Poverty, Sense of Belonging and Experiences of Social Isolation

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*This article compares experiences of social isolation and perceptions
of belonging between lower-income and higher-income people. We
conducted individual interviews with 60 higher-income and 59
lower-income study participants and six group interviews with 34
low-income participants from two Canadian cities. Subsequently,
a representative sample of 1,671 lower- and higher-income partici-
pants was surveyed by telephone. Income was a consistent predictor
of measures of isolation and sense of belonging to the community:
lower-income people experienced greater isolation and a lower
sense of belonging than did higher-income people. Poverty shaped
low-income people's perceptions and experiences of stigmatization
and isolation.*

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INTRODUCTION

Many nations have committed to reducing the proportion of people living in poverty by 2015 (UNDP, 2003). Data from the Luxembourg Income Study reveals that Canada's overall poverty rate, while lower than that of the United States, is higher than poverty rates in other developed nations, such as Sweden, Finland, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands (Smeeding, 2005). The income gap between rich and poor in Canada may even be on the rise. Census data reveal very little change in family income for lower-income families between 1990 and 2000, but sizeable increases for higher-income families (Picot et al., 2003). Female-headed single parent families, unattached people (especially women), people with work-limiting disabilities, and recent immigrants to the country are at an especially high risk of poverty in Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003).

It is well known that living in poverty can have profound consequences for many aspects of people's social lives. For example, some researchers have identified strong effects of socioeconomic status on social isolation from others and on sense of belonging in the community or in society writ large (Hagerty et al., 1996; Green & Rogers, 2001). Social isolation refers to a "state in which the individual or group expresses a need or desire for contact with others but is unable to make contact" (Warren, 1993, p. 270). Inadequate incomes can prevent individuals from participating in various social activities in their communities (Hatfield, 2004) or restrict people's ability to create and maintain social support, leading to experiences of social isolation (Hawthorne, 2006; LaVeist et al., 1997). A sense of belonging can reflect experiences of being valued and needed or of feeling that one is congruent with other people, groups, or environments (Hagerty et al., 1996). Here, too, inadequate incomes can prevent individuals from participating in social activities and establishing the kinds of strong and weak social ties that foster a sense of belonging.

The number of investigations into social isolation and/or sense of belonging and the nature of their interconnectedness with poverty is still small. While some investigations have applied these concepts to particular marginalized populations such as the elderly (Hawthorne, 2006), visible minority elderly women (LaVeist et al., 1997), immigrant groups (Abraham, 2000), and low-income mothers (Green & Rodgers, 2001), experiences of isolation and perceptions of belonging have seldom been explored from the perspectives of both low and higher-income participants. This article seeks to contribute to this small body of literature by investigating associations between income level and social isolation and sense of belonging among people living in two large Canadian cities.

METHODS

We selected two large urban sites for the study—Toronto, Ontario in central Canada and Edmonton, Alberta in western Canada—because the social and economic policies in these provinces have resulted in substantial cuts to their social safety nets. The government of Ontario reduced welfare incomes in 1995 by 22%, and welfare incomes and minimum wages remained frozen through to the time of data collection (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2003). Alberta's minimum wage at the time was the lowest in Canada (Thompson, 2004). Welfare incomes varied between 25–51% of the poverty line in Alberta and between 34–50% in Ontario, depending on family type and ability to work (National Council of Welfare, 2004). The poverty rate in both Edmonton and Toronto was around 16% at the time of data collection (Statistics Canada, 2001).

We collected data in two phases (one qualitative and the other quantitative) from four neighborhoods in each city. The eight neighborhoods were selected primarily on the basis of (a) economic prosperity (including both wealthy and poor places) and (b) variability in the degree of economic heterogeneity (including both economically homogenous places and places where people from very different income groups co-exist). The neighborhoods and selection criteria are described elsewhere (Reutter et al., 2006).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate university committees in both provinces.

Phase I: Individual and Group Interviews with Lower- and Higher-Income People

Purposive sampling was used to select participants representing varied lower-income situations (e.g., working poor, social assistance recipients, unemployed, and homeless) and key demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, ethnicity, marital status, and age) that may also influence isolation and belonging. Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs (LICO) were used to determine poverty status. LICO, a common measure of poverty, represents income levels at which Canadians, differentiated by family size and the population of their community of residence, spend 20% more of their income on basic needs than the average proportion spent by Canadians in similar contexts (Schecter & Paquet, 1999). At the time of the study, families who spent more than 54.7% of their income on basic needs lived below the LICO. The sample for individual interviews consisted of 60 participants in Toronto (30 lower-income people and 30 higher-income people) and 59 participants (29 lower-income and 30 higher-income people) in Edmonton. Table 1 describes demographic characteristics of these participants.

TABLE 1 Demographics of Phase I Individual Interview Participants

	Toronto (N = 60)		Edmonton (N = 59)	
	Below LICO	Above LICO	Below LICO	Above LICO
Gender				
Female	18	24	22	16
Male	12	6	7	14
Age				
15–19	1	0	0	0
20–29	2	1	9	3
30–44	10	16	7	15
45–54	9	8	10	1
55–64	4	1	1	2
65+	4	4	1	7
Main Source of Income[a]				
Full/part/casual employment	6	26	11	22
Retirement pension	4	3	1	5
Disability pension	11	0	4	0
Social assistance	9	0	9	1
Other	0	1	3	0
Family Combined Income				
$100,000 & above	0	7	0	6
$80,000–99,999	0	4	0	8
$60,000–79,999	0	5	0	6
$40,000–59,999	0	9	1	5
$20,000–39,999	3	5	3	2
$15,000–19,999	6	0	4	0
$10,000–14,999	11	0	7	0
$5,000–9,999	9	0	7	0
Below $5,000	1	0	4	0
No income	0	0	2	0
Housing				
Own home	4	24	2	24
Market rent	12	6	17	4
Subsidized	13	0	5	0
Homeless	1	0	1	0
Rooming House	–	–	2	0
Living with parents	–	–	1	0

[a]Many social assistance and disability pension recipients also worked occasionally or part-time.
Note: We have missing values for two above-LICO participants and one below-LICO participant for the Edmonton site.

The interviews were conducted by trained interviewers with experience interviewing people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Individual interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides, designed by the researchers with input from a community advisory committee. The interview guides covered topics such as: sense of belonging, factors contributing to sense of belonging, and effects of income on belonging or isolation. The interview guides were pilot-tested with lower income (n = 5) and higher-income (n = 5) people. Interviews lasted from one to one and a half

hours, and were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Group interviews were also conducted with lower-income people (n = 34) recruited from the same neighborhoods. These interviews lasted about two hours and were co-led by investigators.

Taped and transcribed data from the individual and group interviews were subjected to thematic content analysis. The research team developed a coding framework, derived from the themes and subthemes emerging in the initial interviews, which was modified as analysis continued. Consistency across sites was enhanced by procedures to ensure inter-rater reliability among coders, cross-site discussion of emerging themes and exchange of coding summaries. The NUD*IST software package was employed to manage the data. Perceptions of lower-income and higher-income people were compared and described in relation to sense of belonging and social isolation.

Phase II: Telephone Survey of Neighborhood Residents

Participants in Phase II were randomly selected English-speaking adults from the eight neighborhoods. A two-stage probability selection process was used: (a) selection of households by identifying telephone numbers within the neighborhoods using postal codes, and (b) random selection of respondents from selected households. We obtained approximately 200 completed surveys per neighborhood. A total of 1,671 higher- and lower-income people were surveyed (839 in Edmonton and 832 in Toronto). The Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University in Toronto administered the survey using the computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI) system. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 20 respondents. The conservatively estimated response rate (defined as the number of completed interviews divided by the estimated number of eligible households) was 58%. Comparison of the demographic breakdown of the survey sample to the 2001 national census along age, gender, educational attainment, and household income lines reveals that our survey sample was better-educated and a little wealthier than the population from which the sample was drawn. In the two cities, Toronto had N = 118 respondents (15.0%) below LICO and N = 669 (85.0%) above LICO; and Edmonton had N = 162 respondents (19.4%) below LICO and N = 671 (80.6%) above LICO. Table 2 shows the breakdown for the LICO variable for the total sample.

Telephone-administered interviews lasted about 25 minutes on average. The 110-item survey instrument was constructed by the investigators specifically for this project, using relevant subscales from validated measures as well as items based on the qualitative findings of Phase I. Information was solicited on isolation and belonging and socio-demographic characteristics. (See Table 2 for item descriptions and responses). Sense of belonging was assessed by a survey item pertaining to degree of perceived acceptance in the neighborhood. Social isolation was assessed by an item pertaining to

TABLE 2 Phase II Survey Items and Distributions

	Categories	Distribution
In what year were you born?mean (N, sd)	—	1958.5 (1639, 15.9)
What is your gender? N (%)	female	920 (55.0)
	male	751 (45.0)
At the present are you married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? N (%)	married	790 (47.7)
	living with partner	188 (11.3)
	widowed	94 (5.6)
	divorced	90 (5.4)
	separated	55 (3.3)
	never married	440 (26.6)
Which of the following best describes your situation? N (%)	work for pay in full-time job	806 (48.4)
	work for pay in part-time job	115 (6.9)
	self-employed (full- or part-time)	230 (13.8)
	going to school	125 (7.5)
	caring for family	61 (3.7)
	long-term illness/disability	35 (2.1)
	retired	208 (12.5)
	unemployed	69 (4.2)
	other	14 (0.8)
What is the highest level of education you have completed? N (%)	some elementary school	11 (0.7)
	completed elementary school	30 (1.8)
	somehigh school/junior high	141 (8.5)
	completed high school	284 (17.1)
	some community college, technical school or university	197 (11.9)
	completed community college or technical school	250 (15.1)
	completed Bachelor's degree	513 (30.9)
	post-graduate training: MA, MSc, MLS, MSW, MBA, etc.	181 (10.9)
	post-graduate training: professional degree or PhD	50 (3.0)
Could you please tell me how much income you and other members of your household received in the year ending December 31st 2001, before taxes? N (%)	less than $20,000	140 (9.7)
	between $20,000 and $29,999	124 (8.6)
	between $30,000 and $39,999	142 (9.8)
	between $40,000 and $49,999	145 (10.1)
	between $50,000 and $59,999	136 (9.4)
	between $60,000 and $69,999	104 (7.2)
	between $70,000 and $79,999	115 (8.0)
	between $80,000 and $89,999	97 (6.8)
	between $90,000 and $99,999	49 (3.4)
	between $100,000 and $120,000	140 (9.7)
	between $120,000 and $150,000	102 (7.1)
	more than $150,000	148 (10.3)
Low income cut-off (LICO) N (%)	below LICO	280 (17.3)
	above LICO	1341 (82.7)

(*Continued*)

TABLE 2 (*Continued*)

	Categories	Distribution
Sense of belonging		
If one means you feel left out and ten means you feel accepted in your neighbourhood, what number between one and ten comes closest to how you feel? Mean (N, sd)	—	7.26 (1628, 2.09)
Isolation		
You often feel alone in the world. N (%)	strongly agree	83 (5.0)
	somewhat agree	246 (14.9)
	(neutral)	7 (0.4)
	somewhat disagree	412 (25.0)
	strongly disagree	903 (54.8)

how often participants felt alone. The phase II survey data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0. Descriptive statistics were performed for variables created from survey items and indices. Cramer's V, *eta* Kendall's tau_b were used to assess bivariate associations, while multivariate logistic regression models determined the independent effects of demographic variables; that is, age, marital status, employment status, and gender, and socio-economic variables; that is, education and income, on belonging and isolation.

While the design of the study (i.e., sequential use of qualitative and quantitative methods) incorporates equal emphasis on two methodological approaches, this article focuses primarily on findings from the qualitative inquiry in an attempt to develop indepth understanding of perceptions and experiences of belonging and isolation from participants' perspectives. Our quantitative analyses only allow us to verify and generalize a few of the insights generated in the preceding phase.

RESULTS

Perceptions of and Experiences with Belonging

Sense of belonging was investigated in the in-person interviews via a series of open-ended queries: "Tell me about your community and whether you feel part of it." "Do you feel part of any other community?" "Thinking of the times when you feel that you are part of things, tell me what your neighbors say or do that makes you feel that way." "How does that make you feel part of things?"

Interviewees identified several different types of communities to which they felt they belonged: physical/geographic space or neighborhoods (e.g., neighborhood block, subdivision, and city), institutions, and various communities of shared interests. Most participants believed that they

belonged to more than one community, a phenomenon reported elsewhere (Fisher et al., 2002; Smith, 2001). More higher- than lower-income people (47% versus 31%) utilized physical space to identify a community of belonging. Many described their neighborhood or city as their "physical space" community.

> *The smallest community that I identify with . . . [is] the City of Edmonton . . . I don't think in terms of my community being my neighborhood or my geo-graphic portion of Edmonton . . .* (Higher income participant)

> *In a way I've . . . felt comfortable living here [neighborhood] because it's a nice mix of people . . . situations . . . locations . . .* (Low-income participant)

Participants also defined community in terms of social space, which Smith (2001) classifies as "interest" or "elective" communities, whereby people share a common characteristic other than place, linked together by factors such as religious belief, sexual orientation, occupation, or ethnic origin. Of the many communities respondents identified within their social spaces, institu-tional affiliation, particularly places of worship, social/community agencies, and schools were commonly mentioned. Higher income participants were more than twice as likely as their counterparts to define community in this way.

Religious organizations were the most frequently identified community, primarily by higher-income participants. In religious institutions (e.g., church communities) participants regularly received and provided emotional support, experienced belonging, and made lasting friendships. Low-income status seemed to preclude some from full participation in religious activities, including contributing financially to the church.

> *[Y]ou go to church and everyone says hello and makes you feel welcome, asks you how you're doing, so you know that you're part of that community.* (Higher income participant)

> *It feels we're still outcasts because we don't have money to give to the church and we can't afford to come in to . . . certain things that they do on certain days . . . because we don't have the money. But we try to get around that as much as we can. But they definitely make us feel good. They make us feel like we're worth it.* (Low-income participant)

Some participants, particularly those living in poverty, described social or community agencies as the entities to which they belonged. These agen-cies included rooming houses, health centers or public health units, and drop-in centers.

> *[W]hen you do go there [name of community centre] you feel welcomed.* (Low-income participant)

Given the nature and mandates of most community agencies—which provide various forms of support, particularly instrumental—it is perhaps not surprising that many lower-income people perceived a sense of belonging toward such entities. For example, drop-in centers provide opportunities to mingle with other lower-income people and with service providers who do not prejudge them but instead provide them with emotional and affirmation support. Overall, across the income groups, more women than men reported social or community agencies and programs as relevant communities.

For some participants, a sense of belonging to either immediate or extended family offset the social isolation experienced outside. Those who described their families as communities had close contact and frequent interaction with family members, characterized by an exchange of instrumental, emotional, and affirmation support, key factors in the development and nurturance of a sense of community and belonging (Fisher et al., 2002; Brummet et al., 2001).

I check in with my mom almost every day just to see how things are going . . . they invite us for dinner and offer babysitting help and that normal family stuff. (Higher income participant)

My immediate family and also my mother and my brothers and that, we do things together. (Low-income participant)

However, lower-income participants were less likely to equate family as a community that fostered belonging. This may be due in part to a feeling that they were "looked down upon" and not included in family events.

I feel . . . like an outcast from my family. . . . I don't get invited to a lot of family things . . . Well they just don't invite me if there's a special family affair . . . (Low-income participant)

My cousins especially, they're about my age and they take part in everything . . . [that] . . . costs a lot of money . . . so they don't invite me ever to go along . . . because I don't have the spare money . . . [P]eople just don't include you if they . . . figure you're going to be a financial burden on them. (Low-income participant)

Limited interaction with family members might also result from lower-income participants' limited financial resources to initiate costly social activities with other family members.

I don't see my family very often. I could have gone home for Christmas . . . because my brother does a lot of travelling . . . and there's air miles. [I didn't go] because . . . I'm ashamed of being poor and not being able to do what I would like to do. (Low-income participant)

Local schools featured prominently as communities that fostered sense of belonging, particularly among higher-income people. School communities enabled parents to connect with other parents and facilitated participation in varied social activities: "socializing with the parents . . . going for walks with another family . . . going skating . . . having play dates for [their] kids where [they] end up doing stuff together." As school networks grew, parents' sense of belonging increased due to the support exchanged. These excerpts illustrate parents' strong identification with school:

> *It is a community that's built up around the school and . . . the families of all the kids who go to the school. We do a lot of work that centers around the school . . . [and] social things together . . . [S]ince my children have been going [there] for the past seven years . . . I've gradually built up social contacts through that . . .* (Higher income participant)

> *I . . . usually take . . . part in volunteering at the school and being part of the teachers' group . . . the parents' group [etc].They always need people to be part of the group . . . This year has not been typical, because I just haven't been able to get out.* (Low-income participant)

For older participants with grown-up children, however, the school no longer provided social networks that once offered a sense of belonging, indicating that the school community is transitory in facilitating new connections. Hence, to avoid isolation older people had to look to other "communities" for belonging.

Many participants reported belonging to their workplaces. Some experienced a sense of belonging to their workplaces derived from friendships with coworkers or connections with customers/clients. However, more higher-income participants viewed their workplaces or businesses as relevant communities. One apparent reason for this finding, judging from the demographics we collected, is that over 60% of lower-income participants were unemployed, many on various kinds of social assistance.

Some participants, particularly those with higher-incomes, described community in terms of *common interests,* what Smith (2001) calls "elective" communities. Higher-income people expressed a sense of belonging with people (i.e., family, friends, and co-workers) from varied social networks who shared activities or interests (e.g., association or union membership, religion, sports, parenting, politics) whereas lower-income people affiliated more with neighbors or people in a similar situation. While both income groups identified family members as people with whom they share common interests, it was higher-income participants who identified them more often. Lower-income people generally perceived a sense of belonging with people of similar income level or marginalized situation.

[O]ne of [my husband's] union buddies lives . . . just over on the other side of Whyte Avenue . . . We've lived here all this time, never visited back and forth . . . we never really physically got together as two families to have a good time until the kids were in the same school [and grade] together . . . (Higher-income participant)

In terms of community in another sense I have made new acquaintanceships and friendships with other people who are very much in a low-income situation . . . I find amongst those who are quote unquote poor . . . [a] . . . tend[ency] to be more frank and honest, [and] fewer facades . . . (Low-income participant)

[T]here are other people who have similar views on education . . . kids and child rearing . . . in the program . . . that's why it was easier for us to make friends. (Higher-income participant)

Experiences of sense of belonging among the in-person interviewees were therefore reflected in perceptions of reciprocating support, be it instrumental, emotional, or affirmation, with neighbours, family, and friends, as well as with people with common interests. These experiences were markedly less prevalent among lower-income participants than among higher-income participants. It seems that the benefits of belonging to such communities, particularly communities of common interests, are denied to people whose social, economic, and cultural attributes do not qualify them to be members.

Telephone survey respondents were queried about their sense of belonging to one kind of community in particular: their neighborhoods. The mean score on the belonging variable was 7.26, much closer to the "feeling accepted in the neighborhood" end of the spectrum than to the "feeling left out" end. Nevertheless, there was variability in perceptions of belongingness to the neighborhood. Gender ($eta = 0.111$, p < .001), age (tau_b = 0.122, p < .001), marital status ($eta = 0.134$, p < .001), employment status ($eta = .152$, p < .001), educational attainment ($eta = 0.162$, p < .001), and LICO ($eta = 0.161$, p < .001) all manifested significant relationships with sense of belonging at the bivariate level. Women, older respondents, married respondents, widowed respondents, family care-givers, self-employed persons, better educated respondents, and respondents above the LICO threshold were more likely than their respective counterparts to report a sense of belonging in the neighborhood. Separated or single respondents, respondents with a long-term illness or disability, students, and unemployed respondents manifested especially low senses of belonging in the neighborhood. A multivariate binary logistic regression model on a transformed version of the dependent variable (dichotomized at the median value of 8) that incorporated all of the above-mentioned independent variables indicated that gender, age, employment status, education, and LICO all remained significantly associated with

sense of belonging. Specifically, respondents above the LICO had odds of reporting a sense of belonging that was fully 2.31 times as high as for those below LICO.

Perceptions and Experiences of Social Isolation

Social isolation was explored in the in-person interviews via open-ended questions as follows: "How do people around you—family, friends, neighbours—not make you feel part of things". "Who are they?" "What do they say?" "What do they do?" "[Talking about] the activities you are left out of, how does that make you feel?" "Can you tell me how local agencies do not make you feel part of things?" "Can you tell me how governments do not make you feel part of things?" "Does living on a low income affect your feelings about yourself?" "How does it affect how others think about you?"

Interviewees described structural, interpersonal, and personal factors that they believed influence degree of isolation. People living on low incomes were nearly three times more likely than higher-income participants to emphasize structural factors such as lack of resources. Often lower-income people were isolated because of limited funds available for socialization.

> *We don't have a vehicle, so we're very limited in places we want to go in the city . . . [R]ight now we don't have a lot of family activities that we can do, because it just takes too long to get anywhere.* (Low-income participant)

> *I feel kind of isolated. I don't know my neighbours. I don't get out much because . . . I don't have the money to get gas for my vehicle. So the only times I go out is . . . if I'm shopping, like if I have to shop for something, then I go out. And that's about it.* (Low-income participant)

Other important structural factors included prejudice and discrimination, inaccessibility of amenities, complex bureaucracy, and lack of opportunities to interact with others in the educational system and in the labor market. Lack of a vehicle and inefficient or unavailable public transportation often made it impossible for lower-income people to reach inaccessible amenities. Lack of employment and educational opportunities prevented people from interacting with others in the educational system and in the labor market. These were key structural causes of social isolation for lower-income participants as they influenced the development of common interests, the "choice" of neighborhood in which to live and the social/civic and physical activities they could afford.

The most frequently mentioned interpersonal factor influencing isolation was social distancing. Distancing occurred when other people deliberately reduced contact. Twice as many lower-income participants reported avoidance by others, including family members and coworkers, as a contributing factor to social isolation.

My cousins especially, they're about my age and they take part in everything, but everything they take part in costs a lot of money . . . so they don't invite me ever to go along . . . I feel stuck as far as all those social events go, because I don't have the spare money, and they don't invite me . . . People just don't include you if [they] figure you're going to be a financial burden on them . . . they regard you as . . . a loser . . . also I guess people are more critical of me than they would be if I [had] a good well-paying job . . . then [they] would look at me with an entirely different attitude. . . . (Low-income participant)

I feel . . . like an outcast from my family . . . I don't get invited to a lot of family things . . .. Well they just don't invite me if there's a special family affair . . . (Low-income participant)

I definitely don't feel part of things with some of the women that come into the change room. Like working women at lunch time . . . they're quite often there together and usually they're quite chatty, and they're not exactly . . . say nasty things. But . . . it's more just of an ignoring, exclusion kind of thing. (Low-income participant)

Some participants attributed their avoidance by others to additional factors that augmented the detrimental influence of their poverty status, including their race, age, or single marital status.

I was living in a rural community, I was a single parent, I was kind of shunned by all the women. I mean everybody wants to hang on to their own husband—they don't want to be where you are, you know. So as a single woman I was pretty well, you know, locked out of the whole married couple thing, you know. . . . So I found that . . . was very isolating to me. (Low-income participant)

While lower-income participants largely perceived avoidance by others resulting from their poverty status, higher-income participants described cliques or affiliations based on common interests as a basis for avoidance by others.

You have to have the right friends, and you have to drive the right cars, and you have to wear the right clothes. And if you don't fit into that sort of image, then you don't tend to get invited, and you notice. (Higher income participant)

[A]t social gatherings where people usually sit in their groups . . . like at community functions . . . people get in their own little groups and have a hard time mingling. And if you're there . . . you feel a little bit left out from the whole thing. (Higher income participant)

Participants reported isolation when people displayed distancing behaviors, failed to welcome them, appeared unfriendly, appeared to prejudge

them, or excluded them from social circles. When higher-income people avoided individuals who did not subscribe to their norms, or who had lower incomes than them, those who were "left out" tended to feel isolated. It is poignant to note that no higher-income people talked about being avoided by lower-income people.

Personal factors also contributed to isolation. Often lower-income people were isolated by personal barriers such as embarrassment, discomfort in the company of dissimilar people, language, fear of stereotyping, or poor health that confined them to their homes.

> *Well I'm left out of a lot of things because of . . . my physical health problems.* (Low-income participant)

More than half of the interviewees living on low incomes described situations in which they engaged in self-isolating behaviors or distanced themselves. Self-isolating behaviors occurred when social activities would require financial resources or when perceiving a threat of stigmatization. Making a choice to avoid other people or to lead very private lives contributed to a sense of social isolation. The stresses of living on a low income also could result in self-isolation.

> *I don't feel part of the community at all. We're trying to get involved in different things within our community. I don't have family in this area. They all live in Peace River, so it's basically my husband and I and two children . . . Even if we took our son somewhere in a park or anywhere . . . my husband doesn't want to be a part of that, because he feels there's people with more money there. He just feels really an outcast that way.* (Low-income participant)

Sometimes self-isolation behaviors emanated from a personal preference not to interact with other people.

> *[T]he way I am [with] neighbors basically is just "stay away from me." I don't want to be rude or anything . . . but I'm not that type of person where I'm very friendly. I am friendly when you get to know me . . . but I don't like to be pushed into friendship, and neighbors I find, once they know you . . . they start bothering you. Not . . . a bad thing, I just don't want to hear the doorbell ringing, all the time people coming in for coffee.* (Low-income participant)

Interestingly, lower-income people isolated themselves mainly from higher-income people, but their common situation of poverty united them with other lower-income people.

> *I would rather as a rule, associate with honest poor people than materialistic-minded middle-class types . . .* (Low-income participant)

We assessed sense of isolation with our telephone survey respondents by asking how often they feel alone in the world. Although fewer than 20% of respondents even somewhat agreed with the statement that they often feel alone in the world, variability existed here as well. Marital status (CV = .122, p < .001), employment status (CV = .134, p < .001), educational attainment (CV = .122, p < .001), and LICO (CV = .134, p < .001) manifested significant bivariate associations with this measure of isolation, wherein married or common-law respondents, better educated respondents, and respondents above the LICO were less likely than their respective counterparts to feel isolated. Respondents with a long-term illness or disability and unemployed respondents were *more* likely than their respective counterparts to feel isolated. Gender was unrelated to isolation. A multivariate logistic regression model for a transformed version of the isolation variable (distinguishing "strongly disagree" responses from the other responses) indicated that married or common-law respondents and respondents above LICO were less likely than others to feel alone after controlling for the other variables. Specifically, respondents above the LICO had odds of reporting a sense of belonging that was 1.59 times as high as for those below LICO.

Factors Influencing Sense of Belonging and Social Isolation

The in-person interviewees also provided insights into factors that influence the perception and sense of belonging and isolation. Interviews with both higher and lower-income participants revealed that the receipt and provision of support enhanced belonging and reduced isolation. Only people living on low incomes, particularly those who were older, disabled, or single, reported that they received no support and that this lack of support increased their feelings of abandonment and isolation. Reciprocity is one of the key qualities or norms that fosters sense of belonging (Smith, 2001). Indeed, over a third of the participants across income groups confirmed the importance of reciprocity in their social relationships. Some described reciprocal exchange of support when facing similar circumstances, while others referred to the importance of providing something in return for something else received. Low-income participants who discussed reciprocity perceived themselves as fortunate, or slightly more fortunate, than other lower-income people, and referred to reciprocal support with friends, neighbors, or family. Higher income participants described reciprocity in terms of volunteer work and education.

> *When I'm going away I ask them [my neighbors] to get my mail and I offer to do the same for them.* (Low-income participant)

> *[In the community where I teach] I'm connected definitely, I'm valued. . . . It's very rewarding because it's a more of a giving and getting back.* (Higher income participant)

Reciprocity, along with tolerance and social trust, are key norms or qualities for development of sense of community (Smith, 2001). Participants in our study identified friendliness and helpfulness as the most significant personal attributes for inculcating a sense of belonging to physical and social space. Friendliness, helpfulness, trustworthiness, acceptance, and honesty also helped to instill a sense of valued recognition. Conversely, absence of these attributes in others generated feelings of isolation.

> *That's what I like about this community, is that everyone is very friendly. People say hello and stop and chat, meet your neighbors.* (Higher income participant)

> *Acceptance is really important to everybody. If you don't feel accepted in your home or with your friends or your family, then you feel like an out-cast or a little black sheep, so it makes it difficult.* (Low-income participant)

These facilitating attributes were the building blocks of common activities, which were viewed as catalysts uniting people at family, social, group, interpersonal, and civic levels. Activities fostering a sense of belonging and decreasing isolation included joint holidays, socializing, hosting neighborhood parties, conversing about common interests, and volunteering (e.g., in schools). These activities, while identified more by higher-income participants, also reflected recognition and normalcy for lower-income people.

> *Our neighbours on both sides, you know, we have long conversations just about anything and everything. . . . Just acknowledging one another. It doesn't really have to be much more than that.* (Low-income participant)

> *[W]e've had block parties . . . in one person's backyard, just right in our neighborhood within 10 houses kind of thing, we have barbeques and all that sort of thing.* (Higher income participant)

Various factors influenced connectedness to physical spaces. Partici-pants indicated that belonging to an institution, such as a church or school, facilitated attachment to their residential neighborhood. Others valued available amenities, such as community services or agencies, recreational facilities, childcare, and retail outlets which fostered a sense of belonging. Accessibility to these amenities was particularly important to lower-income participants who found transportation a challenge.

> *So when we first went to the co-op . . . we got free extra stuff, like one month we got an extra package of fish . . . an extra meat item . . . Getting extra food there is nice . . . get certain money for us to do . . . their crafts and recreation . . . So that always makes me feel included, when they have money for . . . going camping, and camping's only twenty dollars . . .*

And they always feed us really good food . . . That's always a good feeling. . . .
I like the idea of things that are potentially available to me. That always
makes me feel comforted somehow, that I know that if I wanted to I could . . .
(Low-income participant)

[C]ommunity agencies like this place . . . I'm a total stranger to them and yet
they still open their door and they're not here to pressure me in any [way] . . .
If I want to talk or I want to communicate and be there, I'm more than
welcome . . . And that's always kind of nice . . . (Low-income participant)

Summary of Findings

Table 3 summarizes our main findings. Although sense of belonging was generally high for the total survey sample, higher-income participants belonged to more communities than lower-income participants. For higher-income participants a sense of community in terms of institutions, places, or groups with similar interests seemed to increase interactions and foster perceptions of belonging or acceptance. Higher incomes appeared to facilitate the ability to be part of many entities or "communities." Often these social ties facilitated the giving and receiving of different types of social supports, according to respondents. While lower-income participants described reciprocity with friends and neighbors, more higher-income participants also gave back to the community through volunteering. The receipt of social support was an independent reason for "feeling like one belongs." In this context, perceived factors that influenced a sense of belonging included "helpfulness" with various day-to-day tasks.

While a relatively small number of participants felt socially isolated, lower-income participants were more likely to be isolated by both structural factors (e.g., lack of resources, educational and employment opportunities) and interpersonal factors (e.g., stereotyping and avoidance by others). According to the lived experiences of these lower-income people, poverty prohibited transportation to, or participation in, social organizations and social gatherings that fostered feelings of acceptance and sense of community among higher-income people. Poverty also shaped lower-income people's perceptions and experiences of being prejudged, stigmatized, avoided, and isolated, which seemed to prevent some lower-income people from becoming involved in community activities. In low income participants' view, poverty also limited the instrumental support they could give others, as well as charitable donations (e.g., offerings in church).

DISCUSSION

As interviews were conducted in English, our study population may not represent some racial minorities, and the telephone survey may have

TABLE 3 Summary of Findings

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Belonging	Respondents had a mean score of 7.26 on a scale of one to ten, with ten representing 'feeling accepted'	Involvement in community activities reflected belonging.
	Women, older respondents, better educated and respondents above the LICO were more likely than their counterparts to feel accepted in their neighborhoods.	Participants experienced belonging to varied types of communities, such as geographic space, institutions, and communities of shared interests.
	Specifically, respondents above the LICO had an odds of reporting a sense of belonging that was 2.31 times as high as for those below LICO.	Most participants belonged to more than one community, and low-income participants were more likely to say they had no sense of community.
		Institutions that promoted a sense of belonging more than others were places of worship, schools, and community agencies, with more higher-income participants identifying the first two and low-income participants the last one.
		Schools were an important means of connecting participants to their neighborhoods as well as other parents with similar interests, or whose children played together.
		More participants with university education regarded the workplace as a community.
		More higher-income participants felt connected to their families.
		Common interests were an important basis for experiencing belonging, with more higher-income participants identifying many areas of common interests, and low-income participants mostly identifying their low-income status as a common interest.
		Factors that contributed to experiencing a sense of belonging include: trustworthiness, appreciativeness, honesty, helpfulness
Isolation	Married or common-law respondents and respondents above the LICO were less likely than their counterparts to feel isolated. Specifically, respondents above the LICO had an odds of reporting a sense of belonging that was 1.59 times as high as for those below LICO	More low-income participants identified lack of resources, structural barriers, avoidance by others, poor health, fear of stereotyping as contributing to isolation than higher-income participants.
		Avoidance by others was a major cause of social isolation.
		Over half of low-income participants also reported self-isolating behaviours.

excluded lower-income people without land-line telephones. Despite these limitations, the sequential use of qualitative and quantitative methods in this study yielded credible and comprehensive data demonstrating a pattern of effect of income on isolation and belonging.

This section explores and elaborates on the specific findings presented above. Interviewees seemed to connect interpersonal experiences with structural explanations of belonging and isolation. For example, both income groups linked poverty to inability to access recreational facilities, and lower-income participants related poverty to inability to donate to church and invite people to dinner, which may in turn have increased feelings of isolation. The study highlights other important factors contributing to social isolation and lack of belonging. On a macro level, while lack of opportunities (e.g., educational and employment) seemed to influence lower-income people's experiences of isolation, these same factors may have exacerbated their lower-income poverty situations, a major factor in isolation. Health problems also figured prominently. Disabilities and illness were linked by participants to experiences of isolation in part because of limited mobility; however, they also seemed to prevent people from actively participating in the labor market, resulting in poverty. These lived experiences appeared to coalesce to influence feelings of worthlessness, disempowerment, and isolation for lower-income people. The influence of stigma linked to poverty in fostering feelings of isolation through distancing and self-isolating behaviors was also demonstrated in this study and is reported in detail elsewhere (author et al., in press). Individuals who experience or anticipate a threat of stigmatization may manage these threats by withdrawing from situations where they perceive they may be judged unfairly (Golden et al., 2006; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Herek, 1999). While self-isolating behaviors may preserve self-esteem in the short term, these behaviors can lead to exclusion from social support and further isolation. This study could contribute to further inform assessment of the impact of structural social and economic factors on social connections to community (Bruhn, 2005; Katzman, 2001).

Our findings seem to reflect a stronger sense of belonging than a study reporting that a strong/somewhat strong sense of belonging was experienced by only 56% of Canadians although belonging was assessed differently (Ross, 2002). A longitudinal New Zealand study also reported high levels of belonging among an urban population (Monitoring and Research Team, 2003). In our study, sense of belonging was experienced in both spatial and relational/social terms, congruent with other research (Smith, 2001). Some participants experienced belonging in the spatial/territorial sense because of resources available in the community. Previous research also reported the influence of these neighbourhood variables on sense of belonging to community (Kingston et al., 1999). Fewer lower-income participants in our study belonged to institutions, which may reflect a lower degree of social capital created from their myriad interactions with institutions and social networks (Oakley & Rajan, 1991). Fewer lower-income people belonged to groups with common interests, potentially reflecting looser connections and greater isolation.

In our survey data, gender, age, educational attainment, employment status, and poverty status were all significantly associated with sense of belonging. The findings implicating income in sense of belonging extend earlier research (Barry, 1998; LaVeist et al., 1997). The relationships pertaining to age and educational attainment are reinforced in a recent study (Henly et al., 2005) that focused only on lower-income women receiving assistance. Our survey results also revealed that women, older respondents, better educated, and respondents above the LICO were more likely to feel a sense of belonging, supplementing earlier findings linking lower socio-economic status among people with cardiac problems to greater isolation (Brummet et al., 2001). The finding that age was mostly unrelated to the measure of isolation differs from some studies that report relationships between social isolation and demographic characteristics such as age (LaVeist et al., 1997; Brummet et al., 2001). Although not many participants in the qualitative findings elaborated on how their marital status—compared to other factors—influenced experiences and perceptions of isolation, qualitative and quantitative data were congruent in establishing an association between single status and sense of isolation.

Our qualitative data indicate connections among participation in community events, sense of belonging and social support, complementing other research findings (Bailey & McLaren, 2005). These data could supplement research on norms and habits that contribute to sense of belonging. Whereas Smith (2001) described tolerance, reciprocity, honesty, and trust; our study identified three additional key qualities: friendliness, helpfulness, and considerateness. Our study also reveals that lower income prevents people from participating in community activities, resulting in social isolation as Hawthorne (2006), LaVeist and others (1997), and Wilkinson (1996) speculate.

Programs and policies that reduce income inequalities by tackling the causes of poverty may help to increase sense of belonging and decrease social isolation of vulnerable populations. Social isolation (voluntary or involuntary) seemingly inhibits incorporation of lower-income people's interests into programs (Barry, 1998). Policies that reduce social isolation and increase sense of belonging offer potential prospects for greater social cohesiveness (Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Kirpitchenko, 2003; Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997).

This study fills a gap in reported research regarding the influence of socioeconomic status on sense of belonging and isolation by explicating the experiences and perceptions of people living on low and higher incomes from two large Canadian cities. Unlike previous research that has focused on one or two aspects of social relationships and on particular disadvantaged segments of the population, our study compared lower-income and higher income participants' perceptions and experiences and revealed a higher sense of belonging and less social isolation among higher income people. The study points to an inverse relationship between income and

isolation, knowledge that could inform the development and testing of intervention programs aimed at reducing isolation and enhancing sense of belonging.

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