Cities 74 (2018) 75–82

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

Neighbourhood conflicts, socio-spatial inequalities, and residential stigmatisation in Santiago, Chile

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Neighbourhood conflict
Socio-spatial inequalities
Residential stigmatisation
Place attachment

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the complex relationship between social inequality and urban conflict by offering a systematic and comprehensive approach to the articulation between macro structural inequality (density, segregation, concentration of high-income), meso level symbolic inequality (territorial stigma) and micro level experiences of conflict and place attachment. We contend that micro-social, neighbourhood level conflicts -mistakenly understood as 'neighbourhood nuisances' (e.g. noise, odours, parking)- are associated with larger scale urban conflicts. We also argue that the development of affective ties with the neighbourhood in which they reside can insulate people from neighbourhood conflict, as well as helping to lessen the impact structural inequality and stigmatisation. Drawing on the results of a representative survey of 2300 individuals, carried out in Chile's capital city, Santiago, at the behest of the country's Ministry of Justice, we apply multilevel logistical regression models. The results obtained allow us to question the prevailing view that regards neighbourhood conflicts as essentially superficial and localised. Our results show that the incidence of these 'nuisances' is not solely associated with individual socioeconomic circumstances, suggesting that they rather form part of a common framework of intersectional vulnerabilities. We suggest that suitable responses include the promotion of active forms of interconnectedness, which empower actors and challenge the noxious effects of the neoliberal model of development.

1. Introduction

An article published in the journal Cities asked internationally renowned researchers to identify the contemporary urban conflicts that they viewed as most significant. The results pointed inexorably to a relationship between urban conflicts and the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities: "'Social inequality' and its consequences, in diverse forms and including a multitude of different stances and attitudes, emerged as the conflict most often mentioned in the interventions" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2013:467). The paper also expressed concern about the relative scarcity of scholarship addressing the complex relationship between social inequality and urban conflict arguing that "even though a great deal of research in the field of urban studies is devoted to analysing specific conflicts in particular cities and processes, the lack of a general and systematic approach to this issue is significant and, perhaps, reveals the inner constitution – and shortcomings – of the discipline" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2013: 454).

The present article explores this concern by studying the various levels and layers of neighbourhood conflict evidenced in the city of Santiago, Chile. We differentiate between macro- and micro- social levels, and introduce a third category: the meso-social level. Our hypothesis is that the spatial conflicts that are typically observed at the micro-social, neighbourhood level, are associated with macro-social inequalities (such as concentration of high/low income in particular areas), and with the meso-level, understood as stigmatisation of those areas.

Literature on urban studies in Chile has grown rapidly over the past decade. These works have extensively documented the ways in which neoliberal urban policies relate to macro, meso and micro processes of gentrification, resistance to displacement, rent-gap accumulation, segregation, polarization, urban density and social fragmentation (e.g. Agostini, Hojman, Román, & Valenzuela, 2016; Angelcos & Méndez, 2017; Borsdorf, Hildalgo, & Vidal-Koppmann, 2016; Garretón, 2017; Link, Valenzuela, & Fuentes, 2015; López-Morales, 2016). While these studies have addressed systematically the "operation of a political-economic system (that) sort people across metropolitan space" (Slater & Hannigan, 2017: 1) through and with the intervention of the State and the estate market, they have –to a lesser extent- given simultaneously

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.11.005
Received 30 January 2017; Received in revised form 21 September 2017; Accepted 10 November 2017
Available online 15 November 2017

an empirical account of the relationship between those macro, meso and micro-social scales and processes. In other words, the relationship between structural socio-spatial inequality (macro), territorial stigmatisation (meso) and neighbourhood conflict (micro).[2] We hope to contribute to fill in this gap and in doing so to offer a theoretical and methodological operationalization to these three intertwined dimensions. Indeed, we aim at contributing with "a wider, systemic picture of the connections and synergies between the multiple layers of urban conflict" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2013: 455).

In addition to this, the article sets its place within a wider framework that explores the role that symbolic structures play in the reproduction of inequality in present-day metropolises, offering a "more complex and nuanced picture of social structure, dynamics, and identity" (Wacquant, Slater, & Pereira, 2014: 1278) in contemporary cities. Following studies such as those by Wacquant (2007), Slater (Kallin & Slater, 2014; Slater & Anderson, 2012), among others, we consider that territorial stigmatisation operates at the before mentioned meso-social level and along with the micro-level (neighbourhood attachment) they can prevent residents -notably those from less privileged areas- to experience and perceive conflict at the everyday neighbourhood life. Confirmatory evidence for this hypothesis should lead us: a) to re-think our conceptualisation of everyday neighbourhood 'problems', - more correctly viewed as conflicts; b) to appreciate the full dimensions of socio-spatial inequalities; and c) to connect macro structural distribution of resources on space, with the symbolic justification of this allocation in particular areas rather than others.

We expect our quantitative findings will provide useful evidence about the role that emotional ties between people and their places of residence (i.e. neighbourhood attachment, rootness, place attachment; abiding attachment to place) (Kirkness, 2014) play in diminishing the effects of socio-spatial inequality, symbolic defamation (Slater & Hannigan, 2017) and neighbourhood conflict.

2. Are neighbourhood conflicts just mere neighbourhood 'nuisances'?

Urban conflict has been characterised as an alteration of order, derailing or destabilising some presumed state of economic, environmental, or territorial equilibrium. It has also been portrayed as a tool that can be deployed to politicise the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism and/or globalisation (Routledge, 2010; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2013).

At the macro-social level, rural and urban studies in the US and Europe have generally focused on conflicts related to social inequalities, i.e. urban exclusion and segregation, concentration of poverty, and residential stigmatisation (Lees, Shin, & López-Morales, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wacquant, 1993; Wilson, 1990). Conflict has also been studied in relation to urban planning and natural resource exploitation (Pacione, 2013). A third area of research deploying the concept of 'conflict' has dealt with issues such as geographical representations of criminality, religious, ethnic and warring tensions, and terrorism (Kong, 2010; Moser, 2004).

Despite a proliferation of efforts dedicated to understanding urban conflict at a macro-social level, the study of the disjunctures of urban life has partially neglected more micro-social spatial conflicts and their possible relationship to other aspects of social life (Cheshire & Fitzgerald, 2015). We refer here to the kinds of conflict that take place in a person's immediate environment or circle, in the everyday spaces of urban life where people coexist alongside others day in, day out. Many authors have agreed in stating that the mere fact of sharing a relatively dense physical space inevitably generates certain kinds of nuisance or irritation, such as unwelcome noise, bad smells, arguments over pet ownership, the proffering of insults, or even frequent quarrels between neighbours (Cheshire & Fitzgerald, 2015; Merry, 1987; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2013; Peper & Spierings, 1999).

The existing literature offers a range of definitions and classifications that attempt to differentiate this type of problem from others. Some researchers have identified these kinds of events as 'disputes' between neighbours, in an effort to distinguish them from actual criminal practices (such as burglary). Similarly, others have talked about 'incivility', associated with a generalised state of rupture of social control; again in order to draw a dividing line from criminal activity (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). The term 'annoyance' is sometimes used to characterise negative relationships between neighbours (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2013); while other studies uncompromisingly use the term 'antisocial behaviour' (Jacobs & Arthurson, 2004).

One recent approach suggests distinguishing between two types of problem: private nuisance, on the one hand, and antisocial and criminal behaviour, on the other (Cheshire & Fitzgerald, 2015). In this schema, private nuisance is understood to refer to the irritation that arises between one or more neighbours over a particular issue, due to lifestyle differences. Noise would be one classic example. These kinds of conflict can arise without there having been direct interaction between the neighbours involved, and the nuisance may not be intentional. Nor do they constitute illegal interference with a neighbour's wellbeing, as antisocial and criminal behaviour do.

However, despite a tendency to depict these events as superficial, the literature does recognise that private nuisance can give rise to more serious problems (Jacobs & Arthurson, 2004; Taylor, 1998). According to Cheshire and Fitzgerald (2015) it could, for example, have a deleterious effect on neighbourly relations that may create stress and anxiety in the affected party, and possibly leading to violence; individual wellbeing could thus be affected (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999), interpersonal communication may deteriorate, and people may lose autonomy over their own living space (Atkinson, 2007). Other authors have even described unpredictable, pervasive and intolerable conflicts that come to seriously damage a community's quality of life (Peper & Spierings, 1999).

Against this backdrop, we can see why it is useful to pay closer attention to the factors that can lead to neighbourhood conflict. Available evidence suggests that such conflict is linked to both area-level and individual characteristics. Associations have been reported, for example, with high levels of religious or ethnic diversity (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2013); crime and petty delinquency (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999), residential density, poor living conditions, and a concentration of disadvantage (Cheshire & Fitzgerald, 2015). However, the literature in the field hasn't yet offered a multi-layered approach to the study of neighbourhood conflicts, in which it can be understood in relation to other levels in which urban conflict is expressed. Following the work by Wutich, Ruth, Brewis, and Boone (2014), which addresses "intersectional vulnerabilities" and thus "including their additive, layered, intersecting, or compounded effects" (Wutich et al., 2014: 557), our paper aims at offering an explanatory model of how socio-spatial inequalities, territorial reputation and neighbourhood conflict are connected. Our research addresses a key question: Does neighbourhood attachment within stigmatized neighbourhoods lessen the effect of that poor reputation as well as the effect of macro structural inequality?

3. Socio-spatial and symbolic inequalities

A key aspect that any research into inequality must address has to be its material dimension, an issue which has recently attracted renewed interest around the world (Piketty, 2014). Multiple accounts describe a rapid accentuation of the concentration of wealth, with a widening gap between the most favoured group and the rest. In Chile, the effects of this phenomenon have been documented in areas such as

[2] Those usually referred to as 'neighbourhood nuisances' (e.g. noise, bad odours, parking issues). See Cheshire and Fitzgerald (2015); Nieuwenhuis, Völker, and Flap (2013).