Mutual Aid and Neighbouring Patterns: The Lower Town Study [1]

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There has been widespread belief, in the popular view as well as in sociological literature, that the modern city is a cold and unfriendly place. In sociology this view goes back at least as far as the writings of Max Weber who said that "personal reciprocal acquaintance" (1958-65) of urban dwellers was not possible because of the characteristics of the modern city. Louis Wirth (1938:1-24) in a much-quoted essay said that urban interaction is "impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental." This, according to Wirth (*ibid* 11) serves as a device for protection "against the personal claims and expectations of others." This picture is often contrasted with the traditional rural neighbourhood which is viewed as a closely knit unit in which mutual aid was a normative element (Weber 1922: Heberle 1960). Since countries such as Canada now have more than two thirds of their populations in urban centers, we are led to expect that virtually no primary group behavior exists outside the nuclear family and that mutual aid is virtually non-existent in the modern city. More recently sociologists have modified this view. Sjoberg (1959:341) for example, points out that a major criticism of "Wirth and others of the Chicago school is that they have exaggerated, even for the United States, the degree of secularization and disorganization that supposedly typifies urban communities. Actually ... many informal networks of social relationships exist that were overlooked by early writers..."

The relatively few empirical studies (Fava 1958: Smith *et al* 1954: Shuval 1956: Tomeh 1964: Mann 1961) that have been done also suggest that urban residents tend to know and converse with at least

some of their neighbours. These forms of neighbouring seem to increase with great distance from the center of the city. Most of these studies also indicate that neighbouring is greater in areas of higher socio-economic status. Stability of residence is also frequently related to neighbouring. While these studies do not deal with the question of mutual aid in the urban neighbourhood, they do suggest that the popular notion of the unfriendly urban neighbourhood is not accurate. Our purpose here then, is to examine the types of behavior that occur among urban neighbours and determine whether mutual aid exists.

The study described in this paper was carried out in Ottawa's "Lower Town East", an area of six city blocks by seven. Lower Town East is located east of Parliament Hill, and the area studied lay north of Rideau Street and east of Nelson Street; it was bounded on its other sides by the Rideau River. The area was scheduled for urban renewal in 1966. It is primarily a French-speaking, Roman Catholic, working class area, with almost 80% of its population belonging to this category.

Data[2] collected from over 1,400 families in this neighbourhood indicated that it was in many ways a typical urban neighbourhood and that interpersonal ties within this area were commonplace. With these assurances we set out to accumulate a more complete picture of interaction among urban neighbours and to look specifically at the question of mutual aid in this neighbourhood. This information was acquired through the use of fifty unstructured interviews which utilized a flexible interview schedule. The respondents were allowed to direct the course of the interview as much as possible so that the investigator's preconceptions would be less likely to bias the results. About 75% of the respondents were French-Canadians (this being close to the proportion of French in the neighbourhood), and about 70% were women.

Most previous studies have been concerned only with contact of neighbours. Since contact is a necessary precondition for inter-action, it was a primary concern in this study. Considerable contact and acquaintance with neighbours was reported in Lower Town East.

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2   These data were collected by the City of Ottawa's Planning Department who made them available to the writer for secondary analysis.

Less than 5% of the respondents reported no acquaintance with neighbours.

For some, knowing many of the people in the neighbourhood was something to be proud of :

> Oh I could name you hundreds of people who live in this area, tell you what street they live on, what they do, and about their family life.

A woman who had just moved into her new home boasted,

> You come back in a few weeks and I'll tell you all about them.

Meeting and interacting with neighbours, even casually, is a regular and important part of life for many people.

> I can't walk more than a block and not meet someone I know. When you're home all day it's nice to be able to go out and meet someone to talk to. If I couldn't do that, I wouldn't be happy.

Three general patterns of neighbourhood interaction can be distinguished in Lower Town East. We refer to these patterns as Privacy-orientation, Latent Neighbouring, and Manifest Neighbouring (Mann 1954).

About 15% of the respondents were classified as demonstrating the privacy-orientation. To them, privacy is highly valued and closely guarded. These people may exchange greetings with neighbours but rarely go beyond this. Anything more is considered interference.

> I don't interfere with the neighbours — it's not my business.

> I keep to my own side. I don't mix in to the neighbour's business.

This group of people usually have neutral feelings towards their neighbours, although in some cases, negative feelings were expressed. These people engage in only casual and minimal interaction with neighbours when they happen to meet.

The most common of the patterns, Latent Neighbouring, involves the verbal expression of positive feelings towards neighbours, as well as casual conversation with people living close by. Also, in time of crisis or special circumstances, these people engage in various forms of aid. About 55% of respondents demonstrated this pattern of neighbouring.

A response typical of this element is :

> The people around here are nice and everyone gets along, but we only talk outside. We don't go in each other's homes.

Normally then, these people engage in casual interaction and respect the privacy of the home. But under special circumstances, such as crisis, the people actively help neighbours.

> Like last night, a boy down the street got bitten by a dog — and everybody was outside ready to drive him to the hospital.

Special needs may also exist on a more regular basis.

> Neighbours help out. Like me ! I'm paralyzed now. My landlord lives across the street and he shovels all walks when it snows. Some of the other neighbours do it for others, like old people.

What is defined as a special situation varies from person to person, but the distinction is made. In this pattern, the watchword is "neighbourly, but not too neighbourly — unless it is something special."

The third pattern, which we call Manifest Neighbouring, applies to almost 30% of respondents. A typical response from persons in this category is

> We see most of them (neighbours) everyday. If the lady next door or two doors down, needs anything I go over to help. We go out with both our tenants and the people two doors away, and sometimes the people next door.

In addition to the more frequent contact that occurs among these people, mutual aid occurs on a more regular basis. The kinds of mutual aid which were found are rather similar to those found in the extended family (Sussman 1965), but there were some differences. Some of the common forms of mutual aid which were found are borrowing and lending goods, especially tools and equipment, child tending services, advice and information exchange and services such as gardening help and the like.

In addition to these specific forms of help, the chatting or visiting that occurs, especially among women, often serves as a form of supportive therapy in facing the tribulation of everyday life.

> We talk about a lot of things : what happened during the day, about the children . . . It makes you feel better to share these complaints with others who have to put up with them.

The kinds of information which are exchanged by neighbours help to save time, energy and often, money.

> We compare information : where did you get that and how much did you pay for it. There's a lot of advice giving. Mostly about food. I shop

at the market and some of them go to IGA, and we compare prices. You can save a lot like that.

Children are an important aspect in mutal aid. The presence of young children can make activities such as shopping or a medical appointment far more difficult. It is, of course, possible to hire someone to watch children but often the costs are prohibitive or the time period too short to make this worthwhile. To have a neighbour watch the children is a very adequate solution. Not only is the neighbour conveniently located, and free in a monetary sense, but also known and therefore more readily trusted.

My neighbour and I minded each other's kids, and if both of us were going out at the same time we'd get the same babysitter for both kids.

If one of us goes out, one of the others takes care of the kids.

The range of items borrowed and lent by neighbours is a wide one.

Clothes, shoes thing like that.

We borrow flour, sugar, elastic, all kinds of things. . . .

I can go across the street and get money or eggs or anything.

Equipment and help in gardening and snow removal are frequently exchanged. Neighbours often take turns in shovelling the snow or watering the lawns.

Some people do shopping or other chores for neighbours.

If I'm going to shop, I ask if anyone needs something, and if someone doesn't have a car to go shopping or someplace, someone will take them. We do a lot of that here.

While there were a few cases of neighbours helping in times of sickness or the arrival of babies, such help is more usually provided by relatives. We had expected to find the use of aid networks in getting jobs and providing contacts for wholesale purchases of major items such as cars and furniture. Very little of this was found, perhaps because networks for such purposes are restricted to the middle and upper classes.

The manifest pattern of neighbouring then, involves several forms of mutual aid which save time, energy and money. For persons in all three patterns, but especially for those in the latter two, there is a marked tendency to gravitate towards relatives and friends, in choosing place of residence. Well over 70% of the respondents were in regular contact with relatives and half of these had relatives living

in the neighbouring or adjacent areas. Having relatives or friends in
the area was an important factor for a large proportion of people
in their move to this neighbourhood or in proposed moves to
other areas.

> We know most of the people around here : two doors down, across
> the street; and my brother-in-law lived at the corner at that time.

> We know many people all around here... That's what made us decide
> on around there. We will live at number 15 and our friends are at
> number 21 and we know people at number 10.

Knowing people in a new neighbourhood can be very important.

> No ! I didn't know anyone when I moved in. The first year I was very
> lonely.

From the frequency with which this factor occurred in decisions
of residential mobility, it seems clear that the presence of friends
and relatives is of major importance.

The most common of the three patterns of interaction involves
overt aid only in special circumstances. This might seem an import-
ant change from the traditional rural neighbourhood where mutual
aid was said to be an integral part of social life. In any such
comparison we must note that there has been a great increase in
specialization and in the number of secondary facilities which
provide for the needs of the people in the modern city. The rural
resident of the past had no choice but to rely on his family and
neighbours. Mutual aid was a necessary part of neighbourhood
life since life was usually quite marginal. To meet the various
needs of daily life, the diffuse nature of primary relationships had
to be depended upon. But in the modern city, it is only in times
of special situations, such as crises, that the specialized facilities
fail and the diffuse primary arrangements come into play. This
is consistent with the findings on the extended family (Sussman 1965)
where the most common form of mutual aid occurs in times of
sickness, which is a special situation. This is also consistent with
Homan's suggestion that primary forms of behaviour exist along
with the institutional or secondary forms and become apparent
"where institutional arrangements have broken down or left gaps"
(Homans ibid 390).

For almost all people, privacy is at some times highly valued.
However, only a rather small proportion of people hold privacy

to be more important than the positive feelings they may develop towards those living near them and the needs that might be met by the resultant relationships. The people who did show such a preoccupation with privacy tended to have particular characteristics which set them apart. Most of these people were near or over sixty years old. A few were members of minority religions and a few were handicapped persons. We might expect that elderly and handicapped persons would be especially anxious to be involved in mutual aid relationships. However, it may be that these people have little to offer in return for any aid received from neighbours and therefore find it harder to get into an aid relationship. We also found that most of these people were closely involved with a single person such as a spouse who provided much of the required help. Bott (1957:60) indicates that people who have close ties with spouses, for example, will be less closely involved in more external relationships, since they will have less needs to be provided for and less time available. This may explain the privacy orientation of this segment of people.

Those who are involved in Manifest Neighbouring with its more regular mutual aid, tend to be younger people under forty years old. Most of these people had children in their home. The other important variable here is length of residence. (cf Pineo 1966) All but two of the respondents in this category had lived here for over five years, and many had lived here much longer. Since a primary relationship involves the right of one person to invade the privacy of the other, most people will require some assurance that such a right will not be abused, before entering into such a relationship. This assurance is gained through experience with the person in the course of the development of such a relationship.

> You can't be friendly right away. You have to be careful with neighbours, you know, to be sure that they aren't going to be in and out all the time.

The length of time required to develop a primary relationship varies with several factors. The more unmet needs a person has the less assurance he will require before entering into a primary relationship. Younger people develop these relationships more quickly since they tend to be at a lower point in their earning cycle and are therefore less able to meet all their needs by the secondary

arrangements which frequently cost money. Younger people are more likely to have children in the home and this too operates to reduce the time required for the development of a mutual aid relationship. Children provide a reason and a legitimate means whereby the parents can meet and interact. Having children also means added needs for the family, and children provide a shared interest and common concern which is frequently discussed by neighbours. Such factors can reduce the length of time required for the development of these primary networks, but generally a period of four or five years is required.

Since the Lower Town East Neighbourhood is a homogeneous French area, it is legitimate to question whether this fact influences the findings. Elsewhere (Shulman 1967) we have compared this neighbourhood on several variables, with the four areas studied by Rossi (Rossi 1965) and found consistent similarity. Further, there is no noticeable difference in the neighbouring behavior of French and non-French respondents in this study. As was noted earlier several previous studies (Tomeh 1964: Smith 1954: Williams 1958) have suggested that neighbouring is greatest in areas of high socio-economic status and those which are farthest from the core of the city. Since Lower Town East is a low income area and is located just east of the Central Business District, we should expect that the degree of observable neighbouring behavior would be less than in the average neighbourhood.

All this suggests that ethnic homogeneity is not a dominant factor in neighbouring.

In an age of rapid transit it is especially significant that people continue to attach importance to the matter of who lives near to them. This suggests that the neighbourhood is still a meaningful social unit. Through frequent contact and shared experiences which occur in the neighbourhood, there develops what Homans (1961; 37 and *passim*) calls "sentiment". This is a part of the process of the development of mutual aid networks.

The fact that these aid relationships exist and provide important services may explain in part why residents so often oppose urban renewal programs. It may be that by providing for the continuance

of such networks for people the opposition to renewal could be reduced.

To conclude, several major points need to be reiterated. First, this study adds to the evidence indicating that the earlier notion of the segmentalized, unfriendly city needs to be modified. Considerable interaction can be formed among urban neighbours. More than this, the kinds of interaction have been differentiated into three general patterns of neighbouring behaviour. The different patterns are related to various social factors such as age, presence of children, and stability of residence. Many urban neighbours engage in mutual aid on a regular basis, but more usually, it occurs only in special circumstances, since for most people it is useful only at such times.

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