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THE SOCIAL MIX DEBATE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD EFFECTS RESEARCH?
ABSTRACT

The increasing promotion of neighbourhood social mixing as a potential remedy for urban social problems has given rise to reinvigorated debate about the expectations, problems, and limits of social mixing initiatives. Critics call into question the fundamental assumptions underlying neighbourhood social mixing strategies, the contradictions and ambiguities about how social mix should translate into beneficial outcomes for residents, and the insufficient attention given to the social costs involved, especially for the populations excluded from newly mixed and revitalized neighbourhoods. In this debate, scholars point out that much of the research on ‘neighbourhood effects’ and the effects of ‘concentrated poverty’ has advanced the notion that living among poor people perpetuates individual poverty, whereas middle-class neighbours provide benefits. This field of research is thus seen as lending theoretical and empirical support to social mixing policies. After briefly reviewing how social mixing is currently being promoted at the neighbourhood level and summarizing key points from the growing critique of social mixing and poverty deconcentration strategies, this paper asks what the social mix debate means for neighbourhood effects research.

Submitted for review. Co-authored by Sako Musterd.
5.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Socially mixed neighbourhoods’ have emerged as a major urban policy goal in cities throughout Western Europe, North America and elsewhere. Social mix (and in many instances, ethnic mix) is promoted through a range of policy interventions, from the large-scale restructuring of low-income neighbourhoods into mixed-tenure, mixed-income communities, to planning regulations that seek to intervene in the social makeup of targeted neighbourhoods (Rose, 2004; Davidson, 2008; Lees, 2008). While these policies serve a number of objectives and interests, one dominant objective is to alleviate concentrations of low-income households and thus, the individual and neighbourhood problems perceived to be caused or exacerbated by these concentrations.

In step with the renewed enthusiasm for social mixing on the part of urban governance and other proponents, has been a growing body of scholarship which challenges the theoretical groundings, empirical support and ideological underpinnings of social mixing strategies (Goodchild and Cole, 2001; Tunstall, 2003; Uitermark, 2003; Kleinhans, 2004; Rose, 2004; Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Musterd and Andersson, 2005; Joseph et al., 2007; Lees, 2008; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008; Lupton and Fuller, 2009; Goetz, 2010). Part of this work examines why social mix is increasingly endorsed, how it is politically framed and what the motives – stated and unstated – behind these strategies are (Uitermark, 2003; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). Critics stress that the rhetoric of social mixing often camouflages state-led gentrification strategies, in which the state actively encourages and supports gentrification, typically in partnership with private actors (Lees, 2008). Particularly in Europe, advocacy of social mix is connected to renewed anxiety about ethnic segregation and integration, social cohesion, and the development of ‘parallel societies’, which are considered to pose a threat to national unity and social order (Uitermark, 2003; Münch, 2009; Phillips, 2010). Another set of critique interrogates the policy objectives and evidence base for mix strategies, with a major focus on whether social mixing is an effective strategy to improve the lives of poor people (Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Musterd and Andersson, 2005; Joseph et al., 2007; Goetz, 2010). When assessed next to the existing empirical literature, the claims that social mixing will improve the economic and social circumstances of low-income residents are at best ambiguous, and at worst, misleading (cf. Tunstall, 2003; Kleinhans, 2004; Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Joseph et al., 2007; Goetz, 2010).

In this critique, a link has been drawn between the academic discourse on ‘neighbourhood effects’ and ‘concentrated poverty’ and the increased policy emphasis on deconcentrating low-income neighbourhoods through social mixing.
(Musterd and Andersson, 2005; Imboscio, 2008; Lipman, 2008; Lupton and Fuller, 2009). This field of research is widely seen as lending theoretical support to social mixing and poverty deconcentration strategies. Writing about the US, Curley (2005: 105) explains:

Theorists and policymakers have taken [William Julius] Wilson’s poverty concentration thesis and argued that if concentrated poverty contributes to unwanted behavior and social ills, then deconcentrating poverty should reverse this effect. This rationale has led to recent housing dispersal programs and mixed-income housing initiatives that intend to deconcentrate poverty, and consequently, reduce the social problems attributed to poverty concentration in urban public housing developments.

Discussing urban policies in Western Europe, van Ham and Manley (2010: 258) also comment that:

[t]he neighbourhood effects discourse has had a major impact on urban neighbourhood and housing policies and has influenced governments to spend large sums of money on area-based policies to tackle poverty. Creating neighbourhoods with a balanced socio-economic mix of residents is a common strategy to tackle assumed negative neighbourhood effects.

Others have questioned whether neighbourhood effects discourse has actually inspired, or is rather helping to legitimate, social mixing policies and the wider turn towards area-based policy (c.f. Fallov, 2010; Smith and Easterlow, 2005: 176). This paper examines the place of neighbourhood effects discourse in the broader debate on neighbourhood social mixing initiatives. In the first part of the paper, we briefly discuss how and why social mix is currently applied at the neighbourhood level, focusing on North America and Western Europe. In the second part, we summarize key points from recent critiques of mix policies, followed by a discussion of the field of neighbourhood effects research, and its place in the social mix debate. Although notions of neighbourhood effects and the (causal) effects of concentrated poverty have, to some extent, been taken up by policymakers in their conceptualizations of the ‘problem’ (i.e. social problems caused by spatially concentrated poverty or socially unbalanced neighbourhoods) and in their justification of the ‘solution’ (i.e. social mixing and poverty deconcentration initiatives), these notions are themselves contested, and
thus the social mix debate offers a useful window into a broader discussion of scholarly research on neighbourhood effects and concentrated poverty. We offer suggestions for future directions in neighbourhood research and in the final section we draw conclusions.

5.2 SOCIAL MIXING: AN OLD IDEAL, A NEW DELIVERY

The origins of social mix as a planning ideal can be traced back to nineteenth century Britain, with its town plans for ‘socially harmonious’, mixed communities (Sarkissian, 1976). The concept shifted in and out of popularity over the years, re-emerging in the 1990s, largely in response to the negative effects tied to poverty concentration and large, monotonous public housing developments (August, 2008). Social mix and poverty deconcentration became widely touted as means of overcoming the difficulties in poor neighbourhoods, and emerged as key components of strategies to ‘revitalize’, ‘restructure’ and ‘regenerate’ these areas (Smith, 2002). These strategies, which variously promote ‘income mix’, ‘social diversity’ and ‘social balance’, seek to deconcentrate low-income neighbourhoods by attracting higher-income households, primarily through housing and tenure diversification (Kleinhans, 2004; Rose, 2004; Joseph et al., 2007; Davidson, 2008; Lees, 2008).

The most ambitious plans promoting social mix are the large-scale neighbourhood restructuring and public housing redevelopment schemes that seek to transform areas of low-income and social housing into mixed-tenure, mixed-income neighbourhoods (Kleinhans, 2004; Goetz, 2010). Typically through a combination of selective housing demolition, refurbishment, tenure conversion and new construction, these programmes decrease the share of low-cost social housing and increase the share of more expensive social and owner-occupied housing. The new owner-occupied dwellings are expected to attract higher-income households into the area, as well as retain upwardly mobile residents. Tenants in social housing units slated for demolition are forced to relocate (Bolt and van Kempen, 2010). The largest and most heavily funded of these programmes are in the US (Goetz, 2003; Curley, 2005), Great Britain (Kleinhans, 2004; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008) and the Netherlands (Uitermark, 2003; Bolt and van Kempen, 2010; van Gent et al., 2009) – as exemplified by HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere), the ‘New Deal for Communities’, and the prevailing Dutch ‘Big Cities Policy’, respectively; programmes also exist
in Canada (August, 2008), Australia (Arthurson, 2005), France (Blanc, 2010) and elsewhere.

These programmes have ambitious social goals; HOPE VI aims to enhance residents’ economic ‘self-sufficiency’, while the focus in Europe and elsewhere is more generally on the ‘upward social mobility’ of residents (Curley and Kleinhans, 2010). In the case of demolition, it is generally assumed that any relocation provides residents ‘inherent benefits’ (Goetz, 2010), as they are not obliged to relocate to any specific kind of neighbourhood, at least not in the Dutch or US case (ibid.; Bolt et al., 2009). Thus, households can move to another poor neighbourhood and many do so. Based on their study of the residential patterns of households forced to move because of restructuring in the Netherlands, Bolt et al. (2009: 510) assert that “[d]isplacement moves tend to be between similar neighbourhoods; such relocations can be characterized as ‘horizontal’ moves”. In a HOPE VI resident tracking study, Popkin et al. (2004: 407) report that about 40 percent of the tenants forced to relocate “have ended up in other, distressed high-poverty neighbourhoods”.

In these programmes, social mixing is one facet of a broader, ‘integrative’ approach to neighbourhood regeneration, in which extra services and support are offered to residents, alongside investments in housing and infrastructure (Lupton and Fuller, 2009; Curley and Kleinhans, 2010). The weight of private-market finance and the role of private actors set these programmes apart from past urban renewal schemes (Smith, 2002; Tunstall, 2003). Whereas urban renewal in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was entirely dependent on public financing, restructuring efforts today rely heavily on private financial capital and public-private partnerships (Smith, 2002). Accordingly, the emphasis has shifted from building (primarily) social housing to promoting homeownership. Current programmes also typically aim for a more transformative change in neighbourhoods than more recent regeneration schemes. As Lupton and Tunstall (2008: 107) explain, although past regeneration programmes in the UK may have encouraged tenure diversification and social mix, they “aimed to improve rather than fundamentally transform poor neighbourhoods”, whereas current initiatives explicitly aim to ‘transform’ and ‘remodel’ low-income neighbourhoods.

1 Although there are common elements in these restructuring programmes – particularly the emphasis on ‘income mixing’ and social housing deconcentration – they naturally vary in their specific approaches. The extent of demolition appears to be highest in the Netherlands and the US. According to Curley and Kleinhans (2010: 373-374), by 2006 more than 78,000 units had been demolished under HOPE VI and another 10,400 were lined up for redevelopment; only 55 percent of the replacement units will be ‘deeply subsidized’ housing. In the Netherlands, more than 121,000 social rented dwellings have been demolished since 1997 under neighbourhood restructuring; the number of new constructions are higher, although the majority are more expensive rental or owner-occupied dwellings (ibid.). For a different policy approach to social mixing, which does not involve demolition, see Andersson et al. (2010) on Sweden.
At a smaller scale, social mix is also promoted through social housing allocation policies and planning regulations that aim to intervene in the population composition of selected neighbourhoods. A recent ‘anti-segregation’ policy in the Netherlands is an example of such an approach (Musterd and Ostendorf, 2008; van Eijk, 2010). First adopted in Rotterdam and later approved by the national government, this policy allows municipalities to refuse the settlement of unemployed or underemployed households (via an income regulation) into the rental housing of targeted neighbourhoods that are deemed to have too large of a concentration of such groups (ibid.). As van Eijk (2010: 5) explains, this policy was justified as a means of preventing these neighbourhoods from becoming ‘unliveable’ due to the concentration of poverty and the social problems alleged to be exacerbated by these concentrations, including unemployment, school drop-out, crime, nuisance and anti-social behaviour. Although the official focus is on income, the intention is nevertheless clear that the policy aims to reduce concentrations of low-income ethnic minority groups. The policy documents connect these ‘concentration neighbourhoods’ to the problematic integration of ethnic minorities (ibid.: 5-6).

In the policy discourse, social mix is presented as leading to a win-win scenario: benefits for the neighbourhood and concerned actors, and positive outcomes for residents (Kleinhans, 2004; Davidson, 2008; Goetz, 2010). As many observers have pointed out, social mix is rarely advocated in higher-income areas (Smith, 2002; Lees, 2008); thus, it is not ‘social mix’ per se that is advocated, but poverty (or social housing) deconcentration. Social mixing initiatives seek to improve both place-based conditions and people-based outcomes. As Lupton and Tunstall (2008: 113) explain, the ‘Mixed Communities Initiative’ in Great Britain aims to “create a more sustainable mix of housing types and tenures and to address deep-seated problems of worklessness, low skills, crime, poor environments and poor health”. The HOPE VI programme in the US, which redevelops public housing projects into mixed-income neighbourhoods, was also created “to produce two major types of beneficial outcomes: better outcomes for the residents of distressed public housing projects, and better neighborhood conditions in the projects themselves and their surrounding neighborhoods” (Goetz, 2010: 140). What are the underlying assumptions and expectations of these initiatives? What theoretical notions are embedded in these approaches to social mixing and poverty deconcentration? How are these strategies justified? In the next section we examine the discourse surrounding social mix and the apparent assumptions underlying these initiatives with regard to the problems they claim to tackle and the solutions they endorse.
5.3 ASSUMPTIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND DISCOURSES OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SOCIAL MIXING

While there is not one coherent discourse underpinning social mix and poverty deconcentration interventions, there are a number of common notions and constructions regarding the causes of and solutions to urban social problems. Perhaps most distinctly, these policies are concerned mainly with the neighbourhood and spatial manifestation of social problems, rather than their structural properties. In the policy discourse, a strong emphasis is placed on the spatial character and causes of social phenomena such as poverty, social exclusion, and integration, and on the spatial concentration of certain groups. As Lupton and Tunstall (2008: 110) explain, in the context of British policy, “[e]mphasis is given to the spatial ordering of problems, not as a manifestation of structural deficiencies, but in terms which appear to emphasize the spatial behaviour of people: ‘concentration’, ‘clustering’, ‘pockets of poverty’, ‘segregation’”.

Social mixing initiatives are premised on the idea that urban problems and individual circumstances can be improved by altering the social makeup of poor neighbourhoods. The spatial concentration of low-income groups is seen as a source of problems, and thus, social mixing and deconcentration are viewed as part of the solution. According to some policy texts, in the absence of social mix, low-income neighbourhoods may run the risk of heading into a “downward spiral” (Uitermark, 2003; van Eijk, 2010). Texts also make reference to the “absorption capacity” of neighbourhoods or certain “tipping points” with respect to the population composition, which are “meant to mark the onset of the quarter’s disintegration” (Münch, 2009: 446). In a number of countries, the pursuit of social mix is entwined with the debate on immigrant integration and political anxieties about the interrelationships between residential segregation, social cohesion and integration (for a discussion of European countries, see Phillips, 2010; Uitermark, 2003; Bolt et al., 2009). Residential segregation (of ethnic minority groups) has come to be viewed as inherently undesirable and is often automatically assumed to be symptomatic of failed integration and potentially threatening to social order and civil unity (Phillips, 2006; Wacquant, 2008; van Eijk, 2010).

While some policy texts make a direct reference to the existence or threat of ‘neighbourhood effects’, others imply their existence (Curley, 2005; Fallov, 2010; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). Neighbourhood effects discourse is also called upon to explain how the benefits from social mixing are meant to materialize. As Fallov (2010: 3) notes, the language of policy is not fixed, and the incorporation of academic terms is not simply an appropriation, but a recontextualization, “[i]n the
sense that the academic concepts are inserted into the existing policy framework emphasizing the particular meanings of the concepts that resonate with the policy narratives”. Based on her analysis of Danish and British neighbourhood and social exclusion policies that aim to cultivate local “community capacities” and “neighbourhood-wide social capital” as a means of overcoming social exclusion, Fallov (ibid.) argues that people-focused explanations for neighbourhood effects, rather than the structural explanations (e.g. lack of job opportunities, poor services), have been appropriated and inserted into this policy narrative “resulting in an individualized and spatialized perspective on exclusion. This means that area effects are used to legitimize the area-based approach to tackling social exclusion”. Individual social problems have become rendered as neighbourhood phenomena, and both problem and solution are seen to lie, at least in part, in the neighbourhood.

According to Lupton and Fuller (2009: 1017), the ‘Mixed Communities Initiative’, in place since 2005 in Great Britain, has adopted the thesis that ‘concentrated poverty’ (or in some iterations, concentrated social housing tenure) is the problem and ‘de-concentration’ the solution. In a way unprecedented in the earlier years of New Labour, UK policy documents from 2005 onwards draw heavily on the notion of ‘neighbourhood effects’, defined as the ‘additional disadvantages that affect poorer people when they are concentrated in poor neighbourhoods’.

In the US, Goetz (2002: 161) asserts that over the course of the 1990s, ‘concentrated poverty’ became “the organizing theme for much urban policy at both the federal and local levels”, which led to a reorientation of housing politics inwards, to the neighbourhood and its specific composition. As a result, the problems of neighbourhoods became internalized and the solutions also became directed internally, with little attention given to the structural factors that concentrated poverty in the first place (ibid.). Crump (2002) voices similar sentiments; he argues that the extensive use of the concept of ‘concentrated poverty’ in the US as shorthand for the conditions in poor neighbourhoods has led to an important theoretical slippage, whereby concentrated poverty has come to serve as a spatial metaphor that hides from view the complex political, social and economic processes that drive poverty, offering instead a simplistic spatial solution: deconcentrate it. Although concentrated poverty may well exacerbate or worsen the conditions of individual poverty, they argue that it has come to be seen as an underlying cause of poverty. They demonstrate how policymakers
have used the concentration of poverty argument to justify the ‘demolish and disperse’ approach to public housing redevelopment, in the form of the HOPE VI programme (see also Goetz, 2003; Imbroscio, 2008; Lipman, 2008).

To explain the causal assumptions embedded in the policy literature regarding individual and neighbourhood-based outcomes, a number of scholars have used the framework of neighbourhood effects (see Joseph et al., 2007 for an overview; see also Tunstall, 2003; Kleinhans, 2004; Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Goetz, 2010). Through various institutional and social-interactional mechanisms, such as shared norms and values, role modelling, peer effects, the quality and diversity of public services and institutions, and stigmatization by external actors, poor neighbourhoods are thought to exacerbate or reinforce individual poverty, while people are generally thought to benefit from living in a more affluent or mixed-income environment (Wilson 1987; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002). In mixed-income neighbourhoods, middle-class groups are thought to be resources for other residents. According to the social capital literature, people might gain from the development of ‘bridging capital’ and ‘weak ties’ to residents with higher levels of socioeconomic status, which could connect them to valuable resources and opportunities beyond their immediate social network (Briggs, 1997). Middle-class residents are also perceived to be good role models, who help to transmit conventional norms and values pertaining to work and education (Wilson, 1987).

A more diverse housing stock is also expected to reduce population turnover, which could strengthen community bonds and the development of collective efficacy (i.e. mutual trust and social cohesion) and informal social control (Sampson et al., 2002). These mechanisms are thought to be important for keeping levels of crime and delinquency in check. Homeowners and higher-income residents are thought to be more likely and better equipped to advocate for the neighbourhood and its institutions and public services (Goetz, 2010). The idea is that “residents of a mixed-income community will benefit from the presence of higher-income residents, whose greater economic resources, political connections, and civic engagement should attract and compel greater attention from external actors” (Joseph et al., 2007: 393).

Thus, it is widely believed that social mixing will foster better community relations and residential stability, and that lower-income residents will benefit in various ways from living amongst higher-income households. Although we have roughly outlined the mechanisms through which social mix may be expected to generate benefits for communities and residents, explaining how social mix should theoretically benefit neighbourhoods and their residents is much easier than elucidating how these notions should be translated into policy affecting real
communities. In the next section we summarize key points from the critiques that have been directed towards social mix and poverty deconcentration initiatives, before looking more closely at the field of neighbourhood effects research.

5.4 CRITIQUING SOCIAL MIX: THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS AND EVIDENCE BASE

Social mixing initiatives have generated considerable critique (e.g. Goodchild and Cole, 2001; Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Lees, 2008). Certainly, much of this is related to the particular settings in which mix policies are launched and the specific nature of the initiatives; nevertheless, there are many common aspects. In this section we highlight four issues: (1) overstating the role of the neighbourhood, (2) blurred objectives, (3) weak evidence base, and (4) social costs.

5.4.1 Overstating the role of the neighbourhood

One of the broad criticisms is that social mixing and poverty deconcentration initiatives only shift or dilute the problems they ostensibly aspire to tackle (Kleinhans, 2004; Joseph et al., 2007; Imbroscio, 2008). Intervening in the population composition of poor neighbourhoods or promoting social mixing does not address the root causes of poverty or segregation; the focus on social mixing and deconcentration as potential remedies for individual problems has been criticized for downplaying the institutional and economic constraints that individuals face, and diverting attention away from more fundamental determinants of poverty (Rose, 2004; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). These policies overstate the role of the neighbourhood and its population composition in bringing about social problems and in resolving them. Moreover, generalized assumptions about the effects of neighbourhood segregation are problematic, for, as many commentators have explained, the links between residential segregation and social integration and inclusion are not well understood and cannot be reduced to a simple, generic formula (Musterd, 2003; Peach, 2009; Phillips, 2010).

5.4.2 Blurred objectives

Social mixing strategies have garnered substantial attention from gentrification researchers, who argue that social mixing is often a euphemism for state-led gentrification (see Lees, 2008 for a comprehensive overview). Lees (2008) writes, "[i]t is ironic that a process that results in segregation and polarization – gentrification – is being promoted via social mix policies as the ‘positive’ solution
to segregation…the rhetoric of social mixing tends to conceal the inequalities of fortune and economic circumstance that are produced through the process of gentrification” (2008: 2463). State-led gentrification does not necessarily involve the direct displacement of residents; rather, displacement may be indirect, occurring in adjacent communities or through a change in neighbourhood resources or socio-cultural milieu (e.g. Davidson, 2008). Referring to findings from HOPE VI redevelopments that profited from local housing markets that were “poised to take off”, Goetz (2010: 152) notes that “[t]he direct displacement of public housing residents via demolition in these cases is supplemented by the indirect displacement of their neighbors via the market”.

As Rose (2004: 304) points out, the “blurring of policy objectives” between “endogenous” neighbourhood revitalization and “exogenous” promotion of gentrification is also problematic, not least because this blurring of policy goals works to “fuel the scepticism” with which many people view social mix discourse. Van Gent et al. (2009) argue, in reference to a Dutch neighbourhood-based social mixing programme, that it is not clear whether the priority of the programme is to tackle neighbourhood-based problems, such as liveability, or people-based problems, such as social deprivation, and that these two issues are not as coupled as policymakers presume and do not require the same type of strategy.

5.4.3 Weak evidence base
Social scientists have long been critical about the alleged benefits of social mixing and the assumed social interaction that it should foster (Gans, 1961; Sarkissian, 1976). Mere proximity does not necessarily bring about interaction between residents, especially among people of different backgrounds and lifestyles, and especially if neighbourhoods lack common spaces, activities or institutions that promote interaction (Blokland, 2003; Butler, 2003; Arthurson, 2010). Moreover, even when present, residents can opt out of local institutions. For instance, studies have shown class divisions in the school choices of families living in socially mixed areas, with middle-class parents often sending their children to (private or ‘better’) schools elsewhere (Butler, 2003). This is an important point, because it is often assumed that mix will be particularly beneficial for children and youth. However, given the system of open school choice in some countries (e.g. the Netherlands and Sweden), the increasing privatization and marketization of education (see Ball, 1998), and trends in ‘school segregation’, it is questionable whether children in socially mixed or gentrifying neighbourhoods will even attend the same schools. Spatial integration is no guarantee for social integration.
In their literature reviews, Kleinhans (2004) and Joseph et al. (2007) find virtually no support for the notion that positive role modelling effects will occur in mixed communities, and weak support for the idea that benefits will accrue from neighbourhood-based social interaction. Studies of the HOPE VI public housing redevelopment programme reveal clear and substantial improvements in levels of neighbourhood safety and crime and the quality of housing and public space, but small or unclear gains in individual economic self-sufficiency or educational outcomes – which were explicit goals of the programme (Popkin et al., 2004; Imboscio, 2008; Goetz, 2010). In describing these findings, Goetz (2010: 159) comments, “[t]he often complicated and extensive chain of events that must occur for individual benefits to materialize provide context for understanding the modest level of benefits documented in most studies”.

The findings to date indicate that the clearest outcomes of mixed-income redevelopments are in terms of place-based revitalization, such as improved housing and physical environment, lower levels of crime and visible disorder, and increased property values (Kleinhans, 2004; Popkin et al., 2004; Joseph et al., 2007; Goetz, 2010). As commentators have pointed out, many of the public housing sites slated for redevelopment into mixed-income, mixed-tenure developments are located on prime real estate land, and such redevelopment has been found to have far-reaching effects in terms of increased property values and transformation of surrounding neighbourhoods (see Goetz, 2010: 152). While some residents will benefit from these changes, it is clear that they also serve the interests of state actors, social housing managers and private developers (see Uitermark, 2003). Moreover, many neighbourhood-level outcomes are due to population turnover and the displacement of problems, rather than the upward mobility of residents or the resolution of problems (see Kleinhans, 2004). Finally, as Goodchild and Cole (2001: 359) remark, although neighbourhood conditions may improve, the households most directly affected by attempts to secure ‘social mix’ – those priced out of the revitalized neighbourhood or forced to move because of the demolition of their home – will ironically not get the chance to share in these improvements. In the case of neighbourhood restructuring projects, this seems to be an obvious injustice when one considers the massive financial investments being poured into their old neighbourhood (e.g. new infrastructure, upgraded housing and public spaces).

5.4.4 Social costs

Importantly, the negative effects that some residents and communities will incur from social mix initiatives are typically undervalued or unacknowledged in the policy discourse (Lees, 2008; Goetz, 2010). Changes in the population
composition of neighbourhoods and resident relocation may bring about significant social, political and financial costs for some individuals and communities, such as the fragmentation of existing social support networks and community ties, displacement and increased rents (Davidson, 2008). Imbroscio (2008) calls attention to the fact that in many cases of housing demolition due to neighbourhood restructuring, some residents are not even afforded the right or opportunity to stay put. Neighbourhood restructuring often (but not always) results in a reduction in the number of social housing units on site, so clearly not all residents who want to remain in their old neighbourhood can stay (Kleinhans and Bouma-Doff, 2008; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). In a recent study of the relocation patterns of 490 residents forced to move due to neighbourhood restructuring in the Netherlands, Bolt and van Kempen (2010) find that about half of the residents expressed the preference to stay in the neighbourhood, but only 27 percent did so. They attribute this discrepancy to the net loss of affordable housing in the restructured neighbourhoods and the burden of moving twice. Results from a HOPE VI resident tracking study indicate that 70 percent of the tenants forced to relocate expressed the preference to return to the revitalized HOPE VI site after redevelopment, but only 19 percent did so (Popkin et al., 2004). The authors attribute this to the strict screening criteria for the new mixed-income developments, which many residents would be unable to meet, and to the major reduction in affordable housing on site (ibid.: 405).

5.5 THE PLACE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD EFFECTS RESEARCH

Many of the central notions in the policy discourse on social mix and poverty deconcentration correspond to those in the field of neighbourhood effects research (Joseph et al., 2007; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008), and in search for evidence to support or refute mix policies, scholars also turn to this field of research (Tunstall, 2003; Kleinhans, 2004; Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Musterd and Andersson, 2006; cf. references in Imbroscio, 2008; Goetz, 2010). Thus, there are several important reasons to reflect on neighbourhood effects research in the context of the current social mix debate.

Although most neighbourhood effects researchers warn against inferring causality from their results, there is much talk of the ‘negative effects’ of living amongst poor people, through such things as presumably bad role models, a lack of conventional norms and values, and deviant work ethnics (Bauder, 2002). Lupton and Tunstall (2008: 114) argue that this research has “unwittingly
lent weight to the idea that poor people are bad for each other”. Because neighbourhood effects research typically emphasizes the population composition of neighbourhoods, which often boils down to “how many poor people live there”, and highlights people-based mechanisms, they argue, “[i]t is a short step from there to the assumption that the solution is to reduce the proportion of poor people, rather than to address structural inequalities or inject additional resources to provide the services that people need” (ibid.). On a similar note, Bauder (2002: 90) cautions that “[r]esearchers should be particularly critical of neighbourhood effects because the concept lends itself as a political tool to blame inner-city communities for their own marginality…the idea of neighbourhood effects provides scientific legitimacy to neighbourhood stereotypes…and justifies slum-clearance and acculturation policies”.

Narratives of ‘neighbourhood effects’ and ‘concentrated poverty’ have been criticized for perpetuating individual-level explanations for poverty and obscuring the structural forces that cause inequality (Bauder, 2002; Venkatesh, 2003). Wacquant (2008: 284) argues that the ‘thematics of neighbourhood effects’ “conveys a falsely depoliticized vision of urban inequality, in which spatial processes appear self-evident, self-generated, or left unexplained when in reality they track the extent to which the state works or fails to equalize basic life conditions and strategies across places”. He insists that ‘effects of place’ are essentially “effects of state projected onto the city” (ibid.: 6). He further writes that “[t]o forget that urban space is a historical and political construction in the strong sense of the term is to risk (mis)taking for ‘neighbourhood effects’ what is nothing more than the spatial retranslation of economic and social differences” (ibid.: 9, emphasis in original). Venkatesh (2003: 1070), in his discussion of ethnographic neighbourhood studies, makes a similar point: “adherents to Wilson’s concept of the socially isolated urban poor, particularly ethnographers, have paid scant attention to the ways in which the state is a constitutive actor in shaping social experience”. He suggests widening “the potential field of empirical agents whose action might be relevant when making sense of any localized social practice” (ibid.). Although individuals may react to opportunities and constraints in their local environment, their social experiences are also shaped by processes far beyond the neighbourhood setting. The social processes and relations that we study in neighbourhoods also interact with non-neighbourhood factors; they are not entirely local.

A recent article by Amin (2007) develops this point, and could be seen as a basis for how neighbourhood effects researchers might begin to approach the study of neighbourhood inequalities differently. Some of the limitations in the neighbourhood effects literature appear to stem from how we often view
the neighbourhood, i.e. our spatial ontology of neighbourhood. Although we may artificially enclose or bound the neighbourhood for research purposes, neighbourhoods are obviously not fixed containers for social action, but have far-reaching connections to other spaces and processes. Amin (2007: 105) argues that the spatial ontology underlying much urban poverty research, which sees cities (and we would also include neighbourhoods) as “as bounded spaces with distinctive markings of inequality – has allowed policy communities to get away with thinking of urban inequality as a local problem requiring local solutions”. He asserts that analysis of urban inequality cannot leave out a concern for trans-local forces; social inequality must be regarded as the product of “multiple geographies of reward and retribution…proximate and remote” (ibid.: 105-106).

Neighbourhood effects research often takes a narrow view of the neighbourhood, divorcing it from its history, surrounding context and position in the broader metropolitan structure (Wacquant, 2008). In quantitative studies, the neighbourhood is typically viewed at one point in time and as a fixed entity. Neighbourhoods are essentially transformed into “an empirical aggregate of variables” (Gotham, 2003: 727), and in the process of quantification, much information is lost. Describing the field of neighbourhood effects research, Lupton and Tunstall (2008: 114) write:

Most typically, in such research, the characteristic of neighbourhood that is described is how many poor people live there, because this is what is available to measure. Place factors such as lack of community resources or poor neighbourhood environments, and structural factors such as de-industrialisation or racial or postcode discrimination, cannot be included in these models. ‘Neighbourhood effects’ thus tend to be spoken of as ‘people effects’: out-of-work role models; anti-social peer groups; lack of bridging social capital; lack of resources to support neighbourhood shops and so on, implying that it is the characteristics and interactions of the poor themselves that account for limited individual outcomes in areas of concentrated poverty…

Thus, there are clear shortcomings and even potential dangers of the neighbourhood effects discourse. The most enthusiastic supporters and the harshest critics of neighbourhood effects research would likely agree that the neighbourhood does matter, just as geography matters, but that most of the neighbourhood effects found are, quantitatively speaking, small. Our own research does point to the existence of neighbourhood effects on such outcomes as youth education (Sykes and Kuyper, 2009) and average earnings (Musterd et al., 2008). However, it is
important to keep in mind that quantifying the impact of one's neighbourhood is an extremely difficult if not impossible task; the relationships between people and place are complex, and the dominant approaches to neighbourhood effects analysis do not fully account for this complexity, in particular, the reciprocality among people, space and place (cf. Smith and Easterlow, 2005) and as noted above, the importance of factors beyond the neighbourhood. Despite these complexities and much criticism, substantial effort continues to be directed at researching neighbourhood effects. There certainly are important reasons to take spatial inequalities and the relationship between place of residence and social outcomes seriously. And, despite the shortcomings outlined above, the intention of most neighbourhood effects researchers is to contribute knowledge and research that will help, not harm, those living in low-income neighbourhoods. How then, can we better research the impact of spatial inequalities and the social problems that surface in neighbourhoods?

The social mix debate underscores the need for neighbourhood researchers to more fully recognize the web of connections that reach beyond the neighbourhood – the role of the state, political action and non-neighbourhood factors in interacting with and impinging on neighbourhood conditions and the experiences of residents. There is also a need to incorporate more comprehensive measures of individual and neighbourhood wellbeing into neighbourhood research and policy. Restructuring programmes that entail involuntary relocation or radical neighbourhood remodelling have been criticized for undervaluing people's local ties, placed-based support networks, and the attachment or belonging they may feel to their neighbourhood, local school or home (Goetz, 2010). Likewise, neighbourhood effects research often takes a limited and partial view of individuals’ wellbeing. Peoples’ income levels, rates of school drop-out or unemployment – which are common outcomes in neighbourhood effects studies – tell a limited and perhaps misleading story about their quality of life. Bauder (2002: 86) points out that neighbourhood effects research is often applied to “ambiguous behavioural outcomes” such as unwed pregnancy, labour market performance, school dropout and welfare receipt, assuming that certain social and behaviour traits are “inherently pathological and indicate social dysfunction”, while they might be perfectly acceptable by some communities’ or families’ standards or be rational choices given certain circumstances. As he asserts, “childrearing ideologies, the meaning of motherhood, standards of ‘making it’ and perceptions of what constitutes good and bad jobs differ between neighbourhoods...” (ibid.: 89). Research has done much to discredit the notion that poor neighbourhoods are ‘socially disorganized’ places where the inhabitants live in a ‘culture of poverty’ or are cut off from ‘mainstream’ values
(see Wacquant, 1997; Gotham, 2003). However, there is still a tendency to gloss over the diversity of experiences within neighbourhoods, to centre attention on behaviour which diverges most from so-called middle-class standards, and to overlook or play down the way neighbourhoods not only constrain but also enable social action.

In sum, research designs would benefit from more theoretically informed notions of neighbourhood and neighbourhood processes, which include the role of trans-local and structural factors in impinging on the neighbourhood and its residents, and would avoid an over-reliance on proxying processes and evaluating outcomes that may actually say very little about people's wellbeing. Taking a more holistic view of the neighbourhood and the factors that constitute and shape it will further our knowledge about the meaning and source of neighbourhood effects and provide less empirical weight to policy discourse which links both social problems in poor neighbourhoods and their solution to the local population composition.

5.6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have outlined how the neighbourhood and its composition has taken on a new meaning in current policy approaches that aim to ‘rebalance’, ‘mix’ and ‘break up’ the composition of low-income neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods and their respective tenure and population composition are seen as causal or contributing factors for a range of social problems, and thus ‘solutions’ to these problems also take a neighbourhood focus. The existing critiques of social mixing provide many reasons to be wary of social mixing initiatives, especially as a policy tool to help the poor. Although social mix is promoted under a policy agenda of ‘social inclusion’, mix initiatives contribute to social exclusion both in their discourse (e.g. stereotyping poor people and places) and in practice (e.g. planning restrictions, tenant screening measures, demolition of social housing). However, this policy discourse is not without a relationship to trends in scholarly research, which have placed a strong emphasis on the ‘negative effects’ that poor neighbourhoods may have on their inhabitants. As a number of commentators have pointed out, both these research approaches and current neighbourhood mix policies tend to overlook or obscure some important features of neighbourhoods: their macrostructural determinants, the function they perform for different people and the wider urban system, their historical
and political context, how they are constructed (who comes to live there and why?), and their relationship to the policies and actions of the state.

Thus, too much weight is placed on the neighbourhood as a generator of problems and as the appropriate target for policy solutions. While reconsidering many of the conceptualizations in neighbourhood research and working towards advancing theory building will not automatically lead to better neighbourhood policy, or curb the political support for social mixing initiatives, it may help to discredit some of the dominant assumptions in the policy (and scholarly) discourse, and contribute to a better theoretical basis for research and policy. There clearly is still a role for neighbourhood effect researchers, but new approaches are needed.

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