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Middle Class Poverty Politics: Making Place, Making People

Victoria Lawson & Sarah Elwood, University of Washington

Welcome. You are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research Conference podcast. I'm Lisa Pruitt, a center faculty affiliate and the organizer of our November 2014 Poverty and Place Conference. This conference brought together scholars from across the social sciences to present and discuss new work on how space and place inflect various dimensions of poverty.

In this presentation, Victoria Lawson and Sarah Elwood discuss their work on the neighborhood formations of class, race, and poverty politics. Lawson and Elwood are professors of Geography at the University of Washington.

>> Well good afternoon everybody, and thank you so much Lisa, for that really generous introduction and for inviting us.

We're really happy to be here. It's very cool as geographers to be at a conference that's explicitly about Poverty in Place, I must say. You're gonna get introduced to the Sara and Vicky show. We have a feminist politics of collaboration where we literally share presentations, just to be really clear about the way we produce knowledge.

And sort of perform what we do in our work. Unfortunately Sam Nowak who's at UCLA is not able to be here with us, but he was equally embedded in the process of producing this piece of work. So we wanted spend a moment explaining the context for the particular empirical project that we're going to present to you today.

And that broader context is the Relational Poverty Network. And this is a network funded by the National Science Foundation, what's called a research coordination network. Which really, in our case, is intended to create a community of poverty scholars who think in terms of the following four precepts. So four ideas that bind this network together.

And the first of these is, if you will, a global orientation to theorizing poverty. What calls posing third world questions of first world places. So by this we mean explicit collaboration with colleagues from elsewhere for the majority world, to sort of trouble, and question, and push our own ways of framing and understanding the causes of poverty.

So that's one of the core idea is to engage in collaborations, to listen, to bring in theoretical perspectives, concepts, ideas that we might not have otherwise thought about if we had only rooted our work in a US context. A second key precept of this network and its collaborators is to take seriously the voices of those who are marginalized in all kinds of ways.

As theoretically relevant. As theoretically salient. That is to say, network members look at the questions of poverty from multiple perspectives. They may look at processes of criminalization, racialization, gendering. They may look at class processes, which is what we will look at today. So part of the emphasis of our work is to think of poverty as overdetermined.

That is, produced through multiple simultaneous causes. And produced in particular contexts, in particular ways. Poverty is having geohistories. A third aspect of relational poverty work that we will

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demonstrate today has to do with thinking of the role of the non-poor in the production of poverty. Thinking of the role of the non-poor.

It may seem to you guys to be a bit counter-intuitive to give a paper on middle class actors at a poverty conference, but that is explicitly part of what we're about is trying to think about those groups that are implicated in the production of poverty and that who haven't necessarily been the focus of analysis and attention.

So we're interested in the middle class because they are the normative aspirational identity and group within US society and also in our Argentinian colleague society, who in some sense produce poverty through a cultural consensus about who is poor and why it is that they're poor, a set of narratives that are received, understood and repeated.

The final tenet of this relational poverty network is that we maintain an openness to surprise. That is, we're interested epistemologically in refusing to know too much before we get into the work. To leave openness in our work. So, for example, today, we're going to ask questions about the possibility of cross class alliance.

Particularly starting from middle class actors. When, where and how do they engage with poor others in ways that don't reproduce middle class normality? So that's, in essence, the heart and soul of the relation of poverty network, and now Sarah is going to dig in a little more.

>> And actually this was all just reconfigured so we're gonna gloss over that.

So that's what you just heard. So, within the work the Relational Poverty Network, the project we're gonna talk about today on middle class poverty politics, that's just one strand of work that all of the network members are taking on. And specifically, so there's more to relational poverty work than the class relations and middle class sorts of questions that we're gonna ask today.

Our project looks at place making, which for us is the spacial and discursive practices through which people negotiate class identities. We're specifically focused on mixed income neighborhoods. So, place making is the imaginaries, the actions that people take to produce the kinds of neighborhoods that they want. That might include aesthetics, the kinds of amenities, the people who are, or not there.

The kinds of things that are behaviors, activities in neighborhood space that are accepted or not. And, much of what we're gonna talk about today is the way that place making is intimately interwoven with the production of class identities, class relations, race and class normativities. So it takes place as always produced rather than a context that then modifies other kind of processes.

So the paper that we're presenting today has two goals. First we want to show that middle class place making is also about poverty politics, so as much as it is about middle class tastes and aspirations. Middle class place imaginaries are rooted in narratives and norms that also always are framed in contrast with imaginaries of poverty.

Oftentimes, encounter relationships that frame poverty as disgusting, threatening, criminal, all kinds of other imaginaries. So we're interested in how middle class actors produce poverty politics through their place making practices. And somewhat counterintuitive, given the boundaries that I've just laid out,

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we're also interested in extending some of the conversation that exists in existing literature that focuses only on boundaries.

We want to ask also where alliance building moments might happen. You know, when, where, and why, as Vicki said, do middle class people act in alliance with poor others. We'll show evidence, that, yes, middle class place making reproduces boundaries, problematic poverty politics. But our project also asks and finds openings for alliance, other kinds of political possibilities.

The Seattle discussion we're gonna talk about today is just one piece of a bigger project on collaboration with Colleagues in Argentina, one of whom is an anthropologist, the other's a sociologist, were working in broadly comparative mixed income neighborhoods in Seattle and Buenos Aires. But we're just gonna present findings from the Seattle project today.

The project asks, it explores links between class identities, urban place making, and cross-class politics. So how do middle class people consolidate or transform their identities, in these kinds of interactions in place with poorer neighbors? And what kinds of poverty politics do they then end up advancing and supporting as part of that?

Briefly, what are poverty politics for us? What we mean by this is representations and judgment of who is poor, explanations for why they are poor, what should or should not be done as a result. So, as an example of where poverty politics are located and produced, things like rules governing people who receive welfare benefits, or visual representations of poverty and poor people in the media, in popular culture.

Scott's example this morning, imaginaries of places and their relationships to poverty. That was behind many of the refusals that you were finding in some of your evidence. Important to keep in mind, and Cheryl's commentary reminded us of this earlier today, that poverty politics are always also simultaneously racialized, they're gendered.

They intersect with other forms of social difference. So taking a political cartoon from, I want to say the 1980s, an invocation of the welfare queen as sort of signifier of poverty. Is that image is gendered, raced, Cheryl reminds us placed in a imaginary of urban poverty. And so always also spatial.

As for instance, things mutually constituted with say, the micro geographies of the welfare office. And here, I'll go to another example from Scott's paper, the social service agency in the suburbs that presents, they navigate a spatially hostile poverty politics around immigration by putting very different kind of visual representations in their window.

That's exactly what we need when we say this is intersectional, it is always spatial. And then the question of where we're going today. Why study middle class poverty politics? We start, it's important to lay out our conception of class. So we take class as a material position, an identity, also a strategy of governance.

And try to look at the way that all of those manifestations, processes of class, interweave together. With respect to the middle class and their poverty politics, from scholarship by Marx to scholarship by John Kenneth Galbraith. The middle class is typically framed as a contented majority, or an essentially conservative group that defends particular kinds of interests.

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Relational poverty work argues following people like Zwieg or that the very normativity of this idea of middle classness obscures fault lines, class fault lines in the US. And the imaginary that everyone is middle class, for instance. And so, because of that, it is this very non class status of the middle class, that is a critical problem for inquiry.

For us, that is a real foundational starting place. We see in the US the middle class is a strategy of governance. It's an idealized norm that de-politicizes class by individualizing success. Normalizing middle classness. Normalizing white privilege. A number of other things that we'll talk about today. So specifically we look at middle class poverty politics.

I'll hold on the place until we actually get there in the talk. We look at middle class poverty politics in residential neighborhoods. Precisely because residential neighborhoods are a site for the consolidation of middle class identities and for class indifference. We know that from, a host of research on middle class place making in residential neighborhoods.

Not just in the US but in lots of other parts of the world that also maps out intersections with race, gender, immigration, migrant status and other axes of difference. So, circling back on that-

>> Sweetie, that's me.

>> Yeah, that's you? Okay.

>> She does this to me all the time.

>> Oh, you did it to me last time.

>> You may wanna prompt me on the clicks cuz I don't always get them. Yeah, there we go. All right, so-

>> You're on the whole collaboration.

>> This is how it goes. So we want to talk to you about a particular empirical study today.

And so let me introduce you to the two neighborhoods that we worked in. All are pseudonyms, so don't be guessing.

>> So, this is the first neighborhood in which we worked. As Sarah said, we worked in two mixed income urban neighborhoods in Seattle. We've called them Pacton and Spruce Ridge.

I'll introduce the two places, and I'll come back and tell you a little bit about the nature of the field work. So Pacton, which is pictured here, is a historically white, originally working class neighborhood that fell on hard times in the 1980s and then again during the Great Recession.

It has higher than average number of households in poverty and also struggling middle class households, compared to the city overall. The built environment, as you can see is quite eclectic. Some residents refer to the areas on the left of the screen as quote, unquote, Poverty Gulch or the ghetto within the neighborhood.

And a lot of middle class residents' place-making efforts are focused on transforming the neighborhood landscape towards what one resident described, quote, as the good neighborhood everybody wants. But of course, this is contested in the neighborhood. And Pacton has struggled over the changes that are coming to the built environment.

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And I just wanna say we're gonna focus primarily on how neighborhood residents imagine and work to make this place. We're not gonna focus on sort of urban capital and gentrification processes writ large. So we're gonna focus much more on what's going on in the city. In the neighborhood, rather.

The other neighborhood that we'll look at is, the pseudonym is Spruce Ridge. And as you can see immediately, it's a much more uniform visual landscape. So this is a socially engineered, mixed income neighborhood that was built on top, literally, of a former low-income neighborhood that was a public housing project.

It's part of HOPE VI transformations of public housing. And as you can see, the neighborhood's aesthetic is tidy, uniform. You can't really tell from a cursory glance which are rental units, which are \$400,000 owned homes. This neighborhood has the explicit goal, explicit, of making low income residents into middle class subjects by shaping their behaviors and exposing them to middle class residents and lifestyles.

interestingly though, that said, Spruce Ridge was marketed to potential homeowner as a place where they could experience diversity. Yeah. Let me go back, very briefly, to the methods. We'd be happy to talk more about them, but we really, because we're looking at two different places, we're a little pushed for time.

But, essentially, we engaged in qualitative research between 2011 and 2013. Comparing these two neighborhoods, asking similar sorts of questions of residents. This qualitative field work involved a set of interviews, 20 in total, with residents in both neighborhoods. The residents are approximately equally men and women, ranging in age between 20 and 70.

Majority white but there were also some African American, East African and African American residents. All of the people we spoke to were actively engaged in place making. They were volunteers, they were active at community meetings. They were engaging with their neighbors and so pedagogical activities, you'll hear more about that in just a second.

They were going to council meetings, community meetings. We do not fix middle classness but we'll tell you that many of the residence self identified as middle class and just to give you a feeling for who they are, most were college educated, most were professionals, most were homeowners. And even though they were less economically secure than you might find in other parts of the city.

In addition to the interviews, we engage in participant observation at community meetings in the neighborhoods. And also looked at neighborhood blogs. And other kind of local media coverage of what was happening in these neighborhoods. So, in both of these two neighborhoods, I probably should have clicked by now.

There we go, yes time to click. In both of these two neighborhoods, as I said, we're interested in residents that are actively engaging in place making. Which means that they both encounter and also produce through those encounters a class and race difference. They do it in streets, in parks, and on buses.

They do it through involving themselves in community programs, neighborhood meetings, and their volunteering. Place making happens in and through their interactions in the socio space of the

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neighborhoods. Residents imagine the neighborhood that they want and they actively work to literally produce it. Whether that do that through changing the built environment, through governing the behavior of other residents, or including and excluding certain sorts of people.

So what we wanna do with the rest of our time is just tell you about three sets of practices or effects of middle class place making in these two neighborhoods. So the first is to talk about how middle class place making reproduces the ideals of middle class normativity.

Then we'll turn to how middle class place making actively produces poverty and poor others and finally albeit too briefly a little bit about some hopeful practices that we saw. So turning to the first of these three effects if you will of middle class place making. Well I will just dive in.

I was going to do the overview but I'm not going to do it. So let me turn to Pacton. In Pacton, remember that was the more racially mixed of the two neighborhoods? Place making involves actively creating an orderly, beautiful, safe, owner occupied neighborhood. Full of consumer amenities. Attributes that have long been associated with middle classness.

So, Kevin says. The unassumed inclusion, right. The normative everyone wants to live in a neighborhood they feel safe in. One of the safety things is being able to show off the neighborhood. Kevin's concern about showing off the neighborhood or the embarrassment that other residents expressed of a visible indications of poverty.

Show how resident's class identities are bound up with this safe, non threatening and non poor landscape. I should have said, and this is probably more than self evident given the time constraints, we are gonna give you little snippets of the ethnographic evidence, and you have to trust us or read the paper to know that there's a lot of richness behind what we'll be able to share with you in real time.

A second kind of place making that reproduces middle classness, has to do with the idea that the neighborhood is normatively white, it's unassumedly white. It's simply, that's what it is. It's also the desired landscape, so racial and ethnic diversity are articulated as desirable. But they're framed as an immunity to be consumed and enjoyed.

So for example Annie says, she feels lucky to live on her street because the neighbors are so diverse. So she's describing her Ethiopian neighbors. She said they'll open up the garage and they'll be roasting coffee. All these women in beautiful, fabulous dresses. It's like, wow.

>> In this statement, the good neighborhood that Annie and others are working to produce is predominantly white, but diverse enough to be fun, or cool.

It's an interesting expression because it erases whiteness as a form of racialize difference and instead, persons of color are perceived as a cruel enhancement to a white neighborhood. So if we turn to Spruce Rich, remember, this is the hopes six visually uniformed neighborhood we see something different going on.

Instead of place making being about transforming the neighborhood physical landscape, instead, this work of place making is more about changing people, acting on people. The emphasis is on the collective efforts to create the neighborhood as a landscape of opportunity. For poorer residents to assimilate up into the middle class, focusing on their behaviors and their characteristics.

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Poorer residents are expected to participate in a range of self improvement activities. English language, parenting or budgeting classes, nutrition and fitness opportunities. And, I just can't help the parenthetical comment that, if you're extremely low income, the last thing you need is a budgeting class. You know a lot about budgeting.

So, middle class residents their presence in the neighborhood and their expectations are about teaching poorer neighbors how to live similarly. As one humanist says, you're teaching people how to become citizens. Capable of living outside subsidized housing. People have an expectation that the yard is weeded. That you don't have broken furniture piled up on the porch.

So, here, we read this as a sort of middle class normatively that the neighborhood being made. Involves teaching people to create a clean orderly non disgusting environment. Another form of place making that takes place is that middle class residents who live here get to decide when and how they might participate in these educational activities.

And what sorts of participation by their neighbors are accessible? So one home owner who teaches a sewing class in the community center insists that class must focus on creating products for sale and expresses her authority to set the standards to decide who to help. I'm not gonna help everybody.

I'm gonna target and focus on the people that are just a little step further along. This statement performs middle class privilege, but it also constitutes of poverty politics of who is deserving of help and who is not. Who is undeserving. That classic binary. Only some poorer residents are deserving of assistance, those who are a little step above.

And are able to maximize the supposed benefits of this sewing class to move themselves into middle classness. So in terms of middle class place making, our first point is this. But it reinforces a sort of a dominant middle classness that is normatively white. And simultaneously reinscribes the otherness of poverty and the poor as that which must be changed, and Sarah will develop that point more.

What we ask in the second part of the paper is what are the kinds of poverty politics that result from this? How are they similar and different in these different places? And in both neighborhoods, poverty and poor others are framed as problematic. At odds with middle class norms.

The foundational point here is that these articulations are intimately related to one another. And so you see poor as problematic in each place but on different terms, and the kinds of poverty politics that result are different. So, in Packton, we find middle class residents express the idea that an excess of poverty is problematic.

So, one resident talking about a homeless encampment that's behind her house puts limits on that. It's okay, but, not in excess. And so we see, in her statement here homeless residents assumed to be criminal when present in sufficient numbers, they become threatening, dangerous to other residents. These are sentiments that threaded all through our interviews.

They generate a poverty politics that is where it becomes common sense to focus on limiting the presence or containing the presence of poverty, it can be present but only in certain ways. These

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dynamics were especially an evidence in their struggle during our field work over supportive housing facility for people who were formerly homeless and living with mental illness.

So a resident who eventually ended up supporting the facility says of it, you know I don't think it's gonna have a lot of negative impact. I think the population's gonna be pretty contained. But they've taken one of the easiest to develop and available pieces of land and locked it up.

So here we see excess of poverty generates a poverty politics of containment. The presence of poorer individuals is acceptable, but only because they're gonna be contained within their apartments. So it's intimately related to middle class place making. And then you see that reflected here that providing a safe home for vulnerable people is not a good thing because it locks up land that might be used for development.

And specifically what she's referring to here stems to some earlier remarks about sort of boutiques and coffee shops and cute little places that other neighborhoods have. In Spruce Ridge, at an abstract level, a similar problem. But it's on different terms. Here the focus is the public production of poor other happens through a racialized discourse of an excess of diversity.

So in Spruce Ridge, racialized difference stands in for poverty, and that's used to reinforce the otherness of the poor subject. So when I asked one of the residents about her interactions with a middle class resident. But, her interactions with her poorer neighbors, she says, well, the other thing is, the kids in the alley, their mother's aren't out there with them.

They're running around in the alley and cars are coming through. That might work in Somalia, but it won't work here in Seattle. What we see here is, explicit repeatedly. I was asking her explicitly about poverty. Answered always with race. So offering the figure of the non white immigrant mother who doesn't supervise her kids.

So you begin to see poverty identified through problematic behaviors and neighborhood space, reinforced as deviant through the spectre of bad parenting, differentiated from an unmentioned white norm with the repeated reference to East African immigrants. These are sentiments and a race for poverty substitution that was all over the interview transcripts from this place.

Part of what this does, and again I think you can see that this generates a poverty politics that focuses on behaviors in public space. It directly governs who is present and what they're doing. But it also begins to show us the limits to the commodified diversity that was used to market this place.

And speaks to the limited vision of mixed income neighborhoods that, part of what's happening in these kinds of places is an othering of the poor and a reinscription of middle class privilege in relationship to one another. We promised that we would talk about hopeful practices. So far our story is decidedly unoptimistic.

We see a reinforcement of middle class privilege, a deepening of poverty difference some really problematic poverty politics. And so we also ask, do alliance building moments ever happen? And our answer from this project is yes, we do find seeds of alliance, and they come from slippages in some of these class and race norms.

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That were articulated and performed in middle class place making. But only in Packton. So this slippage in class and race norms, sometimes it looks like questioning this ideal of the good neighborhood that everyone wants. Sometimes it's about a shift from a focus on consuming diversity.

>> You know the Ethiopian neighbors.

To asking really hard questions about differing material circumstances. So in a conversation about aesthetics in the neighborhood, where one resident was talking, she backed off of an earlier statement that characterized the neighborhood as junky. And she said, well how it actually works is you need enough energy and time in your life and money to make that kind of sacrifice just for your yard.

Those are the kinds of slippages that we see. Or new readings of the social and special landscapes of the neighborhood. So, for instance. Consider this quote Emma's rereading of African American teens walking down the middle of the street, and she's driving down the street. And she gives an alternate reading of that and says we need to let them have that.

Put that against the kids running in the alley. The earlier statement from Joann and you begin to see that yeah, there is an opening of some of the equations and norms that circulate in Spruce Ridge. She doesn't explicitly name racism. She doesn't explicitly name the kinds of marginalization, but she's starting to recognize and validate that there are other kinds of readings of this social space on people's inhabitation of it.

Woo, what happened here? There we go. These insights and these slippages, they matter because they can lead to hopeful practices. They make the space where an income more inclusive poverty politics might start to grow. There are openings for a different kind of poverty politics. In Packton, I think where we saw that grow was in the politics around the supportive housing facilities there.

>> It is there.

>> Which is right there, yes.

>> It looks very different now, that was when they were constructing it. So prompted by some of this critical questioning of place making norms and affect in Packton, residents organized a home based discussion series about this facility, and organized a huge forum that prompted both statements for the facility, against it unsurprisingly, but also really strong statements for it.

So one of the residents talks about it. She's conflicted. It was painful, it was a disaster, we made lots of mistakes, but we got people. And people who wouldn't ordinarily be in the conversation. This was a space where the previously unquestioned norms about what was good in the neighborhood and who it was good for were examined.

And it led to some very positive outcomes that you can ask us about in the Q&A. Briefly, why do we see this in Packton? We can again field in the Q&A, why not Spruce Ridge? But one of the things about this is yes, Packton includes a lot of middle class residents but many of them came to Hackton because it was one of the last places in Seattle that they could afford to be home owners.

So these are vulnerable, more vulnerable middle class households. Many experienced deepening vulnerability during the Great Recession and so I think their privilege is situated in that context, and may

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set the stage for certain kinds of insights and rethinking. And I think I left Vicky enough time conclude for us.

>> I shall be brief. So what does this paper do? It's very easy to be grandiose after a very specific case study so allow me to do that and give me the license. So we feel, we would like to argue that it's critically important to pay attention to the ways in which middle-class actors engage in alliances with poor or others.

That is to say that's one of those surprising moments that doesn't simply reinforce class boundaries. We know for sure and we certainly have plenty of evidence that place making by middle class actors absolutely reinscribes the boundaries, the norms, the narratives that you would expect. But it doesn't only do that.

It is also true, at least in this instance, that place making can contain the refusal, the willingness to trouble, the willingness to step back and question, those same norms and exclusions. So what we want to argue is that the poverty politics of middle class actors, even in NIMBY, residential politics are not already a foregone conclusion and that there's something here worth tapping into and worth trying to understand.

And it's saying that I shall leave you with a sincere thanks to the team of people that helped put this work together. Thank you very much.

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the Director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening.

The center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States. Our mission is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on domestic property, to disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Core funding comes from the US Department of Health and Human Services.

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