

Theorising Social Mix: Spatial Scale and Resident Interaction

Introduction

Recent Australian research maps the contemporary patterns of concentration of spatial disadvantage, due to structural economic change, across metropolitan cities and regional centres (Baum et al., 1999; Vinson, 2007). Within these studies, the communities identified as the most vulnerable to change, in terms of income levels, labour force engagement and the presence of disadvantaged residents, are social housing estates and areas of concentrated low income private rental housing. In tandem with the economic changes, concentrations of social housing tenants have been perceived as having significant associations, whether rightly or wrongly, with a range of issues including anti-social behaviour, crime, welfare dependency and depictions of a socially excluded underclass eschewing work and disengaged from mainstream norms and values (Arthurson, 2004).

These depictions have been reinforced over the past few years internationally by civil disturbances experienced on social housing estates, including in Australia (Macquarie Fields and Redfern in New South Wales), France (St Denis, Poissy, Clichy-sous-Bois) and the UK (Bestwood, Nottingham).

While the debate about a socially excluded underclass has been contentious, it has contributed to the stigmatisation of areas in which social housing is concentrated. This affects social housing tenants through increased difficulty in gaining employment due to negative perceptions of particular areas and lack of role models in terms of employment participation and educational achievement. There are also other implications, such as poor quality local services and lowered local amenity (Galster, 2007). Recent reforms to implement tighter assessment criteria for accessing social housing mean that these issues around concentrations of disadvantaged tenants are likely to increase rather than decrease.

These circumstances have prompted renewed interest by urban and social planners and housing policy makers in the idea of 'social mix'. In this context, social mix is commonly used to refer to the level of socioeconomic variance of residents, housing tenure within a particular spatially delineated area, age range or ethnic mix of residents.

Sarkissian (1976) and more recently Arthurson (2008) detail that historically a continuing theme of the ideals set for social mix is about the necessity for propinquity between poor and better-off residents. The underlying rationale is that propinquity enables the poor to become good citizens through the instrument of middle-class role modelling and leadership. This reasoning assumes that residents' patterns of socialisation in disadvantaged areas are largely restricted to the spatial scale of local neighbourhood with limited social networks/contacts beyond the immediate area. Contemporary proponents of social mix policies claim that the benefits for disadvantaged residents of living among home owners and working residents include access to broader formal and informal networks, including social networks that link disadvantaged residents to job opportunities and role models to become good citizens (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000; Arthurson, 2002). However, within the international literature and policy debates, the sociological understanding of space as a context for social interaction has not been clearly conceptualised or often explored as a framework for understanding the effects of social mix.

This paper explores the problematic nature of the basic assumption underlying support for social mix policies that propinquity in space provides the context for social interaction between residents in different housing tenures. In doing so it questions whether a focus at the broad level of neighbourhood is too delimiting. First, social mix policies are operationalised at a number of different spatial geographic dimensions – at the level of home, cluster, block, street and neighbourhood – which are likely to have different outcomes for residents. Second, they assume that most social interaction takes place at the level of neighbourhood rather than the world beyond, when social network analysis suggests that in contemporary society most people's links extend way beyond the local neighbourhood. In the first part of the paper, the approaches that are currently used to achieve social mix through urban regeneration are detailed. Then the relevant literature is reviewed before turning to the current study findings.

Contemporary Policy Approaches for Achieving Social Mix

Internationally, the most visible signs of problems of social dysfunction and community disharmony are often on the social housing estates that were predominately, but not always, constructed after the Second World War to meet the shortages of good quality, low cost housing. Today, social housing houses large numbers of the most disadvantaged, high need and complex tenants. 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 in most countries moving from housing for families and working tenants to housing for more complex, ethnically mixed and high need tenants. It is not surprising that common characteristics of neighbourhoods with high levels of social housing often include concentrations of residents experiencing

greater than average levels of unemployment, low income and reliance on welfare benefits, poor educational outcomes, mental and physical health problems, and crime and anti-social behaviour (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2006).

Contemporary urban planning and social housing estate regeneration policies in Australia, the UK and North America often aim to break down or prevent concentrations of disadvantaged residents from forming through balancing 'social mix', or creating communities with a blend of residents across a range of income levels and housing tenures. The mix of tenures includes social housing, private rental, home purchase and owner-occupied housing. Social mix is adopted in anticipation of it assisting to create more stable and vigorous communities than when disadvantaged residents are concentrated together in one neighbourhood (Arthurson, 2002). The foundations of social mix policies in regeneration of social housing estates reflect, however, different countries' policy settings and social and political frameworks.

The US approach predominately relocates low income African-American and immigrant households from 'distressed' neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty to areas with wider socioeconomic and racial mix and a range of housing tenures. The programs include Moving to Opportunity (MTO), Gautreaux and HOPE VI (Popkin et al., 2002). Compared with Australian approaches, which may involve permanent relocation of tenants to social housing outside of the regeneration neighbourhood, the UK and European approaches tend to focus more on developing social mix on social housing estates with tenants in-situ, although there are some exceptions (Kleinhans, 2004). Thus far, dispersal or mobility programs that relocate residents out of areas of concentrated poverty into privately subsidised housing in more prosperous neighbourhoods in the nature of the MTO and Gautreaux programs in the USA have not developed in other contexts. In the European milieu, social mix has also been facilitated through targeting social housing to tenants across a wide range of income levels. Conversely, in Australia and the UK, social mix is generally achieved through tenant 'right to buy' schemes, and demolition and/or replacement of obsolete social housing, with housing being made available for private purchase in order to attract higher income home owners and buyers into the neighbourhoods.

Geographic Scales of Implementation

In the current study, the international literature on social mix from 1990 until 2007 was reviewed. This included 57 journal articles, 13 reports, seven conference papers and three book chapters. Two of the themes that emerged as the review progressed were first, the importance of scrutinising the scale at which social mix is implemented, and second, the impact of lifestyle in determining levels of social interaction in mixed income neighbourhoods.

US Studies

Rosenbaum et al. (1998), in a US case study of Lake Parc Place, a mixed income housing development, found that residents tended to socialise with their neighbours. However, the study did not determine how much interaction occurred across different income groups. In this study, social mix was implemented at the scale of the building, whereby various income groups lived in the same two 15-storey apartment buildings. Within the study it was unclear whether households in every income group were included on each floor or whether they occupied different parts of the buildings. Half the apartments were targeted to families with one employed adult earning between 50 to 80 per cent of the median income, and the other half to those earning less than 50 per cent of the median income. Where resident interaction did occur, it generally involved casual interaction, such as in playgrounds and hallways or through volunteer activities. Children were more likely to interact than adults. Brophy and Smith (1997), utilising seven case studies of similar mixed income housing developments, with income mix implemented at the building level, found little evidence of interaction between income groups. In effect, although lower and higher income residents lived in the same buildings, there was little social interaction. Briggs (1997) studied tenants who remained in traditional, highly concentrated social housing neighbourhoods, compared to those moved to scattered sites where social housing was interdispersed among home owners. He concluded that although the new neighbourhoods were safer, there was little evidence of interaction between the low income movers and their new neighbours – some movers maintained ties outside of the area with their previous residential neighbourhoods, still attending church or socialising there.

The findings suggested that the movers' social networks were much broader than their current residential neighbourhood. In another study, Briggs (1998) examined seven small concentrated social housing complexes built in middle income New York neighbourhoods, and raised concerns about the design model undermining opportunities for social housing tenants to interact with their better-off neighbours.

Schwartz and Tajbakhsh (2001) also compared different models of mixed income housing across 12 developments in New York (the Bronx), Chicago, Massachusetts and California. They found little evidence that social mix impacted on social interaction and social networks. In another study that reviewed the existing research, Smith (2002) found inconsistent patterns of interaction between tenants in mixed income housing developments, and concluded that the limited evidence suggests that tenants are unlikely to interact in ways that may lead to potential social benefits. The interaction that does occur seems to be between residents across only a modest range of incomes. Where larger income gaps exist between residents in different housing tenures, the probability of interaction appears more remote. Popkin et al. (2002) undertook a qualitative study of MTO sites in five US cities.

The findings were similar to those of Briggs (1997) in that few movers formed deep relationships in their new neighbourhood, but most had strong social networks outside of

the new neighbourhood. More than half still had close ties with friends and families in social housing in their old neighbourhoods. In addition, substantial numbers of the children attended schools outside of the local area and some in their old neighbourhoods. In these latter studies of mixed income housing, the scale of social mix is unclear, although it appears that rental housing and owner-occupied housing is interdispersed within the neighbourhood.

European Studies

In studies of three Scottish social housing estates where owner-occupation was introduced, Atkinson and Kintrea (2000) found that renters had fewer contacts beyond the estate than home owners, although few renters were absolutely isolated. By comparison, owners had fewer attachments to the local neighbourhood as they spent more time away from the estates, used local services less often, and their employment placed them in different social networks to the renters. There were only small income differences between owners and renters, suggesting that with bigger gaps in income even less mixing would occur across the two tenures. Importantly, the findings suggested that lifestyle was an important factor in determining whether there was social interaction between the two groups. Another key finding was that children's play is important in bringing together different income groups, and this was facilitated as nearly all the owners and renters sent their children to the local primary school.

Beekman et al. (2001), in another Scottish study that explicitly explored the spatial scale of social mix, examined social networks between owners and renters in 10 case study areas where tenure diversification had taken place. They found a direct relationship between the level of spatial integration and the contact that occurred between owners and renters. Generally, owners and renters did not mind living near to each other, but resistance increased exponentially as the spatial geographic proximity between the tenures increased. In part, tensions seemed caused by different values and lifestyles. In view of these findings, the authors did not recommend the policy of 'pepper-potting' different housing tenures on the same street. As differences in socioeconomic characteristics lessened, there was more mixing between residents. Unlike the Atkinson and Kintrea studies, Beekman et al. (2001) found less evidence of social interaction between the tenure groups through children attending the same schools. Overall, these findings illustrate the importance of accounting for the spatial scale of social mix when investigating the effects.

In an English study of 10 mixed tenure estates, involving interviews with over 1,000 residents, Jupp (1999) similarly found little evidence of interaction across housing tenures. Only 4 per cent of residents thought they could rely on someone in a different tenure for assistance that might improve their socioeconomic circumstances, help them find a job, deal with problems at work, or get advice about money or assistance in filling in forms. The findings of this study suggested that the street is a more meaningful social scale of analysis than the estate. Jupp (1999, 45) pointed out that the biggest single barrier to contact was that properties of different tenures tended to be located on different streets

or parts of streets, so little mixing was facilitated between tenure groups and people with different social backgrounds. Where there was street-level mixing of housing, there were higher levels of cross-tenure contact between residents. Unlike in the other studies, careful street-level mixing did not lead to conflict. For these reasons, and conversely to Beekman et al. (2001), Jupp (1999, 81) advocated for pepper-potting, but cautioned that even then the levels of social interaction studied 'are hardly sufficient to create a considerably more inclusive society'. Like the Atkinson and Kintrea studies, Jupp found that schools were important facilitators for cross-tenure mixing as large numbers of home owners sent their children to local schools.

Another English study by Page and Broughton (1997) of four estates also found little social interaction between tenure groups. Like Jupp (1999), the authors illustrate how spatial separation is a barrier to social interaction for residents across different tenures. The estate designs ranged from shared ownership in one block of flats, with social housing tenants mainly located in houses in other parts of the estates, to home owners pepper-potted among rental tenants, a mix of flats and houses, and an L shaped block where one part was rental and the other shared ownership but with the two areas separated off from each other.

Dutch studies, as reviewed by Kleinhans (2004), also find little evidence of social interaction between home owners and renters. Some of the studies suggest that residents' lifestyles are the most important factor as the bulk of social interactions are taking place beyond the local estates. For instance, Van Beckhoven and Van Kempen (2003) in a study of two pre-war industrial estates in Amsterdam and Utrecht that had undergone changes in social mix, found that the majority of old and new residents undertook activities outside of the areas. These activities included shopping, recreation and visits to friends and relatives.

Australian Studies

There is a dearth of Australian studies investigating the issue of cross-tenure social interaction, which forms part of the rationale of policy makers and planners for implementing social mix policies. One recent case study of a Newcastle (New South Wales) suburb found that both social housing tenants and home owners felt that tenure separated and distinguished the local geographical community (Ruming et al., 2004). Social housing comprised eight per cent of dwellings, but most were located in three concentrated areas of the neighbourhood. The authors concluded that social housing tenants are not readily accepted into communities dominated by private owners and that there is little mixing across tenures. Based on the current review of the international literature, this finding is hardly surprising, as once again it raises issues about spatial concentrations of social housing tenants providing a barrier to interaction with home owners located in other parts of the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, in the Ruming et al. (2004) study, many of the social housing tenants were still perceived as different by home owners, and stigmatised as they were readily identified by their small concentrated pockets of social housing.

In summary, the literature suggests that little social interaction takes place between residents across different housing tenures in mixed tenure neighbourhoods. Where social interaction does occur, it is more likely between residents with similar socioeconomic characteristics, where owner and rental housing is spatially integrated or where owners have connections in the neighbourhood, such as children attending local schools, that facilitate mixing. As noted, there is a deficit of research on this topic in the international and Australian contexts, although social mix policies are commonly employed in estate regeneration activities with the underlying rationale that mixing or role modelling will occur for low income social housing tenants. Given the lack of detail in the current studies reviewed, it is not always possible to explore the scale at which social mix is implemented.

These findings support Galster's (2007, 35) argument that policy makers have given little thought to how advantaged and disadvantaged groups will interact within socially engineered mixed income neighbourhoods. They also point to the need for utilising qualitative research methods to provide a contextualised understanding of how residents' behaviour may differ from policy makers' expectations, in turn providing opportunities for enhancing the policy processes.

With the deficit in research in mind, the current study explored the question of whether residents in mixed tenure areas have attachments in common or at different geographic scales that make interaction more or less likely to occur between residents from across different housing tenures.

The Research Design

Data collection for the research involved 40 in-depth interviews with residents across three suburbs, Mitchell Park, Hillcrest and Northfield (the latter two are contiguous), all located within the metropolitan region of Adelaide, South Australia. Of these, 15 were home owners or buyers, 14 were social housing tenants, and 11 were renting in the private sector. The interviews were analysed thematically, covering themes relating to social mix and neighbourhood life.

These neighbourhoods previously had high concentrations of social housing and have been extensively revitalised over the past 15 years. Changes have been made to the social mix through demolition and sales of social housing, urban infill and building of new housing to attract home owners or buyers. Prior to regeneration, all three suburbs were similar in terms of key area characteristics, including high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and concentrations of social housing. As shown in Table 1, Mitchell Park originally had a concentration of 75 per cent social housing that has been reduced over a period of 14 years to 30 per cent. Similarly, Hillcrest and Northfield have experienced significant reductions to the concentrations of social housing.

Table 1: Summary of key neighbourhood characteristics

Area Characteristics	Mitchell Park	Hillcrest/Northfield
Location	10 km south of city centre	8.5 km north-east of city centre
History	Built to service car manufacturing industry – Chrysler (now Mitsubishi) – in late 1950s	Building commenced in early 1950s
Type of housing	Mainly semi-detached double units on large blocks	Mainly timber-framed construction imported from Europe in prefab form
Regeneration	Commenced in 1986	Commenced in late 1990
(%) Social housing concentration before	75	60
(%) Social housing concentration after	35	20

Findings

In interviews two key themes emerged. First, people generally lead busy lives that are not wholly tied to the local neighbourhood, which means that there is little time or inclination for mixing with other residents. Second, where social interaction does occur, it is generally with immediate neighbours who are more likely to be in the same tenure or have similar socioeconomic backgrounds. A key factor that facilitated social interaction in the current study was the presence of children attending local schools. Each of these themes is discussed in turn.

People are Busy – Little Time for Mixing

In discussions about social interactions occurring with other residents within the neighbourhood, numerous respondents expressed the viewpoint that people’s lives were too busy for much interaction to take place, especially when people were working. For one respondent this meant that in effect:

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... over the time we've been here, it's become less friendly. But that seems to be the way of most neighbourhoods now, because neighbours just don't talk to each other. They're too busy, they have insufficient time or they're not interested ... and I think both parties are working and they don't get a lot of time. (N6, home owner)

Other respondents described similar situations:

I go to work every day early in the morning, I come home at night and I don't connect with my neighbours. So their whole theory around social mix is that it is meant to help people, but that is not necessarily happening in society today. (N204, private rental tenant)

You never see anybody. These girls over here, there's two I think. As far as I know you see the two come together, they are nurses and they are on shift work, so you never see them. And I think the other side, the lady, she's new too, and I never see her. (MP270, social housing tenant)

Other respondents, such as those in employment, pointed out that they had links and social ties way beyond the local neighbourhood, often with their old neighbourhoods, which is consistent with the findings of the international literature:

We do keep in touch with the neighbours from the other one [old neighbourhood]. We pop down every now and then and say hello and how are you. We do, yes. They're elderly neighbours and they loved to see the kids. The kids would drop in, take their bikes for a ride and ... yeah, they've grown up with them ... seen them born. (N70, social housing tenant).

Where Social Interaction Occurs

Where social interaction did take place it was generally described as being between neighbours and often perfunctory, such as waving or saying hello in the street. Much of this type of contact was facilitated by the presence of children:

One person on one side keeps very much to himself. He'll wave and that's probably it. The people on the other side, our two youngest kids play with them. You might get an acknowledgement occasionally from them ... think that's the trend now, anyway. People tend not to be quite as friendly. (N70, social housing tenant)

Another typical response was as follows:

And I would say that it's friendly but not close, so people smile at each other in the street but they don't necessarily know each other well. In our little set of units here, it has taken us two and a half years to get to know our neighbours ... and we know our neighbour across the driveway very well because he is not very nice. (N204, private rental tenant)

In this situation, the problematic neighbour was the only owner-occupier in the group of clustered units. The other neighbours knew each other but it had taken a long time for social interaction to occur, even though the units were spatially integrated.

Consistent with the findings of Atkinson and Kintrea (2000) and Jupp (1999), as described by the following respondents, the presence of children at local schools facilitated higher levels of mixing across tenures:

When the girls were at the primary school, and that's just down the road, there'd be lots of single mothers bringing their kids to school who lived a matter of streets away. And myself, we own our home, you've got a lot of single parents, and we all talk and get on well together. (H98, home owner)

Being in the school, we have all the mixture of the Hillcrest community in there. You've got all walks of community. You've just got to go in the car park in the morning and it's mind-boggling the cars you see there. There will be a sports car or there will be a beautiful four-wheel-drive and you think, my God, it's just amazing that all these different people live in this area and they all go to this one public school and they play together as one, or try to. (H2R, social housing tenant)

Respondents often pointed out that, with regeneration of the areas, not only were more home owners moving in but there was a broader age mix. These groups often lead different lifestyles, which might preclude them from interacting with each other. As the following respondent explains, young people, for instance, were often working hard to pay the mortgage and did not spend a lot of time in the neighbourhood.

In contrast, a lot of elderly people were housebound. Once again, people with children were depicted as those most likely to meet and mix with others as they were out and about the local neighbourhood:

Some of them [neighbours] are young, some are middle-aged, some older. There's quite a mixture that are buying here. There were some young people living up the road on the right hand side, but you don't really see much of them, because they're young and they're working hard ... And then you've got elderly people living

in these houses that don't get out much of the time, and you get young people, people up the road that have got two young boys that moved in a couple of years back with the house, and they're of some new-found religion or something ... I don't believe in any of it. They're nice people. I get on with them really well. I have fun with their kids in the playground at school, you know, so there's all different walks of life. I accept people for who they are as I meet them. (H2R, social housing tenant)

The neighbourhood is not friendly ... because of the social mix. You've either got the really elderly people who are friendly, or you've got your cautious young couples with kids. Because of the really awful things happening with paedophiles and stuff like that, I think people are really sheltered and they hold on to kids and don't let them out of their sight. So it's not so friendly with the young. (H7, home owner)

Other residents expressed the viewpoint that as the new home owners were younger couples, often child-free and out working to pay their mortgages, they tended not to spend much time in the neighbourhoods or frequent local schools. In addition, it was pointed out that the changes in socioeconomic mix after regeneration made it even less likely for contact to occur across tenures:

Before there were all mainly the same types of people and now there are huge differences. Like your really poor and really wealthy – not wealthy, but much better-off people – and I think they don't mix. (H7, home owner)

In contrast, another respondent felt that the different tenures 'mix in pretty well' and did not really have a choice because although 'a lot of people poke their nose up ... they can't do anything about it, you've got to live there', (N282, home owner).

Social Mix and Scale

The findings of this study concur with the international literature that highlights the important role that scale of implementation of social mix plays in social interaction. In the current study, beyond the differing and busy lifestyles, the lack of interaction between residents in different housing tenures was often facilitated as social housing was grouped in particular streets, down one side of a street or in clustered groups of units. This meant that many home owners and private renters were separated from the social housing tenants:

There's neighbours on either side owner-occupiers, the house two along on one side, and I think most of them are ... No, there's no social housing. (MP118, private rental tenant)

All the neighbours are home buyers except over the road – house is private rental. (H7, home owner)

One side of the street is Housing Trust [social housing], the other side newer homes [home owners]. (MP270, social housing tenant)

Another home owner mentioned that she lived in a part of the neighbourhood where there was little social housing so she never came into contact with social housing tenants. In fact, the only time she saw ‘Trust tenants’ was when they came into her work at the local Westfield shopping centre (MP1, home owner).

While the layout of the neighbourhoods suggested that there was little spatial integration between the different housing tenures, a perception existed at Mitchell Park, in particular, that social housing tenants were responsible for anti-social behaviour and other problems in the neighbourhood. Sometimes this was based on experience, as expressed by the following home owner who lived down the road from a T-junction that entered a street of concentrated social housing:

One day it was like being in New York. I looked out my window, and I could see these cars and these police officers in vests with guns, and swarming around the outside of the house. Then there was this big attack, and they grabbed the girl and dragged her, and she bit someone, and they had the ambulance. And it was like the streets of New York here. (MP9, home owner)

In other instances, divisions were obvious between the ‘old’ and established social housing tenants, often elderly, who had been in social housing a long time, and the newer, more complex and high need tenants who characterise those now entering social housing. As one elderly tenant depicted the situation:

Oh, the language, they used to swear like anything and it was terrible, you could hear them all, the kiddies ... She couldn't care less but they were terrible children. Amazing how they get these homes, people like that ... Oh, it was funny, it was like Coronation street! I'm glad there're gone, anyhow. (MP6, social housing tenant)

She's bipolar and her and her kids fight all the time and they yell and scream and slam doors, so I rang the HT [Housing Trust], probably three months ago. She started at three o'clock in the morning and she went right through ... and I just couldn't take any more so I waited and got the HT and I complained. They rang her and told her that it was unacceptable. She was quiet for three weeks and they rang me back and asked me. I said that so far she'd been quiet, but it's not going to last. The woman said that instead of ringing us [HT] – and you can ring us – but her advice was to ring the police, then it's on record for them. (N56, social housing tenant)

A key finding was that previous social housing tenants who had become home owners, often through purchase opportunities provided by the regeneration project, were keen to distinguish themselves from the social housing tenure:

A lot of them are trouble. It puts your [house] value down, I think, if you've got them [social housing tenants] all around. A lot of people don't notice who they are, but I do.

(H55, home owner, previous social housing tenant)

This point has been highlighted in earlier research conducted in the Hillcrest area. Biggins and Hassan (1998) assessed the success of the integration component of the Hillcrest Regeneration Project specifically from the aspect of residents' acceptance of socioeconomic diversity and the new mix of social and private housing.

The highest approval for the new mixed community came from low income earners receiving less than \$25,000 per annum (79.4 per cent). Conversely, middle income earners (\$35,000 to \$55,000) approved the least (40 per cent). This is 25 per cent fewer than those residents on incomes over \$55,000 (Biggins and Hassan, 1998, 39). Hence, where social distance is least, that is, from the point of view of middle income earners, there is greater disapproval of the new mixed income community. It seems that middle income residents want to distance themselves from low income residents in the income strata below them, which is consistent with general findings on social interactions, social networks and social distancing and the current study findings.

In other situations that home owners and private renters described as follows, it was difficult to disentangle the perception and stigma associated with the social housing tenure from the reality of what was happening in the mixed tenure neighbourhoods:

And then if you do live in a block of social housing, you get to know the other people living in social housing who might have been unemployed for quite a long time, and then you all smoke pot together and have a good time and get even less motivated about getting a job. Or maybe just get more comfortable not having a job or whatever, I think.

(N204, private rental tenant)

I can tell you going down my street which ones are the Housing Trust, which ones are the rentals, by the rubbish they are leaving out in the street – dumping it alongside the road, that sort of attitude – and what it actually does is, instead of pulling up those who are in the lower socioeconomic group, it actually dumbs down, it drags down the neighbourhood.

(MP7, home owner)

There are one or two streets that I wouldn't want to live in. That's mainly probably because they are Housing Trust homes and you might find that obviously the people who live in those homes are maybe of a poorer

quality of life or something like that, but that I suppose is being judgemental. It might be a very nice street to live in, but I wouldn't live in it. When you look at the home and the way it has been let go, you wouldn't want to live next to somewhere like that, I think.

(MP118, private rental tenant)

These findings are similar to other studies in that the social housing tenure is stigmatised by private home owners and even private renters, although in reality there appears little social contact between tenures. Social interaction is not often facilitated as social housing tends to be located on one side of the street or concentrated in a particular part of the neighbourhood as a clustered group of units. Whether or not residents' perceptions reflect reality is a moot point, as the stigma attached to social housing appears to undermine opportunities for cross-tenure social interaction.

Some of the social housing respondents expressed the view that it is important to disperse concentrations of social housing. One explained that living among people who were similarly disadvantaged impacted negatively on her perception of herself:

People need variety to start with. Where you have got areas with all public housing tenants, everybody's on a low income, which is why they are in public housing for whatever reason, and it's really easy to be demoralised by that.

(MP8, social housing tenant)

Likewise, for another social housing tenant, tenure diversity was preferable:

... for the kids, for everybody growing up in the area, it's more social, you meet different people in life, you get to learn respect and to value other people's opinions and property. It is a different set-up and I think it's working for the best. I think they should have done it a long time ago.

(H2, social housing tenant)

Some of the home owners expressed similar viewpoints, suggesting that it might be better to have a mix of people of different tenures interspersed, so that the 'Trust people' can be among other residents who are employed or on higher incomes (MP1, home owner). One associated high concentrations of social housing with 'ghettoes':

... getting away from the ghettoes is certainly the way to go because I think, just looking at what happened in the past, it was certainly a recipe to create dreadful areas and for bad behaviour to be encouraged in the sense that good behaviour was never rewarded. Why bother to do up your house if you're likely to get a beer bottle thrown through your front yard window, or next door had got five or six car bodies sitting in your front yard?

(H155, home owner)

Conclusion

This paper has examined the underlying rationale of social mix policies that propinquity facilitates social interaction between residents across different income levels and housing tenures through in-depth interviews in three case study neighbourhoods. Analysis of the study findings suggests a complex picture and that the spatial scale of implementation of social mix is an important consideration as a context for social interaction. In general, across the three neighbourhoods, there appeared to be little social interaction between residents in different tenures.

The exception was residents with children, and local schools were identified as important places for facilitating social interaction. In part, this lack of social interaction may not illustrate an obvious choice but rather seems facilitated because social housing is spatially separated from the other housing tenures.

Clearly, the greater the distance between residents in the different housing tenures, then the less likely they are to interact.

A key difficulty is that the literature on social mix lacks precision in detailing the relevant geographic scale of implementation. Conceptually, it is unclear at what level of spatial scale the effects of diversification are expected to work. In view of these findings, there is a need to view the neighbourhood as multi-layered – this means different neighbourhood effects operate at different spatial scales. For instance, is social mix more effective as a ‘salt and pepper’ arrangement or as small homogenous clusters within a more mixed area? This current conceptual confusion hinders policy development.

Another important finding is that social housing policies targeting only high need, complex and difficult tenants are at odds with social mix policies. The resultant stigma attached to a residualised social housing tenure makes social interaction across different housing tenures even less likely. As long as social housing continues to target the most complex tenants, spatially integrating residents seems more likely to heighten awareness of differences and perhaps lead to conflict, as has been found in some other studies.

Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that lifestyle may be the more important factor impacting on social interaction than housing tenure, so there is a need to look beyond a focus on neighbourhood to where residents’ employment, family and friends are located.

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