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Population & Societies

Neighbourliness in France: an enduring—and selective—practice

Jean-Yves Authier* and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière**

With the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, relations between neighbours have taken on new meaning. How neighbourly are people in France, and in what ways? Drawing on the My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey conducted in 2018, Jean-Yves Authier and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière examine whether we all interact with our neighbours in the same way. How is neighbourliness different according to dwelling type, educational level, income, and socio-occupational category?

In the 1980s, François Héran analysed neighbour relations in France using data from the Contacts survey (INED and INSEE, 1983) [1]. Some 35 years later, the My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey (Centre Max Weber and INED, 2018; Box 1) explored people's relations (visits, services exchanged, etc.) with neighbours in their apartment building (or in houses nearby) and with other neighbourhood residents. Between the two surveys, neighbour relations appear to have changed very little. But we do not all interact with our neighbours in the same way or with all neighbours alike. Practices depend on social and residential contexts.

Neighbourliness: still an important concept

In 2018, the share of people who visited neighbours and exchanged services with them was high, and similar to that observed 35 years earlier: 75% of respondents had been into a neighbour's home (in the same building or neighbourhood)⁽¹⁾ in the last 12 months, and 76% had invited a neighbour into their own home (vs. 73% and 74% in the Contacts survey); 68% had provided a service, and 63% had received one (vs. 62% and 62%). The least demanding reasons for visits and services (to have a chat, to borrow cooking

ingredients, etc.) were most frequently cited, but two-thirds of respondents participated in social exchanges (ranging from coffee to a meal), and almost one-third

Box 1. The My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey*

The My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey (Mon quartier, mes voisins) was conducted in two regions of France, Paris and Lyon, in the spring of 2018. Covering 14 neighbourhoods, it took place in seven different settings in each region: wealthy bourgeois neighbourhoods, gentrified working-class neighbourhoods taken over by more affluent households, and disadvantaged working-class neighbourhoods in the city centre; new neighbourhoods with a mix of social and private housing (districts of planned social mixing); high-rise estates in disadvantaged areas; declining peri-urban town centres; and rural peri-urban municipalities. The sampling rate was around 20% per survey zone, and a dual sampling protocol was applied (random selection and network sampling).

The survey was conducted by the Centre Max Weber and the French Institute for Demographic Studies and was funded by the Union sociale pour l'habitat and several social housing agencies, the Agence nationale pour la cohésion des territoires, the Institut pour la recherche run by the Caisse des dépôts et consignations, the Métropole de Lyon and the Ville de Paris, and the Plan urbanisme construction architecture.

For more information, see the survey website (in French): <https://mon-quartier-mes-voisins.site.ined.fr/>

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(1) In peri-urban rural municipalities, the term 'neighbourhood' was replaced by 'municipality'.

shared childcare tasks with neighbours, such as taking them to school or looking after them in their home. Only 10% never talked to their immediate neighbours (in the same building or street) versus 9% in the Contacts survey, and just 6% never spoke either to immediate neighbours or to other neighbourhood residents. While conversations often include small talk (about the weather, for example), topics such as neighbourhood affairs, personal life and, more rarely, politics or religion are also discussed (Table 1). Far from inconsequential, these conversations with neighbours are for many (74%) an opportunity to exchange information—on local shops (64%), schools (40%), job opportunities (23%), or finding domestic help (32%). Disputes may also arise, and these represent a particular form of neighbour relations (Box 2).

Neighbourliness: a socially differentiated practice

While neighbour relations are common, they differ across social groups. They are most frequent at intermediate ages (30–44 years), among families with

children, homeowners, and people who have lived in their neighbourhood for at least 10 years. They are less frequent among young people (18–29 years), people living alone, tenants, and recent arrivals (less than 2 years). Men and women are equally neighbourly, as are French-born people and immigrants. Neighbourliness increases with educational level and income; 10% of people with no qualifications and 11% of household members earning less than €1,000 per month have no relations with neighbours. This compares with just 4% among people with post-graduate qualifications and less than 1% among high earners (more than €6,000 per month).

The social hierarchy is especially visible for visits (coffee, tea, aperitif, meals) and exchanges of services (Table 2), with two exceptions: artisans and traders are more neighbourly than people in higher-level occupations, and personal service workers are more neighbourly than manual workers and civil service workers and police officers, despite their lower income. These two latter groups both work with the public and, more often than others, within or near their neighbourhood.

Discussions between neighbours are more varied at the top of the social hierarchy. People in higher-level occupations more often talk about politics and about

Table 1. Topics of conversation between neighbours

Topics	% who reported talking about...
• The weather (this and that, small talk)	83
<i>Neighbourhood affairs</i>	84
• the building or residence	68
• neighbours	58
• the neighbourhood	68
• topics linked to the town or city	60
<i>Personal life</i>	81
• work (or neighbours' work)	57
• leisure activities (sport, music, cooking, holidays, etc.)	61
• children and their education	48
• country of birth (or of neighbours' birth)	43
• other personal topics about oneself (or neighbours)	57
<i>Politics and/or religion</i>	48
• politics	41
• religion	31
Coverage: All residents of the 14 surveyed neighbourhoods. Source: My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey 2018 (Centre Max Weber and INED).	

Box 2. Disputes and other neighbourhood disturbances

Contrary to common belief, neighbourhood disputes have not increased since the 1980s. Only 1 in 4 respondents reported at least one dispute since moving into their current dwelling. That said, 86% complained of nuisances, such as noise (66%), dirtiness or vandalism (45%), incivilities (28%), etc., although in half of cases they did not result in conflict, judgement, or a refusal to talk to the neighbours concerned. Disputes represent a particular form of neighbour relations: less interaction means less trouble.

Table 2. Social selectivity of neighbourliness

Occupational categories (ranked by earnings level)	% reporting		
	visits	exchange of services	chatting
Higher-level occupations (executives and business owners)	76	76	96
Higher-level occupations (intellectual and cultural)	79	85	99
Artisans and traders	76	86	97
Intermediate occupations in education, health, and social care	74	84	96
Administrative and technical intermediate occupations	71	85	98
Clerical and sales workers	65	75	95
Civil service workers and police officers	60	71	92
Skilled manual workers	61	67	91
Unskilled manual workers	56	65	81
Personal service workers	66	75	94
Inactive (excluding retirees)	60	58	85
Overall	69	77	94
Coverage: All residents of the 14 surveyed neighbourhoods. Source: My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey 2018 (Centre Max Weber and INED).			

Table 3. Network of relations and dwelling occupancy status

Network composition of...	% of social housing tenants	% of private rental tenants	% of homeowners	Total
Social housing tenants	89	6	5	100
Private rental tenants	3	78	19	100
Homeowners	2	30	68	100

Coverage: All residents of the 14 surveyed neighbourhoods.
Source: My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey 2018 (Centre Max Weber and INED).

local shops and domestic services (babysitters, cleaners, plumbers, etc.), combining ‘self-interested dialogue and interest in dialogue’ [2].

Selective networks of relations

Social characteristics also influence the choice of neighbourhood acquaintances. The respondents’ social networks reveal their selection criteria.⁽²⁾ In 84% of cases (well above the 51% that would be obtained through random distribution), they befriend neighbours with the same dwelling occupancy status (Table 3) for several reasons. Social housing tenants in mixed occupancy buildings tend to have separate stairwells, owners and tenants have differing interests, and affinities are stronger between residents at similar stages of the life cycle, with the same origins, lifestyle, or tastes. Social mixing is therefore limited in districts of planned social mixing, where buildings with different forms of occupancy exist side by side [3].

In 72% of cases, neighbour relations concern two people of the same sex, although relations between women are more exclusive than those between men (78% vs. 60%). Social status is also a structuring factor: in 44% of cases, relations are between members of the same occupational group (compared with 39% under a random distribution). And if not in the same group, then in a similar one: for people in higher-level occupations, 40% of neighbour relations are with the same occupational group, 32% are with intermediate occupations or artisans/traders, and just 20% with clerical or manual workers. Conversely, for clerical and manual workers, 11% of rela-

(2) The questionnaire asked respondents to identify the neighbours with whom they had ‘the most relations’. They could list between 0 and 4 contacts who were then surveyed in turn.

tions are with people in higher-level occupations, 22% with intermediate occupations or artisans/traders, and 51% with other clerical or manual workers.

Country of birth, however, has little impact on the choice of neighbour relations. While 27% of residents in the surveyed neighbourhoods were born abroad, only 5% of neighbour relations are between two people born in the same foreign country. It is French-born people who most often choose their relations by origin: 84% are born in France, a difference of 6 percentage points with respect to the mean composition of their neighbourhood.

Local variations in neighbourliness

The intensity and nature of neighbour relations also vary across different residential settings. Social calls and exchanges of services are more frequent in bourgeois and gentrified areas and in rural municipalities; inhabitants of districts of planned social mixing exchange services but rarely visit each other (Table 4). These differences do not simply reflect the inhabitants’ social characteristics.⁽³⁾

Population geography also influences the choice of neighbour relations. For example, it is in rural municipalities (84%), gentrified neighbourhoods (79%), and bourgeois neighbourhoods (78%) that residents most frequently have relations with people born in the same country, reflecting the limited diversity of origins in these settings. Conversely, in the high-rise estates, the proportion is 46%—a finding that challenges the myth that residents in these settings limit their neighbour relations to people in their community of origin.

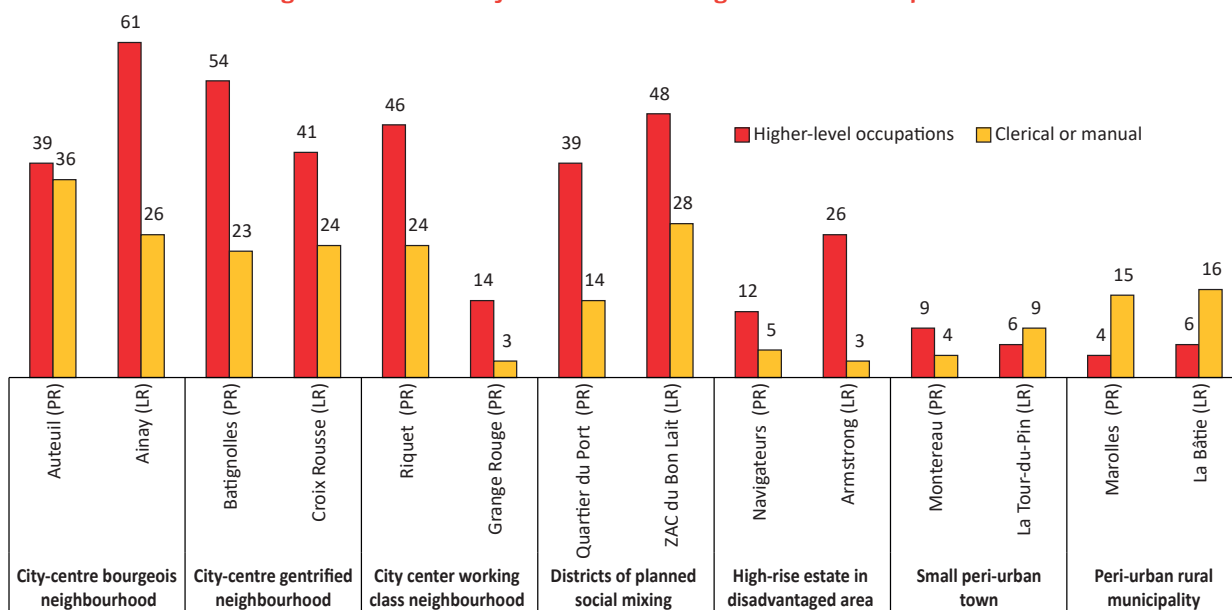
(3) Holding the main sociodemographic variables constant, we observe, for example, that inhabitants of the bourgeois neighbourhood of Ainay in Lyon are 6.8 times more likely to exchange services with their neighbours than those living on the Armstrong high-rise estate.

Table 4. Propensity to be neighbourly in different settings

Residential setting	Neighbourhood	% of residents who visit each other	% of residents who exchange services
City-centre bourgeois neighbourhood	Auteuil (PR)	76	73
	Ainay (LR)	75	88
City-centre gentrified neighbourhood	Batignolles (PR)	74	79
	Croix Rousse (LR)	87	88
City-centre working-class neighbourhood	Riquet (PR)	67	80
	Grange Rouge (LR)	58	59
Districts of planned social mixing	Quartier du Port (PR)	55	80
	ZAC du Bon Lait (LR)	62	87
High-rise estate in disadvantaged area	Navigateurs (PR)	57	71
	Armstrong (LR)	62	60
Small peri-urban town	Montereau (PR)	57	72
	La Tour-du-Pin (LR)	64	68
Peri-urban rural municipality	Marolles (PR)	84	90
	La Bâtie (LR)	83	85
Overall		69	77

Note: PR = Paris region; LR = Lyon region.
Coverage: All residents of the 14 surveyed neighbourhoods.
Source: My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey 2018 (Centre Max Weber and INED).

Figure 1. Probability of having at least one higher-level occupation among one's neighbour relations by residential setting and socio-occupational status



Note: PR = Paris region; LR = Lyon region.

Coverage: All residents of the 14 surveyed neighbourhoods.

Source: My Neighbourhood, My Neighbours survey 2018 (Centre Max Weber and INED).

Jean-Yves Authier and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière, *Population & Societies*, no. 589, INED, May 2021.

These ‘neighbourhood effects’ do not affect all inhabitants to the same extent; they interact with individuals’ social characteristics [4]. The probability of having at least one person in a higher-level occupation among one’s neighbour relations depends both on residential setting and social-occupational status (Figure 1). People in higher-level occupations living in the Ainay neighbourhood of Lyon have a higher-level occupation among their neighbour relations 3 times more often than clerical or manual workers living in the same neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood is hardly a marginal source of social relations; neither is it overcharacterized by rationales of social or community-based separatism. Neighbour relations are nonetheless very socially and geographically inegalitarian. On this last point, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns do not seem to have produced any radical change [5].

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Abstract

Neighbour relations appear to have changed very little over the last 3 decades. But we do not all interact with our neighbours in the same way or with all neighbours alike. Neighbourliness increases with educational level and income. Relations are most frequent among those aged 30–44 and among homeowners and families with children. They are more pronounced in bourgeois and gentrified areas and in rural municipalities.

Keywords

neighbours, neighbour relations, neighbourhood, dwelling type, socio-occupational category, neighbour dispute, *My Neighbourhood*, *My Neighbours* survey, France, Paris region, Lyon region