Investigating a theory of housing, ontological security and self-identity:
A qualitative analysis of interview data in a multi-cultural Canadian city

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ABSTRACT:
This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study investigating the utility of the theoretical constructs ‘ontological security’ and ‘self-identity’ for understanding the routinized, everyday experience of housing and home. In-depth interviews conducted with 16 households in two inner-city neighbourhoods in Vancouver, Canada form the empirical basis for this study. The chief purpose of the study was to ascertain the nature and extent of the role played by housing and home in the ongoing maintenance of ontological security and the construction of self-identity for residents of the two case-study neighbourhoods. The main theoretical guide for this research is Giddens’ theory of modernity and self-identity (Giddens 1991), with particular emphasis on two key concepts: a) ‘ontological security’, which Giddens argues is the chief underpinning of human consciousness through which everyday, routinized experience in late modernity must be understood; and b) ‘self-identity’, which Giddens argues becomes a ‘reflexive project’ in late modernity, ordered by ‘narratives of the self’. The findings suggest that informants' experiences of home were very much articulated through notions of ontological security, both in a material sense and in the sense that a stable home provided the means to generate an ongoing stability of self-identity and sense of control over everyday life circumstances. The intersection between self-identity and the home was also universally present amongst the informants, subject to the informants’ stage in the life-cycle. A further, unanticipated finding was that ontological security was also articulated through a racialized discourse of neighbourliness, with some informants highly accepting of the racial diversity of their neighbourhoods, others rejecting it, and a third group expressing ambivalence. The findings of this research suggest that Giddens’ theory offers a rich and empirically robust way to theorize the mental geography of residential environments.

Keywords: housing, home, neighbourhood, ontological security, qualitative methods, self-identity, racialized discourse
Introduction:
This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study investigating the utility of the theoretical constructs ‘ontological security’ and ‘self-identity’ for understanding the routinized, everyday experience of housing and home. In-depth interviews conducted with 16 households in two inner-city neighbourhoods in Vancouver, Canada form the empirical basis for this study. The chief purpose of the study was to ascertain the nature and extent of the role played by housing and home in the ongoing maintenance of ontological security and the construction of self-identity for residents of the two case-study neighbourhoods. The main theoretical guide for this research is Giddens’ theory of modernity and self-identity (Giddens 1991), with particular emphasis on two key concepts: a) ‘ontological security’, which Giddens argues is the chief underpinning of human consciousness through which everyday, routinized experience in late modernity must be understood; and b) ‘self-identity’, which Giddens argues becomes a ‘reflexive project’ in late modernity, ordered by ‘narratives of the self’. The notion of ontological security has been used to explain important functions of the home in several previous studies of housing (Saunders 1984; 1989; 1990; Nettleton & Burrows 1998; Hiscock, et al. 2001; Dupuis & Thorns 1998) and this paper complements previous efforts. The following sections describe the background and rationale for the study, the theoretical framework used to guide the analysis of housing in the social production of health, the methodology employed and the results from the qualitative analysis.

Background and rationale:
Previous research in housing studies has been concerned with the benefits of home ownership, and one perspective has identified ‘ontological security’ as one of the beneficial elements of owner-occupancy (Saunders 1990). The benefits of the home for ontological security are probably not reducible to home ownership, however, but may have to do with security of tenure, meaningful investment in the home and its functioning as a cornerstone of routinized daily activity. These concerns are reflected in Anthony Giddens’s theoretical project to explain self and identity in late modernity (1991). Of particular relevance are Giddens’s interests in self and society, and most notably the related concepts of ontological security and existential
anxiety. Ontological security is, quite literally, ‘security of being’ or, “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments” (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). According to Giddens, the conduct of routinized, everyday activity plays an important function for human beings in ‘answering’ existential questions on an ongoing basis and in avoiding ‘existential anxiety’ and maintaining a sense of ontological security. Existential questions, in turn, are “queries about basic dimensions of human existence, in respect of human life as well as the material world that people ‘answer’ in the course of the routinized activity of their day-to-day conduct” (Giddens 1991, p.243). In ‘answering’ existential questions through routine activity, the individual forestalls ‘existential anxiety’.

According to Giddens (1991), “[A]nxiety has to be understood in relation to the overall security system the individual develops, rather than only as a situationally specific phenomenon connected to particular risks and dangers”, and as such “anxiety is a generalised state of the emotions of the individual” (1991, p.43). Existential anxiety, in other words, must be understood as a phenomenon of chronicity - a chronic, ongoing inability to generate a stable security system. Furthermore, “[S]ince anxiety, trust and everyday routines of social interaction are so closely bound up with one another, we can readily understand the rituals of day-to-day life as coping mechanisms” (1991, p.46). Arguably, a stable home serves as a medium for the development of ontological security by assisting people in ‘answering’ existential questions in the course of their daily activity (Saunders 1989; 1990; Dupuis and Thorns 1998).

In this paper, the linked theoretical concepts of ontological security, existential anxiety, self-identity and the narrative project of the self are investigated for their relationships with the lived experience of housing and home. The importance of these questions follows from questions raised about previous work on ontological security and the home (e.g., Saunders 1990; Hiscock, et al. 2001), and also from the more general dearth of research on meanings of home and pathways between housing experiences, the meanings ascribed to them and person fulfillment and identity (Clapham 2005).
Study design and methods:

Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted over a 12-month period with residents of two Vancouver case study neighbourhoods, 8 in each neighbourhood. Several strategies were used to recruit informants to participate in depth interviews. In the first instance, sixty names were randomly selected from local telephone directories and letters were sent to these households inviting them to participate in the study. The letter introduced the study as a study of ‘housing and quality of life in Vancouver neighbourhoods’, and explained that the interview would be taped, and then transcribed, but that all information provided would be kept strictly confidential, and that the results of the study would be reported in ways that guaranteed their anonymity. They were asked to telephone the investigator to arrange a time for an interview if interested. This strategy yielded six interviews. The publication of a short column publicizing the study in two local semi-weekly newspapers that are delivered free of charge to East Vancouver households resulted in the recruitment of an additional seven informants. Potential informants who responded to the newspaper ads were sent a letter so as to gain informed consent for the interview. The remaining three informants were recruited by snowball sampling from earlier informants and the investigator’s own contacts.

Sample description

In the end, a diverse set of informants, as assessed by a number of criteria, were recruited for the qualitative depth interviews, as shown in Table I. Interviews were conducted with five men, seven women, and four couples. Seven persons interviewed were single, implying that they did not have a live-in partner. Four of the households interviewed had children at home. The group of informants was relatively homogeneous in terms of education - all but three had some post-secondary education and most had completed a university degree. A relatively wide age range was achieved (age is the age of the primary contact - the person who called to make the interview or to whom the interviewer was referred): four were aged roughly from 18-30, eight from 30-50, three from 50-65, and only one was aged 65 or older. Four informants lived in apartments, and eight in houses that were single-family dwellings. The remainder were people who owned what were originally constructed as single-family dwellings, but had been modified to add a secondary
Eight of the informants owned their dwelling, while four were owners of at least one dwelling and landlords for at least one dwelling. Finally, some ethno-cultural diversity was achieved in the sample: three informants self-identified a non-Western cultural heritage. Two of these were second-generation immigrants, and one was an immigrant himself.

Table I. Sample Characteristics of Interview Informants: Sunset and Mount Pleasant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mount Pleasant (n=8)</th>
<th>Sunset (n=8)</th>
<th>Total (n=16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>males</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>females</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couples</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. with children at home</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some secondary education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age 18 - 30 (primary contact)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age 30 - 50 (primary contact)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age 50 - 65 (primary contact)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age 65+</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>apartment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>own / landlord</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-Western ethnicity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview process:

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion using an interview schedule of questions and topics to be addressed, although not necessarily in the order of the schedule. Italicized text on the interview schedule was included to remind the investigator of the theoretical construct being addressed by the question. Attempts were made to conduct the interviews in a historico-biographical context, by encouraging informants to compare their present home with past homes, and to project what attributes a future home would have to possess in order to enhance their quality of life. This approach is consistent with Horowitz and Tognoli’s (1982) recommendation of the use of ‘housing histories’ in research, and resonates strongly with the emphasis put in this research on locating housing situations within the context of an individual’s reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991).

The interview topic / question list appears in Table II. (QZ) Not all questions were used nor were questions necessarily asked verbatim. The interview guide served as a list of desired topics for the interviewer to cover, and they were articulated as questions so as to provide a suggested wording for the interviewer to introduce a topic. Interview topics were selected to represent relevant themes from the literature on ontological security, self-identity and housing (e.g., housing tenure, pride in home, etc.) as well as to represent dimensions of housing and neighbourhood life relevant to most householders (e.g., crime and safety and civic participation).

Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were taped and transcribed for analysis. Informants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Analysis was conducted by reading the interviews several times, and comparing passages to the theoretical constructs that guide the research. Passages illustrative (in either a consistent or contradictory way) were pasted into files for eight initial themes, and then those themes were further reduced into three major themes, which are reported upon here. At each stage of data reduction, emergent themes were constructed by triangulating answers from multiple respondents. This text was used to develop a narrative that reflects the diversity of opinion and experience.
Results

Three key themes emerged from the data, two of them were partly reflections of the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the questions posed to informants to interrogate these issues. The first two themes, emerging partly from the theory informing the study were: housing, security and control and housing, identity and life projects, while the third, unanticipated theme is titled racialized discourse of neighbourliness.

Specifically, under the issue of control, the interviews showed that tenure distinctions, neighbourhood social relations, and security issues, including ontological security, were negotiated through individuals' relationships to their homes and neighbourhoods. Similarly, individuals used their relationship to their homes and neighbourhoods, to varying degrees, as a vehicle for negotiating their self-identity. One of the identifiable issues this negotiation hinged on for some was tenure distinctions. Finally, individuals were asked at the end of the interview if they thought issues related to their housing were related to their health and well-being. There was some evidence of a generalized sense of well-being associated with domestic circumstances for some of the informants, but the significance of the link is difficult to assess.

Housing, security, and control:

Past research has shown that the domestic milieu is important for its role as one of the relatively few spaces in people’s everyday lives over which they exercise (near complete) control. The home is one of the only spaces in our culture for exclusive use of the owners or tenants, and notions of what privacy and control mean are in fact deeply tied up in our experience of our homes. The controlled environment provided by the home serves as an important base for life for many people, to the point of being taken for granted often. But if this controlled environment is interrupted, it can cause strain, as illustrated by Dan’s experiences. He is a single man in his early thirties who has had a number of experiences with rental housing that was unstable for different reasons, including repeated burglaries, dampness and heating problems, and unreliable roommates, until he moved to his present location. His frustration is evident when he says,

D: It’s so simplistic, I want to live somewhere, I want to come home and I don’t want, like I said about my bed [his bed was mouldy due to dampness], I don’t want to have to worry about my bed, I just want to sleep
on my bed. I don’t want to have to worry about my living spaces, I just want to live there. Sure if you have microwaves, dishwashers, washer and dryers, those are all fun. They are nice amenities, well the washer and dryer especially but even if this place here didn’t have the garbarator and didn’t have the washer and dryer, I would have moved in knowing that there is a fridge and a stove and that is what I have got and I’m happy with that. I don’t have to worry about it. That’s just what I have. But if the fridge doesn’t work and then you have to fight to get it to work, I just want to come home and know that it’s there and have it work and I don’t want it to be an issue in my life. [Dan - MP]

He adds that,

D: It’s a hassle fighting for just what you don’t think you should have to fight for in your living conditions. It’s just a drag. [Dan - MP]

So not only are people inclined to take their living environments for granted, they expect to be able to do so, but living in marginal rental housing may be a barrier to that. A contrast is provided by Cindi, a mid-thirties single woman who owns, with a sibling, a house with two self-contained apartments in Mount Pleasant. They bought the house with money from an inheritance, and they each occupy one of the suites. When asked if her housing provided her with a sense of security and stability, she was emphatic:

C: I mean incredibly. Really I can’t state that strongly enough. It really has been a life saver in the last 7-1/2 years to have this base.

I: I’m interested in you saying that. Would you mind talking a little bit more about that? You say a life saver.

C: Well just having a place that, let’s say in the past 7 years I have had a couple of really hard times where I have haven’t been working and just going through some very difficult things and it’s been great to have a place that’s mine. I don’t again have to worry about the unpredictable things. The house isn’t going to be sold out from underneath me. I’m not going to have to move in the middle of some difficult time in my life. Basically it has given me a real stability to deal with things in my life without, shelter is the biggest stressors, and that has been mercifully a minimal concern for me for this period of time. I know that I have this place. I have often thought that if things, another security thing with the
house for me is that I know I can always take on a roommate if I got stuck financially or even move out and rent this place out and live somewhere cheaper. So in that way it's a real psychologically and actually physically it's been an incredible stable thing for me. [Cindi - MP]

Cindi’s other comments suggested she was aware of the stability her dwelling and location provided her, but this shows the control she derived from owning her house, not only in terms of the house itself, but in terms of its potential as a resource for her financial well-being and her life more generally. Tenure distinctions emerged as important control issues in many of the interviews, for instance, in Robert and Denise’s case. They are a late thirties couple who live in a rented two-bedroom apartment in a walk-up in Mount Pleasant.

When asked about the advantages that they could see about owning a home, Denise replied,

D: Building equity. Well then you would know that you had somewhere to live if you actually got to pay the damn thing off. You would know that you had somewhere to live because eventually we are going to be old and it would be nice to know that you had somewhere to live that you owned it. Even if the neighbourhood goes to shit you can go to a place and own it. It would make me feel safer in terms of I wasn’t going to be a little old lady and living somewhere where I hated because I couldn’t afford to live someplace else. I would paint the walls different colours. The thing is it’s not likely, we want to live in Vancouver, we’re city kids. Who knows. [Robert and Denise - MP]

Denise’s thoughts illustrate a couple of key points for this research, beyond the obvious control she thinks owning would give her in life. She expresses the desire for that control, however, as an attempt to ‘colonize the future’, in Giddens’ (1991) terms, and this is deeply interwoven with her housing. Stable, owner-occupied housing, in Denise’s opinion, would provide an opportunity to colonize the future more successfully, and would mean a greater sense of ontological security. But the temporariness and tenure of her housing also have a cost for her in terms of the investment she is willing to make in modifying it more to her liking (this despite the fact that they had been living in this apartment for six years at the time of their interview).

This temporariness occurs as a loss for Richard and Janice, a late twenties couple who rent a relatively run-down house in Mount Pleasant, on a property that the owner has repeatedly attempted to get zoned for condominium development (he owns adjacent properties as well). A home for them is an
important surface for the inscription of their individual and collective identities, something that is covered in more detail in the following section. In Richard and Janice’s case, the temporariness of their housing is partly voluntary, as at the time of their interview they were about to move out of the province so Richard could do a Master’s degree, but the sense of thwarted intention is evident nevertheless:

I: So when you think about your home and your neighbourhood are these sources of stability and security in your life?

J: I would like it to be more so. I would ideally like to have my house that was my house and I had a real investment in the time and energy of being there. In our social circumstance and the fact that we are still so transient, so no.

R: And knowing that you have to fork out a big chunk of your pay cheque every month doesn’t lend me a real sense of security. But the fact that I have a home and for me the workshop, the worst case scenario I could probably build anything I need to make my life function properly so knowing that I have a space to do that is a real sense of security for me. [Richard and Janice - MP]

Also evident in Richard’s comments is a need to colonize the future, in terms of meeting his needs. It is expressed in a way that is similar to Cindi and Denise’s comments above: if unspecified but difficult circumstances befall me, I’ve got something I can count on, some kind of resources, and/or a contingency plan.

Richard’s comments also draw attention to the issue of housing affordability. Clearly an individual’s disposable income plays a part in the extent to which he or she is able to realize aspirations and goals, as the cost of housing is usually the single largest item in most household budgets. Most informants demonstrated a strong awareness of affordability issues, especially for their own household, and many demonstrated well-developed strategies to manipulate their resources to greatest advantage, and made very conscious trade-offs of housing location, space, and quality of housing against cost. Dianne is a single woman of about forty who owns an entire house on a major street in Mount Pleasant. The house has an ‘in-law’ suite which she rents to a tenant. She originally bought the house with a friend, but later bought the friend out, which she says really stretched her resources. She bridges the gap with the income she receives for caring for teenage foster
children. She is able to manage these expenses and still travel periodically, without much psychological strain she says:

D: I guess affordability for me is all relative. Yeah I make decent money and my mortgage is affordable for me and like I said before the travel.

I: So it’s not an enormous source of strain or stress?

D: Well when it is stressful I kind of put things into perspective. Like I’m getting stressed out because my mortgage is a lot and I’m thinking ‘I have a mortgage’. That’s amazing that I have a mortgage. So I think I’m really good at recognizing at how lucky I am to have the opportunity to pay a mortgage. So when I start to get stressed out about things like that I start to think about the things that are really important. All in all just because it’s going to be a little tight this month ... I’m really good at ‘if I don’t have the money I don’t have the money’. But if I have the money I spend it and I spend it on stuff that I want to do. I went golfing for a week in Arizona this year and New Orleans Jazz Fest and New York for the Picasso exhibit. I live a pretty good life. [Dianne -MP]

Clearly Dianne has skillfully balanced her resources, constraints, and burdens with respect to the role housing affordability has in her life, both materially and meaningfully. In other words, she has coping skills that allow her to manage her resources in a way that lets her indulge in many of her pastimes, and emotionally negotiates her circumstances in a very deliberate and apparently successful manner that allows her to maintain a sense of ontological security.

For Pam, a mid-thirties single mother of one small child, who works out of her home and rents a one-bedroom basement apartment, the tradeoffs were very explicit within the constraints of her budget, and the time she had to find housing:

P: Well it doesn’t cost too much to rent and it has a nice yard which was needed because I have a son. Yeah from what I was able, when I started looking for a place, you know it just seemed to be what I could get for the money that I could afford. So that’s why I took this place and besides I was running out of time. [Pam - MP]
The yard is clearly an important aspect to the amenities her current housing provides, and she negotiates the space shortfall, and other shortcomings, with reference to the tight constraints she was under at the time she found the apartment:

P: Well I like the yard ... When I saw this place it had a lot of running room for [son] and it had good storage, the laundry room had a lot of storage space and the cupboards, the kitchen was an actual kitchen with more than 2 cupboards. From what I had looked at it seemed to be what I could get. Ideally I would have wanted 2 bedrooms but I just couldn’t afford it. [Pam - MP]

Not surprisingly, most informants presented their situations in a way which suggested they had successfully negotiated the various trade-offs they were making in their housing. In some ways this is unsurprising, because it would difficult to maintain a home that one truly cannot afford for very long, both financially and emotionally. That said, the deals struck with oneself from such negotiations can be fragile and subject to fracture.

Jen, a married, mid-thirties woman with a small infant, has been renting a two-bedroom house with a finished basement in Sunset for about $1,000.00 per month for six years. She recalls her experiences while she was younger and still single, illustrates the potential psychological burden of unaffordable housing:

J: At first when there was 3 of us [Jen and two roommates], I was paying $160 something for rent and it was comparable I guess. I think it was $500 or $600 down in Gastown, divided by 2 it’s not too bad. That I can see that’s fine. Oh I can come up with that no problem. But nowadays, again my income is such that sometimes I might make $500/month or $800 or $1500/month. So the idea of having to live again on my own in a bachelor apartment or something, I don’t know how much they are going for, but I’m sure they are more than $300/month by now. They might even be double that. They might be $600. Like if my income is not very stable that can be stressful. If you are actually having to pay more for rent then what you think you can afford, if you are out of work for a month then that can be a little bit frustrating. [Jen - SUN]
There were informants interviewed, however, for whom affordability was not much of an issue. Mike, for instance, a married, early retiree in his early sixties, with no children at home, has owned the same house in Sunset for over 25 years. He had the following to say about affordability:

M: No. That has nothing to do with it what so ever. I can’t speak for others but for myself no. The first thing I did do was pay down my mortgage. [Mike -SUN]

But where affordability was a recurrent theme, especially for younger informants, was in terms of their housing aspirations for the future. Jen and her partner would like to buy a house, but she is aware, and disheartened by, the unaffordability of such a proposition:

J: So that’s where we were thinking about, okay well maybe we can start thinking about buying something but every time [my partner] brings it up I get, I say how can we even dream of affording a house. It’s like $300,000. We haven’t really even gone out to look but you know people point it out to us that you know that house over there went for $400,000, the one down the street that’s sort of smaller than ours, well about the same size as ours, that went for over $400,000. And I’m saying ‘What?, Around this neighbourhood? You have to be kidding!’ So even though my husband has a fairly stable job, like you can’t depend on just one person nowadays to bring in enough money to pay the mortgage and all the other things that go around with running a house and raising a child. So I do work. I work out of the home but that is part-time. You can’t even think about my income contributing a lot to it. It contributes to expenses and what not but not a lot to thinking we could have a mortgage and that. I don’t know. I think it’s very sad. [Jen - MP]

For many of the informants, part of the way they colonized the future was constructed around the housing type and tenure, and even the kind of neighbourhood in which they would be living. Affordability emerged as the most important barrier to realizing their housing aspirations that informants could see, and more importantly, many expressed a sense of resignation and hopelessness about the outlook on housing affordability. This sense of hopelessness is reflected when Denise (above) says “who knows”, and when Jen, at the end of the previous quote, says “I don’t know.”
At the other extreme, however, are Brock and Chris, whose housing situation, as they described it, was extremely stable, and really posed very few problems. They are a late forties couple with a pre-teen child living in Sunset. Their house was purchased from Chris’s father, and they also own another house that they rent out. Despite some shortcomings such as a minor lack of space and only one bathroom, they responded to questions about control, affordability, and the workability of their housing in a nonchalant, matter-of-fact way:

C: Well it’s not a big stress in our lives to deal with financially, or up keep, or anything like that so in that regard it’s definitely a positive for us. It’s a place where we can live happily and without having to worry about a lot of problems. [Brock and Chris - SUN]

C: It really is sort of a refuge. I always feel good coming home to this house and this area. We have a big hedge around it and kind of being closed space kind of gives us a lot of privacy and it’s a nice place to live. We enjoy it a lot actually. [Brock and Chris - SUN]

Their situation also permitted them a wide range of options in the future, which they were in fact planning to exercise in the future, as they revealed that they intended to move to a small town on the Sunshine Coast region north of greater Vancouver along the Pacific Coast.

Also evident in Jen’s comments (above), and an element of environmental control mentioned by many respondents, is a concern with the kind of neighbourhood she lives in. In particular, some of the most important issues to emerge were concerned with neighbourhood crime and deviance, including burglaries and thefts, vandalism, violence, prostitution, and drug activity, although different issues were more prevalent in one or the other neighbourhood. These were a clear threat to the control people exercised in their lives, and the degree of control they experienced in their home environments. When Mike, the early retiree from Sunset, was asked if he had any fears about crime in his neighbourhood, he replied,

M: No. I take precautions. We have to have bars on our windows. We have to live in a siege mentality. We have to live in a situation where you are afraid to go out and if you do go out look around and make sure that nobody is watching you. That’s what’s changed and this supposedly in a civilized country. [Mike - SUN]
Mike’s opinions about crime and its impact, are obviously expressed in very strong terms, and it is worth noting that he told the interviewer he was very active in conservative politics, and that he appeared to treat the interview as an opportunity to publicize his views. Strongly worded as they may be, it is likely that his opinions and experiences probably resonate with many people.

Other informants expressed their concerns in a more under-stated fashion and coped with their concerns differently. Pam, for instance, the single mother living in the basement apartment in Mount Pleasant, adopted a somewhat fatalistic approach:

I: Are you concerned about crime?

P: I try not to be. I usually really don’t give it a second thought. I have a belief that if you live in fear something is bound to happen. I just refuse to live that way. I refuse to live in fear. I guess I’ll deal with it if something happens. [Pam - MP]

Margaret, an elderly, well-educated woman in Sunset who owned her house, had negotiated away the threat in a similar fashion:

M: I have had two break-ins.

I: So it still feels like a secure and safe neighbourhood to you and you have no worries about those sorts of things?

M: Oh yeah. Like I don’t worry, like people who are breaking in they are not going to break-in while you are here ordinarily. If you are not here they sort of come in. If you are here they won’t come in.

[Margaret -SUN]

Finally, Brent, an early-twenties single man living in a Mount Pleasant house with his extended family, negotiated away concerns about crime in ironic fashion:

B: How the neighbourhood occurs to me, everybody pretty much keeps to themselves. There is the odd crime but nothing too horrible. We have taken to putting in an alarm and metal bars over some of the windows. Other than that it seems to be pretty good. [Brent - MP]
Other informants adopted action-focused coping strategies, like joining or initiating a block watch program, or engaging in some form of collective resistance to crime with their neighbours. Cindi [MP], Jen [SUN], and Dianne [MP] all reported some participation in block-watch programs. The most striking example was seen in Greg and Anne’s case. They were a well-educated, mid-forties couple with no children at home who own a house in Mount Pleasant with three separate suites in it. They live in one of the suites and rent out the others. They have taken leadership roles in active resistance on a number of issues concerning their neighbourhood, but the most striking was their action around street prostitution that had begun nearby:

A: the street prostitution thing started one year about January when suddenly 30 street prostitutes showed up in this neighbourhood and were working about a 4 block part of this section to [#th] avenue. By June it had become a stroll and we were counting 250-300 cars/hour going by on [#th] avenue and we didn’t like that. They would go down that way, up to [street] and up around. It was just unbelievable.

G: There would be like 3, 4, 5 girls on a corner.

A: Yeah and in a residential area. So we had a meeting of about 4 or 5 of us across the back lane, neighbors that formed this block watch thing and said what are we going to do about this. And then after the meeting we walked up to the corner of [X and Y streets]... and there was a woman standing over her bicycle with a note pad taking, writing down what looked like names of license plates of these cars that went by. We stopped and said ‘what are you doing?’ She said ‘I have just about had it with this street prostitution and I’m just sitting here writing down license plate numbers’. So we pulled over and stood out there on the corner with her and pretty soon someone else came out and so on. So we had about 4-5 people there and the girls got real nervous. They sat across the other way and eyed us and the next night we went out again and there was like 20 people there from this neighbourhood.

And the next night there was about 30. And it got up to like 40-50 people.

G: It’s incredible. People were so fed up and felt so powerless and had no idea what to do. That just anything. Anything. It was quite amazing.
A: Yeah it was. It was really a classic example of sort of taking back the community. And we just happened to have a couple of people who were able and willing to step forward and coordinate a few things.

The group’s activities included a public meeting with several city and provincial officials, including the local member of the provincial legislature, the mayor, the chief of police and others. Although the neighbourhood activism didn’t eliminate the problem, it did reduce it, and Greg and Anne commented on how the threat to security came not only from the prostitution and drug activities themselves, but also from their impact on neighbourhood social relations. According them:

G: Left alone it would have destroyed the neighbourhood. People were afraid to go on the street.

A: Nobody was talking to each other.

G: No. Everybody was walking around with their heads down. You could just feel the neighbourhood was just in a catatonic state when the pimps were around and all the heavy looking guys. [Greg and Anne - MP]

Greg and Anne demonstrate an obvious confidence and facility in their ability to shape their environment, and clearly had an expectation and desire that their neighbourhood provide them with some degree of stability, control, and predictability, which are fundamental to ontological security. Cindi, on another issue, attempted to organized people in her neighbourhood but in her case this was not a resounding success. She notes, however, a similar condition of neighbourhood social relations that Greg and Anne do (and they don’t live close to one another) - a disturbing sense of estrangement from one’s neighbours:

C: Yeah but the thing is I started a block watch about 3 years ago after I was broken into in the middle of the day.... But the thing is that, and this is something that I was just talking to somebody this morning, that, and this isn’t particularly my neighbourhood but, I have been here 7-1/2 years and I say hi to my neighbours. It’s not exceptionally friendly. I don’t think it’s anything different from anywhere else in Vancouver but, like my neighbour on this side never even wanted to give me her number to be on the block watch list. Things like that. We’ve been neighbors for 7-1/2 years. [Cindi - MP]
In Greg and Anne’s case the lack of interaction was the product of the perception of crime, but organizing to resist crime had the unintended consequence of improving interactions. In Cindi’s case, paradoxically, the lack of neighbourliness, which may have been motivated by fears of crime, may also reproduce the neighbourhood’s vulnerability to it. Nevertheless, it is clear that the informants in this study desire a certain degree of predictability and stability not only within their dwelling, but also in their neighbourhood.

As is evident from Cindi’s comments and the experience of other informants who participated in block-watches, one way people think they can increase their sense of security, stability, and predictability in their neighbourhood social environment is through reciprocal neighbourly relations and a sort of collective surveillance of a common territory.

**Housing and identity**

Housing is widely acknowledged as an important site for the construction of social meanings about individuals’ lives, and one of the principal means by which this takes place is the intertwining of people’s housing with their reflexive project of the self-and self-identity. Previous research (Dunn & Hayes 2000; Dunn 2002) shows that people who have a sense of attachment and meaningful investment with their home had better health status. Such a link can be explained with reference to the ontological security provided by the ability to maintain a coherent, dignified, and meaningful sense of self-identity. The interviews reported here also found such a link for some informants, but not for others. For many the link between housing, identity, and ontological security was negotiated principally through tenure distinctions, and this is highlighted in the following paragraphs.

The intertwining of self-identity and housing, although present for many informants (and absent for some), was constructed in unique ways for each individual. For Cindi, her identity was reflected in her personal effects within the home, and their arrangement, something that is well-documented in the meaning of home literature (e.g., Marcus 1995):

I: ... you said that you felt fortunate and privileged to have this home, do you see this dwelling and home as an accurate reflection of who you are?
That’s a great question too. It’s something that I have been thinking about a lot lately. I think so. I think if someone walks into this home they would get a pretty good sense, yeah, I think just even looking around in the kitchen, I think you could garner a lot of information about me without me saying anything. I mean the things that I have up and the images are things that are really me and mean a lot to me. Whether it is just stuff that I have on the refrigerator or things that I have over the fireplace or my CD collection. Yeah I feel like there is definitely a close connection to my home and myself. [Cindi - MP]

For others, the home was a malleable medium for expressing their identity, through renovations, decoration, etc., and once transformed, it communicated something to them about themselves. This was the case for Richard, who was renting a dilapidated house and had done a considerable amount of work on it. When asked if he was proud to live where he did, he replied,

R: See for me the sense of pride that I grew up with was in your place. So you could put me in a shit hole and I would make it home. The back yard is a good example. It was totally overgrown, swampy and things like that. I put in a fence that didn’t cost us anything, it was out of pallets. We made our own garden and salvaged concrete to make a little patio and things like that so I’m more proud about the space that I create than the location of that space. [Richard & Janice - MP]

In these remarks, Richard distinguishes between his dwelling and its immediate social environment in the interwoven construction of identity and meaning of home. For Greg, who had done even more work on his and Anne’s home, including building rental suites, the meaning he attributed to the work he did was interwoven with his own identity as a proud, dignified craftsperson, and the life history of the house itself:

I: So do you think this house or this dwelling is an accurate reflection of your life?

G: My pride in this place is reflected in the fact that it has come a long way. It was really pretty bummed out when we first got it and it has come a long way. I have a certain amount of pride in that but it’s no more than someone who has other kind of crafts work and is proud of the furniture they built or the cabinet they built and just had installed. It made a difference, it definitely made it more livable. The
bathroom was hideous when we first got here. I think it’s a really great place to live and I think we have done a great job. [Greg and Anne - MP]

For others, the link between their home and identity was not a positive one. Julie, for example, expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the home that she and her husband had chosen, and that her father had mortgaged, especially its immediate social environment:

I: ... are you proud to live where you do now?

J: Am I proud, no. I’m kind of embarrassed. Where do you live, oh South East Van instead of East Vancouver. Or it depends on who I’m talking to I’ll even say oh by the Blue Boy. The Blue Boy is the hotel just down the alley and it had a reputation, it used to be a strip joint and a bar and so it kind of has that connotation as being a real seedy place. So it depends on who I’m speaking to. [Julie - SUN]

Pam’s experience was similar to Julie’s, but she seemed less disturbed by it, perhaps because she was generally more content with her experience of her environment:

I: Are you proud to live where you do?

P: I mean I can’t say as I’m... I’m content. I can’t say that I’m proud to live where I do because I would like to have a nicer place. There is a real stigma in Vancouver with East versus West. It’s just like automatic. You tell someone you live in the East End and it’s like you are living in hell on earth. [Pam - MP]

Despite somewhat divergent experiences for these people, the question about whether they were proud of where they lived clearly resonated with them. But that wasn’t the case for all of the informants. Dan, from Mount Pleasant, for instance, had a very pragmatic approach to his housing. As his remarks above suggested, he just wanted to have his housing looked after, and there for him when he needed it, so he could live his life. When asked if he was proud to live where he does, he replied,

A: I don’t know if pride or shame is really something that applies. I like it. I don’t think I would say that I’m proud to live in Mount Pleasant. I mean sometimes a little bit because people run it down. They
say oh how could you it’s so dangerous. It’s like oh come off it, it’s really not. So sometimes yeah I
guess that is there to some degree. I can see past the reputation it has. But no for the most part I like it,
it’s where I live and pride or shame is just in a different world, it really doesn’t apply that much. [Dan -
MP]

It’s interesting to note that although he did not attribute much importance to Mount Pleasant’s reputation for
his own quality of life, at the time of the interview he had served one month’s notice to his landlord of his
intention to move - to Kitsilano, a wealthier, more trendy neighbourhood with more amenities, including
beaches, in order to be closer to where most of his friends lived. That’s not to say that he was being
disingenuous, but rather to emphasize that his relationship with housing was indeed a pragmatic one, and not
a highly emotional one.

Dan’s relationship to his home stands in stark contrast to many other of the informants, however,
especially those who owned their homes. Dianne, from Mount Pleasant, repeatedly use the term ‘invested’ to
describe her relationship to her home, but her intention was to imply much more than a monetary
relationship to housing:
I: You have said many times that you are invested and I assume that you mean somewhat emotionally
invested?
D: Oh totally emotionally invested.
I: But also it’s important to you as a financial investment too?
D: Yeah. I would almost say more emotionally than financially. My family helped me to buy my
roommate out because we had a two-year commitment and she wanted to sell the house. I couldn’t.
Even though I was going to make money on my investment I couldn’t give up the house.
I: Why is that, can you give me some ideas as to why you couldn’t give it up?
D: I don’t think it is something that you can put into words. It’s that feeling. It’s that sense of home. This
was a place that I walked into and it was a mess when we got it. It was filthy. The woman who had
lived here had lived here for 11 years and was a horrendous cigarette and pot smoker so the walls were
just covered. But I walked in and something hit me in my core. This is it. It was really cool. [Dianne
- MP]

Cindi, also from Mount Pleasant, had a similar experience, and her intimate relationship to her home was also
imbued with meanings about ownership. While discussing her motives for buying a house, the conversation
went in the following way:

I: .... in the back of your mind, when you think of home ownership, is investment part of it?

C: For me it never was at all because I loved my home. It’s like a rock in the middle of life. I have never
thought of it as a financial thing. It’s a bit of security in that I own my own home and that’s great but I
have actually been thinking a lot of travelling or moving somewhere else. I would still like to keep the
house but I would find somebody who could rent it for maybe a year or something like that. It would
have to be pretty extenuating circumstances for me to sell it and hopefully I’ll be able to keep it
financially. [Cindi - MP]

Cindi’s remarks also imply that she thought home ownership to be something of a rewarding and valuable
accomplishment for her, something that was part of her self-identity. Brent, the young man from Mount
Pleasant who was living with his extended family, expounded on why he would like to own his own home:

B: … it does really appeal to me. Just to have ownership of something is more appealing than having to
make payments for it.

I: Okay, in what respect?

B: In that it’s mine. This is my place versus paying rent and you know that.

I: So is it like an investment consideration?

B: No. Not an investment consideration at all.

I: So ownership is less an investment thing than a sense of you can do what you want?

B: I think it would be a sense of accomplishment. I own my own place. You made it kind of thing.

[Brent - MP]

But again, in stark contrast to the intimate relationship between informants and their current and future
homes, Preston had a rather different take. A semi-retired real estate agent from Sunset who immigrated
from Asia in the 1950s, he lives in a very high-priced area, with large, new homes, many of which are valued at over one million dollars. He owns such a home, a new 4,000 square foot dwelling, but at the time of the interview it had only been built for a few years. Prior to that, he lived on the same property in a much smaller, older house for over twenty years, where he raised his family, but he saved up to build his custom dream house. One would think, therefore, that he had invested it with a great deal of meaning, and that he would have some attachment to it, but that was not the case:

I: Do you think there would be anything that would make it difficult for you to move from your present house?
P: Not difficult.

I: So even though you spent a lot of time and effort and money into building your dream home?
P: Oh no problem.

I: You would have no problem with leaving it behind?
P: No problem. I would just change the post office mail.

I: But you wouldn’t miss the house?
P: No problem. I’m an easy man.

I: You are not attached to the house, well that’s good.
P: I have a lot of pictures of my house. I took a lot of pictures. [Preston -SUN]

The only thing that Preston said would be difficult about moving from his dream house was selling the house and getting a good price. He said it’s difficult to sell houses over one million dollars. For him, the part of his identity invested in the dwelling revolved almost solely around making a good return on his investment. (Interestingly, Preston was the only informant who did not invite the interviewer to his home for the interview, he arranged the meeting for a shopping mall near his house).

This section has illustrated that people invest meaning in their homes, and interpret their own lives in terms of their homes, but in vastly different ways, and to varying magnitudes. But if indeed ontological security and self-identity are fundamental dimensions of social being, with implications for the production of
health and well-being over the life course, then the manner in which people construct the intersection of their home and their self-identity does not change the potential effect.

A racialized discourse of neighbourliness

As might be expected from such a semi-structured, inductive research methodology, a number of unanticipated themes emerged from the interviews, and one theme in particular was strong and recurrent. This theme, which is concerned with neighbourhood ethno-cultural diversity and ontological security, manifested quite differently for different informants. Its importance is reflective of the Canadian and Vancouver context in which this research takes place. Since the early 1970s, Canadian immigration policy has changed in focus from prioritizing immigrants from Anglophone and European countries in favour of more immigration from Asia, Africa and to some extent South America. The majority of new immigrants live in one of Canada’s big three metropolitan areas, Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal, and as such, the ethno-cultural character of Vancouver neighbourhoods has changed substantially in the past 20 years. The expression of this growing cultural diversity has even been seen in architectural styles adopted by immigrant home-owners who have renovated their homes, and this has been the source of social conflict periodically (Mitchell, 1993; Li, 1994).

As was described above, especially with reference to Cindi’s comments concerning the relationship between safety and security and relationships with neighbours, one way people think they can increase their sense of security, stability, and predictability in their neighbourhood social environment is through reciprocal neighbourly relations. A number of the informants, however, identified what they believed to be a barrier to greater neighbourliness: language and ethnicity, which was expressed within what could be called a racialized discourse of neighbourliness.

A number of informants expressed a desire for more substantial neighbourly social relations, often with reference to a vague, romanticized ideal. For many, this was expressed along a continuum of a racialized discourse of neighbourliness, with one pole representing an appreciation of the social influence of non-
English speaking people and the inscription of diverse cultures on the landscape, for instance in restaurants and retail establishments. This sentiment is reflected in Denise’s remark about the social environment in Mount Pleasant:

D: And I like the mix of people. I really do like it. The first summer that we lived here one of the, I think a sign had come into our elevator and it read in 3-4 languages. That was cool. [Robert & Denise - MP]

At the other end of the spectrum was a lone informant who expressed an outright discriminatory opinion, attributing many social ills to the influx of immigrants to Vancouver neighbourhoods. Mike, from Sunset, for instance, when asked what he likes about his neighbourhood, replied sardonically, with oblique reference to some highly publicized drive-by shootings that occurred in South Vancouver in 1994, allegedly perpetrated by persons of Indo-Canadian descent:

M: Things that I like is the nice quiet side streets for one. It used to be like that but with drive-by shootings we don’t have quiet side streets anymore. Don’t let me put anything into your mind in an ethnic sense because I might be termed a racist. But dammit see who does it. If you are in a supermarket and somebody runs a shopping basket up the back end of you on your heel turn around and see who did it. If you are standing in a line see who cuts in front of you and shows you no respect. So I’m saying this is empirical evidence there is nothing in it at all, just go by what happens. [Mike - SUN]

In between these polar opposite views appear to be people who would genuinely like to know their neighbours, but are reticent because of language and culture barriers, either real or perceived. Julie, a married woman with three small children lives in a house that her father mortgaged for her and her husband, is herself a second-generation immigrant from the Philippines. She complained of social isolation in her neighbourhood, and expressed a desire to have better neighbourly relations, but in a better neighbourhood. When asked what she thinks gets in the way of more neighbourliness in her area, she replied:

A: Cultures, different class. This is a very heavy duty rental area so you know there are all kinds of people. When we were trying to rent out the basement suite we had, and excuse my terms, welfare people, social services that come in. So you get a lot of that. Different cultures, language barrier. For example,
Halloween, I have couples come by with their kitty, a plastic bag from Super Store. Adults, like they couldn't understand the concept of Halloween. You know, this is for children. But no they are adults and they were just going around getting candy. The joke for me, is that this year oh yeah I had a lot of kids and they are all dressed up as East Indians. They come knock on your door, they wouldn’t be dressed up. Maybe it’s because they are not allowed to I don’t know. There were a few dressed up. So you have quite a melting pot. I guess it’s kind of hard to communicate or have a common bond. Doing things in common. [Julie - SUN]

This seems to point to another paradoxical set of circumstances. Clearly, discriminatory practices have negative impact on the well-being of minority groups, but those of the majority who bemoan the lack of a ‘sense of community’ and attribute the departure from a vaguely romanticized vision of community to the presence of immigrants, ironically, move their neighbourhoods further away from that ideal. It could also be argued that those people who identify with the diversity of their community but do not attempt to overcome the barriers to neighbourliness are guilty of appropriating others’ culture. Whether this is the case or not, it does illustrate people’s inclination to identify with their community, and with their homes, and it is to this topic the analysis turns next: the relationship between housing, home, neighbourhood and self-identity.

**Discussion**

The foregoing results of this qualitative study imply the importance of ontological security, a sense of order, continuity, and stability in the basic dimensions of their daily, lived existence. Although the home is not a fundamental component of that for some of the participants, it clearly is for some, and for still others the significance of their home is even substantial for their reflexive self-identity.

In the depth interviews, therefore, evidence of the likely importance of identity and control as they are manifested in people’s housing and their daily lived existence emerged. Some justification for the usefulness of the concepts of ontological security, and the reflexive project of the self was evident in the interviews, and the importance to housing to these dimensions of social being was also implied by the findings of the interviews.
References:


