

Hypotheses of the (PhD) dissertation

**Family and neighbourhood in Budapest's  
„Magdolna” district**

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# 1 Description of the research

The methodologically fairly mature notion of segregation in the social sciences traditionally - or 'paradigmatically' even - has belonged to the field of urban structures. The concept of segregation in the sociological terminology was originally created by Ernest Burgess, the key figure of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology. Burgess expanded Robert Park's concentric zone model further, claiming that specific residential areas can also be distinguished to further zones: being substantially different from their surroundings both in terms of their architectural-urban features as well as the sociological composition of their inhabitants (Park - Burgess 1984). Therefore, this concept supplements classical stratification theories with the observation that belonging to social groups and classes also appears in the spatial structures of settlements.

However, the notion of segregation has another connotation of a predominantly human rights nature. Recently, this has become just as relevant in the literature as that of the urban sociological interpretation. Martin Luther King - and many representatives of the human rights movements - used the notion of segregation as a synonym for discrimination. It is no coincidence that the civil rights movements of the African Americans chose "No more segregation!" as their slogan, defining demands of the movement.

These two different connotations of segregation have somewhat blended in the Hungarian sociological and anthropological literature in the past years. In the course of examining residential areas, the descriptions of the elite living spaces - that of 'cadre colonies' and 'rural *Rózsadombs* (wealthy areas)' - have basically vanished from urban sociological researches. Similarly, we know little about working-class areas, settlements with Rascian or Swabian majorities, and the red-light districts exiled from Józsefváros. 'Segregated area' has become the common definition of the newly appeared 'gypsy settlements' and poverty areas formed during modern urban development.

This use of terminology defines the geographical borders of the respective segregated areas using the methodological tools developed upon the Burgess' traditions. It has been widely accepted to describe these geographical settlements as a place of discrimination against Romani people, as well as exhibiting ghetto-like characteristics. These implicitly added features have become the so-called segregational characteristics beyond the actual sociological character of the inhabitants of the settlements and settlement-like areas.

The basic question of the present dissertation is whether the segregated areas determined on the basis of urban sociology and stratification theory function as ghettos surrounded by figurative or real walls. Do traditional dimensions of the discrimination overlap with the borders of segregation and does social exclusion translate social inequalities to geographical terms? In other words, I seeked answer whether segregated areas serve only as places of residence (where people live and sleep) or are the inhabitants discriminatively 'locked' into these areas throughout their lives.

Research on human networks seemed to be the most adequate tool to decide whether the segregated areas are indeed 'locked-down' ghettos. Should the borders of human relationship networks overlap with the boundaries of the segregated areas, the ghetto-like characteristics of the respective settlements would be confirmed. If, on the other hand, a significant proportion of the relations extend beyond geographical boundaries, all this can be interpreted as a fact refuting the ghetto nature.

Examining the physical changes of place and commute could also serve as a method of determining whether the ghetto-like characteristics apply. If it can be proved that the inhabitants move (purchase, court, marry, apply for jobs, etc.) mainly within the physical boundaries of the segregated area that would be a proof for the ghetto-like nature. On the other hand, if daily movements and life events transcend geographical boundaries, segregation in the Burgess sense adequately describes the social phenomenon, but the segregationist notions of their ghetto-nature should be nuanced.

In the case of poor families concentrated in street groups and tenement groups, the disproportional shift of formal and informal relations and the fact that they are outside the institutionalised world seem to be the most important factor of inequality instead of physical isolation. For the strata excluded from the official world, instead of literacy and contractual transactions, customs and human bonds serve the purposes of the institutions. Thus, in addition to mapping movements and mobilities, I also examine the impact of the human networks on income generation and management, as well as consumption habits.

While within the Magdolna district it is possible to determine the groups of tenements and streets that are separated from other areas of Józsefváros based on their real estate market value and social composition, the practical question of the research is whether the district as a

whole can be considered segregated. In the colloquial language - as well as some of the scientific papers - the Magdolna district appears as a 'symbolic ghetto' (György, 2009, 2012) but is it safe to assume that its inhabitants live in a '*space locked down both from the inside and the outside*'? We should wonder, whether the inhabitants leave this area whilst pursuing their everyday life or are their relationships restricted to the area within the boundaries of the segregated area? Do 'outsiders' have an aversion towards those living 'inside' or do these 'outsiders' exclude such coerced neighbours from their informal and communication networks? Another question, related to the above, is to discover what sort of habits and community routines substitute the role of institutions.

I hope the introduction of the Romani families living in poverty in Budapest can play a role to disclose the answers related to the permeability of such borders. Hence, the title paraphrasing the classical piece of Michael Young and Willmott<sup>1</sup>: Whether families or neighbourhoods (broader household cooperations) serve as the boundaries of life. The purpose of my dissertation is to find answer to the above questions.

## Research questions

My research questions are aimed to explore the social networks of Roma families of poverty living on the margins of society in Budapest's Magdolna district. The ambition of the dissertation is to review the following issues:

- The primary question of my research is whether the examined segregated micro-areas – segregated streets and apartment blocks – have definable limits in terms of social relations; if they can be defined in a geographical or social sense; or if these relationships have ethnical boundaries.
- The exploration of relationship structures aims to find out what the quarter represent for those who live here: a place to live, a "logistics center" or a special frame of life with boundaries that allow only limited crossing. Are the social boundaries solidified or freely passable despite the residential segregation?
- The research explores the question, whether the examined segregated streets and apartment blocks – individually or collectively – can be regarded a community. Is

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<sup>1</sup> Young, M. – Willmott, P. (1999): Család és rokonság Kelet-Londonban, Új Mandátum Kiadó, Budapest

there any cooperation between the families and households living here to organise their life?

- I intend to describe whether there is any hierarchy or division of labor to be recognized between the households involved, exploring the formal and informal connections of everyday life. A central question of my dissertation is that which community routines and customs fulfill the functions of missing institutions in the state of social exclusion.
- Beside understanding the (deficiency-)compensating role of multi-generational coexistence in Roma families of poverty, I try to describe the extent and functions of blood relationships. I also examine the extended family's impact on the daily lives of nuclear families.
- Furthermore, the research investigates the differences in the relationship structures of women and men; whether urban rehabilitation attempts offered real opportunity for social dialogue; and analyzes work-, school-, kinship- and neighborhood relations in terms of their norm-forming role. By describing the spatial/physical structure of the apartment blocks, I aim to lay out the attributes of private and community life.

## 2 Methods of research

My main methods are the semi-structured interviews, supplemented by participant observations and contact / consumption diaries.

By applying a predominantly qualitative – anthropological-ethnographic – methodology, beyond examining the “exoticism” of the Magdolna district, I intend to raise generalizable questions about the phenomenon of segregation, the structure of social contacts, as well as income and cash management strategies, including consumption habits of people living in the neighbourhood.

### Semi-structured interviews

For the past four years, I have spent 1-2 days a week in my research field. This period resulted approximately 3-400 hours of observation, discussion, and data collection. Overall, I have met at least 2-300 people. From the beginning of the research, I conducted 50 semi-structured interviews. The 10-12 open questions of the research mainly focus on the structure of social relations, income and cash management strategies and consumption habits. Beside exploring

the social networks and daily contacts, I also ask questions about the distances travelled daily. The individual interviews took one/one and a half hours.

The participants of the research are between the ages of 18 and 58 who attended a maximum of eight years of primary education or a vocational course; all of them live in the Magdolna district, in households larger than their nuclear family. When selecting my interviewees, I used the "snowball method": As the respondents typically recommended additional interlocutors from their own circle of acquaintances, some of the speakers are related to each other.

The hypothesis of social isolation and related living strategies has been tested by interviewing two other groups: both the employees of the small shops serving the neighbourhood, as well as the social workers, who are in contact with the families, have confirmed income strategies and consumption habits of those living in the run-down council flats of the district.

Due to the assumed difference in gender roles, I tried to balance the female-male ratio when selecting my interviewees. The semi-structured interviews from Józsefváros and Belső-Ferencváros have been recorded from September 2015.

## **Participant observation**

Findings of the semi-structured interviews are compared with participant observations gained from accompanying my interviewees often for several hours when they went for their visits and errands. On these occasions, I explored, through observation and asking questions, the nature of the contacts, from brief/superficial interactions (like simple greetings) to features of closer relations.

A similar method was followed in the case of income-generating activities and consumption habits: I accompanied some of my interviewees during their daily shopping trips and job search attempts. In addition to analysing the household practices, I focused on observing job search and entrepreneurial strategies.

With my regular interviewees, I recorded in my field diary the geographical distances traveled by them, and depicted the range and typical types of movements on a map. In order to describe the relationship structures and social boundaries, I examined the entire social network of 15 people, about a thousand contacts.

## Contact and consumption diaries

10 interviewees were asked to keep a contact and consumption diary for a week. These participants were instructed to keep record of their daily social contacts as well as their purchases, favors and invitations – with the intent to examine the frequency of these interactions. Exploring exchanges beyond one-way expanses, reveals the habits of mutual reciprocity and informal loan repayment practices within the community.

The contact and consumption diaries were expected to help clarifying the information obtained by the interviews and observations. Contact diaries can provide a more detailed picture of the extent of the network (how many people are involved in the social network), its composition (socio-demographic characteristics), and the function and "strengths" of the connections.

Although, keeping of the diaries was sometimes delayed and other times it was only reconstructed afterwards, the information recorded still reflects the relationship priorities of the person. In the case of “post-reconstructions”, respondents typically revived emotionally significant contacts, these occasions also provided insight into the nature of relationships of trust.

## Methods of analysis

During the analysis of the interviews and other sources, I sought a case-level understanding: Firstly, I wanted to get to know the everyday movements and relationship types of my interviewees. Later, I tried to draw generally valid conclusions about the operational logic of households and kinship systems from the individual interviews.

As it is not possible to representatively survey the whole district using individual interviews, my research aims to concentrate on the structure of communities and the dynamics of their functioning. While network researches have traditionally focused on the extent and intensity of relationships, my research also analyzes their content.

My research intends to compare the collected information to the sociological experiences from before and after the change of regime. For the interpretation of phenomena, I also use the international literature of metropolitan segregation. In some of the chapters the qualitative methods are supplemented by secondary analysis of the available statistical and administrative data (indicators of housing, employment, health, etc.).

### 3 Hypotheses and findings of the research

For families moving to Budapest in the 1980s, the capital was originally their chance to rise in social status, but after the change of regime, their social mobility stalled. The situation of those affected by the declining opportunities for industrial auxiliary work and the burden of illiteracy in the Magdolna district can also be described as a kind of “class-type closure”. Since the institutional nexus are largely related to work, the cessation of official and regular incomes has resulted not only in the loss of predictable livelihoods, but also in the loss of legal and social relations. Due to the lack of institutional relations, their ever important friendly and working relationships have now been reduced to kinship-neighbourhood relations. To substantiate the latter statement, I undertake to support the following hypotheses:

- The majority of Hungarian researchers emphasizes the role of the kinship in the everyday life of the extended families (Durst 2002, Kovai 2015), but it is equally true that their strong relationships also become "family" or "adopted family". "Large households" means the community of people who cooperate in some kind of economic co-operation and exchange networks. Although blood ties are sometimes evidently given, or took precedence in admission, the “large household” is not organized primarily for kinship, but for common well-being.
- While some of the blood relations lose their functional role in metropolitan conditions, other close relations become more appreciated. A “large household” – which makes a variety of reciprocities a livelihood routine – often incorporates the direct neighbourhood, the permanent participants of income-generating activities.
- The organizing power of kinship and neighbourhood relations determines not only their earning but also the consuming and cash management strategies. While in the middle-class world, the "household" typically refers to the group of people living in the same apartment, in case of the examined extended families household means a wider group of people. Referring to the concept of "substantive economy" (by Károly Polányi) beside market activities, it includes the cooperation for other economic purposes (self-sufficiency, reciprocity of gifts, community redistribution, etc.), too.

- Segregated areas of the district are not surrounded by walls, but it seems that these areas have some kind of "social gravity force", which limits people's abilities to leave. The social connections and everyday activities are wider than the segregation limits, but this „radius” is much narrower than the whole city.
- The Magdolna district cannot be considered a community in terms of strong ties either: the range of intensive connections is narrower than the whole district. Their institutional relationships are rarer and weaker than usual, but they try to “domesticate” their acquired weaker bonds. They also extend their trust networks to their “stable weak relationships” (e.g. employees of surrounding shops, aid institutions, etc.).
- Restrictions on the social and physical mobility of poor Roma families in the capital are not to be found in legal norms or explicit rules primarily. The closing tendencies of the poor communities in Budapest are to be found in the specialties of survival strategies and coercive cooperations. The reciprocity of favour and exchange networks became a safety net for those involved. However, informal customs and community obligations – which go beyond the individual interests – become forces that reduce social mobility.
- Rehabilitation attempts often make it difficult to maintain cooperation networks, which are the basis of the above-mentioned income and cash management strategies (Csizmady 2011, 2012).
- As a result of the rehabilitation programs of the 2000s, the “historical poor neighbourhoods” of the capital became even more fragmented. Accordingly, three types of segregation can be observed in my research area: The spatial segregation of social, demographic and ethnic groups are determined by the proportions of three elements: the ratio of houses, which participated in rehabilitation and those that did not, and the newly built condominiums in the area.
- In the case of poor families concentrated in groups of streets and tenement blocks, the disproportionate shift of formal and informal relationships and out-of-institution relationships are the most important factors of inequality instead of physical isolation. For those who are excluded from the official world, customs and human relations replace the functions of the missing institutions.

- According to surveys, Romani women have closer and ethnically more homogeneous friendships than their male counterparts (Albert – Dávid 2006). But as a result of the rehabilitation attempts, the situation is quite the opposite in the capital: in the everyday life of local institutions, women are mainly involved.

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

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