

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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Uneasy Places: Distance and Belonging in Suburban Mobile Home Communities in Florida

Abstract

My paper is based on a recently completed, collaborative study of four mobile home parks in the larger Tampa (Florida, USA) area that includes over a hundred interviews and go-alongs, as well as detailed ethnographic observations. All research sites are located far away from the downtown center of this largely suburban city, in geographical as well as in social-cultural terms. Community life and residents' feelings of belonging in these four places are shaped by several factors: the "suburban" or "exurban" location of the park, the isolation from the surrounding community due to fences and gates, the public stigma of living in a trailer park, and the internal social fragmentation of residents. Consequently, my paper focuses on the multiple spatial and social dynamics in these "uneasy places," thereby providing a complex example of suburban marginality. Yet I also analyze how residents of mobile home parks resist the disadvantages and negative image of their communities, and how some manage to construct thriving micro-communities and positive biographies. The overall goal of the article is to portray and discuss a community type, and way-of-life, that does not fit into "traditional" images of urban, suburban or even rural living which currently dominate our field.