# “People like us”: Discourse on class identity in residential compounds

Henar Baldán[1] (henarbl@ugr.es) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2729-8009
Nayla Fuster[2] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5874-2467
Joaquín Susino[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9096-6172

**Abstract**

In many parts of the world, living in residential compounds has become a widespread and popular way of life. Today, we find a great structural and social diversity of compounds. While there is evidence that living in the most closed forms, such as gated communities, is often associated with the desire of the upper-middle class to live among people of their own status, there is little research on what kind of elective belonging can be found among the upper-middle and working classes. This qualitative study analyses how class identity is constructed in different types of residential compounds through interviews with residents and non-residents of upper-middle and working-class compounds in the metropolitan area of Granada. The results indicate that residents of compounds value the development of a sense of belonging more highly, and reproduce it more noticeably in their discourse, than non-residents. Residential compounds appear to function as status drivers, both materially and symbolically, but operate differently depending on the social composition of the compounds themselves.

**Keywords:** Gated communities; class identity; ‘among similars’; elective belonging; entre-soi; Spain



## Introduction

Residential compounds (RCs) are an expression of residential segregation that, due to their material and social characteristics, are the most likely to contribute to sociospatial fragmentation (Le Goix, 2006). Living in an RC involves distinguishing or separating oneself both physically and socially (Dowling et al., 2010; Manzi and Smith-Bowers, 2013). The best-known version is the gated community, which caters to high-income populations (Borsdorf et al., 2016), but the widespread expansion of gated communities in other parts of the world has led to greater structural

[1] University of Granada, Spain.

[2] University of Málaga, Spain.

and social heterogeneity as a result of their emulation by working class categories (Rafiemanzelat, 2016; Müllauer-Seichter, 2019).

Given the complexity that characterizes this residential phenomenon today, this article examines how class identity is constructed in different types of RCs and statuses. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study by interviewing residents and non-residents with different socioeconomic profiles to observe possible discursive discrepancies in how they develop and express class identities.

We begin with a brief theoretical review of class categories and identities and their configurations in urban space and then focus on their manifestations in RCs. We explain the methodology used and then present the results in two sections. The first section describes in detail the different configurations of class identities expressed by the interviewees. The second section analyses the function of the RC as a promoter and consolidator of status and the situations that disrupt the expected social homogeneity. Finally, conclusions are presented.

**Social classes: from objective categories to class identities**

Classical sociologists based their study of social classes on the economic world, focusing either strictly on the productive system (Marx) or on market situations and opportunities (Weber, 1922). Later developments expanded this analysis. For instance, the concept of contradictory class positions (Wright, 2015) considers not only the ownership of the means of production but also authority relations and specialized knowledge. However, even in these conceptualizations, class action cannot be automatically derived from the position occupied in the economic system.

According to Bourdieu (1987), social actors develop their practices and strategies within a much more complex space that encompasses not only economic but also cultural, relational, and symbolic conditions. It is within this multidimensional space that individuals express their behaviours. Therefore, when moving beyond the understanding of classes as objective positions within a hierarchical economic system, the daily practices that shape class identities become relevant (Bottero, 2004; Bithymitris, 2023).

In these configurations, respectability has been, since the early days of capitalism, a moral criterion for differentiating the middle classes from the working classes (Lawler, 2005). This distinction has also operated internally, as it has served to differentiate the lifestyles of working-class women (Skeggs, 1997, 2004). This shows that the formation and reproduction of social classes have always transcended the productive system (Crean, 2018).

In late modernity, an era characterized by singularization and cultural particularism (Reckwitz, 2020), research on social classes focuses on the strategies that actors use to assert themselves and the collectives to which they belong. Feminist perspectives have contributed to exploring social classes as a moral relationship, through judgments, evaluations, and processes of disidentification with those who are similar or different (Emery et al., 2023).

Socio-affective relationships are deeply intertwined with economic, power, and cultural inequalities (Lawler, 2005; Crean, 2018; Strong, 2023). For instance, Lamont (2009) observed that the working class often experienced moral shame or guilt when compared socioeconomically with the upper-middle class. However, these feelings are not merely passive reactions; they also function as instruments of resistance, reconfiguring class identity in the face of social inequality (Crean, 2018; Strong, 2023). In this way, the labels imposed on the working class, laden with negative stereotypes (Walkerdine, 2016) are rejected, and the superficiality and ostentatiousness associated with the upper-middle class (Skeggs, 2004), also categorized as the 'Barbie and Ken', are disdained (Lamont, 2009).

All these singularities have contributed to the contemporary understanding of social classes as highly heterogeneous groups (Reckwitz, 2020), yet unified by behavioural patterns and values (Skeggs, 2004), work practices (Wright, 2015), lifestyles, and consumption habits (Florida, 2019). These elements, in turn, are intersected and differentiated by gender roles, race or ethnicity, education, and politics (Crean, 2018; Bithymitris, 2023).

However, the increasing complexity of social classes should not be interpreted as their disarticulation. Class disidentification entails a social and discursive distancing of individuals from certain traditional class categories. Some studies (Reay, 1998; Savage et al., 2010; Walkerdine, 2016; Preece, 2020) reveal that people are increasingly reluctant to personally identify with a specific social class. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean they deny the existence of classes; rather, they seek to avoid the cultural or social connotations associated with them (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Savage et al., 2010).

Contrary to the theses on the death or decline of social classes (Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Clark and Lipset, 1991), recent years have seen an abundance of research that does not deny their existence but rather highlights the multiplicity of their manifestations. Social determinations have not been replaced by individual self-determination; instead, individuals must construct their identities within a world shaped by multiple social determinants. These processes of differentiation have intensified, even within the same social categories, particularly when considering ethnic differences, such as those between white and black workers in their perceptions of class and morality (Lamont, 2009). Differences also arise within middle classes, such as those characterized by an "aestheticized lifestyle" (Florida, 2019) or those shaped by processes of socialization and parenting (Reay, 2008).

But the social space is also a physical space: in our case, an urban one. It is a space shaped by historical legacy, heavily laden with symbolism, by territorial functions and social practices, and by groups unequally settled in specific areas. This density of urban space constitutes it as yet another resource that actors use to construct their social and personal identity. This is what we aim to continue examining in this paper, based on a very specific case: that of residential compounds.

**Class identities in urban space**

Space has always been important, but it now seems even more so in the configuration of class identities (Atkinson, 2006; Atkinson and Blandy, 2016). This is due to two reasons: first, because where we live shapes who we interact with and how we relate to others; and second, because this place, through its symbolic dimension, becomes part of our personal and social identity.

In late modernity, the choice of residence based on tradition or local culture of "born and raised" has weakened, although urban space remains key in the construction of class identities (Savage et al., 2005). The place is defined and valued based on its relational meanings, that is, how people inhabit it and make it their own. Thus, "belonging is not to a fixed community, with the implication of closed boundaries, but is more fluid, seeing places as sites for performing identities" (p. 29). Hence, the importance of the concept of "elective belonging" (Savage, 2014).

Residential choices arise from personal preferences, which are interwoven with class dynamics. Space, as a reflection and symbolic representation of class position, is selected through comparisons with "other" places, also identified and socially recognized in terms of class (Allen et al., 2007; Preece, 2020).

Elective belonging is primarily associated with the upper-middle classes, who have the greatest socio-economic freedom to choose their residential environments (Savage et al., 2005; Benson and Jackson, 2017). This choice expresses a defensive interest, both of neighbourhood and individual identity, against its absorption by the working-class "mass" (Lawler, 2005) and a distinctive interest in symbolically recognizing oneself in an exclusive and select space (Donzelot, 2004; Atkinson, 2006; Atkinson and Blandy, 2016). However, empirical research on working classes also highlights the importance that its residents place on preserving the identity of the neighbourhood as a "border" space between other spaces (Kefalas, 2003). The forms of exclusion of "bad neighbours" (Lamont, 2009) are analysed in detail by Elias and Scotson (2008), focusing on power dynamics and stigmatization between socioeconomically similar working-class groups who, however, identify as distinct based on their length of residence. For example, the "established" monopolize control and management of associations and services of great symbolic value to the neighbourhood: the church or the "conquest" of local bars and clubs (p. 91), as well as using gossip and rumours to maintain moral judgment over the "outsiders." These mechanisms of identification and disidentification act in parallel.

The concept of elective belonging is particularly well-suited to gated communities, which facilitate the concentration and preservation of upper-middle-class identities (Le Goix, 2006), as they function as mechanisms for excluding other classes (Kleibert, 2018; Shaharyar, 2020). Blakely and Snyder (1997) proposed three types of gated communities: security zone communities, which are based on fear and perceived insecurity toward the outside and the

"others" from unequal contexts (Landman, 2007); prestige communities, in which socioeconomic homogeneity forms the basis of a shared identity (Sarpong, 2017); and lifestyle communities, which, promote class identity through shared spaces and services that foster specific lifestyles (Svampa, 2001). However, even within these gated communities, processes of disidentification have been observed when newcomers are perceived as a threat to the preservation of the identity of the compound.

The expansion of this residential model, both physically and socially, has led to the emergence of semi-enclosed and symbolic communities, as well as adaptations for middle and working classes (Wehrhahn and Raposo, 2004; Dowling et al., 2010; Villar-Lama and García-Martín, 2016; Müllauer-Seichter, 2019). This necessitates the use of the concept of RCs, which is broader and more flexible, accommodating their characteristic plurality (anonymized). These RCs must meet two basic conditions. First, they must include mechanisms to delimit the compound (not necessarily walls or fences, but also easily circumvented boundaries such as bollards or hedges, or more symbolic ones, such as cul-de-sac streets and other natural barriers) that help to separate life inside and outside the compound (Alkurdi, 2015). Second, they must have shared spaces and facilities (i.e. swimming pools, paddle/tennis courts, playgrounds, landscaped areas, etc.) that serve as meeting points for neighbourly interaction (Rafiemanzelat, 2016; Sakip, et al., 2018).

Thus, moving beyond an understanding of identities too closely tied to a specific type of gated community and upper-middle classes, we aim to investigate how class identities manifest in RCs within a medium-sized metropolitan area typical of Southern Europe, such as Granada. We question whether these processes of identification and, perhaps, disidentification occur similarly across compounds of different types and social classes.

**Materials and methods**

The methodology is purely qualitative, based on 20 in-depth interviews conducted between April and May 2020. The interviewees were selected using both personal and professional networks, although some participants also shared contact information for former neighbours who had moved to different RCs. The interviewees did not know the interviewer or the topic to be covered beforehand to avoid bias. All were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis, following the sociological approach of discourse analysis of the Madrid Qualitative School (Ibáñez-Alonso, 1979; Conde, 2009).

A structured sampling design was developed to capture the social and residential diversity of the RCs. Among the criteria considered, socioeconomic status (vertical axis in Figure 1) and the type of residential environment where the respondent lived (horizontal axis) were fundamental.

In terms of socioeconomic status, we classified interviewees into two contrasting groups: 1) the upper-middle class, comprising professionals and technicians with a high level of education as well as creative professionals (Florida, 2019) such as university professors, lawyers, and doctors. This group would thus include contradictory positions in Wright's terms (2015), those who have authority and high qualifications but no ownership of the means of production and; 2) the working class, which includes people working in manual or service jobs, often precarious, with basic education or whose employment does not require such training as nursing assistants, shop assistants, and sales representatives.

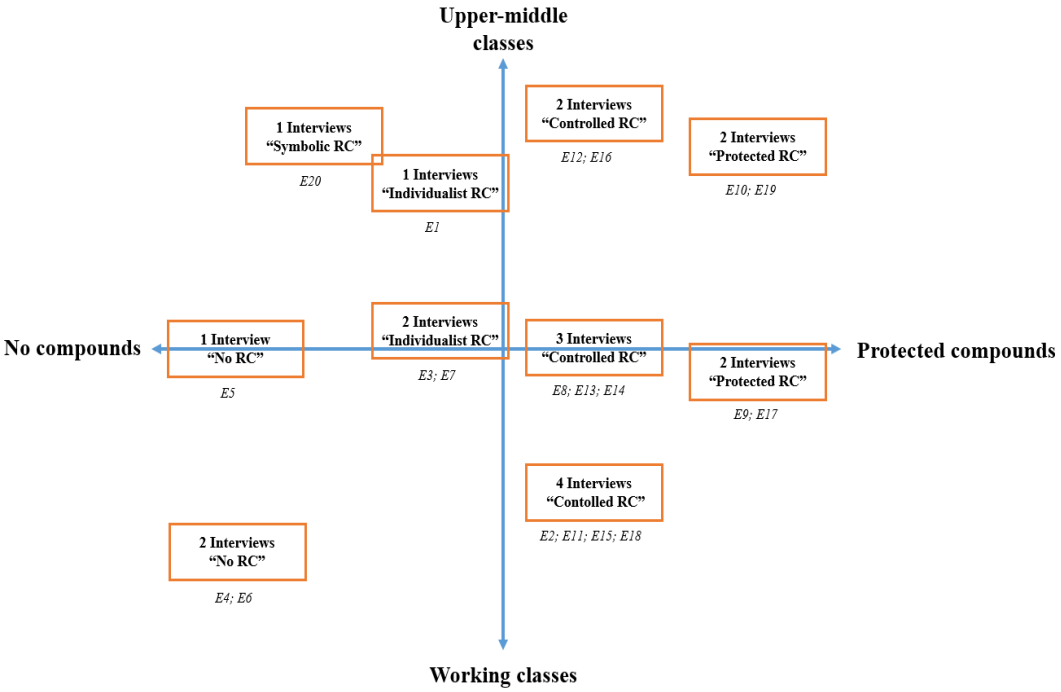


**Figure 1.** Interviews conducted

Concerning the residential environment, we used the typology of RCs developed and presented in previous works (anonymized). This classification comprises five types of RCs, according to their delimitation, from compounds with stricter enclosures *(protected and controlled RC*) closer to 'gated communities', to the most open structurally (*structurally self-isolated RC*) and symbolically (*individualistic and symbolic RC*). Interviews were also conducted with non-residents of RCs in order to find possible discursive discrepancies in the way interviewees define and construct class identity according to the type of residential space in which they live.

We wanted to determine whether class identity exists and emerges in the interviews and whether it is stronger or weaker depending on the type of residential environment (Werhhahn and Raposo, 2004; Dowling et al., 2010). Similarly, it is useful to analyse the possible impact of common spaces on the construction of class identities (Gao, 2015). We also sought variety around basic criteria (Table 1) such as gender and age or household type (single-family households,

families with children and without children) to ensure equity in the social profiles analysed. Additionally, we did not include ethnicity as a criterion, as compounds in Spain are more associated with social class than with ethnicity (Cséfalvay and Webster, 2012; Villar-Lama and García-Martín, 2016). Given that the study was conducted throughout the metropolitan area of Granada, we strove for diversity in the location of the residences of the interviewees. Special attention was given to ensuring the inclusion of compounds from both urban and suburban areas, as well as from different neighbourhoods in the central city, as indicated in Table 1. The type of compound was determined based on a previous study in which all the compounds within the metropolitan area under study had been surveyed (anonymized).

**Table 1.** Interview design

| | **Gender** | **Age** | **Household type** | **Social class** | **Type of residential area** | **Location** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E1 | Male | Adult | Children | Upper-middle class | Individualistic | Alfacar |
| E2 | Female | Young | No children | Working class | Controlled | Cájar |
| E3 | Male | Adult | Children | Upper-middle class | Individualistic | Granada (Rd Sierra) |
| E4 | Female | Elderly | Alone | Working class | No residential compound | La Zubia |
| E5 | Female | Adult | Children | Upper-middle class | No residential compound | Armilla |
| E6 | Female | Adult | Alone | Working class | No residential compound | Granada (La Cruz) |
| E7 | Female | Adult | No children | Upper-middle class | Individualistic | Alfacar |
| E8 | Female | Elderly | Alone | Working class | Controlled | Ogíjares |
| E9 | Female | Young | No children | Working class | Protected | Granada (San Idelfonso) |
| E10 | Male | Young | No children | Upper-middle class | Protected | Granada (Health Campus) |
| E11 | Female | Adult | Children | Working class | Controlled | La Zubia |
| E12 | Male | Elderly | Children | Upper-middle class | Controlled | Grenada (Golden Ball) |
| E13 | Male | Adult | No children | Upper-middle class | Controlled | Granada (Albaicín) |
| E14 | Female | Elderly | Alone | Upper-middle class | Controlled | Granada (Zaidín-Vergeles) |
| E15 | Female | Adult | No children | Working class | Controlled | Granada (Albaicín) |
| E16 | Male | Elderly | Children | Upper-middle class | Controlled | Grenada (Golden Ball) |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E17 | Male | Young | No children | Upper-middle class | Protected | Alfacar |
| E18 | Male | Elderly | No children | Working class | Controlled | Santa Fe |
| E19 | Female | Adult | Children | Upper-middle class | Protected | Granada (Zaidín-Vergeles) |
| E20 | Male | Young | No children | Upper-middle class | Symbolic | Granada (Figares) |

Source: The authors

The interviews were open-ended, starting from a list of topics to be discussed, but allowing the interviewees to speak spontaneously. This meant that there was no structured script of questions, but rather a brief list of potential topics and strategies to encourage conversational dynamics (see Annex), thereby avoiding a questionnaire-style interaction (Conde, 2009). In no case were the interviewees asked to talk about identities or social classes, nor were they asked to self-identify in any social category.

In the analysis, following the line of sociological discourse analysis, attention was paid to the use of language by the interviewees, as well as to the different discursive strategies they used to position themselves in terms of class (Martín-Criado, 1997). This type of analysis emphasizes that all discourse is part of a broader system of discourses (Conde, 2009). The analysis of the interviews is therefore comprehensive and considers the situation and social position of each interviewee, in terms of their sociodemographic and residential characteristics.

## Findings

### Configurations of class identity in the residential setting

Since the interviewees were not asked about their social class, the first thing we noted is that they rarely alluded explicitly to their class status (Bottero, 2004; Savage et al., 2010). Only one interviewee mentioned her social class and that of her neighbourhood in general when asked why she decided to live in her current place of residence.

> "because it is the area where I lived, my lifelong people (...) you know, it's not a nice area and it's also not an area of people... my lifelong people... it's my class"
>
> E19, female, 58 years old, upper-middle class, protected compound

Nevertheless, class identity surfaced in the interviews in a variety of ways. All interviewees expressed their class status at one or more points, albeit implicitly and indirectly (Reay, 1998). They did this implicitly through their behaviour during the interview, by preferring certain ways of life associated with their social position or their residential values (anonymized)

and indirectly, by explicitly mentioning the socioeconomic and professional status of their neighbours or the residential area or neighbourhood in which they live.

As Allen et al. (2007) and Preece (2020) observed in their respective research, the reference to class identities by the interviewees is due, not only to how they perceive themselves, but also to the class in which they perceive their neighbours and the general environment in which they live. Individual, but also collective, recognition and positioning in the social class structure influences the configuration of class identities.

In the following table, we present the different strategies of social positioning adopted by the interviewees, according to their class status. Each of them is accompanied by one or more textual examples. We differentiate three ways or moments in which class identity emerges. From the reception of the interviewee in the dwelling, at the beginning of the interview, through the description of the residential environment - current and past - to the reference to the neighbours for identification, comparison and distinction, in terms of class. From these three different forms, six strategies of class positioning emerge.

**Table 2.** Class positioning strategies in the interviews.

| | | Upper-middle class | | Working class | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Welcoming the interviewer in the dwelling** | | Conscious and distinctive attitude towards the interviewer. The aim is to project a polite and hospitable image. | | Unconscious and more natural attitude towards the interviewer. There is no intention of marking a class position or role in the interview. | |
| | | Example: formal reception with coffee or tea, pastries and classical music. | | Example: informal reception, TV on, interruptions during the interview, people coming in and out of the room, etc. | |
| **Description of the place of residence** | **In the past** | Descriptions that allude to the privileged location of their home, or to the residential patterns or lifestyles typical of their class**.** | | Emphasis on material aspects. The value of the place lies in the improvement of basic housing conditions and the availability of shared facilities. | |
| | | "I have always been a nature lover (...) little by little we started thinking about moving to a place that was countryside and also close to Granada" (E16). | "We bought the plot thinking almost about a second home because at that time there was a custom of a second home very close to Granada! (E12). | "I had two daughters ... we lived in a smaller house and we barely fit (...) but then it had a swimming pool, that was better the best part" (E11). | "Just those of the urbanization, nothing else... with its signs, nice lampposts, well... we even had garbage bins!" (E18). |
| | **Currently** | Emphasis on distinctive value. Use of adjectives and qualifiers that reaffirm the exclusivity and privilege of living in their place of residence**.** | | Emphasis on symbolic value. Description of the general employment situation in the neighborhood (working families), security or the availability of a close family network. | |
| | | "This is magnificent, it's extraordinary... it's wonderful... an outstanding community" (E16). | "it's a wonderful place, uh... it has its own swimming pool... with views of the Alhambra (...)... it's a very special place" (E13). | E.- And why did you come to live here? "well, very simple (laughs) my sisters, my family lived here, she [his wife] is from here in Santa Fe" (E18). | "It is a good area, with hard-working people, quiet... safe, there is no violence or that kind of thing that can happen in a big city" (E4). |
| **Description and position of neighbors** | **Positioning "among similars"** | Repeated allusion to the economic status, profession and education level of the neighbors. They speak of occupational prestige. | | Reference to the employment situation of neighbors and coexistence in general**.** | |
| | | "here there are university professors, high school teachers, teachers, doctors, there are also many who work in banks ... bank manager" (E3). | "There are usually teachers, doctors... there are educated people... high standard of living" (E12). | "It is a block of very consistent people, very calm... who respect schedules (...) normal people" (E4). | "We don't know each other very well, but... normal people, not... working people, each one in his job and... and that's it" (E5). |
| | **Distancing from "among others"** | Distinguish themselves from other social categories by mentioning the type of housing, values or lifestyles of their neighbors. | | Differentiated on the basis of the employment and residential status of the neighbors, as well as their ethnicity. | |
| | | "It is a residential area, there are villas... then there are apartment blocks, an aparthotel (...) more people... you can say that another generation... there is everything" (E12). | "it is not a student profile... because of the location, the price... it can be a bit restrictive... it is for people who have lived for many years in shared apartments and retire here... it is a wonderful place" (E13). | "here there are all types... whatever you can think of... there are gypsies, Castilians, Moors, all kinds (...) yes, a great variety... people without work, some squatters" (E18). | "a block of apartments of working people, and not working people, so that block was problematic (...) their priority was not the community of neighbors" (E6). |
| | **Downplaying the importance of "among others"** | Concern mitigated by fear of losing acquired social status. Constant allusion to professional status and education. | | Awareness of risk or conflicts in the residential environment. Attempt to normalize neighborhood problems or avoid mention or details about them. | |
| | | "some misunderstandings... at times neighbors shout (...) but well, above all, education and respect... what abounds most... there are two doctors, from the same graduating class, by the way" (E3). | "There are female teachers, the one over there is a doctor, civil servants, liberal professions (...) coexistence is more... (laughs) except for the fights, it's fine (laughs) good level" (E14). | "There are squatters, illegal water and electricity hook-ups... but like everywhere (...) what about some fights? few... because gypsies get together with Spaniards and... they don't get along" (E12). | "in a community building you have to count on the rest of the people... the problem is that not everybody pays... well, that's already happened, the truth is that now we are fine" (E6). |

Source: The authors

First, we have the reception at the interviewee's home, where the face-to-face interviews were conducted. This allowed the interviewer to observe more descriptive aspects of the dwelling, but also to learn about the behaviour of the interviewees in their home - how they present themselves and act as hosts to the interviewer. The analysis of these behaviours and attitudes was carried out by the interviewer by means of notes taken before and after the interview. As can be seen, we found certain differences from the first contact, depending on the way the respondents received and presented themselves to the interviewer. Similar to Skeggs (2004), upper-middle class interviewees displayed a pretension of normality, projecting an image of hospitality and politeness. In contrast, working-class respondents exhibited a more carefree and natural attitude. The latter allowed more spontaneous conversation to take place rather than the more articulate conversation that generally occurred with upper-middle class respondents.

Regarding the description of the residential environment, all interviewees expressed their class identity through their immediate surroundings, whether it was the neighbourhood or the RC itself (Savage et al., 2005; Atkinson and Blandy, 2016). While the majority of these descriptions took place at the beginning of the interviews, we noted a greater use of adjectives and qualifiers after some time had passed and the interviewees were more comfortable. We also found significant differences in the way upper-middle class and working-class respondents value and even praise their place of residence, both in the past and today.

Among upper-middle class respondents, residential value is explained by a more mobile way of life (Salvador, 2021); either urban, with ease of availability of all kinds of services and recreational activities near the home, as well as having good views such as the Alhambra for E13, and/or suburban, which in the past was very fashionable among the more affluent population of Granada. The availability of a second home - detached villa - in a peaceful, nature-filled area near the city, was a privileged and exclusive residential option. Although eventually this "*modus habitantis*", as E16 said, faded over time, the interviewees continue to express how wonderful and magnificent it is to live in their place of residence.

In contrast, working-class respondents value the material aspects of their homes, such as having more space or rooms in the home, but also the symbolic aspects, such as living in a working-class neighbourhood with close family networks. In this sense, the attachment of the working-class to their homes reflects a sedentary way of life (Bithymitris, 2023), also indicative of a lack of economic and social mobility, in contrast to the more flexible lifestyle of the upper-middle class, who can afford second homes that reinforce their class identity and social status. Similarly, sharing facilities such as swimming pools, but also garbage bins, streetlamps, etc. also included a distinctive value for working-class respondents, which differentiates them from other people who do not have access to these types of spaces and services, even if they share them with other neighbours.

However, the allusion to the immediate environment was sometimes accompanied and even intermingled with the mention and definition of the neighbours with whom they live in that space (Lamont, 2009; Moore, 2022). This brings us to the third and final form of class positioning, which is through the figure of the neighbour. There is a very prominent and shared interest by both social categories to live in internally homogeneous environments (Donzelot, 2004). In the latter strategy we can clearly detect a self-perception of class (Karlsson, 2017). As shown in Table 2, we distinguish three distinct discursive strategies.

When interviewees identify themselves socially through their neighbours, this is an "among similars" positioning, which usually occurs among residents of RCs where there is a perceived social homogeneity. Both upper-middle class and working-class respondents openly mention the class status of their neighbours, although they do not express it in in the same way. The upper-middle class respondents mention the socio-professional status and level of education of their neighbours, while the working-class respondents emphasize the employment status and morality (Kefalas, 2003; Lamont, 2009) of their neighbours, i.e., that they are hard-working and, therefore, honest people.

Respondents also mention "other class identities" in which they do not identify themselves personally, but they do recognize their neighbours, which is consistent with a strategy of distancing or "fear of moral contamination" (Elias and Scotson, 2008), which we call "among others". There is a use of the second person plural, the *they* or the *others* (Svampa, 2001), which they use differentiate themselves from the others. Generally, these other class identities are considered and defined by the interviewees as inferior to their own (Lawler, 2005). While the upper-middle class respondents differentiate themselves based on the type of housing ('the villas' versus 'the apartments'), the working-class respondents use the housing situation ('the squatters'), ethnicity ('the Moors' or 'the gypsies') or employment status ('unemployed') to distinguish themselves from their neighbours. Nonetheless, some also distance themselves from those who are better positioned socioeconomically. The following excerpts exemplify this "among others", or dis-identification that causes them some discomfort (Preece, 2020) in the opposite direction, present both within the RC and in the neighbourhood in general.

> they look down on you... "who is this?" because I, for example, always wear tracksuits or never wear brand name clothes or blouses that attract attention or that say that I have high purchasing power (...) that is what I mean by hermeticism, you can tell that when they come in here it is like their world and seeing someone who is not from their world shocks them.
>
> E9, female, 27 years old, working class, protected compound

> I would prefer something similar to what I have always had, I wouldn't like to live on Gran Vía, or in a very posh urbanization, you know? where there are very

> high-class people and everybody is watching you and judging whether you have money or not, what kind of car you have... I don't like all that either... it wouldn't make me feel comfortable.
>
> E19, female, 52 years old, upper-middle class, protected compound

There is a final class positioning strategy that consists of recognizing the "among others" in the residential environment, but this reaction to the presence of "among others" is different from the previous one. Instead of accepting the disparity, the goal is to minimize its prominence or normalize its presence. Either for fear of devaluing or losing their acquired social status, as occurs among upper-middle class respondents, or for being recognized in a social category perceived as inferior to their own, as is the case of the working class (Elias and Scotson, 2008). The upper-middle class downplays the importance of "among others" by constantly referring to the professions and education of their neighbours, accompanied by softened references to conflicts by defining them as "little misunderstandings". The working class normalizes "among others" and conflicts, which is exemplified by the expression "like everywhere else".

There is a desire to live in internally homogeneous environments. The following excerpt illustrates this recurring interest among respondents in knowing who they will be living with. This is not for the purpose of strengthening ties with one's neighbours, of belonging or collective community (anonymized), rather, it was solely to know "*who we were and what we did*".

> we are new to the urbanization (...) so when you move in you are a little apprehensive about who you are going to live with, right? so we and the neighbours also "oh, come and have dinner", right? that is, what they were looking for was to know who they were living with (...) I personally noticed a need on the part of other neighbours to know who we were and what we did for a living.
>
> E1, male, 44 years old, upper-middle class, individualistic compound

Homogeneity in terms of class also implies similarity in lifestyles (e.g., having the same work and leisure schedules, living in family environments where children can make friends, play with each other, etc.).

> that they are people with a lifestyle and values similar to mine... that the rules of coexistence are similar, the rhythms of life... (...) that our sons and daughters have similar values and whether they should get to know each other, like each other, make friends, whatever...
>
> E19, female, 52 years old, upper-middle class, protected compound

Interestingly, the search for homogeneity in terms class of does not seem to be exclusive to RCs. All the interviewees allude to their interest in living in residential environments that they themselves perceive as homogeneous and having a similar class identity. If the search for and assessment of living among similar people is not a question that can be ascribed only to people living in RCs, what is the function of these compounds and why do people ultimately choose to live in them rather than in other, less delimited settings?

**Residential compounds as a social uplift mechanism**

Previous studies on gated communities indicate that living in an RC also fulfils the individual desire to distinguish oneself socially (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Farid and Ahmed, 2018). In this study, we found that this distinctive characteristic was not exclusive to the upper-middle class, we also find it among the working class, although the status given by the RC is not the same in each social class.

We noted two distinct mechanisms of status elevation associated with RCs. First, there are repeated references to the material characteristics of the RC. According to the interviewees, moving into an RC implies having access to a series of common facilities that give prestige to the interviewee and to the RC in general, such as a gym, one or more swimming pools, gardens, paddle tennis courts, etc. We call this mechanism of status elevation 'material status'. However, there is also an elevation mechanism that has to do with the average social and professional status of the residents. In this sense, we refer to the sociocultural and professional profile of the neighbours, and this is what we call 'symbolic status'. While both material and symbolic status mechanisms are mentioned in all the interviews, the working class draws more attention to the material characteristics and amenities of the compound in which they live, while the upper-middle class places more emphasis on the sociocultural and professional profile of their neighbours, that is, that they are doctors, lawyers, university professors, etc.

As we saw earlier, neighbours provide and reinforce class identity. Living in an internally homogeneous environment not only consolidates the overall identity of the RC, it is also an additional advantage for maintaining its status. The logic is that if there are good neighbours and neighbourhood coexistence is harmonious, it is easier to maintain and access certain facilities than under individual conditions where access would be more difficult or much more costly Nonetheless, a neighbour can sometimes act more like an enemy than an ally, who can threaten the overall status and identity of the RC.

The following figure depicts the different discourses that appear in the interviews regarding the value - material or symbolic - that the neighbour has in the RC. On the vertical axis, we find the two ways in which the interviewees interpret their neighbours, either as allies or as enemies in order to maintain, or even improve, the status of the RC. On the horizontal axis are the two types of status that the RCs provide, either material or symbolic.

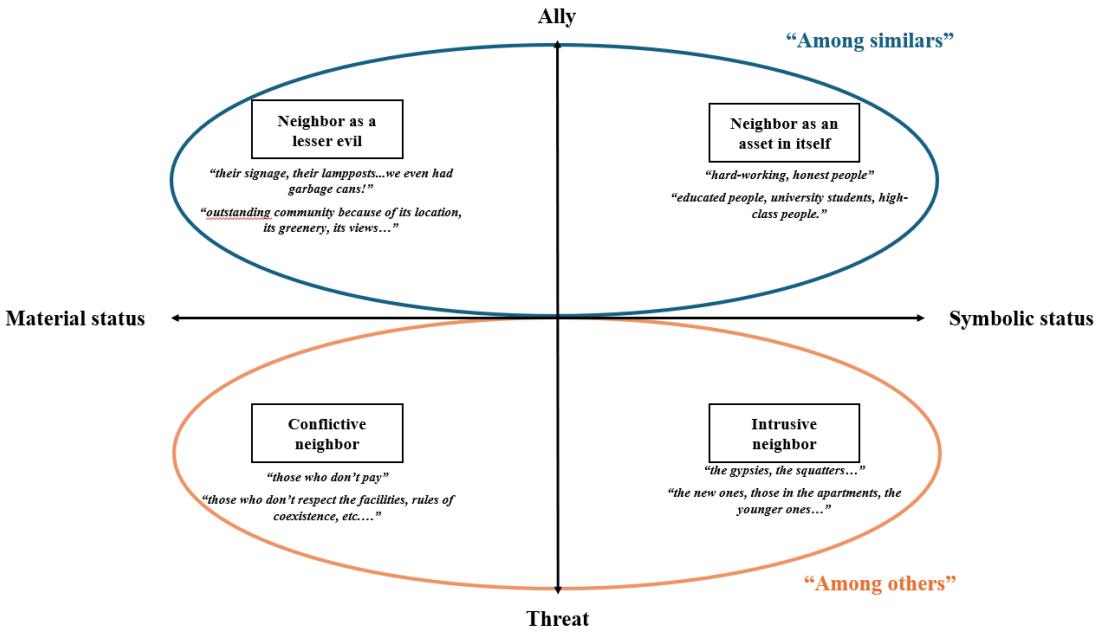


**Figure 2.** Narrative configurations of the role of the neighbour in the residential compound.

Four differentiated discourses can be seen. These discourses do not belong to a single interview or profile. In fact, several may appear in the same interview. They are a set of perceptions that the interviewees have of their neighbours throughout the interviews, which, as we will see later, may reflect the vision of the neighbours at two different points in time: the first to arrive in the community and, after the passage of time and the evolution of the community, the newcomers.

In the upper left quadrant, we find the view of the neighbour as 'a lesser evil'. This discourse is more common in working-class compounds that give more importance to the material aspect, since the common areas or facilities are what mainly provide them with an improvement in their status. Here, collective class identity in the urbanization is provided by the RC, through its services and its characteristics. Here the neighbour, but above all his or her socioeconomic position, has no distinctive value. Rather, the neighbour is necessary to enable access to the shared facilities enjoyed by everyone in the compound. This is not to say that this discourse does not occur among the upper-middle class:

> you enter or you don't enter an enclosed space like an apartment block with the elevator, the stairs... but you enter and you see a green space... the pool is always well kept, the green space is well kept, there are open air corridors... it is still an open space with plants and trees (...) in summer it is even more pleasant when you get home in the horrible heat and you have your pool... you know? the coolness... at night, all that is very pleasant…
>
> E19, female, 52 years old, upper-middle class, protected compound

> the common areas with their... with their signs, their nice lampposts, in short... we had garbage bins, the garbage bins were ripped out, they were thrown away... nothing, here you come and say "damn, what a shame" of course... you can't do anything else.
>
> E18, male, 65 years old, working class, controlled compound

However, as we see in the last excerpt, even if the neighbour is not an asset in itself it can become a problem that threatens the material and overall status of the RC. Now, we focus on the neighbour located in the lower left quadrant, whom we have called the 'conflictive neighbour'. This name is used to describe a fairly common occurrence, which is when disputes and conflicts arise in the community (Müllauer-Seichter, 2019). In our case, conflicts arise from not conforming to community norms (Svampa, 2001; Elias and Scotson, 2008), which generally affect the poor or deficient management and maintenance of common spaces and facilities. For example, through misuse of these common facilities or non-payment of community fees, the neighbour becomes a kind of collective enemy by jeopardizing the material status of the RC. The following excerpt illustrates this notion of the conflictive neighbour in the particular case of the upper-middle class.

> …What I can't understand is that some neighbours who when they came here those were the conditions and if they came here because of how well cared for it was and how well we lived here, they have taken it upon themselves to break up the community.
>
> E. - *How do they break it up?*
>
> of course ["tss"] the quality is not going to be the same, it is clear... here, something breaks down and the next day it is being repaired (...) there are neighbours who want to save on community expenses, so they prefer to lose quality of life... it is incomprehensible why they came to live here…
>
> E12, male, 78 years old, upper-middle class, controlled compound

The neighbour understood as an ally appears mainly in the interviews of the upper-middle social class and is represented in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 2, with the neighbour as 'an asset in itself'. Neighbours are allies because they confer prestige due to their social position (symbolic status). We see this when interviewees repeatedly mention the sociocultural and professional profile of their neighbours in their interviews. We find two different expressions of the neighbour as an asset in itself, depending on the interviewees' perception of their own class identity. In the first excerpt, we see an attempt by the interviewee to equate and justify his class position with that of his neighbours. After listing the different professions of his neighbours, he points out that he also has higher education. The second interviewee, however, does not try to validate his status in front of the interviewer. Rather, he comments on the current diversity in the

community and then subtly mentions that the general status of the community at the beginning, which was when he and his family moved into the urbanization, was higher.

> *E. – one of the things you had also commented on was the cultural level within the urbanization itself... what were you referring to?*
> E3– well then... with university studies for example... university professors... high school professors... teachers... doctors, in short... bank jobs... other neighbours who are... who also work in banks, jobs like that more... I don't know... of a sociocultural level, I was referring more or less to university studies, high level... I studied teaching, so... (laughs).
>
> E3, male, 47 years old, upper-middle class, individualistic compound

> E12a[3]. – there are usually teachers, doctors... there are educated people (...) high standard of living…
> *E. – that is to say, occupations of... high education level or ...*
> E12. – there are all kinds... there are all kinds... normally the first ones who arrived were professionals and so on... teachers... high school teachers... university teachers... especially university teachers…
>
> E12, male, 78 years old, upper-middle class, controlled compound

As we can see, in both cases the neighbour is an ally because he or she grants symbolic status, and functions as a promoter of class identity and prestige. The neighbours, as asset in themselves, are the ones who give this distinctive sense to the interviewee and to the compound in general. However, the last excerpt also serves to highlight a small detail that can turn the symbolic value of the neighbour in the RC into an inconvenience.

When there is a gradual change in the socioeconomic profile of the community, what we call the 'intrusive neighbours' appears, located in the lower right quadrant of the figure. This last discourse appears, above all, when there is a perceived change in the socioeconomic profile of the neighbours (Skeggs, 2004) and, consequently, of the community in general over the years. Sometimes, the arrival of new members to the community can be a serious threat, especially for the long-standing members who perceive the newcomers (Kefalas, 2003; Elias and Scotson, 2008) as having a lower status than their own, the maintenance of the community's status is then endangered.

> there is everything... normally the first ones who arrived were professionals and so on... then... the aparthotel ["tss"]… then things changed... at first the

[3] E12a corresponds to E12's wife, who occasionally intervened in the interview.

> aparthotel was for an Arab sheikh (...) then... it was sold as very small apartments... and then... well... the level there dropped a bit.
>
> E12, male, 78 years old, upper-middle class, controlled compound

This last passage reminds us of what Svampa (2001) called "generational transfer" in the Argentinean *countries*. The status of the community begins to be threatened when the newcomers (young upper-middle class families) try to change the rules of use, management and maintenance of the gated community. These first steps are observed by the original members (older upper-middle class families) as an attack not only on the management, but also on their way of life and the identity of the community. Nevertheless, the intrusive neighbour appears not only among upper-middle class members, but also in working-class RCs. The following excerpt reveals how the interviewee, speaking about the price of his home, associates the arrival of socially worse-off profiles with the low price of housing in his community today.

> E18. (..) from when I bought it to now it has gone down by half (...) housing is cheaper because I told you, here we have everything... you have all kinds here, gypsies, Castilians, Moors, there is everything (...) variety yes, great... there is variety because... people without work (...) there are squatters, there are illegal water and electricity connections…
>
> E18, male, 65, working class, controlled compound

Accordingly, in Figure 2 we can distinguish two situations that occur in RCs, represented by two colours. In the upper part, surrounded in blue, we find the discourses that constitute what we call 'among similar' living, thus indicating the achievement of internal homogeneity in terms of class and identity in the residential environment. The situations located in the lower part of the figure, in orange, represent the rupture of the 'among similars' by living 'among others', which symbolizes variety and heterogeneity in the RC and, consequently, the loss of unity and collectivity.

Until now, the study of this residential phenomenon has focused on the clear sociospatial and discursive differentiation between those who live inside the RC – 'we' – those who live outside it – the others – (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). The presence of the 'among others' in our interviews, however, corroborates that this distinction is also present within the RCs. Even so, the allusion to 'lower level' or 'inferior' profiles continues to be made implicitly or indirectly. The upper-middle class uses less explicit terms to refer to their 'among others' such as 'those in the apartments', 'the young people', or 'those who came later'. Conversely, the working class tends to speak more openly, mentioning the ethnicity, housing or unemployed status of their other neighbours who threaten or have completely ruptured their status, and that of the RC.

## Conclusions

In this study, we qualitatively analysed how class identities are shaped within RCs in the metropolitan area of Granada, according to social class and the type of residential environment: whether residents live in RCs or not, and the type of compound. The results show that, although the respondents avoid overtly identifying themselves with a particular social class (Reay, 1998; Savage et al., 2010; Preece, 2020), residents and non-residents of compounds generally do so implicitly and indirectly through their behaviour during the interview, the description of their place of residence or the allusion to their neighbours.

We have observed that RCs function as status drivers. Living in a compound grants social position in two ways: materially (through access to amenities) and symbolically (through the socioeconomic profile of the residents). Interestingly, the discursive strategies for identifying (and disidentifying) with status through RCs differ between the working class and the upper-middle class. For the upper-middle class, the construction of class identity is primarily symbolic: it involves self-attributing the socioeconomic position of their neighbours (Farid and Ahmed, 2018; Moore, 2022). In contrast, for the working class, it is more material, focusing on the services and amenities provided by the compound, which enable an elevation of their social standing within their own class. We also observed disidentification strategies, wherein residents position certain neighbours as part of a separate group—"among others" (Benson and Jackson, 2017)—or downplay conflicts and normalize certain behaviours that might otherwise be socially stigmatized. This serves to preserve the status of the compound. Residents handle potential stigma by emphasizing normality and coexistence rather than highlighting differences (anonymized), reminiscent of the protective "entre-soi" described by Donzelot (2004).

These results confirm that the choice to live in these compounds operates within the logic of 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2005) across all social groups. Such compounds allow individuals to better position themselves socially and spatially, partly due to their conflict-preventive function, as discussed in a previous publication (anonymized). This finding underscores the importance of not limiting research to compounds associated with middle and upper-middle classes, which have received more attention in the literature (Moore, 2022), and instead expanding the focus to include working-class RCs (Flint, 2011). Interestingly, the specific type of compound and its level of enclosure appear to be less significant than the mere fact of living in one. This suggests that the literature should not be restricted to studies of the most closed compounds (gated communities) alone, as doing so would overlook an important dimension of the phenomenon. Across all types of compounds, regardless of their morphology, similar dynamics of identification and disidentification are at play.

Moreover, these results have implications that extend beyond the specific literature, as they are also relevant for urban sociology and social class studies. In late modernity, where identities are increasingly fragmented and individuals navigate various resources and dimensions

to construct them (Skeggs, 2004; Reckwitz, 2020), the space they inhabit – whether it be the city, the neighbourhood, or even a specific building – serves as a key resource for social positioning (Bithymitris, 2023). Thus, the overall development of RCs as more or less isolated environments (anonymized) contributes to socio-spatial fragmentation and heterogeneization (Atkinson and Blandy, 2016).

In this regard, it is important to note that, although this study reaffirms the importance of the class dimension, its design and analysis do not allow for conclusions regarding other basic dimensions of these fragmentations, such as gender or ethnicity, which also play a role in these processes (Skeggs, 1997; Crean, 2018). This should be considered in future research, as well as in similar studies in other cities across Europe and the rest of the world, whether in larger cities or those with different metropolitan dynamics. Despite these limitations, this study provides empirical insight into a city in southern Europe, showing how social classes continue to be relevant, albeit in a less visible manner than in the past. We found more discursive differences based on social position than on the type of residential compound, which reaffirms the centrality of social position in studies from sociology and social sciences in general.

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## Annex

**Table 3.** Interview script

| |
|---|
| **Begin the interview:** Recording and data privacy reminders |
| **Introduction**: How old are you? What is your profession? Do you have children? etc. |
| Initial prompt: So… how would you describe the place where you live? |
| **Questions as tactics to prolong the development of the conversation** |
| - Ah, children... Are there many in the area? |
| - Nature? Tranquillity? How so?... |
| - So, space is important? noise, of course… |
| - Excuse me, could you repeat the place? I didn't quite understand..… |
| - So, you live in X (place)... what area is that? I'm not familiar with it right now... |
| **When the interview cannot be prolonged with such tactics ... use the following questions** |
| **1. Urbanization or residential environment** |
| - So, what is the urbanization (the neighbourhood, the area) like? |
| - Apartments, single-family houses, common or individual accesses… |
| - Ah... so, how many people live there? |
| - Advantages and disadvantages |
| **2. Common areas** |
| - Because... of course, you were telling me there was a swimming pool or...? |
| - Ah, with a swimming pool/playground... was that something you were looking for from the beginning or...? |
| - And how is the swimming pool, do you use it regularly/often (adapt depending on the facilities available) |
| - Who uses them the most (common spaces)? |
| - and is this public or...who manages it? |
| **2. Neighbours and coexistence** |
| - How are the neighbours? |
| - And the atmosphere here, what is it like? |
| - So, you were telling me that life here is…? |
| - And your children, how are they doing here? Do they have friends to play with and so on? |
| - And the neighbourhood meetings, how are they? |
| - Now with the issue of confinement and so on... has the relationship changed a lot? |
| **3. Safety issues (only in the event that this did not come up spontaneously beforehand)** |
| - Earlier you told me that you were comfortable/calm... what exactly did you mean? |
| - So, safety, how is that? |
| - Do you think it is important? |

Source: own elaboration