



## **Social Diversity in Gentrified Neighborhoods: Child's Play?**

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*Translated from the French by Christina Mitrakos*

*How do children develop relationships? Do they meet children from socio-economic backgrounds other than their own? What are the effects of (much sought-after) social diversity among adults on the younger generation? This study of children's social relations in a gentrified neighborhood in Paris sheds light on these questions.*

Since the 1980s, many large European and North American cities have been affected by gentrification: upper-middle-class households settle in neighborhoods formerly inhabited by working-class households, leading to forms of coexistence, for variable amounts of time, between populations from different socio-economic backgrounds (Lees, Slater and Wylie 2008). Until now, relations between these groups have almost always been studied by looking at the sociabilities and experiences of adult residents, giving the impression that social mixing between upper-middle-class residents and working-class residents is low (Clerval 2008). However, gentrified neighborhoods are not only composed of adults. What about children? How do they relate to their peers? Do they experience more social mixing than their parents? These questions are at the center of our research, conducted in three gentrified neighborhoods in Paris, London and San Francisco (Lehman-Frisch, Authier and Dufaux 2012).

In Paris, our observations focused on children between the ages of nine and eleven, attending two primary schools, one public, the other private, in Batignolles, a neighborhood in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Upper-middle-class households began to settle in this old working-class neighborhood in the 1990s. Today, it is a gentrified and diverse neighborhood, where executives and other highly educated professionals coexist with current and retired blue-collar workers and office workers. It is known as a family neighborhood, where children are overrepresented demographically and very visible in public spaces. To get an understanding of their everyday sociabilities, we conducted 20-minute-long individual interviews with 47 children. We showed them photographs of the neighborhood and asked them to speak about their experiences. This material was supplemented by other interviews conducted with their parents and their teachers.

### **A “nice mix of children”**

Examining the everyday social relations of children, both in and outside of school, and in and outside of the neighborhood, first reveals the intensity of children's sociabilities in this gentrified neighborhood. Parents confirmed this: when asked about where their children's friends live, they responded, “the neighborhood,” as if it were obvious. Most of the children's relations are with school friends, whom they socialize with regularly in school, but also often outside of school. In the neighborhood, many of them also spend time with former school friends, friends they met at extracurricular activities, neighbors and cousins. These sociabilities show that children are more rooted in the neighborhood than adults, especially their parents. Nevertheless, parents recognize

that, with the birth of their children, a certain amount of their social life now revolves around the neighborhood. With these sociabilities, “a nice mix of children” is visible in the neighborhood (Ball, Vincent and Kemp 2008). In gentrified neighborhoods, children generally have more relations with peers from different socio-economic backgrounds than do adult residents, and in particular their parents.

### **The diversity of children’s sociability varies with location**

These many and mixed sociabilities take place in different parts of the neighborhood. It makes sense that school is a particularly important place in this regard. Nevertheless, children socialize outside of school as well. When asked about their favorite place in Batignolles, the children interviewed readily cited Parc Martin Luther King, which emerged as a true shared space in the neighborhood: all the children go there (although the frequency of their visits may vary). More than a playground, they see it as a place to meet up with their friends from school or elsewhere, sometimes even friends that they met at the park. The home (their own or their friends’) is another important place: children often invite their friends round (or they get invited to theirs) for birthday parties, to play for a few hours or even for “pajama parties.” Extracurricular activities at school, such as sports, games and art (for example the “*Ateliers bleus*” workshops organized by the city), outside of school, or even in other neighborhoods, are also situations where children develop relationships that can be pursued elsewhere. We noted differentiated uses of these places according to gender: boys have a tendency to see their school friends at the park, whereas girls also go to the park, but tend to meet more often at home.

The sociabilities that play out in these different places are not exactly alike. Children’s experience of social diversity seems to vary with the circumstances. Diversity is more pronounced at school than in the rest of the neighborhood. The classes we studied (and the schools in general) were more open to social diversity as they welcome a population representative of the neighborhood from different socio-economic backgrounds that include children from both working-class families and upper-middle-class families. However, the level of diversity was higher in the public school than in the private school. In the former, characterized by a wider range of socio-professional categories, almost all of the children interviewed had affinities with classmates from a background different than their own. In the latter, where the range of social classes is more limited, children’s sociabilities were slightly less mixed on the whole. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, with the exception of the park, a place where children from all socio-economic backgrounds mix, sociabilities tend to be less diverse than at school: at people’s houses, at extracurricular activities and other neighborhood places (even sometimes outside of the neighborhood), children’s relations tend to take place within their own social group.

### **The effects of class and space**

The diversity of children’s sociabilities according to place is influenced by class. For example, children from the upper middle class have more diverse social relations than those from the working classes, as they tend to meet children from different backgrounds in different places. At school, they have more diverse sociabilities than children with working-class origins. Outside of school, by contrast, their relations are more often limited to children from the same socio-economic class. They meet their friends during extracurricular activities, sometimes at the park, but mostly at home as children invite each other over. On occasion, they also invite children from working-class backgrounds to their home, but the visit is rarely reciprocated, revealing an important social asymmetry in the use of the home. The children belonging to the working classes have relatively less diverse sociabilities at school than their upper-middle-class schoolmates, and they invite friends to their home less often (because they perceive their housing conditions as less favorable, even reflecting poorly on them), even more so when their friends are from the upper middle class. For

these children, especially the boys, their (mainly working-class) sociabilities tend to take place in the neighborhood park.

Both working-class and upper-middle-class children tend to have less diverse sociabilities in the neighborhood than at school, each for a different reason. The children from the working classes seem to follow a logic of social isolation: their relations are more imposed than chosen, a situation often reinforced by strong family ties and strengthened by geographical proximity. By contrast, it appears that the upper-middle-class parents take steps to counterbalance the diversity of their children's social relations at school, by containing their social activities outside of school to their own class through invitations to their home, the choice of extracurricular activities, and so forth.

The influence of socio-economic background on the diversity of children's sociabilities is modulated by the spatial location of the home within the neighborhood. This is particularly clear in the case of working-class children attending the local public school: those who live in this gentrified neighborhood have some upper-middle-class friends, whereas those who reside in the nearby working-class neighborhood of Épinettes limit their sociabilities to their own social group. In other words, spatial proximity favors social proximity and exposes children to a certain amount of social diversity among neighbors.

### **Sociabilities under parental supervision**

Children do not develop sociabilities on their own. They are obviously structured, in part, by the child-rearing practices of their parents, especially in the upper middle class. There is a general agreement among these parents on the necessity for their children to experience diversity. However, they tend to supervise their children more strictly than working-class parents: by regularly accompanying their children to the park, by receiving their school friends (especially those from working-class backgrounds) at home, or by encouraging participation in particular extracurricular activities (and thus meeting other children from the same socio-economic background). They seem to encourage their children's exposure to social diversity, while at the same time keeping it under control.

In raising their children, these upper-middle-class parents do not all place the same value on social diversity in the neighborhood. Depending on their idea of parenting, they control the exposure of their children to such diversity by controlling the places where their children can go. This naturally plays out in the choice of school, public or private, but also in other domains. One mother (a schoolteacher), for example, considering the neighborhood to be "a school for life," feels it is important that her son be exposed to social diversity at the public school, at home, and in the neighborhood in general. This fosters a broad range of sociabilities for her son. By contrast, for another mother (an architect), "social diversity has its limits," and while she tolerates her daughter's diverse social relations in the context of her public primary school, she strives – successfully – to balance out these sociabilities by organizing the bulk of her daughter's social life with children from her own social group, outside the neighborhood, with friends who "resemble" her daughter, and who are "supervised by their parents at home."

### **From Batignolles to Noe Valley**

The relations of children in the Batignolles neighborhood are both more numerous and more diverse than those of their parents – and indeed those of adults in gentrified neighborhoods in general. At the same time, sociabilities take place in significantly different ways depending both on their location in the neighborhood (school, home, park, etc.) and on social class, as parents, and more specifically the upper-middle-class parents, play a fundamental role in organizing the social life of their children. These mixed sociabilities influence children's behavior as they share experiences with peers from different backgrounds. For example, compared to observations in other

urban contexts (Lareau 2003), the children from upper-middle-class families in the Batignolles neighborhood go to the park more often, and those from working class families participate in more organized activities. These two main results were similar to what we found in two other gentrified neighborhoods we studied, in San Francisco and in London, but with a few differences: in Noe Valley (San Francisco), for example, the sociabilities of children were considerably more spread out than in Batignolles, because of a lower residential density and a system of school enrollment that is not based on geographical zoning. Moreover, because the children from working-class backgrounds and those from the middle classes live further from each other, there is much less of a chance that they will see each other outside of school. Finally, in Noe Valley, upper-middle-class parents see diversity (to encourage or to limit the sociabilities of their children) in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation (of the families), or even disability, rather than in terms of socio-economic class.

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