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# Geographical neighbourhood research

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## 1. Introduction

The era of neighbourhood as a self-explanatory concept seems to be a thing of the past. The trends of polarisation and segregation are all too evident in cities worldwide. And with the quest for appropriate solutions, the number of interventions at neighbourhood scale have increased. Nowadays, ‘neighbourhood’ is arguably “one of the central concepts of regulation and governance in the complex cities of today, which means that the clarification of its theoretical foundations and the discussion of its measures and implementations are key roles of urban policy” (Drilling and Schnur 2019a, without page numbers). The two-fold nature of geography as discipline and profession plays a particular role here. As a scientific discipline, geography analyses urban spaces, its shaping structures and processes, the people and actors, and its discourses and narratives. As a profession, with geography being primarily represented in the field of urban planning, the objective is to find solutions for today’s challenges. That neighbourhood research in geography is not well structured and interrelated between disciplines, which presents a scientific dilemma within this context.

This special issue aims to encourage a step forward towards a common understanding. In the first paper “Neighbourhood research from a geographical perspective” we, Drilling and Schnur, argue that there is a history and tradition of neighbourhood research that can be traced in geography. We derive our thesis from the early thinking of the Chicago School, in which geographers also played a role, contributing to its work. Geographical neighbourhood research has always been applied in its approach and was always related to the general debates in geography as a scientific discipline. It has thereby developed an independent understanding of neighbourhood, sophisticatedly related to the concepts and debates inherent in other disciplines such as sociology, economics and anthropology. We argue that geographic research on neighbourhood today has reached a strong position with a solid body of knowledge and experience, and has also surpassed the purely territorial understanding of neighbourhood. Neighbourhood in geography has come to be seen as a “framework for social interactions, as a place of emotional relationships and, more fundamentally, as a discursively dissolvable category” (Drilling and Schnur 2019b, in this issue, p. 48). The following contributions to this special issue shed light on selected aspects and illustrate the wealth of thought, both in

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relation to its theme and to the places where research is conducted. And we are particularly pleased that we were also able to engage colleagues from other disciplines that are in close exchange with geography.

## 2. The special issue foci

*Viggo Nordvik* and *George Galster*, who have been working on neighbourhood effects for many years, contribute to this issue with results from their Norwegian study. Under the title “Neighborhood variation in early adult educational outcomes: The case of Norway”, they promote an understanding of the interactions between neighbourhood, structure and individual. To this end, they evaluate data on the educational pathways of Norwegian pupils and, in particular, of siblings. Their methodological approach is perfectly suited to research on neighbourhood effects. From the registry information on all individuals born between 1986 and 1992 in Norway who are alive and had not emigrated before the age of 22, the authors selected approximately 120,000 siblings who they locate in neighbourhoods as they are officially defined. They then looked for the correlation between childhood neighbourhood exposure and two different educational outcomes in early adulthood. This territorial neighbourhood concept is the basis for the results: the educational pathways differ according to territorial patterns (towns, cities) but also according to categories such as gender or family composition (siblings, single parents, etc.). Neighbourhood effects are therefore always an interplay between contextual conditions and individual endowments and decisions. Or, in other words, “inequalities in early adulthood educational outcomes would probably feed into even stronger inequalities later in the life course of a cohort. This again may harm social cohesion” (*Nordvik and Galster 2019*, in this issue, p. 69).

*Gequn Feng* and *Fang Chen*'s contribution locates geographical neighbourhood research in a political-historical dimension. “Old wine in new skins? China's neighbourhood transformation from *danwei* to *shequ*” shows how political beliefs about how a community should function are translated into national programmes. Using the traditional *danwei* system as an example, the author shows that all areas of coexistence are organised by political bodies such as street committees or residential committees. The neighbourhood as an optimal unit becomes a spatial and physical representation of a model of community (in-

cluding behavioural control, surveillance of individual daily activities, and social welfare). And participation provides access to housing, medical care, and other basic needs. Accordingly, this is how neighbourhoods have been designed and organised. The opening up of China was accompanied by a rapid transformation of this vision, which was also followed by a new spatial organisation, for example by decentralising housing policy or by the fact that living no longer took place in the immediate vicinity of the workplace, or because home ownership was also granted and the individual preferences for living became spatially visible. “As a result, the *danwei* that bounded the former workers together has lost its model of working and living has collapsed” (*Chai 2014*, cited in *Feng and Chen 2019*, in this issue, p. 79). This was connected with a transformation of narratives about the neighbourhoods: *danwei* became *shequ* and thus an emphasis on the bottom-up society. But the *shequ* system is also subject to a political thrust, which is attempted via the mechanism of social integration used to counter the various crises and potential conflicts that are associated with privatisation processes. In this respect, the question remains whether the *shequ* system also follows the model of governing through community.

*Elke Schlack* and *Paulina Varas* offer their contribution to political geography. Neighbourhood is understood here as an arena, a contested space. In “Peripheral urbanization and the UNCTAD III building in Santiago, Chile: continuity and disruption in grassroots engagement”, based on *Lefebvre's* concept of ‘right to the city’, they describe which power structures unfold through neighbourhood development and how movements of citizens are founded, especially when they are formed from the disadvantaged neighbourhoods themselves. The authors thus show the theoretical path in geography from neighbourhood to place. The sovereignty of interpretation over urban spaces and places mobilises a wide variety of actors and enables the emergence of the grassroots movement. Their contribution is to uncover the hidden structures of power and the powerful, for what is occurring in one place of struggle is nothing other than “archipelago urbanism: the concentration of capital in desirable areas, driven by neo-liberal policies and alliances between corporations and mayor's offices, as cities jockey for position within the context of globalization and international competition” (*Schlack and Varas 2019*, in this issue, p. 88f.). Built in the 1970s, the UNCTAD building is symbolic of the right to the city and of more than 40 years of debates about space, and thus about the ques-

tion of what representations a city carries within itself, for whom it was produced, and which groups are among the winners and losers in the governance of the place. In the authors' interpretation, geographical neighbourhood research becomes a tracker in the production of space, its governance and the potential of co-processing the urban and the neighbourhood.

*Talja Blokland* enriches this special issue with a study that starts from the model of belonging and therefore has an understanding of neighbourhoods as a discursive structure. "‘They got a project mentality’: Theorizing neighborhood dis-identification and the paradox of belonging through the lens of ‘the Ghetto’" problematizes the widespread assumption that disadvantaged neighbourhoods can be characterised by a lack of belonging, identification and community. Decision-makers at all levels (including neighbourhood management) attach these narratives of scarcity to the people and then expect the inhabitants to behave the way they are discursively constructed. But the routines of everyday life – according to the author – by no means meet expectations. Rather, a coexistence and a simultaneity of feelings of belonging and non-identification can be assumed. This belonging and dis-belonging is always redefined and negotiated. The author illustrates this ‘de-facto community as urban practice’ in an American ‘ghetto’ in which she has conducted ethnographic research in a 240-unit housing complex for four years. There, she learned that some of the residents do not live mentally in the housing complex at all, that is, they separate themselves from their flatmates, although at the same time they share a daily life with them. For geographical neighbourhood research, these results point to a stronger dissolution of space and time than fixed categories; they help research to pay attention to situations and to rec-

ognise the inhabitant as an individual (instead of as a representative of a milieu or a social class). This also breaks up the doxa defined by the author with reference to *Bourdieu*: "the absence of neighbourhood identification, local belonging and community as problems" (*Blokland* 2019, in this issue, p. 102). Rather, identification and dis-identification, belonging and dis-belonging are simultaneous phenomena, and recognising this helps the post-positivist approaches in geography to regain topicality.

## References

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