

Community Building and Urban Life

Abstract This chapter focuses on theories and contemporary scholarly debates on community building as a means to improve livability and social cohesion in disadvantaged and heterogeneous urban settings. It shows how the necessity of creating social networks for people to be able to feel safe and at home in the city is stressed by many policy-makers, as well as anthropologists and sociologists. Seen from a political perspective, community building, feelings of belonging and social engagement are seen as prerequisites for urban neighborhoods and their dwellers to function well. The implementation of a community restaurant in a working class area in Amsterdam must be seen in light of decades of Dutch social interventions. As is shown, the exclusiveness of communities brings about contradictory outcomes.

Keywords Social networks · Feelings of home and belonging
Heterogeneous urban settings · Exclusive communities · Social interventions

[Community building] enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other, to reshape their mutual values and expectations and rediscover the possibilities of acting collaboratively—the prerequisites of any successful self-help initiative. (Obama 2012: 29)

Community building is widely considered as an effective means to improve livability and social cohesion in disadvantaged and heterogeneous urban settings—by social scientists, policy makers, social organizations, as well as by residents (cf. Jacobs 1989; King 2013; Kleinhans and Bolt 2010; Mattessich et al. 1997; Minkler 2012; VROM 2007; Weil 1996; Wittebrood and Permentier 2011).

City life, as is argued, exerts negative pressure on social cohesion: while living closely together, urban dwellers tend to keep their social distance. The opacity, chaos and complexity of large cities make it hard for city dwellers to navigate and ‘socially survive’ in this environment. Feelings of detachment, loneliness, anomie and a blasé-attitude toward others are only some of the consequences of living in the city (Blokland and Nast 2014; Durkheim 1951, 2014; Simmel 2002; Wirth 1938).

The necessity of creating social networks for people to be able to feel safe and at home in the city is stressed by many policy makers, as well as anthropologists and sociologists. Thereby, social networks can improve people’s personal circumstances and self-sufficiency (Kleinhans and Bolt 2010; Putnam 2000), as collective or economic benefits can derive from the cooperation between individuals and groups. In that sense, strong social networks among friends and families (*bonding*) as well as between different groups of people (*bridging*) are perceived of as *social capital* (Putnam 2000; cf. Bourdieu 2010, 2011). Aldrich (2011) defines a third type of social capital, besides bonding and bridging, which is *linking* social capital. The latter, and weakest, form of social capital refers to benefits that can derive from the relationship between an individual or group and a government official or institutional leader.

Although social networks are considered indispensable for citizens to socially survive, improve their lives and acquire a sense of home and belonging, having a social network is not self-evident in urban settings (Duyvendak and Wekker 2016; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). Cities are comprised of sites of enduring conflicts, and cohesive social networks are no ‘natural’ aspect of city life (Durkheim 2014). This evokes the question: To what extent and how urban dwellers manage to socially survive and create a sense of belonging if the emergence of urban social networks is not self-evident?

Schultz (1999) argues that urban residents shape legible group identities among themselves. Through imagining (collective) identities, they shape pathways that provide them with direction while they live in a complex and multi-layered social reality. In a similar vein, Thomas Blom

Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik suggest in their article ‘Urban Charisma: On Everyday Mythologies in the City’ (2009), that cities should be regarded as ‘performative spaces’—i.e. spaces that are only readable and liveable through repetitive circulations of narratives about ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Seen from a political perspective, organizing local networks in urban settings is also considered necessary (Minkler 2012; Obama 2012; VROM 2007; Walter and Hyde 2012). A professionally organized local community could provide urban dwellers legible and durable pathways through urban social life, as is assumed. They enable residents to create a sense of belonging to the place and to exert social control (Blokland and Nast 2014). In neighborhoods that lack social cohesion, residents tend to feel unsafe and withdraw from public (and thus democratic) city life. Especially when public space is ‘taken over’ by particular groups—for example ‘ethnic youths’—feelings of insecurity and detachment tend to increase among other residents (Binken et al. 2012; Burgers et al. 2012). This is seen as problematic because:

[N]eighbors should feel a sense of belonging where they live, and once they do they will engage, or so the argument goes; once they engage, the neighborhood will be on its way up. [Therefore,] [...] urban policies aim at strengthening local community, [presuming] that personal networks are a necessary condition for well-functioning neighborhoods. (Blokland and Nast 2014: 1143)

Hence, community building, feelings of belonging and social engagement are seen as prerequisites for urban neighborhoods and their dwellers to function well.

PROBLEMATIZING COMMUNITY BUILDING

However, there is yet another aspect to community building that we must take into consideration: the exclusiveness of communities. The ‘local community’ is thereby defined using the work of Smith et al. (2007: 22) as being characterized by ‘[A] common identity, interests and collective practices of individuals sharing a bounded area’. Indeed, urban dwellers seeking local networks themselves, tend to connect to people *like* themselves (Duyvendak and Wekker 2016; VROM-raad 2009). Many scholars have shown that a sense of community among one group of residents inherently involves the exclusion of others (Besnier 2009; Binken et al. 2012; Duyvendak and Wekker 2016; Elias and Scotson 1994; Hage

2000). In a setting characterized by heterogeneity, such as the city, the creation of heterogeneous communities might therefore, seemingly paradoxically, be impeded (Blokland and Nast 2014: 1143). Although strong bonds among people who can easily identify with each other are depicted as the strongest type of social capital (Aldrich 2011), it is also shown that very cohesive in-groups can reinforce hatred, violence and aggression toward ‘others’ as they lose their capacity to deploy bridging social capital and can, therefore, become isolated as pointed out by Fukuyama (2001) below:

Strong moral bonds within a group in some cases may actually serve to decrease the degree to which members of that group are able to trust outsiders and work effectively with them. [...] At best, this prevents the group from receiving beneficial influences from the outside environment; at worst, it may actively breed distrust, intolerance, or even hatred for and violence towards outsiders. (Fukuyama 2001: 14)

In other words, the very strength of those internal bonds does create a gulf between members of the group and those on the outside (ibid.: 15).

Therefore, cohesive communities exist due to the boundaries they create. The establishment of group boundaries and the definition of group membership simultaneously create a ‘constitutive outside’ (Butler 2011; see also Barth 1969; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009; Jaworski and Coupland 2005; Meder 2010; Schultz 1999; Wimmer 2004, 2005). To know who ‘we’ are inherently involves knowing who ‘the others’ are—i.e., who ‘we’ are *not*. More strongly put, belonging to a community consists to a large extent of knowing whom one does not wish to identify with. The particular knowledge of ‘the others’ that is needed to establish who ‘we’ are is provided by and constructed through the repetitive circulation of powerful narratives about the presumed negative characteristics of those ‘others’ (Besnier 2009; Elias and Scotson 1994; Jaworski and Coupland 2005). Hence, while community building increases a sense of belonging for the in-group, it obstructs the integration of the out-group.

Again, from a political perspective, states and state-supported organizations might aim to organize individuals who lack social capital because this capital is seen as a prerequisite for the well-functioning of urban dwellers and city life. At the same time:

States do not have many obvious levers for creating many forms of social capital. Social capital is frequently a byproduct of religion, tradition, shared historical experience, and other factors that lie outside the control of any government. (Fukuyama 2001: 17)

Furthermore, Fukuyama points out that:

Policy makers [...] need to be aware that social capital, particularly when associated with groups that have a narrow radius of trust, can produce negative externalities and be detrimental to the larger society. (ibid.)

It is therefore suggested that although social capital and community formation are important for neighborhood development, it is more likely that trust, safety and a stable environment for public interactions will arise as a result of spontaneous daily interactions among residents and/or organized from the bottom up (Blokland-Potters 1998, 2006; Fischer 1981; Fukuyama 2001).

STATE-SUPPORTED COMMUNITY BUILDING IN AMSTERDAM

The Netherlands and the country's capital city of Amsterdam have a long history of nationally and locally state-supported social interventions that aimed to improve the lives of and socialize the *disadvantaged working class* according to middle class moral standards and norms of conduct (Dercksen and Verplanke 2005; de Regt 1995).

Since the 1920s, certain working class areas have been designated to house anti-social families, who were joined together under the surveillance of a female superintendent in so-called *woonscholen* ('schools for dwelling'). As a precursor of today's social work, the mothers of the disadvantaged families were 're-educated' in housekeeping, raising their children and providing a 'good home' for their husbands in order to keep them out of cafés (Dercksen and Verplanke 2005: 105–187).

Today, working class families in Amsterdam are generally still described as anti-social, and many of these families are currently the focus of (nationally coordinated) social interventions that aim to improve their lives, working habits and moral standards (Kan and Van der Veer 2013; VROM 2007; Wittebrood and Permentier 2011).

In 2007, five neighborhoods in Amsterdam were designated as 'Empowered Neighborhoods' (*Krachtwijken*) by the then department of

Housing, Neighborhoods and Integration (*Wonen, Wijken en Integratie*). The Empowered Neighborhoods Policy was implemented in forty deprived neighborhoods, each characterized by a large concentration of migrants and their offspring, across the Netherlands and aimed at resolving accumulating problems in these areas, such as impoverishment, mass unemployment, high rates of criminality, large numbers of school drop-outs, increasing domestic violence, general anti-social behavior of youths, an alarming lack of social cohesion and feelings of insecurity among residents (VROM 2007; Wittebrood and Permentier 2011). One of these designated neighborhoods was the same area in which the restaurant of our concern is situated.

An important aspect of the policy program was its focus on community building and the creation of empowered local networks. Former Minister Vogelaar allocated a sum of 95 million euros to neighborhood initiatives that would enhance cooperation and cohesion among neighbors. In order to encourage (groups of) residents to display self-sufficiency and responsibility, activities such as neighborhood gardening, computer lessons, street barbecues and neighborhood dinners were abundantly subsidized and facilitated by local social organizations.

Due to economic crises and an enduring public and political criticism with regard to the costly endeavor of the Empowered Neighborhood Policy, the entire program was ended prematurely in 2010.

Despite the efforts of the national and local government to improve social life in Amsterdam, in 2012, the Verwey Jonker Institute proclaimed the residential area in which the neighborhood restaurant is located to be the ‘worst neighborhood of Amsterdam to grow up in’. This was due to extremely high rates of unemployment, poverty, child abuse, youth criminality, school drop-out levels and very low scores on social cohesion and livability, when compared to similar neighborhoods in Amsterdam and throughout the Netherlands (Steketee et al. 2012: 25; Kan and Van der Veer 2013; Van Ankeren et al. 2010).

Since the problems continued in most of the deprived neighborhoods in Amsterdam following the abandonment of the Empowered Neighborhoods Policy, the municipality of Amsterdam decided to design their own ‘Amsterdam Focus District’-program (*‘De Amsterdamse wijkaanpak’*). The objective was to improve the livability in these districts by—among other means—strengthening informal networks among residents and stimulating residential participation (Haccoû 2011: 16).

Several social and financial interventions did bring some results: between 2011 and 2013, livability in Amsterdam increased, residents felt more safe in the streets at night and were more positive about their personal futures (Kan and Van der Veer 2013: 9).

In contrast, the livability level of the neighborhood that became the site of fieldwork at the time was still considered too low by 2014. In that year, it was proclaimed ‘Focus Neighborhood of 2014’ by the municipality, designating a more focused attempt to improve social life in this particular residential area (Municipality of Amsterdam 2016).

In sum, the implementation and ongoing presence of the community restaurant in this working class area, since 2006, must be seen in light of decades of social interventions to counter the negative social effects of urban life and a lack of livability, initiated by the national government and pursued by social organizations, sponsors and the local municipality of Amsterdam. As is shown below, many of the middle class, normative assumptions that were used to underpin the interventions of the past can still be found in the current attempts to build a community in situ at the neighborhood restaurant.

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