

Article

## Housing Stigmatization: A General Theory

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Submitted: 6 July 2019 | Accepted: 3 October 2019 | Published: 27 February 2020

### Abstract

This article treats housing stigmatization as a social process of symbolic ascription, connected to inhabitants, housing form, housing tenure, and/or housing location. Stigmatization research tends to focus on personal stigmatization, or to examine housing only in relation to territorial stigmatization, while housing research tends to focus on health and policy. This article demonstrates that housing stigmatization, which is differentiated from personal stigmatization and territorial stigmatization, is a viable unit of analysis in its own right for stigma research. Seven core elements are identified, showing that housing stigmatization is: (1) relational; (2) contextual; (3) processual; (4) reinforceable; (5) reversible; (6) morally loaded; and (7) treated as contagious. Comprehending the elements of housing stigmatization will benefit destigmatization efforts.

### Keywords

housing; housing stigmatization; stigma; stigmatization; tenure

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “New Research on Housing and Territorial Stigma” edited by Margarethe Kusenbach (University of South Florida, USA) and Peer Smets (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands).

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### 1. Introduction

In May 2017, *Toronto Life* magazine, a popular self-styled “guide to life in Toronto,” ran an article titled “We Bought a Crack House.” Authored by one-half of a young affluent couple, the article tells their story of purchasing a “three-storey detached Victorian on a corner lot” (Jheon, 2017) in Toronto’s Parkdale neighbourhood, equally renowned for its poverty, single room occupancy (hereafter, SRO) housing, community organizing, and gentrification. The house was a “crumbling Parkdale rooming house, populated by drug users and squatters and available on the cheap,” with a “post-apocalyptic vibe inside,” but the couple sensed that “[b]eneath the grime, dust, junk and assorted drug paraphernalia was a potentially stunning home” (Jheon, 2017). The article recounts their travails evicting existing residents and deconverting the rooming house, and throughout it is peppered with the before-and-after images that so thoroughly infuse the property-porn obsessed age of real estate speculation.

This vignette draws together multi-dimensional and overlapping processes of stigmatization: stigmatized housing type (SRO); stigmatized form of tenure (short-

term rental); stigmatized neighbourhood (Parkdale); and stigmatized identities (drug users and squatters). Working together, these layers of stigmatization generate a morally-laden tale of inequality and exclusion organized around housing that bears a negative taint.

Little research to date focuses explicitly on housing stigmatization: Housing research generally tends to focus on policy, and stigmatization research on housing tends to connect it to territorial stigmatization. To develop a general theory of housing stigmatization, I treat housing as a viable unit of analysis in its own right for stigma research by disentangling housing stigmatization from two closely related but analytically distinct forms: personal stigmatization and territorial stigmatization. While all three forms are connected in practice, housing stigmatization remains comparatively underscrutinized. Developing a general theory of housing stigmatization informs strategies for blunting or undermining its force, and addresses a gap in existing literature.

First, I outline the relationship between housing and stigma, showing how conceptual tools from interpretive sociology are useful in bringing housing and stigma research together. Next, I distinguish between stigma as

a state, and stigmatization as a process. Then, I survey three broad literatures on stigmatization, primarily from Western contexts: individual/group level stigmatization; territorial stigmatization; and housing stigmatization. Drawing out themes from existing research, I discuss seven core elements of housing stigmatization, showing how it is: (1) relational; (2) contextual; (3) processual; (4) reinforceable; (5) reversible; (6) morally loaded; and (7) treated as contagious. Deepening our understanding of how these elements work together in producing housing stigmatization aids in destigmatization efforts. Finally, I consider potential applications and limitations of the general theory.

## 2. The Housing Stigma Interface

The UN identifies a:

Global crisis in access to adequate housing [defined as adequate privacy, adequate space, adequate security, adequate lighting and ventilation, adequate basic infrastructure and adequate location with regard to work and basic facilities—all at a reasonable cost]...rooted in a crisis in access to justice. (Farha, 2019, p. 3)

Addressing this crisis necessitates understanding interconnections between housing policy reforms, state withdrawal from housing provision, and housing's rapid financialization (August & Walks, 2018; Fitzpatrick & Pawson, 2014; Forrest & Hirayama, 2015; Rutland, 2010). That said, housing stigmatization cannot be understood or reversed by an exclusive analytic focus on housing as commodity and policy object (King, 2009). For example, as homelessness research shows, being homeless endures as a stigma globally (Anderson, Snow, & Cress, 1999; Hansen, 2018; Somerville, 1992; Ursin, 2016), yet being housed does not automatically mean that stigma is absent. While an address is fundamental to accessing rights of citizenship and residency, an address alone ensures neither full societal membership, nor neighbourhood belonging, nor community esteem.

Stigma research approaches stigma as an ascribed characteristic of persons, places, and things. Early waves of research focused primarily on personal or identity-based stigma. Over the last quarter-century this focus has been supplemented and extended by research on, for example, structural stigma (Hatzienbuehler & Link, 2014), territorial stigma (Wacquant, 1993), and housing stigma (Hastings, 2004). Recent research also analyzes destigmatization (Clair, Daniel, & Lamont, 2016). Before surveying these literatures, I first describe stigmatization as a symbolic process whose effects are not only symbolic.

### 2.1. Housing Stigmatization Is Symbolic

Housing is a material necessity layered with multiple meanings, but the symbolic dimensions of material in-

equalities are often overlooked. Recent research in cultural sociology markedly advances our understanding of the role of symbolic classification, in particular, in (re)producing inequality and exclusion (Alexander, 2007; Lamont et al., 2016). Following an interpretive social scientific thread running from Durkheim (1995), through Goffman (1963) and Douglas (1966) to Alexander (2006) and Lamont et al. (2016), my approach focuses on the social life of symbolic ascriptions. This interpretive social scientific perspective treats meaning as central to social life (cf. Blumer, 1969; Geertz, 1973; Weber, 1978). While this approach is relatively marginal in housing studies, it has much to offer.

To treat stigmatization as symbolic, our analyses must be meaning-centred. This means disentangling the processes by which housing markets marginalize people, from other less well understood processes, like stigmatization, that work alongside—and, sometimes, independently of—market dynamics. Since “the marketplace does not exhaust modern society, which is filled with places and positions that operate according to fundamentally different logics” (Alexander, 2018, p. 6), my approach hedges on the overlap between symbolic denigration and economic forces, and focuses on a meaning-centered analysis of stigmatization as a symbolic ascription.

A meaning-centered analysis addresses the current lack of a general framework for understanding how specific forms of housing and specific housing units in particular become stigmatized. From the slums of Lagos and Manila (Davis, 2007) to the Parisian *banlieues* and Chicago's 'ghetto' (Wacquant, 1993), from Toronto's SROs (Horgan, 2018) to Beijing's informal settlements (Huang & Jiang, 2009), housing stigmatization may well be a global phenomenon, but may not be everywhere identical. It is unevenly applied and varies contextually. Focusing on meaning helps make sense of this variability. The argument that follows focuses on the symbolic processes by which negative meanings attach to housing. It does not analyze consequences of stigmatization or the resistance strategies of stigmatized persons/groups. What it does do is deepen our understanding of broader processes of stigmatization (of housing and beyond) and provide conceptual foundations for developing destigmatization strategies.

### 2.2. Stigmatization Is a Process, Stigma Is Its Product

Stigma describes the “situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963, p. 9). Relatedly, the theory of symbolic pollution posits dirt/pollution as “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966, p. 36). When people and properties that should not be here, are here, based on how their presence is interpreted by others they can be stigmatized and socially excluded. Thus, spatio-temporal context shapes who or what is stigmatized.

If stigma is an ascribed quality with negative meanings, then stigmatization is the social process making

negative meanings stick to persons, places, practices, or things. Because stigmatization is meaningful and interpretive, it is malleable. Stigmatized individuals are not necessarily stigmatized in all places at all times. There are many examples of destigmatized identities and forms of conduct, for example, homosexuality in Western liberal democracies. This contextual variability emphasizes that stigmatization is processual. Treated as a process rather than a product, stigmatization requires symbolic work to be reinforced or reversed.

In light of the above, I define stigmatization as the social process of symbolic denigration of persons, places, practices, and/or things. The case of housing stigmatization adds some complexity.

### *2.3. From Stigmatization in General to Housing Stigmatization in Particular*

Housing is first and foremost material, but it is not only material. As anthropologists of housing demonstrate, housing is symbolically-laden, infused with meanings that weave persons, places, things, and ideals into “dense webs of signification” (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995, p. 3; see also Lévi-Strauss, 1988). Stigmatization is primarily symbolic, but is also material in the sense that it attaches to persons, places, and things. Its effects are also material, and markedly so when material deprivation and negative symbolic ascription combine (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014; Link & Phelan, 2014).

Discussing housing and stigmatization simultaneously means exploring intersections between material reality and the symbolic realm of signification. Housing stigmatization involves the process of ascribing symbolically denigrating qualities—stigma—to material artifacts—housing. As Goffman’s (1963, pp. 30–31) concept of “courtesy stigma” demonstrates, stigma can spread; for example, housing units may be stigmatized by stigmatized residents and/or location. Moreover, particular housing types and forms of tenure are also stigmatized. With housing stigmatization, the flexibility of a social ascription meets the relative durability of the built environment. A general theory of housing stigmatization, then, must account for the meanings ascribed to residents of particular housing units, to neighbourhoods where they are located, to particular housing types, and to forms of tenure.

In light of the above, I define housing stigmatization as the social process of symbolic denigration of particular housing units due to their inhabitants, form, tenure, and/or location.

### **3. Situating Housing Stigmatization**

Housing mediates the complex relationship between the individual and their neighbourhood, community, and societal membership. Analytically distinguishing between stigmatization as it applies to persons and to places helps unpack this relationship. To situate a general the-

ory of housing stigmatization, I group existing research into two broad categories: identity-based stigma (individual/group level stigma), and place-based stigma (territorial and housing stigma). Below, I begin by discussing identity-based stigma, connecting it to recognition as a core dimension of social justice and inclusion. Next, I survey research on territorial stigmatization—in particular as it concerns housing—before moving to research on housing and stigma, focusing on what I call ‘tainted type and tenure.’ With this context in place, I then identify and describe seven core elements of housing stigmatization.

#### *3.1. Individual/Group Level Stigma*

For Goffman (1963), stigma is a social ascription of taint—that is, a negative moral judgment of character and/or worth—that attaches to persons because of: (1) a physical attribute, usually visible to others; (2) membership in a particular group; or (3) some element of their personality or behaviour that brings disrepute. Stigma is a “discrediting...undesired differentness” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 3–5), where a tainted part represents the whole. Stigmatization is the eminently social process by which some people deem others to be impure, profane, or polluted (Durkheim, 1995). As a social process of symbolic ascription, stigmatization connects a person’s conduct, for example, and negative moral judgment. Stigma is the product of this moral judgment (Yang et al., 2007).

There is no inherent, natural, necessary, or fixed relationship between a particular person, their character, their conduct, or their group membership and their stigmatization. The social ascription of stigma draws upon a binary symbolic structure dividing the world into sacred and profane categories (Durkheim, 1995). Stigmatization requires continuous discursive revitalization of this binary, through, for example, direct statement (‘they are bad’) or discursive alignment with polluting properties (‘they are vermin’). While what is considered impure varies cross-culturally, that the impure is to be excluded, feared, and/or avoided appears to be constant (Douglas, 1966). The contents of stigma vary, but stigma as a form is steady. What is sacred is good, what is profane is stigmatized (Alexander, 2006; Durkheim, 1995). Thus, while, stigma’s symbolic structure is analytically independent of particular persons or locations, it is enlivened and mobilized in specific times and places with regard to specific persons and groups.

Since Goffman’s initial formulation, stigma research has developed remarkably, focusing, for example, on the stigma management strategies of persons experiencing homelessness (Anderson et al., 1999; Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004), panhandlers (Lankenau, 1999), and persons with visible disabilities (Cahill & Eggleston, 1994). Examining the management of stigmatized identities in public places provides an inroad in to understanding the relationship between personal identity and societal membership.

Goffman-inspired stigma research also has its critics. Kusow (2004) argues that a focus on identity management fails to get at contemporary manifestations of the stigmatization process. In Kusow's view, the agency of racially stigmatized groups—Goffman's "tribal stigma" (Goffman, 1963, pp. 4–5)—needs reconsideration in light of complex membership and group identification in contemporary societies defined by heterogeneity in personal and group attachments. This connects to broader political philosophical understandings of recognition as central to the achievement of social justice and inclusion (Honneth, 1996; Lamont et al., 2016; Taylor, 1994).

Since Goffman, linkages between stigmatization, discrimination, and negative attitudes have become well established (Klin & Lemish, 2008; Philo et al., 1994; Powell, 2008). Link and Phelan (2001) connect stigma to discrimination at three levels: individual, structural, and through the beliefs and behaviors of the stigmatized person. The internalization of negative judgment by stigmatized persons animates research on those who accept being denied full societal membership, and is found too in research analyzing heightened self-monitoring by stigmatized persons (Zaussinger & Terzieva, 2018).

Tying together these various strands, recent research demonstrates the causal power of stigma, both in terms of its structural embeddedness (Hansen, Bourgois, & Drucker, 2014; Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014) and connection to negative health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Kelaher, Warr, Feldma, & Tacticos, 2010; Link & Phelan, 2014). Treating stigma as an independent variable impacting individual and community mental health also provides analytic tools for deepening our understanding of destigmatization, or the "reduction of societal-level stigma over time" (Clair et al., 2016, p. 223; see also Corrigan et al., 2001).

### 3.2. *From Persons to Place-Based Stigma*

Stigma is not about personal attributes or group membership alone, it also attaches to place. As Douglas' formulation of dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p. 36) suggests, the spatial presence of some polluting quality generates the perceived need for symbolic and spatial exclusion. Cities where extremely structurally differentiated populations dwell in close physical proximity demonstrate this clearly (Caldeira, 1996). At the neighbourhood level, Takahashi (1997) and Smith (2010) show how social and spatial taint intertwine through "socio-spatial stigmatization." In a different register, Anderson (2012, 2015) explains how pervasive images of the "iconic ghetto" reproduced in popular culture act as a "powerful source of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination" (Anderson, 2012, p. 8) casting a shadow over African-Americans' experiences in "white space" (Anderson, 2015).

Wacquant's (1993) concept of "territorial stigmatization" brings together Goffman's foundational theory and Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of the symbolic power embed-

ded in structures of classification. Where Goffman shows how stigma attaches to categories of persons and shapes social relations, Wacquant shows how stigma also attaches to and shapes neighbourhoods. If Goffman's theory is one of social taint, Wacquant's is one of spatial taint. Social and spatial taint mutually reinforce one another, with territorial stigmatization generating forms of marginalization irreducible to those based more exclusively on personal characteristics. Territorial stigmatization foregrounds the "role of symbolic structures in the production of inequality" (Wacquant, Slater, & Pereira, 2014, p. 1270; cf. Alexander, 2007), with research tracing the texture and topography of these symbolic structures, showing "how persons become polluted or their pollution is accentuated through association with stigmatized territories. Territorial taint then 'rubs off' on inhabitants" (Horgan, 2018, p. 502). Research also highlights the strategic deployment of territorial stigmatization to justify state and/or market intervention in 'problem' areas (Cohen, 2013; Kallin & Slater, 2014; Kornberg, 2016; Kudla & Courey, 2019; Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014).

The connection between territorial and personal stigma is debated. While some claim that residents internalize stigma, and that this "feeds back into demoralization" (Wacquant, 2010, p. 218), others argue that "networks of solidarity and a deepening attachment to place...allow residents...to cope with life under conditions of territorial stigmatization" (Kirkness, 2014, pp. 1285–1286; see also Jensen & Christensen, 2012).

Due to its restricted focus, territorial stigmatization research informs but does not circumscribe a general theory of housing stigmatization. While housing is a central focus of literature on territorial stigmatization (Arthurson, 2010; Hancock & Mooney, 2013; Slater & Anderson, 2012), this tends to centre on public housing (Hastings, 2004; Kearns, Kearns, & Lawson, 2013; Wassenberg, 2004), examining, in particular, the stigmatization of public housing's tenants and location. While public housing is vilified in many places, as demonstrated below, public housing is not the only stigmatized housing type, nor indeed is it everywhere stigmatized.

Territorial stigmatization generally includes housing stigmatization, but housing stigmatization does not always include territorial stigmatization: Stigmatized properties are not only found in stigmatized neighbourhoods, for example, stigmatized group homes in 'respectable' middle-class neighbourhoods in Western cities (Finkler, 2014). Moreover, taint is not evenly distributed across territories: it varies by housing type and tenure. Territorial stigmatization research neglects intra-territorial differentiation—differentiation within a given territory—specifically variation at the level of individual housing units and across locales. And, as noted above, stigmatization varies too by the personal characteristics of dwellers, for example, racial or class difference. A neighbourhood can contain radically differing identities, some that are more amenable to territorial taint, and others that it may bypass.

### 3.3. *Housing Stigmatization: Tainted Type and Tenure*

While incorporating dimensions of each, housing stigmatization is neither generalizable to the level of territorial stigma, nor reducible to the particularities of individual or group-level stigma. It can vary in intensity according to the possible combinations of personal and territorial stigmatization involved. This is especially important in considering variation in housing type and tenure. Take, for example, the persistence of prejudice against SROs and their residents (Dear & Taylor, 1982; Dear & Wolch, 1987; Derksen, 2017; Freeman, 2017; Harris, 1992). Similar patterns of prejudice, whether interpersonal, community-based, or formal-legal have been delineated across research on SROs, sober houses, group homes, and mobile homes (Crystal & Beck, 1992; Grant, Derksen, & Ramos, 2019; Heslin, Singzon, Aimiuwu, Sheridan, & Hamilton, 2012; Kusenbach, 2009; Mifflin & Wilton, 2005). This sometimes infuses battles over municipal zoning, where the ‘saturation’ of a particular housing type is rhetorically deployed to propose desaturation through zoning as a means of destigmatization (Finkler & Grant, 2011; Horgan, 2018). Thus, “selective accentuation” (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1274), emphasizes the concentration of particular stigmatized housing forms, and can scale up from individual stigmatized properties—like SROs—to broader territorial stigmatization. In Goffman’s (1963, p. 3) synecdochal language, a “tainted” part comes to stand for the whole.

Housing scholarship also shows how tenure—owning versus renting, especially social renting—can impact belonging (Smets & Snee, 2017). Ronald (2008, pp. 239–254) demonstrates the negative impacts of the “ideology of home ownership” for those who do not own their own homes. Homeowners often implicitly question the moral character of renters, generating “tenure stigma” (Rollwagen, 2015). Similarly, Bate (2018) shows how the stigma of renting in Anglophone countries shapes public discourse and tenancy law, and consequently, tenants’ homemaking practices (see also Flint, 2004). Echoing this, Vassenden and Lie (2013, p. 78) demonstrate how “tenure can work as a proxy for moral character” in Norway, but they find significant variations between private and social renting, thus establishing that the stigma of renting is not generalizable. In the UK, Gurney (1999) argues that the rapid normalization of home ownership generated prejudice towards social renters (for a comprehensive history of Western social rented housing, see Harloe, 1995). While renting is the norm in some markets (for example, Vienna), shifts in European housing markets make renting increasingly the norm across the continent (Arundel & Doling, 2017). Yet, even with affordable home ownership off the table for so many—the UK’s so-called ‘Generation Rent’—renting remains stigmatized (Cole, Powell, & Sanderson, 2016). While Hulse, Morris, and Pawson (2019) show that many renters in Australian “home owning society” do not view renting negatively, the extent to which their sample in-

cluded people bearing personal stigma, or living in stigmatized territories is unclear.

Overall, symbolic boundaries between homeowners and non-homeowners appear to be pervasive, with homeowners’ real or perceived equivalent structural position limiting cross-tenure mixing (Arthurson, 2010; Bucerius, Thompson, & Berardi, 2017; Kemp, 2011; Palmer, Ziersch, Arthurson, & Baum, 2004; van Eijk, 2012; Vassenden, 2014). There are some important caveats here. Cultural expectations around housing type and tenure figure strongly. For example, Lauster (2016) shows how the single family home is disappearing as a norm in Vancouver, while Kusenbach (2009, 2017) shows that despite the fact that many trailer homes in Florida are owner-occupied, this form of tenure does not protect trailer homes from being stigmatized.

### 3.4. *Interplay between Types of Stigmatization*

Clearly, housing stigmatization does not occur in a vacuum; personal/group, territorial, and housing stigmatization can shape one another. For example, one could be stigmatized as both a drug-user and a member of a stigmatized ethnic group, or one could bear neither such stigma, but live with the consequences of inhabiting stigmatized social housing. Further, public housing dispersed into otherwise middle-class areas, for example, may show different patterns of stigmatization compared to concentrated public housing, the former likely less subject to territorial stigmatization than the latter. Thus, housing stigmatization intersects with personal/group stigmatization and territorial stigmatization in complex ways that generate variability. A general theory cannot measure this variability, but does sensitize us to it. To do this, the next section outlines seven elements of a general theory.

## 4. Elements of a General Theory of Housing Stigmatization

Stigmatization is boundary work: it is about the production, reproduction, reinforcement, and defense of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). The stigmatization process requires something or someone doing the stigmatizing, yet we cannot locate a single source. Rather, constellations of actors and activities *in toto* produce stigmatization.

Social exclusion is both material and symbolic. With housing stigmatization, material and symbolic exclusionary processes are complementary. Theorizing housing stigmatization means understanding where and how housing’s material form intersects with more generic features of the process of stigmatization. As shown above, while housing stigmatization attaches to specific properties, the process of housing stigmatization is neither territorially bounded nor reducible to personal characteristics of individuals. If taint accrues to the housing of already marginalized persons, it appears to intensify their marginalization. While housing stigmatization



incorporates the generic social process of stigmatization, it is neither monolithic nor unidirectional. Thus, a general theory must account for unit-dweller and unit-neighbourhood relationships, as well as multiple housing types and forms of tenure.

Drawing out themes from existing research discussed above, I identify seven core elements of housing stigmatization. While these work together to produce housing stigmatization, here, I distinguish between them analytically. Housing stigmatization is: (1) relational; (2) contextual; (3) processual; (4) reinforceable; (5) reversible; (6) morally loaded; and (7) treated as contagious. I describe each of these elements below, where appropriate illustrating with examples tying them to the opening vignette and existing research.

#### *4.1. Housing Stigmatization Is Relational*

Housing stigmatization draws on a binary structure of symbolic ascription, organized around the sacred-pure/profane-impure (Douglas, 1966; Durkheim, 1995). Since housing stigmatization is relational, it is also relative: binaries are activated through contrast. These binaries are absolute in name only. In practice, we find that some housing can be more—or less—stigmatized than other housing. For example, Valverde (2012) has demonstrated how the “normative family home” is discursively employed in Toronto to position other housing types—particularly SROs—as not the ‘right’ kind of housing. Similarly, this relational element can connect to housing condition or quality, for example, where the poor physical appearance of a housing unit relative to nearby units provides bases for stigmatization. For some housing to be stigmatized requires other housing to not be stigmatized, so housing stigmatization is relational.

#### *4.2. Housing Stigmatization Is Processual*

As discussed earlier, stigmatization is a process rather than a steady state or a fixed product, “it is never a static nor a natural phenomenon” (Tyler & Slater, 2018). It has no permanent and enduring form. Housing stigmatization is the social process by which stigma, as a symbolic ascription, is made to attach to particular housing units. This processual character means that stigmatization can develop or diminish; because housing stigmatization is processual, it is also malleable. For example, in the case of rental housing above, the meanings ascribed to particular types of tenure can shift across time and space; the ascription of stigma does not always and everywhere stick to the same housing. If housing stigmatization were not processual, such shifts would not be possible (see also Section 4.7).

#### *4.3. Housing Stigmatization Is Contextual*

Housing stigmatization is spatio-temporally bounded: it is embedded in particular spaces at particular points

in time. While housing stigmatization draws on abstract symbolic structures, it must be enlivened in particular grounded contexts. While some housing types—like mobile homes, for example (Kusenbach, 2009)—are widely stigmatized, in some contexts they may not be—for example, mobile homes used as holiday homes. Similarly, prejudice against rental properties on predominantly owner-occupied streets, or student rentals in family neighbourhoods (Sage, Smith, & Hubbard, 2012) highlight this contextual element of housing stigmatization. Indeed, stigmatization appears more likely in forms of housing with residents perceived as transient, with renters deemed to be uncommitted to neighbourhood well-being (Rollwagen, 2015). Whether or not this has basis in fact is an open question. This belief’s wide currency makes it real in its effects. The process of stigmatization may be generic, what is stigmatized is not always and everywhere the same. Thus, housing stigmatization is contextual.

#### *4.4. Housing Stigmatization Is Morally Loaded*

Housing stigmatization is a symbolic ascription laden with moral judgment. For housing to be stigmatized, it must be posited as in some way morally corrupt or corrupting. This moral dimension may be tethered to characteristics of inhabitants as somehow opposed to value-laden constructions of ‘decency’ and ‘respectability’ (Anderson, 2000; Bourgois, 1996). As a moral problem, stigmatized housing is deemed to be either in need of transformation through radical top-down intervention, or beyond salvation, and sometimes isolation (Navon, 1996). For example, slum clearance and neighbourhood renewal projects mobilize moral language to denigrate particular types of housing, often strategically, as a pretext for displacement and/or to provide moral justification for state intervention (Davis, 2007; Whitzman, 2009).

#### *4.5. Housing Stigmatization Is Treated as Contagious*

If housing stigmatization means being posited as morally corrupt, it is also treated as morally corrupting. Proximity to stigmatized individuals risks pollution of adjacent persons, properties, and places (MacRae, 2008; Wood & Lambert, 2008). Thus, stigmatization is treated as contagious between places and persons, what we can call stigmatization by association or proximity. Housing stigmatization can rub off on dwellers, and can also scale up from person to housing, and from housing to territory. Conversely, a neighbourhood’s stigma can also rub off on housing units located within it, and from housing units to individuals. In this sense, stigmatization’s contagiousness is multidirectional.

That said, location within a stigmatized territory does guarantee that an individual housing unit or cluster of units will be stigmatized. As gentrification scholarship has demonstrated, homes of middle-class gentrifiers in

stigmatized territories are rarely subject to the same process of stigmatization as are SROs, for example (Freeman, 2017). Nonetheless, housing stigmatization can rub off from a stigmatized housing unit to adjacent properties. Thus, housing stigmatization is treated as contagious.

#### 4.6. *Housing Stigmatization Is Reinforceable*

Fundamentally incomplete, housing stigmatization is reinforceable in the sense that for existing stigmatization to be reproduced it must be reinforced. In line with well-established research on social reproduction in sociology, any existing state of affairs is not in itself stable: The status quo requires ongoing work of reinforcement (Archer, 1995; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1986). In the case of housing stigmatization, this means that the negative symbolic ascriptions that attach to a particular housing unit, for example, must be repeated and reasserted. This can occur through regular restatement of its bases, for example, through morally loaded denigrating language in public meetings and media stories, whether local, regional, or national (Anderson, 2012). In this sense housing stigmatization is reinforceable.

#### 4.7. *Housing Stigmatization Is Reversible*

Because housing stigmatization is processual, relational, and reinforceable, it is also reversible. The process of reversing housing stigmatization is best termed housing destigmatization. If reinforcement is not regular and the symbolic work of maintaining stigma is not ongoing, then destigmatization may be possible. Reversing housing stigmatization may attend to context and attunement to local-level exigencies and particularities (Horgan, 2018), and may also occur through a variety of reversal strategies including positive representations or increased normalization of previously stigmatized housing.

While these seven elements of housing stigmatization can be analytically disentangled, it should be clear that they are deeply imbricated in practice. Nonetheless, parsing them analytically in this way opens up avenues for possible action. Developing a general theory of housing stigmatization is not simply an abstract pursuit. At the core lies a normative concern: undoing housing stigmatization.

### 5. **Practical Uses and Limits of General Theory**

There is no single fix-all for undoing housing stigmatization. Nonetheless, we may arrest the social processes where symbolic denigration is invoked and mobilized. While I do not wish to make untenable claims on the basis of the general theory presented here, housing destigmatization efforts that do not attend to at least some of the seven elements identified above are unlikely to succeed.

Returning to our opening vignette, and the case of SROs in Parkdale, the work of a local agency—the

Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT)—is instructive. The PNLT (2017) has worked to demonstrate how SROs, while symbolically denigrated, form an important part of the affordable housing landscape for single persons often living with mental health and addictions issues. Drawing together housing advocates, activists, civil society organizations, service providers, and progressive local officials, the PNLT developed a two-pronged approach to SRO preservation in the neighbourhood by: (1) demonstrating how SROs are a viable and valuable form of affordable accommodation for structurally vulnerable residents; and (2) destigmatizing SROs by working alongside SRO residents in designing research and proposing policy. SRO residents gathered both qualitative and quantitative data, combined with their own first-person narratives to demonstrate the significance of SROs to the local housing landscape. This work focused specifically on destigmatizing SRO housing, showing its value both for dwellers and for maintaining Parkdale's heterogeneity. The combination of hard evidence and personal stories elicited "empathy across chasms of difference" and successfully gained "a hearing for claims that would be otherwise ignored" (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011, p. 115). In 2019, on foot of this work, Toronto City Council passed a motion making municipal funds available to purchase Parkdale SROs identified by PNLT (2017) as at risk of deconversion in Toronto's heated housing market. These properties actively sustain the heterogeneity of housing types and tenure that has long characterized Parkdale.

More generally, given the contextual variability of housing stigmatization, mitigation requires strategies attuned to specifics. While firm and enduring commitment to the provision of quality affordable housing is clearly necessary, absent government appetite for spearheading social housing, then legally binding demands on governments, property owners, and developers must play some part. Thus, destigmatizing housing is part of a broader battle to meaningfully attend to wider social and material deprivation.

As demonstrated here, stigmatization generates social distance by drawing symbolic boundaries. Two decades of research shows that symbolic boundaries can harden into social boundaries, potentially becoming embedded in institutional structures, social policy, and common ways of understanding collective life (Lamont et al., 2016; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Symbolic boundaries, though, are malleable and can be loosened. If they cannot be dissolved in their entirety, we can at least find where they are most porous and focus our efforts there.

The conceptual work presented here has some limits that may impact the extent of its generalizability across contexts. First, since it is conceptual, it does not engage with the lived experience of stigmatization in a significant way. Second, because it offers a meaning-centred theory of housing stigmatization, it may not adequately account for the connection between housing condition and stigmatization. Third, the bulk of the literature con-

sulted focuses on Western sources, and so may overlook elements of housing stigmatization operational in non-Western contexts. Finally, while the theory sensitizes us to variability in housing stigmatization, empirical tools for operationalization and measurement are absent. That said, applying the basic conceptual framework to a variety of cases will enhance, refine and—I trust—critique the general theory. This can inform both analyses of, and strategies for, housing destigmatization.

## 6. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that housing stigmatization is a viable unit of analysis in its own right for stigma research, by attending to housing as a central point of mediation between persons and broader societal membership, and to the specificity of the place of particular housing units in their immediate context. As a contribution to both housing and stigma studies, this article deepens understanding of how the symbolic denigration of marginalized persons, housing, and neighbourhoods, are intertwined. It also advances understanding of how stigma may attach to specific housing types and particular forms of tenure. Focusing attention on housing stigmatization brings a new lens to the intersections between different forms of stigmatization and how the stigmatization process is mobilized and modulated in arenas adjacent to housing, such as, for example, municipal zoning and welfare provision.

Structural vulnerability and housing stigmatization are all too often connected and mutually reinforcing. The symbolic work of destigmatization should accompany expanded rights to adequate, appropriate, and affordable housing. At base, destigmatization is about civil inclusion and the extension of solidarity necessary to a just society worthy of the name. Deepening our understanding of housing stigmatization permits us to discover cracks and cleavages in those processes upholding social exclusion, so that we may wedge open new ways of halting and reversing processes of stigmatization, and work to make good on the promise of an open, just and inclusive society. Housing is an important—if not essential—place to focus our efforts.

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the thematic issue editors, Peer Smets and Margarethe Kusenbach, and to two anonymous reviewers for demonstrating exemplary collegiality through finely detailed and constructively critical feedback that strengthened the argument immeasurably. Conversations with fellow participants on the RC 21 Housing Stigma panel at the 2018 ISA World Congress in Toronto helped the ideas presented here to cohere. Thanks also to Laura Eramian and Saara Liinamaa for inspired conversations. This article was written during a Visiting Fellowship at the Yale University Center for Cultural Sociology where Jeffrey Alexander and Philip

Smith have created a convivial and stimulating environment conducive to theoretical development. Any faults remain mine alone.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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