“Difference,” ethnicity, disability and housing: Prospects for theoretical work and comparative research

Malcolm Harrison

School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.
email: m.l.harrison@leeds.ac.uk

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Introduction

Although longstanding concerns with divisions related to socio-economic status or class remain important for social scientists, other aspects of differentiation have moved up the agenda in recent decades. Housing researchers and theorists today may highlight the importance of several lines of variation, including age, disability, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. This paper discusses ethnicity and housing using UK illustrations, and also refers briefly to disability. One conclusion will be that differentiation may be viewed in terms of the notion of difference within difference. This concept was developed in previous writing (Harrison with Davis, 2001), offering a reminder that we need an understanding not only of experiential diversity, but also of more persisting patterns of resources, opportunities and constraints. In effect we can think usefully of a “big picture” of constraints and opportunities patterned fairly consistently over time (although not static), and related to differentiation along lines of class, racialisation, gender and so forth. Yet we also need to remember the complexities of individual and group experiences and actions, within or alongside those persisting patterns.

Later the paper turns to prospects for comparative work, noting theory possibilities but focussing more particularly on “race” and housing linked to policy issues. Comparative analysis presents problems here. Even if we leave aside trying to develop broad theoretical frames, there may be difficulties about vocabulary and meanings, as well as questions about underlying assumptions. To illustrate the latter a UK example is mentioned, concerning debates about segregation and “community cohesion.” Analysis might be influenced by assumptions from “top-down” white-led or middle class assimilationism on the one hand, or by a less authoritarian and pejorative perspective on neighbourhoods and multi-culturalism on the other. Such choices might have parallels outside Britain. Nonetheless, the paper concludes by suggesting that comparative work on difference and policies in housing is well worthwhile. Doing some “groundwork” for developing
Europe/North America comparisons on the ethnic relations front might be one reasonable way to begin to enlarge what can be tackled.

“Race,” ethnicity and housing in the UK

This paper uses specific terms current in the UK, including “minority ethnic,” “black minority ethnic,” and “black and minority ethnic,” when referring to people perceived as differing from majority white groups. Such identifiers are not clear-cut, but are widely found in British public policy contexts and have proved reasonably “fit for purpose.” I also refer to more specific groups in terms of ethnic or national origins where appropriate (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, etc.). A later section of the paper touches again on the choosing of terminologies, in relation to comparative work.

In overall terms there is strong evidence of continuing relative disadvantage for black minority ethnic households in the UK, despite considerable socio-economic advance by many households. It is recognised officially that in comparison to their representation in the population, people from minority ethnic communities are more likely than others to live in deprived areas, to be poor, to suffer ill-health, and to live in over-crowded housing (Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 17). Of course, bad conditions are also experienced by many poor white households. Nonetheless, drawing on the 2001 Census and the English House Condition Survey of 2001, Phillips notes that there are still major inequalities between white British and black and minority ethnic groups overall when considered in terms of levels of over-crowding or access to good quality housing in all tenures, and that black and minority ethnic households are nearly three times (27%) as likely to live in “poor” neighbourhoods as are whites (10%) (Phillips, in Harrison et al., forthcoming). People from black minority ethnic groups are also disproportionately represented amongst the officially-recorded homeless (see discussion in Harrison with Phillips, 2003, pp. 30-31, and Cole and Robinson, 2003, pp. 44-45). Local housing research reports have reinforced impressions of difficulties facing particular minorities, revealing in specific instances substantial problems of chronic illness or impairment, or highlighting practical issues such as inability to use central heating fully because of costs.

A longstanding feature of UK urban housing has been the phenomenon of low income home ownership as an important aspect of black minority ethnic experience, with potentially difficult consequences for owners when repair and maintenance costs have been high, conventional finance difficult to obtain, or neighbourhood environmental quality unsatisfactory. There may be at least some degree of convergence, however, in terms of patterns of owning and quality of properties, between the later generations of minority ethnic group buyers and the white British population, with increasing numbers of young middle class people from all minority ethnic groups pursuing suburban goals of good housing, relatively spacious and low crime neighbourhoods, and access to good schools (Phillips, in Harrison et al., forthcoming). Even with suburbanisation, however, there may still be some over-crowding because of family size, and not all minority groups are moving up the housing market at the same pace. Furthermore, local housing and labour markets strongly affect available options through variations in dwelling affordability and limits on viability of purchase strategies.
Unsurprisingly, social rented housing remains significant for minority ethnic households, reflecting low incomes and specific situations pushing people towards this tenure (just as for many single parents and disabled people).

Minority ethnic households account for about 8% (4.5 million) of the total UK population, and it seems that 70% live in the 88 most deprived areas (Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and Constitutional Affairs, 2004). Significant variations have been observed between minority ethnic groups in matters such as household composition, tenure, dwelling types, settlement geographies, and density of occupation (see Ratcliffe, 1997), and different groups can have differing household characteristics, population growth rates or potential for new household formation. Stresses may be considerable when population growth is fast within low income communities where there is already extensive overcrowding and a shortage of affordable dwellings. Amongst the larger minority ethnic groups, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are more likely to live in the most deprived housing conditions in the worst locations, and to experience high levels of overcrowding and inadequate “living space” (according to the 2001 census: see Phillips, in Harrison et al., forthcoming). Many also live in homes without central heating, and about a quarter of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households have been found to be living in “unfit” housing compared with 6% of whites. Households of Indian origin are generally achieving better outcomes, with increasing numbers obtaining access to good quality, semi-detached housing in the suburbs. Even here, however, disproportionately high numbers may still live in poor, overcrowded inner city conditions. When it comes to home ownership, levels vary between groups (currently being highest for Indians, at 76%), but variation may be diminishing. As Phillips explains, after decades of fairly static home-ownership rates amongst Indians and Pakistanis, levels have now fallen slightly as more of the younger generation select renting for economic reasons (Phillips in Harrison et al., forthcoming). Tenure choices pursued may be coming into line more with socio-economic status than previously, against a backdrop of rising housing prices and difficulties of getting into the market.

Differentiation within particular minority ethnic groups is affected by age, generation, gender, household type, chronic illness or impairment, community or settlement histories, and specific religious or kinship affiliations, as well as by socio-economic status. Even within extremely successful groups, we might expect to find a housing “gradient” linked to class, occupation, etc. Household composition within ethnic groups is important for housing needs (as with high proportions of female-headed lone-parent families, or of extended households). Female heads of households are less likely than men to own dwellings, even taking into account socio-economic status, and there is higher dependence of women with children on social rented housing. Phillips observes that the quality and status of the housing owned by women tends to be worse than that of men, and that this difference holds across classes and ethnic groups. She also notes that indications are that those owners most likely to live in higher quality homes (e.g. in good areas with semi-detached/detached housing with central heating) are the white British, Chinese and Indians, whilst the least likely are those of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin (Phillips in Harrison et al., forthcoming).
Despite diversity of trajectories amongst households and specific groupings within the overall black minority ethnic category, everyone who is perceived as “non-white” nonetheless can face similar problems in daily living to some degree. Even a person who feels at home in UK “mainstream” culture and has achieved economic success may fare less well than a comparable white person. Writers have applied the term *ethnic penalties* (although the word ethnic is not quite what is needed here). This refers to situations where members of “non-white” categories (independently of qualifications and positions in jobs hierarchies), tend to encounter disadvantages that lead them to progress or be included less easily than apparently comparable white people (Karn, 1997, pp 266-267, 275-281; Modood, 1997, pp 144-145). In housing this is manifested through the constraints (including worries about racist threats) that continue to restrict housing and area choice for a wide range of minority households (for relevant discussion see Ratcliffe et al., 2001, and Phillips and Unsworth, 2002). There are also effects from “institutional racism,” despite considerable advances in legal protection. Acknowledging shared disadvantage does not mean undervaluing the vitality of particular cultures or capacity of individual households to achieve goals, but alerts us to widespread processes of racialisation and inferiorisation connecting with ongoing economic and political histories and events. The term *difference within difference* is applicable, conveying the view that there is still an uneven patterning of outcomes in which a general “white/black minority ethnic” divide remains important, but that diversity at household or minority group levels can be substantial.

*The policy agenda relating to black and minority ethnic housing: preoccupations and prospects*

Thinking on racism and ethnicity within policy domains has shifted over the years in the UK. Reform preoccupations of earlier post-war decades cast anti-racism strategies largely in terms of monitoring and resisting direct discrimination, exposing and seeking change in systematic bad practice around a “black/white” divide, starting to tackle broad “racial inequalities,” bringing resources into specific inner urban localities to counter economic decline, and (as time passed) promotional and exploratory work on equal opportunities through codes of practice and investigations (for an account of change see Law, 1996). There were also often ideas about encouraging assimilation and harmony, but it was mainly the “equality agenda” which became important for housing practice. As time has passed, there has been a marked increase in sophistication as far as housing organisations’ activities are concerned, together with something of a change in the focus and purposes of policy analysis and research. Several factors led to preoccupations gradually becoming more complicated in housing practice and allied fields. A series of intermittent urban disturbances on the streets stimulated positive interventions affecting housing. The rise of the black voluntary housing movement brought new voices into prominence, helping redirect policy towards community empowerment and cultural sensitivity. More generally, the governmental agenda gradually changed in the face of recognition of increasing diversity across households and localities, and the growing numbers and impact of minority ethnic people. Alongside these changes came a heightened governmental interest in participation by groups of “users” or service consumers, or at least a
discourse touching increasingly positively upon this. Although simplifying somewhat, we can think of a second agenda – “the diversity agenda” – supplementing the equality one.

Meanwhile, processes of monitoring, regulation, advice and audit have developed considerably (see Harrison et al., forthcoming). Recent policy development, strategy and training ideas have shown understanding much advanced on that of earlier periods, while law has been strengthened, with enhanced duties for organisations under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Although progress in ethnic relations has been undermined by political and media debates over asylum and immigration, this runs somewhat against the trend in general anti-racist and equal opportunities expectations. Overt racisms have been very much reduced in social rented housing practice, and there is wider acknowledgement of the significance of cultural sensitivity for service design and delivery. Nonetheless, a focus of recent investigations in England has been the housing associations, with questions raised about several dimensions of their performance (Somerville, Sodhi and Steele, 2000; Tomlins, et al., 2001; Robinson, Iqbal and Harrison, 2002). Their equality policies may still lack depth and breadth, record-keeping, monitoring, and consultation with communities remain inadequate, and there are ongoing doubts about outcomes on contractors and consultants, employment of staff, lettings, and investment.

If we were trying to identify key elements in a useful medium-to-longer-term UK policy analysis and research portfolio, the following (Harrison, forthcoming, 2004) would be worth considering:

(i) Investigations into conditions, affordability and security

One interesting feature in the UK has been the emergence of the local needs study as a tool for acquiring information on conditions, for feeding ideas into the policy process, for helping with target setting, or for framing the social audit of ongoing housing organisations’ performance (see Harrison with Phillips, 2003, p. 50). Methodologies, measures and indicators for such studies vary, with potential for disagreements about how far a specific type of information is actually a good guide to needs in a particular locality or community. For instance, established approaches to indicators of households’ relative needs may not place enough weight on isolation or potential harassment. Homelessness can be a needs indicator (although the problem of “hidden” or “unrecognised” homelessness complicates matters), and one might want to scrutinise any significant patterns of institutional and actor behaviour (in private, voluntary and public sectors) playing a role in creating conditions for homelessness.

(ii) Understanding implications of differences and diversity

Writers have commented usefully on provision and problems relating to specific impairments, older age, women separating from partners, and many other concerns. There are plenty of potential misunderstandings to avoid. For instance, with elders, stereotypes about ethnicities may lead to over-optimistic assumptions about the preparedness or capacity of people’s relatives and social networks to provide informal support, while lack of directly expressed demand for services may be taken mistakenly to suggest lack of need (disregarding
possibilities that problems of information, communications or cultural insensitivity may have restricted take-up).

(iii) Participation, empowerment, and voice

Involving housing consumers in consultative and decision-making processes has been given higher priority by governments in recent years. Some attention has also been paid to improving housing career opportunities (through positive action strategies focussed on training, etc.), and to development of housing organisations run directly by black and minority ethnic people. These organisations in some senses have been the “jewel in the crown” within minority ethnic housing strategy for two decades. More generally, research and monitoring remain underdeveloped in respect of participation, with little detailed information about recent practices or developments for women, specific minority ethnic or religious groups, elders, or disabled people.

(iv) Choice, pathways, residential mobility and outward movement

Considerable UK debate has developed about movement from established areas of residence into neighbourhoods outside existing areas of minority settlement. Whilst significant numbers of minority ethnic residents may wish to move out of inner city areas, they are inhibited by worries about the absence of other minority ethnic households and associated facilities and shops, as well as fear of potential harassment. Concerns about harassment may be complemented by reservations about what are thought of as crime-prone and “rough” (primarily white) neighbourhood cultures (see Phillips and Harrison in Harrison et al., forthcoming). Phillips and Unsworth indicate a need for sensitive policies to support minority ethnic households wishing to rent in non-traditional areas of social rented housing. They observe that some housing providers have begun implementing strategies of creating “settlement nodes” or clusters in more outlying areas, perhaps underpinned by inter-agency initiatives and tenant support (Phillips and Unsworth, 2002, p. 85).

(v) Sustainability, ownership and asset-based welfare

Surprisingly little is known about the durability, limitations and effectiveness of physical improvements in inner areas, the contributions that policy interventions make there to ongoing financial success, autonomy or difficulty for minority ethnic households, or the manageability for tenants and landlords of rented dwellings over time. These research topics all relate to sustainability, which is important in its social and economic as well as physical senses. A concept of social sustainability implies taking account of people’s individual, household or collective preferences and strategies, and bearing in mind the dynamic nature of these. More active support for “down-market” owners might include increases in direct funding, more state-sponsored protection to reduce financial risks, easier arrangements for changing tenure (in whichever direction was appropriate) while staying in the same house, and enhanced funding and choices for moves out of run-down areas into replacement housing. Preferences for ownership, however, may not be fixed or universal, being affected by experiences of poor dwelling quality, repair problems, and changing housing and labour market conditions, as well
as by governmental moves affecting viability of tenure options. Across the tenures, the control of assets and management is potentially significant for households and groups, and important for a sustainability agenda. One possible route for contemporary housing policies lies in the direction of “assets based” welfare, in which support might focus more on helping people establish or sustain a share in housing property, individually or collectively (Harrison with Phillips, 2003). For conventional social renting, sustainability could have several dimensions concerning autonomy, rights, security and safety, but also clearly a financial one, since low rents and servicing charges are often crucial components of a sustainable and stable housing environment.

(vi) Equality testing or proofing

Although expectations about better monitoring practices and audit processes have spread, systematic analysis of outcomes from specific policy or legal measures is still far from automatic. Ideally, implemented policies should be kept under review in the light of their impact for particular types of households, while proposals should be tested before they become entrenched in programmes. There may be indirect or unanticipated side-effects from policies which at first glance seem to have little direct connection to equality of opportunities. Several phrases are presently in use (equality testing, equality proofing, disability testing, ethnicity proofing, and so forth), but the main point is that government should evaluate its proposals in the light of their potentially differential impacts for differing groups. Perhaps it is over-optimistic to expect this in any comprehensive form in present national political environments, but it is nonetheless a practice to be pressed for by all those favouring better informed and genuinely “evidence-based” policy.

Disability

Turning to disability, we can again think about difference within difference, and usefully refer to the social model of disability (for further comment see paper for ENHR conference, Cambridge, 2004). The nature of the broader societal patterns has been illuminated by advocates of the social model, who highlight an understanding of disablement which views this as a social process (see Oliver, 2004). From this viewpoint, disability is understood primarily as something resulting from a persistent devaluing of people with impairments, their exclusion from good careers and high incomes, and lack of concern for their needs and preferences in the arranging of physical spaces, running of services, and social interactions. This social approach has challenged entrenched formulations within medicalised or individualised accounts which portray disability as an attribute of particular people who deviate from a supposed physical norm. Social model thinking means rejecting the locating of disability in the individual, as simply a condition to be measured and classified as a medical matter or functional limitation. In supporting a social model analysis, however, we do not deny the importance to individuals of chronic illness, or of particular pain or difficulty experienced individually. For this reason, the word impairment or phrase specific impairments may be used alongside disablement to refer to people’s individual physical, mental, health or socio-medical attributes, often generating particular preferences or needs, and lying along a continuum on which every
person has a place. The model points us towards commonalities of disadvantage in relation to the big picture of constraints and opportunities, and to the rights of disabled people to be included on a fairer and more equal basis. Meanwhile, we can see diversity of experiences at household level. Thus, although the meaning of housing and home is very individual, housing is a potential component at a more general level in disabling or enabling environments through its administrative, financial, and physical features. Referring to disability as well as ethnicity shows that there are similarities alongside distinct features when we review more than one line of difference in relation to power, institutions and patterns. One task for theory is to help handle convergence, parallels, and similarities.

Prospects for enlarging comparative policy-related cross-countries work

In recent years comparative social policy scholarship has expanded, and there has been considerable interest in theories and ideas about welfare systems in different places (see for instance Arts and Gelissen, 2002). A number of factors may have contributed to the growth of interest amongst scholars. In Western thinking there is probably less certainty and confidence about European-style welfare states, following substantial changes and the rise of neo-liberal ideas, as well as transnational developments affecting national policies. Assumptions and preoccupations that went with the “old welfare state” have been challenged. Kennett refers to a rethinking “of the theoretical and analytical traditions of the welfare state”, as well as a reappraisal of the assumptions “embedded in social policy research” (2001, p. 1). In addition there is interest in the substantial population flows between countries, and the effects of this for domestic policies. Furthermore, as Kennett suggests, “In cross-national social policy research, the emphasis has moved from ranking countries according to their welfare effort to a recognition that there are different types of welfare states, that formal social policies are only one element in the arrangements of welfare, and that social policy is not just about ameliorating the impact of social inequality or about altruism” (2001, p. 77).

It would be valuable to have more comparative work linking difference with housing and allied policy areas, both in order to test, improve or find alternatives to available theoretical frameworks, and to build up the interchange of empirical material on conditions, individual and collective strategies, empowerment, and policy preoccupations. Perhaps the ISA might be one key channel in such a process. On the theory front I wonder if difference within difference might be a useful concept in a range of national contexts, and whether another group of ideas I have worked on – social regulation, differential incorporation and structured selectivity – might also eventually prove helpful for comparative analysis, focussing on differentiation and state institutions. Ever since Esping-Andersen’s 1990 book on welfare capitalism, there has been considerable interest in using concepts of regime theories to classify or compare states, and various formulations have been developed. Comparative accounts of societies or state institutional arrangements nonetheless face difficulties, one being that quite often there will be more “grounds for variation” than can be encompassed sensibly in “a limited typology” (Spicker, 2000, p. 4). Perhaps one way forward might be to prioritise analysis and cross-country comparison of specifiable societal regularities and mechanisms that affect production or consumption in
relation to welfare systems or housing, and the comparative roles of institutions or practices in sustaining regularities and differentiations here. With a consumption-focussed account, a key component might be the idea of an ensemble of overlapping regulatory practices (orientated especially to the organisation and management of consumption), and highlighting issues such as citizenship, rights, empowerment, and difference across private, non-profit and public sectors (Harrison with Davis, 2001). At the moment, however, developing a comparative perspective on this lies in the future, and my present task is to concentrate on prospects for more tightly-focussed cross-national work on “race” and policy in housing and allied fields.

An initial problem is that there is no agreed international set of terms and meanings, and quantitative as well as qualitative data may reflect differing definitions and terminologies. Comparative analysis might encounter preconceptions and foci associated with particular academic and policy environments, reflected even in choices of terminologies. In the UK, for example, although the word race is often deployed, it may sometimes be placed in quotation marks to signify that, while there is a human race, doubts exist about the meaningfulness (and ideological or political implications) of dividing this along supposed lines of physiological differences. References to racisms and racialisation are more straightforward, denoting processes of social construction through which boundaries may be drawn between groups and inferiorisation occurs, but not necessarily attributing genuine significance to supposed physical demarcations as such. “Black” and “white” are used as descriptors (and appear in data sets), but sometimes with reservations, and “non-white” is also used from time to time. Serious scholars will be cautious if using the word “immigrants,” or a phrase like “second generation immigrants.” These cannot be appropriate to describe in a general way those people perceived as non-white. There are potentially pejorative implications or racist connotations with such terminology, especially when applied to longstanding residents or people born in the UK. There was an increasing tendency to refer to African/Caribbean and Asian or South Asian people, as reservations strengthened about a simplifying black or “non-white” category in recent years, but this too has limitations as these groupings themselves embrace households of varying backgrounds. Frequent reference is now made to the “next level down” in disaggregation as far as Asian groups are concerned (Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, etc.), but limited data availability often prevents desirable specification. Within policy domains current practice is often to refer to “black minority ethnic,” “black and minority ethnic,” “minority ethnic,” or “BME” groups. Such usages reflect enhanced awareness of ethnicity, culture and religion, and have coincided with a degree of official acceptance of the “diversity agenda” alongside the firmly-established equality of opportunity agenda. Uses of the term “ethnic groups” should reflect awareness that everyone (black or white) has ethnicity, and should not be reserved for non-whites alone, although “ethnic divisions” or “ethnic relations” are unproblematic terms. A reference to “ethnics” as if this were a suitable descriptor for black people would attract derision from scholars. Anyway, there is no obvious terminology that can meet all criticisms, especially since many households have multiple heritages, and even self-classification might prove problematic.
As well as coping with terminologies, comparative work faces likely variations in the available information base in terms of depth, coverage, or timescales. The UK has a great deal of qualitative information, and some reasonable large data sets, but relatively little on private sector institutional behaviour and outcomes. Other important “data-poor” UK topics include housing quality and the costs experienced by households, and housing in relation to children, chronic illness, impairments, and newer or less visible minority and migrant categories. More generally, we lack information on housing “pathways” and trajectories for minority ethnic households or their communities.

When it comes to connections with policy trends and priorities, there may be some resonances across countries. Perhaps items in my short list of research and analysis priorities for the UK might “travel” to some degree. Nonetheless, specific national cultural, legal and historical contexts remain crucial to understanding and comparison. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions of academics and policy communities may differ from place to place.

Values and assumptions: the case of segregation and “community cohesion”

To illustrate problems associated with academic or policy-makers’ assumptions, I turn to UK debates related to segregation and minority ethnic clustering. A series of urban disturbances in 2001 led to the idea of “community cohesion” being given a place in UK governmental strategy. The disturbances affected particular deprived areas in northern England, against a backdrop of tensions over policing, white/South Asian conflicts, and provocative right wing political activity. “Traditional” racist claims were being voiced that “people of African origin have a predisposition towards criminality” or that those from the Indian subcontinent “make slums out of good areas and also bring bad attitudes and disease” (see Loney, 2003), but there were also assertions about Asian households having benefited from policies at the expense of white people. It seems that some of the younger generation amongst South Asians felt that their communities were being threatened (although older people might have been less in sympathy with action on the streets). Perhaps ethnic solidarities and affiliations played an enhanced defensive role when disturbances developed, given the strengths of local South Asian communities and the recently heightened hostile targeting of Asian youth, religion and culture within popular debates.

Several official reports followed these events, the most well known being the Cantle Report (Independent Review Team, 2001). Central government was considering how national policies might promote “community cohesion” based upon shared values as well as celebration of diversity, and appointed a review team led by Cantle. There has been a stream of guidance for local government and other players on how to pursue the new agenda. A “working definition” of community cohesion was offered which embraced a “common vision” and sense of “belonging” for all communities, appreciation and positive valuing of the diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances, those from differing backgrounds having similar life opportunities, and strong and positive relationships being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods. Central government
sought to bring community cohesion into the mainstream agenda, and encouraged local authorities to promote it. There is a mixture of benign and pejorative elements in the debate. Elsewhere, I have tried to chart a positive way forward (Harrison et al., forthcoming), but for present purposes concentrate on the deficient assumptions. Central is a conception of community that is laden with normative intent, implying that perceived “micro-communities” at very local level should “mesh into” or have counterparts at or across some higher level of community (at neighbourhood, civic network, or perhaps in some senses even national level).

It has been asserted that neighbourhood concentrations of people from one ethnic background (although actually this only means non-white ethnicities!), and their separation from other groups living in adjacent areas, has contributed significantly to inter-community tensions and conflict. Although concepts of community can be contested, what is actually important for satisfactions and collaboration is usually people’s particular interactions, interdependencies and joint involvement in diverse and very specific institutional, economic, cultural or geographical contexts (such as the workplace, voluntary bodies, or politics). When it comes to interactions outside small localities, questions arise about the agenda being envisaged for cohesion, since it may imply an assimilationist model in which entrenched values of white communities pass relatively unchallenged, while the cultural domain of South Asian households is pushed back into a private realm.

Borrowing from work in hand, I summarise in the accompanying box some features in the thinking that deserve challenge. Community cohesion debates have been driven in part by a “backlash” against the growing visibility and strength of culturally distinct communities in specific neighbourhoods, and the impact of Islam in particular. Perhaps there was also the political worry that specific area-based or culturally-linked projects might be denigrated by white critics for supposedly channelling too many resources into the hands of non-white communities.

### Misleading assumptions in the UK “community cohesion” agenda

1. The labelling of specific minority ethnic communities or religious groups as “problematic,” with stereotypes developing about their supposed tendencies to “self-segregate” and “unwillingness” to acclimatise to Western values.

2. Adopting stereotypes of South Asian young men in inner urban areas which present them as potentially threatening in ways that echo the images that developed of African/Caribbean youth of the recent past (with supposedly disproportionate group tendencies to criminality, disorder, a drugs culture, etc.). Similarly, adopting parallel crude stereotypes about disaffected white youth. Such stereotypes (whether of white or black) might lead to over-dependence on punitive measures against anti-social behaviour at the expense of more constructive or holistic approaches, and divert resources away from an attack on causative factors (unemployment, educational and income issues, racisms, punitive rather than preventative drug control regimes, policing failures, poor services and housing, loss of local services, etc.).
3. Assuming that minority ethnic groups and their organisations as a general category have generally been over-privileged through the investments and policies of government and voluntary bodies, and that this is a major issue that policy-makers should highlight.

4. Assuming that sustainable “mixed” communities can readily be brought about within areas of settlement in a “top-down” way, through housing allocation and management. Underestimating the barriers and difficulties that have to be overcome for more “mixing” to occur naturally.

5. Assuming that identifying degrees of physical separation of non-white people in statistical terms will provide key indicators of a lack of community cohesion or of other problems. This would build on assumptions that geographical separation of culturally distinctive groups into different areas of residence is in itself necessarily harmful (which is unproven), and might involve fruitless research investigations of supposed divisions and groupings which may have less meaning or permanence than is imagined. There are dangers of classifying individual people in too simplistic a way, and even perhaps of implicitly assuming that some pre-determined notion of “deviance” may apply to them. None of this is to deny the benefits of knowing more about people’s residence and trajectories.

6. Moving the “diversity agenda” in the direction of a stronger top-down management of ethnic divisions, which (while acknowledging the strengths of communities) seeks more fully to measure and identify certain groups with a view to containing and modifying their distinctiveness, or to help handle where appropriate any supposedly “deviant elements” (a revitalised “ethnic managerialism’). (See Harrison and Law, 1997, for Law’s concept of “ethnic managerialism.”)

7. Assuming that tackling inter-community or ethnic relations problems is something needed urgently in certain northern towns where South Asian groups live in substantial numbers in old housing areas, but is less pressing or significant elsewhere.

(From Harrison et al., Housing “race” and community cohesion, forthcoming.)

One should be sceptical about the notion that separation based on clustering is in itself necessarily problematic. The spatial concentration of Britain’s black minority ethnic populations into housing areas within parts of urban England is well known, but a concentration in itself does not necessarily indicate or cause “social exclusion” or generate “deviance.” Although many black minority ethnic people would prefer better dwellings, some favour existing areas of settlement despite deficiencies, wishing to avoid harassment and isolation arising elsewhere, and needing access to specific facilities. Racist violence generates barriers to movement, although residence patterns and boundaries are potentially fluid rather than static. As well as offering relative safety, inner urban areas may also have processes of what might be depicted as local cultural, community or political inclusion, often facilitated through affiliations linked to ethnicity (see Harrison, 2003, pp. 110-112; and for fuller analysis Phillips in Harrison with Phillips, 2003). While aspects of life in inner city areas may carry penalties, there can be benefits from living in proximity to
people of similar culture and language. Yet we are being expected to believe that streets where black minority ethnic people form a majority may be a threat to civic order and community, however benignly this message is explained. There is also the view that minorities “keep themselves apart” rather than joining in wider participation, although actually racist barriers deter such engagement.

An interesting feature of the debate has been the assumption that it is non-whites who “self-segregate.” Whether we look at the history of housing or schools, “self-segregation” has been identifiable most strongly in the behaviours of white communities and white-run organisations, and perhaps this may be an issue within dominant group activity in many countries (a recent UK newspaper report, for instance, points to contemporary white self-segregation via religious schooling in Spain). UK government has not suggested, however, that private rural and suburban neighbourhoods threaten community cohesion because so few non-white people live there, or because some villages have become preserves for the rich. Indeed, a village might be proposed as a classic example not only of the persistence of localised community but of contributions to a wider positive civic climate. Similarly, no official suggests trying to identify distinctly Jewish households and measure their degree of spatial separation in Britain, in order to appraise their integration into UK society. Their inclusion and integration has been a long and successful socio-economic process, with barriers overcome and cultural adaptations made, and these are likewise key issues for other more recently established minority groups. Where Jewish people live (which may involve some clustering) tells us little about integration. There might be considerable concern if official bodies attempted to investigate “the extent and nature of cross-cultural contact” for Jewish people (which was one thing suggested for differing groups in official advice in 2002). Current official interest really derives partly from a wish to appraise and hasten aspects of Muslim assimilation in particular, and might perhaps be seen as potentially racist in its foundations.

Within research, there must be doubts about statistical exercises seeking to measure degrees of residential segregation or of daily interaction or participation, relying on categorising people neatly under predetermined “ethnic” headings (as if this was necessarily a reliable guide to their identities or relations with wider society). Policy analysts might be well advised to be cautious about interpreting “indicators” and “top-down” exercises producing “indices of segregation” or other measures of supposed separateness. There is nothing wrong with gathering information about where people live and why, and what they feel about their future housing pathways. One must be careful, however, about what data are assumed to mean, and the extent to which information succeeds or fails in capturing people’s own conceptions of identity and belonging. In a valuable account Simpson shows that understanding migration effects and population change is essential when considering concentration or dispersal, and that increasing residential segregation of South Asian communities is a myth (Simpson, 2004, p.668). This commentary also explains that – internationally – studies of segregation emerged from the “Chicago School,” and “have seen concentrations of any non-White group as negative” (p. 664). I suspect that until recently such pejorative perspectives carried much less intellectual or policy weight in the UK than in North America and parts of continental Europe:
there is resistance in Britain to ideas that concentration of non-whites in itself is a threat, to be measured and “treated” as if it were a pathological phenomenon.

Clearly the concept of integration is capable of varying interpretations (for systematic efforts at analysis see Reinsch, 2001). One marker of successful integration, however, might be the extent to which people are able to enjoy the rights and everyday opportunities that others take for granted, while another indicator might be the degree of incorporation and inclusion by institutions (such as colleges, trades unions, businesses, housing providers and criminal justice organisations). For minority ethnic groups generally, UK traditions of concentrating research and monitoring on institutional performance, and relating this to social inclusion, fairer access and participation, appear valid as central components for policy-related work. We should be wary of inclinations towards social engineering to create mixing or to “correct” patterns of separation in a top-down manner, supposedly for the sake of integration. The historical record shows not only that black people were disadvantaged by being allocated into areas of inferior housing and refused access to better estates, but also that there were some attempts to disperse non-white people locationally through social rented housing allocations, in response to fears about the “threat” posed by numbers of non-whites living together. The emphasis should be on facilitating equality of access in terms of quality of properties and areas, and responding to preferences of individual needy households (of all kinds). Any broader considerations of creating a “social mix” would have to be justified by demonstrable benefits for households who are in the weakest positions or potentially vulnerable, while a key target might well be to widen choices for those households. If we want real “community cohesion,” there are barriers to choice to overcome, collective capacities to develop, communications and knowledge to improve, and participative and collaborative enterprises and frameworks to sustain or create. More concern should be given than in the past to the dynamics and structuring of inter-group relationships, and the fit between group needs or preferences, investment prioritisation, and overall urban planning. Furthermore, the strengths of established communities should be acknowledged. Current housing activities are probably already addressing some of the more positive and practical aspects of a community cohesion agenda. In a recent report drawing on key informants from housing practice, Robinson et al. (2004) indicate that residential integration was not necessarily seen as essential for interaction to take place, and reservations about promoting residential integration appeared to recognise that people often live in segregated communities for good reason. One key theme was the importance of choice. A housing association director quoted even observed interestingly that “my most sustainable schemes are mono-cultural” (p. 15). Perhaps practitioners have a better understanding than central government Ministers at present.

A brief comment on implications

I have mentioned the community cohesion example because it raises issues on how scholars should approach questions about minority ethnic groups and housing. My emphasis would be on researching empowerment, engagement, institutional behaviours, rights, and widening of choice, not physical separation. Yet other researchers might take a different view. Developing future comparative programmes involves confronting our diverging assumptions or politics, alongside the many practical and “framework” problems touched upon above. So perhaps we
should proceed rather cautiously towards a cross-countries housing policy, ethnicity and “race” agenda. One task could be to work collaboratively to try to see what materials are available in different countries (the information base), and the kinds of research and policy preoccupations that the materials reflect. Maybe this will be easiest where there are at least some similarities of law, traditions, rights, and minority ethnic settlement. Anyway, comparative work on difference and public policies in the housing field still seems to be all too rare. I am hoping to get something collaborative going that might lay groundwork for developing Europe/North America comparisons, as this seems a reasonable way to begin.

References


Managing the “trust” relationship between researchers and researched is vital. Ethnography is extremely skilled work and so requires competent, well-trained researchers, capable of making reasonable ethical judgments during the research. Researchers have a responsibility to each other and to prevent doing harm that will undermine future research work. Ethical codes have to be “interpreted” and put into practice by the researcher in light of the substantive research topic and methodology employed. The manner in which research is commissioned, by whom and how the relationship between researchers... Scientific knowledge can be divided into two levels: theoretical and empirical. The first is based on conclusions, the second is based on experiences and interaction with the object under study. Despite the different nature, these methods are equally important for the development of science. Research is a learning process. This is when we try to define the ways that things work and truly understand them. This is the time for wide open questions. Is it possible? Why does this happen? There is no direct relationship to utility. The mere... It’s experimental or theoretical work specifically meant to acquire new knowledge around a topic without a bias around a specific product within the field. Basic research is meant to familiarize yourself with a market, technologies within it, trends & more to give you a strong platform for moving onto the next level which is applied research. Research projects include a comparative study of the professional working knowledge of teachers in the Nigerian States of Kwara, Lagos, Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa (ESSPIN, DFID) and the professional working knowledge of teachers in India (Core Projects and Technologies). The Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture (ICSLAC) (Carleton University) is a haven for intellectually rebellious researchers; a home for those who seek independence as well as a sense of belonging. Centre for Comparative Construction Research (CCCR) currently occupies a niche position by specializing in...