Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship
– In dialogue with David Morgan

Vanessa May, Helen Holmes and Sarah Marie Hall
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

In 2012, David Morgan gave a talk entitled ‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship – Some further thoughts’ at the University of Turku, Finland. In this paper we engage in dialogue with Morgan’s talk, as well as his 2009 book Acquaintances, in particular the observations he made about the simultaneous closeness and distance that characterises neighbouring relationships. We suggest that using the metaphors of elasticity and stickiness instead allows us to explore neighbouring relationships as more than inhabiting a space between intimates and strangers (Morgan, 2009), but as textured and messy everyday relationalities. We consider also how the ‘stickiness’ of this relationship as well as the significance of its ‘elasticity’ are likely to have been heightened during COVID-19 lockdowns, which have altered the usual configurations of intimate and stranger relationships. In doing so, our aim is to contribute further to Morgan’s theorising of the nature of neighbouring as a specific form of acquaintanceship.

Key words: David Morgan, neighbours, relationships, stickiness, elasticity

Introduction

In 2012, David Morgan gave a talk entitled ‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship – Some further thoughts’ at the University of Turku, Finland. After David’s death in June 2020, his partner Janet Finch shared a copy of this paper with us. Although only 2,500 words, we found it to be – characteristically for David’s work – rich with fascinating observations about neighbouring. In this paper, we engage in dialogue with David Morgan’s talk, particularly the
observations he made about the simultaneous closeness and distance that characterises neighbour relationships. While many know Morgan as a family sociologist, we wish to highlight the important contribution that his work made to the sociological study of relationships and relationality more broadly.

Inspired by Morgan’s own creative and often playful approach to sociological thought – something that those who ever had the pleasure of witnessing him asking questions of seminar and conference presenters will be familiar with – our initial aim was to experiment with what might happen if we used different metaphors instead of closeness and distance to study neighbouring. During our initial discussion, Sarah came up with the notion of social glue and stickiness, and Helen suggested that we could explore elasticity. Distant closeness or close distance might appear to present a paradox because physically, something cannot simultaneously be near and far. We found that this paradox dissolves if neighbour relationships are conceptualised as ‘sticky’ and ‘elastic’. This is because these metaphors combine a sense of how these relationships can be both spatially and emotionally constraining in some ways while also offering latitude in others. In other words, following Henri Bergson’s (2001 [1913]) critique of the tendency to spatialise and thereby externalise human experiences, we argue that the metaphors or stickiness and elasticity draw attention also to inner experience. We do this by analytically distinguishing between physical proximity and propinquity – the notion of feeling near.

With regard to stickiness, we explore conceptualisations of ‘social glue’ (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) as both a positive and negative feature of neighbour relationships. In relation to elasticity (Rebughini, 2011) we consider how reciprocity is a core yet flexible feature of neighbour relationships both in terms of positive reciprocity and what Kortteinen (1982) referred to as ‘negative solidarity’. Our aim is to contribute to Morgan’s theorising of the nature of neighbouring as a specific form of acquaintanceship, but we propose that our insights are of relevance also to a broader audience of scholars concerned with the nature of human relationships.
Throughout the paper, we consider the stickiness and elasticity of neighbour relationships in light of the COVID-19 pandemic – ongoing at the time of writing – during which the configuration of intimate, stranger and acquaintance relationships has been altered for many. For some, this will have heightened the ‘sticky’ physical proximity and emotional propinquity of neighbour relationships as well as the significance of the ‘elasticity’ of fleeting relationships.

‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship – some further thoughts’

In 2012, David Morgan gave a talk entitled ‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship – some further thoughts’ in which he extended his discussion in Acquaintances (2009) of neighbours as a type of acquaintance relationship. In this paper we focus particularly on the spatial understanding in which Morgan’s discussion of neighbouring is rooted, as indicated by the title of his book Acquaintances: The Space Between Intimates and Strangers and the title of the chapter on neighbours ‘Acquaintances in space: neighbours’. Here Morgan defined neighbour relationships as ones that emerge due to the fact of living ‘next door or close by’ (2009: 21). Space is also important when considering where neighbour relationships take place: for the most part in public or semi-public spaces, more rarely inside the home. Furthermore, Morgan observed that ‘good’ neighbouring is to do with ‘ethics of space’, which entails ‘striking the “right” balance between closeness and distance’ (p. 33) Being ‘too’ close means ‘[o]ffending an individual’s sense of personal space’ (p. 34). In his 2012 paper, Morgan further developed this point by talking about personal space both in the Goffmanian sense and also by reference to the home. A neighbour might easily come ‘too’ close to either of these boundaries. Indeed, being invited into a neighbour’s home signals a shift in the relationship in terms of level of knowledge and perhaps also intimacy.

A core theme in Acquaintances on which Morgan expanded in his talk ‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintanceship’ was the balance between this distance and closeness that acquaintance relationships must find. Morgan drew inspiration from Simmel, who in his essay
'The Stranger' noted that a ‘union of closeness and remoteness is involved in every human relationship’ (1950[1908]: 143). The particular combination of distance and closeness involved in each relationship creates a specific ‘form of being together, a form of union based on interaction’ (p. 144). Morgan (2009) similarly argued that acquaintance relationships have a logic of their own, and that the distance and reserve inherent in these relationships should not be seen as necessarily a negative, as it can also bring with it certain benefits. Below we consider how COVID-19 has brought this to light in a heightened way.

The majority of Morgan’s talk in 2012 was focused on the simultaneous closeness and distance that characterises many neighbour relationships. How neighbours achieve a balance between individualism and privacy on one hand and sociability and neighbourliness on the other has been the focus of much research, some of which Morgan referred to in his talk (e.g. Crow et al., 2002; Gullestsad, 1986; Kortteinen, 1982; Stokoe, 2006). Morgan also listed some of the common expressions used in the UK to describe the presumed ideal balance of involvement and detachment in neighbour relationships, including ‘not being in each other’s pockets’ and ‘friendly distance’. He observed that the fact that this theme of balancing distance and closeness is found in research on neighbouring in different national contexts indicates that this character of the relationship is not culturally specific and may be universal.

However, a note of caution is in order lest we assume that neighbouring is a uniform experience. When considering the concept of neighbouring in different dwelling types – a suburban terraced house, a rural farm, an informal settlement, living on the street – very different features of neighbouring can come to the fore. In Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi’s study of street children in Accra, Ghana, for instance, neighbour relationships were highly embodied via ‘the customary positioning of hands, feet, elbows, legs, torsos so as to connect with one another, [which] provides a physical manifestation of their social interdependence; the simple exchange of human contact and physical proximity a source of shelter, security and protection’ (2010: 450). These are quite different types of neighbouring to the examples we work through and with which David Morgan was thinking. And yet commonalities might emerge, such as
alignments between this work in the Global South, and work on street play in South Wales (Skelton, 2000) or Northern England (Stenning, 2020), where street locations and neighbour relationships become a space for togetherness and friendship. Therefore, while in this paper we draw on particular ideas of neighbouring based on ways and forms of living in the Global North, and especially the UK, we encourage scholars from different settings to explore the contextual nature of neighbours as proximate relations.

Morgan explained the need for distance in neighbour relationships as rooted in people’s wish to protect their privacy. But he also offered a more relational explanation, drawing from Becker’s (1960) notion of commitment. By this Morgan meant that people might be wary about:

- embarking upon a course of action if it seems likely that a reversal might seem problematic. Conversely, once one has begun upon a particular path (e.g. getting to know a neighbour) one is becoming committed to that course or action. In circumstances of limited knowledge of the other initial steps are likely to be tentative and exploratory.

In other words, developing a closer relationship with one’s neighbour can be risky if this is done on the basis of limited knowledge. What if they turn out to be an awful person? It can be difficult to pull back and reinstate a more distant relationship. Put simply, developing closeness is easier than (re)creating distance in a relationship. We return to this in our discussion below of the stickiness of neighbour relationships.

The above point exemplifies the mixture of ascription and achievement, or choice and necessity, that characterises neighbour relationships: ‘There is an element of achievement in deciding “how far to go” with any particular acquaintances’ (Morgan, 2009: 109). But on the other hand, as Morgan noted in his talk, even when people have the resources to choose where to live, they can rarely choose their neighbours, who are always to an extent ascribed.
In his 2012 talk, Morgan devoted considerable attention to the particular form of knowledge that distinguishes acquaintance relationships, a topic which also constituted a core theme in his book *Acquaintances* (2009). While we lack the intimate knowledge of acquaintances that we have of friends and family, we know something about them as individual persons, even if it is just which house they live in. Due to physical proximity, we will come to know things about our neighbours even if we never talk to them, such as the composition of their household and what their everyday routines and habits are; we might also glean something about how well household members get on with each other. Relationships are of course never fixed, so over time we may gain more intimate knowledge of an acquaintance, particularly a neighbour who we may see or (over)hear regularly. Morgan (2009: 10) distinguished between explicit or overt knowledge gained through conversation, and knowledge that people give off for example by body language or appearance. He also referred to what could correspondingly be called ‘covert’ knowledge that neighbours can learn about each other by for example overhearing arguments.

In his talk, Morgan highlighted that:

here a crucial distinction is whether this knowledge is obtained covertly or unintentionally or whether it is openly provided. It is one thing for a neighbour to explain to you that he is not getting on with his wife. It is another for you to learn, or to assume, this from overhearing noisy rows or exchanges. The sight of a sunbathing or drunken neighbour, noisy sounds of visits to the toilet or sexual intercourse may constitute 'obtrusive public intimacy' (Stokoe) or 'guilty knowledge' (Hughes).

Hughes's (1962) notion of ‘guilty knowledge’ is similar to what Goffman described as ‘backstage difficulties’ amongst neighbours who can ‘find themselves in the embarrassing position of knowing that each knows about the other too well’ (1959: 122). Morgan noted that:

The difficulty with this knowledge is that it is not negotiated; the recipient (even if he or she does not find it personally offensive) does not quite know what to do with it. This contrasts with intimate knowledge which is freely provided where negotiation ('please keep this to yourself') is possible.
As we go on to discuss below, covertly and unintentionally gleaned ‘guilty knowledge’ is an aspect of the sticky nature of neighbour relationships.

In sum, distance and closeness – both as physical realities and as metaphors for the quality of the relationship – are key in how Morgan conceptualised neighbour relationships. While he did not solely refer to distance and closeness as spatial, neither did he analytically unpick when these are spatial and when emotional properties of a relationship. We now go on to explore why such an analytical distinction is important.

A brief Bergsonian detour

The simultaneous closeness and distance that constitutes ‘good’ neighbouring might at first glance seem a paradox, given that something cannot logically be simultaneously close-by and far away. We argue that a way of resolving this paradox is by analytically distinguishing between physical proximity and propinquity as a feeling. Such distinctions matter: in *Time and Free Will* (2001[1913]), Bergson noted the habit of spatialising ‘our immediate conscious life’, meaning that we tend to ‘describe sensations in terms of quantities attributable to objects with well defined outlines’ (Muldoon, 2006: 76). As a consequence, inner states, which Bergson described as being a ‘continuous multiplicity that cannot be reduced to numbers’ (Deleuze, 1991: 38), come to symbolically be represented as akin to physical objects that can be ‘string[ed] along a spatial line’ (Bergson, 2001[1913]: 123) and measured in relation to each other. We propose that understanding relationships through the prism of distance and closeness spatialises and thereby externalises something that could in Bergsonian terms be understood as an internal experience.

Bergson argued that projecting our inner states ‘into spatial discreteness is to cast them into a new form not originally attributable to them’ (Muldoon, 2006: 79). We cannot take a position outside of our inner life as we can in relation to material objects in space, and it is only in space that there is ‘a clear-cut distinction of parts external to one another’ (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*; 149, quoted in Muldoon, 2006: 80). Instead, our inner life is one of duration, which is a
felt experience that flows in a fluid manner. Yet our attempts to imagine this inner life tend to spatialise it in such a way as to render it inert:

For Bergson, real duration is the indivisible continuity of change. It is the felt experience of change ... it is an experience of quality ... any attempt at imagining it tends to spatialize its flow; any attempt to logically categorize it tends to hypostatize its fluid quality, any attempt to substantialize it renders it inert. (Muldoon, 2006: 81)

Drawing inspiration from this Bergsonian critique, we distinguish between the spatial dimensions of neighbour relationships – particularly physical proximity – and the felt experience of the relationship, what is often referred to as propinquity. This is a concept used to describe the emotional geographies of closeness and distance that are not reliant on physical spatiality but are nevertheless complicated by proximity (Popke, 2003). Such emotional closeness or distance is also not so easily measurable, rather being subject to negotiations, subjectivities and responsibilities (Massey, 2004). Whereas closeness and distance are spatial metaphors, we introduce the notions of stickiness and elasticity which allow for a way of paying attention to the distinctions between proximity and propinquity. While the socio-spatial metaphors of distance and closeness indicate something that can be externally measured, understanding relationships as experiences of stickiness and elasticity offers a more textured understanding of how physical proximity and emotional propinquity interweave in neighbour relationships.

We turn first to Spencer and Pahl’s (2006) notion of ‘social glue’ and the concept of the ‘stickiness’ of relationships as developed by Carol Smart (2007) and Katherine Davies (2019). We then move on to discuss the ‘elasticity’ of neighbour relationships, drawing on the work of Rebughini (2011) and others.
The ‘stickiness’ of neighbour relationships

We have already established that a key part of most neighbourly relations is (enforced) physical proximity, which affords neighbour relationships their distinct form. We propose that this proximity of socio-spatial relations, as it gives rise to a need to negotiate emotional propinquity, can lend these neighbour relationships a sense of stickiness. We deploy this metaphor of stickiness in multiple ways so as to bring out its different features. As yet, these ideas have not been applied to neighbours and neighbouring. We propose that they present an interesting interpretation of the particularities attached to such relationships, including their adhesive nature, as a form of ‘social glue’, and their tenacity. Moreover, the metaphor allows us to pay attention to the uncomfortably sticky nature of this social glue as experienced in situations when managing neighbourly relationships and situations can be difficult, tricky and awkward.

To start, inspired by Spencer and Pahl (2006), the concept of ‘social glue’ is one way of thinking through the various dimensions of neighbour relationships. They derived this concept from early sociological work of Durkheim and others on social cohesion, social order and social solidarity, and argue that friendship acts as a form of social glue (see Pahl, 1991). Their work can partly be understood as engaging with the idea, fashionable at the time, that social relationships were waning in a dangerous fashion – most famously captured in Putnam’s contention that people were now ‘bowling alone’ (Putnam, 2000). For Spencer and Pahl, the gluiness of relationships relates particularly to friendship. We enjoy Spencer and Pahl’s material metaphor of glue and wish to extend this to neighbours, while also recognising that drawing boundaries between different types of relationships can be tricky. For instance, neighbour relationships are also encased within Wellman’s broader notions of ‘kinfolk’ (also see Bowlby 2011), and what Smart (2007) described as relational networks. Early sociological and community studies research took particular interest in the suffusion of roles between family and friends, as well as critiquing a reductive common focus on these relationships within people’s lifeworlds. Instead, ‘personal communities’, as Spencer and Pahl (2006) term them, became of increasing interest. By personal community, they were referring to people who are
considered important to one’s personal life, whether or not they are kin. As Wellman described:

Family sociologists have usually treated kinship networks as discrete systems in Western (post)industrial societies. While separate treatment is useful for studying such matters as inheritance and ceremonial obligations, it wrenches out of context an assessment of how ties with kin fit into everyday lives... the place of kinship ties in *personal community networks: intimate* and *active* ties with friends, neighbours, and workmates as well as with kin. (1990: 195, emphases in original)

We agree: to understand social relationships they need to be viewed together because they are relational, not just in terms of who they involve but by definition when compared to one another. These boundaries are also fuzzy: a neighbour could be a friend, a workmate or kin. It is this knottiness that we find intriguing, but it also leads us – and led David Morgan – to ponder why neighbour relationships have lacked broader appeal within the sociological literature. The stickiness of neighbour relationships is implicit also in the language Wellman chooses: to separate everyday relations is to ‘wrench’ them out of context when they are in fact emplaced and embedded. This also helps to demonstrate the knottiness of proximity and propinquity.

In fleshing out the knotted and glue-like characteristics of neighbour relationships, we also draw from Smart’s (2007) notion of family relationships as being ‘sticky’, which Davies (2019) developed further in her work on siblings. Speaking of relationships with kin and family, Smart described these as ‘sticky’, referring to the fact that it can be hard to ‘be free of one’s family and kin’ and to ‘shake free from them at an emotional level’ (2007: 45). Due to the nature of family relationships, the ‘tenacity of these bonds and links’ between family is one that can continue even after a family relationship has been broken off or a family member has died. This is because they involve not just proximity but also a cultural expectation of propinquity. Neighbour relationships are likely to be of a slightly different nature. The tenacity of a
neighbour relationship is, in most cases, more reliant on proximity – a neighbour remains a neighbour only for as long as they live next door or near-by.

Davies (2019) made use of Smart’s argument about the sticky nature of some relationships, regardless of the quality of the relationship. She did so in the context of how siblings influence each other’s educational experiences and orientations, even when the relationship is not a close one. She argued that the stickiness of sibling relationship is in part the result of norms and obligations surrounding sibling relationships, such as the expectation that older siblings offer support and advice to their younger siblings at school. The young people in Davies’s study expressed a keen awareness of this moral obligation, which made it ‘difficult for young people to free themselves of their responsibilities towards their siblings’ (Davies, 2019: 217).

In conversation with David Morgan’s talk, we bring this idea of sticky relationships to bear on neighbour relationships. While these are quite different from family relationships – for one, there is the absence of strong familial norms and obligations, a point we return to below in our discussion of elasticity – an important similarity, and one that can make neighbour relationships sticky, is the inescapability of this relationship. Whether good or bad, the neighbour relationship is sticky in a very literal sense. Just like siblings find that as long as they live in the same household, the very existence of a relationship between them is a given, neighbours will find that because of the fact of the proximate location of their homes, they cannot escape being neighbours (other than by moving house). The relationship cannot easily be ‘shaken off’ because physical proximity necessitates some level of social interaction, even if this is in the form of ignoring each other. In other words, a proximate relationship demands some negotiation over the degree of propinquity of the association. We propose that it is this proximity that also adds a sense of stickiness such that many neighbours are careful of the commitment that developing a propinquitous relationship would entail.

Others have written about how such gluey or sticky relations are part of the making of ‘collectivity’ (Edwards and Gillies 2004: 31), an important feature of which is care. In The Care
*Manifesto*, the authors in fact specifically referred to neighbour relationships using the language of caring and mutuality. They posited that:

communities based on caregiving and caretaking provide each other with mutual forms of support. This is palpable to the idea of being a good neighbour, looking out for those who live nearby. Whether it involves checking in on those who are ill, running errands, keeping a spare set of keys, watering plants or feeding pets, ‘neighbourliness’ is a powerful and widely practiced informal mode of localised and mutual community care (The Care Collective, 2000: 47)

The example of care is particularly pertinent to developing our ideas in this paper and relates to the multiple types of stickiness that we try to articulate. Firstly, the adhesive, cementing nature of care is well versed, argued to hold together community and civic relationships. Sometimes described as ‘social infrastructure’, social relationships such as these are distinctly gendered, classed and racialised (Brownlie and Anderson, 2017). In a paper exploring non-profit care work, Baines et al. (2020) drew on Nancy Fraser’s brief use of the metaphor of ‘social glue’ during an interview on care under capitalism, in which she described social reproduction as:

sustaining horizontal ties among friends, family, neighborhoods, and community. This sort of activity is absolutely essential to society. Simultaneously affective and material, it supplies the ‘social glue’ that underpins social cooperation.

(Fraser, 2016, no page number)

Although she only used it fleetingly, Fraser nonetheless deployed the concept of social glue as a means of indicating both proximate and propinquitous relations required to sustain social life, and with specific mention of neighbourhoods. Thus, to come back to *The Care Manifesto* (2000), to posit neighbour relationships as a form of care is one way in which to draw out their multiple compositions of social gluiness. If anything, COVID-19 has served to emphasise how the socially reproductive labour of care is a sticky substance.
Secondly, care relationships are multifaceted, drawing in caring, cared for, informal, waged, loving as well as strained relationships (see Twigg, 2006). A recent article by Doward (2020) for example points to a growth in estranged relations between neighbours, offering a counterpoint to assumptions about people rallying together and an accompanying rise in community spirit. During COVID-19, also the negative aspects of this stickiness have perhaps become heightened. Take for example how neighbouring often involves (over)hearing one’s neighbours, perhaps to the extent of being the unwilling recipient of ‘guilty knowledge’ of their personal lives or being disturbed by noise (Lewis, 2019). Sound can thus act as a sticky adhesive, sometimes of the type that pinches and causes discomfort. News reports from South Korea for example tell us that the number of complaints about noisy neighbours has risen sharply during the pandemic (Choon, 2021).

Identifying these connections between proximity, collectivity and (lack of) mutuality also serves to highlight how the ‘social’ in social glue has many possibilities, with neighbours being one of the lesser discussed relations as opposed to family and friendship. So while our focus also lies on personal communities and micro-social worlds, our use of the concept of ‘social glue’ is different from Spencer and Pahl’s (2006). Our argument does not concern the nature of social cohesion, but instead we use the metaphor of glue to explore the experiential nature of neighbour relationships. Indeed, it is the physical proximity of neighbours that acts like a social glue in the relationship. But it is the degree of propinquity that adds a sense of stickiness to it, both in the case of ‘bad’ neighbours whose lives cause a disturbance of some kind and of mutually caring neighbour relationships. This stickiness, we suggest, has become especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns have for many people meant having to spend more time at home than usual, perhaps seeing their neighbours more than anyone else.

**Elasticity: The flexibility of neighbour relationships**

Whilst stickiness is a significant characteristic of neighbour relationships, we argue that so also is elasticity. Drawing on David Morgan’s work, we note the wide range of neighbour
relationships that are possible, from having nothing to do with and feeling no obligations to one’s neighbours to being intimately entwined in their lives.

Here we draw inspiration from Rebughini’s paper on friendship dynamics in the context of individualisation, where she argued that it is the ‘elastic character of friendship that makes it such an indispensable [sic] and precious form of support’ (2011: 4.2). While Rebughini’s argument relates to the significance of mutual emotional support in societies characterised by uncertainty and risk, we are specifically interested in the first part of her depiction of friendships as elastic because these are ‘less tied down by social norms, or at any rate less influenced by socially defined expectations than family or romantic relationships’ (4.2).

Neighbour relationships are similarly elastic in that there are fewer norms and expectations of how these should be conducted than there are in relation to family relationships. Yet neighbour relationships have the added complexity that, unlike friendships, we cannot choose them. Consequently, neighbouring involves a complex interaction of proximity and propinquity that requires constant negotiation (see Massey, 2004). We are subject to fate, albeit structurally aided, with regards to who we live near to. This further complicates the elasticity of neighbour relationships as they are at once both a ‘given relationship’ and one that requires a conscious decision to engage with or disengage from.

Whilst we may show kindness to our neighbours we are not obliged by any norms or conventions to do so. Small acts such as bringing a neighbour’s bins back after they have been emptied or looking after their pet whilst they are away are part of the micropolitics of care and kindness (Hall and Smith, 2014) but they are not expected activities in the same way that caring for sick kin, for example, may be. In their study of low-level help and support in three areas in and around Glasgow, Brownlie and Anderson (2017: 1226) observed that such ‘low-profile acts’ have an ‘infrastructural quality’. This is because they are ‘little noticed and yet also fundamental’: they ‘enable other things to happen’, to the extent ‘sometimes they enable whole lives or ways of life to be sustained’. Brownlie and Anderson indicated that it is their
voluntary nature that makes them acts of kindness: ‘while not necessarily completely unexpected ... neither are they expected in the way that acts of civility might be’ (2017: 1227).

But we contend that it is reciprocity, rather than kindness on its own, that is a core feature of the elasticity of neighbour relationships. This can be either positive reciprocity or what Kortteinen (1982) referred to as ‘negative solidarity’. As the work of Pahl (1984) illuminates, positive forms of reciprocity include neighbourly activities. For example, undertaking a household task for a neighbour might be reciprocated with a cooked meal or a token gift. These small reciprocal acts create fragile boundaries around the elasticity of neighbour relationships. Failure to properly reciprocate may threaten neighbourly relations.

At the other extreme, reciprocity can mean consciously doing nothing. Kortteinen’s (1982: 251) notion of negative solidarity entails people not interfering in the lives of others, and expecting the same in return. As Morgan noted in his talk, neighbouring is about ‘not wanting to be in each other’s pockets, each other’s hair. Keeping one’s nose out’. This mutual respect of privacy can be tenuous and of course difficult to maintain. Doing so for years, perhaps decades, requires skill. The skills involved in being a neighbour and maintaining negative solidarity are similar to the skills needed to live in cities as identified by Lofland (1973). These might include knowing how to minimize encounters (not stopping for a long chat every time we see a neighbour, instead deploying a friendly wave of the hand and a quick hello) or, if we really dislike a neighbour, potentially hiding when we see them or timing our arrivals and exits so as to avoid them (the latter of course based on the knowledge that we have gleaned about our neighbour’s routines).

As Goffman (1963) noted, ordinary face-to-face interactions between people tend to follow certain patterns and are subject to (unwritten) ground rules of co-mingling. According to Lofland (1998), even the most fleeting of encounters are seemingly choreographed. Our avoidance of or engagement with neighbours present no exception. We must communicate to others that we want our privacy (physical and emotional); that we know they are present, but
that we remain invisible to each other; that we do not intend to intrude in their personal space. Neighbours might also defend their territory, usually through body language and ‘props’ – fences, garden ornaments, plants – and at times verbally. Lofland argued that city residents have not lost the capacity for ‘deep, long-lasting, multi-faceted’ relationships but have ‘gained the capacity for the surface, fleeting, restricted relationship’ (1973: 178). Neighbours may pass the time with chat; share an unexpected experience; share momentary ‘fellow feeling’. That this negative solidarity is subject to constant negotiation and maintenance so as to ensure that it does not tip over into intimacy or hostility also makes the elasticity of neighbouring fragile.

The frequency and tenor of such interactions are no doubt partly influenced by the type (and potentially tenure) of one’s housing. As we have noted above, different dwelling contexts can encourage very different forms of neighbouring by steering the sorts of encounters neighbours may have and the work they must undertake to maintain an acceptable balance of proximity and propinquity. For example, living in a block of flats – with shared entrances, stairways and communal facilities such as postboxes – is likely to present many more opportunities for neighbourly encounters (or the need to avoid them) than say a detached house on a suburban street. Likewise, how a person engages with neighbours might be predicated on their tenure and how long they plan to stay in their current residence. This is not to say that owner-occupiers are likely to have better relationships with their neighbours than short-term tenants do. Instead, we propose that the predicted length of residence is likely to influence how a person approaches the balance between acts of kindness and negative solidarity, and what degree and kind of elasticity (and stickiness) they are comfortable with.

Building on the previous point, the elasticity of neighbour relationships is further highlighted when considering neighbours moving away. As noted by Morgan in his talk, neighbourly relationships are unlikely to continue after people move away. In other words, the elastic rarely stretches that far. Similarly, the fact that people are likely to move a number of times in a lifetime also stretches the elastic capacities of neighbour relationships. Figures suggest that the average person in the UK moves 1.8 times after buying their first home (Gompertz, 2018), but
this of course does not account for the growing number of renters. Recent research reports that home ownership is in decline and instead ‘Generation Share’ is the prevalent, if not only, option for many aged 20-39 (Maalsen, 2020). The elasticity of neighbour relationships for those renting highlights not only an under-researched area worthy of future study, but also confirms that neighbourly bonds are subject to multiple forces stretching and tightening their elastic capacities. Neighbours moving away and new ones moving in require further negotiation around acceptable neighbourly relationships.

Finally, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic may have strengthened neighbourly relations for some, it has also weakened them for others. Lockdown rules have led to ‘pandemic shaming’ (Tait, 2020; Nabity-Grover et al., 2020). At one point, a UK government minister even encouraged neighbours to report each other for breaking COVID rules (BBC, 2020). Given the constantly changing and often confusing rules around when it is permissible to leave one’s home or visit the homes or gardens of others, it is likely that for some people, neighbour relationships have become strained and difficult, possibly resulting in disagreements regarding acceptable pandemic behaviours. Such judgements and shaming, or even anxieties that others may be judging one’s behaviours, would no doubt test the elastic capacities of neighbour relationships, perhaps straining them to breaking point.

**Interactional qualities**

In this final section, we take the Bergsonian critique discussed above to its logical conclusion, by exploring in more depth the kind of propinquity that interactions with neighbours can offer. The significance of this, we suggest, has become accentuated during COVID-19 as restrictions on movement and social interactions were put in place and as consequently people’s opportunities for fleeting encounters in shops, pubs, cafes and restaurants, and on the street and on public transport were reduced. While some of these will no doubt be stressful and negative encounters that people might be happy to forgo, also the positive ones have been largely missing. Even though temporary, this reconfiguration of the relational and interactional landscape brings to the fore the need to analytically distinguish between physical proximity and
emotional propinquity and to understand these as interrelated when studying neighbour relationships.

In his talk, Morgan referred to a very particular benefit of neighbour relationships, one that we suggest has perhaps become heightened during COVID-19. Morgan described acquaintances as a counterbalance ‘to the demands ... of intimate life’ (Morgan, 2009: 114). Drawing from Simmel, Morgan (2009) argued that many acquaintance interactions are about pure sociability where the interaction partners are most concerned about the tone and tenor of the conversation. Whereas family members might be sharing their concerns over job security or debating over whose turn it is to work a shorter day so as to home-school the children, sociability can be an end in itself in neighbour interactions. Quoting Adam Smith, Morgan noted that the lowering of passions in such interactions can make them particularly pleasurable. In addition, such casual encounters can be ‘creative, exciting’ in contrast to the ‘highly routinised and reiterative’ interactions that take place between familiars (Riesman and Watson, 1964: 238, quoted in Morgan 2009: 115).

Goffman’s (1959) distinction between front stage and backstage interactions is also of relevance when discussing neighbour relationships, particularly in reference to the perhaps less respectful nature of interactions between family members. The backstage allows such ‘minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect’, while the front stage ‘disallows such potentially offensive behaviour' (Goffman, 1959: 129). Goffman referred to a husband and wife bickering who, upon meeting an acquaintance, must ‘put aside their intimate quarrels and play out between themselves a relationship that is almost as distant and friendly as the one played out for the sudden arrival’ (1959: 139). Put simply, at home with family, we need not adhere to the niceties of etiquette as we might while out in public. Goffman proposed that consequently, ‘we may expect a tone of formality to prevail’ in the front region, while in the backstage ‘we may expect reciprocal familiarity to determine the tone of social intercourse’ (1959: 129). While we may draw warmth and pleasure from the informality of these familial interactions, there can also be a negative intensity to our intimate relationships. At its extreme,
this is evident in the prevalence of men’s violence towards women and children in the home, which has reportedly been on the rise in the UK during COVID-19 (The Guardian, 2020).

On the front stage, people tend to present performances devoid of profanity and ‘inconsiderateness for the other’ (Goffman, 1959: 129). This is perhaps what Morgan was referring to when he noted the ‘lowering of passions’ that is evident in interactions with acquaintances. We contend that the possibly more pleasant nature of interactions in public, such as those we might have with neighbours, has come to the fore during COVID. The intensity of living 24/7 with family members or housemates, or of the solitude of living alone, has perhaps been refreshingly offset by the tone and tenor of interactions with neighbours (as long as these are positive). This has been further accentuated by the fact that due to restrictions on movement, for some, bumping into neighbours may have been their most frequent or even only interactions with known others. Therefore, the significance of acquaintanceships with neighbours has likely become more visible or heightened, both in the negative and the positive; perhaps propinquiries have grown or waned. These chance encounters with neighbours as we step out our front door to go exercising or to the shops, as we take the bins out or walk the dog, can offer us a chance to enjoy the benefits of pure sociability. On the negative side, the stress of an encounter ‘gone wrong’ might come to dominate in a different way if this is the only encounter we have in a day.

Concluding discussion

This paper has been inspired by and written in dialogue with David Morgan’s work on neighbours as a particular acquaintance relationship. His writing and thinking around this topic were characteristically rich in insight, reflecting his never-ending fascination with and creative way of looking at the mundane and often overlooked aspects of people’s everyday lives.

As we read Morgan’s 2012 talk ‘Neighbours, neighbouring and acquaintance – Some further thoughts’ and then re-read his 2009 book Acquaintances, our attention was drawn to
his use of the socio-spatial metaphors of distance and closeness in describing the particular character of neighbour relationships. Inspired by the conceptual creativity that was characteristic of Morgan’s work, we decided to play around with different metaphors that would allow us to both analytically distinguish between the notions of proximity and propinquity, and explore their complex interconnectedness. In doing so, we have drawn from the rich literature on what brings people together and what might push them apart. We have argued that neighbour relationships can be felt and experienced as simultaneously sticky and elastic. There is the unavoidable fact of physical proximity and the resultant need to interact with our neighbours on a regular basis. This then leads to some kind of relationship to propinquity, whether this be small acts of reciprocated kindness and care or (mutual) attempts to avoid and ignore each other. Whether positive or negative in character, this stickiness of neighbour relationships adds an important texture to daily life. But there is also the elasticity allowed by the fact that the precise quality and content of neighbour relationships is not prescribed to the same extent as family and friendship relationships might be, and indeed they may offer us a refreshing dimension of pure sociability.

We contend that the metaphors of stickiness and elasticity draw attention to the limitations that the conventionally used metaphors of distance and closeness might place on our sociological imagination. As noted in our detour into Bergsonism, there is something static about distance and closeness. Furthermore, these are spatial metaphors, measurable from the outside. In contrast, stickiness and elasticity allow for both the spatial/material and felt dimensions of neighbour relationships to be kept in view. In doing so, they bring to mind the textured quality of experience as well as dynamism and movement. The emphasis thus lies on relationships not as something externally measurable but as inner experience. Whereas characterising neighbour relationships as simultaneously close and distant presents us with a paradox, stickiness and elasticity can be experienced simultaneously, and indeed glue can be both sticky and elastic, while an elastic band can at the same time hold something in place while allowing for movement. Our analysis has thus drawn attention to the need to distinguish between the different socio-spatial dimensions of neighbour relationships. To be precise, we
have distinguished between the unavoidable fact of physical proximity and the consequences thereof on the one hand, and emotional propinquity on the other. This has allowed us to explore the processual felt experience of dynamic and complex relationships that constrain us in some ways and offer latitude in others.

Although this paper is about neighbour relationships, the analytical insights offered by the use of the metaphors of stickiness and elasticity are likely to have broader relevance and could be used to explore the full range of relationships. And at a more fundamental level, we argue for an awareness of the ways in which the metaphors we use to study and conceptualise relationships allow for insight and simultaneously constrict our sociological gaze and imagination.

We conclude with a few thoughts on the limitations of our paper, and how the ideas developed herein could be taken forward in future research. We have written this paper from the perspective of adults. Morgan (2009: 25) noted the children have their own understandings of neighbourhood and it would be fascinating to explore their experiences of stickiness and elasticity in relation to the relationships they build with neighbours of various ages. We have also not touched upon the many others who play a significant role in shaping the tenor of daily neighbourhood life. Thus, we would welcome a study of how postal workers, delivery drivers and refuse collectors, among others, observe and are part of neighbourly interactions.

Furthermore, context matters. The socio-political, material and economic fabric of everyday life, including ways and forms of living with and near others, influence the tone and texture of neighbour relationships. Hence others writing on neighbouring in different and diverse circumstances – whether in the Global South, in rural dwellings or in times of economic transition (e.g. see Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010, Skelton, 2000, Stenning, 2005) – will likely add interesting new dimensions to our theorisations here.

**Conflict of interest statement**

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.
Acknowledgments
We wish to thank Professor Dame Janet Finch for permission to use David Morgan’s unpublished talk. We are also grateful to the two anonymous referees for their insightful and constructive comments on our paper.

Bibliography


Fraser, N. (2016) ‘Capitalism’s crisis of care’, Dissent,


