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Article

Strengthening Social Ties While Walking the Neighbourhood?

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Abstract
Social connectedness among neighbours impacts health and well-being, especially during stressful life events like a pandemic. An activity such as neighbourhood walking enables urban inhabitants to engage in incidental sociability and acts of "neighbouring"—that is, authentic social interactions with neighbours—to potentially bolster the social fabric of neighbourhoods and strengthen relationships. With the potential of neighbourhood walking in mind, this article investigates how everyday encounters while engaged in routine neighbourhood walks strengthen and/or weaken social ties among neighbours. To this end, the article draws on three sources of qualitative data from neighbourhood walkers in Southwestern Ontario, Canada: (a) "walking diaries" in which participants took note of their walking routes, the people they observed on their walks, and other details of their walking experiences; (b) maps of their neighbourhoods that outlined the boundaries of their self-identified neighbourhoods, their routine walking routes, and the people they recognized during their neighbourhood walks; and (c) one-on-one interviews during which participants provided crucial context and meaning to the maps and their walking experiences. The findings provide evidence of how interactions among inhabitants, while engaged in neighbourhood walking, help generate greater social connectedness.

1. Introduction

For many inhabitants across the globe, living under public health restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic underscored the relevance and value of leisure in their lives (Glover, 2022). Long bouts of imposed self-isolation led to "pandemic fatigue," which drove many to seek refuge in activities that enabled them to enjoy a break or time away from their lockdown experience. Local, publicly accessible spaces became an important source of escape and enjoyment for people because of the restrictions placed on mobility (Mehta, 2020). Specifically, people flooded outdoors, especially during warm weather months, because of their relative safety in comparison to indoor environments (see Cevik et al., 2021), and to get much-needed fresh air, physical activity, and

social interaction (Guzmán et al., 2022). While parks gained much attention during the pandemic (Hoover & Lim, 2021), the broader public realm, including so-called "hardscapes" (e.g., sidewalks and streets), emerged as spaces for physical and social activity, too (Wray et al., 2020). All of these developments converged to position neighbourhood walking as a popular activity during Covid-19 (Lotfata et al., 2022).

Neighbourhood walking, one of the few sanctioned options available to people during the early stages of the pandemic, offered its participants welcome physical activity and mental health support. It also appeared to address social isolation by enabling inhabitants to participate in what Glover (2021) regarded as a resurgence in "neighbouring"—that is, engagement (from a safe distance) in authentic social interactions with their

neighbours, the people closest and most accessible to them geographically. While Glover (2021) surmised from his own personal observations at the beginning of the pandemic that people were paying increased civil attention to others while walking their neighbourhoods, his claims remain unexamined. To address this gap, this article investigates how everyday encounters while engaged in routine neighbourhood walks during the pandemic strengthened social ties among neighbours.

2. Background

Neighbourhood walking, no matter what the motivation, facilitates encounters of varying degrees of meaningfulness to their participants. As a slow-moving activity that enables walkers to absorb their surroundings as they stroll, walking attunes people to their neighbourhoods. In addition to coming to know the features of the built environment, the shared daily path of a neighbourhood walk makes other inhabitants more recognizable. Even minimal social contact (e.g., walking past one another with no acknowledgement) has the potential to increase public familiarity (Rietveld et al., 2019) and introduce openings for greater social interaction, such as an exchange of glances, smiles, and conversation. Social interaction, here, refers to "formal (e.g., active, planned) or informal (e.g., casual, unplanned) social opportunities during which two or more people attend to the quality of their relationships" (Kim & Kaplan, 2004, p. 316). When neighbours do stop to talk with one other, their exchange, no matter how brief or trivial, creates the potential to build and possibly strengthen their relationship, even if only superficially. They no longer see themselves as strangers participating in random encounters. Acknowledging and engaging with others (i.e., neighbouring), moreover, can generate "feelings of solidarity, increases in emotional energy, creation of symbols, and feelings of morality" (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013, p. 170). Welcoming a neighbourly interaction, then, even if only for a brief, albeit authentic, moment can potentially establish a bond of mutual obligation, which opens the relationship up to future engagement and potential favours (Rosenblum, 2016). What begins as "routinized relations" established during casual walks can turn into something more meaningful (Lofland, 2017).

During the pandemic, many people sought to escape their isolation by going out for routine walks in their neighbourhoods. Those who did so ostensibly became more conscious of others and their local surroundings (Glover, 2021). Evidently, events such as a pandemic reveal "social conditions that are less visible, but nonetheless present in everyday life" (Klinenberg, 1999, p. 242). The emergence of Covid-19, in other words, appeared to make people aware of their inattentiveness toward those with whom they were copresent, the sociological term used to describe when people are "physically proximate, but socially distant" (Horgan, 2012, p. 608). While public health restrictions aimed to minimize phys-

ical distance among people, neighbourhood walkers seemingly found themselves occupying the same physical space (e.g., sidewalks and paths) at the same time as others (Glover, 2021). However, instead of remaining aloof or disinterested during their encounters—as expected under normal circumstances in modern communities of propinquity characterized by individuation and the desire for quasi-anonymity—they seemed to show interest in those they encountered. As a New York City resident commented in a New York Times article at the beginning of the pandemic, "The word 'neighbour' has taken on a new meaning. We now greet each other with more than a polite hello; we've crossed a line with each other" (Ruhling, 2020). While Covid-19 undoubtedly posed a challenge to personal networks of close relations, it had an even greater impact on social connectedness by limiting incidental sociability. Neighbourhood walking represented one of the few activities that facilitated this incidental sociability during Covid-19 and therefore warrants investigation as a means to facilitate greater social connectedness.

Walking and its relationship with social connectedness have received some attention in the literature. Scholars point to walking as a social practice that enables individuals to engage in sensory and embodied experiences (Kanellopoulou, 2017), creates a sense of "rhythmicity" (Vergunst, 2010; Wunderlich, 2008), facilitates encounters and interactions with others (van den Berg et al., 2017), opens up opportunities for conversation (Shortell & Brown, 2016), and invites the possibility to form social connections and relationships (Lund, 2003). In addition, an impressive number of studies focus on perceptions and features of the walkability (i.e., design) of a neighbourhood and their association with social capital (see Hanibuchi et al., 2012; Leyden, 2003). Interestingly, however, Lund (2003) found no significant direct relationship between objective environmental variables and acts of neighbouring. Moreover, after examining the proposition that more walkable neighbourhoods encourage local social interaction, Du Toit et al. (2007) concluded influences on neighbourhood sociability extend beyond issues of urban form. While attention to the walking-exchange process and the built environment (i.e., walkability), respectively, remain important areas of research, the social outcomes of walking have received less attention (Ettema & Smajic, 2015). This study aims to address this gap.

3. Methods

Research on social tie strength typically uses quantitative measures of formal network properties (e.g., strength, direction, composition, and density) to generate numerical data on social relations and examine the structural properties of social networks through sophisticated statistical techniques (Edwards, 2010). While enormously useful, these approaches have been critiqued for their "abstract, formal, and structural mapping of social life"

(Crossley, 2010, p. 2) because they reduce complex relationships to numerical data. In contrast, qualitative approaches to studying tie strength provide a deeper understanding of the relationship "story." By focusing on the relationship depth, qualitative methods assist with the understanding of how and why different social ties in a network occupy their social position, thereby making it possible to tell a larger narrative of the underlying drivers that, in the case of this research, tie inhabitants together. Qualitative research methods, therefore, were used to achieve the goal of this project: to understand how, if at all, neighbourhood walking strengthens neighbourhood social ties.

Participants for this project were recruited via local media. Profiles of the study appeared in the local newspaper and on local radio, which provided a URL that interested participants could visit to view information about the study and sign up. Eligibility criteria included any adult resident of Kitchener and Waterloo, twin cities located 105 km southwest of Toronto. In the end, a convenience sample of forty-six participants completed all three data collection phases of the project. Methodologically, Felder (2020) argued "socializers"—those individuals who seek to develop ties with at least some of their neighbours—are considered good informants for research projects on the strength of ties because they are willing to talk, are interested in the topic of neighbouring, and can help reach more interviewees. Convenience, however, led to some homogeneity among participants. 39 participants identified as female, while only seven identified as male. 44 of the 46 participants listed themselves as Caucasian or White. Almost half the sample (n = 20) was aged 60 or older, while the remainder were 18–29 (n = 6), 30–39 (n = 6), 40–49 (n = 4), and 50–59 (n = 8). The sample was highly educated with 41 having at least some post-secondary education. The majority (n = 37) owned their own home. All but one participant were Canadian citizens. Most had lived in their neighbourhoods for a lengthy period: 36 of the participants lived there for 11 or more years; 7 for 6–10 years; 7 for 1–5 years; and 6 for less than 1 year. From a socioeconomic perspective, however, household income varied relatively evenly across the sample: $25k–$49,999 = 6; $50k–$754,999 = 9; $75k–$99,999 = 7; $100k–$124,999 = 7; $125k+ = 6; 11 did not respond).

Data collection consisted of three activities: First, participants kept "walking diaries" (i.e., electronic web-based forms completed post-walk) of at least five walks in their neighbourhoods, specifically to take note of their walking routes, the people they observed, the people with whom they interacted, and to provide other details of their walking experiences (e.g., distance, time of day, duration of experience); second, participants used an online mapping platform to outline the boundaries of their self-identified neighbourhoods, draw their routine walking routes (using different colours, if they drew more than one), and identify meaningful people they recognized during their neighbourhood walks; and

third, participants engaged in individual interviews to provide crucial context and meaning to the maps and their walking experiences. Interviews were coordinated and conducted by research assistants via a video conferencing platform. The diaries and maps were used to probe participant responses and stimulate participant recall. Interviews were divided into four parts: (a) inspired by Felder (2020), participants not only considered with whom they interacted on their walks and whom they knew in their neighbourhoods (i.e., strong and weak ties), but also whom they recognized, but perhaps did not know (i.e., invisible ties or nodding relationships); (b) participants were asked what role walking in their neighbourhood played in building, maintaining, and sustaining the social ties they identified in their neighbourhoods; (c) participants were invited to describe how they became familiar with the social ties they identified on their maps and explain in what ways, if any, walking contributed to the strengthening (or worsening) of those relationships; and (d) the final set of questions sought to understand what resources (e.g., information, material, emotional support), if any, participants accessed through their neighbourhood social ties. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with participants assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

The walking diaries, qualitative maps, and interview transcripts were imported to a cloud-based shared drive to allow for collaborative analysis. To achieve data immersion and familiarity with the entire data set (Bernard et al., 2016), initial analyses involved each member of our research team reading interview transcripts and viewing maps. More specifically, data analysis followed an iterative process that involved a conventional qualitative analysis approach that involved breaking down interview text and mapping data into idea units or common themes to explain interconnections.

4. Findings

The following section presents the findings from our research. We organized these findings into the following themes: (a) social connection as a by-product; (b) social connection as acknowledgement; and (c) social connection as social consciousness. Each theme is illustrated using direct quotes from participants.

4.1. Social Connection as a By-Product

At least initially, many participants failed to identify social interaction as an intentional purpose that drove their neighbourhood walking behaviour. For a few, like Anna, they went on walks "to get somewhere. To go to work. Or to get to the supermarket." Under these kinds of circumstances, participants found themselves focusing on their main tasks and avoiding socializing with others while doing so. The difference between leisure-oriented strolling (i.e., when participants felt they had time to socialize) and utilitarian walking (i.e., when they

had to get something done) seemed to make a difference in terms of their openness to interacting with others. In Bethany's words:

> Sometimes walks are about, well, the dog needs to be walked. I have other things to do, but I've got to walk the dog and so I've left myself, you know, half an hour for this task and I don't have time to talk.

Most participants walked their neighbourhoods chiefly for physical activity, namely "to get their steps in" or to avoid being sedentary. Sometimes, this purpose meant they sought to maintain a vigorous pace not conducive to engaging with others. Other participants, especially those who worked from home and had no other reason to leave their house, welcomed the opportunity "to get outside" and "enjoy a little fresh air." Often, in these cases, walking emerged as a substitute activity for participants at a time when their activities were limited by public health restrictions (e.g., the gym closed). As Christa explained, "[walking] was a way to do something when everything was locked down." "It's kind of like, okay," said Dana, "get outside and go for your walk because there's not really much else to do." Accordingly, participants' neighbourhoods, in most cases, represented "the only place they could go" (Christa). And walking presented itself as one of the few sanctioned activities in which they could participate outside of their homes. Correspondingly, many participants began walking routinely in their neighbourhoods as a result of the isolating conditions that emerged with the pandemic.

Mental health arose as a particularly important driver for many participants' walking behaviour during Covid-19. Indeed, many described neighbourhood walking as "a clear my head kind of thing" (Evelyn). For Fern, walking was "a time when I get a lot of thinking done and think through issues and problems." For these reasons, Christa labelled her walking experiences "meditative" because of their therapeutic effects on her mental health. Whether for physical activity or mental health, a few participants underscored their desire to be alone while walking. As Kayla put it bluntly, "[socializing is] totally irrelevant for me [during my walks]." Similarly, Gertrude said, "I don't do the walks for the social." Some participants even admitted to feeling disappointed when others would ask to join them on their walks. "I actually prefer not to walk with [others]," said Evelynn.

Even so, some participants did view social interaction as a primary reason they engaged in neighbourhood walks. For those who expressed such a sentiment, they sometimes saw walking together with family or friends as a way to maintain their social bonds: "During Covid, a lot of times, [walking] was the only time you could meet up with friends and catch up on life" (Fern). In a similar way, Helen saw neighbourhood walking as "more of a family activity" during which she bonded with her husband and children. For others, interacting with people they encountered, as opposed to those who accompa-

nied them, on their walks made the experience meaningful. When isolating at home, a neighbourhood walk could often be one of the few, if only, activities in which participants could see someone outside of their household without a mask on. Many participants expressed delight in seeing other people's faces (i.e., unmasked), whether they sought social interaction or not. Seeing and talking with people during their walks made participants feel like "other people still existed," as Ingrid explained. The isolation made Joy feel as if she were "starved for conversation." Similarly, Christa said she "craved interaction." Walking, therefore, enabled participants to satisfy their social cravings.

Interestingly, whether participants viewed social interaction as a driver of their neighbourhood walking behaviour or not, all participants acknowledged they most often valued it as a welcome by-product of their experiences. Even Kayla (mentioned above), who described social interaction as "irrelevant" to her, made time to interact with construction workers she encountered on her neighbourhood routes. She was deeply interested in the physical changes to her neighbourhood and felt the construction workers with whom she talked appreciated her interest in their work. As a result, she would stop to talk with them and admitted to enjoying the interaction. Like Kayla, Lana told us she was "happy being alone. I'll go for a walk and hope I don't meet anybody. I just want a nice quiet walk. But when I do meet somebody, and we start talking, I find I enjoy the encounter." Gertrude expressed a similar point of view:

> I don't go seeking [to socialize with others], right? Like, when I'm walking, it's mostly visual, you know? It's a physical kind of thing. But when I have conversations that are meaningful, it does enrich my life. I learn things. I feel like I'm enriching their lives a little bit, too, with what I have to say....I just feel conversations, even if they're just by chance, I usually always learn something.

Mia who was open to such interaction told us she "[doesn't] have to see people [on her walks]," but "I actually do notice that I feel good when I come back and say, 'Oh, that was nice. I met somebody' and 'those people seem friendly' or whatever." This sort of reaction led Joy to describe social interaction on a neighbourhood walk as "a bonus." Whether intentional or not, social interaction turned out to be something participants almost always valued during their neighbourhood walks.

4.2. Social Connection as Acknowledgement

Participants described a positive interaction with others as "an understanding or reciprocity." "It's a kind of sweet spot," explained Bethany:

> Like, if you're genuinely friends with these people, it would be weird to just wave and keep walking, right?

But if you're just neighbours, then it's not weird to just wave and keep walking, sometimes. And other times, you stop and have a longer chat… That to me is really a kind of valuable balance.

That balance, evidently, meant adeptly reading the social cues of those involved in a walking encounter.

Improvisation on sidewalks characterized neighbourhood walking during much of the pandemic as walkers negotiated their neighbourhood spaces in ways that respected physical distancing. Natalie described this negotiation as "the choreography" and "dance." Ophelia called it "negotiating the sidewalk." However participants referred to it, they acknowledged the dynamics involved. As Parker described it, "Because of Covid, everyone's doing the swerve where you, like, walk on the road and you're not getting close to other people." Even so, this mutual scenario introduced shared experiences. Mia offered the following story to illustrate:

The interactions maybe wouldn't have happened without Covid-19 only because you go out of your way to give somebody a wide berth on the sidewalk, and they kind of look at each other and say 'thanks.' Or kind of offer a weird sheepish, like, isn't this ridiculous? And we're still doing this kind of like eye roll.

Participants appreciated that they were negotiating the pandemic, not just the sidewalk, together. "It's nice that strangers have that same mentality of still, like, we're getting through [the pandemic] together," said Joy. Of course, these sorts of acknowledgements between walkers—the idea of sharing a moment—occurred outside of the context of pandemic living, too. For example, Quinn described the following interaction:

I was walking by and [another walker] was walking by, and we both kind of smirked at this little kid who was doing a funny dance….We didn't even say a thing, but I remember thinking I can tell [the other walker is] enjoying that, too. So that wasn't a conversation, but it was just something you could tell we both were appreciating the same thing at the same. Like, build that connection for that one minute.

These shared moments when people figuratively "bump into each other" (Raina) were common among most participants.

Bad interactions, unlike positive interactions, meant the people with whom participants interacted had "bad social awareness" when they failed to "read social cues." "If someone's talking and trying to chat you up when you're, like, I don't want any of that, that's a bad interaction," explained Helen. Not surprisingly, situations in which participants' overtures were dismissed by people they encountered resulted in hurt feelings. As Parker said, "It's like rejection [when people don't wave back]. Like, yeah, just feeling kind of lonely." Sadly, Sasha felt

dejected by the poor interactions she encountered in her neighbourhood: "Here, it's like nobody even cares about you. So I kind of got used to that….The lack of interaction discourages me further to even do, like, eye contact, or say 'hello'….Maybe nobody cares, so maybe I shouldn't care."

Most participants gave other walkers the benefit of the doubt, however. "They might be pressed for time or something," explained Gertrude. Other participants figured those they encountered who ignored their gestures may have been dealing with other personal issues. From Christa's perspective:

I figure you never know what's going on in a person's life, right? Just lost their job, maybe they're having family problems. You just never know. So, I give them the benefit of the doubt….Maybe me saying 'hi' actually brightened their day. They may not have said something back, but you know what? Maybe it meant something to them.

Along these lines, positive interactions did not always have to include an exchange of words. Most participants said they welcomed non-verbal gestures, such as a smile or a nod. While many saw such gestures as a "bare minimum" (Craig), most referred to them as "pleasant" and "satisfying." Talking about social interaction while walking in her interview led Anna to appreciate "the value of connecting with people in my community in ways that are not obvious or direct." Ophelia described them as "building moments." "They're small, but they do build something," she said. These moments often gave participants the cue that "this is my opening…to get into a bigger chat" (Joy).

Done well, social interaction resulted in a greater sense of community for participants. Most participants told us pleasant exchanges with other people on their walks "brightened their day." While positive interactions "positively reinforced the walk" (Ulysses), they also made participants feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods. After a positive encounter with an unfamiliar neighbour, Sasha found herself saying, "'Hey, I'm acknowledged here.' And maybe I'm welcome here, you know? Because the lack of those things like eye contact, covering your face, or something, it just makes me feel, 'Okay, nobody really cares.'" Helen believed such encounters fostered a "sense of connection." She said, "I think [walking has] really built a sense of community. It's helped me realize, yeah, I do have greater interactions around the neighbourhood and that's nice." Similarly, Fern told us, "It's comforting still to recognize people in the neighbourhood, even though you don't know them. It just feels like a sense of community, even though you're not connecting with them directly." These sentiments led Natalie to surmise, "I'm not sure how anybody would establish a sense of community if they didn't walk around their neighbourhood….I can't imagine how else you would really meet people, other than the people

that live right around you." In short, neighbourhood walking made participants feel acknowledged as members of the community, especially at a time when they were prone to feeling isolated (i.e., Covid-19).

4.3. Social Connection as Social Consciousness

Interacting with other inhabitants on a neighbourhood walk resulted in a growing consciousness of the presence of identifiable members of participants' neighbourhoods. To build on the theme above, acknowledgement led not only to a sense of belonging among participants but also to a process of neighbourhood inhabitants fitting into participants' imagined community. Belonging, in this sense, went both ways. Accordingly, participants spoke about it as a learning process. For example, Bethany offered the following story:

> There's one person that lives on my street, but on the next block. I've always admired her house, but I had never ever seen her. Like, never. Finally, she introduced herself during a walk. And when she introduced herself and where she lives, I thought, "Oh, my gosh! That's who lives there." I've never set eyes on her before. So I thought how interesting that this person lives, how many houses away? And I had never seen her and not even looked at her, right? She's not recognizable to me at all. And yet, I've walked by that house a few times a day for well over a decade. It just shows how you can just exist anonymously in a neighbourhood on a street and not know your neighbour.

Experiences of expanding consciousness of who belongs to their neighbourhood led both Raina and Bethany separately to describe neighbourhood walking as "serendipitous" insofar as it facilitates unexpected encounters that introduced them to new people. While Bethany characterized neighbourhood walking as having "its own kind of rhythm and purpose," she also described it as having "potential." It opened up the possibility of meeting people.

After being introduced to people on walks, relationships began to develop. For some participants, those relationships remained at "a pleasant distance" and "largely anonymous," albeit "familiar." These participants often cited encountering a recognizable "guy" who became a regular feature of their neighbourhood walks with whom they would exchange pleasantries, but not much more: "yellow coat guy," "pie guy," and "weird guy," among others. Other participants discussed people developing into acquaintances, "people that you have sort of passing conversations with," as Gertrude described them. For Helen, acquaintances were about recognition: "I know where they live and may or may not know their names. I probably know their pets' names. They're just people we have intermittent contact with. Friendly, but there's no depth to it." And for other participants, familiarity led to friendships over time. Friends were described as

people with whom they socialized outside of neighbourhood walking. Bethany described these friendships as "kind of a reciprocal, kind of I-invite-you-you-invite-me. We do things together. We understand what's happening in each other's lives from, you know, week-to-week or month-to-month."

In many cases, irrespective of how they defined their relationships with others, these various social connections were perceived by participants as people on whom they felt they could depend for some level of support if the need arose. As Christa explained it, "I got a lot of support around me from those I know on my walking path." This support looked different for each participant, though it fits into various forms. One form was informational support: "[My dog's] had a couple of health issues lately," Vita informed us. "I've chatted with [my neighbour]. She's had some suggestions." Similarly, Wilma told us "We're redoing our roof, so I asked the neighbour that I never talked to before where they got the roof, and it turned into a giant thing. Now, I have their emails and everything." Dana described a similar scenario: "At one point, when we were walking past [someone's] house, we started talking about eavestroughs for some reason and that we needed help cleaning ours out. So then that turned into them coming over to help us clean them out." Talking with people while on neighbourhood walks had the potential to result in helping behaviours.

Social support emerged as another form of support. This support included serving as a social connection with whom participants could socialize. "If you see a neighbour, you know their name, you have a conversation, maybe from time to time you get together, maybe have a barbecue or things like that," said Dana. Similarly, Xavier explained, "It's really nice to be able to walk to someone's house for a little event or, like, my kids being able to run to their neighbour's house down the street to play after school. Things like that are important." Social support also took the form of emotional support. For example, Christa recounted a recent interaction she had with a friend she met on one of her walks:

> I haven't seen this particular person in probably two or three weeks because this person stayed in because of the weather….The person was actually waiting for me [while I was on my walk] and flagged me down. What happened? What the heck is she doing? She called me over because her sister had passed away, and she wanted to let me know. I knew she was close with her sister. She's a very isolated person.

By seeing and acknowledging others on their walks, participants felt a level of commitment to looking out for those individuals in their neighbourhoods. Ingrid described it as "having that community care aspect." She explained:

> If I see that [my neighbour], who's two doors down, hasn't cleaned his sidewalk [of snow] and it's been a

day, I know that maybe he's just not feeling well. So I'll clean his sidewalk or something. Just that looking out for each other.

Similarly, Yusuf talked about his dad, whom neighbours came to know because of his presence as a regular walker in the neighbourhood:

Folks are always asking about my dad....He has not been walking the dog very often....I've taken over that duty, but people always remember him. And they're always asking about his health. And I suspect that if and when his health goes down, there is help to be had.

This idea of knowing neighbourhood support exists for participants was a common theme. As Parker explained:

There is a connection with neighbours like [Grace]. For example, like, if I ever saw anything amiss out of her house, I know I would say something or try to help. And if she ever needed anything, we would be there for her. And I'm sure vice versa. She's very helpful in that way. You rely on the people around you, right? Like it's nice to know and to be kind of recognized and connected in that way.

Ultimately, building social consciousness through neighbourhood walking created a greater sense of connectedness and built up participants' support networks: "That's where you can get support if you need it," explained Terrance.

5. Discussion

Not surprisingly, participants in our study engaged in neighbourhood walking for a variety of reasons that did not necessarily include social connection as the driving factor for their behaviour. Physical activity (Lee & Buchner, 2008), mental health (Doughty, 2013; Paydar & Kamani Fard, 2021), and escape (Roberson & Babic, 2009), in particular, compelled participants to get outside and walk as a means to address their isolation during the pandemic. Of course, the social connection did motivate some participants to address their "social craving" for contact with others outside of their households. Interestingly, Tomova et al. (2020) noted people often crave social interactions when forced to isolate, not unlike during the pandemic when people isolated at home as a public health measure to mitigate the transmission of Covid-19. Sometimes participant openness to an encounter stemmed from the type of walking they did, whether utilitarian or leisure-oriented. The latter proved to offer "a unique opportunity for exercising the capacity for sociability," as Ferdman (2019, p. 298) explained. Those participants who did not walk for social purposes nevertheless tended to welcome social contact during their walks, perhaps because the pandemic lim-

ited their incidental sociability in most other contexts. They almost always felt good about a positive interaction, which would often count as a highlight of their walks. This retrospective of their encounters underscores the notion that humans are fundamentally social beings who generally value positive interactions with others.

Interactions during walks took on the character of "a dance" or "choreography," as one participant described it. These descriptions conjure up Jane Jacobs' reference to the intricate interplay of people, activities, and material objects on a streetscape as "sidewalk ballet" (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 50–54). Walking as "sidewalk ballet," suggested Ferdman (2019, p. 3), organizes "this intricate, ever-changing collection of discrete and prosaic acts and objects into an organized system of meaning and value." Middleton (2011, p. 2871) went so far as to describe walking as a "body ballet," in which "integrated sets of embodied gestures, behaviours, and task-oriented actions of individuals combine into dynamic wholes that become important places of interpersonal and communal exchanges, actions, and meanings." During Covid-19, participants seemingly found themselves empathizing with those they encountered on their walks because they, too, were negotiating the same restrictions and corresponding challenges of living through a pandemic. The sidewalk, thus, emerged in many cases as a community space of empathic connection during Covid-19. "Body-Ballet," a term coined originally by de Certeau (1984), also points to the way participants unconsciously choreographed their movements in their neighbourhoods during the pandemic, namely by using walking in subtle and unconscious ways as a tactical mode to adapt to, subvert, and resist dominant cultural norms established in response to public health restrictions (e.g., physical distancing, indoor mask mandates, isolating at home). Their choreography arguably involved engaging in social interaction as a tactic to cope with their everyday mundane situations.

It warrants mention that the social circumstances that emerged during Covid-19 made for a unique context in which encounters took place. The shared experience of living through a pandemic and all of its public health restrictions likely opened people up to be present with others, not just copresent. Glover's (2021) observation that people were more willing to pay civil attention—in contrast to Goffman's (1963) idea of civil inattention—to one another during the pandemic, even if at a safe distance, appeared to reflect the experience of participants in this study. As noted above, Klinenberg (1999) predicted such recognition during community emergencies.

Characterized as an understanding or reciprocity, positive interactions during walks gave participants an opportunity to showcase their emotional intelligence, even if only resulted in a nod or a smile. Along these lines, Ferdman (2019, p. 4) noted that "walking provides the opportunity to develop and exercise our social capacities in public spaces, through the development of sensitivity to social signals and the nurture of trust." In sharing a moment with others, participants created a shared world

through joint attention and interpersonal synchronization (O'Mara, 2019). Overt forms of engagement with others brought participants together with those they encountered on their walks (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017). Where those encountered on a neighbourhood walk failed to read the social cues or responded in a seemingly rude way, negative interpretations, not surprisingly, resulted. Responses of indifference may have represented what Simmel (1971) regarded as a coping strategy for negotiating the sensory overload of the city, but perhaps more accurately in this case reflected the sensory overload associated with living through a pandemic. In at least one case, reaction to an unreciprocated overture led to feelings of insecurity and influenced future behaviour insofar as the participant lacked motivation to engage with her neighbours because of her negative interaction(s). Feeling "acknowledged" by others meant something to participants because it made them feel validated (or invalidated) as a member of the neighbourhood/community (i.e., a sense of belonging).

Where positive interactions took place, participants acknowledged the presence of the person with whom they experienced the exchange and felt a greater affinity toward them and consciousness of them. The process contributed to neighbourhood inhabitants, whom participants may not have necessarily known prior to the encounter, fitting into an imagined community—that is, a socially constructed community invented by those who perceive themselves as members of a group (Anderson, 1991). In this case, the group refers to neighbours who are believed to belong to the neighbourhood. The "cultural intimacy" of engaging in the "social poetics" of everyday neighbourhood life through the act of walking transforms the abstract idea of community into intimate expressions of felt solidarities (Herzfeld, 2014). Positive encounters during neighbourhood walks, then, act as reinforcing experiences that serve to build relationships, solidarity, and identity.

Having imagined themselves as members of the neighbourhood—either because they were acknowledged as such or because they engaged in a positive interaction that led to greater consciousness of others—participants came to trust the people with whom they experienced positive interactions, even those they did not know personally. Trust, in this sense, represented the return potential of an imagined community, with the expectation that fellow community members would come to each other's aid if needed (Glover et al., 2020). Here, the construction of an imagined community—a kind of in-group with its own boundaries of membership—appeared to engender expectations, and even demonstrated behaviours, that fellow community members could be trusted to reciprocate prosocial behaviours (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008). Positive encounters during neighbourhood walks, in this sense, led to a strengthening of social ties among those involved and represented an investment in relationships that built social capital as a resource to each other (Lund, 2003).

6. Conclusion

This research shows how neighbourhood walking during the pandemic led participants to connect with others (often unintentionally), feel acknowledged when they engaged in positive interactions with other inhabitants they encountered, and become more conscious of people whom they came to recognize as members of their imagined neighbourhood. In this sense, neighbouring via walking reflected a humanizing process that led to positive social outcomes. These findings likely reflect the conditions through which participants lived during the pandemic, a period when they experienced public health restrictions on their mobility, thereby limiting their interactions with others and restricting the activities in which they could participate. Neighbourhood walking represented one of the few sanctioned, albeit still limited, activities in which people could engage during the early period of Covid-19. Furthermore, the isolation imposed on people during the height of public health restrictions likely led to a greater openness to engage with others, where and when possible, making the quasi-anonymity associated with pre-pandemic life less appealing. In many ways, neighbourhood walking proved to be a tactic of everyday life that enabled participants to subtly subvert physical distancing restrictions and stay-at-home orders (de Certeau, 1984).

Admittedly, the findings of this study contribute to the romanticization of walking and its relationship to social connectedness since they laud neighbourhood walking as an idealized mode of transport with the potential to engender social interactions (Middleton, 2018, p. 301). While participants did offer stories of negative interactions, their perception of neighbourhood walking remained, with few exceptions, overwhelmingly positive. As Blokland (2017, p. 14) noted, "community always implies boundary work"; how neighbourhood walking performs "un-community" (see Williams, 2016), therefore, warrants attention in future research. However, neighbourliness and perceptions of neighbours will always remain flexible and unstable, as opposed to fixed, so recognizing the dynamic nature of tie strength and its performance also deserves consideration. The relationship between social interaction and specific neighbourhood characteristics (e.g., geographic scale, urban form) remained unaddressed in this manuscript. It should go without saying, though, that neighbourhoods clearly represented the social spaces in which neighbouring occurred, and moreover, where neighbours connected with each other on their walks (whatever neighbourhood meant to them). For this reason, neighbourhoods represent crucial social infrastructure for "community doings" (Blokland, 2017). Talen (2019, p. 192), however, noted the bulk of research on neighbouring focuses "not on the effects of form but on how social relationships [are] predicted by other social variables," such as crime. Correspondingly, she argued planners should reject outright social relationship-related claims

about form and refocus their attention on functionality. Research, accordingly, should follow suit.

A fair and necessary critique of this research centres on the homogeneity of the sample of participants. The vast majority of the participants were older White Euro-Canadian women who owned their own homes and lived in their neighbourhoods for a number of years. This lack of diversity among participants cannot be ignored. The experience of people of colour, Black, and Indigenous people during the pandemic suggests their experiences engaging in activities in public spaces subjected them to greater surveillance and scrutiny (Hoover & Lim, 2021), which no doubt influenced their experiences and social interactions when walking in their neighbourhoods, assuming their neighbourhoods even supported leisure strolling, to begin with. More must be done to get at these experiences. Even so, the sample in this study does offer important insights into aging-in-place insofar as it points to the importance of the social environment in supporting older adults and the ways walking can make them feel socially connected. Because this study is exploratory, it does offer initial insights into understanding the relationship between neighbourhood walking and the strengthening of social ties. Qualitative findings should never be treated as generalizable, but they do offer analytic generalization that warrants further investigation. We call on researchers to explore neighbourhood walking and its role in strengthening neighbourhood social ties with purposeful sampling that gives specific preference to the inclusion of more racially and ethnically diverse participants.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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