

Mixed Communities: the Fourth Dimension

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘mixed communities’ has become an overarching goal of housing and regeneration policy in the UK and in several other European countries. This is in response to concerns about social segregation in itself, and to the desire to reduce the social and individual costs of segregation – in spatial location, in ways of life and in attitudes. Research and policy effort on mixed communities has focussed on the first three dimensions – space. In particular, it has concentrated on how to create or maintain ‘spatial’ social mix within residential areas of cities. Space is seen to structure the potential for interactions between different sorts of people, and neighbourhood planning and careful design is thought to have the potential to encourage more interaction between them. Several countries have seen policies to influence neighbourhood social composition and housing mix, layout and design.

However, the studies which have looked into social processes and social and economic outcomes in existing and carefully-created ‘mixed’ residential areas have often found limited or disappointing results, at least against the most ambitious aims, and in particular on the extent of interaction between different sorts of residents. Some have suggested that the different lifestyles of different residents might be creating practical or social barriers to sustained or even casual interaction. Different daily schedules may mean that even literal next door neighbours rarely set eyes on each other, with little potential for spatial social mix to lead to social mixing.

This paper asks how much mixed communities encourage people of different kinds to: 1) observe each other; short of actual social mixing and 2) interact in a casual or a more meaningful way. It does this by exploring in more depth the fourth dimension of social life – time – which has been neglected in urban studies. Bringing together disparate evidence sources, from a wide range of literatures, it examines how time structures the potential for observation and interaction between similar and different sorts of people living in close proximity. It also introduces an experimental method for investigating the real experience of social mix across space and time in daily life.

Once time is taken into account, it appears that residential areas are being asked to do too much to create social mix and social mixing – perhaps schools, workplaces and public facilities offer neglected potential. In addition, concern about physically gated communities may be misplaced, given the significance of the barriers of time.

Key Words: Mixed communities; social cohesion; time