# 'They got a project mentality': Theorizing neighborhood dis-identification and the paradox of belonging through the lens of 'the Ghetto'

*Talja Blokland*

*Department of Urban and Regional Sociology, Institute for Social Sciences, Humboldt-University Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany,*
*talja.blokland@sowi.hu-berlin.de*

### Abstract

*In a housing project in a small college town on the American East coast, a project that residents call 'the Ghetto', city administrators, social workers and politicians alike have often argued that housing projects offer living conditions that are not beneficial to the residents because, in a causal argument, they do not care about their community. Caring about the community is associated in public discourse and urban studies alike with positive identifications, and positive identifications with a sense of belonging, and sense of belonging with community. Based on long-term ethnographic research, this paper aims to critically discuss the question of how, on a meta-theoretical level, sense of belonging, community and positive identifications with a place are connected, showing that such connections are less obvious than sometimes suggested. Drawing on fieldwork on discourses of dis-identification and distancing in daily routines that constitute de-facto community as urban practice, this paper argues that first, sense of belonging and identification develops in an individual agents' perspective, whereas community is relational and collective. This contrast explains the paradox of belonging: people say that others have 'a project mentality' and that they themselves do not 'belong' in the projects. Yet at the same time much of their networks and daily interactions consist of doing community locally. Second, this paper argues that usual explanations of simple stigma coping strategies - discursive constructions of dis-identification as a way of stigma - may play some role but do not suffice as a full explanation.*

### Zusammenfassung

In einer Kleinstadt an der US-amerikanischen Ostküste liegt ein *Housing Project*, eine Sozialwohnungssiedlung, die von den Bewohner_innen oft ‚das Ghetto' genannt wird. Wohnungsbaugesellschaft, Sozialarbeiter_innen und Politiker_innen haben wiederholt behauptet, dass dieser Wohnkomplex den Bewohner_innen schlechte Lebensbedingungen biete und der *Community* daher, so der angenommene Kausalzusammenhang, egal sei. Sowohl im öffentlichen Diskurs als auch in der Stadtforschung wird ein Sich-Bemühen um die Community mit positiver Identifikation, diese positive Identifikation mit einem Zugehörigkeitsgefühl und dieses Zugehörigkeitsgefühl zur *Community* mit kollektivem Handeln in Verbindung gebracht. Aufbauend auf einer ethnografischen Studie geht dieser Artikel der Frage nach, ob, auf einer metatheoretischen Ebene betrachtet, durch die positive Identifikation mit einem Ort Zugehörigkeitsgefühl und *Community* so einfach miteinander verbunden sind, wie zum Teil

### 'They got a project mentality': Theorizing neighborhood dis-identification and the paradox of belonging

angenommen wird. Basierend auf der Beobachtung, dass Nicht-Identifizierung und Distanzierung in Alltagsroutinen stattfinden und sich *Community* somit faktisch als urbane Praxis konstituiert, wird zunächst argumentiert, dass Zugehörigkeit und Identifikation auf individueller Ebene stattfinden, wohingegen Ortsidentität und *Community* relational und kollektiv sind. Diese Unterscheidung erklärt das Paradox der Zugehörigkeit: Bewohner_innen sagen, dass andere zwar eine ,*Project mentality*' hätten, sie selbst aber nicht in den Sozialbau ,gehören', obwohl sie genau dort, in ihrem Alltag, Gemeinschaft konstituieren. Zweitens wird angeführt, dass die gängigen Erklärungen zu Strategien des Umgangs mit Stigma – die diskursive Konstruktionen der Nicht-Identifizierung als Art des Stigma-Managements – zwar eine Rolle spielen mögen, als Erklärung jedoch nicht ausreichen.

### 1.    Introduction

Neighborhood belonging has seen increased academic interest, with new theoretical insights (*Beatley* 2004; *Savage* et al. 2005; *Watt* 2009; *Andreotti* et al. 2013; *Benson* and *Jackson* 2013; *Drilling* 2014) and empirical studies (*May* 2011; *Wu* et al. 2011; *Finney* and *Jivray* 2013; *Watt* and *Smets* 2014). We all seem to root in our neighborhoods. Belonging where we live appears as a highly personal, important psychological necessity. While travelers and nomads challenge this universality, in a Global North, privileged perspective routes are exceptional; roots are the standard (*Blokland* 2017: 1; also *Day* 2006; *Schnur* 2012: 451; *Vogelpohl* 2014: 61). By implication, to say that one does not belong to one's neighborhood and dis-identifies with one's neighbors is deviant. One approach to this theme – for a sociologist in a geography journal - is to follow a 'sociological imagination' of making images relevant and lend meaning to facts (*Wright Mills* 2000: 3, also 125) in ways that upset standard understandings and link apparently individual, private problems to broader social issues. I aim to do this with the ideas of 'neighborhood identification' and 'belonging' in this paper, hoping to invite further discussion.[1]

'Doxic' adherence to specific orders in our everyday lives, *Bourdieu* writes (1994: 57), makes these orders appear natural. Such orders, and how we 'know' what is proper and right within them, pass mostly unnoticed (*Bourdieu* 2000: 11), but they have political foundations. The need to belong to a place and be part of a community is such a *doxa* (*Bourdieu* 1994: 57): a viewpoint imposed as universal and a dominant point of view, inserted by the dominating. If our minds are "structured according to the structures of the world in which [we] (..) play, everything will seem obvious" (*Bourdieu* 1994: 77): we hence cannot develop new prepositions, because we cannot ask 'behind' the obvious – or *hinterfragen*[2]. Similarly, *Smith* notes that "the world as we know it sociologically is largely organized by the articulation of the discourse of the ruling apparatus of which it is part" (1987: 63). I start from the assertion that a sense of neighborhood belonging and expectations of neighborhood community paired with the construction of a social and sociological problem, when these are absent, are exemplary for how *doxa* structure the social. I do not evaluate belonging, community or local identification. I only suggest to think about these ideas from the preposition that they are not natural.

With retreating welfare states, scholars have suggested, city politics focus on neighborhood as community and encourage local initiatives to support neighborliness that are neoliberal (*Oldfield* and *Stokke* 2007; *Mosley* 2012). We may not be able to establish the motives behind governance modes that focus on belonging and community. But when we start with seeing the absence of neighborhood identification, local belonging and community as 'problems in the eye of the state', we can identify them as doxic and analyze them sociologically. Indeed, in public imageries and academia alike we seem to forget that the sense of belonging to a neighborhood is historically produced (*Lis* and *Soly* 1993). It is common to see dis-identification and low community participation as deviant. Deviance is not fixed (*Becker* 1963): practices that deviate from norms which are constructed socially as common sense become deviant when recognized as different *and* judged, if not punished. Projects on neighborhood social cohesion and community development intend to fix these deviations. Neighborhoods ought to provide a space with which people identify, a place where they feel they belong, or where they find community – concepts often used as if they refer to *one* phenomenon.

This paper theorizes dis-identification and dis-belonging without seeing these as simple absence of a normality or deviations. It does so through analyzing the paradox of belonging of Black residents[3] in an American housing project: while they dis-identified with the neighborhood, they practiced community in daily routines.

## 2. Methodology

Following *Wacquant* (2016: 70) that through empirical research theorizing makes sense, I draw on ethnography produced between 2000 and 2004 in a 240 unit public housing project in an American college town.

I combined writing fieldnotes, interviewing and a survey with 36 additional random households. I spent almost two years with residents going to work, schools, family gatherings, weddings, shopping, church, health centers, court, jail, state offices, restaurants and bars – very often in my car. I tutored in an after-school program and participated in neighborhood events. Different from the 'classic' community study, I left the neighborhood with residents as much as possible to study the *relational* construction of 'The Ghetto'. I tape-recorded many conversations and 30 sit-down semi-structured interviews (transcribed by assistants). Obviously, no empirical generalizations are possible – the research design was set up for theorizing. Methodologically, my account suffers from the partiality – the inherent incompleteness and commitment of ethnography (*Clifford* 1986: 7)[4]. Two further clarifications are necessary: one on the construction of 'the object' of research, one on my positionality.

First, *ghetto* is a *word* that *pastes* characteristics to a physical *site* and evokes connotations. I call the housing project 'the Ghetto' as do its Black residents. They hardly used its official name used by Housing Authority (HA), politicians or newspapers. The low-rise development of two dead-end streets with courtyards was set apart from the rest of the 8th ward by a highway overpass and surrounded by light industrial uses (see *Fig. 1*). It was talked about as "tucked away", as the HA director said, a "ghetto by design", an interpretation politicians shared. In 2017 demolished and replaced by mixed-income housing and commercial uses, the opinion that it should be demolished as it was "drug invested", a "hub of social problems", "isolated people from society" and "provided children with no proper role models" was widespread among NGOs working with 'the community' and local politicians in the early 2000s. But it was not a ghetto as defined by isolation or its own infrastructure: two dead-end streets on walking distance from downtown, serviced by school buses to public schools elsewhere, on a direct bus-line to downtown and the suburbs, without amenities like shops or corner stores or bodegas. Fifteen minute walks in either direction got you in a gentrified neighborhood, a Hispanic lively shopping street or College campus.
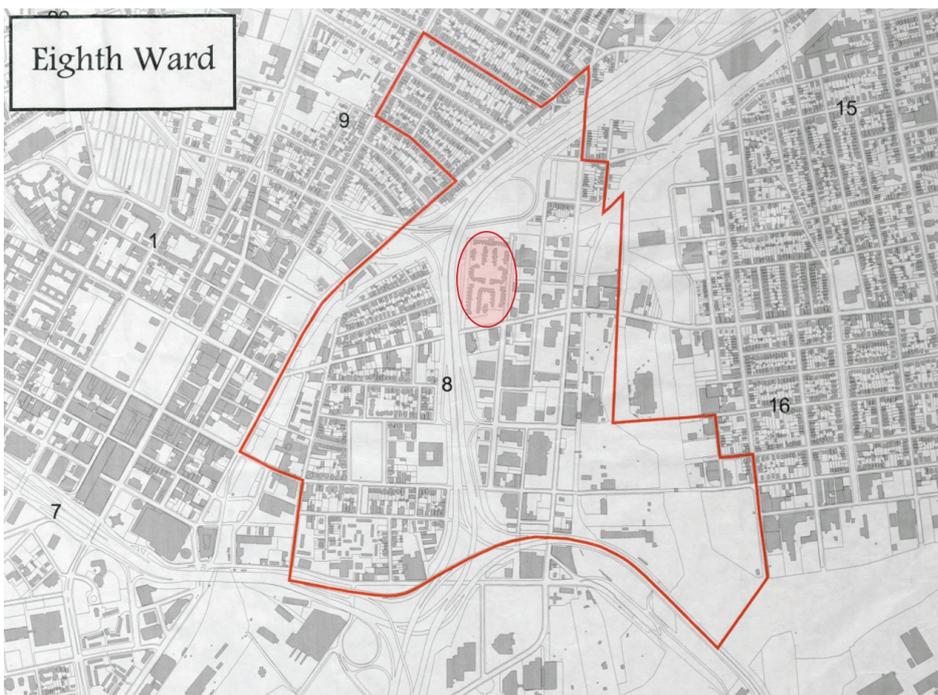


*Fig. 1   The Ghetto on the map. Source: Adjusted from Department of Planning, City of New Haven*

The area's smallness enables us to theorize dis-belonging and community precisely because Ghetto residents were not geographically isolated. Daily routines of work, school, health care, shopping or entertainment implied leaving the Ghetto. They used the same infrastructure as other city residents. But Janie, a woman in her 30s, food service employee in a suburban college, daughter of preachers, a mother of five children and the expert who drove my sick baby daughter to an emergency room one night and taught me how to jump the cue there – in short, a central knowing agent in the field – used to tell others that I was "going to write up how we all living here like prisoners in a camp." Similarly, Ms. Magnolia, chair of the Tenants Representatives Council (TRC), a long-term resident whom everyone knew, commented that all the HA would needed to do was putting up a gate and they would be in jail. This reflected the control by the HA management, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the police and the situation of being possibly observed through security cameras (*Blokland* 2018). I explore (here) the idea that these statements also refer to the socially constructed and sanctioned mentality, ascribed to housing projects generally and the Ghetto particularly: to experiences of stigmatization.

Second, I went to the Ghetto as White academic from Europe to study practices, not behavior. I am not interpreting actions through motives. I write from a privileged standpoint and select fragments of lives that people temporarily shared with me to theorize broader or abstract and recognize the ontological, epistemological and ethical issues (see *Smith* 1987, 2005). I wish therefore to note that this paper's theme, that dis-identification is not deviance and that neighborhood community is not natural but historically embedded in economic and political power, occurred as I learnt from especially Black women as knowledge producers (*Collins* 2015: 2349). I learnt a central wording, 'project mentality', in the field. People distanced themselves from it. An interpretation may be that such distancing from that mentality was produced (be)for(e) me. The dominant representations may also be reflected because in the "discourse of the dominated (..) when they speak to dominant groups, they tend to use a borrowed discourse, the very one the dominant offer about them" (*Bourdieu* 1999: 61). But I was also a foreigner not assumed to know and I did not. I spoke imperfect English with Dutch accent. I lacked knowledge of housing projects. I understood very little about US race relations. Janie and Timika

explained my position in encounters as "she don't know, she's not from here". Ms. Magnolia urged others to speak slower: "she don't understand you, she speaks Europe English". I was privileged White, but not America White. I tend to think that the discourses here were not only produced as self-representations but shared.

## 3. Caring for community and relations of ruling

Institutions as 'ruling' (*Smith* 1987), e.g. politics, HA administration, social service agencies and police, assumed a necessity of caring for 'the community' and defined local social problems directly linked to an abstracted 'not caring'. One day, a man was shot at 7.30 am. The newspapers said he was shot for no reason while walking his dog. HA residents are forbidden to have dogs. The man had lived in another project. Everyone talked about it that day. His dead was related to a conflict over drug-sale. A victim's relative said everyone knew thus and also knew who shot him. Located near a highway exit, the Ghetto was an important market for suburban narcotics consumers. Individual sellers and organized trade existed alongside each other as long as independently working men did not use certain times and places. There was always potential conflict. But the shooting was at 7.30 am with children about to go to school. The outrage that day was about the death – everyone I interviewed or surveyed had known someone killed – but especially about time and place. A community meeting with the police and HA was called to discuss safety, which I analyzed elsewhere (*Blokland* 2008). During that meeting, officials expressed concerns in wordings that fitted the abstracted language of a broken windows theory (*Wilson* and *Kelling* 1982). The discursive Ghetto produced was one of people not caring for their community. If people did not work together to improve their community and show they cared, they sent a message that anyone could "deal drugs out here". In a nutshell, they inferred from practices of residents not attending community activities, not calling the police when they saw law-breaking, not picking up trash or leaving trash themselves that people did not care.

They hence deducted that their 'mentality' was, first, a shared mentality, confined to a spatial area, with no relation to the wider urban fabric. Second, they abstracted from people's concrete experiences of violence and police actions, transcribing these into a dominant mode of ruling of viable communities. It

reflects that "a mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms (....). We are ruled by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships" (*Smith* 1987: 81).

The discursive constructions by activists and non-profit organizations (sometimes contracted by the City or HA), showed similar abstractions from the particular. A director of a new community development program to 'work with families', a Black man with a master degree in social work, thought low attendance of such programs resulted from people "not being early risers":

> Low income …. Uhm … effectively they got social ills of substance abuse, mental health, HIV, uh, and this is not to stigmatize but to recognize that these issues actually exist in these communities. That those kind of families do not operate under the traditional modes of living (…) Even though they're working doesn't mean they don't have other issues. They're under-skilled, underemployed. You know, [such] kind of people. Because they're living in public housing. That gives you an indication.

While he was critical of other outside agencies and tried to provide need-based services, he also said that residents needed to "awaken to the possibilities that are there". Rather than seeking out individuals through a 'clinical model', he saw a need to strengthen 'community', as it is "the circle around them that's causing this person to behave this way" and to get them "thinking outside of the box":

> I think we've painted a mask of beliefs now, for folks. [Like] I'm African-American, I live in a low-income complex, you know, I can only go so far, I might get a 10-12 hour job, you know, I don't invest my time into upward mobility activities (…) that is where we block up our true um… development and growth of people. Because they're locked into that.

A White retired social worker participated in a neighborhood group to build bridges between the wards' gentrified part and poorer sections. She had her first job in the 1950s in the Ghetto, then inhabited by Italian-Americans and Blacks. While she hold increased racism responsible for the distance between Blacks and Whites, she also thought the isolation of the Black poor made them experience a "void" in a society where "they don't have a stake in what's going on around them":

> I think it is worse for Blacks now, really. To be living the way people do, in the locations they do, in the housing that they have (…). It's a wonder there aren't more problems. That there aren't more murders and fights than there are. You can't put people in a box and let them just sit there with nothing to the right, nothing to the left to support them.

One of the HA youth program assistants who had been 'on welfare' some years ago herself, said:

> Everybody that lives in a public housing project is a victim. And they don't even know it. And you don't become aware of it until you get out of the situation that you're in (…) everything, social security, reduced rent, all of it makes you a victim because you're fearful of doing anything above that, because you get set into that (…) and because they're victims, they're fearful of everything. All change, everything (…) and they should all be working to self-sufficiency, and not to 'oh my daughter is going to get to move into her own apartment when she's 18.

From these fragments the Ghetto emerges as a place where people did not care about their community as in other neighborhoods, explained by a mentality linked to, if not produced by, living in the projects. Political views of how and why such mentality developed differed. But the constructions of a mentality itself did not differ much.

The history of US public housing shows how relations of economic ruling conditioned current relations of ruling in safety and policing, social work, education and other fields where the imagery of a project mentality acquired relevance. The Ghetto was built in 1942 following the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act (1937), a program for slum clearance and public housing (*Judd* and *Swanstrom* 1994: 124) "designed to serve the needs of those of low income who otherwise would not be able to afford decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings". Realtors, banks and builders feared that the Act made the government a competitor on the housing

market (ibid: 131). To avoid this, it should only house the poorest Americans. The title on public housing imposed cost limitations to prevent 'extravagance and unnecessary' amenities. The strong regulating of rent and eligibility criteria ensured that housing market competition was minimized and public housing only benefited the neediest families. In most post-war European countries, public housing became available to a wider group than just the very poor (*Harloe* 1995). In America, it was "a welfare program for people who had failed. It passed Congress amid intense criticism from the real estate lobby and its allied groups, who labeled it socialistic and un-American. Many local communities build it only as the price to be paid for getting on with urban renewal. The legacy that public housing carried was simply too negative to allow it ever to be a successful program" (*Judd* and *Swanstrom* 1994: 132). Cost and design restrictions guaranteed that the units were uncomfortable and undesirable: "Public housing served as a constant reminder to its tenants and everyone else that this was a grudging welfare program" (*Judd* and *Swanstrom* 1994: 134).

So, capitalist rulings, that made public housing substandard from the onset and strongly defined it as housing for those unable to take care of themselves, set the historic relations in which discourses about the Ghetto evolved. Combined with the ideology of the self-made man, housing project and a mentality as formulated in the interview-fragments fitted these historic conditions.

But the mentality hence constructed had an inconsistency: residents were blamed for not caring about 'their' community but also stigmatized so generally - also in racist stereotypes - that one may ask why anyone would express to care about a place defined where belonging was only defined through un-deservingness (*Gans* 1995) and unfavorable characteristics.

## 4.    Belonging is not 'natural'

Belonging and neighborhood identification are thus embedded in racialized and gendered relations of economic and political ruling. When renting furniture, paying bills, pawning jewelry, attending a parent-teacher meeting, going to family court or visiting jail, living in the projects mattered. Especially younger women with small children had to negotiate institutions were I observed teachers, social workers or front-desk personal in health care clinics speak-

ing loud, restrictive and not oriented on listening to concerns. For example, I went with Timika, a 24-year old single mother with sons aged 2 and 8, to apply for unemployment benefits. The case worker interrupted her attempts to explain her situation, saying that she did not "care what the story was", or that she should have thought about daycare issues before having children. Referred to a child psychology clinic for her son, the care worker told her that she herself needed therapy and "anger management" (her son was diagnosed with a mental illness years later). They assumed a mentality of not being in control, as not caring or "trying", another word used often to speak to, not with, Timika.

To dis-identify with such racialized, gendered and class categorizations of the projects could be stigma management (*Damer* 1974, 1989; *Flint* 2003; *Hastings* 2004; *Hayward* and *Yar* 2006; *Watt* 2008; *Arthuson* 2012). Various geographers have suggested a contrast between external and internal reputation of neighborhoods which fits the idea of stigma management (*Hastings* 2004; *Permentier* et al. 2007; *van Ham* et al. 2008). However, The Ghetto was relationally produced between residents and institutions in historical rules of political and economic dominance, not simply created externally. Every survey-participant planned to move. "I am going to move up and move out", Timika used to say (she did). Someone's daughter "did so well, she moved out". People talked about others having "escaped" the projects. Janie announced that she did not grow up "like this": the dominant discourse among residents was dis-identification, and more than a coping mechanism.

Nikki, in her early forties, moved to the projects aged 12. She had an adult daughter and 8 year old Kyara. We talked about drugs. Herself a user, she did not judge drugs, but saw harm in using drugs in front of children, using drugs instead of feeding children, and taking anger out on children. Such 'mothers in the projects' were 'out of control' and 'monsters' – an imagination also mediated (*Gubrium* 2008). Nikki defined fighting, back-stacking, jealousy and child abuse as part of the project mentality:

> This is the projects. You have a lot of people bruise their kids. When my boyfriend gets high, I tell him, you calm down, you hurt my child, I'll call the cops on you. But Kyara is all hyped up, she gets so mad. They don't come with no instructions.

## 'They got a project mentality': Theorizing neighborhood dis-identification and the paradox of belonging

To me, Nikki represented the idea that anger was caused by drifts unchecked, not exhaustion through structural disadvantages. Court decisions, social worker advices, school therapy referrals all seemed to tell people to restrain themselves and manage anger. Nikki's individualized moral framing echoed professional's constructions.

Lena, 40 at that time, combined crack use with disciplined mothering that made her three youngest children neatly dressed, their hair often beautifully braided, ready for the school bus most days. While teachers knew about her user history as one daughter had learning disabilities because of prenatal brain-damage, Lena controlled her use and the family controlled their privacy so that outside the projects her use was invisible. Lena, too, identified a 'project mentality' among parents. She had not grown up in a 'proper family' and not stayed with her children's fathers. Lena said the projects "bred" a lifestyle of not having "normal, functional families":

> Parents, the younger people, the generation has changed. I don't know why, how, who (...) you go to people's houses, you see it, don't you? Where do you go at in here and see a family where there's a father who's 60 or 50 so and still got 5 or 6 kids at their house? Ain't nothing but single parents, moms with their boyfriends with a whole lot of kids. (...) It wouldn't be as corrupt as it is now (...) People don't care anymore. There's no morals, no happiness. They got a lot of anger in them, the peoples out here. Nobody's happy because of the way they're living.

Sean, Kyara's father, grew up in the projects. We talked on one of the benches in the court when a toddler passed on a bike:

> His mother is a drop-out from school and a drug dealer. He ain't got no future. It passes down. Nobody wants to break the chain. They're like 'I had no fun, why should you?' If you ask any of those parents, do they remember their 16th birthday, they don't. It's all bad things, nothing good. First it was, let society go away. We created our own boundary. Now it's like, let society take over. Nobody stood up and said 'that's not the way to go'. Instead of doing something about it they just hang around, gossip. Before, they see something, they're like 'lemme whoop your ass'. Now it's like 'ain't my kid, why do I care?' Parents are ignorant.

Bringing them together, they'll just be like, you yell at my kid. They're champing each other: I talk louder than you do. You got to have that image. If you don't have that image, you're nobody.

The lack of respect for rules impeded the drug business, in which he was active, and gender relations:

> There was a code we all lived by. Now the kids don't care. They got no respect for what they do. These shootings. That's no respect. When we were growing up, we could fix them [e.g. business disagreements did not result in gun violence, TB]. Now, they shoot. And they go to jail. For life. They have no discipline (*pauses*). Look at them girls around here. Look what they are wearing. They're your baby, next thing you know they're pregnant of some smooth-talking, drug-dealer guy (...). It's about discipline again, you know what I am saying? I always use protection. My generation, we always use protection. It's discipline (...) If you don't have discipline: kid. Or you die.

Listed as 'project mentality' were for Sean lack of discipline, gossiping, keeping each other down, being rude, being aggressive, looking for fights. As many people whom I talked to over 30, Sean believed that it got "worse" over time.

Lena connected anger to structural conditions ("because of the way they are living"); Nikki presented the project mentality as individual. Sean saw both. Timika taught me that the project mentality was not a label for individuals, but a habitus: practices that one could challenge through 'focus' or give into if one was not staying on top of things. We chatted about an initiative of urban gardening. You would not catch Timika caring for the community: the focus should always be on moving – on moving out from badly maintained apartments where you could not control the heating, repairs took long and were overpriced, roaches were a hopeless fight no matter how you cleaned, you heard mice running between walls and rats inhabited the backyards, and the rent increased as soon as you made a little money (and was never adjusted quickly enough when you lost that job again):

> Ain't nobody living here because they like it, well, may be some people do, like the crackheads, you know, crazy people, but normal people, they don't wanna stay in the projects. If you don't wanna get out no more, the project mental-

ity got you, you got to fight that (…) I want more for me and my kids. (…) And trying to fix it up around here, like with them flowers (…) I ain't got no time for that bullshit. I gotta work, I gotta provide for my kids, I gotta run back and forth to the school because my son's acting up. I ain't got no time, and anyways I'm getting outta here.

Timika clarified it was *not* a character, but a set of practices that could take anyone down as the dispositions of disadvantages by class, race and gender were so similar. In dis-belonging to the projects and distancing oneself from community actions, agents took charge and maneuvered the space that their dispositions (e.g. "the ways in which the socio-symbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons", *Wacquant* 2016: 65) offered them, developing a habitus (the conditioning associated with a particular class or conditions of existence, *Bourdieu* 1992: 52) to *not* match the one of their habitat. *Bourdieu* speaks of spatial profit where habitus and habitat match (*Bourdieu* 1999: 76). Middle class elective belongers (*Savage* et al. 2005) have found perfect matches. In contrast, Ghetto residents resisted acquiring the habitus discursively and materially connected to the habitat by the rules of economic and social and racial relations on the other side of the spectrum.

"Normal people", Timika said, would hence not identify with this place. All other existing doxa about how to live besides the one of neighborhood belonging required the opposite of caring for this community or belonging there. Following *Misztal* (2001: 313), we may differentiate between normatively normal and situationally normal. We need a sense of normalcy to experience continuity and cannot make sense of everyday experiences from scratch time and again. As summarized elsewhere what we experience as normal or not depends on (1) how often we experience performances of others or frequency (situationally normal) and (2) whether we see these performances as (not) conforming to a norm (normatively normal) (*Misztal* 2001: 314; *Blokland* 2017: 104). "Actors sustain each other's expectations of things as usual which leads them to judge such situations as normal" (*Misztal* 2001: 313). Normative and situational normalcy may, however, diverge. The normatively normal – the standard of neighborhood belonging - and the situationally normal – people dis-identify while living local lives – appears to contradict.

## 5.   Practices: symbolic and actual neighborhood use

While in constructing the project mentality residents reflected dominant normative normalcy, their practices included a situational normalcy of, first, distancing occurring from ruling relations, not moral judgements or stigma coping and second, of networks constituting community instrumentally. We may distinguish here between practices of the symbolic use of the built environment and representations of space (symbolic neighborhood use) and practices that constitute space (actual neighborhood use) (these by definition hence also ascribe meanings but not necessarily symbols, as elaborated in *Blokland* 2003, 2017). Such practices can also be called performances (*Benson* and *Jackson* 2013; *Dirksmeier* et al. 2014), allowing us focus on the "banality of everyday life" (*Amin* and *Thrift* 2002: 8-9). Relations of ruling and agents' dispositions frame such practices.

First, some limited or avoided contacts with neighbors out of fear – but not for crime itself (cf. *Sampson* et al. 1997). Crime contextualized all daily routines, but generally predictably so. Except for shootings, the drug economy had acquired a situational normalcy. However, police attempts to suppress the trade affected practical neighborhood use. While officials suggested that people did not hold together as community, policing discouraged people from doing so. Officers stopped and searched people on the streets, especially men. They asked for IDs, questioned them about reasons for their presence and told residents to "go in the house" when sitting outside at night. Overcrowded apartments had no balconies. Air-conditioning was absent or broken. Ceilings were low. Summers were hot. But night-time socializing was discouraged. And encounters with the police could always go in any direction. With the increased police presence in 2004 under a changed HA site management – with a manager said to have been "bounty hunter" who "played no games" – people increasingly connected policing to 'minding your business'. Destiny moved to the Ghetto some years earlier as single mother with an adult son and ten year old daughter. She socialized outside, but was careful with visitors:

I don't care who is who, you got no drugs on you and no warrants, that's the only time people come in. People come in here, all I care about is you got crack on you, you can't come in here. No warrants either. Because that is questionable, from a police

perspective. They might have been involved in something, the police may know him from before (...) I don't knowingly associate with people who do drugs. But it is hard to avoid it because it is the environment we live in. In order not to be involved in it, you can't live here.

Second, that visitors could use information easily in later conflicts seemed to produce more outside encounters on porches, benches and court yards and communications than private visits. People created exchange networks, often of monetary and instrumental character in order to get by. The apartments had no hallways, so you stepped from the doorstep into the living room and open kitchen. The control over privacy was limited when one let people come in. This may have impacted actual neighborhood use twofold. First, it brought people outside, making visible who communicated with whom and who went over to whom – for some a reason to keep distance in any neighborhood. There was, however, again a relation of ruling. The police and DCF workers hold fixed imageries of the projects. Many shared stories of people calling cops on others, "having" them arrested, or calling DCF just to get "at someone" The fixed imageries could be put to use, as officials in first instance believed callers. The low community participation may therefore also be understood as avoiding sharing more than casual information.

Third, however, families who lived in the Ghetto long and residents who grew up together had developed a strong practical 'feel for the game' (*Bourdieu* 2001: 7-81) that made the Ghetto predictable and readable. In the survey, 58.3 %, or 21 residents, believed their area (officially defined as 'crime hotspot') was as safe as any other and 13.9 % thought it safer than other city neighborhoods. They felt equally safe at daytime and safer at night than residents in the gentrified area[5]. Moreover, 15 network generator-questions asked people about organizing support like childcare, getting a ride, help with small household tasks, emotional support, sharing leisure activities or access to political meetings. These 220 ties where mainly neighborhood (43.3 %) and city (38.2 %) ties. Neighborhood ties had higher contact frequencies, but no higher likelihood to include people whom one felt close to or shared views with than non-neighborhood ties. Only 1/3 of neighborhood ties were reported trusted. Full data-analysis cannot be done here; data suggest that instrumental relations were highly important in organizing daily routines. But one could practice community in

this way and still dis-identify with the neighborhood, its residents and, above all, its symbolic use.

With the local networks, to be from the Ghetto was also a possibility to link persons to others, to position someone through affiliations. Located in the projects and ascribed a mentality in relations outside the Ghetto, positioned in the most marginalized intersection of race, class and gender, there was, one may argue, next to dis-identification and distancing *also* an understanding of a shared common history. Generally, we share common histories as we go through similar events that we can experience differently. Symbols of such histories may still have a variety of meanings (*Cohen* 1986: 8; *Blokland* 2017: 44-45). While practicing minding one's business, not getting involved, and distancing from the project mentality, people faced similar institutional domination, especially outside the Ghetto. This did not produce strong ties or moral solidarity expressions. But there was an understanding of dispositions that framed their experiences now and in the past. These stood apart from experiences of those who never lived in projects. As such I read a recognition of sameness in the words of for example Lena or Timika when talking about the project mentality and a habitus of resisting it.

## 6. Doing community while dis-belonging: concluding remarks

This paper used ethnography to question the naturalness of neighborhood belonging or identification and theorize the connection between belonging, identification and community. I have done so because urban actors in ruling relations often speak about disadvantaged neighborhoods in terms of lacking engagement, community or participation. Scholars have often discussed neighborhood stigma as constructed elsewhere (*Hastings* 2004; *Permentier* et al. 2007; *van Ham* et al. 2008). Indeed, such meaning making processes had consequences for residents here, too. But differentiating internal and external reputation and understanding neighborhood withdrawal as simple stigma coping is too easy. It does not explain that a discursive construction of distancing from the projects was linked to local networks, creating a neighborhood where everyone wanted to move out (100 % in the survey) while 'everybody knew everybody' and 45 % of network-generator ties were in the small area. Moreover, there was no internal versus external reputation.

# 'They got a project mentality': Theorizing neighborhood dis-identification and the paradox of belonging

Stigmatization happened in relations of ruling there where they connected *directly* with everyday practices. The stigma is embedded in its economic and political history and a product of a history of racism, but made relevant time and again in practices of agents whose work brings them in direct interactions with project residents – and emulated (*Tilly* 1998) in the very relations with them. Practices outside the geographical area were framed relationally in being 'from' the Ghetto. Through symbolic and practical neighborhood use I argued that the historical, socio-political construction of this Ghetto as site of a mentality created a setting of oppression, for example, in policing, which affected residents relating to one another. It made them careful with privacy, further reducing participation.

We learnt that we can do community as practice, develop a feel for the game that makes the social predictable and readable and therefore know what life is like and derive a sense of security from this. But we can then *still* maintain that we do not belong, that it is not 'our' place, and we do not identify with our neighborhood. Under stigmatization and experiences of un-community outside the Ghetto, distancing may be coping strategy. But such coping presents an under-socialized individual (*Granovetter* 1985). Instead, we may see stigmatization as disposition from where to be in the world. The people whom I met in the Ghetto presented the project mentality as habitus that habitat may enforce – and all resisted. Theoretically, we learn from them that belonging and identification are individual experiences, whereas community is relational. This explains what appeared as contradiction: people said that others have 'a project mentality' and that they do not 'belong' in the projects. Yet, networking and daily interactions practiced community locally. It was para-doxical, or *seemingly* contradictory: only the doxic understanding of belonging and place of residence stood in the way of seeing the normative and situational normalcy of their ways of being in the world.

## Notes

1 My paper does not do justice to the many studies on neighborhood, community, local identity and belonging or the conceptual work done within geography, as summarized for example for Germany in *Schnur* (2014). I have, however, found inspiration by many geographers. *Mills*' 'The Sociological Imagination' (orig. 1959) is a plea for a humanist sociology connecting history, the social and the personal. It meant an important turning point in sociology away from structuralism and functionalism and (only or dominantly) variable-oriented research.

2 This is not a unique thought. For example, *Simmel* (1950) in 'The Stranger' pointed in 1908 already to the relevance of the eye from outside, followed by in geography well-known *Robert Park. Park* urged to study the unusual to reflect on what appeared 'usual' (*Harding* and *Blokland* 2014). However, *Bourdieu* points to the constitution of such *doxa* as power-laden political processes, a focus also in feminist geography (for example *Massey* 2013 or *McDowell* 1992). Recent geography approaches, for example *Butler* (1990) focus on the repetition of norms. Many theories of performativity, however, are aimed primarily at theorizing the production of space (overview: *Glass* and *Rose-Redwood* 2014). I prefer to use *doxa* as it allows moving to the para-doxical of belonging and dis-belonging.

3 I write 'residents' but had most intense interactions with women between 20 and 60. The necessary discussion of gender, race and class, their intersectionality and the positionality of Black women as knowing agents, not research objects (*Collins* 2015) cannot be done here. With 'residents', I refer to all people with whom I established relationships over time. The aim is not to present an overall picture of all residents but rather to use ethnographic material to discuss the *doxa* of belonging and community.

4 Non-ethnographers may note that ethnographers understand their material as inter-subjectively produced in the field, not as available 'data' to be 'collected'. While this has shortcomings like any method, its main value lies in ethnographers' attempt to position oneself *near* people in the field and then look at the world as good as one can looking out from this standpoint, whilst also reflect on where we are usually standing ourselves (see a.o. *Smith* 2005; *Emerson* et al. 2011).

5 I surveyed 204 residents randomly in the surrounding ward, including middle and high income households. Space permits no further discussion: I followed the method as reported in *Blokland* and *Van Eijk* 2009.

## References

*Amin, A.* and *N. Thrift* 2002: Cities. Reimagining the Urban. – Cambridge

*Andreotti, A., P. Le Galès* and *F.J. Moreno Fuentes* 2013: Transnational Mobility and Rootedness. The Upper Middle Classes in European Cities. – Global Networks **13** (1): 41-59, doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00365.x

*Arthurson, K.* 2012: Social Mix, Reputation and Stigma: Exploring Residents' Perspectives of Neighbourhood Effects. – In: *van Ham, M., D. Manley, N. Bailey, L. Simpson* and *D. MacLennan* (eds.): Neighbourhood Effects Research. New Perspectives. – Dordrecht: 101-119

*Beatley, T.* 2004: Native to Nowhere. Sustaining Home and Community in a Global Age. – Washington, DC

*Becker, H.S.* 1963: Outsiders. Studies in Sociology of Deviance. – New York, London

*Benson, M.* and *E. Jackson* 2013: Place-making and Place Maintenance. Performativity, Place and Belonging among the Middle Classes. – Sociology **47** (4): 793-809, doi:10.1177/0038038512454350

*Blokland, T.* 2003: Urban Bonds. - Cambridge

*Blokland, T.* 2008: "You Got to Remember You Live in Public Housing". Place-making in an American Housing Project. – Housing, Theory and Society **25** (1): 31-46, doi:10.1080/14036090601151210

*Blokland, T.,* and *G. Van Eijk* 2009: Do People Who Like Diversity Practice Diversity in Neighbourhood Life? – Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies **36** (2): 313-332, doi:10.1080/13691830903387436

*Blokland, T.* 2017: Community as Urban Practice. – Malden

*Blokland, T.* 2018: The Ghetto, State Surveillance and Control. – In: *Flint, J.* and *R. Powell* (eds.): Class Ethnicity and State in the Polarized Metropolis. – London

*Bourdieu, P.* 1992: The Logic of Practice. – Malden

*Bourdieu, P.* 1994: Structures, Habitus, Power. Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power. – In: *Dirks, N.B., G. Eley* and *S.B. Ortner* (eds.). Culture, Power, History. – Princeton: 155-199

*Bourdieu, P.* (ed.) 1999: The Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society. – Stanford

*Bourdieu, P.* 2000: Pascalian Meditations. – Oxford

*Bourdieu, P.* 2001: Practical Reason. – Oxford

*Butler, J.* 1990: Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity – New York

*Clifford, J.* 1986: Introduction: Partial Truths. – In: *Clifford, J.* and *G.E. Marcus* (eds.): Writing Culture. – Berkeley: 1-26

*Cohen, A.P.* 1986: Of Symbols and Boundaries, or, does Ertie's Greatcoat Hold the Key? – In: *Cohen, A.P.* (ed.): Symbolising Boundaries. Identity and Diversity in British Cultures. – Manchester: 1-19

*Collins*, *P.H.* 2015: Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. – Ethnic and Racial Studies **38** (13): 2314, doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1058515

*Damer, S.* 1974: Wine Alley. The Sociology of a Dreadful Enclosure. – Sociological Review **22** (2): 221-248, doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1974.tb00250.x

*Damer, S.* 1989: From Moorepark to "Wine Alley". The Rise and Fall of a Glasgow Housing Scheme. – Edinburgh

*Day, G.* 2006: Community and Everyday Life. – London, New York

*Dirksmeier, P., I. Helbrecht* and *U. Mackrodt* 2014: Situational Places. Rethinking Geographies of Intercultural Interaction in Super-diverse Urban Space. – Geografiska Annaler **96** (4): 299-312, doi:10.1111/geob.12053

*Drilling, M.* 2014: Die Metapher vom Raum als Sozialen Landschaft. – In: *Schnur, O., D. Gebhardt* and *M. Drilling* (eds.): Quartierforschung zwischen Quartier und Praxis. – Wiesbaden: 21-58

*Emerson, M., R.I. Fretz* and *L.L. Shaw* 2011: Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. – Chicago

*Finney, N.* and *S. Jivraj* 2013: Ethnic Group Population Change and Neighbourhood Belonging. – Urban Studies **50** (16): 3323-3341, doi:10.1177/0042098013482497

*Flint, J.* 2003: Housing and Ethopolitics. Constructing Identities of Active Consumption and Responsible Community. – Economy and Society **32** (4): 611-629, doi:10.1080/0308514032000107628

*Gans, H.J.* 1995: The War Against the Poor. – New York

*Granovetter, M.S.* 1985: Economic Action and Social Structure. The Problem of Embeddedness. – American Journal of Sociology **91** (3): 481-510

*Glass, M. R.* and *R. Rose-Redwood* (eds.) 2014: Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space. – London

*Gubrium, A.* 2008: Writing Against the Image of the Monstrous Crack Mother. – Journal of Contemporary Ethnography **37** (5): 511-527, doi:10.1177/0891241607309891

*Harding, A.* and *T. Blokland* 2014: Urban Theory: A Critical Introduction to Power, Cities and Urbanism in the 21st Century. – London

*Harloe, M.* 1995: The People's Home? Social Rented Housing in Europe & America. – Oxford

*Hastings, A.* 2004: Stigma and Social Housing Estates. Beyond Pathological Explanations. – Journal of Housing and the Built Environment **19** (3): 233-254, doi:10.1007/s10901-004-0723-y

*Judd, D.R.* and *T. Swanstrom* 1994: City Politics. Private Power and Public Policy. – New York

*Hayward, K.* and *M. Yar* 2006: The 'Chav' Phenomenon. Consumption, Media and the Construction of a New Underclass. – Crime, Media, Culture **2** (1): 9-28, doi:10.1177/1741659006061708

*Lis, C.* and *H. Soly* 1993: Neighbourhood Social Change in

West European Cities: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries. – International Review of Social History **38** (1): 1-30, doi:10.1017/S0020859000111757

*Massey, D.* 2013: Space, Place and Gender. – Oxford

*May, V.* 2011: Self, Belonging and Social Change. – Sociology **45** (3): 363-378, doi:0.1177/0038038511399624

*McDowell, L.* 1992: Doing Gender: Feminism, Feminists and Research Methods in Human Geography. – Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers **17** (4): 399-416, doi:10.2307/622707

*Misztal, B.A.* 2001: Normality and Trust in Goffman's Theory of Interaction Order. – Sociological Theory **19** (3): 312-324, doi:10.1111/0735-2751.00143

*Mills, C.W.* 2000: The Sociological Imagination. – New York

*Mosley, J.E.* 2012: Keeping the Lights On. How Government Funding Concerns Drive the Advocacy Agendas of Nonprofit Homeless Service Providers. – Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory **22** (4): 841-866, doi:10.2307/23321344

*Oldfield, S.* and *K. Stokke* 2007: Political Polemics and Local Practices of Community-Organizing and Neoliberal Politics in South Africa. – In: *Leitner, H., J. Peck* and *E.S. Sheppard* (eds.): Contesting Neoliberalism. Urban frontiers. – New York: 139-156

*Permentier, M., M. van Ham* and *G. Bolt* 2007: Behavioural Responses to Neighbourhood reputations. – Journal of Housing and the Built Environment **22**: 199-213, doi:10.1007/s10901-007-9075-8

*Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush* and *F. Earls* 1997: Neighborhoods and Violent Crime. – Science **277** (5328): 918-924, doi:10.1126/science.277.5328.918

*Savage, M., G. Bagnall* and *B. Longhurst* 2005: Globalization and Belonging. – London

*Schnur, O.* 2012: Nachbarschaft und Quartier. – In: *Eckhardt, F.* (ed.): Handbuch Stadtsoziologie. – Wiesbaden: 444-474

*Schnur, O.* 2014: Quartiersforschung im Überblick. – In:

*Schnur, O., D. Gebhardt* and *M. Drilling* (eds.): Quartierforschung zwischen Quartier und Praxis. – Wiesbaden: 21-58

*Simmel, G.* 1950: The Sociology of Georg Simmel (KH Wolff, Trans.). – Glencoe

*Smith, D.E.* 1987: The Everyday World as Problematic. A Feminist Sociology. – Boston

*Smith, D.E.* 2005: Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People. – New York

*Tilly, C.* 1998: Durable Inequality. – Berkeley

*van Ham, M.* and *P. Feijten* 2008: Who Wants to Leave the Neighbourhood? The Effect of Being Different from the Neighbourhood Population on Wishes to Move. – Environment and Planning A **40** (5): 1151-1170, doi:10.1068/a39179

*Vogelpohl, A.* 2014: Stadt der Quartiere? - In: *Schnur, O., D. Gebhardt* and *M. Drilling* (eds.): Quartierforschung zwischen Quartier und Praxis. – Wiesbaden: 59-76

*Wacquant, L.D.* 2016: A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus. – Sociological Review **64** (1): 64-72, doi:10.1111/1467-954X.12356

*Watt, P.* 2008: 'Underclass' and 'Ordinary People' Discourses. Representing/Re-Presenting Council Tenants in a Housing Campaign. – Critical Discourse Studies **5** (4): 345-357, doi:10.1080/17405900802405288

*Watt, P.* 2009: Living in an Oasis. Middle-Class Disaffiliation and Selective Belonging in an English Suburb. – Environment and Planning A **41** (12): 2874-2892

*Watt, P.* and *P. Smets* (eds.) 2014: Mobilities and Neighbourhood Belonging in Cities and Suburbs. – Basingstoke

*Wilson, J.Q.* and *G.L. Kelling* 1982: Broken Windows. – Atlantic Monthly **249** (3): 29-38

*Wu, Z., F. Hou* and *C.M. Schimmele* 2011: Racial Diversity and Sense of Belonging in Urban Neighborhoods. – City & Community **10** (4): 373-392, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6040.2011.01374.x