

A Facebook-based questionnaire survey study on social justice perceptions in Hong Kong housing policy

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Abstract:

The topic of social justice in Hong Kong housing policy study is a vital one both academically and in practice, given the severe housing affordability problem in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the topic is acutely under-researched while the underlying concept of social justice itself is also a complex topic. This paper examines the concept of social justice and identifies five social justice concepts from the literature as useful analytical tools. They are employed to study the Facebook-based questionnaire survey on social justice perceptions in Hong Kong housing policy. Via such an exercise, the value of examining Hong Kong housing policy via the social justice lenses is established. The survey findings also contribute to social justice research on Hong Kong housing policy, which is in need of much more research efforts.

Key words: Facebook-based questionnaire survey; Housing policy; Social justice; Social justice concepts (SJs)

Introduction

As a part-time university programme teacher on housing diversity and housing imaginations, the writer is fully aware of the importance of the social justice topic in housing policy study. However, in Hong Kong, the topic has been severely under-researched. At the same time, the subject of social justice

itself is also a dynamic and complex one. Thus, the writer takes up the task of conducting a literature review of social justice so as to inform a Facebook-based questionnaire survey on social justice perceptions on housing policy in Hong Kong. Such an exercise is considered to have major academic, pedagogical and policy evaluation values, thus worth doing.

An overview on the subject of social justice and related analytical concepts

As a subject, social justice has a rich literature, notably reported in the academic journals of *Social Justice Research* (Springer), *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates) and *Journal of Comparative Social Welfare* (Routledge), etc. For a concept, social justice has several but somewhat contradictory definitions (Merrett, 2004). It is understood to be related to a set of terms such as social equality, fairness, and inclusiveness (Merrett, 2004). In this regard, two definitions are illuminating:

Definition 1: According to Aristotle (cited in Yung, 2007), “justice is to award equal equally and unequals unequally”.

Definition 2: The British Commission on Social Justice (cited in Merrett, 2007) is made up of two categories:

Category 1 - related to positive freedoms and procedural justice

It is a hierarchy of four ideas (Levels 0 to 3):

Level 0 (foundation idea): “the foundation of a free society is the equal worth of all citizens”.

Level 1: “everyone is entitled, as a right of citizenship, to be able to meet their basic needs for income, shelter and other necessities”.

Level 2: “self-respect and equal citizenship... demand opportunities and life chances”.

Level 3: “unjust inequalities should be reduced and where possible eliminated”.

Category 2 - related to negative freedoms and distributive justice

This refers to “freedom from hunger, inadequate shelter, or oppression”, which, in turn, stresses the need for: (i) “a publicly funded social safety net” via paying taxes and (ii) “obeying laws”.

Both definitions, on closer examination, raise conceptual (Yung, 2007; Merrett, 2004) and operationalization issues that cannot be easily addressed. From the literature, the writer identifies a set of five analytical concepts on social justice (SJs). They are as follows:

Social Justice Concept 1 (SJC1): **The etic** (quantitative and objective) and **emic** (qualitative and subjective) **frames** of scholarly inquiry on social justice (Sabbagh, 2012). These two frames are theoretically incompatible.

Social Justice Concept 2 (SJC2): **Social dilemmas** involving social justice (Schroeder *et al.*, 2003). These are situations that require choice of actions between (i) serving one’s best interest while threatening one’s sense of justice or (ii) “maximizing the joint payoff of the group as a whole” while sacrificing one’s best interest.

Social Justice Concept 3(SJC3): **Scope of justice** (Hafer and Olson, 2003; Opatow, 1990). It is “the psychological boundary for justice or fairness such that moral values and consideration of fairness apply only to those within this boundary for fairness.... entities or targets for whom one believes justice is irrelevant.... are said to have been “excluded” from one’s scope of justice” (Hafer and Olson, 2003).

Social Justice Concept 4 (SJC4): The Western and Confucian concepts of social justice (Yung, 2007). For Yung (2007), the Confucian concept of social justice is to “treat people harmoniously not equally as in the Western world”. As to the Western concept of social justice, it endorses the needs principle¹, the deserts principle² and the rights principle³.

Social Justice Concept 5(SJC5): Justice conflict (Montada (2007) as cited by Törnblom and Kazemi, 2011). This is conflict resulting from social injustice instances, e.g., unjust distribution of food and land, air pollution, and human rights issues, etc. For Törnblom and Kazemi (2011), feelings of injustice from such conflicts can be a potent social change driver.

These five concepts on social justice, chosen from the literature, are powerful analytical tools to study social justice concerns. They are to be employed to study social justice in Hong Kong housing policy in this paper. Before doing so, a brief discussion on social justice in housing policy study in Hong Kong is presented in the next section.

Current status on social justice in Hong Kong housing policy study

Housing policy is about “attempts by governments to modify the housing market or, perhaps more accurately, housing markets... to achieve social objectives” (Lund, 2011). In this paper, the main social objective to examine is social justice

¹ “Only basic needs critical for survival” are relevant with the needs principle (Yung, 2007).

² In this case, “justice is to reward people in accordance to their merits or deserts” (Yung, 2007).

³ It is based on Hume’s theory of allocating property rights “based on antecedent relations, e.g.. present possession, long possession, first possession, etc” (Yung, 2007).

achievement. The present situation is, there are very few academic works on social justice in Hong Kong housing policy study. The primary ones are from Yung (2007; 2008). Such an under-researched yet important topic in Hong Kong housing policy study is very unsatisfactory for the academics, housing policy makers and the general public in Hong Kong. After all, as Yung (2007) reminds us, “about half of Hong Kong’s population lives in public housing, rented or self-owned”. Social conflicts (SJC5) and social dilemmas (SJC2) as related to housing policy formulation and implementation occur with the distribution of limited housing resources among many people who need them. For instance, it has been suggested that the recent Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong was partly fostered by the housing affordability problem in Hong Kong, especially among the young generation (Ho, 2015) and that “some 40 percent [of young adults] said they supported civil disobedience in the pursuit of justice.. most young people...cited housing...as their main area of grievance” (Lau, 2015). Most citizens share the feeling that the housing policy in Hong Kong is unjust. The topic is definitely within their scope of justice (SJC3). On the other hand, It has also been argued that “a coalition of existing property owners would, out of self-interest, vote in favour of limiting housing supply” (Wong, 2015) and that “Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying is someone who made his own fortune in the property business and hardly needs property developers to remind him that there is no question of devising policies that would undermine the basis of their wealth” (Vines, 2015). This situation makes up a clear case of social dilemma (SJC2). Furthermore, as Hong Kong is “a place where East meets West” (Yung, 2007), both the Western and Confucian concepts of social justice (SJC4) are relevant to the study of housing policy in Hong Kong. In this regard, Yung (2007; 2008)’s work on social justice in Hong Kong housing policy, being attentive to the cultural dimension and context-specific aspect, essentially endorses the emic frame rather than the epic

frame in social justice (SJC1). Her works covered five periods of Hong Kong: (1) pre-1954, (2) 1954-1992, (3) 1973-1986, (4) 1987-2002, and, finally, 2002 onwards. Interested readers are referred to her works for details. What this paper provides is a recent Facebook-based survey on perceptions of housing policy fairness in Hong Kong. The term fairness is used in the survey instead of social justice because the writer feels that the targeted respondents would have difficulty to understand the more technical term of social justice. The survey findings are examined in the next section.

Findings from the Facebook-based questionnaire survey on perceptions of housing policy fairness

A Facebook-based survey was carried out by the writer from February 11 to 18 this year with friends on the writer's Facebook. Most of them are the writer's previous and current students. The survey questionnaire was constructed with the tool from KwikSurveys.com. The questionnaire was distributed via Facebook messages. The method of Facebook-based survey has been employed by the writer a number of times and the method itself was examined by Ho (2014). Altogether, 101 friends participated in the survey. Such a response rate was a bit on the low side, very likely due to the Lunar New Year long-holiday effect. The questionnaire was made up of 16 questions, the first 6 questions being about the respondents' personal profile while the other 10 questions being related to their perceptions on housing policy fairness in Hong Kong. The basic findings and additional ones via Excel-based querying are provided as follows (also see Appendix 1 and 2):

I. Basic findings: findings 1 to 10

Finding 1 (re: survey question 7): 50 (50%) of the respondents feel that personal housing affordability is a problem to them. This figure is quite a significant one, reflecting the

pervasiveness of the personal housing affordability problem in Hong Kong. This perceived problem increases the potential of justice conflict (SJC5) in the society.

Finding 2 (re: survey question 8): 43 (42.6%) of the respondents describe their personal view on fairness in Hong Kong housing policy as a mix of traditional Chinese and non-Chinese in orientation. There are also quite a number of respondents, 27 in total, who have no idea on this question. In this regard, analysis of social justice on Hong Kong housing policy needs to be sensitive to both Western and Confucian concepts of social justice (SJC4).

Finding 3 (re: survey question 9): 77 (76.2%) of the respondents strongly feel that the present housing policy of Hong Kong is unfair overall. Still, there is a small minority of respondents of 6 (5.9%) who strongly feel that the present Hong Kong housing policy is fair. In other words, the majority of the respondents feel that the topic of housing policy of Hong Kong is very much within the scope of justice (SJC3) and involves substantial justice conflict (SJC5) in the society.

Finding 4 (re: survey question 10): 82 (82%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive long-term impacts on the Hong Kong GDP growth. This perception is in line with Deininger and Squire (1997)'s finding that more egalitarian countries, e.g., in assets distribution, have a higher economic growth rate. Nevertheless, adopting a fairer housing policy raises a social dilemma (SJC2) to those who benefit from the existing unfair housing policy.

Finding 5 (re: survey question 11): 88 (88%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that a fairer housing policy in

Hong Kong can have positive impacts on social harmony in the society, i.e., lower level of justice conflict (SJC5).

Finding 6 (re: survey question 12): 92 (92.1%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive impacts on political stability in the society. This suggests a lower level of justice conflict (SJC5) if this can be achieved.

Finding 7 (re: survey question 13): 90 (89.1%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that fairness in housing policy is a controversial topic in the Hong Kong society. Issues of the definitions of social justice, alternative frames of inquiry (SJC1), justice dilemma (SJC2), scope of justice (SJC3), diverse concepts of social justice involved (SJC4), and justice conflict (SJC5) all contribute to the controversy in this case.

Finding 8 (re: survey question 14): 96 (95%) of the respondents either strongly or mildly feel that fairness should be an important consideration in the formulation of Hong Kong housing policy. This finding indicates that such a feeling is widely shared by the respondents and that it is clearly within the perceived scope of justice (SJC3) of them.

Finding 9 (re: survey question 15): 67 (67%) of the respondents do not feel that Hong Kong housing policy will be fairer in the near future. This sentiment could be due to social dilemma (SJC2) and is in consonance with Vines's (2015) view that "it is a basic tenet of all government policy that nothing must be done to fundamentally challenge the interest of the powerful property developers". It also suggests that justice conflict (SJC5) is expected not to be alleviated in the future.

Finding 10 (re: survey question 16) 58 (57.4%) of the respondents do not feel that the Hong Kong government is

interested in formulating a fair housing policy vs. 6 (5.9%) respondents who strongly feel so. This perception can be related to the government’s scope of justice (SJC3) as well as the justice dilemma that exists in the society (SJC2).

II. Additional findings via Excel-based querying: findings 11 to 14

[Note: the figures in the cells of the tables for these findings are numbers of frequency, while the % figures in the cells are for each row of the tables. For the survey questions, please refer to *Appendix 1*.]

Finding 11 (re: survey questions 7 and 9): Referring to the table below, the figures suggest that those who have a major personal housing affordability problem also tend to feel that the present Hong Kong housing policy overall is unfair.

| <i>Personal housing affordability</i> | Strongly feel so | Mildly feel so | Do not feel so | No idea |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| <i>Not a problem</i> | 1 (6%) | 4 (24%) | 12 (71%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>A minor problem</i> | 2 (7%) | 9 (33%) | 16 (59%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>A major problem</i> | 3 (6%) | 2 (4%) | 45 (90%) | 0 (0%) |

Finding 12 (re: survey questions 1 and 11): Referring to the table below, the figures suggest that gender has minimal effect on their perception that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive impacts on social harmony in the Hong Kong society.

| <i>Gender</i> | Strongly feel so | Mildly feel so | Do not feel so | No idea |
|---------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| <i>Male</i> | 29 (67%) | 9 (21%) | 4 (9%) | 1 (2%) |
| <i>Female</i> | 39 (68%) | 11 (19%) | 7 (12%) | 0 (0%) |

Finding 13 (re: survey questions 6 and question 10): Referring to the table below, the figures suggest that self-conceived social class has negligible effect on their perception that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive long-term impacts on the Hong Kong GDP growth. While the figures on

the Upper class and No class tell a different story, the sample sizes of 2 respondents (Upper class) and 7 respondents (No idea) are so small that the figures for the Upper class row and the No idea row in the table are not reliable anyway.

| <i>Perceived social class</i> | Strongly feel so | Mildly feel so | Do not feel so | No idea |
|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| <i>Lower class</i> | 23 (51%) | 13 (29%) | 6 (13%) | 3 (7%) |
| <i>Middle class</i> | 23 (50%) | 17 (37%) | 3 (7%) | 3 (7%) |
| <i>Upper class</i> | 2 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>No idea</i> | 4 (57%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (29%) | 1 (14%) |

Finding 14 (re: survey questions 2 and question 16): Referring to the table below, the age group of 28 to 37 has a stronger feeling than other age groups that the Hong Kong government is not interested in formulating a fair housing policy. While the age group of 48 to 57 shows an even stronger feeling than the age group of 28 to 37, its sample size of 10 respondents is so small that the reliability of the figure is very low. Also, even though the age group of 18 to 27 has a relatively high proportion of respondents who express “no idea” on the topic, the figure here is not reliable as total respondents for the age group of 18 to 27 is only 8.

| <i>Age group</i> | Strongly feel so | Mildly feel so | Do not feel so | No idea |
|--------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| <i>18 to 27</i> | 0 (0%) | 1 (13%) | 4 (50%) | 3 (38%) |
| <i>28 to 37</i> | 2 (5%) | 10 (24%) | 26 (62%) | 4 (10%) |
| <i>38 to 47</i> | 3 (8%) | 14 (35%) | 21 (53%) | 2 (5%) |
| <i>48 to 57</i> | 0 (0%) | 2 (20%) | 7 (70%) | 1 (10%) |
| <i>58 to 67</i> | 1 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| <i>68 or above</i> | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |

All in all, findings 11 to 14 provide further information on how respondents’ profiles affect the perceptions of fairness on Hong Kong housing policy. The analysis of the findings, notably from findings 1 to 10, reveals the perceptions of housing policy fairness in Hong Kong in terms of the five social justice concepts (SJC) identified by the writer from the social justice literature.

Concluding remarks

Via the literature review on social justice, the writer made an attempt to conduct a theory-driven analysis on the Facebook-based survey findings. While the external validity of Facebook-based survey is limited, it is able to offer some relevant findings on perceptions on social justice on housing policy in Hong Kong. Such findings are useful, given that the topic itself has been severely under-researched in Hong Kong. Via the study, the writer found that the five social justice concepts (SJs) valuable in enriching the analysis. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the subject of housing policy itself is not solely about achievement of social justice and that the social justice lenses is only one among others, e.g. laissez-faire economics, social reformism, Marxist political economy, behavioural approaches, and social constructionism, etc., (Lund, 2011) to study housing policy. Finally, the writer strongly encourages academics who are interested in the subject of social justice and housing studies to conduct more research on this interesting topic in Hong Kong.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: The Facebook-based survey questions (13 questions) and responses statistics

| <i>Survey questions</i> | <i>Survey statistics</i> |
|--|--|
| Question 1: What is your gender? | Male: 44 (43.6%) Female: 57 (56.4%) |
| Question 2: What is your age? | 18 to 27: 8 (7.9%) 28 to 37: 42 (41.6%) 38 to 47: 40 (39.6%) 48 to 57: 10 (9.9%) 58 to 67: 1 (1.0%) 68 or above: 0 (0.0%) |
| Question 3: What is your marital status? | Single: 51 (50.5%) Married: 49 (48.5%) None of the above: 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 4: What is your education background? | Not yet a degree-holder: 19 (18.8%) Finished University Undergraduate Degree study: 65 (64.4%) Finished Master Degree study: 16 (15.8%) Finished Ph.D. Degree study (or equivalent): 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 5: Do you live with your family or alone? | I live with my family: 82 (81.2%) I live alone: 15 (14.9%) It is complicated; none of the above: 4 (4.0%) |
| Question 6: How would you perceive your social class in the society? | I feel I belong to the lower class: 46 (45.5%) I feel I belong to the middle class: 46 (45.5%) I feel I belong to the upper class: 2 (2.0%) No idea: 7 (6.9%) |

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|---|--|
| Question 7: Do you feel that your personal housing affordability is a problem to you? | No, I do not feel it is a problem at all: 17 (17.0%) I feel it is a minor problem to me: 27 (27.0%) I feel it is a major problem to me: 50 (50.0%) No idea: 6 (6.0%) |
| Question 8: How would you describe your personal view on fairness of Hong Kong housing policy? | Basically traditional Chinese in orientation: 19 (18.8%) Basically non-traditional Chinese in orientation: 12 (11.9%) A mix of traditional Chinese and non-Chinese in orientation: 43 (42.6%) No idea: 27 (26.7%) |
| Question 9: Do you feel that the present housing policy of Hong Kong is fair overall? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 6 (5.9%) I have this feeling mildly: 17 (16.8%) I don't feel this way: 77 (76.2%) No idea: 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 10: Do you feel that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive long-term impacts on the Hong Kong GDP growth? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 52 (52.0%) I have this feeling mildly: 30 (30.0%) I do not feel this way: 11 (11.0%) No idea: 7 (7.0%) |
| Question 11: Do you feel that a fairer policy in Hong Kong can have positive impacts on social harmony in the Hong Kong society? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 68 (68.0%) I have this feeling mildly: 20 (20.0%) I do not feel this way: 11 (11.0%) No idea: 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 12: Do you feel that a fairer housing policy in Hong Kong can have positive impacts on political stability in the Hong Kong society? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 52 (51.5%) I have this feeling mildly: 40 (39.6%) I do not feel this way: 8 (7.9%) No idea: 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 13: Do you feel that fairness in housing policy is a controversial topic in the Hong Kong society? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 59 (58.4%) I have this feeling mildly: 31 (30.7%) I do not feel this way: 8 (7.9%) No idea: 3 (3.0%) |
| Question 14: Do you feel that fairness should be an important consideration in the formulation of Hong Kong housing policy? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 66 (65.3%) I have this feeling mildly: 30 (29.7%) I do not feel this way: 4 (4.0%) No idea: 1 (1.0%) |
| Question 15: Do you feel that Hong Kong housing policy will be fairer in the near future? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 10 (10.0%) I have this feeling mildly: 19 (19.0%) I do not feel this way: 67 (67.0%) No idea: 4 (4.0%) |
| Question 16: Do you feel that the Hong Kong government is interested in formulating fair housing policy? | Yes, I strongly feel so: 6 (5.9%) I have this feeling mildly: 27 (26.7%) I do not feel this way: 58 (57.4%) No idea: 10 (9.9%) |

Appendix 2: Response statistics over time, from February 11 to 18, 2015.

