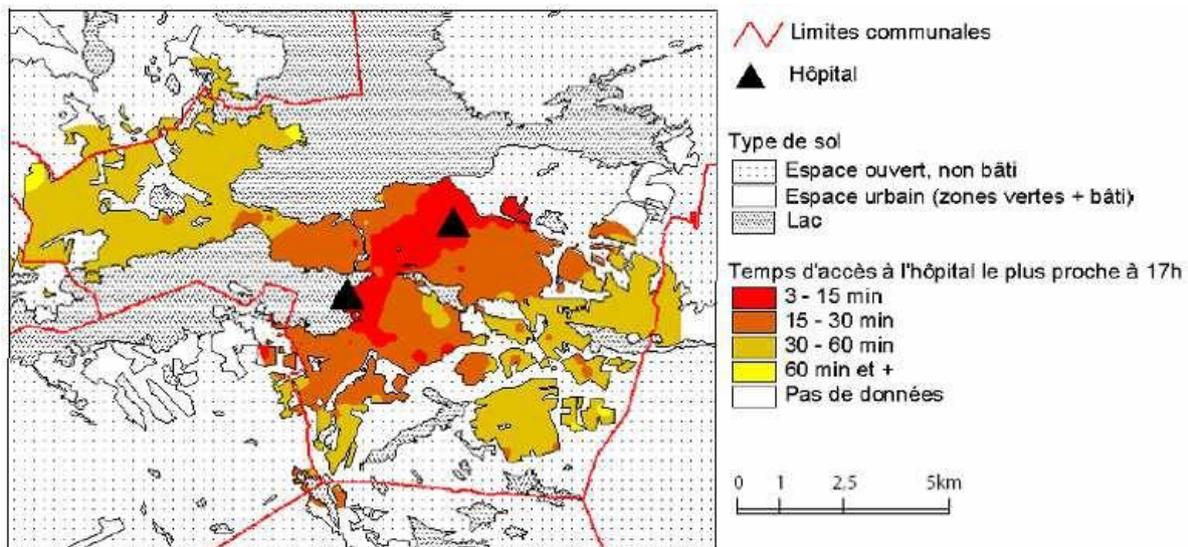
One major drawback the accessibility paradigm sought to overcome was the stationariness subjacent to the study of immigrant neighborhoods. More than limiting its very amplitude of analysis, scholarship's traditional reliance on bounded conceptualizations of space also overestimates the localness of immigrants' spatial forays. It is such tendency that would allow one to denounce a given immigrant neighborhood as disadvantaged for not possessing any hospitals or schools while a neighboring area might have these same facilities within a short walking distance.

As it does not address spatial integration in terms of discrete and bounded locales and the resources they contain, the idea of *access* allows for a less restrictive enquiry concerning dislocations. The recalibration provided by a focus on access has two important advantages. First, it seems much more consistent with contemporary evidence of city dwellers' usages of space. If urban life has come to be so deeply permeated by mobility, and city dwellers –

including immigrants – rely daily on buses, trains, metros, cycling, cars or walking in order to access the workplace, leisure spaces, friends’ and relatives’ and so on, why should research on spatial integration remain so static, communitarian, locally bounded?

A second strength of the accessibility approach is that it brings to the forefront individual migrants as spatial actors. According to Lussault (2000 cited in Asselin et al. 2005:64), “it is important to assess the spatial practices of diverse individuals and to understand how their usages produce spatialities via an approach focused on individuals’ roles in situations and their values”. It is only by taking immigrants as full actors in the production of space rather than as ‘subjects’ of public policy that scholarship may move beyond descriptions of behaviors fitting into categories of international migration to a more experiential examination of the daily and concrete aspects of immigrants’ lives (Asselin et al. 2005:56).

The image below provides an example of how accessibility may be measured and interpreted. The map indicates the amount of time necessary to access a hospital by bus at 5 p.m. in Tampere, Finland. As reported by Asselin et al. (2005:71), the choice was voluntarily limited to only one service, hospitals, considered a service of basic necessity just as the type of transportation selected, buses, is taken as the most accessible in terms of cost and usage restrictions.



Source: Asselin et al. 2004

A possible conclusion we can draw from the map above is that accessibility is not necessarily related to distance. There are, for instance, a number of areas in the city (red-colored small spots) from which one would take less time to reach any of the two hospitals than if one would depart from areas which are geographically closer to them. This might be due to many variables such as the topography of the city, the structure and frequency of the transport network, or even the existence of traffic jams in specific parts of the city.

This conclusion is important in the sense that it reveals another dimension of urban segregation, one that does not refer to residing geographically far away, but of lacking accessibility to urban resources. In modern cities where “the spatial distribution of urban resources is increasingly unequal, (...) mobility becomes increasingly a filter for access them” (Asselin et al. 2005:58). The discriminatory character of spatial mobility is thus better assessed if mobility itself is considered as a *resource* and, as such, not equally distributed among all kinds of groups.

The proponents of the accessibility approach defend that it is necessary to consider other modes of transport (such as cars, metros, trains) and to extend the analysis to other place-specific resources such as schools, commercial centers, public areas and so on. By taking into account the location of essential urban resources in general, it is argued that scholarship would be able to identify the extent to which migrants provide themselves with access to these resources and also how a lack of access to mobility may result in spatial and social exclusion.

Notwithstanding its valuable contribution to the study of urban segregation and exclusion, I believe the accessibility approach is based upon certain premises that limit its reach as a form of addressing immigrants’ spatial integration. A first critique can be raised in terms of the choice of urban resources serving as destination. Consider the hospital example. Although it is evident that it is a service of basic necessity, how often do people actually go to hospitals? Or to social welfare offices? Or shopping malls? How representative of everyday dislocations are the trajectories to *place-specific* resources? The problem, I believe, is not resolved by expanding or improving the list of destinations. Every choice of places will be, to a certain degree, an arbitrary choice. Even if we decide to measure one individual’s everyday mobilities, any given list of destinations may obscure the many mobilities which are not prefigured; places one discovers while going somewhere else; or even resources which are not

place-specific but play an important role in (leisure) mobilities such as restaurants, friends', relatives', cinemas and so forth.

A second critique refers to the measuring of mobility. Such measurement implies a starting place, a trajectory and a destination. Mobility, therefore, is employed as a means to an end. As Asselin et al. (2005:70) state, it is assumed that an individual leaves one location in order to access another. In this regard, displacement is considered either in terms of the physical distance, time spent, or cost of transportation required to fulfil a planned journey. What is at stake here is that framing mobility in such terms subsumes a normative underlying logic: the less distance/time/money spent, the better. In what it is a cost, a disutility, travel *should* thus be minimized.

A lot may be argued about how limiting it is for scholarship to adopt such a utilitarian approach towards human mobility. A major risk is assuming that city dwellers are – or should be – ‘rational-mobile persons’, a figure invented by transport geography who was seen to make economic-based decisions about when and how to move in accordance with the ‘least net effort’ principle (Cresswell, Merriman 2010:2). I believe that such a framework is not the most adequate for the study of immigrants’ spatial integration not because I suppose that people do not think of travel as utility but because, among other reasons, such a model loses sight of all those mobilities which do not obey the ‘least net effort’ principle. As I try to demonstrate in the next section, the idea of spatial integration cannot be limited by an aprioristic organizing principle but should rather delve into the many forms immigrants engage with practiced urban spaces.

Space as it is practiced

Spatial integration has to do with people’s complex relationship with space. It consists of the many ways situatedness is experienced, the legibility of places is constructed, pathways are forged, and routines come to endow places with a sense of coherence, defining networks of practical territories, places of interest, a web of familiar and unfamiliar spaces (Mar 2002). Perhaps the best way to claim for an alternative approach towards immigrants’ spatial integration is by defining its perspective, the standpoint from which we are to look at it.

Bruno Latour once wrote that “most of what we call ‘abstraction’ is in practice the belief that a written inscription must be believed more than any contrary indications from the senses”

(1990:51). If scientific knowledge always involves a certain degree of abstraction, we might as well say that some approaches require more abstraction than others. Time geography abstracts the movement of individual bodies throughout the materialities and physicalities of space into a thin line on a graph; the accessibility approach manages to condense topographical characteristics, distances, people's pace, speed of transportation into units of time (or money). By looking at peoples' movements as reversible lines in a time-space profile or by breaking movement into quantifiable homogeneous units, mobility is represented as being looked down upon from above.

I hold that our study of immigrants' spatial integration would benefit from a change of perspective, less abstracted, more experiential. Human movement from point A to point B is much less a projected line on a one-dimensional surface than the experience of a journey made, "a bodily movement from one place to the other and the gradually changing of vistas along the route" (Ingold 1993:154). The perspective 'from the ground' is not one which rejects the cartographer's panoramic view, but one that embodies an ongoing relationship between a planned, readable city and the many uses to which it is put, the ways its spaces are used, practiced, experienced (Certeau 1984; Ingold 1993).

Evidently, the appraisal for a more experiential approach to the study of human (spatial) practices is not new (see, for instance, Tuan 1974, Certeau 1984, Zukin 1991). Nevertheless, I believe it reveals an unexplored potential regarding the study of immigrants' spatial integration. Such a change of perspective would imply two important implications in terms of how we conceptualize space and mobility.

First, we would pass *from a model anchored into residential settings to one concerned with people's spatial practices*. As Magnani (2002) remarked when conducting a series of urban ethnographies in São Paulo, the only spatial unit of analysis consistent with ethnographic research is that which the social actors whose behaviors we try to understand experience and recognize as meaningful – therefore his claim for scholarship to refrain from simply 'applying' into the field *a priori* units of space (whether it is the city as a totality, the neighborhood, the street and so forth).

We can also find a similar standpoint in phenomenological perspectives such as that undertaken by Seamon (1979) in his study of the many engagements people entertain with their local environments. Borrowing from Spiegelberg (1971:656 cited in Seamon 1979:17),

he argues that phenomenology “bids us to turn toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical pattern in front of them”.

Although my argument is not precisely phenomenological, I believe that approaching individuals’ mobilities in terms of practiced space is more coherent with the very ways people experience space. As Felski points out, “we experience space not according to the distanced gaze of the cartographer, but in circles of increasing proximity or distance from the experiencing self” (1999:22). This way of framing spatial practices brings to the fore the extent to which the practice of space is embodied (the ‘experiencing self’) and thus varies from person to person, and according to their distinctive subject positions.

A second major implication to the study of spatial integration refers to the way we address mobility practices. What is at stake here is that we *open the black box of mobility and examine the ways it informs individuals’ experiences of the social and physical environment*. As Sheller and Urry (2006) argue, we need to overcome the infertile distinction between ‘travel’ and ‘activity’ which implies that all journeys are means to the accomplishment of an activity and, therefore, are either a cost (of time and money) to be minimized or simply unworthy of attention, dead time.

The new mobilities literature has indeed contributed to unveiling the complexity entailed in (urban) spatial practices (see Sheller, Urry 2006; Cresswell, Merriman 2010). If at some point transport geography could not but relegate to footnotes the supposedly ‘irrational’ mobility behavior of those who drive for the pleasure of driving, or those who prefer itineraries along which one appreciates the view over the shortest way, now the growing body of mobility studies looks at human movement as a phenomenon in its own right.

An important contribution from mobilities literature has been to ask ‘exactly what happens *on the move*’ (Cresswell, Merriman 2010). By investigating mobility as an activity in itself, scholarship has been able to grasp the manifold material and sociable dwelling-in-motion to which they give rise, including their own ‘itinerant places’ (such as cars, buses, trains etc.) and their specific kinds of activities and sociabilities (see Augé 1986 regarding the specific forms of interaction in the Parisian metro network).

Conclusion: towards a working-concept of spatial integration

But how can we operationalize such approach as we set out to address immigrants' spatial integration? What kinds of knowledge are enabled and which objects of study are authorized when spatial integration is conceived in terms of migrants' spatial practices?

The answer I propose to the previous questions is a working-definition of spatial integration that allows us to examine individuals' spatial incursions in a very practical perspective. I suggest we think of spatial integration *as the development and maintenance of relations of use and knowledge over the practiced space*.

Why is this definition a practical one? In the first place, because it refers to the spaces one frequents, one occupies, one knows how to get to. It relates to the practices and usages spatial actors establish with certain places but also with the itineraries and trajectories described. For most people, going from point A to point B involves more than knowing where they are both located; it also requires people to draw on certain practical knowledges such as public transport schedule, frequency and accessibility; the preferable times for travel (privileging off-peak hours); which zones are to be avoided (for security reasons, discrimination, or simply due to steep relief) and so on.

Beyond that, the present definition of spatial integration enables us to enquire migrants not only about the places they frequent (like work, school or their houses) but also about places they have never been to but know about and could possibly access. Such spatial knowledge may seem a minor topic, but I am convinced it plays an important role in the ways migrants come to feel 'integrated' to their host cities. This is precisely the kind of competence which can only be acquired by an active practice of space – a work of inhabitation – and is exactly the one kind missing when a migrant has newly arrived.

It is evident by now that the proposed way of addressing spatial integration may only be conceived as an ethnography. But not *any* ethnography. It does not suffice to undertake participant observation at selected 'stopping points' such as the workplace, house, or leisure spaces. It seems crucial to engage in some sort of mobile ethnography of 'what happens on the move' (Cresswell, Merriman 2010:4). It is only through mobility that one may build a 'sense of place'. And it is by engaging with locality – materially, symbolically, and corporeally –, that migrants not only comply with everyday life mundane requirements (such as traversing the city for a job interview, spending time on the bus after a hard day's work, or window shopping on the weekends) but also form a sense of place of their own so that the very urban space gradually becomes legible and familiar (Buhr 2013).

Finally, I would like to point out two interesting analytical advantages entailed in the use of the present working-concept of spatial integration. While the accessibility approach posits segregation as the lack of accessibility to urban resources, a perspective based on practiced space is able to look at segregation also in terms of spatial knowledge: not only about *not* knowing (or not having access to knowledge) regarding a given urban resource, but also about consciously avoiding certain places where migrants know they will be discriminated against even when those are technically accessible.

Another usefulness of the present approach is that it allows scholarship to examine migrants' spatial presence beyond more recurrent spaces such as the neighborhood or the workplace so to also encompass the extent to which the deployment of practical abilities such as spatial confidence and wayfinding may enable migrants' fruition of alternative city spaces.

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