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Living in a gated community: The subjective experience of sense of community and social cohesion

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Abstract

The phenomenon of gated communities is growing worldwide. In South Africa, these residential enclaves are shrouded in a context that is inseparable from the historical conditions of multiple inequalities, rendering these spaces highly controversial. The influence of gated communities on social relations is one area of debate that is considered at various levels, however, greater attention appears to be paid to this influence on a broad societal level. This study adopts an alternative focus and explores social relations between the residents within the gates while those that extend past the boundaries form a prominent, but less in-depth, element of investigation. Specifically, sense of community and social cohesion within the gated communities are the point of interest within this study. Overarching social interaction and inter-group relations are similarly paid attention to. A qualitative approach was utilised for this exploration, with an interpretive paradigm framing the study. Interviews were carried out with 11 residents of gated communities, with consideration given to various aspects of their subjective experiences of this living style. Five themes are highlighted through a thematic content analysis of their relayed experiences, and these speak strongly to the dynamics within the gates. Furthermore, framing these themes are meta-themes of inequality, discrimination, exclusion and homogeneity. The South African context frequently enters discussion, and its relevance to the outcomes of this research is noted. This study points to strained social interaction and inter-group relations within the gated communities. Furthermore, a minimal sense of community and poor social cohesion are found within the subjective experiences of the residents.

Key words:

Sense of community, social cohesion, inter-group relations, social inequality, race division, class division.