The ‘Environmental Justice’ framework has often been used to explore inequalities in harmful environmental exposures between communities, usually defined by race and socioeconomic position. Despite its large evidence base there are views that the literature on environmental justice has remained somehow separate from the literature on urban research and health inequalities (Brulle and Pellow, 2006; Schweitzer and Stephenson, 2007). In this brief account, I comment on the use of the environmental justice framework in explaining findings from the quantitative component of an ongoing mixed method PhD study. I also point to the role of researchers when studying environmental injustice and health inequalities.

In Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city, informal areas occupy more than 45% of the city’s total inhabited area and are home to half of the total population. In my study I investigate the association between neighbourhood socioeconomic status and self-rated health (SRH) of adult women and men residing in formal and informal urban neighbourhoods) in Aleppo. This is a mixed method study using multilevel modelling, and qualitative interviewing with women. SRH is shown to be a valid and reliable indicator of overall morbidity (Martikainen et al, 1999). It is a measure that has been widely used in research on health inequalities in many societies including Syria (Asfar et. al, 2007).

One of the findings from the multilevel modelling study showed that after controlling for both individual and neighbourhood socio-economic factors, women living in informal neighbourhoods were less likely to report poor SRH than women in formal neighbourhoods. This finding is somehow surprising given the evidence on informal neighbourhoods in Aleppo. Residents of these areas, especially women are poor and suffer disproportionately from poor quality housing and exposure to unknown level of pollutants from unregulated industry, sewer outlets and waste dumps (Hammal et al, 2005; Maziak et al, 2005). The result appears to contradict a widely held and usually untested assumption in the environmental justice literature in that worse environmental quality should act as an antecedent to adverse health status (Pearce et al, 2010). The question is whether an environmental justice framework is limited in explaining such a result or is it that the result is an artefact of the measures used? For example, would environmental quality be deterministic to health had I chose to use a different measure for health or disease such as the prevalence of Tuberculosis or Leishmaniasis, which are known to be directly related to environmental quality? This is an issue that needs to be debated.

Our role as researchers in the environmental justice and health and urban inequality fields is to be more critical of the methods and measures we use in our studies and to question the mechanisms by which varying environmental exposures influence different measures of health and wellbeing. This point has been articulated by several researchers in the field of place and health inequalities (Diez Roux, 2002; Macintyre et al., 2002; Riva et al, 2007). It is also encouraged that researchers from different disciplines engage in forums to exchange
and debate ideas. There is a lot to learn from our shared perspectives of studying environmental justice and health inequalities.

References


