**What is Gentrification and why do we talk about it so much?**

One of the most comprehensive definitions of gentrification that I point to when people ask me about is that it is a “process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestments and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off, middle- and upper middle-class population” (Freeman, 2005). However, the plethora of definitions and it’s difficulty to operationalize, has for some, been seen a major shortcoming of the concept. Some argue that if we can’t agree on what it is, then, the concept is not meaningful or useful. Moreover, some think that gentrification is a symptom of something else entirely, and this is complicated by the fact that despite gentrification of urban areas, whites continue to move to the suburbs. As Massey has argued, "gentrification is truly a drop in the bucket” (Massey and Rivlin, 2002). While there is much to debate, to me, the debate itself signals that the conversation is meaningful and that we ought to continue wrestling with its significance and relevance to urban sociology.

Chris Hamnett’s article, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” is by far the most succinct and cogent explanation of the supply- and demand-side explanations for gentrification. Briefly, the demand-side explanation is rooted in the work of David Ley (Ley, 1986, 1996) and asserts that changes in occupational structure produced a “new middle class” of white collar professionals that in turn represent particular lifestyle and housing demands. Gentrification is led by consumers’ demands for housing and that housing prices rise in response to those demands. The supply-side explanations—based on the work of Neil Smith (Smith, 1979, 1996)—rejects the “consumer sovereignty” explanation for gentrification and instead locates “gentrification within the long-term shifts of investment and disinvestment in the built environment,” which is specifically focused on the “way in which disinvestment produces the possibility of capital investment” (Hamnett, 1991: 179). The rent gap is theorized to be the difference between current and potential rent, which drives developers to invest when they feel it is wide enough to ensure profit.

While both of these explanations are compelling, Hamnett’s position is that they each only tell party of the story. He sees the demand-side approach as generally taken out of context—that Ley’s argument is rooted in an assessment of the impact of changes in the occupational structure and that he is not arguing that gentrification is solely driven by elite tastemakers, as many Marxists cite as its major shortcoming. Rather he suggests that the demand-side argument fails to explain where in a city gentrification takes place and that class both plays a role but is also a product of gentrification. In contrast, he is more critical of the supply-side explanation. He asserts that it “fails to explain where the individual gentrifier comes from and why some become gentrifiers,” “it makes the distinction between production and consumption an artificial one,” that the presence of mortgage capital in and of itself does not cause demand, that empirical studies fail to show that gentrification is an inevitable outcome of the rent gap, and that it if does not adequately explain why some people do one thing and not the other (Hamnett, 1991). In the end, he agrees with Beauregard that “the explanation for gentrification begins with the presence of gentrifiers” and that “gentrification is defined by the presence of gentrifiers” (Hamnett, 1991: 185). Essentially, he believes that while there has to be a supply of housing stock to gentrify explanations, it is not the pre-requisite to gentrification that gentrifiers fulfil.

But why do we still talk about gentrification, and why does the literature seem to suggest such contrasting things? Japonica Brown-Saracino takes up these questions in her latest ASR article, “Explicating Divided Approaches.” She gives four reasons for why researchers come to hold divergent views about gentrification: (1) it is a result of the empirical heterogeneity or “chaos” of gentrification, (2) that there are competing definitions and measurements of gentrification, (3) that there is uneven empirical attention to different stages of gentrification, and (4) that each camp pursues distinct questions as a result of their methodology. Clearly, number 2 and 4 are true, but I disagree with her argumentation on points 1 and 3. While quantitative and qualitative methodologies are of different scopes that ask different questions, I think that qualitative methods sample on the dependent variable—meaning they choose neighborhoods that are already gentrifying and go investigate them. The ability of quantitative methods to look at all neighborhoods ensures that they won’t look at two different neighborhoods in LA and conclude different things. However, we need qualitative research to understand at the micro-level what is going. I prefer using both methods so that we can get a better sense of what’s happening across the board, yet also understand the dynamics on the ground.

**Displacement, Authenticity, and Different Pathways of Gentrification**

The remaining readings each address specific, important issues. The core issue with gentrification for many is that it displaces people. People wouldn’t care if it wasn’t displacing people, and we’d call it “neighborhood turnover” instead. East Harlem was Italian before it was Puerto Rican, the difference was that the Italian moved because they could. So Freeman (2005) wants to measure displacement and mobility across the country to see if residents living in gentrifying neighborhoods are more likely to move or to be displaced than those in non-gentrifying neighborhoods.  He finds that mobility and higher rates of displacement play minor roles as forces of change in gentrifying neighborhoods. While he finds a statistically significant relationship between displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods, he finds a higher (significant) relationship in neighborhoods not eligible to gentrify, and when calculating the probability of actually being displaced, this significant relationship only increases chances very little. Displacement studies are very difficult because of their nature, and to date, no study has proven a significant relationship to exist between gentrification and displacement.

Sharon Zukin’s *Naked* City is an extraordinary examination of the soul of the gentrifier—what is it that they are seeking so desperately and why do they what they do? Her answer, they are seeking authenticity and authentic experiences. In short, this is about the social and psychological roots of the demand base that gentrifiers provide the urban restructuring underlying gentrification. They want "authentic” experiences that give them a sense of moral superiority and connectedness. She defines authenticity as the moral superiority that is associated with downward mobility, connectedness to nature, and their “intouchness” with a simple and less complicated life. And I think she is dead right to assert the we are fundamentally witnessing the shift from city of production to consumption (221). However, while it may be true that consumers play a large part in reshaping neighborhoods and spurring gentrification, it is not clear that process is completely driven by the consumption patterns of gentrifiers. I mean, can we not imagine some consumers’ choices are not predicated on “authenticity”? Moreover, to what extent do developers who create luxury apartments in new buildings that remain vacant prove the supply-side theory? While I don’t buy her arguments are universal, the book is critical for its ethnographic breadth and its analysis of neighborhoods proceeding along different pathways of gentrification. Harlem’s gentrification is led by state intervention, while industrial chic transforms Williamsburg and boutique shopping remakes the East Village. However, here again, I don’t buy her vision of gentrification as simply tied to consumers. People have been talking about Harlem having been gentrifying for the last 20 years, but we still see large sections of Harlem that have remained predominantly black and disinvested. Despite claims that gentrification is tearing these places apart, segregation is alive and well in these areas.

The articles by Hwang and Sampson (2014) and Timberlake and Johns-Wolfe (2017) deal with race in gentrification studies. This is an important topic because I often argue that gentrification is about class, not race. We often talk about gentrification in racial terms because of how class and race intersect in the United States. Briefly, Hwang and Sampson find there to exist a durable racial hierarchy that governs residential selection and, in turn, gentrifying neighborhoods. They find that gentrification had a negative association with the share that was black and Latino and whether the neighborhood would gentrify. That is, the higher the minority concentration, the less likely it was to gentrify. Rather, “gentrification tends to favor neighborhoods beyond a substantial share of white residents, around 35 percent” (2014). Conversely, racial composition has a threshold effect, “attenuating gentrification when the share of blacks in a neighborhood is greater than 40 percent” (Hwang and Sampson, 2014). Timberlake and Johns-Wolfe had similar findings, varying slighting in the degree that whites were willing to move into predominantly Latino neighborhoods. This discrepancy could be that Chicago is more highly segregated than New York, in terms of Blacks and Latinos. In general, both studies found that whites are consistency unwilling to move to neighborhood with even small black population and in neighborhoods near the central business district. Together, their work calls into question the trope of white gentrifiers moving into minority neighborhoods and displacing them. While it clearly happens, these quantitative results suggest that it does not seem to happen with the frequency that much of the qualitative work suggestions or how gentrification has been talked about in public. Moreover, it calls into question whether gentrification is itself a novel urban restructuring process or if it is simply masking another important phenomenon—segregation or a general housing crisis.

**Final Thoughts Displacement, Authenticity, and Different Pathways of Gentrification**

Overall, these articles were covered a lot of territory. My own thoughts are that you need both approaches—"quant” and “qual,” supply and demand—to really understand gentrification. But I side more with the quantitative camp. I think that qualitative researchers generally sample on the dependent variable and are too quick to generalize their findings. Plenty of quantitative research suggests that displacement is not happening at the rate some have be suggested, that gentrification is occurring in relatively few neighborhoods overall, and that segregation persists. Moreover, I think that the fetishization of race in gentrification studies misses how race and class intersect and that gentrification at its core about class, not race, because it’s about someone being able to afford more than you to displace you. Finally, my own research suggests that demand leads supply. My work with Brenden Beck has found that in New York City between 2009 and 2017, demand led supply. In light of these findings and recent work by Hackworth and Smith (2001) as well Hackworth (2002), I think that gentrification is sparked by demand, but that supply is the engine that remakes cities. Moreover, I think that gentrification is a side-effect of a larger process, a generalized housing crisis—my dissertation topic.