

Cultural proximity and residential choices

Rosella Nicolini (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)
Juan A Piedra-Peña (Universidad de Oviedo)
José Luis Roig Sabaté (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

February 2026

Abstract

In this paper, we aim to assess the extent to which cultural proximity—approximated by linguistic and religious distance—contributes to the selection of a place of residence. Our objective is to disentangle potential spillover (network) effects arising from the concentration of specific ethnic groups in particular locations.

Our empirical analysis focuses on different ethnic groups residing in Barcelona and on migration dyads observed in 2018. The analysis considers the city's neighborhood structure (73 spatial units).

To model migration flows, we propose an innovative empirical strategy that captures both spatial and cultural proximity in migrants' location choices. Specifically, we employ spatial econometric interaction models (SDM) to estimate the effects of origin and destination characteristics on migration flow patterns and to identify spillover effects.

Our findings reveal significant network effects among migrants who share similar cultural characteristics. Moreover, linguistic proximity emerges as a key determinant of migration flow patterns toward neighborhoods located near areas with higher shares of children and elderly residents.

Finally, we discuss potential place-based policies that could foster deeper integration, particularly emphasizing the cohesive role that the labor market may play

Keywords: Ethnic groups, cultural proximity, spatial analysis, urban neighborhoods.

JEL Classification: J60, R23, Z10.