

'There goes the neighbourhood . . .':
recasting 'neighbourhood effects' and 'disadvantaged places'
using collaborative 'emergence' methodology

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'There goes the neighbourhood . . .':
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through participatory action research

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the early stages of a cross-national project foregrounding tenants' constructions of the links between disadvantage and residential neighbourhood, and thus challenges conventional notions of place-based disadvantage. The research takes an open ended approach to knowledge and deploys a participatory action research approach that minimises pre-definition of problems and research questions, and generates opportunities for participants to develop their own accounts of the role of place/neighbourhood, in their lives.

The concept of 'neighbourhood effects' remains controversial in housing and urban studies, despite being widely used to justify public housing redevelopment. Critics have questioned the measurability of such effects, and even the utility of the theory (Lupton 2003), while even those who claim to demonstrate a link between location and disadvantage admit that possible 'causal mechanisms' are poorly understood. Galster (2009) highlights the importance of 'external' factors, such as under-investment and stigma, in reproducing disadvantage, and since most identified disadvantaged neighbourhoods, in advanced capitalist countries, are dominated by public housing, to this can be added the eligibility, allocation and management practices of housing authorities.

The 'exclusion' of public tenants can be seen to extend to their exclusion from the discursive practices through which disadvantaged places have become problematised, and in which policy solutions are framed. These practices notably include academic research, where the definition and identification of disadvantaged places, and the local processes at work, is primarily the province of experts. Conventional positivist epistemology, which dominates both research and policy-making, systematically excludes important aspects of community life as experienced by those most affected (Darcy 2007).

The study reported here has been developed in collaboration with grass-roots tenant leaders and representative organisations. It uses a range of visual and interactive techniques, including participatory diagramming and video-conferencing, to collaboratively construct, interpret and theorise residents' accounts of place and disadvantage. Although locally initiated, these accounts and analysis are developed collaboratively across sites. This is to allow and encourage participants to consider the different ways in which place factors might impinge in different contexts and to think deductively about the meaning of these differences rather than reacting to specific local conditions or interventions. This cross-national, collaborative approach also encourages communication and networking between participants which may lead to innovative approaches or action plans addressing the problems and issues they identify.

Introduction

This paper reports on the early stages of a new study of the links between housing, place and disadvantage. The research is designed to be multi-site, trans-national and collaborative. It is intended to develop and demonstrate innovative ways of reframing contemporary debate about concentration and de-concentration of poverty, particularly through redevelopment of public housing areas in major cities. The project aims to cast new light on this debate by directly involving affected residents of disadvantaged areas in research design and implementation, and to provide opportunities for residents to develop and share insights across sites, both within cities and across national boundaries and cultures.

This approach seeks to respond to the fundamental problem for Housing Studies identified by Allen (2009: 55)

challenges to Housing Studies knowledge and understanding from other epistemic universes (“lived experience”, etc.) are often dismissed as inferior. I argue that this is a form of fraudulent scientific imperialism because it fails to recognize the epistemological value of “lived experience” and the “local knowledge” that is constituted through it.

The research strategy is intended to support residents of publicly subsidised housing – as situated knowledge producers - to examine the so called ‘problem’ of public housing / subsidised housing concentration, and to scrutinize the strategy of de-concentration and the *mixed income* neighbourhood model underpinning housing renewal programs in both Australia and the United States.

While disadvantaged communities have often been the focus of university and government sponsored research, this project is intended to go well beyond gaining residents’ insights or responses to the predetermined questions of professional researchers. If successful it will provide an opportunity for residents of so-called ‘excluded’ or disadvantaged neighbourhoods to be involved in setting the research and policy agenda. It is anticipated that synthesising situated / local knowledge with other sites of local knowledge will produce new ways of understanding the issues surrounding *social exclusion* and proposed policy solutions such as redevelopment and *mixed income* housing projects.

Findings produced by the transnational linking of local knowledges can be used to provide credible alternative perspectives to views that deconcentration is the only way of increasing opportunity in low-income communities. Research results will have implications for housing renewal programs in many other countries.

This is not primarily a theoretical paper but a report on an emerging research approach. It does not deal substantively with either the dominant forms of knowledge about place and disadvantage or with philosophical considerations of the nature of knowledge. However, a short review of relevant elements of each of these is warranted. Thus the remainder of the paper is divided into three parts: the first reviews briefly the dominant contemporary ways of conceptualising the relationship between place and disadvantage; the second suggests the need to reassess the epistemology which underlies this discourse; the last section outlines our attempt to conduct research which reflects a new epistemology of housing studies.

Dominant Discourses of Place and Disadvantage

In what could be described as a ‘spatial turn’, the impact of ‘place’ – or, more specifically, residential location - on the social and economic condition of households has emerged as a fundamental concern of social science and social policy over the past decade. Illustrative constructs including ‘social exclusion’, ‘neighbourhood effects’ and ‘the geography of opportunity’ have been developed by social scientists to describe and attempt to explain the apparent persistence of social disadvantage amongst poor households residing together in defined ‘poor areas’ of major cities. However, measurement of these constructs, and demonstration of causal links between place and disadvantage or opportunity, has proved elusive.

As Levitas (1998) points out, the discourse of social exclusion imagines a boundary, and focuses attention on those outside it rather than on the features of society which systematically generate widespread poverty and disadvantage. The metaphor of ‘exclusion’ has contributed to the construction of disadvantage as a largely spatial phenomenon, drawing attention to the location and concentration of people in poverty, usually within small and defined areas, as evidence of a causal link between place and poverty which is mediated by local cultures.

To the extent that exclusion, and hence poverty, is perceived as (at least partly) a function of residential propinquity, then its persistence is understood as primarily a process of cultural reproduction strongly reminiscent of Oscar Lewis’s (1961) ‘Culture of Poverty’ theory – social exclusion/poverty persists in certain geographically defined areas because people are exposed to dominant local values and locally acceptable behaviours which inhibit personal economic advancement and independence.

The ‘neighbourhood effects’ theory suggests that the geographic propinquity of large numbers of disadvantaged households creates a social or cultural dynamic at the local level which compounds and perpetuates their disadvantage, while conversely ‘social capital’ is understood as the form of social interaction/relationships which leads to or sustains economic well-being, through role modelling, networking and civic participation. Social capital is thus commonly associated with ‘face-to-face’ relationships and interaction in the ‘non-economic’ sphere of local neighbourhoods or communities, and so also has a spatial character. Regardless of what we know about the operation of affinity and economic networks, especially in the cyber-age, physical space and the built form are deeply embedded in ideas concerning the production of social (civic) behaviour and anti-social behaviour. Aspects of residential areas, including questions of density, distinctive building design and specific combinations of public and private space are all assumed to be implicated in the production of social capital, as evidenced for example by the New Urbanist principles guiding redevelopment of public housing and new town development in the US and Australia.

The fact that the places where prosperous households reside appear to manifest better commercial facilities and public infrastructure –and house richer people - is seen as evidence of local social capital at work. Conversely, when applied to the analysis of public housing space this logic has deemed such spaces to lack social capital, or to have the wrong type of social capital (“bonding” or even “negative” social capital) which cannot lead to economic capital because at best it is unproductive and at worst produces anti-social behaviour.

A lively international debate has emerged, in academic and policy circles, concerning what to do about ‘disadvantaged places’. New books have appeared (Allen 2008; Bennett,

Smith and Wright 2006; Goetz 2003), two international journals have produced special issues in 2008¹, a number of national² and international conferences³ have been convened, and a welter of scholarly and research articles have appeared in leading journals.

In the policy domain, state policies which historically contributed to the geographical separation and containment of poor households have more recently been concerned with the emergence of an urban economic and social 'underclass' and now emphasize dispersal or penetration of low income communities as a way of generating social order in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Uitermark et al 2007).

De-concentration of poverty, and the development of mixed income communities, has become a central theme of (public or social) housing policy across the English speaking world. A key premise of de-concentration is that poor communities lack the 'social capital' required to build wealth, that they are 'socially excluded' and that by living in more economically mixed areas, poor people will learn skills and build social networks necessary to engage in cultural practices which will improve their lives (deFillipis 2007).

Whose problem, whose knowledge? A question of epistemology

In the research and policy development activity described above, with a few notable exceptions, and certainly in the policy directions which have emerged, the voice and perspective of those most affected is absent. This is despite Allen's concession that

theoretical housing researchers are very well aware that dominant definitions of housing issues (whether in social science or society at large) are simply those whose protagonists have successfully transformed them from concepts into 'established facts' that are widely agreed upon (Allen 2009:62).

The 'exclusion' of public tenants can thus be seen to extend to their exclusion from the discursive practices through which disadvantaged places have become problematised, and in which policy solutions are framed. These discursive practices notably include academic research. Conventional positivist epistemology, which dominates both research and policy-making, systematically excludes important aspects of community life as experienced by those most affected (Darcy 2007, 2009).

Where attempts have been made to incorporate residents' experiences and insights (Arthurson, 2002; Bryson & Thompson, 1972; Peel, 1995; Randolph & Wood, 2004; Warr, 2005) this has generally been undertaken through conventional empirical and case study approaches which are, nevertheless, premised on the academic convention of knowledge production which partitions community and academic knowledge bases (Nyden, 2006). Moreover, the approach has the tendency to represent research participants as an (often invisible) 'Other' (Subedi & Rhee, 2008). As Allen contends:

A key problem . . . is that the social sciences ask questions about housing phenomena that are fundamentally different to the types of questions posed (if they are posed at all) by people as they dwell in everyday life. (Allen 2009:66)

¹ Journal of Education Policy 23(2) March 2008; Journal of Urban Affairs 30(2) April 2008

² Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute *Housing and Social Inclusion* Melbourne 7th Oct 2008

³ Durham University *Well-being and Place: an International Conference* April 2009

Previous research and community engagement work conducted by the research centres⁴ involved in this study demonstrates the strength of place attachment and positive social engagement by residents in identified disadvantaged areas (for example, Minto Resident Action Group 2005, and Loyola University 1996). By drawing out and bringing together the situated and experiential knowledge of residents in disadvantaged communities in contrasting urban settings, and across national and cultural differences, we aim to assist resident researchers to analyse deductively their links to the theoretical discourses of exclusion, inclusion and social mix, and to open a new space for debate concerning the relationship between social inclusion, geography and housing policy.

Nyden (2006: 21) notes that the ability of local research groups to share research questions, experiences and knowledge “represents an underdeveloped source of new knowledge”. A fundamental aspect of this research is the transnational linking of local knowledges to inspire and create a dynamic, cross-cultural production of knowledge. Comparative findings produced by the transnational linking of local knowledges can be used to provide credible alternative perspectives to views that deconcentration is the only way of increasing opportunity in low-income communities. The cross cultural sharing of knowledge involves the placing of one’s own experience in the context of others, and drawing on the similarities and differences to develop more comprehensive explanations and understandings. Such an approach is particularly important given the ‘travelling policy’ (Ozga & Jones, 2006) of social mix as the solution orthodoxy to the ‘problem’ of concentrated public housing. With regard to the liberating potential of globalisation Sassen refers to:

the multiplication of partial, often highly specialized, cross-border assemblages of bits of national territory, authority, and rights that are getting dislodged from national settings . . . some of which are emergent spaces for political action, notably spaces where those confined to the nation-state (citizens) or those who are immobile (because of poverty or political vulnerability) can actually engage in global politics (Sassen 2008),

Following on from Sassen then, this situation warrants comparative research which is capable of recasting international debate concerning the relationship between poverty, place and housing. Involving local communities as integral members of this trans-national research is expected to produce new insights, understandings and knowledge.

A methodology of emergence

The methodology underpinning this research project is driven by the need to explore the issues of place, community and advantage and disadvantage through techniques which produce alternate ways of knowing and ‘new *theoretical* possibilities’ (Cahill, 2007). Consequently, drawing on the paradigm of engaged scholarship (Holland, 2006), the research is designed using a ‘collaborative university – community research’ approach (Nyden, 2006). This methodology involves community collaborators informing each phase of the research, from developing specific research questions, to data collection, analyses and dissemination (Cahill, 2004). It is an approach which recognises that community contributors are competent agents and experts in their own lives (Cahill, 2007), and thus emphasises the integration of academic and community knowledge in the making of new knowledge. According to Nyden (2006), the real value of collaborative

⁴ Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at UWS and Centre for Urban Research And Learning at Loyola university Chicago

research is the emphasis on *what could be* rather than the traditional research emphasize on *what is*.

The research design is intended to support residents of publicly subsidised housing – as situated knowledge producers - to investigate the ‘problem’ of public housing / subsidised housing concentration, and to scrutinize the strategies of public policy agencies which seek to address it. As outlined above tenants have rarely had opportunities to frame their own research, and universities are generally less supportive of research that commences without well developed plans and proposal, so this approach presents many initial challenges.

The university based researchers need to develop relationships and networks amongst tenants, and to carefully avoid imposing pre-emptive theoretical frameworks, while at the same time continually reinforcing the potential for resident’s lived experience to be valorised as ‘knowledge’, disseminated, discussed and responded to by other contributors.

Allen argues that failure to recognize the epistemological value of “‘*lived experience*’ and ‘*local knowledge*’ . . . is not simply an epistemological issue, but constitutes a violation of lived meanings . . . [which] also has ethical and political consequences.” (Allen 2009: 55)

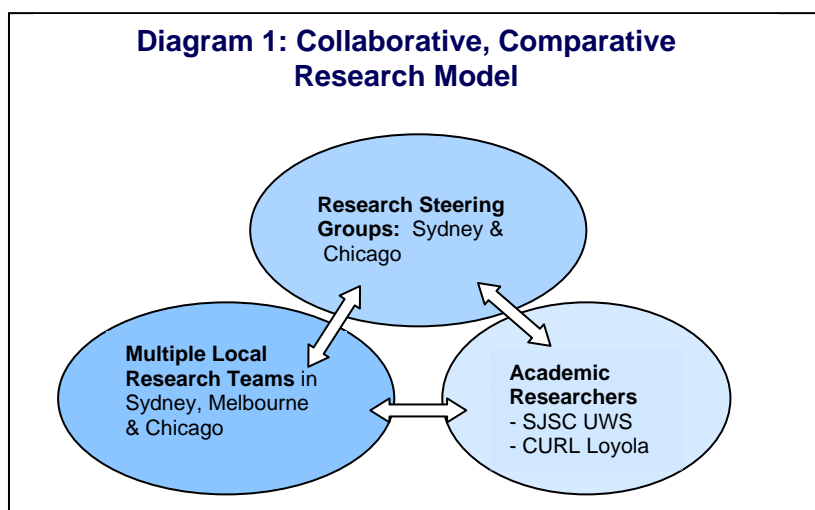
The collaborative aspect of this research foregrounds the need to develop ethical relationships with and between co-researchers. In part this involves being attentive to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status, but moreover to recognise the different ways people of the same community, gender or cultural background express and interpret data. An ethical relationship also privileges the relationships involved in the project over outputs, as important as the latter are (Subedi & Rhee, 2008).

The study will focus primarily on sites in the metropolitan regions of Sydney, Melbourne and Chicago. The sites have been chosen largely on the basis that the researchers have strong existing contacts with tenants groups, and also have access to technological resource and communication nodes in these cities. Nonetheless, the similarities and differences displayed in these cities offer an opportunity to divine from practice the principles driving these developments which are independent of the particular urban context. Both are large metropolitan centres with a small minority of public tenant households, although in each case a large proportion of public housing dwellings were ‘mass produced’ in relatively large scale concentrated projects developed between the late fifties and the late seventies (as part of the Keynesian/modernist welfare state, and to provide affordable housing for the low income urban industrial workforce).

In each case, eligibility criteria, underinvestment and tenancy management issues have seen this housing occupied by progressively more disadvantaged populations, fewer and fewer of whom are in the paid workforce. These tenants and the housing have become ever more stigmatised and associated in policy discourse and the public mind as undesirable, crime ridden, dangerous and degraded places which are seen as encouraging welfare dependency and intergenerational poverty. Programs of deconcentration and social mix are viewed as the prescription to this problem. Where prior to the current housing market crisis Chicago was the most active U.S. city in transforming subsidised housing communities through poverty de-concentration and social mix, Sydney is emerging as the Australian leader. The juxtaposition of the similarities and differences between housing renewal project sites presents a dynamic canvas upon which new ways of understanding social mix policies can be developed.

Collaborative, comparative research model

The collaborative, comparative research model informed by this methodology of emergence involves three primary components - city based research steering groups, multiple local research teams and academic research teams (see Diagram 1) - and the transnational linking of these knowledge bases (see Diagram 2).



i Research Steering Groups

It is proposed that each city will have its own local steering group comprising of people engaged in public and subsidised housing issues including residents, tenant support networks and tenant advocates. The role of the steering groups is to guide the research and research teams, refocus the project as required and assist with recruitment of residents to local research teams. The local steering groups, in conjunction with the support of the academic research teams, will also be able to develop and support the transnational communication between local research teams and residents, which is fundamental to the success of the project.

ii Local Research Teams

Local research teams will comprise public housing residents. The principal role of the local research teams is, with support from their local steering group and academic researchers, to determine the issues, frame research questions relevant to their context, and collect data through techniques appropriate to the groups' questions, skills and interests. Groups will also be involved in the analysis of their data and in the inter-city linking of local findings (see Diagram 2 – Linking Knowledge Bases).

context based story telling (autoethnography) and visual contributions (photographic, video) will be important methods of cross-cultural knowledge development, exchange and interpretation of findings. In collaborative emergence research, data analysis is an integral part of the research process and is not necessarily separate from the processes of data collection and production techniques. Regular “moments of analysis” (Cahill, 2007: 306) emerge at various points of the research processes as part of the collaborators’ reflective praxis.

Establishing formal and informal local and transnational communication opportunities is a particularly important methodological aspect of this project because it is within and between the sharing of experiences, ideas, arguments and rationales that new knowledge emerges. And it is within these communication opportunities that the analysis of data takes place.

Consequently, communication opportunities will need to be well supported. One way of doing this will be to establish an interactive website for supporting communication between research teams - transnational, local and institutional - and individuals involved in the project. The site will also have the potential to facilitate international blogs on pertinent aspects of the research, data collection, live feed-back loops, and the dissemination of findings and outputs. Although the general content of the website would be managed by the steering groups and researchers, the intention is that all manner of material emerging from the project could be posted and online, open discussion encouraged. Other methods of supporting communication exchange include virtual, transnational face-to-face meetings through teleconferencing as well as physical face-to-face meetings between members of the steering committees and local research team.

4. Collation of findings and dissemination of various outputs. Dissemination amongst research members is as important as disseminating findings to the academy and policy community. Although academic outputs will be one form information dissemination, the emphasis will be on disseminating information through more accessible mediums and publications that all research team members will have input into and the potential to access.

The data collection and analysis techniques which are applicable to ‘emergence methodology’ include:

- Participatory Diagramming: this is a flexible participatory visual technique which draws on the knowledge and experience of participants, reflects their own priorities and interests, and promotes information sharing and education. Participants work initially in small peer groups or teams over a period of time. Question raising, question answering and issues are worked through by the group using large sheets of paper, coloured pens, sticky dots, post-it notes and what ever other visual materials are necessary or handy. Although the visual output is important, the most valuable part of the method is the discussion which develops. Exclusive groupings are then encouraged too participate in inclusive plenary sessions to examine the perspectives of others (Kesby, 2000).
- Story telling and collaborative autoethnography: this involves grounding research data in the concrete details of community researchers’ lives (Cahill, 2007). Autoethnography can be produced in written, visual and verbal forms.
- Other possibilities include creative techniques such as photo voice, film making and arts based inquiry.

In practice...

A number of aspects of this project are in the process of being piloted. For instance, a Sydney based steering group primarily comprising residents from inner city and outer suburban public housing estates was established in 2008. The group has met a number of times to discuss the nature and potential of the project, possible research questions and issues around communication including the cost and access to communication technology. These meetings also provided an opportunity for members to discuss and compare their experiences of living in public housing. This was particularly important in demonstrating the knowledge which can develop through such a process.

Members of the group also participated in a video-conference with community organisers and advocates working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Chicago. Again the experience enabled a sharing of experiences and knowledge. Importantly the conference also provided the opportunity for public housing residents in Australia to realise and reflect on some of the converging ideas and attitudes relating to the concentration of disadvantage, and the realisation that it's not just a local thing.

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19 December 2008

Dear Project Partners,

Firstly we would like to thank you for your support in the development of the RESIDENTS' VOICE' project over the past six months. We believe that with your continued support and interest together we will be able to develop new and more relevant ways of understanding some of the issues involved in public housing tenancy and also the changes that are happening around us.

As discussed at our meeting of 26 November 2008, Gabrielle, Larry and Michael were invited by the Inner Sydney TAFE Outreach 'Residents in Harmony' committee to talk about the RESIDENTS' VOICE project at their 11 December Community Forum at Alexandria Town Hall. Rather than *talk* we thought it would be a good opportunity to demonstrate the rationale of the project through a demonstration diagramming workshop.

Two groups explored the themes of '*My Place / My Community*', and '*On Being a Houso! Perceptions / Reality, Hopes and Fears*'. The photographs below (courtesy of Larry) were taken at the workshop.





Participants' responses to the workshop were extremely positive, and many of them wanted to continue the process at a later date. This was most encouraging.

Early next year we would like to run a similar demonstration workshop with the Residents' Voice Steering Group. As we discovered last week, the strengths and weaknesses of the approach are more likely to be discovered 'in practice'. We will confer on appropriate dates and locations in the New Year.

At this stage we are still waiting to confirm with Phil Nyden, from the Centre for Urban Research and Learning, Chicago, the date and time of the international video conference seminar on community organising in the Obama era. We hope you will be able to participate in the seminar and meet some of the community leaders from Chicago who may be involved in the project in the US. At this stage we are looking at a date in mid February. Again we will keep you posted. The University of Western Sydney has video conferencing rooms at Campbelltown and Bankstown (Milperra) campuses. As Bankstown is the more central for most people we will endeavour to book the room there.

We at the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre wish you the very best for the festive season. We look forward to our continuing collaboration in the New Year.

Regards

Michael Darcy and Gabrielle Gwyther