

“Battles on the block: What neighborhood conflicts tell us about urban diversity”

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Many of the concerns about diversity are linked to its discordant quality. It seems we are not very good at living with difference. Urban sociologists have found that the tensions and conflicts associated with neighborhood heterogeneity pose significant challenges to community engagement, order and stability. This paper uses data from three years of ethnographic fieldwork to explore processes of everyday conflict in Riverwest, a racially- and economically-mixed neighborhood in a mid-sized city in the United States. I find that “on-the-block” conflicts play a central role in local social organization—a community’s capacity to realize shared goals and solve shared problems. Examining the ways in which residents define and manage deviance reveals distinct approaches to negotiating difference. Local conflicts sometimes reinforce oppressive and marginalizing practices, justify denying people access to resources, or turn violent. Yet local conflicts are often constructive. They can induce cooperation and coalition-formation, complicate group boundaries, and prevent larger conflicts. Local conflicts also create unique opportunities for the expression of dissent, mutual criticism, and challenges to the legitimacy of dominant understandings. Through everyday clashes on the block, local norms are negotiated, challenged, and renegotiated. I argue that conflict can open up possibilities for justice: for difference without exclusion.

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