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Reframing Social Tectonics with the Sociology of Everyday Life: Insights from the Public Spaces of a Mixed Housing Neighbourhood

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Abstract: *Social mix policies aim to integrate residents living in diverse forms of housing. While numerous studies have showcased the limitations of social mix in achieving this objective, explanations for this tendency remain incomplete. Accordingly, this qualitative case study adopts insights from the sociology of everyday life and interaction ritual theory to elaborate on academic understandings of (non)-interaction between disparate groups in mixed housing communities. It draws primarily from observational fieldwork and semi-structured interview data gathered in the public spaces of a transitioning mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. The findings report how everyday encounters among and between the urban poor and wealthier residents (re)produce patterns of group solidarity and conflict. The continued application of micro-sociological perspectives to housing mix research can chronicle and perhaps mend the gaps between government housing policy objectives and the experiences of residents living within relevant legislative jurisdictions.*

Keywords: poverty neighbourhoods; urban policy and planning; metropolitan housing and urban policy; residential environments and neighbourhoods.

Introduction

Social mix policies plan to provide neighbourhoods with residences of assorted tenure and type (Sarkissian 1976). In Ontario, Canada, policy justifications for social mix borrow from Smart Growth and New Urbanist design principles to encourage *complete communities*, characterised by social diversity, environmental sustainability, walkability, and opportunities for employment and transportation. Additionally, housing policies targeting economically disadvantaged areas in North America, Australia, and Western Europe have endorsed social mix-styled gentrification by adopting *emancipatory* narratives, which claim affluent residents are catalysts for positive change (Lees 2000: 392). Specifically, intent on deconcentrating poverty and encouraging reinvestment, supporters of social mix foresee incoming middle-class residents as offering a source of social capital and social mobility for the urban poor. However, leading criticisms of social mix describe these policy rationales as paternalistic (August 2008: 84-85) and, rather than raising living standards, contributing to neoliberal restructuring, cultural erasure, and displacement (Addie and Fraser 2019).

Crucially, several studies have supported Butler's (2003: 2480) position that 'social and spatial distance are not synonymous' in mixed communities. These tendencies were captured in Robson and Butler's (2001: 77-78) influential study of social mix in London. While middle-class Brixton residents rhetorically celebrated the diverse multicultural landscape, social groups existed spatially in parallel to one another without sharing experiences in social and cultural institutions (see also Butler and Robson 2001). The researchers offered the metaphor of 'social tectonics' to capture a form of social cohesion in cities where different social groups move past each other 'like tectonic plates below the Earth's crust' (Jackson and Butler 2015: 2350).

However, Jackson and Butler's (2015: 2350) reflections on the 'social tectonics' concept noted that it 'only partially described and did not in itself explain social relations between the middle classes and other social groups within the area.' Qualitative research into how diverse residents 'meet, interact, and conflict in everyday life' in shared neighbourhood areas remains needed (van Gent, Boterman, and van Grondelle 2016: 263), especially given that these encounters contribute to residents' sense of belonging and social cohesion.

This qualitative case study explores neighbourhood social mix in Downtown Oshawa, Ontario, an economically disenfranchised area driven by provincial and municipal policies to diversify and revitalise housing stock. It adopts a *sociology of everyday life* (SOEL) perspective of the phenomenon of social tectonics to (1) enrichen academic understandings of intergroup avoidance and, in doing so, (2) further scrutinise the emancipatory claims of social mix policies. In summary. my research findings support that group identities and interests in mixed housing communities are 'not naturally constituted' (Collins 2014: 303) but *reproduced*, in part, through everyday social interactions and encounters in public spaces, such as parks and sidewalks. Further, I argue that micro-sociological understandings of everyday life can be harnessed to inform the development of more inclusive and equitable urban regeneration policies and improve social integration among diverse residents. Moving forward, the next section offers a broad overview of the theoretical orientation adopted for this study.

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Public Order, Social Mix, and Interaction Rituals in Everyday Life

The SOEL takes interest in neighbourhood sociability. Briefly, SOEL researchers explore 'public order', which refers to the relatively stable arrangements of persons and places in urban public space (Lofland 1973: 186) and the regulation of face-to-face interaction among members of a community who are not well acquainted (Goffman 1963a: 9). When individuals cross paths in cities, they typically remain distant to one another; most contacts are 'impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental' (Wirth 1938: 12).

Nevertheless, discussions continue over the potential for housing mix to foster new relationships and networks. Optimistic readings consider how residents of high-density neighbourhoods may overlap and intermingle in public spaces constituting the 'fault lines' in social tectonics (van Gent, Boterman and van Grondelle 2016) and during shopping, eating, and commuting (Forrest and Yip 2011). Certain atmospheres can foster conditions that increase the potential for sociability, with musical ambiance (Doughty and Lagerqvist 2016) and bodies of water (Bates & Moles 2022), for instance, appearing to orient diverse users of public space towards conviviality. Further, quasi-public 'cosmopolitan canopies' foster civility and allow people to feel welcomed and relaxed 'to the point of engaging complete strangers in conversation', including 'others' of different social statuses (Anderson 2011: 38).

However, in examining the daily flows of mixed housing communities, studies have shown that residents engage in symbolic boundary work to negotiate difference and disaffiliate from neighbours residing in different forms of housing (e.g., Dunn 2012; Nast and Blokland 2014). For example, wealthier populations have attributed anti-social behaviour to social housing residents (Kenna and O'Sullivan 2014), questioned the moral character of renters (Rollwagen 2015), and claimed long-time residents pose threats to the well-being of children (Martin 2008). These objections enter public forums in disputes over the control of community meeting agendas (August 2014) and debates over affordable housing developments (McNee and Pojani 2022).

Collins' (1981, 2004) interaction ritual (IR) theory, which is based on Durkheimian and Goffmanian sociology, extends this analysis by identifying the elements that are necessary for face-to-face social interactions to build social solidarity among participants. As summarised by Collins (2004: 47-49), successful IRs may be parsed into these ingredients: *physical co-presence between two or more individuals*; *boundaries to outsiders*; a *mutual focus of attention*; and *shared moods or emotions*. Outcomes of successful IRs include *group solidarity and a feeling of membership*; shared *emotional energy*, what Durkheim (1965 [1915]) calls *collective effervescence*; *symbols that represent the group*; and *feelings of morality*.

Collins' (2004) concept of 'IR chains' finds special applicability for investigating the relational practices of social mix. This concept highlights the role of past interactions in familiarising individuals with group symbols and solidifying group boundaries (see also Collins and Hanneman 1998). According to Collins (2004: 69), individuals wish to recapture the emotional energy derived from IRs, even through forms as simple as 'friendly chatting or animated discussions among friends'. Individuals will therefore define situations as 'attractive or unattractive to them to the extent that the IR is successful in providing emotional energy' (Collins 2004: 44). From this perspective, social tectonics may reflect a form of public order wherein different groups, sensitised by past experiences, move past one another as they pursue situations offering opportunities for emotional energy. Of course, during 'normal' times, social

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interactions in public can be fraught with complexities and do not always proceed smoothly. In the 'differentiated field of social encounters that make up real life' (Collins 2004: 69), interactions can be awkward, dangerous, interrupted, understimulating, or offensive. Accordingly, individuals respond by developing a repertoire of strategies to prevent or cope with unwanted encounters, such as when anticipating gendered public harassment (Gardner 1995) or risky street or police confrontations (Fader 2021). Having sketched this theory and its relevance to advancing understandings of social tectonics, the next section describes the setting and applicable policies for this research.

Making a Meeting Place: Policy Considerations and Setting

Downtown Oshawa is one of 25 neighbourhoods designated as an *urban growth centre* (UGC) by Ontario's *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (MMAH 2020). Introduced in 2005, the *Growth Plan* is a sweeping growth management policy that addresses economic and environmental sustainability throughout the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Canada's most densely populated region. The MMAH (2020: 11, 87) defines UGCs as 'existing or emerging downtowns' that serve as 'regional focal points for accommodating population and employment growth'. The *Growth Plan* calls for municipalities to become 'complete communities' by considering their 'range and mix of housing options' and diversifying 'their overall housing stock' to meet intensification and density targets by the year 2031 (MMAH 2020: 23). While UGCs share in these general provincial aims, legislation provides for local government leadership on decision-making pertaining to housing and social services. The District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB) for the Regional Municipality of Durham administers, funds, and maintains most social housing projects. Oshawa is home to 30 community housing properties offering rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units, as well as a homeless shelter program, street outreach services, and an emergency shelter for women with children fleeing violence or abuse.

Once known as Canada's 'Motor City', Oshawa gained its status as a manufacturing powerhouse when Irish and English families established industries during the 19th century. Oshawa's automotive working-class population was especially vulnerable in the wake of transformations following Canada's post-1984 economic strategy. Deindustrialization, along with suburban sprawl, a concentration of housing and social services, and the opioid crisis has made it difficult for Downtown Oshawa to shed its disreputable status as stagnant and unsafe (e.g., Gee 2023). Downtown Oshawa has been designated as a 'priority neighbourhood' based on income, education, unemployment, and health measures (Durham Region Health Department 2022: 9). These characteristics contrast with more affluent areas of the city. Since the early 2000s, the demand for executive housing with commuting proximity to Toronto, along with the growth of post-secondary institutions, has spawned expansive suburban development in the northern neighbourhoods of 'Poshawa', a local portmanteau. While the Gini coefficient for Oshawa ranged between .46 and .48 from 2000 to 2016, the downtown neighbourhood median income fell from a -72% to a -84% deficit with the rest of the city during this same period (Earle 2018).

The transition to mixed housing stock reflects city representatives' multifaceted attempts to overhaul the disparaged reputation of the downtown and reconfigure the neighbourhood into a *meeting place* (MMAH 2020: 11). City Council has issued financial incentives (including property tax grants and forgivable façade improvement loans) for developers behind adaptive

reuse projects and luxury apartments. In 2017, nearly 35 percent of Oshawa's new residential units were constructed within the *Growth Plan* boundaries (Ralph 2018). In the same year, Oshawa set a historical record by issuing 2,286 permits totalling $613 million in total construction value (Szekely 2018). Middle-class consumption venues (such as cafés, yoga studios, creative hubs, hotels, and education facilities) and market-rate apartments are increasingly present. However, this class transition has stoked tensions between residents, with City Council meetings regularly providing a platform to frustrated delegates attributing visible homelessness, drug use, and disorder in and near the downtown area to the presence of alternative housing and social services (Szekely 2019). The housing situations of respondents recruited for this study reflect the diverse forms of dwellings available in and near the downtown.

Methodology

The University of Guelph Research Ethics Board granted ethical clearance for this project. Data for this study were collected over approximately 8 months via observational fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. My fieldwork involved more than 100 hours of unobtrusive observations (with field notes and memos) in parks, shops, sidewalks, bus stops, foyers, meetings, and fairs throughout the Downtown Oshawa UGC. The observational data presented here are primarily drawn from my field notes on social interactions in downtown public spaces. Additionally, 25 respondents completed a semi-structured interview and questionnaire, with 23 (92%) recruited through convenience sampling while I was stationed downtown with a recruitment sign. The remaining 2 (8%) respondents were city representatives recruited directly over email. All respondents provided informed consent and 21 (84%) consented to a digital audio recording. Interviews averaged approximately 35 minutes. A critical realist grounded theory methodology guided my coding, organization, and analysis of data, which was assisted by research software (see Fletcher, 2017 for an overview).

Overall, respondents were predominately White (22, 88%), averaged nearly 45 years old ($\bar{x}$ = 44.63, sd = 12.99), and identified their gender as male (15, 60%) or female (10, 40%). Every respondent had lived in Oshawa at a point in their life and almost all (23, 92%) lived in Oshawa at the time of the interview. For expediency, I divide the 23 respondents recruited via convenience sampling into two ideal types—*inhabitants* or *visitors*—based on the attributes listed in Table 1. The primary characteristic distinguishing inhabitants from visitors was their main purpose downtown. I note additional attributes of some quoted respondents in the findings.

Table 1: Respondent types: Inhabitants and visitors

Respondent Type	Purpose Downtown	Annual Income	Receiving Social Assistance	Housing Situation
Inhabitants	Leisure or attending social services	Below $20,000 per year	Yes	Subsidised rental; rooming house; hostel; insecurely housed or homeless
Visitors	Work or special event	Above $30,000 per year	No	Market rental; homeowner

Source: Author's typology based on interview and questionnaire data.

Findings

This section outlines two themes identified through my data analysis. The first theme, *navigating sociability and belonging*, illustrates how residents identify opportunities for social interaction in public. The second theme, *interference and reinscribing difference*, implicates IRs in generating cohesion and conflict.

'It feels like two separate cities': Navigating sociability and belonging

Residents often lack personal knowledge about community members who live in different forms of housing (e.g., Carnegie et al. 2018). The association between personal knowing and housing status was supported in this study, with inhabitants describing residents of a new market rental apartment as shrouded in mystery and speculating that newcomers had adopted the city as a bedroom community. Importantly, the urban poor sharpen their feel for sociability by routinely occupying public spaces. This produces 'a guide to who can do what with whom' (Hannerz 1974: 151) and assists in distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Suttles 1968: 7-9). Clues such as appearance, location, and behaviour helped to categorise others' 'place' downtown (Lofland 1973: 98-107). Visitors used strategies to maintain anonymity while traveling through public spaces.

Inhabitants identified visitors through their projected sense of obligation and detachment while traveling downtown. Jacob, an inhabitant, noted the peculiarity of an accountant working downtown who looked '*straight ahead*' when he walks. With his disgust barely hidden, Arthur speculated that suburban sprawl and '*strip mall*' environments outside of the downtown had habituated visitors' more instrumental orientation: '*Go in for a purpose, get out. That doesn't build community. That just…you go get your necessities and leave*.' Kenneth, an inhabitant, stated that visitors were just '*passing through*' downtown and content attending events marked with a spatial and temporal fixedness, such as sporting exhibitions, theatre events, and weekend fairs. Jennifer, a business owner downtown for work, admitted that wealthier newcomers saw '*little reason to come down here at all […] It feels like two separate cities*.' This outlook provided little opportunity for spontaneous interaction and contrasted with more casual patterns of sociability among inhabitants.

Inhabitants demonstrated a lower barrier of entry into sociability by using opening moves (Goffman 1963a: 91-95) to signal their availability. For example, several of my interviews occurred in Victoria Park, a space assigned to promote passive recreation and pedestrian foot traffic. Nametag-clad workers would occupy picnic tables during lunch breaks, enclosed in their seated circle of colleagues, before promptly returning to the workplace. Inhabitants would sit on the borders of the park, face outward, and/or greet passers-by between their visits to social services and, for some, part-time jobs. Joseph, who had been homeless for '*about a year*', met people by '*just hanging around downing a couple of beers in the park [...] That's what I do all the time*.' Joseph's strategy was successful, as we were interrupted twice with friendly check-ins by inhabitants who met his glance while walking by. Of note, inhabitants' conversations were often symbolically framed around conditions of marginalisation. Sharing stories about insecure housing, health issues, family problems, and legal predicaments eschewed 'normal' concerns of non-disclosure (Goffman 1963b: 73-74) and sometimes functioned to seek advice or remedies to problematic situations, such as unhoused residents' need for shelter.

In summary, visitors and inhabitants typically passed each other with 'almost no contact' (Butler 2007: 173). Sociability usually occurred within groups and was oriented around familiar group symbols. However, on occasion, discussions among inhabitants brought uninvolved others within earshot. As elaborated upon below, these conversations could constrain or enable sociability depending on one's status as observer or participant.

'It's very scary': Interference and reinscribing difference

Social tectonics risks suggesting that individuals of a certain housing category, in keeping 'by and large, to themselves' (Butler and Robson 2001: 2157), disregard the presence of different groups while in public. However, in the context of urban restructuring, passively observing disparate groups can reinforce social boundaries and inform prospects for deriving successful IRs. To illustrate, on one afternoon, I stood on a sidewalk near a harm reduction facility with two women, who were friends with one another and lived in apartments nearby, debating the efficacy of needle exchange programmes in reducing blood-borne illnesses. As the conversation veered into claims about government plots to engineer and transmit syphilis, an eavesdropping passer-by, a man unknown to the women, joined the conversation by sharing in the line (Goffman 1955) and condemning government evils in contributing to HIV/AIDS epidemics. This entry was enthusiastically reciprocated by the women, who shared in and intensified his indignation, heightening their focus (see Collins 2020) as the conversation propelled towards increasingly conspiratorial realms.

Meanwhile, as the energies of the participants built up, I observed other passers-by silently maintaining a wide berth. In interviews, visitors claimed that the noisy interference from these 'neighboring encounters' (Goffman 1963a: 162) disrupted their enjoyment of events. I met Abigail, a homeowner, at a festival organised by a local business coalition. '*I go to a lot of things that are advertised'*, she told me, indicating the role of event marketing in luring wealthier residents into public spaces in gentrifying cities (e.g., Berglund et al. 2022). Among the events Abigail regularly attended included outdoor concerts that have been organized as part of Downtown Oshawa's rebranding as a cultural district. Abigail described how the commotion from '*yelling*' inhabitants, like those described above, diverted her attention at Memorial Park:

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> '*It's very scary, because they've taken over the Memorial Park, which is down here. And I've gone to see concerts there and they've really cheapened the event. Because, you know, they might be sitting at the benches or at the picnic tables, and then they would just start yelling, you know? […] When you're attending a concert, like – you enjoy it. But, not for things that – that go that way. And then sometimes you see the police walk in […] they're checking up on them.*'

The phrase '*taking over*' reflects how emotional energy inspires a 'feeling of confidence, courage to action, boldness in taking initiative' (Collins 2004: 39). '*They're jumping up and down and making a lot of noise*', Abigail said. Abigail's statement also evokes parallels with discussions pertaining to order maintenance policing in gentrifying neighbourhoods (see Beck 2020; Collins et al. 2022). Similar occurrences were commonplace for inhabitants like Jacob, who opined that visitors avoided the downtown to prevent being bothered in this way. Many inhabitants were keenly aware of how visitors perceived their presence and behaviours, but would discredit, reframe, and/or reject these judgmental assessments. Specifically, inhabitants felt that their proximity to alternative housing and social services invited misgivings about their character which unfairly lumped them in with a troublesome few. Arthur said, "*[Visitors are] not willing to get out and meet these people […] The majority of 'em are really nice people that have just had a really bad run o' life*.'

Jennifer, a downtown resident and part-time retail worker, defended her get-togethers with other inhabitants in a park downtown. Jennifer had recently been hassled by by-law officers; '*they wouldn't let us sit there*', she said, gesturing to her friends by the picnic table. She suggested that these enforcement actions were made in the service of visitors' comfort, and explained:

> *'A lot of people will judge you just because you're down this way or walking down here. […] So, there's a lot of judgment goin' on, I find, in people's minds, around here. Thinkin' that because you're downtown, you're automatically a drug addict, you know? [...] You know, and that's a stigma too. You're either workin' down here or you're down here because you're just hangin' out and just want to be a nuisance to everybody, when you don't. That's not the real reason, it's just because – this is where I meet my friends, you know? And it's nice here. They made it all really nice, you know? Why not sit there, right?'*

In summary, these initial findings support that encounters in the public spaces of mixed housing communities can reproduce patterns of social cohesion and conflict. Social tectonics reflects a state of public order wherein tensions and boundaries between groups differentiated by housing (and other) statuses are particularly salient. These experiences influence residents' sense of belonging, patterns of sociability, and their interests for the future direction of the city. With urbanisation and urban restructuring continuing in Canada and globally, insights from the SOEL can scaffold key considerations for associated research and policy agendas.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ontario's policies for 'complete communities' seek to foster social integration among diverse residents through housing mix and urban revitalisation. This brief case study has offered a grounded perspective of how users of public space in a neighbourhood transitioning to mixed housing navigate and perceive social encounters in their everyday lives. While public space

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provided for co-presence between strangers, social tectonics (Butler and Robson 2001) largely endured. As I hope to have shown, though, residents do not simply *move past* one another, but take the presence of strangers into account when finding solutions to uphold public order—solutions that are *interpreted by* others and *feed into* subsequent encounters. These findings also support the key insight that social tectonics, like social cohesion, requires maintenance. In IR theory terms, social tectonics occurs when residents 'will not feel identity with a [different] group, respect for symbols, and emotional enthusiasm' (Collins 2014: 300). Under the conditions documented in this case study, the higher-order hopes of social mix policies, such as social capital transference between new social ties, appear to be faint prospects.

This observation aligns with the bulk of the evidence accumulated in related studies. It is appropriate, then, that researchers have reconsidered what outcomes can reasonably be expected from mixed communities and gentrification (e.g., destigmatization; Doucet and Koenders 2018). This scope should be expanded.

Perhaps a central reminder for urban planning is that context influences how residents enter into and navigate social encounters. As warned by Park (1926: 10), we must avoid reducing 'all social relations to relations of space'. Streets and parks foster co-presence between strangers, but in doing so, become host multiple and, as demonstrated here, competing forms of sociability. Bringing strangers together to get along or join in solidarity varies by the 'dynamics of situations' (Collins 2020: 479) and relies on shared symbols among participants. Whether residents attend school together (Allen et al. 2005) or share busses (Kim 2012) or trains (Pütz 2018), symbolically-laden places and activities can orient residents to different purposes and foster togetherness. Residents' biographies, codes of civility, and previous interactions also inform whether 'successful' interactions will proceed. In the present study, this was evident in the finding that the conversational resources wielded by the urban poor to spark and maintain interaction with others repelled uninvolved visitors. Thus, researchers should be attentive to the subtle influences on social (mal)integration in mixed communities. However, these are not all of the factors constraining intergroup sociability in neighbourhoods (see Arthurson 2010).

Continued attention towards the conditions enabling successful IRs between residents differentiated by housing status could provide valuable extensions of this research and inform the development of equitable housing mix policies. Collins' (2004) premise that the symmetrical distribution of emotional energy is more likely when participants share in resource positions offers a suitable starting point. If urban regeneration and/or housing mix proponents genuinely endeavour to improve the lot of the urban poor, planning agendas should intentionally involve diverse neighbourhood residents in participatory coalitions. In such initiatives, the recruitment, employment, and training of local residents can promote community empowerment (Dobbs and Moore 2002: 163).

Additionally, these programmes may be oriented towards cultivating *new* symbols (Collins 2004: 153) and guided by an ethic of equitable urban planning and the promotion of inclusion and belonging. To this end, community participation programmes informed by the principles of affective citizenship and pre-figurative politics (see de Wilde 2015; de Wilde and Duyvendak 2016) are valuable in their recognition of the centrality of emotion in local governance strategies, given the sense of loss that may accompany gentrification (Shaw and Hagemans 2015). Proposals for mixed-housing neighbourhoods can take lines of inquiry and action that extend from the bottom up to determine and champion residents' focal concerns and local priorities. In this study, the main issues of concern discussed by respondents (regardless of

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housing type) included housing insecurity, surveillance, crime, employment, and tenant issues. While respondents differed in their proposed solutions to these matters—a stubborn gulf that I do not wish to minimise—placing intersecting interests at the centre of community participation schemes may provide a valuable precursory step in fostering the conditions for successful collaboration and sustainable solutions, while providing marginalised populations a contributive stake in the future of their neighbourhoods. Whether these organised efforts will lead to conviviality being sustained outside of the context of coordinated action and 'spill out' into public spaces or remains to be seen.

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