Investigating the effects of neighbourhood restructuring on destigmatization practices and health in a Toronto public housing community: An emerging research agenda

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades there has arguably been a renewed interest in addressing the perceived problems with large concentrations of poverty in the cities of Western Europe and the Anglo-American world. One of the major targets for such efforts has been the large concentrations of poverty that are, in a number of cases, the direct result of the manner in which public housing was built in the early post-war era. In Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe the problems of the spatial concentration of marginalized groups in public housing developments is portrayed as a class issue much more so than a racial issue as it is in the United States (perhaps naively so), however, the proposed and attempted solutions, at least on their face, have been targeted at economic issues for adults and educational issues for children.

The main concern that has persisted is that the stark spatial separation of poor households within urban environments sets up the possibility that segregated households are isolated from life-enhancing opportunities such as good quality education and other public services and as well as employment opportunities (Wilson 1987; Mayer and Jencks 1989). The spatial isolation of the urban low-skilled workforce from the areas of cities experiencing growth in low-skilled jobs is well-documented in the ‘spatial mismatch’ literature (e.g., Ihlanfeldt and Sjoquist 1998), but that the spatial segregation and isolation of low-income households can also isolate residents from high-quality public services (e.g., schools, social services, public health services) is also a significant concern. Ultimately, there is good evidence that concentrated poverty can undermine life chances on various measures, including, for example, adult employment outcomes, incarceration rates, welfare dependency, educational outcomes and teen pregnancies (Wilson, 1987; Massey et al. 1991; Bauder 2001).

Because neighbourhoods also provide benefits in terms of identity and belonging (Kearns and Parkinson 2001), the decline severe concentrations of poverty can lead to damaging stigmatization and discrimination of residents living in such neighbourhoods. In 1996, Massey ominously predicted that, “the juxtaposition of geographically concentrated wealth and poverty [in urban areas] will cause an
acute sense of relative deprivation among the poor and heightened fears among the rich, resulting in rising social tension and a growing conflict between haves and have-nots.” (Massey 1996, 395). A similar hypothetical future of Canadian cities has been described by Bunting and Filion (2001).

The antidote to concentrated poverty in a number of public policy initiatives in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia has been to develop policies and programs that introduce ‘social mix’ into existing public housing developments characterized by high levels of concentrated poverty or, in more limited cases (notably the Moving To Opportunity, or MTO, initiative in the United States), to assist residents of public housing developments characterized by concentrated poverty to move to neighbourhoods with much lower concentrations of poverty (i.e., < 10%)( Popkin and Goering, 2010).

Although the efforts to introduce social mix into public housing developments are primarily designed to alter some of the social dynamics of places with high levels of concentrated poverty that are believed magnify the disadvantages of poverty (e.g., by diversifying social networks that may lead to job prospects; by reducing the level of social problems public schools must deal with, etc.), in this paper, we argue that this is also a de-stigmatization strategy, but not necessarily the same kind of de-stigmatization strategy that has been described in the literature previously (Lamont 2009). Specifically, Lamont (2009) describes de-stigmatization strategies as the ways in which ordinary members of stigmatized groups respond to exclusion by challenging stereotypes that feed and justify discriminatory behaviour, and rebutting their inferior status. The focus of this paper is to theorize and develop a research agenda for describing and understanding de-stigmatization strategies at two levels: a) a quasi-state agency’s efforts to de-stigmatize geographically concentrated public housing residents; and b) the everyday de-stigmatization practices and experiences of those residents.

We argue that because initiatives to introduce social mix into public housing developments can do little to directly alter the material conditions of households living in concentrated public housing (i.e., by increasing incomes), the bulk of the efforts are to provide secondary improvements to residents’ quality of life and life chances at the level of places and networks. In other words, social mix initiatives seek to de-stigmatize: 1) the people who live in such places (the public housing residents) and integrate them into social networks that may grant them access to resources that may have knock-on material effects, like access to job-finding networks (Granovetter 1973), and 2) the places where they live, which can be the cause of direct discrimination (e.g., literally discrimination by address) and the cause of attenuated life chances due to endemic crime, poverty, hopelessness, joblessness and more generally class and
racial subordination. Expressed in Lamont’s (2009) terms, socially-mixed redevelopment seeks to increase the porosity of social boundaries, through spatial proximity and network integration. In addition, it seeks to reduce the salience of one of the stigma-bearing attributes of residents – that they live in concentrated public housing (and are marked by this fact), and all of its attendant social meanings associated with various forms of social deviance. Our ability to gauge the ‘success’ of socially-mixed housing in terms of these outcomes, however, depends on 1) an understanding of the effects of mixed-income redevelopment on everyday experiences of stigma and de-stigmatization strategies by affected residents; and 2) our understanding the nature of interaction between dominant (upper-income residents) and subordinate (public housing tenants) residents in the newly built, socially-mixed neighbourhoods, and the perceptions the groups have of one another. These are things that have been difficult to study empirically in the past, in part because of under-examined benchmarks for interaction that have been imposed on the reality in previous research.

In the following section, we provide some background on the state of knowledge of socially-mixed public housing developments and the putative mechanisms by which social mix is presumed to benefit public housing residents (subordinate groups). Then, we describe the main features of an example of socially-mixed public housing redevelopment, Toronto’s Regent Park, and posit some of the ways that social mix and de-stigmatization may play out in that community. Finally, we suggest an empirical strategy for investigating the impacts of social mix to address gaps identified above.

2. Why Social Mix?

Research on the negative aspects of concentrated urban poverty can be traced back to 19th century public health reformers like Edwin Chadwick in the United Kingdom and Rudolf Virchow of Prussia. Both were primarily concerned with the potential for concentrations of poverty and unsanitary conditions to breed disease that could be spread to the upper classes (Porter 1996). In a North American context, the more recent concern has been less about the effect of concentrated urban poverty on infectious disease than it has been about its effects on other social ills: crime, deviance, economic development, social capital, etc. (Gans 1961; Wilson 1990). These concerns have given rise to a succession of slum clearance and urban renewal initiatives over the past century (the original Regent Park was a slum clearance effort), and the most recent manifestation of these is the notion of socially mixed neighbourhoods (Sarkissian 1976; Cole and Goodchild 2001; Gwyther 2009). The notion of social mix has become popular
in current policy in Anglo-American countries such as Australia, the UK, the Netherlands and the United States (Arthurson 2008; Cole and Goodchild 2001; Kleinhans 2004; Joseph 2006). Indeed, the benefits of social mix have even become a plank in urban policy for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 1998; Bradford 2005) and with numerous city governments (e.g., Toronto, Glasgow) and a number of governmental agencies (e.g., HUD, the EU’s ‘Quartiers en Crise’ initiative).

Two recent reviews are instructive for understanding the most important factors driving socially mixed public housing redevelopment efforts seen in the United States (Joseph 2006) and the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Kleinhans 2004). Collectively, these two reviews identify five key knowledge gaps on the impacts of socially mixed public housing redevelopment. Specifically, Joseph (2006) and Kleinhans (2004) argue that there is a dearth of knowledge about the impact of planned social mix in public housing developments on: 1) social networks and ‘social capital’; 2) social control; 3) culture and behaviour / role-modelling; 4) the political economy of place; and 5) residential attitudes towards and experiences of social mix.

Regarding 1), social networks and social capital, according to Joseph (2006) the proponents of socially mixed neighbourhoods assert that “by attracting higher-income residents back to the inner city…” such developments “…can facilitate the re-establishment of effective social networks and social capital for low-income residents” (p.213). This notion draws on seminal ideas such as that of Granovetter (1973), who suggests that broad networks of ‘weak ties’ (or ‘bridging social capital’ in contemporary terms) provide people with access to information and opportunities are more important for upward mobility, especially employment, that is not necessarily available within their networks of close association or ‘strong ties’. The empirical evidence on the strength of weak ties bears this out, showing that social networks are important for employment and that the social networks of low-income individuals are more localized than those of people with higher incomes (Joseph 2006). It is presumed by proponents of socially mixed communities, therefore, that mixed-income neighbourhoods may be able to “build weak ties with affluent neighbors and thereby improve their access to employment networks and other resources” (Joseph 2006, 213). But there is no evidence that these kinds of relations will develop in a short time through planned social mix. Indeed, there is good evidence that as telecommunications improve and people become more mobile, the notion that people can achieve ‘community without propinquity’ (Webber 1963) is increasingly true. At the same time, studies of the impact of the physical environment on social relationships show that “opportunities for contact, proximity to others, and appropriate space in which to interact are key factors that can promote and shape social interactions”
(Joseph 2006, emphasis added). But this kind of evidence is not available in socially mixed contexts, and in fact, there is some evidence to suggest it only happens where there is real or perceived homogeneity among residents. Additionally, there are important questions about the role of space and scale in creating interaction (generally interaction will only happen among people at the building level) – there must be actual sites where people of different social strata interact (Kleinhans 2004).

In terms of the impact of socially mixed communities and social control (2 above), the main argument for this theme “posits that the presence of higher income residents – particularly homeowners – will lead to higher levels of accountability to norms and rules through increased informal social control and thus to increased order and safety for all residents” (Joseph 2006). This kind of social control requires reciprocal relationships among community members and collective surveillance to be successful (e.g., Sampson and Groves 1989). There is evidence that higher-income, residually stable neighbourhoods have lower levels of social disorganization, higher levels of ‘collective efficacy’ and lower crime levels. It is presumed that the more influential neighbourhood residents would be more likely to take action to maintain social control, to the benefit of all residents, however, the evidence of this phenomenon is indirect, and there is no evidence of such actions taking place in any example of planned, socially-mixed housing developments.

One of the more widely espoused theories underlying the benefits of creating socially mixed communities is that it will create a new local culture of acceptable norms of behaviour. In other words, it is believed that “the presence of higher-income residents in mixed-income developments will lead other families to adopt more socially acceptable and constructive behaviour, including seeking regular work, showing respect for property, and abiding by other social norms.” (Joseph 2006). The notion that social mix can lead to conformity to more middle-class norms comes from the controversial research on the “culture of poverty”, a term to which some object, arguing that rather than culturally rooted, such behaviours are adaptations to marginal positions in society (Joseph 2006; see also Lamont and Small 2008). Kleinhans (2004) traces the intellectual roots of role-modelling to Wilson (1990). Regardless of its roots, proponents of social mix appear to believe strongly in the culture and behaviour / role-modelling concept. Interestingly, the research evidence suggests that if role-modelling does occur in socially-mixed social housing developments, it is usually not from adult to adult, but by adults from higher socio-economic strata role-modelling for lower socio-economic status children (Joseph 2006; Kleinhans 2004). Joseph (2006) further argues that role-modelling can be distal, through the act of observing others in the
behaviours, or more proximal, through the provision of advice, guidance, and accountability by adults for children.

According to the political economy of place theme (4 above), the infusion of higher-income residents “will generate new market demand and political pressure to which external political and economic actors are more likely to respond, thereby leading to higher-quality goods and services available to a cross-section of residents in the community” (Joseph 2006). This proposition is related to Kleinhans (2004) emphasis on the reputation of the community with insiders and outsiders; if it is better, than this will affect investment and mobility patterns (higher-income people who move in will stay if the services and the reputation remain high).

Finally, in terms of the fifth theme, residential attitudes towards, and experiences of, social mix, most proponents of social mix are optimistic that interactions will be neighbourly and peaceful, but it is also possible that the infusion of higher-income households will lead to conflict, in the form of “disputes or hostile attitudes between residents” (Kleinhans 2004, 379). According the Kleinhans (2004), the literature suggests that both higher-income and lower-income residents are ambivalent about social mix, depending upon how closely (i.e., geographically) groups live to one another. At the same time, however, Kleinhans (2004) claims that “there is also evidence that social mix is a relatively insignificant factor in neighbourhood satisfaction” (p. 380). Despite all of this, if groups involved have a strongly negative attitude to the others, then it could severely compromise the possibility of success of the mixed-income development.

There is limited evidence of effect for each of these five themes. Studies by Kleit (2005) and Rosenbaum, et al. (1998) investigated patterns of social interaction in mixed-income developments. Both studies found evidence of neighbouring relationships across income levels, but Joseph (2006) cautions that there were specific contextual features that were critical to this finding, including shared social characteristics (ethnicity, language, marital status), links through children, and use of shared public facilities. Apart from these two studies, the evidence suggests that few changes to residents’ social networks occur.

According to Joseph (2006) the evidence is inconclusive about the effect of social mix on social control. Rosenbaum, et al. (1998) found differences in income groups concerning the support for rules, but in a study of eight HOPE VI sites, Buron, et al. (2002) found that perceived levels of social control were the same for residents of all kinds of housing, except for the perception that graffiti in public housing sites
was less than in other kinds of housing. Other factors, such as capable property management, may be more important (Joseph 2006).

There is virtually no evidence of the existence of role-modelling behaviour as a result of the introduction of social mix to public housing developments, nor is there any evidence of the effects of role-modelling should it exist. This may be because, as both Kleinhans (2004) and Joseph (2006) point out, it is almost impossible to measure role-modelling empirically.

The proposition that the infusion of higher-income residents into public housing developments helps to leverage better public and private services and other resources also has little empirical evidence to support it. This too is difficult to measure, although residents’ self-reports may be valuable because arguably the perception (even if it is biased) is important to help maintain stability in the neighbourhood and community support for the mixed-income initiative. Conceptually, it is reasonable to think that market forces would respond to the infusion of higher-income households and attempt to meet their needs, and these same households would wield a high level of political influence over the quality and quantity of services provided, given the participation of public bodies in promoting the concept of socially-mixed communities. That said, it is possible that the introduction of social mix to a neighbourhood could attract more, higher quality services, but one of the cautionary tales of the gentrification literature is that such services are seldom targeted at lower-income individuals, and usually include high-end grocery stores and cafés, and luxury-goods retailers. At the same time, services aimed at traditional residents (e.g., ethnic grocery stores, discount services and retailers) are less viable with a smaller customer base and rising pressure on commercial rents (Smith 1996).

In addition to social interaction patterns, it appears that the only other proposition advanced by Kleinhans (2004) and Joseph (2006) that is empirically measurable is the residents’ (and possibly also outsiders’) perceptions of social mix. Not surprisingly, the evidence suggests that people are generally positive about the concept of social mix, although it may be somewhat dependent on the management of the community (Page and Boughton 1997). Additionally, however, some previous studies have found that conflicts, racism and classism still exist, and for lower-income residents who stay in situ, there are studies which have shown that residents experience feelings of loss for their familiar neighbourhood.

In short, there is a significant knowledge gap in the effects of socially mixed communities on outcomes for marginalized groups. There do appear to be questions concerning: a) social interaction between residents of different social classes and ethno-racial groups; b) the role of context, specific sites for
interaction, and the geographic scale of housing mix; c) perceptions of both higher- and lower-income residents of the positive and negative aspects of socially-mixed redevelopment; and d) the actual changes in experiences of stigma and de-stigmatization practices that take place for residents in communities where mixed income is introduced.

3. Background on Regent Park Redevelopment

Built over 50 years ago, Regent Park is one of the oldest and largest concentrated public housing communities in Canada. The community occupies a 69-acre site just east of the downtown core of Toronto and at the start of redevelopment was home to 7,500 people living in 2,087 social housing units. This social housing development sits within the City of Toronto, the 5th largest urban municipality in North America (after Mexico City, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago) and the continent’s 9th largest metropolitan area.

Initially a slum clearance initiative beginning in the 1940s, Regent Park’s original designers sought to create a “garden city”— a place where buildings sit in park-like settings, street automobile traffic was removed and the community is set apart from surrounding areas. Regent Park, however, has come to be known for its deteriorating buildings, poorly planned public spaces and its concentration of the some of the ills of urban life: poverty, violence, drug use, and poor health and educational outcomes.

Regent Park is extremely racially, ethnically and culturally diverse: more than half of its population are recent immigrants. Over 50% of the Regent Park population is aged 18 and younger (compared to a Toronto-wide average of 30%). The average income for Regent Park residents is approximately half the Toronto average. A majority of families in Regent Park are low-income (72%), compared to the Toronto average of 20%.

Over the next several years, (possibly as long as 12 years), the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) (a non-profit corporation owned by the City of Toronto), that owns and manages Regent Park, will demolish and re-build the entire community in 6 phases. About 70% of the existing rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units will be replaced on the site, and the remainder will be replaced in nearby locations. As a whole, the original site will grow to 5,000 units of mixed income housing, including rent-geared-to-income social housing units, below-market rental units, and privately owned condominiums. In the new
Regent Park, roughly 40% of units will be RGI and the remaining 60% will be owner-occupied or market rentals.

In 2006-07, three buildings in the south-west corner of the site (containing 410 units) were demolished and the residents re-housed to social housing units near the site. This part of the site is known as Phase 1 of the redevelopment. In early 2010, four more buildings will be demolished to allow for new construction, and this is known as Phase 2 of the redevelopment.

Figure 1: Phasing Strategy for Regent Park Redevelopment

4. Place De-Stigmatization in Regent Park

The nature of the physical transformation of Regent Park is important to understand as there is a significant interest in the contemporary literature in architecture and geography on the role of public spaces in the dynamics of recognition of marginalized groups (e.g., Sarkis 1997; Low and Smith 1996). Consequently, in addition to ‘re-balancing’ (as social mix has been called) the social composition in Regent Park, the community will be physically redeveloped, with the destruction of all on-site buildings,
the re-routing of streets through the area, and the introduction of mixed land uses (i.e., commercial, retail and other non-residential land uses). It is hoped that the new design will improve safety, “normalize” the neighbourhood’s physical appearance within the larger urban context, and stimulate vibrant urban diversity, commercial activity and social interaction.

Figure 2: Artist’s Rendering of Completed ‘Socially-Mixed’ Phase 1 of Regent Park

The physical redevelopment plans for Regent Park are based on the design philosophy promoted by “The New Urbanism,” a U.S.-based planning and design movement. The New Urbanism arose in response to Modernist, post-war architecture and planning, and the “sprawl” produced by it. It is hoped that New Urbanist design prescriptions will correct the design flaws of large postwar public housing complexes (Newman and Franck 1982; O’Neill 1999, Rybcynscki 1993). There are three important elements to the physical aspects of the redesign. First, to reduce stigma attached to the appearance of public housing, New Urbanism-guided redevelopments will attempt to make market and public units visually similar (see Figures 3 and 4). Second, common spaces in public housing complexes have been singled out in the literature as “indefensible” sites that encourage crime, and discourage a sense of community ownership (Newman 1972; Jacobs 1961). New Urbanism is a model for re-configuring buildings, streets, and open spaces to distinguish between public and private space, and foster a sense of ownership and safety through “eyes on the street”. Third, critics have noted that the lack of streets in
public housing “superblocks” makes them difficult to navigate, unsafe, and isolating for residents; while setting the area apart from the rest of the city. New Urbanist guidelines promote integration of the urban street grid, with short blocks, bicycle paths, good lighting, and benches. Alleys are used to put vehicle storage behind buildings and create high quality pedestrian environments on streets uninterrupted by driveways and garages. New Urbanism also promotes mixed land uses, so that residents can walk to stores, services, and recreation. In combination, these elements are intended to increase the use of streets by residents and encourage social interaction and community formation (Bohl 2000).

5. Personal De-Stigmatization In Regent Park

Destigmatization at a personal level may be understood through the process of destigmatization practices. According to Lamont (2009), destigmatization practices refer to the ways in which “ordinary members of stigmatized groups respond to exclusion by challenging stereotypes that feed and justify discriminatory behaviour” and rebuking beliefs of their inferior status (p.151). Therefore, performing destigmatization practices requires boundary work, in other words, drawing and defining symbolic boundaries between the groups one does or does not identify with or belong to. Specifically, symbolic boundaries represent the distinctions made by individuals to classify and divide objects, people, practices, time and space (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). They also serve to foster feelings of similarity and group membership. However, when symbolic boundaries are widely accepted and significantly influence social interactions, they can become social boundaries: “objectified forms of social differences” marked by inequitable distribution and access to material and non-material resources (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p.168). Therefore, although destigmatization practices may occur on an individual and personal level, they can translate to larger scale interactions. Conversely, destigmatization practices are influenced by and embedded in macro-contextual factors, such as the socio-economic and political milieu as well as the cultural repertoires or traditional narratives available to people in a particular society (Lamont, 2009; Barreto & Ellemers; 2010). Ultimately, destigmatization practices can be regarded as an interactive process like stigma, which is the very construction it attempts to transform (Barreto & Ellemers, 2010).

Research surrounding stigma and its pernicious effects have emerged from Erving Goffman’s (1963) seminal work, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Here he defined stigma as a
“process of devaluation in which certain individuals – those with physical deformities, mental health and drug issues as well as those ostracised for other reasons...are disqualified from full social acceptance on the basis of their physical appearance, moral character or lifestyle choices” (Palmer, Ziersch, Arthurson & Baum, 2004, p.412). Consequently, scholars have employed Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma to better understand why majority group members exclude particular individuals and how stigmatization may negatively affect a target’s task performance, health and socioeconomic wellbeing (Barreto & Ellemers, 2010). Although informative, by only examining stigma as a unidirectional process, as Goffman’s definition may imply, the literature on stigma has predominantly viewed stigmatized individuals as disempowered. Until only recently, research investigating the ways in which stigmatized group members negotiate strategies to challenge perpetrators and stigmatizing notions, was rarely observed (Barreto & Ellemers, 2010).

Therefore, studies of stigmatized individual’s responses to stigma and discrimination are only just emerging and may not necessarily be conceptualized as Lamont’s “destigmatization practices” (2009). This may be particularly seen in the urban environment and regeneration literature, where studies have examined people’s perceptions of and responses to stigma (Palmer et al., 2004; Hastings, 2004; Hastings & Dean, 2002). For example, a study by Palmer et al. (2004) demonstrated that South Australian residents of public housing estates reported great pride and commitment to their neighbourhood in spite of negative stereotypes propagated by mainstream media and outsiders. Some strategies they employed to respond to stigma included considering their particular neighbourhood section as “good,” finding commonality with their neighbours, and actively participating in community activities. Some residents explicitly refuted negative remarks about their neighbourhood by stating that it was a “good place to be” with tremendous “community spirit” (Palmer et al., 2004).

Another study by Hastings (2004) revealed similar findings after interviews were conducted with residents of social housing estates in the UK. According to Hastings, residents interviewed could be divided into two categories: normalisers (residents who described their neighbours as similar to people living outside the public housing estate) and pathologisers (residents who attribute the problems of the estates to their neighbours’ behaviour) (2004). Normalisers emphasized that their neighbours were “hardworking” and “decent” people and that residents of more affluent areas exhibited greater problematic behaviours. Normalisers also tended to attribute problems within social housing estates to larger systemic problems, like the lack of welfare benefits, an unstable labour market and
discrimination. Normalisers also showed greater knowledge of their neighbourhood and demonstrated more active involvement in community activities than pathologisers (Hastings, 2004).

A similar pattern was also seen in a study by Hastings & Dean (2002) that investigated the effects of urban regeneration on people’s perceptions of neighbourhood stigma in three large social housing estates in the UK. The authors found that even ten years after redevelopment stigmatizing portrayals of the neighbourhoods were still propagated, predominantly by individuals who were not personally familiar with the area, including journalists, employers, real estate agents and people living outside the estates. The findings of this study point to potential barriers members of stigmatized groups face if they attempt to engage in destigmatization practices, since low-income, public housing neighbourhoods are still regarded by powerful groups as “improper places,” with “problem people” (Hastings & Dean, 2003).

Therefore, despite a small body of research investigating neighbourhood and housing tenure stigma, it is clear that stigmatized group members are not passive subjects. Although impacted by outsider perspectives and a host of external and contextual variables, stigmatized residents of low-income and public housing neighbourhoods may indeed negotiate destigmatization strategies (Palmer et al., 2004 & Hastings, 2004). This can be observed by analyzing the destigmatization strategies used by members of minority ethno-racial groups in a study by Lamont, Morning & Mooney (2002) and comparing these strategies to the responses of low-income, public housing tenants illustrated in Palmer et al. (2004) and Hastings (2004).

The particular destigmatization practices individuals employ may mediate the effects of social inequality on health and wellbeing (Lamont, 2009). This is especially important since stigmatized group members often face greater barriers to attaining socioeconomic resources that render positive health outcomes (Lamont, 2009). Two of these essential resources are housing and neighbourhood, which are also social determinants of health that interact with a variety of other determinants like income, ethnicity, education and gender (Bryant, Chisholm, & Crowe, 2002). Since the goal of many urban regeneration initiatives is to create more inclusive, healthier communities by improving housing quality, neighbourhood conditions, and destigmatizing the reputation of particular neighbourhoods, it is imperative to understand how such place-based initiatives affect the destigmatization strategies and health of individuals (Thomson, 2008).
6. A Research Agenda to Investigate Public Spaces, Social Mix and Place De-Stigmatization

There are several important transformations that will occur on the Regent Park site that have potential implications for de-stigmatization. The first is a possible re-scripting of social narratives of the place. By this we mean that at one scale, the meanings attached to the neighbourhood’s name will likely be transformed over time. At the risk of oversimplification, Regent Park is infamous for a variety of social problems, some of which have been described above, and for many Canadians, is arguably the closest example in Canada of the distorted, sensationalized and racialized portrayal of public housing seen in numerous American television programs and on U.S.-based newscasts, both of which are readily available to Canadian households. With the introduction of more affluent households and the dilution of such social problems, there is a strong likelihood that Regent Park will not carry such strong

Figure 3: Artist’s Rendering of First Condominium Development on the Regent Park Site (One Cole)
connotations as a stigmatized place (with stigmatized residents) in the future. But as the term ‘re-scaling’ suggests, it is also possible that the place-based stigma attached to public housing residents will simply be attached to place at a different scale – the building level.

Consequently, it is likely that public housing residents will engage in a significant amount of ‘boundary work’ (Lamont 2000) in the newly constructed communities, which will be a significant component of the de-stigmatization strategies that they may employ. How this plays out remains to be seen, but there are a couple of other subtle features of the redeveloped neighbourhood that are necessary to reveal in order to be able to discuss a research design for understanding de-stigmatization strategies surrounding the new Regent Park.

The next important aspect of the design of the new Regent Park for de-stigmatization strategies is the addition of commercial, retail and service-based land uses, as well as a plan for a major central park and a large aquatic centre. As both Joseph (2006) and Kleinhans (2004) have noted, social interaction among disparate groups, if it is going to happen, must have some site for this to take place, and the most likely sites are public and commercial spaces. This is an important advance in the research on social mix, because in the literature on the topic, it has been lamented that there is relatively little socializing between public housing tenants and home-owners in socially-mixed redevelopments. Similarly, proponents of social mix are vague about the kind of interaction that is expected, it ranges from the possibility that tenants and home-owners will have barbeques together all the way to peaceful, but indifferent co-location. But I suggest that if the benchmark of ‘successful’ social mix is socializing across class and ethno-cultural lines, then too high a bar has been set. Instead, it is the types of interaction in public and commercial spaces, and people’s experiences and reactions to such interactions, where the ‘success’ of social mix will be seen.

In the plans for Phase 1 and 2 there are five key sites where this kind of interaction is likely to take place: a planned new central park, aquatic centre, bank, grocery store and coffee shop. However, the specific dynamics of that interaction, and people’s experience of that interaction is extremely important to investigate. We will address the experience of social mix among condominium owners (or tenants), public housing tenants, and users of public and commercial services in the newly developed neighbourhood. Condominium owners and public housing tenants will be surveyed using in-person household surveys (N=200 each), while non-resident users of the commercial and public services will be recruited using time-location sampling (or venue sampling) at the five public locations described (planned new central park, aquatic centre, bank, grocery store and coffee shop) to understand how
urban planning of communal spaces shapes community life and specifically how it affects interactions between social groups and their experiences of social inclusion/exclusion and attitudes of (in)tolerance. The importance of these locations is that they are key sites for the enactment of social mixing. Participants are expected to include people living outside the Regent Park site (these spaces were all designed to promote use by non-residents) (N=250). Condominium owner, public housing tenant and non-resident respondents will complete an in-person questionnaire that includes age, sex and household composition, income, major income source, ethnicity, language spoken at home, visible minority status, residential history, neighbourhood satisfaction, generalized trust, social capital, psychological sense of community, and perceptions of crime and disorder, attitudes of (in)tolerance, items tapping social mix in their social network, neighboring behaviours, and perceptions of social control.

In order to recruit a sample of 250 non-resident users of public and commercial services in the new Regent Park to survey them for their experiences of social mix, we will use time-location sampling (TLS). Time-location sampling (or venue sampling) is used to recruit respondents in places and at times where they would reasonably be expected to gather and to ask them about their experiences within the place or space (Muhib, et al. 2001; Aldana and Qunitero 2008). It is a probabilistic method used to recruit members of a target population at specific times in set venues. The method involves identifying days and times when the target population gathers at specific venues, constructing a sampling frame of venue-day-time units (VDTs), randomly selecting and visiting VDTs (the primary sampling unit) and systematically recruiting and collecting information from members of the target population (subject to consent). We will engage in preliminary observation of the target sites at different times of the day and on weekdays and weekends in order to identify appropriate VDTs. Then, once we have selected our VDTs, our interviewers will approach potential participants to participate in the study. We will use standardized enumeration to calculate response rate (Muhib, et al. 2001).

The questionnaire items that will be used to study social interaction and de-stigmatization focus on understanding actual social interaction that occurs across socio-economic and ethno-cultural groups, residents’ perceptions of social mix and the role of public spaces in facilitating positive social mix. In constructing the interview items, we will draw upon previous studies by Rosenbaum, et al. (1998) and Kleit (2005). Items that will comprise the interview (in addition to basic socio-demographic factors for condominium residents and non-residents) include: attitudes of (in)tolerance for other socio-economic and ethno-cultural groups, experiences of discrimination and social inclusion / exclusion (using the
stigma consciousness questionnaire – Pinel 1999), perceptions of safety, management safety efforts, police effectiveness, overall satisfaction, neighbouring behaviours (watching children, having a meal, talking 10 minutes, lending items, greeting on street) and with whom these behaviours occur; social network within the neighbourhood, and group membership in the neighbourhood. Also included will be satisfaction with, use of, and experiences of social mix within the commercial (bank, grocery store, coffee shop) and public (park, aquatic centre) service spaces.

7. A Research Agenda to Investigate Social Mix and Personal De-Stigmatization

Finally, these changes will have a significant manifestation in the everyday destigmatization practices of individuals. Neighbourhood stigma is often ignored in urban regeneration research, although it is a key factor influencing the health of residents living in low-income, public housing estates (Palmer et al., 2004). A UK study showed that even ten years after regeneration, three low-income, public housing estates, did not shed their reputation as stigmatized “improper places” (Hastings & Dean, 2003). Residents of low-income, public housing estates hold their own perspectives of their neighbourhoods, however, that many times contradict outsiders’ perspectives (Palmer et al., 2004). For example, in a study by Palmer et al. (2004), South Australian residents of public housing estates vocalized greater pride and loyalty to their particular part of their larger neighbourhood. In addition, they employed a variety of strategies to maintain their view of their particular neighbourhood positive. Some divided their particular neighbourhood into good and bad parts and defended their particular neighbourhood section from negative portrayals. Many residents from stigmatized suburbs also actively participated in their communities and even explicitly refuted prejudicial remarks about their neighbourhood (Palmer et al., 2004).

Although the actions of Palmer et al.’s participants were not explicitly framed within Lamont’s destigmatization practices paradigm, their actions parallel the responses of stigmatized ethno-racial groups resisting discrimination (Lamont, 2006) and can help guide the formulation of a research agenda. For example, a study by Lamont, Morning & Mooney (2002) examining destigmatization practices among North African immigrants in France, demonstrated that they employ a variety of strategies to engage in anti-racism. A cross-cutting theme was that many mobilize evidence of universal equality in order to demonstrate that everyone is equal and humans share more commonalities than differences. This was also done by estate residents in Palmer et al.’s study when they challenged
negative perceptions of their neighbourhood by stating that it was not so different from more affluent areas (Palmer et al., 2004). Overall, it is clear that individuals belonging to groups that are stigmatized on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, class, or place of residence, actively resist the prejudice and discrimination they face (Lamont, 2002; 2006).

In addition, the ways in which individuals respond to stigma, by either challenging or internalizing it has shown to have serious health consequences. For example, a study by Huebner & Davis (2007), investigated the effect of perceived discrimination on health among a sample of gay and bisexual men. They found that men with a higher level of schooling were more likely to report frequent doctor visits and non-prescription medication use as they reported more perceived discrimination. Researchers also found that individuals who identify more strongly with their group are more likely to report discrimination, which is also associated with better health (Huebner & Davis, 2007). These findings also parallel many studies examining the social, psychological and health benefits of identifying with a particular “out-group” and reporting or challenging discrimination on behalf of that group (Lamont, 2009).

Yet, in spite of the potential health benefits destigmatization practices may provide, researchers have not employed this particular concept to investigate the health effects of urban regeneration. It is possible will address this gap in knowledge by investigating the ways in which public housing tenants practice destigmatization, how these changes as a result of revitalization and redevelopment, and how their strategies impact their health and mental wellbeing.

These considerations give rise to a number of questions that will be pursued in a qualitative research design to complement the quantitative research described above that will focus on place destigmatization. Twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted with adult tenants (aged 18 and over) living in new housing in Toronto’s Regent Park. The interview schedule will be adapted from Lamont (2005) in order to highlight perceived stigma and types of destigmatization practices in relation to individuals’ neighbourhood and housing tenure.

Topics to be addressed in interviews include length of residence in Regent Park before redevelopment, length of residence in new housing and experiences of stigma experienced before and after redevelopment. Questions are included to identify groups that participants belong to that may subject them to stigma in addition to Regent Park residence (e.g., racial minorities, ethnic groups). The interview schedule also includes questions about changes in destigmatization practices after redevelopment and
effects of stigma on participants health and well-being both before and after perceived boundaries of the community before and after to help identify ‘boundary work’ that residents may be engaged in.

Interview transcripts will be coded according to themes using NVivo8 software. Transcripts will be read closely together to identify salient or emerging themes according to the research questions. This will provide a systematic method of reading and grouping the data. Preliminary themes for re-housed Regent Park residents may include: demographic information, physical boundaries of Regent Park, community belonging, Regent Park characteristics, neighbourhood and housing tenure stigma, destigmatization practices, and health and mental wellbeing. Types of destigmatization practices may be further categorized according to type of strategy as in a study by Kusenbach (2009). After analyzing these preliminary themes, We will construct more in-depth themes and draw connections between participants if possible.
References


