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Practice Review: Urban Policy and Research

Social Mix and the Cities – 12 August

The idea of balanced social mix, or creating communities with a blend of residents from different housing tenures and income levels, is of common concern for contemporary housing and planning policies in Australia, the UK and the US. In Australia, the state based Shelter organisations have run several workshops about the issue and in the UK the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has recently released a consultation paper on 'Planning for Mixed Communities' (ODPM 2005). Internationally, social mix and the related issue of neighbourhood effects have been the subject of much debate, which is reflected in the flurry of articles and special editions of major international journals, including 'Housing Studies' (Vol 17, 1 & Vol 18, 6) and 'Urban Studies' (Vol 38, 12).

This interest is by no means new as the concept of 'social mix' has informed Australian, British and US new town planning policy since the post second world war years. In general, this model of town planning anticipates benefits for disadvantaged residents of coexisting with homeowners and working residents, in balanced heterogeneous communities. However, the importance placed on social mix has waxed and waned over time and the policy goals, expectations and meanings and values embedded in the concept of social mix have also varied. During the 1970s in Australia, for instance, the concept was tied to addressing poverty and achieving redistributive ideals and equity in the distribution of government resources and as a reaction against the development of mass public housing projects. At that time, social mix was thought to achieve better access to services for disadvantaged residents and also to build more stable communities.

Social Mix and Contemporary Housing Policy

The recent resurgence of interest in social mix in contemporary Australian and UK housing policy reflects the situation whereby housing authorities have to deal with issues emerging in areas of concentrated social housing. Over the past two decades, global economic restructuring coupled with changes in family structures and progressively tighter restrictions governing access to social housing has resulted in the sector moving from housing for families and working tenants to housing for more complex and high need tenants. It is not surprising that common characteristics of neighbourhoods of concentrated social housing include residents experiencing higher than average levels of unemployment, low-income and reliance on welfare benefits, poor educational outcomes and mental and physical health problems. Likewise in the US, similar processes of structural economic change and housing markets have resulted in concentrations of disadvantaged residents in particular neighbourhoods.

In part, this situation seems to support the convergence thesis of the housing system, in that being subjected to universalistic imperatives, such as global economic restructuring, results in the different countries experiencing similar issues of spatial concentrations of disadvantaged residents. Indeed, despite the different contexts, in all three countries there is a common concern with using social mix as a way to diffuse concentrations of disadvantaged social housing tenants. However, there are important cross-national differences in the social construction of the problem that social mix diagnoses and seeks to address and in the subsequent constitution of the policies. These differences reflect the divergence in the institutional structures of Australia, the UK and US, in their organisations of housing policy-making, systems of implementation, historical circumstances and political forces.

Nowadays in Australia and the UK, the notion of social mix has strong currency in contemporary urban regeneration policy, where balancing 'social mix' is attached to addressing 'social exclusion' on social housing estates. Social mix policies aim to

stimulate social mobility and social integration and are attached to a broader area regeneration framework. These regeneration approaches seek to acknowledge that where a person lives affects their access to services and other opportunities. In the US, social mix is more explicitly linked to resolving the problems of an 'urban underclass'. Social mix policies are informed by the thesis that living amongst other similarly disadvantaged people detrimentally impacts on life chances and aspirations through developing a 'culture of poverty'. The 'culture of poverty' thesis purports that individuals outside of the labour market are generally culpable for their disadvantaged material circumstances.

In Australia, the major strategy to achieve a more balanced social mix on estates is to diversify housing tenure through increasing owner-occupied housing. This is generally achieved through demolition and replacement of obsolete social housing with private housing to attract higher income groups into the areas. In some states regeneration involves permanent relocation of social housing tenants to social housing in other neighbourhoods. The overall effect is to lower the concentrations of public housing in the regeneration area. The policies adopted, to date in Australia more closely resemble those of UK regeneration policy than the US. UK approaches focus on in situ dilution, often through private sales to sitting tenants. In both these countries, social mix is part of a broader regeneration framework that may involve other initiatives, such as employment and community development projects.

In contrast, the dominant approach to changing social mix in the US involves dispersal or mobility programs that relocate social housing tenants out of areas of concentrated poverty. The programs utilise housing vouchers to 'scatter' public housing tenants across more prosperous neighbourhoods using private rental housing. This policy direction reflects the enforcement in law of the rights of African Americans to live in white suburbs. These types of programs, exemplified in the

'Gautreaux' and 'Moving to Opportunity' projects, have not developed in the Australian or UK context.

Evidence-based Policy Making

The inquiries of much contemporary research on the topic of social mix are concerned with answering the important policy related question of, 'does social mix work'. These types of studies have led to valuable information with which to inform the debate about social mix. However, if we start from this question, it can become more important to objectively measure the social and economic effects of social mix, rather than explaining residents' and other actors' understandings and day-to-day experiences of social mix. This focus complements the current policy concern with utilising research in evidence-based social policy development Australian interest in adopting an evidence-based approach to policy development follows the enthusiastic support for this direction by the UK Labour government, which claims to focus on developing government policy based on 'best evidence' and 'what works' (The Prime Minister and the Minister for Cabinet Office 1999). The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), for instance, argues that disseminating the findings of the research that it funds is central to AHURI's aim of providing an evidence-base for policy development (AHURI 2003). Likewise, the Australian Federal Government Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) aims to base decisions about policy on sound information and research evidence (DFACS 2003). Consequently a large amount of the research funded on specific housing policies, including social mix, seeks to inform policy makers in their practices and to answer the related question of 'what works'. Important as this policy focused research is, such an approach does not pay attention to questions of the 'why' and 'how' particular policies emerge, nor does it scrutinise the policy objectives.

The Missing Pieces

In recent times there has been only limited in-depth qualitative exploration of the effects of policies such as social mix from the viewpoint of those most affected by the policies, the residents of social housing estates. Atkinson and Kintrea (2004: 20), for instance, in the UK context, argue that there are few explanations of how individual actors understand social mix or even if they think it may or may not “affect their decisions and therefore life chances”. Likewise, Rose (2004: 12) a Canadian based researcher contends that, debates about social mix are occurring “in the absence of a knowledge base as to how social mix is experienced on a day-to-day basis”. As well within the literature, there is only limited scrutiny of social mix as a conceptual category. A review of the literature from 1990 until 2004, which included fifty two journal articles, seven conference papers, thirteen reports and three book chapters is informative. Much of the research is concerned with the question of ‘whether social mix works’. The empirical studies often attempt to compare and measure the effects for residents of living in neighbourhoods with different levels of social mix. This is a difficult task given that the effects of mix are often conflated with other aspects of particular neighbourhoods, along with efforts at regeneration. There is a significant literature committed to evaluating the outcomes of the US ‘Gautreaux’ and ‘Moving to Opportunity Programs’ that seeks to assess whether the programs assist families to become more self sufficient, through leading to improvements in residents’ health, education or employment prospects. Numerous articles are dedicated to exploring the best methodologies to adopt in order to measure the effects: the types of indicators to use; whether to use case studies or statistical models; and the relative strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

There is a growing call amongst some researchers for the existing work to be complemented with more conceptually aware and historically specific analyses of social mix policies. They point out that a focus merely on evidence ignores important

questions about theory and the policy intent and logics of changing social mix (Briggs 2003; Musterd 2002). Indeed, there are few studies that take these aspects into account. Some exceptions are Sarkissian, Forsyth and Heine (1990), Goodchild and Cole (2001), and Ruming, Mee and McGuirk (2004). Sarkissian et al (1990), for instance, examine some of the different policy goals attributed to social mix over the past century. Alternatively, Goodchild and Cole (2001) explore the way the term social mix has influenced UK housing policy and its different meanings at the levels of national policy, in the management of estate upgrading and from the social experiences of residents. In a recent Australian study, Ruming, Mee and McGuirk (2004) conduct empirical research that investigates the management practices of the New South Wales Department of Housing and the normative beliefs that dominate policy thinking on social mix.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social mix has emerged as a key policy issue in Australia, the UK and US. The aspects that are missing however, from recent accounts of social mix are an exploration of historical debates and the analysis of policy measures. In addition, there are no in-depth Australian studies that explore the viewpoint of those most affected by social mix policies, the residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Some of the key issues of interest are:

- Where does the idea of social mix arise from?
- What problem is social mix constructed to address? and
- Why does social mix remerge as a popular policy metaphor at certain times?

Future research would benefit by commencing from an understanding of the historical basis of social mix strategies and the different conceptions of the term. Policies can be driven by different agendas and if the underlying beliefs and

assumptions are not placed in their historical context, we may be doomed to repeat past errors.

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