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Neighbourhood Effects and Cultural Exclusion

Harald Bauder

Summary. The idea of neighbourhood effects implies that the demographic context of poor neighbourhoods instills 'dysfunctional' norms, values and behaviours into youths, triggering a cycle of social pathology. It is argued that neighbourhood effects are part of a wider discourse of inner-city marginality that stereotypes inner-city neighbourhoods. Reflecting upon arguments made in the existing literature, the ideological underpinnings of the idea of neighbourhood effects are revealed. Essentialist conceptions of neighbourhood culture among employers, educators and institutional staff contribute to the neighbourhood effects phenomenon. It is also suggested that researchers and policy-makers must recognise wider forces of cultural differentiation and exclusion.

Introduction

The idea of neighbourhood effects suggests that the demographic context of poor neighbourhoods instills 'dysfunctional' norms, values and behaviours into individuals and triggers a cycle of social pathology and poverty that few residents escape. Current public debate on inner-city poverty in the US widely endorses this sequence of events (see, for example, Wilson, 1987, 1996; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1997a, 1997b; Nenno, 1998).

The idea of neighbourhood effects is closely associated with the notion of the urban underclass, which focuses on the relationship between values and norms of urban minority communities, and social and economic marginality (Wilson, 1987). The underclass notion, however, has ideological underpinnings, which are often not acknowledged in public debate (Gans, 1990). It essentialises 'culture'—i.e. it assumes that dysfunctional cultural norms, values and be-

haviours *cause* marginality. What makes neighbourhood effects a particularly powerful idea within this discourse is that neighbourhoods, not personal characteristics, signify social dysfunction (Fainstein, 1993; Wilson, 2001). The idea of neighbourhood effects implies that the residents of the so-called ghettos, barrios and slums are ultimately responsible for their own social and economic situation (Hughes, 1989, Sibley, 1995; Jargowsky, 1996). If public discourse uncritically embraces this essentialist conception of neighbourhood culture, then it sanctions policies and social conventions that enforce cultural exclusion and facilitate acculturation.

The Idea of Neighbourhood Effects

In an influential study of the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program in Chicago, Rosenbaum (1991, 1995) examines participants in

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a public housing voucher programme that allows poor families to choose their neighbourhood of residence. The study reveals that the children of suburban movers are performing better in school and in the labour market than their inner-city counterparts. Rosenbaum concludes that youths in middle-class suburbs learn important social and behavioural skills, unavailable to youths in poor inner-city neighbourhoods.

Three mechanisms supposedly explain how neighbourhood effects operate: peer groups; concentrated poverty and adult role-models; and, physical infrastructure and institutional networks. The first mechanism suggests that local peer networks 'infect' youngsters with negative behaviour and attitudes. The literature sometimes uses the metaphor of the 'epidemic' to describe how social dysfunction spreads through peer networks like a deadly disease (DuBois and Hirsch, 1990; Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Peer group effects relate to school dropout, teenage pregnancy and labour market participation (Case and Katz, 1991; Evans *et al.*, 1992).

According to the second mechanism, concentrated poverty and adult role-models, local adults in poverty areas pass their pathological behaviour, such as unstable employment, welfare dependency or being a single, unmarried mother (Kasarda, 1993; Jargowsky, 1997), on to the youths who live in the same neighbourhood (Wilson, 1987). This kind of neighbourhood effect is also known as the 'collective socialisation' effect (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). A related argument suggests that neighbourhood circumstances affect attitudes towards young people and family management strategies (Sampson *et al.*, 1997; Coulton *et al.*, 1999; Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999). Researchers have correlated 'problematic' behaviour among adults with crime, teenage motherhood, school dropout rates and employment outcomes (Crane, 1991a, 1991b; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1993; Galster and Mikelsons, 1995; O'Regan and Quigley, 1996).

The third mechanism focuses on the physical infrastructure and institutional networks available to youths in their neighbourhood. According to this mechanism, local institutions, such as schools, commonly fail to provide adequate services in poverty-stricken areas (Kozol, 1991; Waggoner, 1991; Card and Krueger, 1992). Researchers also propose that the dilapidated physical infrastructure destabilises communities and subsequently triggers peer group and adult role-model effects (for example, Nenno, 1998).[1]

Most neighbourhood effects studies assume that particular behaviours are inherently 'problematic'. Whereas public consensus deems behaviours such as child abuse or violent crime unacceptable (see, for example, Simcha-Fagan and Schwarz, 1986; Coulton *et al.*, 1999), the critique in this paper targets the way in which the idea of neighbourhood effects is applied to more ambiguous behavioural outcomes, such as teenage and unwed pregnancy, dropping out of school, welfare dependency, drug consumption and labour market performance (see, for example, Anderson, 1991; Crane, 1991a, 1991b; Mayer, 1991; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1993; Brewster, 1994; O'Regan and Quigley, 1996; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1997a, 1997b). In addition, the paper problematises the idea that social marginality is *caused* by the socio-demographic context of the neighbourhood.

Conceptual Problems

The idea of neighbourhood effects is problematic on several counts. First, we do not know how neighbourhood effects really work. Although statistical evidence demonstrates that the correlation between neighbourhood characteristics and individual behaviour is more than accidental, statistics do not explain *why* neighbourhood and individual circumstances are correlated. This shortcoming has been widely acknowledged in the literature. Two of the most prominent supporters of neighbourhood effects state that

Almost all of [neighbourhood effects evidence] relies on a 'black box' model of

neighborhood and school effects that makes no assumption about how social composition influences individual behavior. Models of this kind try to answer the question, How much would an individual's behavior change if he or she moved from a low-[socio-economic status] to a high-[socio-economic status] neighborhood or school? They do not purport to explain *why* moving has an effect (Jencks and Mayer, 1990, p. 115).

In a similar vein, Galster and Mikelsons note that the

fundamental challenge … is to distinguish measures of causal input and behavioral outputs … This problem is particularly acute when one tries to understand the relationship between *aggregations* of individual behaviors and neighborhood-level socioeconomic conditions that affect the behaviours of *individuals* (Galster and Mikelsons, 1995, pp. 74–75; emphasis in original).

Many authors acknowledge that implied causality is a common mistake of neighbourhood effects research (Rosenbaum, 1991; Evans *et al.*, 1993; Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999, pp. 17–20). Furstenberg *et al*. (1999, pp. 145–170) show that neighbourhood effects are mostly the result of the "sum of individual differences" among residents, rather than unique neighbourhood-based norms, group behaviour and local "emergent properties".

Without understanding the causal mechanisms of how neighbourhood effects work, statistical results are ambiguous. Turner and Ellen (1997, p. 64) lament the lack of ethnographic research to "identify and test the causal mechanisms that link neighborhood conditions to individual outcomes". Other researchers derive explanation from research conducted in other contexts (for example, Crysdale and MacKay, 1994; Galster and Killen, 1995; Mayer, 1996; Gephart, 1997; Holloway, 1998).

Secondly, I suggest that the idea of neighbourhood effects is the product of ideological

discourse. Galster recognises that policy-oriented research does not occur

in an epistemological, moral, or ideological vacuum … On the contrary, public policy decisions should be normative, with ethics and democratic philosophy playing important roles in policy research (Galster, 1996, p. 2).

Thus, social science operates within a normative discourse that defines "what phenomena are …'social problems' " in the first place (Galster, 1996, p. 8). At the root of the problem is the assumption that some social and behavioural traits (especially dropping out of school, teenage and out-of-wedlock childbirth, drug consumption or welfare dependency) are inherently pathological and indicate social dysfunction. Urban researchers often ignore the fact that conceptions of pathological and mainstream behaviour are ideological constructs produced through an on-going public and academic discourse of inner-city culture, inspired by Lewis' (1969) culture-of-poverty notion, Moynihan's (1965) writing on the inner-city family, Wilson's (1987) work on the urban underclass and other policy-oriented research (such as Murray, 1984). But Steinberg (1981) reveals that cultural traits and behaviour have no essence of being good or bad. Social marginality is not a product of cultural inferiority but rather the result of denied opportunities to people who are labelled culturally different.[2] The very concept of social dysfunction and dislocation rests on the false assumption that social behaviour and negative consequences are directly and causally linked, and detached from their wider socio-political context. Liebow (1993), for example, rejects the popular view that the behaviour of homeless women explains their homelessness. Rather, their behaviour is a *response* to the situation of being homeless. In a similar way, the culture-of-poverty and underclass ideas lay the blame for marginality on the poor themselves, who do not conform to dominant norms (Gans, 1990; Fainstein, 1993; Bourgois, 1995).

Neighbourhood effects are implicit in the

culture-of-poverty and underclass concepts. Both concepts suggest that cultural pathology procreates through the community and that the cultural characteristics of neighbourhoods and the social and economic situations of individuals are directly and causally linked (Gephart, 1997; Turner and Ellen, 1997). Some research even measures 'concentrated poverty' by high school dropout rate, proportion of males with no stable employment, welfare dependency rate and proportion of female-headed households, implying that the sum of these behaviours automatically defines poverty (Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988; Hughes, 1989; Kasarda, 1993). Jargowsky (1997, p. 24) argues correctly that such a position "confuses behavior with economic outcomes". Patillo-McCoy (1999) demonstrates that distinct cultural patterns, typically described as 'pathological', also exist in African-American middle-class neighbourhoods. The idea of neighbourhood effects obscures processes of racialisation and class stratification (Kobayashi and Peake, 1994; Sibley, 1995) and instead shifts attention towards the cultural attributes of residential communities. From a critical perspective, therefore, the idea of neighbourhood effects can be interpreted as yet another episode in the on-going discourse of inner-city marginality that blames marginal communities for their own misery.

My third point addresses the presumed effect of physical infrastructure and institutions. Critiques of environmental determinism have convincingly argued that physical infrastructure and design enhancements do not necessarily improve individual outcomes (Bohl, 2000). The argument that institutions underservice poverty-stricken neighbourhoods is more convincing than the physical infrastructure argument. But the reason poor and minority neighbourhoods receive few and inferior services relates again to complex processes of social and cultural exclusion. In addition, institutional networks provide a setting through which complex processes of cultural differentiation operate (Mayer, 1991; Bauder, 2001). In its current articulation, the institutional argument offers only limited insight into the processes that operate inside the black box labelled 'neighbourhood effects'. Below, an alternative explanation is offered for the statistical correlation between neighbourhood circumstances and individual outcomes. It is proposed that both inner-city neighbourhoods and their residents suffer from cultural labelling.

Alternative Explanation

Negative stereotypes of poor neighbourhoods have existed long before neighbourhood effects studies emerged. Employers, for example, may base their hiring decisions on the residential addresses of job applicants (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Waldinger, 1997), assuming that neighbourhood of residence reflects personal attitudes, interaction skills and other cultural traits (Holzer, 1996; Moss and Tilly, 1996). Some employers do not advertise in newspapers that circulate in stigmatised inner-city neighbourhoods (Wilson, 1996; Turner, 1997). In addition, recent labour market research has shown that personal networks are especially important to the poor and minorities in finding jobs (Waldinger, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 1999; Mattingly, 1999). However, if entire neighbourhoods are excluded from employers' recruitment channels, neighbourhood-based networks are ineffective in producing employment. In this case, employers' cultural discrimination against stigmatised residential areas, rather than neighbourhood-based cultural pathology, explains neighbourhood effects.

The cultural labelling of neighbourhoods and the exclusion of residents also operates through service delivery practices in institutions and schools. Bauder (2001) suggests that staff of neighbourhood-based institutions embrace ideas of cultural pathology and deem youths unfit for educational and labour market achievement, based on the cultural label associated with their neighbourhood of residence. This assumption guides institutional practices and discourages youths from

excelling in school or at work. In a similar vein, Browning (1994) finds that educators attribute the low educational achievement in inner-city schools to the cultural shortcomings of the students themselves. In this way, educators absolve themselves from responsibility and legitimise cultural stereotyping on the basis of place of residence.

But the cultural processes that link neighbourhood characteristics with individual outcomes are more complex than blatant discrimination. Residents commonly identify with the cultural environment of their neighbourhoods. In fact, many households who receive housing vouchers decide not to move into middle-class areas, but stay in or close to their previous neighbourhood (Pendall, 2000; Varady and Walker, 2000). Distinct cultural identities form within the context of the local community (Fernández Kelly, 1994). For instance, childrearing ideologies, the meaning of motherhood, standards of 'making it' and perceptions of what constitutes good and bad jobs differ between neighbourhoods (Wial, 1991; Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999; Holloway, 1999). Residents usually do not consider their own family or labour market standards as pathological. A fallacy of the neighbourhood effects literature is to apply supposedly universal norms of childrearing, school performance and labour market success to culturally distinct neighbourhoods. Not all communities adhere to the same family norms and standards of education and work.

Moving families out of their neighbourhoods may indeed change the behavioural, education and labour market outcomes for the children of these families, as predicted by the neighbourhood effects model (and empirically verified—see, for example, Rosenbaum, 1991, 1995). However, the reason for improvement is not that the movers become better families and individuals, but that they assimilate to a dominant set of cultural norms and values, and therefore experience less cultural discrimination in the school system, the labour market and other institutions. Neighbourhood effect models may only measure the degree to which neighbourhood context facilitates or constrains assimilation to dominant cultural norms. In this case, neighbourhood effects are explained through processes of cultural assimilation and exclusion, not cultural dysfunction.

Material Consequences in Policy-making and Planning

The statistical evidence of the relationship between neighbourhood context and individual outcome has shaped public policies and planning initiatives. For instance, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Moving to Opportunities pilot project replicates the Gautreaux programme in other US cities (Rosenbaum, 1995). HUD also awards Section 8 housing vouchers to 1.4 million low-income families, allowing these families to move to middle-class and suburban areas (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000). Regional HUD initiatives and local housing authorities offer similar programmes. Implicit in these efforts is that moving into middle-class areas offsets negative neighbourhood effects. Alternative strategies seek to break the social and cultural isolation of the poor by focusing on urban enrichment and mixed-income housing initiatives (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1997b; Galster and Hornburg, 1995; Brophy and Smith, 1997; Schwartz and Tajbakhsh, 1997).

Without a firm grasp of the causal processes involved in neighbourhood effects, urban policy and planning responses are prone to produce unintended consequences. The direct causality implied by neighbourhood effects models presents a simple and 'straight-forward' explanation for the social and economic marginality of inner-city residents, which entices through its use of quantitative methods and its claim to be objective and value-free. Yet, as was argued above, this literature makes ideological assumptions that remain unacknowledged by many researchers. One of these assumptions is that suburban middle-class lifestyles are normal, and inner-city, minority lifestyles are pathological. By not relaxing this underlying assumption, the idea of neighbourhood effects

ignores wider social processes of cultural differentiation and exclusion. An unintended effect of policy responses may be that they force culturally different communities to assimilate to dominant culture, or otherwise suffer from social and economic marginality.[3]

Ethnic minority neighbourhoods are not a cultural wasteland. Voluntary spatial concentration can have important social and cultural benefits to ethnic communities (Dunn, 1998; Peach, 1996) and persistent residential segregation is not *necessarily* associated with labour market exclusion (Balakrishnan and Hou, 1999). In addition, many poor communities possess rich networks of personal and informal relationships that help residents coping with social marginality, the lack of opportunities and resources, and a sociopolitical climate that deems their lifestyles pathological (Mattingly, 1999; Johnson *et al.*, 1999; Gilbert 1998; also Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Childrearing outside the context of a nuclear family, for instance, may not be a terribly defiant practice in neighbourhoods in which extended family and community support networks exist. Neighbourhood-based social practices and behaviour are important elements of cultural identity. They should neither be dismissed as pathological nor subjected to policies that enforce acculturation.

Conclusion

The idea of neighbourhood effects is a vital element of the underclass discourse: the inner-city neighbourhood serves as the geographical context in which dysfunctional cultural traits are bred, procreate and spread like diseases. Although most neighbourhood effects researchers recognise that "causality is always hard to prove" (Rosenbaum, 1991, p. 1205), they usually imply that direct causal linkages exist between neighbourhood context, individual behaviour and social and economic outcomes. By articulating an explanation of cultural exclusion regarding the correlation between neighbourhood context and individual outcomes, I expose ideological assumptions ingrained in the idea of neighbourhood effects.

Researchers 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. Of course, the academic literature on neighbourhood effects has only limited influence on the world-views of politicians, educators, community-workers or planners. However, the idea of neighbourhood effects provides scientific legitimacy to neighbourhood stereotypes among employers, educators and institutional staff, and justifies slum-clearance and acculturation policies.

To investigate further the claim that processes of cultural exclusion explain the relationship between neighbourhood characteristics and individual outcomes, researchers need to shift their methodological as well as their epistemological frameworks of analysis. However, new methods and epistemologies come with their own challenges. Sibley explains that

> Research on inclusion/exclusion … may require an appreciation of other world-views, which is most likely to come from ethnography and participant observation (although this also raises questions about the right to speak for others) … (Sibley, 1998, p. 120).

We must accept these challenges to debunk the myth of neighbourhood pathology and recognise the value of neighbourhood-based identities.

Notes

1. For more elaborate literature reviews on neighbourhood effects, see Gephart (1997) and Turner and Ellen (1997).
2. An important book in the context of the construction of cultural difference is *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984).
3. Offering residential choices should be an important goal of public housing policy. US federal programmes, such as Section 8 or Moving to Opportunities, formally provide such choices. However, as the statistical evidence on neighbourhood effects demonstrates, the only option to escape social and

economic marginality is to move to the sub-urbs. If residents opt for housing in stigma-tised inner-city neighbourhoods, their chances for social upward mobility are severely constrained.

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