TURNING THE TIDE ON SEGREGATION: Benefits of experiencing other cultures may lead to more mixed urban neighbourhoods

Cities can always become integrated if individuals benefit enough from their interactions with members of the other racial groups. That’s the conclusion of research by Florent Dubois and Christophe Muller, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016.

Their study estimates the strength of voluntary interactions with other racial groups, because the individuals believe they benefit from exposure to them, as a counterbalance to the desire to live alongside people of your own racial group (‘homophily’) or racist feelings towards other people.

The researchers estimate that in the case of South Africa, this effect is between 116% and 456% the effect of racism, and between 31% and 451% the effect of homophily from 1996 to 2011. This indicates that South Africa should experience more integration, rather than increasing segregation, which is predicted if we just measure racism or homophily.

The authors add that policy-makers can do more to promote integration if they know individual preferences and/or present a positive image of the benefits: ‘Our results suggest that influencing preferences by public speeches or publicity campaigns might be another relevant policy tool against segregation. For example, politicians might stress the benefit of the interaction between members of different groups.’

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Since the 1970s, researchers have tried to explain the persistence of residential segregation despite its constant decline since then in the United States. No matter the preferences for the racial composition of their neighbourhood, if an individual has a slight preference to live with individuals of the same racial group, then complete segregation would emerge. But they do not consider the gain (or the loss) that individuals may get from the interaction with a member of a different group.

When we take this effect into account, it can overcome racism and preferences for one’s own kind (‘homophily’) then ensuring the emergence of an integrated city. For example, a person might not like Africans because he believes that they are violent, but he might like to listen to African music. Thus, as long as his taste for African music is strong enough, he might choose to live in a location that has some African musicians, then starting to build an integrated neighbourhood.

But it might simply be that one group possesses the capital while the other constitutes the labour force. Then each group needs the other to be able to produce.

These interactions are actually quite strong. In the case of South Africa, this study estimates them to be between 116% and 456% the effect of racism and between 31% and 451% the effect of homophily from 1996 to 2011. This indicates that South Africa
should experience more integration since individuals are asking for more integrated neighbourhoods.

These results have important policy implications for fighting segregation. Actual policies provide vouchers for the minority group in the private housing market of the more advantaged neighbourhoods as in London or in the Moving To Opportunity experiment in the United States.

But this is actually done without knowing the underlying preferences of the individuals. Thus, individuals might move back to a disadvantaged neighbourhood, or affluent residents might move away turning it into a disadvantage neighbourhood after some time. So knowing the preferences of the individuals might help determining the dynamics.

These results also suggest that influencing preferences by public speeches or publicity campaigns might be another relevant policy tool against segregation. For example, politicians might stress the benefit of the interaction between members of different groups.

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