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Complexity of Life in Public Housing: A Multi-Case Photovoice Study Examining the Relationship Between Residential Environment and Tenant Well-being

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Abstract:	As a social policy, public housing aims to reduce social inequalities by providing access to affordable dwellings. Studies examining the relationship between public housing as a residential environment and tenant well-being have yielded mixed results. Moreover, few of these studies adopted a participatory design. A multi-case photovoice study was undertaken to amplify public housing tenants' voices concerning aspects of their residential environment that have a positive or negative influence on their well-being. To this end, 303 captioned photos were collected by 59 tenant-researchers at six sites in Québec (Canada). In-depth cross-case analysis of the material led to four key-themes: a) Residential environment perceived as mostly positive; b) Public housing related to most negative elements; c) Services influenced sense of community; and d) Participation as potentially limited. These findings illustrate the complexity of life in public housing, where positive and negative aspects co-exist and tenants report a weak sense of control over the possibility of making meaningful change. Community-based participatory research involving public housing tenants shows their desire and capacity to have a say in improving their residential environment. Empowerment strategies to promote tenant involvement should target the organizational level as well instead of focusing solely on the individual level.

Additional Information:	
Question	Response
Highlights: Bullet Point #1	Describes a multi-case photovoice study conducted in six public housing sites in Québec, Canada.
Highlights: Bullet Point #2	Presents the aspects that tenant-researchers consider positive and negative for their well-being.
Highlights: Bullet Point #3	Identifies the complexity of life in public housing and potential impacts on tenants' well-being.
Highlights: Bullet Point #4	Reflects on the importance of considering organizational and social levels of empowerment.
Highlights: Bullet Point #5	

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Nicole E. Allen,
Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Champaign, IL,
Editor-in-Chief, American Journal of Community Psychology

Montreal, June 30th, 2021

Dear Professor Nicole E. Allen,

I am pleased to submit an original research article entitled "Complexity of Life in Public Housing: A Multi-Case Photovoice Study Examining the Relationship Between Residential Environment and Tenant Well-being" by my four co-authors and I for consideration for publication in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

As part of Stephanie's thesis for a PhD in Community psychology under Janie's supervision, it would be an honor to have this article published in our discipline's most prestigious journal. The manuscript presents unpublished results from our "Flash on my neighborhood!", a multi-case participative action research project which aims at improving the well-being of public housing tenants through the collective improvement of their residential environment in the province of Québec, Canada.

This study presents the results of a cross-case analysis of a photovoice process conducted in six public housing sites. Tenant-researchers showed the residential environment as mostly positive, while identifying most negative aspects to the particularities of public housing. They also highlighted tensions regarding relations with their neighbors and opportunities to participate in the residential environment.

This manuscript has not been published and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose, and we certify we have complied with APA ethical principles in our treatment of individuals participating in the research. The study was approved by the IRB at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Thank you for your consideration,

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Conflict-of-Interest Disclosure Form

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Manuscript Title: Complexity of Life in Public Housing: A Multi-Case Photovoice Study Examining the Relationship Between Residential Environment and Tenant Well-being

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☒ I have included a section, Conflict-of-Interest Statement, in the manuscript (required even if just to state there are no disclosures).

☒ I have no potential conflict of interest pertaining to this submission to *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

Category for Disclosure	Description of Interest/Arrangement

Author Completing this Form: **Janie Houle**

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Date: **30-06-2021**

Ethical Principles Authors are required to state in their submission cover letter that they have complied with APA ethical principles in their treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript. They should also note that the research has been approved by their organizational unit responsible for the protection of human participants.

Complexity of Life in Public Housing: A Multi-Case Photovoice Study Examining the Relationship Between Residential Environment and Tenant Well-being

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Highlights

- Describes a multi-case photovoice study conducted in six public housing sites in Québec, Canada.
- Presents the aspects that tenant-researchers consider positive and negative for their well-being.

- Identifies the complexity of life in public housing and the potential impacts on tenants' well-being.
- Reflects on the importance of considering organizational and social levels of empowerment.

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Declarations

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Conflicts of interest/Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval (402_e_2017) was granted by the institutional research ethics board for research involving human participants at Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada. The participants have signed a written consent form which was thoroughly explained to them before taking part in the study, with all their questions answered if applicable. The authors have complied with APA ethical principles in the treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript.

Complexity of Life in Public Housing: A Multi-Case Photovoice Study Examining the Relationship Between Residential Environment and Tenant Well-being

Abstract

As a social policy, public housing aims to reduce social inequalities by providing access to affordable dwellings. Studies examining the relationship between public housing as a residential environment and tenant well-being have yielded mixed results. Moreover, few of these studies adopted a participatory design. A multi-case photovoice study was undertaken to amplify public housing tenants' voices concerning aspects of their residential environment that have a positive or negative influence on their well-being. To this end, 303 captioned photos were collected by 59 tenant-researchers at six sites in Québec (Canada). In-depth cross-case analysis of the material led to four key-themes: a) Residential environment perceived as mostly positive; b) Public housing related to most negative elements; c) Services influenced sense of community; and d) Participation as potentially limited. These findings illustrate the complexity of life in public housing, where positive and negative aspects co-exist and tenants report a weak sense of control over the possibility of making meaningful change. Community-based participatory research involving public housing tenants shows their desire and capacity to have a say in improving their residential environment. Empowerment strategies to promote tenant involvement should target the organizational level as well instead of focusing solely on the individual level.

Keywords: public housing, well-being, photovoice, residential environment

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> Health and health inequalities tell us a great deal about the good or bad effects of social policies.
>
> —Sir Michael Marmot

Social policies are an essential lever for tackling health inequalities (Barsanti et al., 2017). These inequalities are created by the unequal distribution of resources among a population on the basis of social status. Social policies have the potential to redistribute resources in a way that lessens the impact of inequalities on health (Whitehead & Dahlgren, 2006). Housing represents a key social determinant of health (Swope & Hernández, 2019). Housing policies, such as public housing programs, were implemented in many countries in the past decades to offer access to affordable housing (Suttor, 2016; Vale & Freemark, 2012). These programs are part of the social policies aimed at decreasing economic inequalities and improving the health of residents (Bryant, 2003; Waterston et al., 2015).

In 2019, there were 74,337 households in Québec (Canada) living under the government subsidized public housing program, which sets rent at 25% of a household's income (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2020). The program was funded by the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government but managed locally by housing authorities (Vaillancourt et al., 2001). Given the lack of affordable housing (Macdonald, 2019), the public housing program began prioritizing applicants for public housing based not only on very low income, but also on other physical, psychological, or social difficulties (Morin et al., 2014). According to housing authorities, this has contributed to aggravate tenant profiles by increasing the proportion of people with psychological disorders or physical disabilities in this population (Morin et al.,

2014). Although the program presented an inherent selection effect whereby applicants were chosen specifically because of their poor health and adverse situation, research has shown that living conditions in public housing could also influence health and well-being (Fertig & Reingold, 2007). Studies have also documented other problems in public housing with a potential bearing on tenant health, such as poor sound-proofing, pest infestation, and conflictual relations between tenants (Shah et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2017).

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease of infirmity" (World Health Organization, 1948). Scholars have criticized this definition, pointing out, for example, the near impossibility of achieving the goal of "complete well-being" (Leonardi, 2018). However, two aspects of the definition remain highly relevant: health and well-being are more than the absence of ill-being, and well-being is multi-dimensional. For Keyes (2002), well-being entailed individual dimensions, namely, emotional (positive emotions, life satisfaction) and psychological (self-growth, environmental mastery, autonomy), but also a social dimension regarding interactions with one's surroundings (integration and social actualization).

Research on the characteristics of public housing that promote or hinder tenant well-being remains limited. To understand this influence, housing must be considered through the concept of residential environment that encompasses not only one's dwelling but also the surrounding neighborhood (Amérigo & Aragonés, 1990). The residential environment is composed of both physical and social structures. For example, according to Horelli (2006), environments include four types of structures: *physical*, which represent built or natural spaces such as buildings or green spaces; *functional*, which are services available through commercial, community or municipal organizations; *participatory*, which represent the opportunities to take part in decision

making or capacity building; and *sociocultural,* which comprise relational and normative aspects such as sense of security.

Ground-breaking research on public housing was conducted in the context of massive renovations and relocations in North America during the late 1990s and early 2000s (August, 2014; Manzo, 2014; Manzo et al., 2008). It challenged the traditional rhetoric concerning public housing as a place of last resort by exposing the "benefits of concentrated poverty" (August, 2014, p. 1317). Study participants indicated that they appreciated the sense of community shared with their neighbors and the central location of their homes, which allowed easy access to services (August, 2014; Manzo, 2014; Manzo et al., 2008). This literature shed light on positive aspects rarely documented previously, but the context of relocation or redevelopment was not necessarily typical of life in public housing and limited our understanding of the everyday life of tenants.

In one study involving public housing tenants not confronted with relocation or redevelopment, researchers conducted focus groups with 28 residents in Baltimore, Maryland (Hayward et al., 2015). Three of the four themes identified from discussions were negative: public housing's physical environment hinders health, urban environment limits opportunities for healthy lifestyle choices, and lack of trust in interpersonal relations contributes to social isolation (Hayward et al., 2015). The fourth theme underlined the participants' hope for improvement and concerned ways an increase in social capital could improve well-being in the neighborhood (Hayward et al., 2015). This last theme suggested a desire for change and a potential for tenant mobilization. While the study was important in documenting the perceptions of public housing tenants, the number of participants was small and the use of focus groups limited community participation. This is a major gap in our knowledge, especially given the call for increased access

to community participation and greater tenant control over their residential environment (Paradis, 2018; Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014)

A community-based participatory approach might be useful in public housing research to engage with groups who have traditionally held less power (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). The photovoice method allows not only to document the perspective of participants through participatory photography and to engage them in a critical dialogue on the issues that they consider most important; ultimately, it also allows to reach decision-makers in order to foster social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). A few photovoice studies have been conducted with public housing tenants, focusing on tenants' experiential knowledge of their residential environment (e.g., Freedman et al., 2014; Petteway, 2019). However, these have involved a small number of participants and have generally focused on only one public housing site each.

Research findings on public housing have been contradictory, demonstrating on the one hand that it could constitute a positive residential environment and, on the other, that it might undermine tenant health. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no participatory research had engaged with public housing tenants on a large scale. It is against this background that [Project Name] was undertaken. This was a large-scale community-based participatory action research project aimed at involving public housing tenants in the evaluation and improvement of their residential environment (see Authors, 2017, for more details). The first step in the study was to conduct a participatory diagnosis of the residential environment where tenants co-constructed knowledge with the research team. To this end, a photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) process was implemented in six public housing sites in the province of Québec, Canada. The findings from the photovoice study's first site were presented in a previous article (Authors, 2018). Since then,

this portion of the research was completed in all six sites, making it possible to carry out the full analyses planned under the study's multi-case design.

The aim of this paper is to comprehensively document the perspective of public housing tenants on how their residential environment positively or negatively influences their well-being. More specifically, our objective was to use the photovoice method to compare six public housing sites and identify the patterns underlying the relationship between residential environment and tenant well-being.

Method

Study Design

We applied a multi-case design to compare how public housing tenants perceived the relationship between their residential environment and their well-being across six cases. The cases were public housing sites and their surrounding neighborhoods during the three-month period that the photovoice process took place. We chose the sites based on a purposeful sampling strategy requiring rich cases with the potential to highlight pertinent information about the phenomenon (i.e., intensity sampling; Patton, 2014). Sites were selected with the help of housing authorities based on a series of contrasting characteristics, including city size and types of tenants (see Table 1 for more details).

Participants

The tenants involved in this study were considered tenant-researchers following a peer-research approach where people with lived experience of the phenomenon under study actively participate in the research process (Buffel, 2019; Roche et al., 2010). As such, they took part in data collection, analysis and dissemination while being offered training and support. Research

assistants placed recruitment flyers in the common spaces of the buildings and sent every household an explanatory invitation letter.

An average of ten tenant-researchers per site agreed to participate (N = 59; see Table 1 for details), which was appropriate for photovoice studies (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather et al., 2009). To participate, tenants had to be 18 or over, live in one of the public housing sites considered, and be sufficiently fluent in French.[1] The facilitation team organized meetings on site at the six locations. Tenant-researchers received $20 as compensation for each meeting and, at the end of the study, got to keep the digital camera that they were given. We also provided a meal for groups before each meeting. Every tenant-researcher signed a consent form and the study was approved by the Université du Québec à Montréal's Research Ethics Committee.

[Insert Table 1]

Data collection

The captioned pictures produced by the tenant-researchers were the primary data source. The descriptive notes of the meetings and the interpretative field notes taken by the research assistants constituted a secondary source. Tenant-researchers knew they were participating in a multi-site study but each group completed the data collection process independently without any knowledge of what transpired on the other sites.

Tenant-researchers collected the data following a photovoice process (Wang & Burris, 1997) facilitated by a different group of three research assistants on each site. The group met at

[1] At one site, one tenant-researcher was not a resident and spoke limited French. She was allowed to participate because she lived in a nearby public housing site, was friends with tenants at the research site, and one facilitator and other tenant-researchers could translate for her. The decision was made also because the person was socially isolated and not allowing her to participate might have caused her harm. She understood that she had to consider matters in terms of the site under study.

eight to nine weekly sessions that lasted about 2.5 hours each. The first two served to instruct and train the tenant-researchers on the study's concepts (well-being and residential environment), research ethics and photography. Over the course of the next four sessions, tenant-researchers presented and discussed pictures they took to answer our overarching research question: "How does your residential environment positively or negatively influence your well-being?" On these occasions, the group consisting of all tenant-researchers and facilitators on each site also conducted an iterative thematic analysis of the pictures.

The last sessions focused on organizing a public exhibit of the pictures taken specific to each site. For the purpose, the tenant-researchers wrote captions to convey their messages and deliberated over the pictures to include in the exhibit. Tenant-researchers completed a form to identify pictures that represented aspects that they felt had the most significant, positive, or negative influence on their well-being. The exhibit was held at public venues (e.g., municipal library, cultural center) where other tenants, decision-makers and community organizations discovered the work and exchanged with the tenant-researchers to better understand their perceptions and messages. For the six sites, the tenant-researchers chose a total of 303 captioned pictures for the presentation in the public exhibit. A more detailed description of the different steps involved in this photovoice process has been published elsewhere (Authors, 2018). Throughout this process, the research assistants took field notes to have a factual account of each meeting and interpretative notes to document their views, perceptions, and reflections.

Data Analysis

Once the six sites had completed the photovoice process, the first author (SR) engaged in a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). During the first stage of the analysis, she considered each site individually to gain an in-depth understanding of the local context, while also keeping in

mind the overarching research objective of identifying the aspects of the residential environment that have a positive or negative influence on public housing tenants' well-being (Stake, 2006). A descriptive case report was drafted by triangulating the tenant-researchers' captioned pictures, the research assistants' field notes, and contextual data gathered by the research team. To organize the data and allow a more efficient comparison between sites, the 303 captions by the tenant-researchers were deductively analyzed using a coding grid with NVivo 12 software. We built the coding grid based on the study's conceptual framework (Horelli, 2006; Keyes, 2002). This allowed the coder to identify the valence of the caption (positive or negative effect on well-being), the residential environment's structures (functional, participatory, physical, or sociocultural), and the dimensions of well-being (emotional, psychological and social). At this stage, eight captioned pictures were removed either because they were too vague to be analyzed without over-interpretation or because they did not address the research question.

At the second stage of the analysis, the first author completed several cross-case matrices to highlight the similarities and differences between the six sites. The goal of this comparison was not to emphasize each case's unique situation but rather to use the cases as selected examples to better understand the phenomenon as a whole (Stake, 2006). She then drafted a summary of the emerging patterns for every matrix and presented excerpts of these analyses to obtain critical feedback from a group of colleagues. These iterations led to the identification of key-themes that transcended the cases (Chmiliar, 2010; Stake, 2006).

At the third and final stage of analysis, the authors formulated general explanations to account for the key-themes identified in the previous stage. The goal of this stage was to synthesize the information in a coherent portrait of the phenomenon under study (Stake, 2006). In this process, the main coder carefully reflected upon specific questions to nuance the general

explanations: Is the data sufficient to lead to this general explanation?; Are some of these explanations related?; What is the relevance of each explanation with regards to the main research question? (Stake, 2006). By answering these questions in depth, she refined the findings and organized these explanations in a coherent manner.

During this process, the main coder kept as close as possible to the tenant-researchers' intended messages. To do so, she chose to analyze mainly the captions, which afforded a certain insight into the tenant-researchers' points of view. To add to the credibility of her analyses, she used extensive field notes to triangulate data sources and viewpoints (Tracy, 2010). To enhance the trustworthiness of the process, she regularly presented excerpts of her analyses to "critical friends" whose role it was to challenge her explanations and foster reflexivity (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This allowed her to include diverse perspectives and competing explanations (Stake, 2006). The coder also kept a detailed analysis journal to keep track of difficulties encountered and decisions made. It is also important to mention that she facilitated the photovoice process in one of the sites and supervised the process in the four last sites. This enabled her to have a prolonged immersion not only in the data but also in the context specific to each site.

Results

Four key-themes transcended the sites: a) Residential environment perceived as mostly positive; b) Public housing related to most negative elements; c) Services influenced sense of community; and d) Participation as potentially limited.

Residential Environment Perceived as Mostly Positive

At every site, tenant-researchers reported a greater proportion of positive elements related to their residential environment than of negative elements. They discussed access to nature,

positive relations with their neighbors and community resources, as well as elements related to their apartments, such as interior decoration and the right to have pets.

Access to green space and nature was a positive physical structure mentioned at all the sites. In Gladstone, one tenant-researcher indicated that she was very happy to live in her neighborhood because of the easy access it afforded to nature while living in the city. A tenant-researcher living in Cloverdale said that the numerous squirrels roaming on the site were positive: "It's like zootherapy for my kids. For instance, we can learn respect and calmness from watching them and feeding them." At some sites, the tenant-researchers mentioned that they enjoyed the well-maintained architectural and historic buildings in their neighborhood, which elicited a sense of shared pride in their city's heritage.

The tenant-researchers also identified many functional structures that were beneficial for their well-being. In all but one site, community resources that provided basic necessities (e.g., food, clothes, furniture) were deemed to be an important part of the residential environment. In describing a food bank, a Cloverdale tenant-researcher wrote: "It's a very good initiative and a privilege to have this kind of help here. We are very lucky and proud." This type of resource also represented an opportunity for certain tenant-researchers to engage in a participatory structure by volunteering. At every site, tenant-researchers mentioned the availability of recreational facilities, such as swimming pools, libraries, and sports fields.

Tenant-researchers in most of sites discussed the positive relationships that they had forged with other tenants, in connection with sociocultural structures. In Hafford, tenant-researchers took several pictures to showcase their cordial relations with neighbors or a close group of friends that formed after years of living in the same public housing site (see photo no. 1 in Figure 1). In Parkville, one tenant-researcher underlined the strong relationship that she had

with a friend who "is a gem for me because she does things for me that I can't do, in addition to being a good friend. This is a beautiful photo that illustrates friendship and support between tenants."

In St-Thomas, a few tenant-researchers took pictures of elements of their interior decoration. The pictured items were all significant emotionally for them as they related to their family heritage or to memories of the past. Finally, the right to have domestic animals was mentioned in most sites as a positive element for tenant well-being. Many tenant-researchers reported that they felt "lucky" that the housing authority gave them such a right. In Cloverdale, only cats were allowed on the premises, which had one tenant-researcher sharing: "Domestic animals can offer a family a sense of security and of trust. However, we are not allowed to have dogs at Cloverdale and many tenants had to give theirs up when they moved in."

Public Housing Related to Most Negative Elements

The tenant-researchers identified a number of negative elements adverse to their well-being, of which a strong majority related specifically to living in public housing, such as strict regulations, lack of intimacy, lack of proper maintenance, and conflicts between tenants.

The functional rules and regulations related to the housing authority were often pointed to as generating a lack of autonomy or a decreased sense of control. In Hafford, tenant-researchers mentioned that, although they were happy to have access to a community garden onsite, they were disappointed that they had not been consulted about its location. In fact, the housing authority, unaware of how tenants had been using the space, put the garden in the only grassy area where the children could play soccer. Difficulties related to shared and paid laundry were mentioned at many sites, with one tenant-researcher saying: "Why does it cost so much in

addition to being complicated and not very hygienic? It doesn't bring me well-being and it's even destructive for me." More globally, a tenant-researcher underlined:

> When we sign our lease, we have rules to follow (…) We have no control and live a sense of injustice. I find it important to talk about it because this situation can cause psychological damage. The consequences can be serious.

Concerning the sociocultural structures, tenant-researchers in some sites talked about a certain lack of intimacy. In St-Thomas, a tenant-researcher underlined: "Behind the door of each of the 133 apartments, there is a person. This picture represents the need to respect people's intimacy and their right to privacy. To feel good at home is to feel respected by your neighbors who are so close. St-Thomas is a small village inside a building." Tenant-researchers at two other sites took pictures to convey a similar message, as the one taken in Parkville shown in Figure 1 (see photo no. 2). During discussions around the right to privacy the subject of gossiping among tenants was often evoked, including the strain it could put on relationships with neighbors. One tenant-researcher in Lawrenceville mentioned in his caption that "Sometimes, isolating oneself can make it easier to be a good neighbor" and in ensuing discussions, the group emphasized "the importance of respecting privacy and the importance of making efforts to promote cohabitation between tenants."

Often, separate aspects had an incremental influence on well-being, as when the lack of proper maintenance or repair from the housing authority resulted in defective or unsafe spaces. At Gladstone, a tenant-researcher took a picture of an unfinished worksite in front of the building, which was unsafe as people had slipped using the entrance that was being renovated. Physical structures interacted with sociocultural structures at many sites. At Parkhill and Lawrenceville, tenant-researchers underscored the poor sound insulation that led to conflicts between neighbors:

> I hear my neighbor speak like we were in the same apartment, but in a different room. I don't feel at home. We have to live with the fact that there is no soundproofing. We feel intruded on by the neighbors and that creates a lot of conflict.

Similarly, tenant-researchers at four sites raised the issue of waste disposal as a source of conflict that comprised a physical and sociocultural aspect. As one tenant-researcher mentioned: "This garbage container is dirty and does not present a positive image of Hafford." At Gladstone, as the garbage chutes were difficult to open, many tenants just left their bags on the floor next to them.

Services Influenced Sense of Community

Tenant-researchers reported that how they were treated by services and organizations could positively or negatively impact their sense of belonging to their community.

At Lawrenceville, tenant-researchers criticized recent administrative decisions that led to diminished services. For example, one caption mentioned: "In addition to being under the poverty line, to get our welfare benefits, we now have to pay for transportation to get to the new service center located in another sector." At Cloverdale, one tenant-researcher explained how certain practices of the local and regional public housing organizations were detrimental to his well-being:

> Building inspectors: when shown a wall full of mold, tell us to wash and paint. For our windows that freeze during wintertime, they ask us to open our window when we take a shower, even though it's 20 below. What I am denouncing is the lack of respect that I see on the part of the authorities. Even if we have low income, we have the right to a home that respects our dignity.

Certain tenant-researchers discussed the lack of connection between the public housing and other essential services, which limited their accessibility. For example, one tenant-researcher mentioned that many tenants who lived with chronic physical or mental health problems tended not to seek professional help. At certain sites, tenant-researchers also mentioned that they lacked

information about opportunities with the potential to improve their well-being and sense of inclusion, such as community gardens and free prescription glasses.

Tenant-researchers also identified ways that services could improve their sense of being part of the community. At some sites, tenant-researchers discussed inclusion in their local church as making them feel accepted and improving their sense of community. At Lawrenceville, a tenant-researcher took a picture of a coffee shop with a social vocation that offered cultural events and food at affordable prices (see photo no. 3 in Figure 1). This was part of services that tenant-researchers identified as contributing to their sense of inclusion in their community by helping them meet their basic needs.

Under this theme, tenant-researchers also discussed people with restricted mobility and how their residential environment influenced their well-being. This was especially salient at Gladstone, where one tenant-researcher used a wheelchair. In one picture, he showed the adaptations that were made to his bathroom to increase his autonomy. A different story was told at St-Thomas, a site reserved for older adults: "Access to the balcony is difficult for the elderly. It's hard stepping over the threshold. It's too high."

Participation as Potentially Limited

Participatory structures were the least mentioned aspect of the residential environment but were referred to as mostly positive. Following Horelli's (2006) model, participatory structures represent opportunities offered in the residential environment to give back to one's community, to be involved in decision-making or to develop one's capabilities. Some tenant-researchers mentioned formal ways of participating in their environment, such as volunteering. The tenant-researchers at Parkville were very involved in their residential environment and offered many examples, such as the tenant association, the collective kitchen and the foodbank.

Similarly, tenant-researchers in Cloverdale mentioned volunteering either in the tenant association or in a community organization (see photo no. 4 in Figure 1). At Hafford, two people drafted the following joint caption to a picture:

> Numerous Hafford tenants volunteer and are involved in our community. Organizations like the local support center and hospital have missions that are dear to our hearts. We are also involved in our environment with the collective garden and the tenant association. Sharing and cooperation are values that are very important to us.

A couple of tenant-researchers reported experiences of how they were able to give their opinion and influence their environment. In Parkville, a tenant-researcher photographed the tenant committee to underline how they work towards issues important for tenants. A person from Lawrenceville described an experience he had: "After an initiative from Lawrenceville tenants and a nice discussion with the city, a net was installed close to the baseball field and Lawrenceville is now safer."

A few tenant-researchers discussed how they were able to develop their talents and passions as a way to participate in their community. For example, one tenant-researcher at Gladstone explained how she learned to play guitar. Some tenant-researchers presented ideas that they had for improving their residential environment or pointed to obstacles they faced when they wanted to participate in their community. As one person from Parkhill put it:

> We are all people who don't have a lot of money and we often have to make choices. I placed my work cap on top of my art supplies because that's what takes over in my life right now.

Discussion

This was the first multi-case photovoice study of public housing tenant perceptions of how their residential environment influences their well-being. The study's implementation in six distinctive sites yielded rich and nuanced results that shed light on how complex the reality of tenant-researchers can be. Our results show both "good" and "bad" effects on tenant well-being

and health of public housing as a social policy. While public housing tenants tend to face more adversity than the general population, they described their residential environment as mostly positive overall. The negative aspects they identified were related to particularities of living in public housing, suggesting that the public housing program has many "bad" aspects that need improvement. The study adds depth to a body of literature that suggests that tenant satisfaction and dissatisfaction coexist regarding public housing residential environments (August, 2014; Gibson, 2007; Hayward et al., 2015; Manzo, 2014; Manzo et al., 2008). On the whole, our findings suggest a lack of power among public housing tenants. Addressing this problem has the potential to improve their well-being.

Mostly Positive Residential Environment

Tenant-researchers discussed aspects of their residential environment that they considered beneficial for their well-being. Access to green spaces such as municipal parks or nature preserves was considered especially positive. This is consistent with other studies that underlined the importance for low-income residents to have access to nature (Arthurson et al., 2016; Maas et al., 2006). In a study of vacant spaces in a low-income neighborhood, participants discussed how they perceived well-maintained spaces to mean that neighbors were taking care of their surroundings (Sampson et al., 2017). This echoes the discourse of some tenant-researchers in our study who provided pictures of well-kept properties and reported how this elicited a sense of shared pride. Access to such green spaces did not appear to be an issue for them, whereas participants in other studies of public housing reported limited access to outdoor facilities for children as the local playground was rendered unsafe by criminal activities taking place there (Hayward et al., 2015).

Another positive aspect discussed by tenant-researchers was the community resources available in their residential environment, with an emphasis on those that helped meet basic needs. This resonates with findings from a study involving the tenants of a downtown public housing site in Toronto (Canada) undergoing a redevelopment project (August, 2014). The tenants mentioned the importance of having accessible resources to meet their basic needs, for example, affordable grocery stores and free classes for children in a local social agency (August, 2014). In the photovoice study by Freedman et al. (2014) with public housing tenants, participants pointed out both existing resources, like a community center, churches and recreation facilities, and the resources missing in their neighborhood. The tenant-researchers in our study did the same, underlining both positive and negative aspects of their environment.

Negative Aspects Mostly Related to Life in Public Housing

A novel aspect of our study is the distinction between the positive influence of the residential environment in general, and the negative influence of certain specifics of life in public housing. Our approach led tenant-researchers to distinguish the nested levels of their residential environment: dwelling, public housing site, and neighborhood. While they appreciated certain aspects of life in public housing, other items were recurrently presented as hindrances across the sites, notably poor quality building materials. Even though buildings on some of the sites had recently been renovated, aspects such as acoustic insulation were left wanting, and tenant-researchers discussed how this created conflicts between neighbors.

Above and beyond physical aspects of construction and maintenance, tenant-researchers had much to say about relations with public-housing-related institutions, including a lack of respect from building inspectors. Other studies of public housing have shown that tenants consider relational factors equally important to physical factors for their well-being (Arthurson et

al., 2016; Bond et al., 2012). Several tenant-researchers in our study also mentioned the many public housing regulations that curbed their autonomy and sense of control. This lack of control over their environment translated into various tension points.

Tension Points

The tension points mentioned by the tenant-researchers reflected mixed feelings amid this population. The two main tension points mentioned were relations between neighbors and participatory opportunities.

Some tenant-researchers mentioned positive relations with their neighbors and the importance of community, whereas others discussed a lack of intimacy. This is a recurrent theme in public housing research, with many studies mentioning the presence of a sense of community (Manzo, 2014; Tester et al., 2011), and others instead reporting ambivalent feelings towards their neighbors among participants (Hayward et al., 2015; Hicks & Lewis, 2019). To make sense of these seemingly incongruent findings, Raudenbush (2016) proposed the theory of selective solidarity, which postulates that public housing tenants initially consider relations from a position of distrust before carefully selecting a few people whom they consider trustworthy to build a small but efficient network. This might explain how some tenant-researchers in our study underlined their group of friends as a significant positive aspect of their residential environment, whereas others raised issues such as gossiping and lack of respect between neighbors.

Access to participatory opportunities was also reported in a seemingly contradictory manner. Although opportunities to participate were almost all described as positive, such opportunities were seldom mentioned. This could suggest that participatory structures were less important for tenant well-being. However, it could also be that there existed few opportunities or that they were not consistent with tenant needs and aspirations. Public housing tenants were

encouraged to participate in the tenant association, a formal and often demanding role not necessarily suited to everyone. Indeed, researchers in the UK have criticized participation in public housing as having been institutionalized and stripped of its original social movement potential (Bradley, 2012). The formal spaces of participation offered within the public housing program are narrowly defined by the housing authorities and regulations in effect. This runs counter to a genuine attempt at offering empowering opportunities. According to Gaventa (2006), "participation as freedom is not only the right to participate effectively in a given space, but the right to define and to shape that space" (p. 26). Similarly, in the context of Canada's National Housing Strategy (Paradis, 2018), advocates for a human rights-based approach to housing and homelessness in Canada have called for a shift away from consultation towards meaningful participation for people with lived experience.

Lack of Power

The tensions underlined in our study reflect two major problems that hinder empowerment research and practice. First, the term *empowerment* has been given a variety of meanings, many that deviate from its original essence, thereby diluting its conceptual clarity (Woodall et al., 2012). Whereas empowerment is defined as "practices seeking to build and exercise social power so the people and organizations gain greater control over their lives and affairs" (Christens, 2019, p. 179), our study yielded relatively little evidence of opportunities for tenants to gain greater control over their lives in public housing. On the contrary, tenant-researchers indicated that they felt that they lacked control over their environment in terms of regulations, physical structures and intimacy.

The second problem is that research and practices have focused primarily on empowerment at the individual level and that few words have been spent on the organizational

and community levels, whereas these were initially conceptualized as intertwined (Christens, 2019). This has limited knowledge and practices intended to reduce health inequalities (Woodall et al., 2012). Housing authorities have promoted empowerment practices as part of their social agenda to support tenants. However, very little attention has been lent to public housing sites and housing authorities as organizations. It is necessary to go beyond an individualistic vision of empowerment that places responsibility on tenants and to consider the contexts created for them from an organizational standpoint.

Our photovoice study of public housing can be considered as an attempt to provide a context that tenant-researchers could shape. The goal of the method was to create a space where power relations were mitigated and where groups could develop collective efficacy. The active participation of tenants as tenant-researchers in a participatory action research project shows that, when given significant opportunities to get involved in their environment, public housing tenants are not only able to do so, they also provide access to rich and profound knowledge about their environment.

Strengths and Limitations

The multi-case, participatory design of our study constitutes its principal strength. Comparing the findings from six sites with distinct contextual characteristics allowed to identify reliable key-themes that shed light on public housing in Québec (Canada). Furthermore, placing the focus on the experiential knowledge that tenant-researchers have of their environment allowed the research team to gain an understanding that otherwise would have been inaccessible. Some limitations need to be underlined. The photovoice process proved somewhat ineffective at seizing more abstract aspects of life in public housing projects. This might explain why participatory opportunities were so seldom mentioned by tenant-researchers. However, every

group of tenant researchers had the chance to name elements or aspects of their living environment that were missing or wanting and to reflect collectively on how to photograph them. Finally, as with most participatory processes, the tenant-researchers were mostly people who were already involved in their residential environment. This could have tainted their perception. Efforts were made to develop a more collective mindset by reminding tenant-researchers that they represented not only their immediate group, but all of their site's residents. These efforts seemed to have paid off, as tenant-researchers without children took pictures of recreational facilities and playgrounds for kids.

Conclusion

Our study provides fresh insight on the complexity of the reality of public housing tenants. Despite the considerable adversity that they faced, tenant-researchers described their residential environment as mostly positive but also underscored various negative aspects related to particularities of life there. Furthermore, tension points were identified in connection with a lack of power reported by tenant-researchers. In recent years, housing authorities have expressed the intention to implement empowerment interventions to enhance tenant well-being. Our study shows that public housing tenants are willing and able to take part in a meaningful participatory action research project. However, the limited participatory space that they are actually offered in public housing is a real barrier in this regard.

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Table 1

Contextual Characteristics of the Six Cases Under Study

Case	Description of site	Description of tenant-researchers
Parkhill	• Located on the outskirts of a large metropolitan center, in a mostly residential and industrial area with access to a nature park. • Very large housing authority managing close to 23,000 units. • Parkville contained 188 units in one high-rise, four smaller buildings and 13 townhouses. Built in the 1970s and extensively renovated from 2009 to 2014. • Mixed site with families and single adults under the age of 60. • Community organizations on site, including food bank and youth center. • Newly created tenant association specific to the site, supported by a community organizer from the housing authority.	• Ten women, the majority 36 to 55 years of age. • Five lived alone, three were single mothers with children, and two lived with a partner and children. • Most had lived in Parkhill one to two years, while two had lived there more than six years and had been relocated during the extensive renovations. • Nine had no employment and one had a part-time job. Many volunteered in various organizations. • Three had some mobility limitation due to health problems.
Hafford	• Located in a medium-size city known for its agri-food industry. • Small housing authority with 551 units under management. • Hafford contained 119 units in three buildings and 48 townhouses. Built in the 1970s with the three buildings entirely rebuilt in 2009. • Wedged between a busy street and railroad tracks, with a roundabout street with a single exit. There were no organizations on site, but there was a park for children. • Mixed site with families and single adults under the age of 60. • One tenant association for all the tenants in the city. A local committee had existed but was on hold because of conflicts.	• Ten women and one man. Five had immigrated from Colombia and one from Burundi. • Six were older adults living alone, and five were younger and lived with their family. • Most had lived in Hafford five years or more. • Six were without a job, three had a full-time job, one was retired, and one was a full-time student. Two were part of the tenant association. • Many said they wanted to participate in the study to change the stigmatized outlook other citizens had of the Hafford site.
Cloverdale	• Located in a small rural city characterized by bilingual citizens (rare outside of big cities in the province of Québec). The absence of public transit limited access to services and resources. • Smallest of the study's housing authorities with 198 units under management. • Cloverdale contained 98 units, in nine small buildings and ten townhouses. Built in 1972 and never significantly renovated. • Mixed site with families and single adults. • A community organization and housing authority offices on site. • One tenant association for all the tenants in the city.	• Seven women and six men with a mean age of 45 years. • Four were older adults living alone and nine were younger and lived with their family. Six were heads of single-parent households. • Most had lived in Cloverdale three to five years. • Seven had no job, one worked part-time, two were students, and three were looking for work. Most did volunteer work on a regular basis and three were involved in the tenant association. • Many mentioned that they wanted to participate in the study because they hoped to bring about change in their environment.

Case	Description of site	Description of tenant-researchers
Lawrenceville	• Large city with a bustling economy on the bank of the St-Lawrence River. • Small housing authority with 893 units under management. • Smallest of the six sites, 70 units in three buildings built in 1976 around a central courtyard, never significantly renovated. • Site for single adults under the age of 50. Type of tenancy had changed in recent years, but tenants exceeding the new age limit were not forced to move out. • No community organizations on site. • One tenant association for all tenants in the city.	• Two women and four men with a mean age of 56 years, many chose to stay on site even after the change in tenancy age limit. • All lived alone. • Three had lived in Lawrenceville three to five years and three, six or more years. • One was the site's representative for the tenant association. • Most mentioned that they wanted to participate because of their desire to photograph their environment. Two also mentioned being interested in the evaluative aspect of the project.
Gladstone	• Large city close to the national capital with access to an important nature preserve. • Medium housing authority managing 2,100 units. • Gladstone was the largest of the six sites, with 398 units in three high-rises. Built in 1972, it underwent major renovations in recent years (e.g., windows and doors replaced). • Two buildings were for older adults and the third, for families. Several units were adapted for tenants who used a wheelchair. • No community organization in situ. • Although each of the three buildings could have an individual tenant association, none existed.	• Four women and five men, including two couples living together. Most were 55 to 65 years old. • Most had lived in Gladstone six years or more. • Four lived alone and five lived with a partner. • Four were without a job, two were looking for work, two were retired, and one was working full-time. Most did volunteer work on a regular basis. • Half wanted to participate in the study to improve the neighborhood and half, to socialize and share ideas. • One had limited mobility, having to use a wheelchair.
St-Thomas	• Large city once recognized for numerous industries, now relied on government service jobs. • Medium housing authority managing 1,563 units. • St-Thomas contained 133 units located in a single high-rise. Built in the 1970s, some renovations over the years. • Site reserved for older adults, understood to be 50 or older. • Presence of an in situ community organization that offered services such as meals on wheels. • Tenant association had just been dissolved because of conflicts between members and other tenants.	• Group of six women and two men, which included two couples. Mean age of 68 years. • Four lived with partners and four lived alone. • Most had lived at St-Thomas for six years or more. • Two were without a job and six were retired, all volunteered regularly. • Most said that they wanted to participate in sparking improvements in and out the building. Some mentioned their interest in the learning aspect of the project.

Note. The names of the sites were changed for confidentiality purposes. All the mentioned characteristics were valid at time of project which ran from Fall of 2015 for the first site, to Fall 2017 for the last two sites.

Figure 1

Pictures and Captions Illustrating Each Theme

Photo no. 1 This is the social scene at Hafford. We're friends, we talk, we chat in the evening. When I moved to Hafford, I was advised to do my own thing and not to socialize with the other tenants. But that's impossible for me, I'm just a naturally sociable person. I don't regret doing what I did at all because I made some very good friends, which is all the more important for someone like me who lives alone.

Photo no. 3 Café la Mosaïque: A cultural place for meeting up, work and relaxation, accessible to all. The tenant-researchers point out that that it is one of the few meeting places in the neighbourhood that has a social vocation.

Photo no. 2 Here are the halls of Daily Life. I can hear the voices in the hall that resound like in the vault of a cathedral. This confirms to me that I do not live alone, that behind each door hides a daily life different from mine.

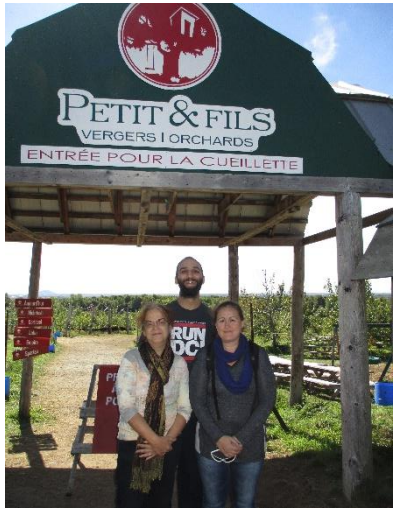

Photo no. 4 Here are the members of the tenants' association who were present at the apple activity, a real success with 54 tenants present. The association serves as a link between the tenants and the housing authority and creates a participative life in every public housing development of Cloverdale.