

# **'Where my neighborhood ends': inclusion and exclusion criteria in subjective constructions of a Social Housing Neighborhood**

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## **Abstract**

This study draws upon cognitive maps and in-depth interviews with 15 unemployed women residing in a Portuguese social housing neighborhood (Bairro de Contumil) to examine their subjective construction of the neighborhood's boundaries. Due to the internal homogeneity (socioeconomic and architectonic) of Social Housing Neighborhoods (SHN) in Portugal, one could assume that the boundaries of the SHN would be similarly drawn by its residents. Against this expectation, the mental maps of the interviewees vary substantially and none of the participants limits her neighborhood definition to the social housing area. Consistent among the participants are the reasons guiding the inclusion and exclusion of spaces in their neighborhood definitions. The study uses place attachment and place identity theory to shed light on how emotional connections with place and humans guide the residents' boundary work. The in-depth interviews reveal complex relations between place attachment, human relations, spatial cognition, and the use of space.

## **Introduction**

Neighborhoods have long captured the interest of researchers in several fields of science, ranging from political science, health sciences, psychology, and urban studies. Despite the vast interest in the topic, we still lack a unanimous definition of the concept of *neighborhood*, which is particularly problematic for empirical analyses which demand a clear conceptualization and operationalization of the concept, for example those focusing on neighborhood effects (van Ham et al., 2012). As a practical solution, researchers often opt to use economic or administrative units defined by governments or other agencies for statistical purposes (van Ham et al., 2012). However, these top-down definitions may fail to grasp how residents really experience and construct space (Lefebvre, 1974). While it is consensually agreed that these units may not correspond to the residents' own definitions, very few studies work with subjectively constructed maps. Some scholars acknowledge this shortcoming and investigate the discrepancies between administrative units and subjective neighborhood constructions, and analyze the criteria guiding these perceptions (Campbell et al., 2009; Burdick-Will, 2018). Some factors analyzed so far include physical characteristics (e.g., physical barriers), social categories (e.g., racial composition of space), and individuals' behavior (e.g., routines). In spite of the valuable insights into

how residents evaluate their social and spatial environments and how these shape their mental maps, most of these studies largely overlook the role of affection and emotions in neighborhood definitions and how, in turn, these representations nurture further emotional attachment.

This study addresses this research gap, by using place attachment and place identity theory to shed light on how emotional connections (with place and people) may guide the construction of subjective neighborhood boundaries. It examines the inclusion and exclusion criteria that a group of unemployed women residing in a Social Housing Neighborhood (SHN) apply when defining their neighborhood boundaries. These women spend almost their entire time in their neighborhood and, consequently, have a strong place attachment. This allows me to explore how these emotional connections shape and are themselves shaped by relationships with neighbors and workers in the area.

The subjects of this study live in Bairro de Contumil, a SHN in Portugal. Due to its internal homogeneity and its disconnection with the surroundings, SHNs constitute a most-likely case where neighborhood boundaries are expected to be clearly visible and collectively agreed upon. Against this expectation, all interviewees in this study have different perceptions of the neighborhood's boundaries. Nevertheless, the reasons that inform these decisions are very consistent among the participants. Their main inclusion/exclusion criteria are their habitual use of space and their relations with residents and workers in the area. Visible in all women's testimonies is the interrelation between person-to-place connections (i.e., emotional attachment to places) and their relationships with the users and residents of those places. On the one hand, the women sympathize with the users and residents of places they are emotionally attached to. On the other, they often exclude areas from their territory based on the profile of their inhabitants. These findings shed light on the intricacies between emotional and place connections and have further implications for the cohesion between residents of vulnerable neighborhoods and their surroundings.

This article starts with a literature review on neighborhood boundaries and the criteria that residents use to guide these subjective constructions. It is followed by a theoretical discussion of place-identity and place-attachment theory. Afterwards I discuss the case selection and methods for this research. This is followed by the analysis of the interviews and cognitive maps. The article ends with a discussion of the findings.

### **Neighborhood definition and place attachment**

The main argument of most studies on neighborhood effects is that the place where one lives has implications for individuals' well-being and life chances. In other words, neighborhoods are important. Yet, despite the vast scholarly interest, the concept of neighborhood is still not consensual, a fact that is, in itself, the subject of research (van Ham et al., 2012; Galster, 2001). Notwithstanding this inconsistency, there is general agreement that neighborhoods are both physical spaces and social contexts, thus having a geographic and a social

dimension (Elliott et al., 2006:11). From a geographic perspective, it has been argued that neighborhoods consist of physically bounded areas (Hallman, 1984:13; Keller, 1968:89; Morris and Hess, 1975:6; Schoenberg, 1979:69), where residents live close to each other (Warren, 1981:62), marked and distinguished by several space-based attributes (Galster, 2001). Yet, neighborhoods are also defined by their residents, networks, and social relationships (Hallman, 1984:13; Downs, 1981:15; Galster, 2001:2111; Schoenberg, 1979:69). This implies that neighborhoods are not only 'spaces'. Instead, neighborhoods constitute 'places', which are imbued with meaning, represent a particular way of life, host shared identities, and have identities of their own. Scholars add that neighborhoods' definitions and boundaries are perceived differently across individuals and within time, meaning that neighborhood borders are subjectively and individually constructed (Campbell et al., 2009; Coulton et al., 2001; Coulton et al. 2013).

Abstract, top-down definitions of neighborhoods may not capture residents' lived experiences and perceptions (Lefebvre, 1974; Burdick–Will, 2018), which has clear implications for studies that use administrative or economic units to investigate neighborhood dynamics (van Ham et al., 2012). As argued by Burdick–Will (2018: 419), residents perceive their neighborhoods socially and spatially, but neither of these elements can be objectively measured. Therefore, studies on subjective boundaries have sought to systematize, instead, the factors that inform residents' boundary work. Several studies have found that perceptions of neighborhood boundaries are affected by both neighborhood and individual characteristics. It has been argued that the area, density, the location of the neighborhood, and the demographic characteristics of its residents (e.g., age composition, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity) affect the perception of the neighborhood's limits (Sastry et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2009). Physical and institutional characteristics (such as the presence of schools, or physical barriers) are often used as landmarks to delimitate the neighborhood area (Campbell et al., 2009; Harding, 2010; Burdick–Will, 2018). Furthermore, neighborhoods are ascribed a place identity that serves to guide individuals' understanding of neighborhood boundaries (Campbell et al., 2009), which then affects the residents' own identity (e.g., Proshansky, 1978). Personal experiences and individual characteristics affect how neighborhood boundaries are perceived. This explains the great disparity in mental mapping, even among members of the same household. Studies that investigate these individual-level variations have found that the level of education, socioeconomic status, immigration status, civic participation, length of residence, and relationships with neighbors influence neighborhood perception (Campbell et al., 2009; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Sharkey 2006; Sastry et al., 2004; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Small 2004; Coulton et al. 2013; Burdick–Will, 2018).

As identified in previous research, individuals are more likely to feel a personal connection to places they frequent regularly and consider part of their neighborhood (Foster et al. 2015; Jorgensen 2010; in Burdick–Will, 2018). Thus, subjective neighborhood definitions are an indicator of emotional connection with places. Lofland (1998) suggests three different types of person-to-place relationships. She argues that some places

take "(...)the aura of sacred places" when they are associated to an event or a certain object, hence acquiring symbolic value and generating place attachment. These are what Lofland calls "memorialized locales". "Familiarized locales" are places that are part of individuals' routines and therefore are used very frequently. Finally, "home territories" (the strongest form of person-to-place connection) consist of places where individuals have a sense of intimacy and control. One can argue that when individuals share their perceptions of neighborhood boundaries, they are, in fact, defining their home territory. Hence, following Lofland's argument, the social construction of one's neighborhood implies an emotional connection with the places included in her/his definition. Moreover, Lofland argues that emotional connections with places are "somehow coupled" with emotional connections with those who occupy that space. That is, there is some association between place attachment and social bonds, which she deems difficult to analyze separately (1998:65).

Even though the relationship between place attachment and community ties is not fully asserted, there are several authors drawing an association between the two. For example, Manzo and Perkins (2006) argue that the emotional connections with places relate to community social cohesion and community development. Low and Altman (1992) see places as repositories of interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships and, therefore, by extension, see attachment to place as an attachment to these relationships. Empirical studies that investigate this relationship seek a causal explanation. While there is empirical evidence that supports the association between the two, the direction of the link is unclear (Rollero and De Piccoli, 2010). Indeed, different studies use place attachment as the explanatory variable (Lewicka, 2005) and others as the dependent variable (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Mesch and Manor, 1998). This supports Lofland's argument that person-to-place connections and person-to-person connections are hard to untangle (1998).

The overall fuzziness of the association between place attachment, behavior, preferences, and human connections has not been satisfactorily reflected upon in studies investigating factors influencing the subjective construction of neighborhood boundaries. For example, is it group membership that influences boundary definition (Campbell et al., 2009), or are perceived boundaries generating feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont and Molnar, 2002)? Is it the use of local institutions that bends the perception of neighborhood boundaries (Burdick-Will, 2018), or is it because these infrastructures are included in one's neighborhood that residents choose to use them? To explore these intricacies and fuzzy relations and to complement studies of neighborhood boundaries that focus primarily on collective definitions, there is a need for qualitative studies that adopt a grounded theory approach.

### **Place identity theories**

Place identity theory posits that place is a substructure of one's identity. The theory was first formulated by Proshansky in 1978, who proposed that "(...)the self-identity of the individual is structured by various more

specific identities (sometimes referred to as ‘subidentities’) such as gender, social class, ethnic background, occupation, religion, and still others, then it follows that there must be a place identity in this structure” (1978:155). Place identity has often been studied using the theoretical framework of identity process theory (IPT). Initially proposed by Breakwell (1983, 1986), IPT postulates that identity is both a structure and a process. The structure of one’s identity has two elements: a content element that comprises both our social and personal identity (i.e., our group memberships, personal attitudes, etc.) and a value element, which consists of the self-evaluation of these components. The value element determines the salience of each sub-identity in our identity hierarchy. Two processes serve to organize the elements of one’s identity structure: the accommodation-assimilation process consists of incorporating new elements and readjusting the remaining sub-identities, while the evaluation process refers to the attribution of meaning to that component. These two processes are guided by four principles: distinctiveness, continuity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. As such, place constitutes a sub-identity, which is accommodated, assimilated, and evaluated by these principles. Speller (2000) argues that places that make us feel unique (distinctiveness), in control (self-efficacy), good about ourselves (self-esteem), and are consistent with our subjective ideas of who we are (continuity) are more likely to be assimilated into our identity.

It has been argued that the centrality of place on one’s identity is also influenced by the degree of place attachment (i.e., the more attached we are to a place, the more we identify with those places) (Hauge, 2007; Giuliani, 2003). However, there is no clear consensus about the distinction between place attachment and place identity (Hernández et al., 2007; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010), and these definitions are often imprecise (Anton and Lawrence, 2014). For some scholars, place identity and attachment are indistinguishable (Brown & Werner, 1985). In other instances, the concepts are defined as a component of the other: while some see attachment as a component of identity (Lalli, 1992), others argue that identity is a component of attachment (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005). Yet other authors claim that attachment precedes identity since the latter requires some time to develop (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Hernández et al., 2007). It has also been argued that place identity consists of a cognitive dimension of person-to-place relationships, while place attachment is its affective dimension (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010).

Despite the variations in the way place attachment and identity are theorized, these are useful theoretical tools to investigate how residents draw symbolic neighborhood boundaries. In particular, IPT theory is selected as a theoretical framework for the analysis because it recognizes the relation between different identities and how place may fit into self-definitions that create group membership. First, IPT's principles (distinctiveness, continuity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem) are used to understand what drives attachment and self-identification with the neighborhood under study. IPT theory sees identity construction as a dynamic process. It is, thus, used as a framework to explore how different identity elements form neighborhood boundaries and how salient

identity elements (especially place-identity) shape relationships within and outside the participants' perceived territory.

### **Case selection and methodologic considerations**

Social housing neighborhoods in Portugal consist of low-cost residential areas (prices are controlled by the State) intended for low-income households (INE, 2016). They are often segregated and stigmatized, and its residents have low socioeconomic (SE) status (Augusto, 2000; Carreiras, 2018; Azevedo et al., 2009), many of whom are unemployed (Alves, 2008:61) and dependent on social benefits (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009). Augusto (2000) argues that SHNs are often characterised by internal homogeneity due to the SE profile of their residents and the apartment buildings' standardized design. The author adds that the external heterogeneity of the surroundings enhances the perception of internal homogeneity. Thus, many SHNs experience socioeconomic, physical, and symbolic disconnection with the remaining environment.

Bairro de Contumil is a SHN in Porto, which was built in 1977. It is composed of 254 apartments, which house around 643 dwellers (Domus Social, 2021). Bairro de Contumil is a multi-ethnic neighborhood<sup>1</sup>. According to the residents interviewed, the two largest ethnic groups are Portuguese Romas and Ethnic Portuguese. Albeit in smaller numbers, there are also Ukrainians, Brazilians, Asians (unspecified), and African descendants (unspecified) living in the SHN. From a socioeconomic perspective, Bairro de Contumil shares similar characteristics with other SHNs in Portugal. Although, according to public data, "only" 29% of the residents are unemployed, the reality is that many of the residents have never had a job and therefore are not counted as unemployed for statistical purposes. Bairro de Contumil is part of a larger cluster of SHNs in the Campanha parish. Indeed, two other SHNs (Bairro do Pio XII and Bairro Engenheiro Machado Vaz) are located less than one kilometer away.

Bairro de Contumil is a typical case of a Portuguese SHN. As most SHNs, it is marked by a physical disconnection with the surrounding environment. In terms of design, the social housing apartments present a considerable internal homogeneity which is in contrast to the residential, commercial, and institutional spaces in their surroundings. The neighboring streets to the west of the social housing apartments comprise detached or semi-detached family homes. To the north of the SHN, an unoccupied vacant field separates Bairro de Contumil from the single-family detached houses and apartment buildings, creating a symbolic division with the neighboring residential areas [Picture 1]. To the east of the SHN, there is a narrow cobbled street with several warehouses and workshops and semi-detached houses, many of which are vacant (as surveyed in 2021). Finally, on the southern border of Bairro de Contumil, the street Rua de Contumil runs from west to east. It

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<sup>1</sup> There is not data available about the residents' ethnicities. Therefore, this conclusion is based on the interviews conducted.

contains many small grocery shops, kiosks and services (e.g., cafés, bakeries, tutoring center, religious associations) with housing units above them. Four of the apartment buildings in this street blend in with the social housing apartments. If it weren't for the fence separating the buildings from the SHN, they would be almost indistinguishable from one another. Apart from these four buildings, all the remaining properties have a contrasting design.



*Picture 1 - Northern area of Bairro de Contumil. The social housing apartment buildings (on the right side of the picture) are separated from detached family homes (on the left side of the picture) by a vacant field.*

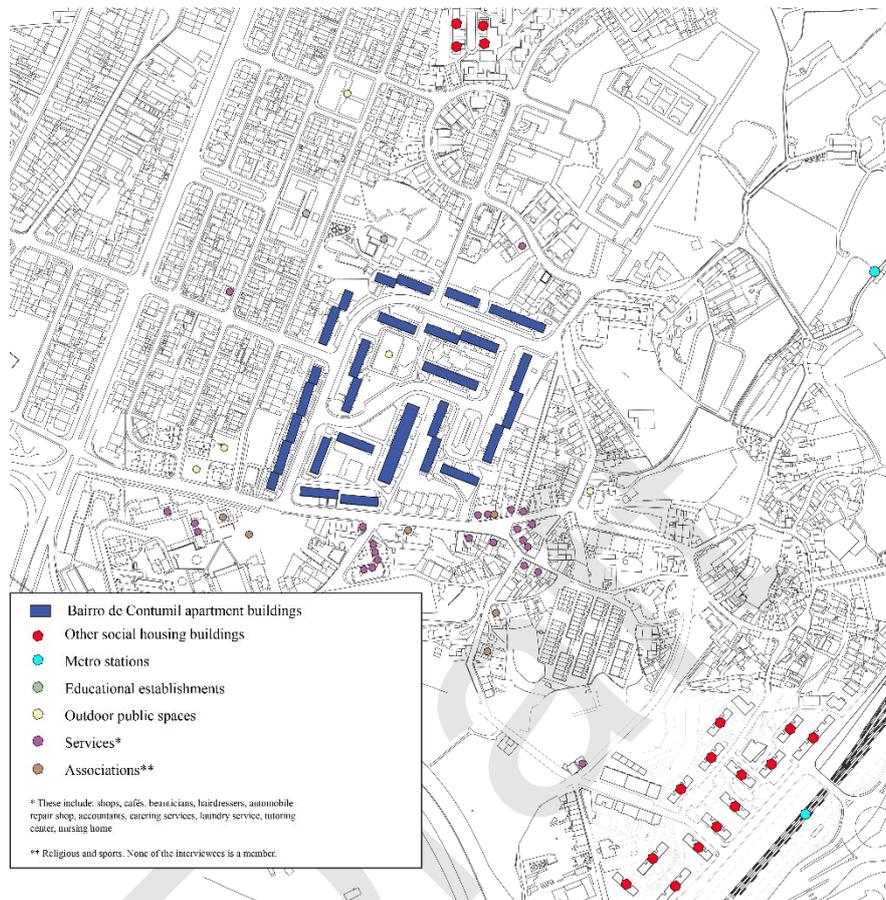
In the vicinity of Bairro de Contumil there are two public schools, a park, two metro stations, and several bus stops, rendering the area self-sufficient (i.e., all basic needs can be fulfilled in the area) and well-connected to the city core. The research area is depicted in Map 1.

Bairro de Contumil is often described as a “Bairro de Ciganos”, a derogatory expression used to refer to SHNs with a large concentration of Roma. This indicates that the ethnic composition of the residents further contributes to differentiating Bairro de Contumil from the neighboring streets.

Studying Bairro de Contumil had the added benefit of being an area that I knew very well, having lived in its vicinity for over 20 years. This knowledge of the area proved fundamental to investigate the mental maps of the women interviewed. When the women explained where the neighborhood ended and why, they referred to very specific locations, some of which are no longer present. My familiarity with the area allowed me to follow their thoughts and map those references. It has been argued that this inside knowledge may engender data interpretation (Creswell, 1994), which was a concern during the entire fieldwork. As such, there was a constant effort to dissociate myself from the interviewees' narratives. Moreover, there was also careful consideration about how much I would let the interviewees know about my experiences in the area since this could potentially

affect their narratives. I opted for revealing that I had a good understanding of the area but did not mention that I had lived there for many years.

#### Research area



*Map 1 - The dark blue polygons correspond to the social housing apartment buildings of Bairro de Contumil. The red dots correspond to other SHNs in the area. All other colored dots correspond to public and semi-public spaces, the majority of which are used by the interviewees.*

The study is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews with unemployed women<sup>2</sup>. The participants were recruited with the help of a social worker in the area, who facilitated the initial introduction. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided not to interview women older than 45 years old. It has been argued that, compared with men, women are more attached to the areas where they live because they are the primary caretakers of children and their home (Tartaglia, 2006). Furthermore, according to Burdick-Will (2018), places that are used regularly influence the perception of neighborhood boundaries and the relationships with neighbors. Due to their economic condition, the interviewed women spend almost their entire time in the SHN area, making them the prime users of the public and institutional spaces in the vicinity. Therefore, based on insights from literature, I expected this group of interviewees to know the site well and constitute an extreme case of

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<sup>2</sup> However, one of the women was on lay-off due to the national lockdown, but expected to return to work afterwards.

emotional connections to the area they define as their neighborhood. The presence of strong feelings towards the neighborhood allowed me to investigate how emotions are used to define one's neighborhood. Furthermore, since ethnicity is expected to be a decisive criterion for boundary work (as demonstrated in previous studies), the interviews included women of various ethnicities (Portuguese Roma, Ethnic Portuguese, Brazilian). The selected group of women was beneficial for practical reasons as well, since they were available at any time during the day. I did a second round of short interviews with workers of establishments in the area. They were asked about the interactions they observe between the residents of the SHN and the neighboring streets.

A major obstacle in the study was the illiteracy of many of the participants. Most studies that use mental maps rely on participants' drawings of the area. To make sure the interviewees would understand the questions, I conducted a mock-up interview with a woman with very low literary skills. It became clear that asking these participants to draw boundaries on top of maps would be both fruitless and intimidating. Therefore, I opted to use photo vignettes that depicted many different streets in the area. Since the women have an extensive knowledge of the region, they were able to give me thick descriptions of their perceived boundaries. Translating these descriptions into actual drawings was a post-hoc exercise and the boundaries of the mental maps in the annex must be viewed as close approximations to what the women described. I did not render one of the participants' mental map because her descriptions were not sufficiently precise. Nevertheless, the criteria the women use to include or exclude spaces in the neighborhood were clearly stated and these are the focus of the study.

The interviewees were rewarded with a 10€ gift voucher. To protect identities, all the names of the interviewees below are aliases. Interviews took place in Portugal and were held either in the women's homes or outdoors, according to their preference.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After the transcription, the interviews were manually open-coded by grouping excerpts with similar meanings. The codes were then re-organized according to their relationships (axial coding) and their centrality (selective coding). Therefore, from initial 14 categories, the criteria were grouped into three categories: habitual use, human relations, and labeling. A second similar process of coding consisted of the categorization of every reference to their sub-identities and attachment. In this sense, grounded theory coding methods were used to systematically analyze the data. However, these were not followed by theoretical sampling nor theoretical coding.

## **Analysis**

### **The participants' place identity and place attachment**

Throughout their descriptions of Bairro de Contumil, the women ascribe a character and identity to the neighborhood. In addition, all the participants are strongly attached to Bairro de Contumil and explain that

they would not want to leave the area under any circumstances. Diana, for example, describes conversations with her son:

*My son, who plays football, says a lot of times “mom, when I become the Casillas of FC Porto I will buy you a detached house.” [And I say] “Son, you buy a house for yourself and I will visit you during the weekend, but I will not leave my home”. (Diana, ethnic Portuguese)*

The participants have ambivalent feelings towards the place identity of Bairro de Contumil. On the one hand, the women identify situations in which they are discriminated against because they live in a SHN, and they are aware of the negative connotations that the general population attributes to SHNs. But, on the other hand, they feel proud to live in one, as they describe people who live in SHNs as more tolerant, outgoing, and generous. Sara, who has always lived in SHNs, explains:

*[SHNs] are welcoming, friendly, liberal. (...) you came here today and I think people here welcomed you much more than if you would have gone to a private apartment area, isn't it? I think you are accepted much faster here than in those places. (...) In SHNs there is one thing that is true: they are very welcoming. (Sara, ethnic Portuguese).*

Despite the favorable opinions of SHNs in general, the participants positively distinguish Bairro de Contumil from other SHNs. Almost all the participants stated that Bairro de Contumil is the best SHN in the city and that residents of other SHNs would like to move there. The women also describe Bairro de Contumil as the only place where they would feel safe enough to let their children play unsupervised outside. Overall, their testimonies evidence that Bairro de Contumil is a source of continuity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and distinctiveness. That is, the four elements that are theorized to make place identity salient.

All interviewees feel very positively about their neighbors and community. They acknowledge that sometimes they might have quarrels, but they know each other well, and sharing the neighborhood brings them closer together. When asked about what they liked the most about Bairro de Contumil, the great majority of the interviewees said that it was their neighborly relationships, hinting that they are more than neighbors: "(...) it is a family, a family" (Lara, Portuguese Roma). Their narratives evidence that sharing the neighborhood creates ingroup membership, which trumps their self-categorization as ethnic minorities:

*Here we don't experience racism! Here, everyone is the same. (Gabriela, Portuguese Roma)*

All participants feel stigmatized by some homeowners in the area. When referring to these negative experiences, they emphasize their SE status and their place identity. The ethnic minority women make very few references to their ethnicity when describing these relationships. However, when asked about relationships with others outside of the neighborhood area, ethnic identity gains salience. In those encounters, Portuguese Roma recount episodes of racism, while the ethnic Portuguese continued to emphasize their place-identities as their primary source of discrimination. According to IPT, individuals' identity is formed by multiple identity sub-categories organized hierarchically. From this analytical viewpoint, it can be concluded that, for the

Portuguese Roma and Brazilian women, ethnicity is a salient identity category only when it comes to their engagements in other city spaces. Overall, in their local relationships with outgroups, place identity has the most salience. For ethnic Portuguese, their place identity is salient everywhere.

### **The neighborhood area: inclusion and exclusion criteria**

In this section, I show that, despite differences in the placement of the boundaries, there is significant consistency in the criteria the participants use to either include or exclude places from their territory. All interviewees included in their neighborhood streets outside of the social housing area. The size of the area included varies significantly. Sometimes the women used infrastructures to mark the neighborhood's boundaries (such as a school or the post office or even recycling bins); other times, they indicated specific corners of streets or intersections. In some narratives, the boundaries are vague, and the neighborhoods are not defined by dichotomous inclusion-exclusion reasoning but by degrees of belonging. Ana, for example, distinguishes between the core of the SHN and other areas that also belong to Bairro de Contumil:

*Because, well we go a lot of times to the place you saw before: the bakery down there, we go there [so they are included]. But, where it really starts... for me, the core of Bairro de Contumil is from the School Nicolau Nasoni until here. It's in this center (Ana, ethnic Roma)*

The participants use two main criteria to justify the inclusion or exclusion of places within the neighborhood's boundaries: their familiarity and habitual use of space and their relations with the other users of these places (both residents and workers in the area). A few participants also mentioned the name of the infrastructures and streets to justify its inclusion in the neighborhood. Below, I describe each of these criteria in more detail.

#### **Familiarity and habitual use of space**

*No [it doesn't belong to the SHN], because I don't go there often. (Sara, ethnic Portuguese)*

*I think it does [belong to the SHN] because I go there when the kids finish school. I used to take them there for a little while. (Berta, ethnic Roma)*

Like Sara and Berta above, nearly all interviewees refer to their use of space to mark the boundaries of Bairro de Contumil. Their narratives corroborate previous studies that find that routine destinations expand the spatial definition of neighborhoods (Burdick–Will, 2018; Foster et al. 2015). Since their routines are constructed around leisure, commercial and institutional establishments in the area, these spaces mark off the limits of the SHN. The residential streets that the women take to access these establishments are also often included in the neighborhood's territory. The habitual use of space is used both as a factor of inclusion and exclusion since the women regularly leave out the roads they do not take, despite their proximity:

*It is only the main street [that is part of Bairro de Contumil] which we use when we take the kids to school. Everything else no... we don't feel it belongs, we don't feel that. We feel that it is distant. That's really what I feel. (Ana, ethnic Roma)*

The women's sense of neighborhood boundaries is fluid, changing according to their routines. Therefore, when the establishments close and, as a result, they cease to use those areas, they become excluded from the SHN's boundaries. However, since most of the open establishments have been in the area for a long time, these spatial representations are highly stable. Indeed, the interviewees emphasize that these establishments have been part of their landscape for many years, and therefore, 'they *must* be part' of their territory. Continuity is an important element for the women's self-identification with space, attachment, and neighborhood definition. In fact, some women distinguish between the "real" Bairro de Contumil and the "new" additions. While they include both within the borders of Bairro de Contumil, they hint at different degrees of belonging. Olivia, who has lived all her life in Bairro de Contumil, illustrates this circumstance when she reflects whether or not the nearest metro stops are still within the boundaries of Bairro de Contumil:

*I think it is part of the new Bairro de Contumil, let's say it like that. Everything is very different, there were a lot of changes in the SHN. I don't know, it [the area] doesn't belong to my childhood that much... (Olivia, ethnic Portuguese)*

The women's daily use of place creates emotional attachments with place itself, which is consistent with Lofland's theory of person-to-place connections (1998). Furthermore, the routine use of place also generates familiarity between its users. Therefore, when the women draw the boundaries of their SHN, they constantly refer to those they meet there and use their knowledge of place and human relations almost interchangeably:

*Frida: Where the stores are and the butchers... I go there and meet a lot of people, and we say good morning to each other.*

*Interviewer: How do you meet them?*

*Frida: Just by looking, watching them.*

*Interviewer: What about that area there, which is also nearby? [area on the opposite side which the interviewee does not include in the neighborhood's area]*

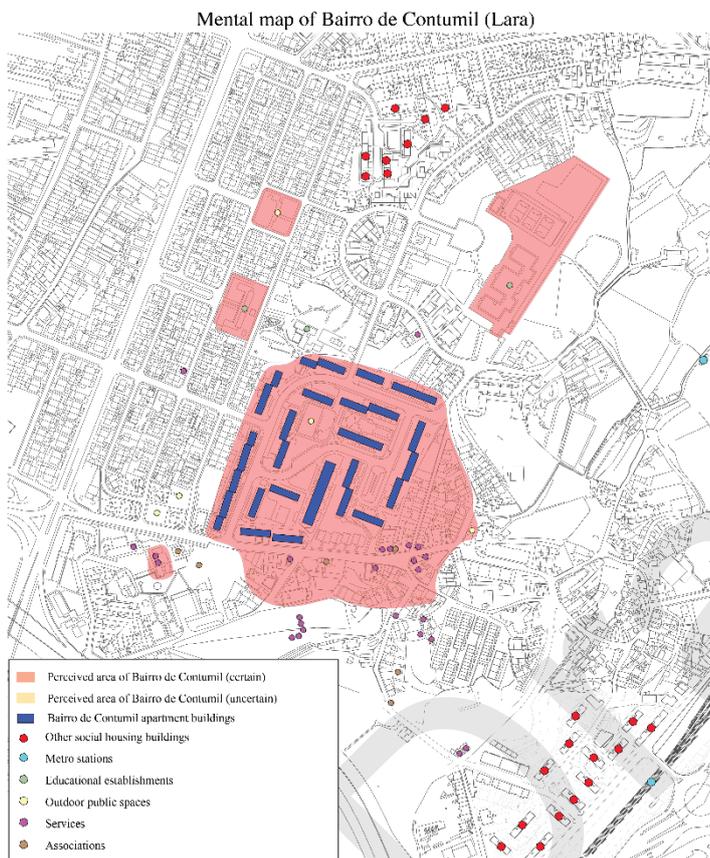
*Frida: I don't socialize there, nor do I go there. It is very rare.*

*Interviewer: Why is that?*

*Frida: I feel like it is more distant. You could say that is close, but for me, it is distant. It is a place where I don't go, that I don't know. (Frida, ethnic Roma)*

In general, the women's routine use of space results in positive attitudes towards the residents and workers of those areas. However, in some instances, their neighborhood's definitions are marked by a conflict between

person-to-place connections and person-to-person connections. This observation supports Lofland's argument that place attachment is not only a by-product of human relationships (1998). When such conflicts arise, they often exclude those streets from their neighborhood's territory.



Map 2- Lara's mental map of Bairro de Contumil's boundaries

These decisions indicate that the feelings towards people are more decisive than the attachment towards place when defining one's neighborhood, since they choose to exclude places they use and feel attached to only because of their feelings towards its residents. These conflicts also result in neighborhood definitions marked by empty spaces and disconnections. This is illustrated by Lara's mental map (Map 2), where the schools and nearby park are perceived as belonging to the SHN, while the streets that connect them are not. In other instances, the interviewees choose to include the streets but specify that their residents do not belong to their neighborhood, as shown by Paula's affirmation:

*The streets belong [to Bairro de Contumil] because we need to walk through them, but the people do not. (Paula, ethnic Roma)*

## Human relations

The emotional connection to other users of the area (both residents and workers) is used to define neighborhood belonging. When asked about the borders of their home territory, the women often refer to the presence of other people to signify the neighborhood's area. Indeed, the relationships with the inhabitants of the residential streets nearby determine whether those streets are included or not. Overall, the women do not separate their personal connections from their place attachment. Instead, these emotional connections are used almost interchangeably. Their feelings towards the people in the area influence their routines and spatial cognition, just as much as their routines influence who they meet and like.

The interviewees have strong emotional connections with the staff of the establishments in Rua de Contumil, and they frequently mention these friendships when explaining why the business is part of their neighborhood. For example, when I ask Olivia about the inclusion of the stationary shop in the SHN area, she replies that its owner is part of the neighborhood, as if place and man cannot be disassociated:

*Oh it's the stationary shop of Contumil. This man [shop owner] has been here for so many years, he is part of the furniture. This man is without any doubt part of Contumil. (Olivia, ethnic Portuguese).*

The relationships with residents are more frequently used as a factor of exclusion than inclusion. Most women do not include the private apartments and detached houses to the North and West of their apartments. The exclusion of these areas is mainly based on their perceptions of those who live there. Gabriela, for example, emphasizes her relationship with the residents of apartments in the adjacent northern street to justify its exclusion from Bairro de Contumil's territory:

*Gabriela: Look, we get there to the school Nicolau Nasoni, and it's the end. For me, the buildings around it are not part [of Bairro de Contumil] anymore.*

*Interviewer: Why? Is there a reason?*

*Gabriela: Because (...) there isn't that conviviality, there really isn't. Even they... they set themselves apart. They say they live in private apartments, and we live in public housing. It's because of that. On that side [points to the Southern residential streets], even if they live in private apartments, they still hang out with us. They say that they are part of the Bairro.*

*Interviewer: Why do you think there is this difference?*

*Gabriela: It's the people. It's the people who make the difference. (Gabriela, Portuguese Roma)*

Demographic factors, especially perceived income, add to this division. The women see the ownership of detached houses as a signal of wealth. While almost all include some private apartment buildings within the SHN boundaries, they commonly exclude the detached houses purely based on their perceived status. This may imply that, in these relationships, their socioeconomic status is more salient than their place identity. Thus, despite living near each other, they exclude these homeowners from their ingroup. The role of perceived SE

status for the definition of neighborhood boundaries has been asserted in previous studies of this kind (e.g., Campbell et al., 2009; Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004). In these studies, the ethnic composition is argued to have the same effect. However, in these interviews, none of the participants mentioned ethnicity as a factor of exclusion. For example, Eva, who identifies as Roma, brought up her ethnic background several times during the interview, but never when describing or defining Bairro de Contumil. When devising the neighborhood's boundaries, she particularly emphasizes the income inequality between the residents of the SHN and its surroundings:

*Eva: This street isn't in the Bairro because these are different houses, they are detached houses. Regarding these, we say "Ah! It's those detached houses there!"*

*Interviewer: Does it make any difference the fact that they are detached houses?*

*Eva: It does. Of course it does. A detached house is different (...). We live in subsidized housing, a little apartment from IHRU [Housing and urban rehabilitation institute] and they don't. [We say] "Ah! It's a house! That house, those apartments!" and, for us, we say it like this: "ah it's those little social housing neighborhoods". There is a difference. (Eva, ethnic Roma)*

The social housing neighborhoods in the area are also frequently used to delimitate the boundaries of Bairro de Contumil, in the sense that one starts right when the other begins. Sometimes, places like schools and bus stops are thought to belong to both SHNs. It evidences once more that the women interviewed think in terms of degrees of belonging. In contrast to the private houses and apartments in neighboring streets, the exclusion of other SHNs from the neighborhood's boundaries does not reflect any hostility or resentment. They construct different place identities because they live in different SHNs, but they are friendly. The interviewees are proud of Bairro de Contumil, so they believe it is better than the other SHNs nearby. Notwithstanding, they do not look down on any of their inhabitants. Because they share similar demographic characteristics, only their place of residence is used to set themselves apart.

### **Name**

Only one justification mentioned by the women did not relate to either their habitual use of space or their human relations: the name of places. For instance, except for one interviewee, all exclude the surroundings of the metro station from Bairro de Contumil's boundaries since this area corresponds to a different SHN (Bairro Bairro Engenheiro Machado Vaz). Nevertheless, they commonly include the metro station in their territory. When asked about this inconsistency, many refer to the station's name (named "Contumil"). A similar logic guides the inclusion of some of the establishments, streets, and areas that contain the word "Contumil".

*For example, Rua de Contumil [street name in the vicinity of the SHN], of course it's part of Bairro de Contumil. Largo de Contumil [how the respondents refer to the area in front of the commercial establishments] belongs to Contumil. I think this is more how we think, this is our logic. (Julia, ethnic Brazilian)*

## Spatial cognition and attachment

Spatial cognition and attachment may constitute different things (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010), but just as person and place attachment, they are difficult to untangle. The interviewees' mental maps reveal that their definitions of neighborhood boundaries and belonging affect their overall spatial cognition. Their notion of distance is informed by both their routines and their emotions towards space and people. These perceptions, in turn, may result in different decisions regarding their use of space. For example, they frequently report that they do not visit the park in the neighborhood's vicinity more often because it is far away. However, the park is located only 500 meters away from their apartments, which is the same distance as some of the commercial establishments they visit regularly. Some of the women recognize that there is a mismatch between what is objectively and subjectively distant, but they nonetheless use these perceptions to shape their routines. In some instances, the mismatch is between what they perceive as the administrative boundary of Bairro de Contumil and their emotional place attachments:

*It is because of that, if we look at the address it is not Bairro [de Contumil]. But... affection-wise, it is Bairro [de Contumil]. (Sara, ethnic Portuguese)*

Furthermore, their definition of neighborhood boundaries is blurry, and they recognize different levels of neighborhood belonging. Indeed, while some women have different levels of certainty regarding the inclusion and exclusion of the surroundings, others specify that some areas are more central to the neighborhood than others. Ana, for example, distinguishes between the core of Bairro de Contumil and the remaining areas, which are still within the borders of their territory.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that, despite considerable variation on the placement of Bairro de Contumil's boundaries, the criteria that guide the boundary work are highly consistent among the participants. The women interviewed use as main inclusion/exclusion criteria their habitual use of space (and consequent familiarity) and their relationships with the other users of those spaces (both residents and workers). However, these two principles should not be seen as independent, since they are deeply interconnected. Routines influence who the women meet and establish relationships with; positive relationships influence the choice of places they use. There is also a strong interrelation between place and people attachment and the interviewees use these concepts almost interchangeably.

The women feel very attached and dependent on their neighborhood. Bairro de Contumil is where they have all their closest relationships, where they fulfill all their needs, and, under no circumstances, would they prefer to live elsewhere. Their neighborhood fulfills the four principles that, according to identity process theory,

make place a salient identity sub-category. The women are proud of their neighborhood (self-esteem), deeming it the best SHN in the city. Although they recognize that SHNs are generally stigmatized spaces, they defend that this stigma is based on misconceptions of those who do not know the reality of Bairro de Contumil. Bairro de Contumil also provides them a sense of distinctiveness since they consider Bairro de Contumil to be better than the remaining SHNs, due to its peacefulness and hospitableness. They also distinguish themselves from wealthier neighborhoods in the area, describing Bairro de Contumil as more welcoming and friendly. Most of the women interviewed have lived all their lives in the SHN and the neighborhood gives them a sense of continuity. Many refer to their childhood when they draw the boundaries of the neighborhood, meaning that places that were part of their routine as children have a higher degree of belonging. Places, landmarks, and people who have been in the area for a long time are emphasized. Finally, women feel they have control in the area which they know very well, which reflects self-efficacy. They see themselves as the prime users of the infrastructures in the area and they have a strong sense of ownership over the public and semi-public spaces in the area. It is “their” school, “their” butcher, “their” café. This sense of ownership is manifested in the mental maps of participants who include all these local services and institutions within the boundaries of the SHN, sometimes excluding the streets that stand in between.

The interviews included questions about other areas in the city and their experiences of discrimination. When asked about these places and relationships, the Portuguese Roma and Brazilian interviewees frequently referred to their ethnicity. In contrast, ethnic Portuguese women indicate that they are stigmatized for living in a SHN or due to their SE status. However, when they describe their relationships with the residents of the near surroundings, their narratives align. Except for two interviewees who identify as Roma, they never mention their ethnicity when they refer to the latter. Rather, all participants talk about their place identity and their SE condition. According to identity process theory, individuals’ sub-identities are organized hierarchically based on their salience. These narratives reveal that place identity is consistently a salient self-category for the ethnic Portuguese, while for ethnic minorities place identity is only salient when describing relationships with outgroups in their home area. It should be noted that the salience of place identity may be the result of the interview guide itself since the interviewees knew the study was about Bairro de Contumil. Two factors minimized this risk. First, the interview guide contained several questions about the women's routines and relationships outside of the neighborhood area (e.g., previous workplaces, hospitals, city center), about other social housing neighborhoods, and any parts of the city they feared/liked. Secondly, since the same interview guide was used to interview all of the participants, the systematic variation between the different ethnicities evidences that, at least to a certain extent, ethnicity is less salient in their local relationships. They construct their place identity around their equally low SE condition and it is mostly this feature that is used to set themselves apart from the residents of the neighboring streets. Since Bairro de Contumil is an ethnically diverse neighborhood, it makes sense that they do not use ethnicity to define the neighborhood area nor to describe the relationships with those they exclude from their territory. Studies that argue that residential segregation

increases psychological distance (Enos, 2017) should consider the effect of place identity. As evidenced in this study, the impact of residential segregation on intergroup relations/perceptions may vary according to the salience of place identity. First, the stronger the place identity of a homogeneous and segregated group of people, the more they are likely to reflect upon those shared features to set themselves apart. Secondly, place identity may generate group membership between people who share the same place, creating different ingroup and outgroup dynamics that do not necessarily rely on ethnicity or income. This is observable in the women's mental maps that include the residential streets near the establishments of Rua de Contumil. Its residents do not share the same SE condition as the residents of the social housing apartments, but that difference is overlooked because "they say they are part of the Bairro" (Gabriela, Portuguese Roma). In other words, a shared place identity makes them part of the ingroup.

This study investigates the subjective boundaries of a social housing neighborhood to explore the intricacies, fuzziness, and blurred lines between place and human relations. It complements studies of neighborhood boundaries that mainly investigate collective representations and predictors of neighborhood definitions, by considering the role of emotions (towards space and people). It finds that these emotional attachments influence neighborhood definitions, but it cautions against causal inferences between place attachment and social bonds, by exposing problems of simultaneity (i.e., the variables influence each other equally).

The results have broader implications for the integration of vulnerable population groups and intergroup relations. SHNs in Portugal have been equated with several social problems and many constitute cases of residential segregation, since they are often physically, socially, and symbolically disconnected from their surroundings. The women interviewed feel distant from residents who live in the Northern and Western neighboring streets, but see the residents of the streets to the South and East of the social housing apartments as part of their ingroup. The shared commercial infrastructures in Rua de Contumil seem to foster feelings of community and expand the perception of neighborhood boundaries. Furthermore, the names of these establishments (which often contain the word "Contumil") add to feelings of self-efficacy. While public interventions on SHNs tend to focus on the SHNs themselves (either by renovating them, diversifying their design, or even demolishing them), these findings suggest that interventions on surrounding spaces can be equally effective. In particular, investing in shared public and semi-public spaces and being attentive to their naming may constitute effective policies for integration.

The study's exclusive focus on unemployed women is a limitation of the study. First, all findings of this study should not be generalized to the remaining residents of Bairro de Contumil. The women interviewed are a case of extreme place dependence and place attachment, both due to their social role and economic condition. Therefore the complicated associations between place and human connections may not apply to residents who do not identify as strongly with the neighborhood area. Furthermore, the contrasting attitudes towards residents of different neighboring streets may not be experienced similarly by all residents. To study these ingroup-

outgroup dynamics and explore the effect of place identity, future studies should investigate the mental maps and spatial relations of both the residents of the SHN and the residents of its surroundings.

Finally, this study raises the question of how to conduct mental mapping exercises with illiterate population groups. Studies on neighborhood boundaries commonly rely on participants to draw their subjective maps. In this case, doing such an exercise would be too intimidating. An alternative considered is walking interviews, in which participants can take the researcher to their perceived boundaries. However, considering how extensive some of the neighborhood definitions were, this could have introduced bias, encouraging women to select a smaller area. Moreover, the participants' neighborhood definitions did not consist of a continuous area and they were full of nuances and different degrees of belonging. If I had asked the participants to walk me through the external boundary of what they perceive to be Bairro de Contumil, these nuances would have been lost. The strategy adopted was to use photographic vignettes and rely on my extensive knowledge of the area. This may have introduced biases as well since it might have encouraged the participants to use the photo vignettes as landmarks to define the boundaries. I tried to minimize this risk as much as possible, by extensively probing their answers. A second limitation of this method consists of my subsequent rendering of the mental maps, which are included as an annex to this article. However, because the women's descriptions of their perceived neighborhood area were built upon photographic vignettes and aided by my vast knowledge of the area, I am fairly confident that the renderings are an accurate representation of the participants' mental maps.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to understanding how unemployed women living in a SHN construct their neighborhood and how these neighborhood definitions affect their relationships. The study evidences an interrelation of human relations, place attachment, and spatial cognition. It also unveils problems of simultaneity, which should be acknowledged in future studies of this kind.

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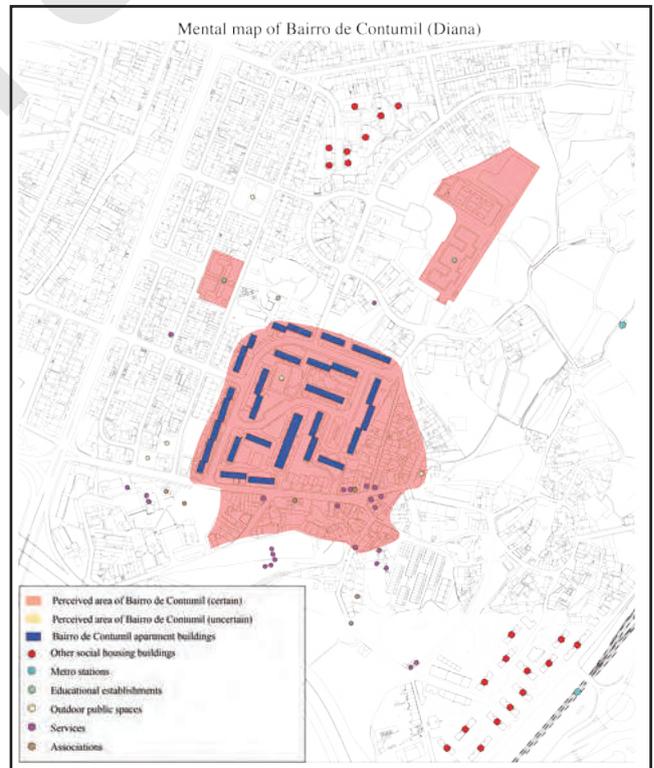
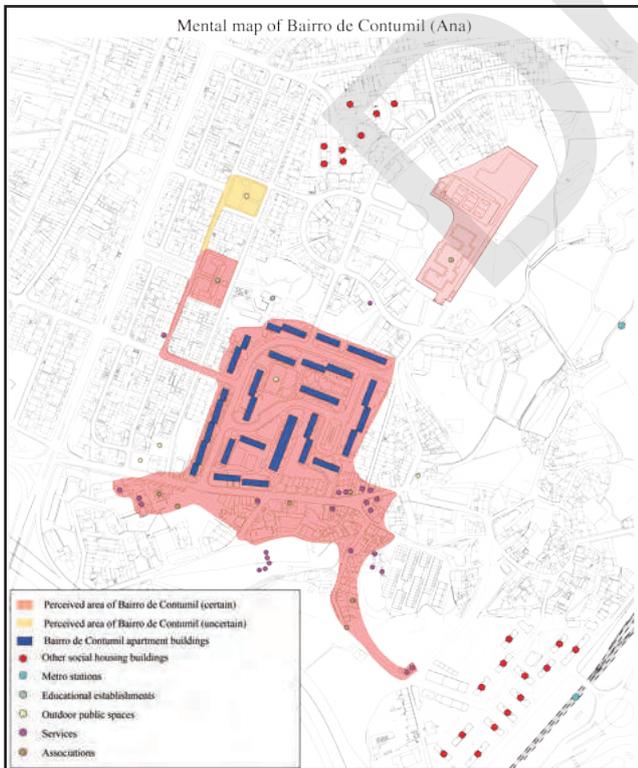
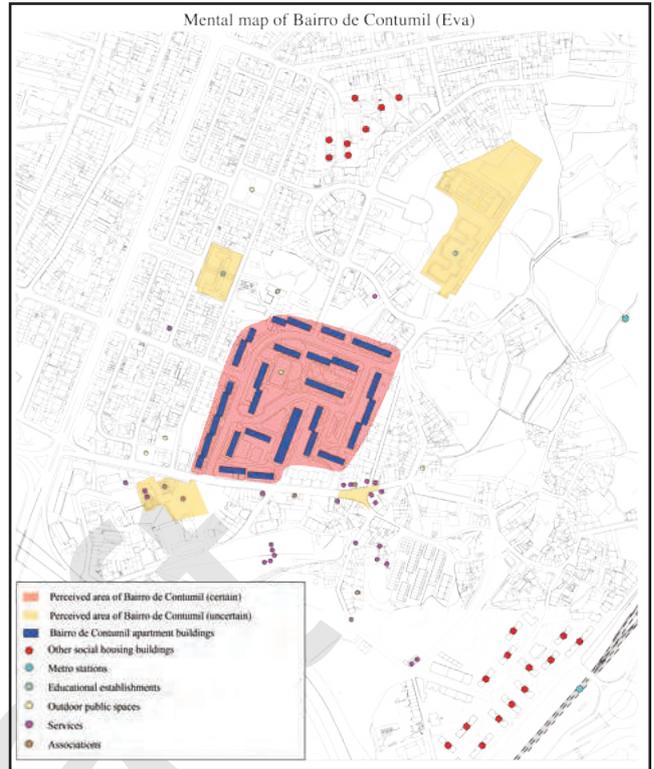
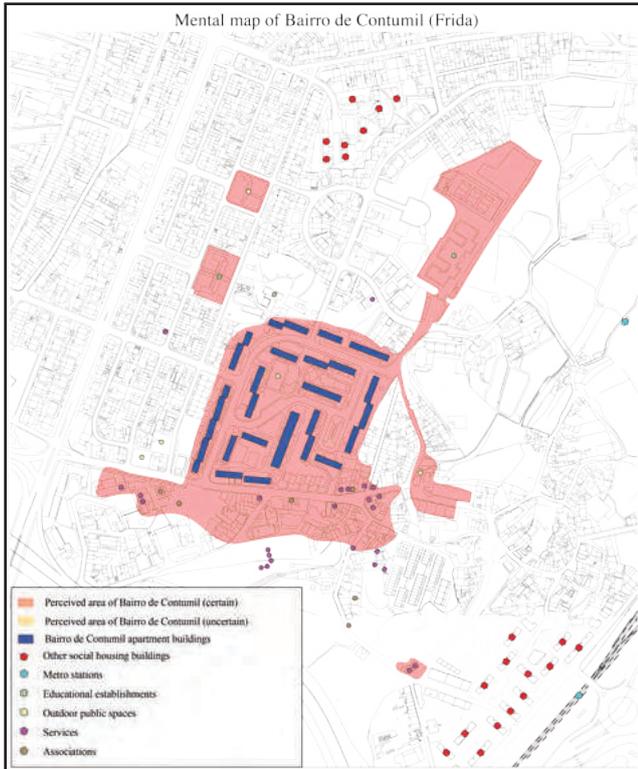
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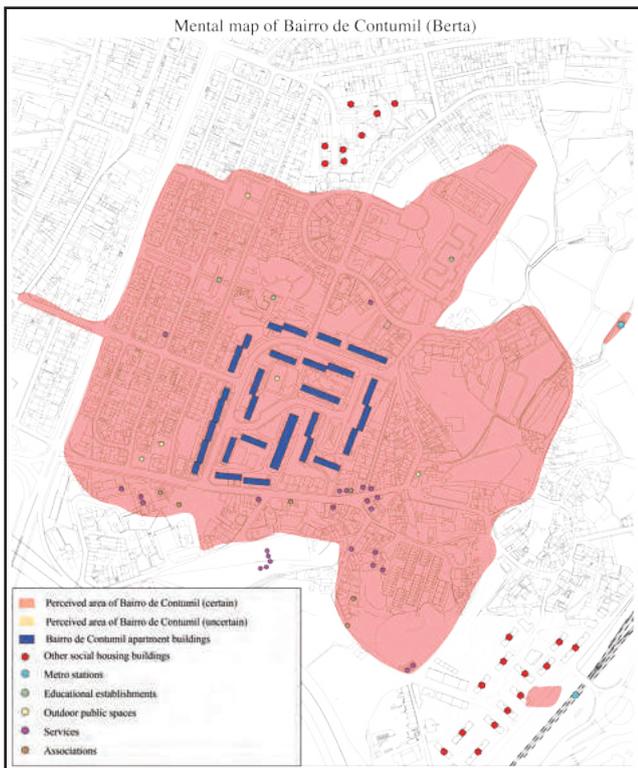
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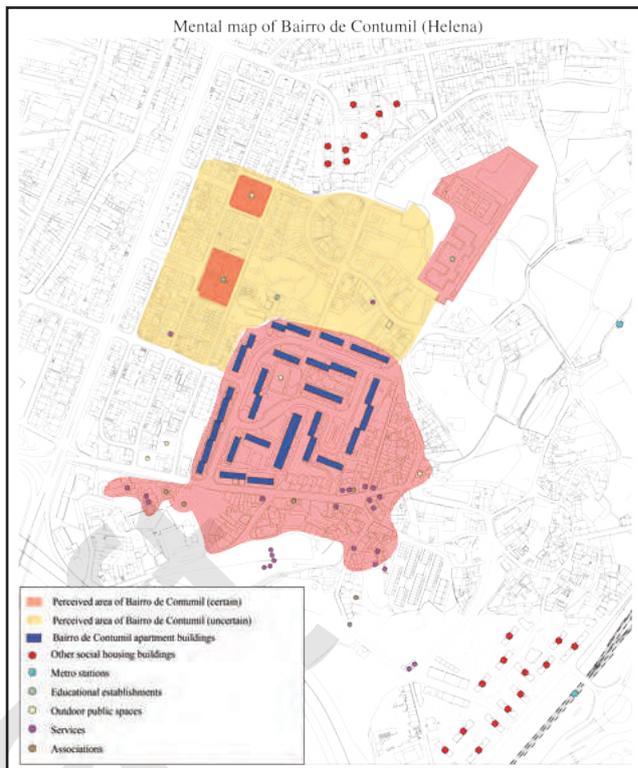
# Annex



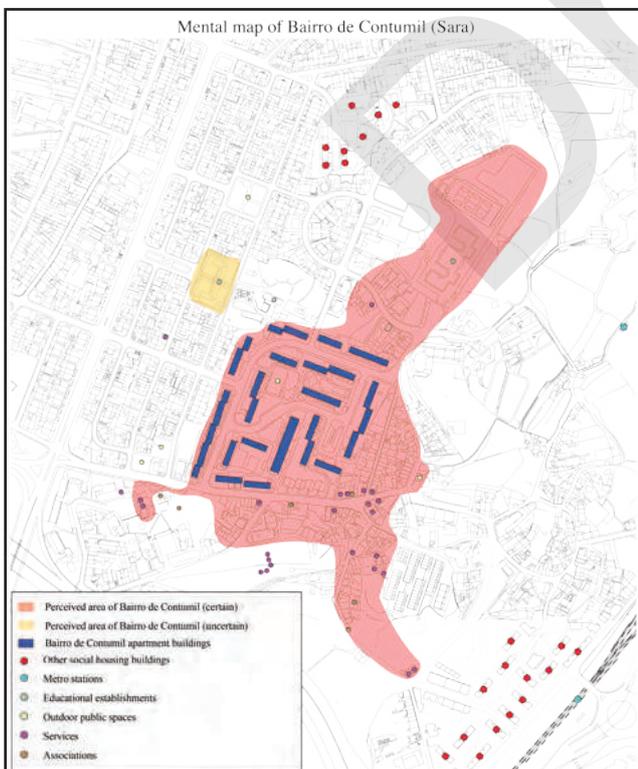
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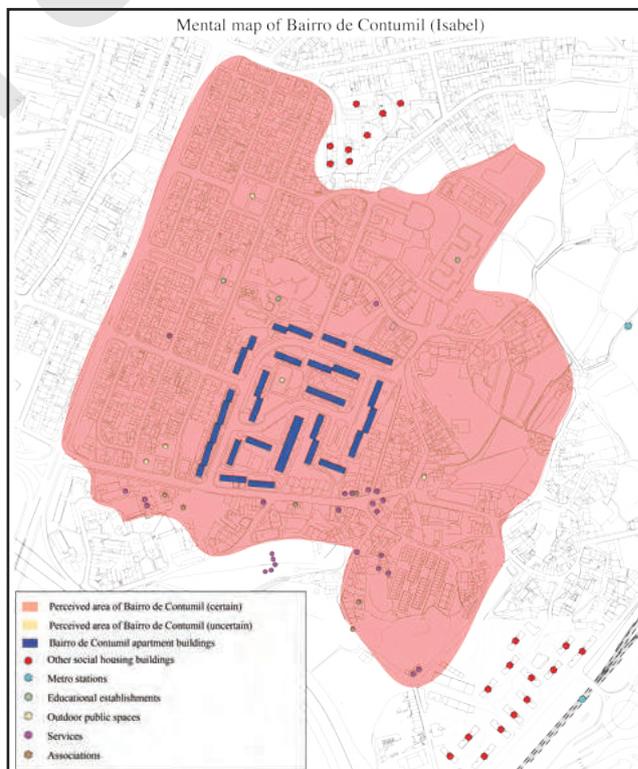
Mental map of Bairro de Contumil (Helena)



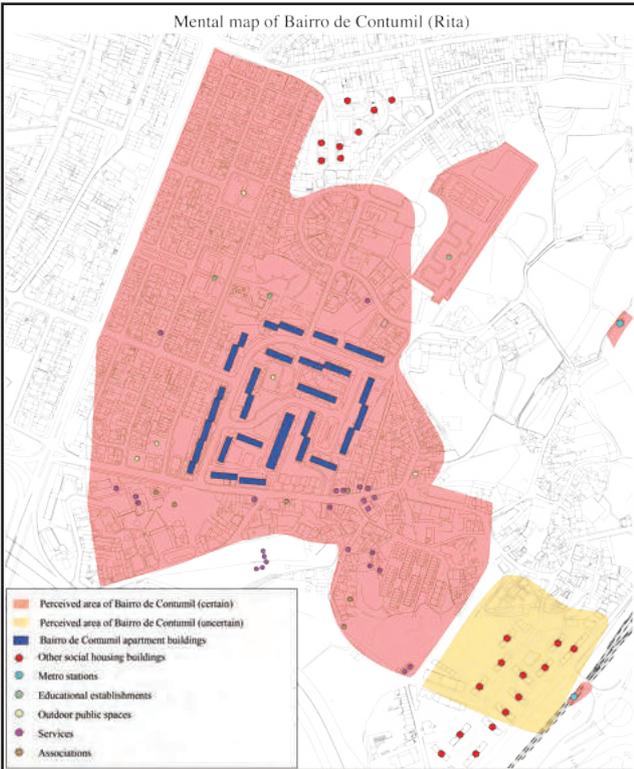
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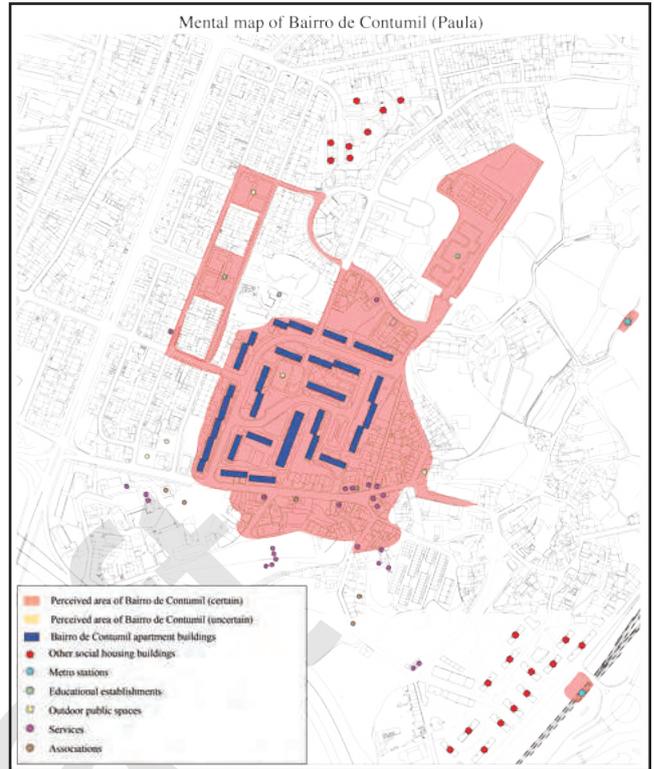
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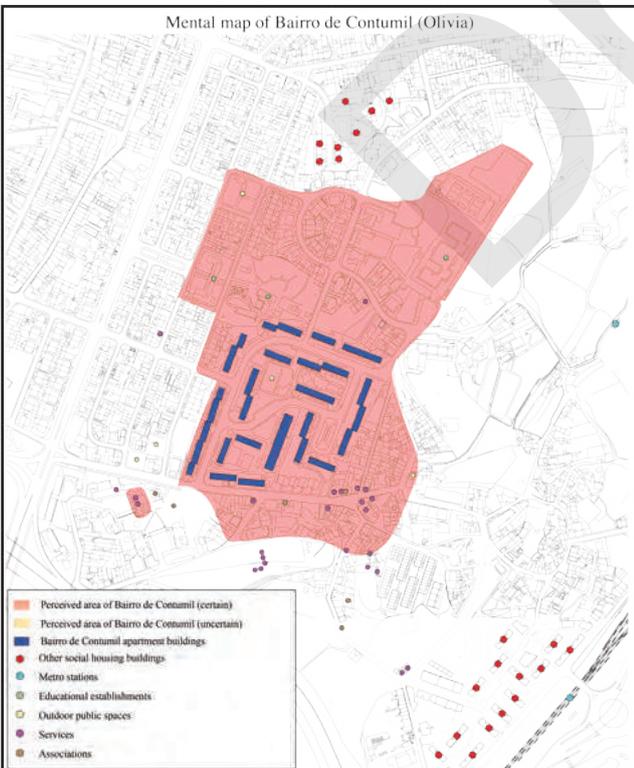
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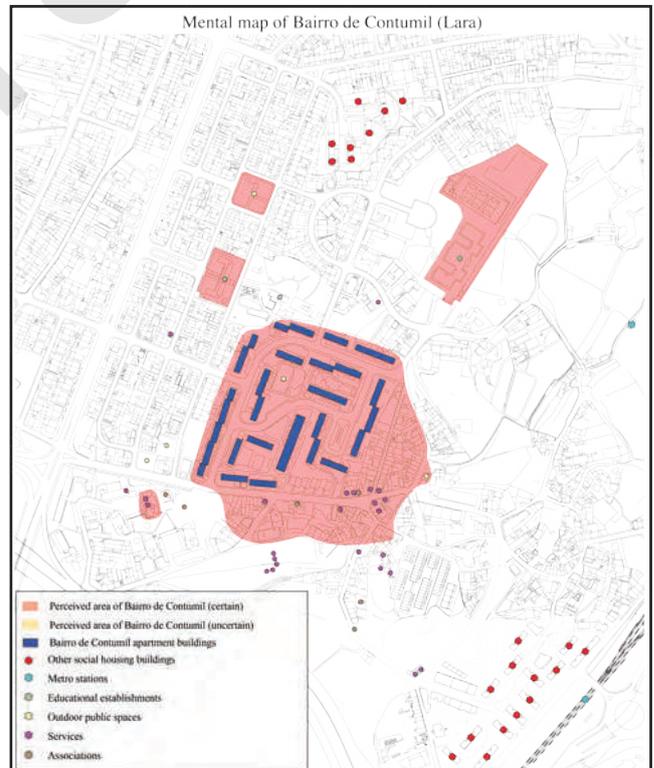
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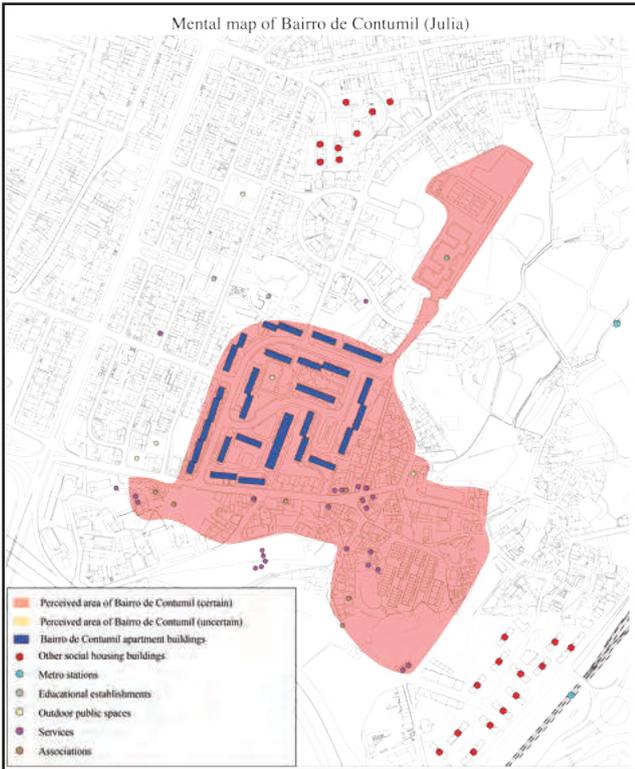
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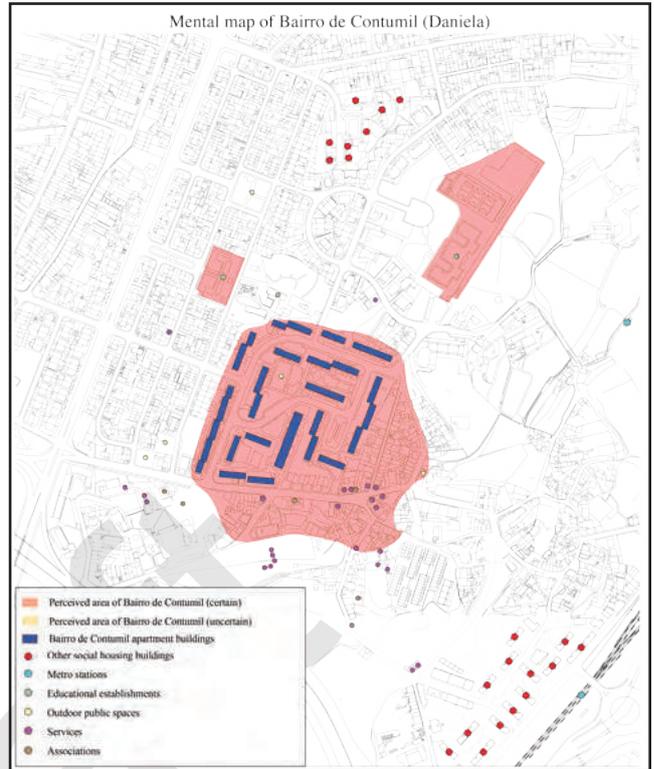
Mental map of Bairro de Contumil (Lara)



Mental map of Bairro de Contumil (Julia)



Mental map of Bairro de Contumil (Daniela)



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