

Neighbourhood dynamics and neighbourhood effects

Ludi Simpson

Major points made as discussant of presentations made on 9th September 2010

1. Neighbourhood dissatisfaction may follow the decision to move.

Nic Bailey et al.'s review notes that influences on residential mobility are mainly individual circumstances and life course events, and that association of mobility with neighbourhood satisfaction is clearer than with any specific neighbourhood characteristics (p4). Karien Decker said much the same thing, that subjective evaluation of neighbourhoods is more closely related to migration than objective measures of neighbourhood attributes. For this reason, Karien models 'dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood' as a causal precursor to an individual's consideration of moving.

Shouldn't we also consider that the ordering might be in reverse? As soon as a person seriously considers a move, doesn't their whole frame of mind change towards where they live? One begins to compare the neighbourhood with other places one might like to be, to evaluate it in a new way. And certainly by the time you decide to move, you are more likely to be aware of the things about your current neighbourhood that you will be happy to leave behind, that you have not considered before. This may not be the case for everyone, particularly when the reason for the move is very clear cut and not a desired move. But for some people a move will be a desirable outcome, motivated by household circumstances and life events and not by the quality of the neighbourhood, but consideration of the move will initiate rational consideration of other factors including the neighbourhood, whose drawbacks will be included in any justification of the decision.

The number of people for whom heightened dissatisfaction with neighbourhood follows consideration of a move may be sufficient to entirely cause the association noted in the literature.

2. To what extent are individual opinions of neighbourhood composition a result of institutional influence?

By identifying redlining as a current practice of Dutch banks, Manuel Aalbers described clearly an institutional response to a neighbourhood or a type of neighbourhood, which affects all the residents of that neighbourhood. It affects them directly by not being able to get loans, and presumably indirectly by the knock-on effect of other people getting to know the bad reputation of the area and also acting on that knowledge.

I want us to consider that such powerful institutional effects may be more pervasive than this. It is well known, for example, that a belief in 'otherness', that people not like us are dangerous and difficult to live near, is more strongly held by those who do not in fact live near those 'others'. Experience of people of diverse backgrounds tends to make us more aware of common concerns and values, and less concerned by neighbourhood composition, according to opinion surveys. Presumably this is the case because our attitude to mixed areas and the threatening experience of living in them is to some extent 'received opinion, not determined by ourselves alone but derived from

institutionalised ideology. Put more practically, our ideas about things we don't know much about are influenced by commentators, headline and 'opinion-setters' in the media and elsewhere, that impinge on everyone in a neighbourhood.

Can we measure this type of institutional effect? Is this important to understanding neighbourhood effects on decisions to move and which neighbourhoods are attractive or not? One could say that if we don't identify institutionalised influence on individual views, then studies of individual attitudes are simply reflecting that influence and have little hope of changing it.

3. Decomposition of social change requires comprehensive accounting, summary indicators and typologies of areas

Nick Bailey et al. and Stephen Jivraj today, and Nissa Finney yesterday, each decomposed change in the social or ethnic mix of areas into that due to migration, that due to change of status in situ, and that due to entrants and exits to the system as a whole. The latter was called 'ageing' by Nick, 'turnover' by Stephen (entrants to and leavers from school) and for Nissa was represented by births and deaths.

The flows of migration might be further disaggregated into types of external area: within the nation and overseas, or city and longer-distance flows, or to different types of area. The influence of each of migration (whether disaggregated or not), change in situ, and system change is a net impact on the composition of an area. Even when that composition is represented simply by one percentage as in these papers (% White; % claimants; % unemployed and so on), the net impact is a result of adding and differencing four flows. Their different sizes can tell quite different stories. For example if migration induces an increase in the local unemployment, this may mean that fewer unemployed have moved out than expected, or more have moved in, or fewer employed have moved in, or more have moved out. In Nissa's context, is natural increase due to high fertility or low mortality (and the introduction of rates adds further complexity).

This detailed accounting usefully indicates what is causing a change in neighbourhood composition, or indeed what is causing stability. It might borrow from and develop demographic accounting methods. Decomposition of population change has been re-discussed by Bongaarts and Bulatao in the 1990s and in the context of sub-national ethnic mix will be used by Phil Rees and colleagues in their dissemination of population projections finalised earlier this year. One might extend the accounting to age and time dimensions as Nick Bailey suggested, therefore including the duration of stay, to model a person's lifetime 'neighbourhood career', which surely affects their behaviour in addition to simply the neighbourhood they inhabit at a particular point in time.

Particularly important will be the development of indicators which can capture in summary the influence of different factors on population composition (as the Standardised Mortality Ratio does for mortality's influence on population size).

Such summary indicators may together help to classify not only the changing composition of areas, but the source of this change, as Nissa showed in reducing sub-national ethnic change in Britain to four types. A typology of neighbourhood change in

social or ethnic composition might be expected to help distinguish influences on other aspects of neighbourhood and individual behaviour.

4. Selective migration does not change neighbourhoods, it keeps them the same

It has been unchallenged today that interest lies in the ways in which selective migration changes areas, and some disappointment that selective migration has less impact than in situ and other sources of change. Instead, we should recognise and use the fact that the role of selective migration is usually to keep areas the same.

Geoff Meen would have noted that the physical layout of cities, and the role of each neighbourhood, changes very little over decades and centuries, determined by geology and morphology at the time the neighbourhoods are established, and kept in place by the physical structure of long-lasting housing and road networks. Educational planners understand that infants born in blocks of high rise flats will not enter local schools. Their parents will aim to move when the children are old enough to walk, rather than be constrained by the danger and lack of outside space. New young couples move into the flats to replace them. Selective migration keeps the family composition constant. In general, mismatch between individual and neighbourhood, described as 'stress' by Nick Bailey, leads to migration of those who do not fit the neighbourhood's role. Stress arises as individual circumstances change and as people age, provoking the circulation of population required for equilibrium.

Areas may suit young families, larger families or retired people, but it is not only age and life stage that determines a neighbourhood's social role. Neighbourhoods have remained immigrant areas over successive generations of immigrants from different origins, as is well appreciated for Tower Hamlets as Huguenot refugees, Jewish refugees, and then Bangladeshi immigrants have started their UK stay in London. And the distribution of low-cost havens and prosperous suburbs does not change much over the decades, though the people who live in them do as they circulate through selective migration. There are not many self-sustaining neighbourhoods that are not regenerated by selective migration.

This does imply that neighbourhoods will be hard to change through social policies directed at people in neighbourhoods, and explains why such investment may simply speed up the selective migration rather than change its nature. Changes in neighbourhood role, if they are sought, may better come from changing the built environment, or from changing income inequality across the board. The discussion gave the example of 1980s social policy in Britain reducing social housing and restricting its new tenants to the most poor, often unemployed: during the past 30 years these policies have concentrated very poor families in the remaining social housing, with a consequent increase in social segregation.

Discussion also pointed out that the reduction of migration in the late 2000s due to reduced income may increase neighbourhood change rather than reduce it, if it makes selective migration less feasible, increasing the unresolved mismatch between individuals' circumstances and their housing conditions.