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Bringing urban governance back in: Neighborhood conflicts and depression

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ABSTRACT

Urban governance and its impact on contentious politics have received remarkably little attention in existing studies on mental health. Drawing on a measure of neighborhood conflicts developed in a survey of thirty-nine urban neighborhoods in Guangzhou, China, this article investigates the potential link between urban governance and mental health. Net of sociodemographic, relational, and environmental measures, it finds that among residents' conflicts with different entities of urban governance, only those with local/grassroots governments are significantly associated with more depressive symptoms. Moreover, these subgroups of government-oriented conflicts associated with more depressive symptoms are related to neighborhood planning and communal properties, reflecting a dilemma in the Chinese model of urban governance. By offering a relational interpretation of neighborhood conflicts, this study not only challenges the previous view that *community building* in China improves mental health, but calls attention to the significance of urban governance in research on mental health.

1. Introduction

Mental illness in the city has long been an intriguing topic for social scientists. Simmel ([1903] 1964) deemed "profusion of sensory stimuli," including sights, sounds, smells, and interference, as the city's most profound effects. Individuals must adapt, "react with their heads instead of hearts," and become aloof when dealing with urban life. Until recently, however, the issue of urban governance as a key mechanism for the restructuring of urban space (Brenner, 2004; Jessop, 2002; Pierre, 1999; Wu, 2002) has largely been neglected by health scholars. Brenner (2004: 455) describes urban governance as "the broad constellation of social, political and economic forces that mold the process of urban development within modern capitalism." While its scope is not necessarily restricted to modern capitalism, urban governance clearly involves a dynamic interplay of state authorities (e.g., local officials and urban planners), market forces (e.g., real estate developers and property managers), and social entities (e.g., residents and territorial civic organizations). Yet, the few epidemiological studies that have considered urban governance (Burris et al., 2007; Muennig, 2014; Shen, 2014) only treat it as being prescribed a priori by policy makers, and focus on the existing repertoire of strategies (e.g., ways of resource mobilization and regulatory measures) used by local authorities to promote healthier urban life. The relational nature of urban governance and its ramification on health have not been sufficiently theorized.

This study considers neighborhood conflicts as another form of stressors for depressive symptoms. From a relational perspective, neighborhood conflicts are conceptualized as contentious expressions of dyadic interplay between urban residents and other entities of urban governance (e.g., property managers, local authorities and real estate developers). It should be noted that the neighborhood conflicts analyzed here are different from the established measures of neighborhood disorder/disadvantage from the poverty literature, such as crime, the concentration of single-parent families, vandalism, and graffiti (Browning and Cagney, 2002; Sampson et al., 1999), nor do they include domestic violence within a family, daily complaints between neighbors, or routine strife among residents. By emphasizing a relational definition of neighborhood conflicts, this study argues that urban governance is not merely a set of rules made and enforced by these who are capable of imposing their will on the will of others. Instead, urban governance is experienced, realized, and made by interconnected entities, each with its own interests in urban space. The presence of neighborhood conflicts implies that existing rules of urban governance (material or abstract, traditional or transitional, moral or political, important or trivial, broad or narrow) are being contested, resisted or rejected by participants in urban governance, which may have ramifications for mental health.

Today we see the process of urban transformation most vigorously in China, where cities are undergoing fundamental changes in less than a generation (Hsing, 2010). Owing to its sheer scale, China's great urban transformation can have a far-reaching impact on the global burden of mental disorders (Gong et al., 2012; Hsieh, 2015; Jin et al., 2012; L. Song, 2015). Given that the lower rates of depression reported

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previously tend to suggest denial of depression among Chinese (Parker et al., 2001), scholars need to understand the broader cultural, sociopolitical and historical context of China's urban transformation in order to identify meaningful stressors that explain the onset of depression. Since the late-1990s, China's central government has initiated a nationwide *community-building* campaign to restore state control over urban space, which leads to a further restructuring of the triangular relations among state, market, and society. Being officially recognized as "a process that is guided by the Party and the state, …and that harnesses community resources for the purposes of strengthening community functions" (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2000), the purpose of this community-building model of urban governance is to convey the message that state authorities will do anything in its power to maintain governable urban space (Bray, 2006; Fu and Lin, 2014; Tomba, 2014).

From an urban-governance perspective, we next explore how community building comes into being and its link with neighborhood conflicts. We often observe market (e.g., developers and property managers) or social (e.g., civic territorial NGOs) forces in Western urban neighborhoods, but Chinese neighborhoods provide scholars a great opportunity to observe state forces expressed in vibrant power relations. Since this particular constellation of power relations has rarely been addressed by previous studies on urban health, this article is among the first to critically examine the mental-health consequence of contentious urban politics.

2. Background

2.1. Community building as a way of urban governance

Urban governance refers to the process through which local authorities, in conjunction with private entities, seek to achieve overarching goals in the city (Jessop, 2002; Pierre, 1999; Wu, 2002). To coordinate the interests of organizational or individual entities, this political process defines, reproduces and transforms relations among various entities in the urban space. In China, these entities involved in urban governance mainly include residents, local/grassroots governments, property management companies (PMCs) and real estate developers (Fu and Lin, 2014; Read, 2003; Tomba, 2014). Grassroots governments, including street offices (*jiedao ban*) and residents committees (*juwei hui*), compose subdistrict branches of local governments. They extend the roots of state power into urban neighborhoods through direct interactions with citizens (Lee and Zhang, 2013). While PMCs and developers appear to be nongovernmental, they often maintain various connections with governments due to reasons such as state ownership of enterprises, shared economic interests in land development, or personal networks.

Drawing on evidence from cities in North America and Europe, Keating (1991) maintains that urban governance in different sociospatial contexts can be assessed along two aspects: democratic participation and managerial efficiency. Following this line of reasoning, Pierre (1999) eloquently defines four models (or, more precisely, ideal types) of urban governance according to their overarching goals—the managerial, corporatist, progrowth, and welfare models—and argues that real-world urban governance can resemble one or a mixture of the four models. Yet these frameworks primarily derived from Western cities appear to be ineffective in conveying the rich substance of China's urban governance against the backdrop of urban transformation and the persistence of political power (Hsing, 2010; Tomba, 2014; Wu, 2002). Despite the rise of territorial civic organizations (Fu and Lin, 2014) and fierce market-oriented competition within and between Chinese cities (He and Wu, 2009), the conventional democratic and managerial aspects fail to provide a comprehensive instrument for assessing the Chinese model of urban governance.

One overarching goal of urban governance in China is the maintenance of state control over urban space, which is featured by a specific constellation of power relations (Bray, 2005; Lee and Zhang, 2013; Tomba, 2014; Vogel, 1989; Wu, 2002). This goal means that the state not only determines the landscape and planning of the city but also makes rules that govern the everyday life of urban residents (Friedmann, 2007). As noted by Wu (2001), state control over urban space has been weakened in the reform era: with the rise of the private sector, market transformation has created resources and personnel beyond the direct reach of state authorities. Given that decision-making power has been decentralized to the local/grassroots level, it becomes increasingly difficult and sometimes impossible for state authorities to dictate what urbanites should or should not do. To restore state control over urban space, the community-building campaign has several distinct political imperatives (Bray, 2006). Grassroots governments with defined territories have been endowed with a clear institutional identity; staffed with professional cadres; provided financial resources; and empowered to intervene neighborhood issues, using a wide repertoire of political instruments.

A recent cross-sectional study argues that, through the building of community capacity, the community-building campaign promoted the communal grassroots organizations and amenities, which subsequently led to fewer depressive symptoms (Shen, 2014). A follow-up commentary corroborated this enthusiasm for community building and argued that this policy solution to health disparities, if proven to be effective, should be advocated worldwide (Muennig, 2014). However, the argument that community building promotes communal resources is questionable because the latter can be the consequence of other sociospatial changes, such as the rise of territory-based civic organizations, healthcare reforms, or simply the fact that all boats rise on China's urban-transformation tide. Without key measures reflecting the possible downside of the Chinese model of urban governance (e.g., neighborhood conflicts), it is too early to conclude that a policy aiming to strengthen the Party rule at the grassroots level can improve mental health.

Moreover, the optimistic view of community building and its ramifications for neighborhood well-being is actually at odds with conclusions drawn by scholars with a keen interest in China's urban transformation (e.g., Bray, 2006; Fu and Lin, 2014; Hsing, 2010; Read, 2003; Tomba, 2014). As noted by Tomba (2005: 948-950), even inherently market-oriented relations such as dealing with PMCs are subject to government interventions, which frustrates urban residents, undermines residential satisfaction, and leads to direct confrontation. Moreover, power relations in Chinese urban neighborhoods are shown to discourage, let alone to promote, civic engagement and communal grassroots organizations (Fu and Lin, 2014). We thus have two conflicting pictures: in the view of a few medical sociologists and epidemiologists, community building promotes mental health, whereas the majority of human geographers, urban sociologists, political scientists, and cultural anthropologists see community building as leading to neighborhood unrest and contentious actions (e.g., Bray, 2006; Fu and Lin, 2014; Hsing, 2010; Read, 2003; Tomba, 2014). This study contributes to this debate by critically examining neighborhood conflicts and their association with depression from an urban-governance perspective.

2.2. Neighborhood conflicts and community building

To understand the link between neighborhood conflicts and community building, we must explore fundamental sociopolitical changes in urban China and answer the following two questions. First, what institutional changes account for the emergence of neighborhood conflicts in a socialist state? Second, with these institutional changes, how does community building lead to a dramatic increase in neighborhood conflicts?

The first question should be explored in the context of China's great urban transformation, or more precisely, from workplace (work unit, or *danwei*) housing to commodity housing. Marxist ideology views unequal homeownership as displaced class struggles between capitalists