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'Ordinary, the Same as Anywhere Else': Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity in 'Marginal' Middle-Class Neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT
Urban sociologists are becoming increasingly interested in neighbourhood as a source of middle-class identity. Particular emphasis is currently being given to two types of middle-class neighbourhood; gentrified urban neighbourhoods of 'distinction' and inconspicuous 'suburban landscapes of privilege'. However, there has been a dearth of work on 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods that are similarly 'inconspicuous' rather than distinctive, but less exclusive, thus containing sources of 'spoiled identity'. This article draws on data gathered from two 'marginal' middleclass neighbourhoods that contained a particular source of 'spoiled identity': social renters. Urban sociological analyses of neighbour responses to these situations highlight a process of dis-identification with the maligned object, which exacerbates neighbour differences. Our analysis of data from the 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods suggests something entirely different and Goffmanesque. This entailed the management of spoiled identity, which emphasized similarities rather than differences between neighbours.

KEY WORDS
class / identity / neighbourhoods / ordinariness

Introduction

Acontemporary theme in urban sociology concerns the decline of 'community' (Crow, 2002), which has invited two forms of response. First, many urban scholars have maintained their focus on the social relational aspects of community, for example, by continuing to examine the (changing) nature and extent of contacts between neighbours. Second, a number of urban scholars have turned their attention away from the social relational aspects of community and towards the social significance of neighbourhood, i.e. attributes, reputation, image etc. (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001). Our article is concerned with this second focus of attention. Much of the work on the social significance of neighbourhoods has been tied up with debates about the formation and fragmentation of middle-class identity (Savage et al., 1992). A key concern has been with how different combinations of economic and cultural capital influence the way middle-class households judge the suitability of residential sites (Butler with Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005).

However, this concern has hitherto been limited to particular segments of the middle class and specific types of neighbourhood. First, a large volume of work has examined how a range of inner-urban neighbourhoods have been appropriated and gentrified as sites of 'distinction' by a 'new' middle class of well-educated professionals that are rich in cultural capital but less well endowed with economic capital (e.g. Butler, 1997; Butler with Robson, 2003). Second, a less voluminous body of work has examined why exclusive-but-inconspicuous 'suburban landscapes of privilege' appeal to a 'middle' middle class of 'organizational men' that are rich in economic capital but less well endowed with cultural capital[1] (e.g. Baumgartner, 1988; Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Silverstone, 1997; cf. Savage et al., 1992; Savage et al., 2005). Savage et al. (2005) have recently offered a partial corrective to this by examining why Cheadle appeals to 'marginal' middleclass households at the lower end of the professional and service class that are neither rich nor poor in economic and cultural capital. However there has been precious little other work on 'marginal' middle-class suburban neighbourhoods that are primarily but less exclusively populated by those at the lower end of the professional labour market and therefore socially diverse. This is problematic because it means we currently lack an understanding of how and why 'marginal' middle-class households elect to live in inconspicuous-but-diverse suburban areas and, crucially, how they engage with the social diversity therein.

In addressing our article to this lacuna, we seek to make a contribution to the literature on neighbourhoods and middle-class formation but also find it necessary to critically engage with some long-established debates within urban sociology more generally. Specifically our analysis of data from two 'marginal' middle-class suburban neighbourhoods highlights two things. First, the primary motivation for 'buying into' the neighbourhoods was to engage in the 'inconspicuous consumption' of semi- or link-detached houses with gardens that were surrounded by green space, rather than to achieve 'distinction'. In other words, the housing aspirations of 'marginal' middle-class households tend to be oriented towards the 'middle' middle-class preference for the 'bland' conformism of suburbia (Savage et al., 1992) rather than the 'new' middle-class 'taste' for distinct and gentrified inner-city neighbourhoods (Butler, 1997; Butler with Robson, 2003).

Second, since 'marginal' middle-class suburban neighbourhoods are less exclusive than 'suburban landscapes of privilege' (cf. Duncan and Duncan, 2004) they are by definition more socially diverse. Although they were primarily populated by marginal middle-class households at the lower end of the professional labour market, they also contained significant numbers of the 'respectable' working class and 'middle' middle-class households. And although they were predominantly owner-occupied neighbourhoods that had enjoyed house price rises higher than the borough and national average between 1999 and 2004, they were also peppered with a significant element of 'affordable housing' (owned by local authorities and housing associations). Owner occupiers were intimately aware of the stigma attached to social housing and that its presence therefore 'spoiled' the identity of their neighbourhood.

Now urban sociologists and geographers have previously noted how situations such as this tend to result in dis-identification with the maligned object (cf. Skeggs, 1997, 2004) and the emergence of 'us' and 'them' boundaries that exacerbate apparent social differences (e.g. Elias and Scotson, 1965; Jones, 1999; Southerton, 2002). However, our own observations of 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods unearthed an entirely different, Goffmanesque response to this situation. This concerned the management of spoiled identity. For Goffman (1968), awareness of societal norms and standards equips individuals to be intimately alive to what others see as a 'failing', causing them to agree that they fall short of what they ought to be. This was evident in the home owners' acute awareness of 'tenure prejudice' towards social renting in wider society and thus to the 'spoiled identity' that this potentially bestowed on their neighbourhood. However, Goffman (1968) also suggests that the stigmatized employ 'adaptive techniques' that prevent stigma from looming large with the objective being to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier to withdraw overt attention from the source of stigma. Of key import here is the 'middle-class marginality' of both owners and renters (i.e. lower-end professionals or working-class aspirants), which meant that they also shared social characteristics and thus had some means of identifying with each other. These similarities facilitated the social construction of civil and polite neighbour relations around a shared sense of 'ordinariness' and 'sameness' which, in turn, acted to reinforce their respectable-but-inconspicuous mode of housing and neighbourhood consumption, thereby concealing spoiled identity (cf. Longhurst et al., 2001; Savage et al., 2001). We discuss the urban sociological implications of this analysis in the conclusion.

On the Communities We Have Lost and Neighbourhoods We Have Found

The rich tradition of community studies, spanning 50 years, was recently reviewed by Crow (2002). A key focus of 'traditional' community studies has been on the density and strength of kinship networks (Bulmer, 1986; Young and Willmott, 1957) and the nature and extent of neighbouring more generally in modern societies (Foley, 1952; Warren, 1981; Willmott, 1986). Conversely, a recurring theme in 'postmodern' urban and community sociology is the claim that the social and economic cement of the modern era is crumbling and casting individuals adrift in a world in which the previous rules of social and neighbourhood cohesion do not apply (Crow et al., 2002; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Pahl, 1991). For Forrest and Kearns (2001), then, households now live in a precarious (rather than cohesive) social and economic

world that is driving them into much more individualized ways of life and opposite poles of income, assets and lifestyle. Such claims have resulted in the emergence of an academic discourse of individualization (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), which, in urban sociology, has translated into an increasing concern with how individuals that are 'cast adrift' are required to construct a coherent sense of self-identity in order to 'find' a place for – and locate – themselves in an increasingly open and fluid social world (Beck, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Pahl, 2000; Urry, 2000). Giddens (1991) refers to this as a 'project of the self' which, Savage et al. (2005: 29) suggest, has propelled households and individuals into a chronic concern with 'elective belonging' which is:

> Not to a fixed community, ... but is more fluid in seeing places as sites for performing identities. Individuals attach their own biography to their 'chosen' residential location, so that they tell stories that indicate how their arrival and subsequent settlement is appropriate to their sense of themselves ... Elective belonging is critically dependent on people's relational sense of place, their ability to relate their area of residence against other possible areas, so that the meaning of place is critically judged in terms of its relational meanings.

For urban scholars such as Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2130), the 'project of the self' and concern with 'elective belonging' has resulted in households that are less concerned with neighbouring but increasingly concerned with neighbourhood as a source of self-identity:

> … there are many other sources [of self-identity] partly dependent on our individual and collective time-geographies and action spaces within the urban arena ... Urban neighbourhoods continue to perform important but more specialist roles in people's lives in parallel with extra-neighbourhood association ... 'location matters' and the neighbourhood becomes part of our statement about who we are.

Forrest refers to neighbourhoods as 'consumption niches' that households 'buy into' because, for him, 'we are increasingly where we live' and because 'neighbourhood is set to become more rather than less important ... as a discriminator of lifestyles'. Neighbourhood is important, then, because it 'says something about us' and assists us to appeal to others with similar lifestyles and aspirations (Forrest, 2004).

Much of the work on neighbourhoods as 'consumption niches' has focused on the elective occupation of specific types of residential site by different elements of the middle class. Savage et al. (2005) argue that the elective occupation of specific types of neighbourhoods is directed by the different assets possessed by different elements of the middle class, who they define according to their possession of property assets (e.g. landlords), organizational assets (e.g. managers) and cultural assets (e.g. public sector professionals) (Savage et al., 1992) and their possession of different combinations of economic and cultural capital (Savage et al., 2005; cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Following this schema, class analysts have examined how inner-urban neighbourhoods have been appropriated and gentrified as sites of 'distinction' by a 'new' middle class of well-educated professionals that are rich in cultural capital but less well endowed with economic capital (e.g. Butler, 1997; Butler with Robson, 2003). The neighbourhood attributes that this element of the middle class 'buy into' range from the desire to renovate and occupy buildings that display a distinctive sense of 'taste' (Savage et al., 1992; Zukin, 1982) to the desire to practise distinctive

lifestyles (O'Connor and Wynne, 1996) or because of the distinctive 'feel' of a particular neighbourhood (Butler, 1997; Ley, 1996).

The 'middle' middle class that occupy higher managerial positions tend to be rich in economic capital but less well endowed with cultural capital and thus have 'few distinctive consumption patterns and appear to exhibit a lifestyle based on ... "inconspicuous consumption"' (Savage et al., 1992: 216; Silverstone, 1997). For Savage et al. (1992) these 'organizational men' are 'the boring semidetached variety' that elect to buy into exclusive-but-inconspicuous 'suburban landscapes of privilege', reflecting their overall preference for standardized patterns of consumption and their lack of interest in the pursuit of cultural distinction (Baumgartner, 1988; Duncan and Duncan, 2004; cf. Ley, 1996; Savage et al., 1992; Savage et al., 2005).

Limits of the 'Neighbourhood Turn'
Although we concur with the view that neighbourhood is increasingly a source of self-identity we want to argue that the direction in which debates about neighbourhoods have been heading are limiting. First, although the notion of neighbourhood as an important source of self-identity speaks directly to key debates about the nature of 'modern individuals' in contemporary sociological theory (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1991) this has been done in a limited way. Specifically, much of the work on the elective occupation of neighbourhoods cited above has tended to focus on those undergoing a process of gentrification. These gentrifying neighbourhoods have been conceptualized as sites of 'distinction' for the 'new' middle class of well-educated urban professionals that are rich in cultural capital but poor in economic capital (see Butler with Robson, 2003; Ley, 1996; O'Connor and Wynne, 1996; Zukin, 1982). However, although there has been a rapid growth of 'distinctive consumers' within the 'new' middle class, to the extent that they now constitute the majority of that class (Savage et al., 1992), work on the inconspicuous and conformist neighbourhoods preferred by other elements of the middle class has hitherto been limited in scope.

Specifically, there is a rich tradition of research into exclusive-but-inconspicuous suburban utopias occupied by 'middle' middle-class managers that are rich in economic capital but less well endowed with cultural capital (cf. Savage et al., 1992; Silverstone, 1997; Whyte, 1956). However, notwithstanding the work of Savage et al. (2005), which includes a case study of the marginal middle-class neighbourhood of Cheadle, there has been a dearth of work on 'marginal' middleclass neighbourhoods that are primarily but much less exclusively populated by people in lower management, lower professional, intermediate, technical and supervisory occupations as well as small employers and self-employed workers. That is, there has been a significant lack of work on the housing and neighbourhood consumption practices of those on the 'margins' of the middle class that are neither rich nor poor in economic and cultural capital. This is significant, because 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods invite a tension between those that buy into them because they are desirable-but-inconspicuous, and their lack of exclusivity which might result in an ideally unwanted level of social diversity within the neighbourhood.

The Research Study of 'Marginal' Middle-class Neighbourhoods

The remainder of this article draws on data gathered from two marginal middle-class suburban neighbourhoods that were predominantly owner occupied and 'locally desirable'. These desirable neighbourhoods are referred to as North Township (located 4–5 miles away from the centre of a large town in the north east of England) and New Township (located 4 miles from the centre of a new town in the south east of England)[2]. The 'local desirability' of North Township and New Township was indicated by house price rises that were higher than borough and national averages between 1999 and 2005. Their local desirability was also indicated by the high demand for, and low turn-over within, social rented housing which was mainly 'pepper potted' and thus 'mixed in' with owner occupied houses.[3] The 2001 census shows that North Township had proved particularly desirable to households containing members over the age of 45 and over retirement age (i.e. they contain higher than the national average of residents in these age groups), with the converse in New Township which, instead, had proved especially desirable to households containing members below the ages of 16 and between 16 and 29 years.

According to the socio-economic classifications and data in Table 1, North Township and New Township were predominantly populated by 'marginal' middle-class households as opposed to 'middle' middle-class households that tend to occupy higher management positions (Watt, 2005) or 'new' middle-class households that tend to be composed of well-educated urban professionals (Savage et al., 1992). Thus, people in 'marginal' middle-class occupations such as lower management, lower professional, intermediate, technical and supervisory work as well as small employers and self-employed workers formed the largest element of the neighbourhood population (43.3% in New Township and 39.7% in North Township compared to a national average of 42.7%).[4] The neighbourhoods also contained significant numbers of households in working class occupations (21.2% and 32.4% compared to a national average of 20.9%),[5] which formed the second largest population group, and a much smaller but still significant number of households in higher managerial and professional occupations (5.2% and 4.5% compared to the national average of 8.7%).[6]

The marginal nature of this professional occupational structure was reflected in the qualifications possessed by residents in both case study sites. Both sites had higher than average numbers of residents without any qualifications and higher than average numbers of residents with GCSE or equivalent school leaving certificates as their highest form of qualification; 22.5 percent of New Township residents and 24.6 percent of North Township residents had their highest qualification at school leaving level compared to the national average of 21.1 percent. On the other hand, both sites had lower than average numbers of residents with AS level qualifications; 8.9 percent of North Township residents and 7.1 percent of New Township residents were qualified to this level compared to the national average of 9.4 percent. Crucially, according to the Savage et al. (1992) middle-class schema, both case studies had significantly fewer than average numbers of residents with degree level qualifications which, when considered alongside the occupational structure of the case study sites, suggests that their asset base was organizational rather than cultural; only 16 percent of North Township and 10 percent of New Township residents possessed qualifications at this level compared with the national average of 21.2 percent. Although both case study sites had a relatively high proportion of

Table 1 Socio-economic classifications (national statistics)

	A Higher managerial and professional occupations	B Lower managerial and professional occupations	C Intermediate occupations	D Lower supervisory and technical occupations	E Small employers and own account workers	F Semi-routine occupations	G Routine occupations	H Never worked and long-term unemployed	I Not classified
New Township	5.2	19.8	10.7	8.7	4.1	12.8	8.4	4.5	25.9
North Township	4.5	15.9	10.5	9.6	3.7	16.2	16.2	4.6	18.7
England	8.7	18.9	9.5	7.2	7.1	11.8	9.1	3.6	24.2

Source: 2001 Census of Population. Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO.

families with dependent children (34% in both) compared to the national average of 27 percent, then, these households appeared to share the same attitudes towards education as households in the similarly marginal middle-class neighbourhood of Cheadle where:

> ... talk around schooling and educational choice was generally less salient ... [Many] of our respondents did not have the economic or cultural capital to make choices over schooling, and in general didn't articulate schooling as a problem ... In Cheadle educational choice was less of an option, and provoked much less of a debate, with a more passive acceptance that the local schools were 'ok' or even good. (Savage et al., 2005: 70)

Research in the two neighbourhoods involved a range of methods. First, the above social and economic profile of the case study areas was developed by drawing on Census data for 1981, 1991 and 2001 and house price data from the Land Registry. Second, eight[7] focus groups investigated perceptions of (a) the current state of the case study areas, (b) perceptions of how the case study areas have changed over the last 20 years, and (c) perceptions of the 'standing' of the case study area in relation to neighbouring areas and the borough or city more generally. Third, diaries were completed by approximately 30 households in each of the case study areas. Diarists included a wide range of residents in terms of household type, tenure, age and length of residence. The diaries provided an important insight into how residents used their neighbourhood, the wider area and how much contact they had with people from their own neighbourhood. Fourth, the diaries were used to identify a sample of 30 post-diary interviewees across the case study areas. This sample of postdiary interviewees was selected using the following variables: tenure, gender, age, length of residence, levels of contact inside the case study areas and levels of contact outside the case study areas. Post-diary interviews then explored the daily lives of the residents and their views and experiences of the areas in more detail. Focus group and post-diary interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed to establish empirical themes within and across case studies, thus giving rise to this article on the management of spoiled identity in 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods.

Buying into 'Marginal' Middle-class Neighbourhoods

The housing aspirations of our 'marginal' middle-class households were oriented towards the 'middle' middle-class preference for the inconspicuous conformism of suburbia (Silverstone, 1997), rather than the 'new' middle-class 'taste' for distinct and gentrified inner-city neighbourhoods (see Southerton, 2002, for similar findings).[8] This was evident in the reasons they gave for 'buying into' the neighbourhoods, which were valued because they contained, and were surrounded by, copious amounts of green open space.

> It's got to be one of the best areas in North Town ... We have eighty percent of greenbelt in North Township area and that's a big slice isn't it ... We looked at the area ... we looked at four bedroom detached and it was particularly the green belt and the nice location, the green isn't it. It's a lovely location to live ... You can see for yourself when you drive around really how nice the area is. Beautiful. (North Township #42, Owner)

Particular value was placed on how their enjoyment of this green space was not disrupted by traffic flows, which were excluded from most parts of both townships that had, instead, a network of footpaths and cycle ways. These environmental features encouraged walking, and thus social interaction, as well as the ability of children to play in safety in the built-up parts of the neighbourhoods. Although our marginal middle-class respondents were less concerned with educational provision in the area (provided it was 'ok'), they were concerned to live in an area that had a 'nice neighbourly feel' and that provided a safe environment for their children to play:

> I like the way you've got so many little pathways and you walk (the dog) three or four times a day …… I talk to all the kids. (New Township, Renter)

> I'm not saying she knows everybody [laughs] but a ten minute walk to the shop takes two hours. (North Township, Owner)

> There isn't a lot of cars that come into my area so we can play out the front. (New Township, 8 year old)

> Me and (my friend) go for bike rides … and we go to the shops. (North Township, 8 year old)

The townships were also valued as residential sites because they had higher than average numbers of 'nice looking' detached, semi-detached or linkdetached[9] dwellings that were arranged in 'lovely little cul-de-sacs'.

> It's just the houses, houses, detached and semi detached. These are called linked detached 'cause the garages are linked you know. You know, you've got little terraces like just up the road there but ... the kind of housing mix is really lovely. (North Township #32, Owner)

Indeed, far from being 'distinctive' housing consumers that were seeking to buy into an area for the purposes of accumulating 'cultural capital', the considerations that underpinned household decisions to 'buy into' the case study neighbourhoods were more pragmatically organized around 'budgeting', reflecting our respondents' moderate levels of economic capital (Savage et al., 1992; Southerton, 2002). The primary considerations here were to ensure that households' moderate economic assets were deployed in a way that would secure a 'good quality' semi- or link-detached dwelling in the most 'respectable' suburban neighbourhood possible thereby securing value for money:

> Why North Township? ... North Township seemed to fit the price bracket that I was looking for from property because I knew I could not live in [posh area] but I didn't want to go to the centre of North Town. I wanted to stay on the outskirts and North Township has a good reputation and I felt secure being here. (North Township #1, Owner)

And:

Int: So what attracted you to New Township rather than anywhere else in New Town?

New Township #153 (Owner): Price principally ... When we were looking for somewhere to rent we came down and spent a weekend looking at various properties and the property here ultimately was by far and away the best value for money as far as the property is concerned

Int:	So was that a house like a 3 bed house
# 153:	That's right yes. It was a 3 bedroom house [that] had a garage as well and a garden. So as I say that was the reason we moved to New Township initially and then having been here for a little while we were quite happy with the area. We don't have children so we don't have to worry about the schooling or you know things like that sort of thing. We literally went out on a Sunday having decided that we were going to look for a property to buy in New Township. We went out walking for four or five hours and, as it happened, on the way home we saw this property up for sale and went for it
Int:	So it was primarily what you got for your money
# 153:	Oh yes. That was almost you know the primary reason ... I was aware that New Town Development Corporation built the properties. Obviously it was a new town development sort of thing so I knew roughly how old the properties were [and] I had lived in New Town about 16/17 years ago ... So I was aware of the quality if you like as far as the houses were concerned ... We came and had a look and got an idea as to how many there is and sort of likely to be working by how many cars were here on a night-time and how many were missing during the day and those kinds of things because then you know that was of interest to us when we were deciding where to buy

'Marginal' Middle-class Neighbourhood Identity under Threat

Households that 'bought into' the case study areas did so because they understood them to be 'desirable' in the context of the towns within which they were located as well as according to socio-environmental indicators such as suburban location, access to green space, and prevalence of semi- or link- detached dwellings with gardens. However, although both case study neighbourhoods were considered to be desirable, they were originally conceived as tenure and socially mixed areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is significant because a number of researchers have highlighted how 'tenure prejudice' towards social renting and social renters has since grown, especially over the last two decades (Gurney, 1999; Rowlands and Gurney, 2000).

Now although the 'new' middle class tend to be positive about living in co-presence with 'working class' households without necessarily wanting – or having – any social interaction with them (Butler, 1997; Ley, 1996; Savage et al., 2005), the 'middle' middle class have traditionally sought to socially isolate themselves in exclusive 'suburban landscapes of privilege' (Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Ley, 1996; Savage et al., 1992). Since households that buy into 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods shared the 'middle' middle-class 'housing aspirations' for the inconspicuous conformity of suburbia, there were some concerns that the presence of social housing spoiled their neighbourhood identity

> My boyfriend thinks it [social housing] keeps prices down ... I haven't really noticed it to be honest ... I think he thinks that the car is going to be stolen [by social renters] and things like that. (New Township # 127, Owner)

Although households in New Township and North Township did not generally exhibit tenure prejudice attitudes, they were 'intimately alive' to how the tenure prejudices held by 'generalized others' inscribed their neighbourhood, and therefore themselves, with a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1968), reflecting the findings of other research in tenure mixed areas (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001):

> Some work people said 'Oh don't move to New Township, oh! that's a bit dodgy' you know, sort of thing, and [if we'd have listened to them] we would have been looking for something probably that we couldn't afford but ... in what other people determined was a nicer area. (New Township #157, Owner)

The Management of 'Spoiled Identity'

Most urban and suburban sociologists have argued that awareness of class status differences tends to result in dis-identification with the maligned object (cf. Skeggs, 1997, 2004) and the emergence of 'us' and 'them' boundaries that exacerbate apparent social differences within neighbourhoods (e.g. Edwards, 2000; Elias and Scotson, 1965; Jones, 1999; Southerton, 2002). Yet, our own data suggest an entirely different, Goffmanesque, response to the status differentials caused by awareness of tenure prejudice, which was that:

> The stigmatised employ an 'adaptive technique' ... [whereby] persons that are ready to admit possession of a stigma (in many cases because it is known about or immediately present) may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large. The individual's object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself and others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma. (Goffman, 1968: 125)

Although our diary data indicated that neighbours tended to occupy individualized social worlds, with the objects of their significant relationships living outside of the case study neighbourhoods and little in the way of social mixing between owning and renting neighbours, this did not therefore mean that relationships between owning and renting neighbours were hostile or negative as urban scholars have conventionally claimed (e.g. Goodchild and Cole, 2001). Conversely, owning and renting neighbours lived 'separate lives' but were able to identify with each other because both neighbourhoods were primarily populated with a narrow social range of 'marginal' middle-class and 'respectable' working-class households (see Skeggs, 1997 for a discussion of the notion of working class 'respectability'). In respect of the latter, local authorities and housing associations had used vetting procedures, such as 'employment criteria', to ensure that social rented housing was allocated to 'respectable' households, which meant that high levels of economic activity had been consistently evident in social rented housing as well as in owner-occupied housing. This combination of spatial distance (i.e. separate everyday lives) with social proximity (i.e. 'marginal' and overlapping class identities) translated into neighbour relationships that were 'distant' rather than 'close' but, critically, 'civil' and 'polite' (see also Pfiel, 1968 in Bridge et al., 2004; Crow et al., 2002).

> We don't socialize together. Although we're good neighbours we don't socialize. (New Township #127, Owner)

> [I would call the neighbours] casual acquaintances. I know a lot of people, but friends, very few ... I treat people as those people treat me ... If people want to talk to me and they're friendly I'll be friendly back. (New Township #138, Renter)

> We don't go into and out of people's houses like but if we were getting in the car and going anywhere or she is we stand and talk and things like that. (North Township #83, Renter)

> We all seem to get on alright round here ... I mean we all we don't sort of live in each other's houses but we speak to each other if we see one another ... Yes I mean even the next door neighbours the only time we speak to them is if we see them sort ofthing we don't make a habit of going round ... We don't go out of our way to sort of well to speak to people you know if they speak to us we speak back obviously or you know if I see them in the street I speak to them. (New Township #143, Renter)

Social interaction between neighbours was thus something that tended to 'just happen' rather than something that was actively sought out. Yet when social interaction between neighbours did 'just happen', it was based on a civil and polite 'hello' greeting that, on occasion, might be followed up with enquiry about their well-being as the owners below indicate:

> I know the lady next door well enough to say hello to. The gentleman across the street that we know well enough to say hello to. If one of the neighbours says hello then obviously we respond and maybe there would be a short interchange but that's it. (New Township #153, Owner)

> It's normally basically saying 'hi'. I mean I've lived here 12 years and I mean I speak to my neighbours. I have a bit to do with a couple of them but basically mainly it's 'hello, how are you?' (New Township #163, Owner)

> If I was to bump into [neighbours] in the shopping centre I would say hello and I have done ... So yes I communicate with them at that sort of level. If I was to see them in the street I would give them a wave. (North Township #81, Owner)

Significantly, the polite and civil nature of social interactions between neighbours did not change as length of residence increased. Long-term residents did not have a 'deeper' level of social interaction with neighbours that they had known for a long time and, as such, were still just as likely to restrict their social interactions with them to the issue of a 'hello':

> X and Y next door. We've lived next door to each other for twenty five years ... They moved in three weeks after we did to a brand new house. The boys, mine and hers, grew up together but they if they see each other in the street they'll stop and have a quick natter but they don't keep in touch and [it's] the same with me and X if we see over the fence at that back we stand and natter perhaps half an hour but to actually go and make contact with her I wouldn't want to ... She's just a next door neighbour that you have a chat to every now and again. (New Township #122, Owner)

Neighbour Relations and the Management of 'Ordinariness'

A number of studies have highlighted the continuing significance of convivial neighbour relationships in modern societies (Bridge et al., 2004). That said, these studies tend to focus on functional significance of neighbour relationships (i.e. inter-household cooperation, e.g. practical help) and not the significance that such relationships have for identity work. This is evident in two ways. First, little has been said about the importance of social relationships between neighbours to the construction of identity, largely because neighbour relationships are considered to have become less significant in an individualized world (Forrest and Kearns, 2001).

For example, Atkinson and Kintrea (2000, 2001) have interpreted a similar finding to our own in their work – concerning the separate social worlds of owners and renters – to mean that neighbours were largely 'indifferent' to each other. Second, urban scholars have identified 'neighbourhood' (Forrest, 2004), 'neighbourhood liberated' social networks (Sprigings and Allen, 2005) and spatial proximity to specific types of neighbours (Ley, 1996; Savage et al., 2005) rather than social relationships between neighbours as important to the construction of self-identity. Yet, the 'civil' and polite nature of social relations between New Township and North Township neighbours was significant to the social construction of identity because it was this that enabled them to identify their neighbourhood as 'pretty ordinary' and therefore 'the same as anywhere else', thereby negating the presence of social renting neighbours as a potential source of 'spoiled identity' (cf. Goffman, 1968).

> I think it's pretty standard. (New Township #28, Owner)

> It's just like anywhere else. (New Township # 127, Owner)

Indeed, although the presence of 'ordinary' and 'same-like' people in the neighbourhood at large was important to the owners' ability to construct it as 'just like anywhere else', their presence was even more important in social rented housing. This was because it enabled the owners to sustain the discourse of ordinariness and sameness that they used to describe their neighbourhood, thereby buttressing their negation of its 'spoiled identity'. One of the strongest themes within the interview transcripts, then, concerned how the perceived 'ordinariness' and 'sameness' of social renting neighbours allowed owners to present the case study neighbourhoods as 'no different to anywhere else'.

> If you look around New Town or any village in New Town you've got private housing and you've got council housing and I've never understood what the great big issue was about this because in my view it is no different from anywhere else in any town. That is my take on it because wherever you are in New Town you'll get, well council houses don't exist now obviously because they've been bought, but you'll get a street of so called New Town housing next to a development of private housing so what's the big deal? (New Township #23, Owner)

> [The man] who lives in the council houses just across the road here ... He's a smashing bloke you know, just ordinary people like us, you know. People are people and you get good and bad everywhere don't you, in all walks of life. (North Township #86, Owner)

> They're just the same as us they really are I mean we've always owned our own home until 2 years ago so I mean they're just the same as us. (New Township #124, Renter)

There are two things to note here. First, the urban sociological and geography literature has made connections between neighbourhoods as specific places and self-identity (Forrest, 2004) as well as local identity (Berry et al., 1990, cited in Bridge et al., 2004). Our data seem to suggest the opposite, that neighbourhood is significant to identity because of its ability to be non-place specific, that is, nowhere and everywhere (cf. Friedland and Boden, 1995).

Second, this 'nowhere' discourse, concerning the ordinariness and sameness of neighbours living in different tenures, in turn, enabled owners to construct *tenure as a non-issue*, which also contributed to their management of spoiled identity. Since

tenure was a 'non-issue', they were ambivalent towards it and therefore did not waste their time 'thinking about it' or 'paying attention to it':

> I don't see any problems with it [social housing] at all ... I think different classes mix well. I find you know all different walks of life. (New Township #163, Owner)

> [Social housing] is not a problem. You don't really think about it really ... you think about just getting on with your life ... It doesn't present a problem at all. (North Township #86, Owner)

> It doesn't make any difference what type of housing it is just who is in the house ... I mean there are plenty of people who own their homes who behave ... Behave in a manner you know that is socially unacceptable. (New Township #153, Owner)

Renters thus talked about how only a 'small minority' of people in the area were 'snobby' and 'looked down' on them:

> I've had private properties before I know who owns them all right, it didn't matter to me that I owned it or I rented it, to me it's the same isn't it, mortgage has to be paid or rent has to be paid. [Some people] tend to look down on the people that are renting, there's a few in particular, well three I could name in particular ... I would say it was a very small minority, very small. (North Township #44, Renter)

For their part, owners talked about how the neighbourhoods were 'nice' places to live and they were therefore 'happy to stay':

> You very rarely see a board go up for sale. You do occasionally don't you but not very often ... You hear of more people moving to North Township than moving away from North Township. You do, really ... In the club, they're the same people I met twelve years ago. In fact, but for one or two passing away it hasn't changed. (North Township #86, Owner)

> Int: What is it you like about living here you know that made you want to stay?
> New Township #153: In New Township? Because of the high standard of housing

Indeed the stability of the populations was a key feature of the neighbourhoods. Census analysis demonstrated how the populations have aged in each neighbourhood and how there has been a steady decline in the number of young people under 29 years.

Conclusion

This article has called for more of a focus on 'marginal' middle-class neighbourhoods and, in doing so, has raised a number of issues within contemporary urban sociology. First, we argued that housing is not considered to be an investment in cultural distinction (Savage et al., 1992; Zukin, 1982), a symbol of lifestyle distinction (O'Connor and Wynne, 1996), or even an economic investment (Butler, 1997) for a significant element of the middle class. Conversely, housing represents a form of 'inconspicuous consumption' that should provide 'value for money' (see also Southerton, 2002).

Second, when neighbours had a means of identifying with each other they were able to develop 'shallow' and convivial relationships, which provided them with a means of negating sources of 'spoiled identity' within their neighbourhood. Marginal middle-class neighbourhoods were thus constructed as 'ordinary' and 'just the same as

everywhere else'. The implication of this is that neighbourhoods should not simply be conceptualized as distinctive places that feed the 'project of the self' (cf. Giddens, 1991). The case study marginal middle-class neighbourhoods were arenas in which households with marginally similar-anddiverging social characteristics sought to construct a shared sense of 'social identity' based on the notion of 'ordinariness' and 'sameness', which, in turn, acted to reinforce their preferred inconspicuous mode of consumption (cf. Savage et al., 1992). On this basis, we would suggest that there is such thing as a 'project of the neighbourhood', which is a shared rather than individualized endeavour and that, paradoxically, identifies itself with 'nowhere' in particular!

Third, since this 'project of the neighbourhood' constructed neighbours and neighbourhood as inconspicuously ordinary and same-like, in order to negate 'spoiled identity', it introduced another paradox: tenure was problematized whilst simultaneously being considered a 'non-issue' and even an irrelevance in the case study neighbourhoods. This is particularly interesting because the implication is that 'us' and 'them' or 'established' and 'outsiders' do not necessarily represent discrete categories of resident, which is the impression given in much urban sociology (e.g. Elias and Scotson, 1965; Jones, 1999; Southerton, 2002). Rather, they are dialectical categories that are fluid in the way they conterminously exhibit separating (owners and renters) and overlapping ('ordinary, the same as anywhere else') tendencies.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] Watt (2005) identifies 'marginal' middle-class households as those that are located at the lower end of the professional and service class.
[2] New Township had a population of 8217 and North Township had a population of 4100.
[3] Social housing constituted 33.1 percent of dwelling stock in New Township (which was 55% owner occupied) and 42.6 percent of dwelling stock in North Township (which was 52% owner occupied).
[4] Sum of columns B–E in Table 1.
[5] Sum of columns F–G in Table 1.
[6] See column A in Table 1.

[7] This consisted of one focus group with home owners, one focus group with house renters, one focus group with 7–8-year-old children and one focus group with 10–11-year-old children in each case study area.

[8] Southerton's 'Cartmel Street' group are similar to our respondents in terms of their occupational status (e.g. lower management, technical, supervisory, etc.) and housing preferences (e.g. oriented towards 'middle' middle-class conformism and respectability).

[9] 'Link-detached' dwellings are single dwelling buildings that are linked together by features such as garages. They made up 60 percent of the dwelling stock in New Township.