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## **Place attachment and detachment of middle-class households in poor neighborhoods**

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This paper addresses a seeming anomaly to the ‘iron law’ in the housing market that social status is reflected in residential location: the continuing presence of middle-class households in many ‘poor’ neighborhoods in the Netherlands, where they constitute almost half of all households. So far, these middle-class households do not seem to retreat into middle-class enclaves in order to distinguish and insulate themselves from others, as has been described by Atkinson (2006) and Savage et al (2005). So why do these residents associate themselves with neighborhoods that have a relatively low social status and are constructed as ‘poor’ and ‘problematic’ in policy discourse? To address this question, in-depth interviews were held with middle-class residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Amsterdam and The Hague. The study found that most residents had developed different disaffiliative strategies to deal with the low status and problematic aspects of their neighborhood. On the one hand, they validate their residential choice through a value-for-money discourse and by downplaying the negative neighborhood reputation, while at the same time avoiding the neighborhood in everyday life in sometimes extreme ways.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, urban scholars have paid substantial attention to the ‘rediscovery’ of the city by middle-class households and the associated processes of gentrification. At the same time, Atkinson (2006) argues that this has not resulted in mixed neighborhoods as a result of the socially selective nature of the embracing of the central city. Rather, urban middle-class residents increasingly distance themselves from more marginalized groups in the city by retreating into middle-class enclaves. This process of disaffiliation is said to be the driving force behind socio-spatial segregation, whereby different class segments in the city increasingly lead separate lives in separate places (Atkinson, 2008). Disaffiliation of middle-class residents is thought to have both a symbolic and a practical component. On the one hand, it reflects the need of the urban middle-class to distinguish themselves from ‘others’ through their consumption of housing and its residential setting, whereby specific neighborhoods provide symbolic capital and a source of identity (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001; Savage, Barlow, et al., 2005; Watt, 2009). On the other hand, it reflects a more practical need of residents in the city to protect themselves from the dangers of the street (Atkinson, 2006) and to guarantee access to high quality services and institutions (Bridge, 2006).

This paper addresses a seeming anomaly to the described middle-class residential practices in cities, but from a social mix policy perspective very interesting phenomenon: the continuing presence of middle-class residents in low income neighborhoods in the Netherlands. A recent study showed that middle-class households form on average 52 % of all households in ‘disadvantaged’ neighborhoods that are part of the national urban restructuring program. Moreover, middle-class households do not leave these areas *en masse* and when they do leave, they are replaced by residents with similar social positions

(Wittebrood and Permentier, 2011). Nevertheless, these neighborhoods form the lowest tier of the housing market in Dutch cities (Permentier, Ham, et al., 2009) and they can be seen as a potential source of a 'spoiled identity' (Allen, Powell, et al., 2007). This paper therefore explores why current middle-class residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Amsterdam and The Hague 'buy into' these neighborhoods and how they 'manage' the potential problem of spoiled identity. The paper discusses the ways in which residents relate to and engage with their residential surroundings in order to explore three possible explanations for these residents' residential practices, focusing on more subtle forms of disaffiliation *within* the neighborhood, alternative discourses to the need for distinction through neighborhood exclusivity and processes of place attachment.

### **Alternative explanations**

First, while disaffiliation in extreme forms might result in segregation, a number of studies have shown that more subtle forms of disaffiliative behavior can also occur *in place*. For example, in a recent study on selective belonging in an English suburb, Watt (2009) demonstrates how middle-class residents draw symbolic boundaries at the micro-level between their own private housing estate and the surrounding low-status areas of council housing, creating split images of 'us' versus 'them' in the neighborhood and dis-identifying with the council housing estate. These spatial boundaries overlap with social boundaries between themselves and 'local' poor, working-class residents. In such a way, the middle-class residents in Watt's study solve with the unpleasant association with the adjacent council housing estates through processes of othering and stigmatization at the neighborhood-level, as has also been described in gentrification studies (Butler and Robson, 2003). Moreover, Watt describes how middle-class residents also disengage "in their everyday social practices from 'local' people and places" (p.2890), for example by avoiding neighborhood settings in the field of consumption and education. Similar forms of functional disengagement from the neighborhood has been found in a number of Dutch studies of middle-class residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods, who have been recently restructured (Kleinhans, 2009; Van Beckhoven and Van Kempen, 2003; Van Eijk, 2010, Veldboer, 2009).

A second explanation for the continuing presence of middle-class residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in The Netherlands might be that they engage in different discourse than the discourse of social distinction through place. Several studies have reported alternative discourses with respect to middle-class residential choice that lead to other residential outcomes in terms of location and neighborhood quality. In the previously mentioned study by Watt (2009), middle-class residents in the private housing estate use an alternative discourse of quality-for-money to validate their residential choice for a location close to a disreputable council housing estate. They thus compromise the lower symbolic capital of the neighborhood for a higher housing and area quality. In another study by Allen et al. (2007) residents in an indistinctive suburban neighborhood, where social renters form elements of spoiled identities, use a similar discourse of value-for-money to explain their residential choice. These residents do not buy into this neighborhood because they are looking for distinction, but because they are more oriented towards inconspicuous consumption or the "conformism of suburbia". In speaking about their neighborhood, they therefore emphasize the ordinariness of neighborhood to negate its low social status. Both

their value-for-money discourse and the tendency towards inconspicuous consumption are strongly associated with to their marginal middle-class position. In contrast, Van Eijk (2010) focuses on another alternative discourse in a recent study in an ethnically mixed neighborhood in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands. The choice of middle-class residents for this neighborhood can be understood as an expression of their lifestyle, even if the neighborhood itself has neither a particularly distinctive reputation. For these members of the 'new urban middle-class', diversity forms an asset for shaping their social identity as it reflects their values of inclusion and integration (Butler and Robson, 2003).

A third and final explanation for the large share of middle-class households in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the Netherlands might be that the unfavorable neighborhood attributes are compensated by residents' attachment to their neighborhood (Lee, Oroposa, et al., 1994). A distinction can be made between an attitudinal or emotional dimension in terms of a sense of belonging and feeling at home (Blokland, 2003) and a behavioral dimension (Woldoff, 2002). This behavioral component of attachment includes residents' social ties to the neighborhood, such as relationships with neighbors as well as friends and relatives who might live in the area. It can also include the degree to which residents' time-space trajectories overlap with their neighborhood through economic ties in terms of employment or other business activities and ties to local institutions such as schools or religious institutions. Both dimensions of neighborhood attachment are thought to reduce residents' desire to relocate. However, note that this explanation for residential choice conflicts with the previously discussed findings by Watt (2009) and Dutch studies on neighborhood attachment of middle-class newcomers in recently restructured areas.

## **Research**

A qualitative study was undertaken amongst current and former residents of restructuring neighborhoods in Amsterdam and The Hague. In-depth interviews were held with 59 middle-class residents, 30 of whom currently reside in restructuring neighborhoods and 19 residents who have moved from a restructuring neighborhood. These neighborhoods constitute so-called 'problem areas' that are part of a national urban policy program aimed at tackling social deprivation and liveability problems in a limited number of neighborhood (Gent, Musterd, et al., 2009). The interviews included questions about respondents' neighborhood and housing choice, moving intentions, residential satisfaction, perceptions of the neighborhood and neighborhood attachment. Although all respondents live in a restructuring area, this is not a perfect 'proxy' for living in a 'problem area': 11 respondents lived in what can be seen as middle-class enclaves, which were clearly physically separated from adjacent 'problem' areas by either waterways, parks or roads. These interviews are nevertheless incorporated in this paper, because – as will be discussed in more detail below – these enclaves form part of a larger neighborhood that carries a certain stigma as a restructuring area that these respondents struggle with.

Two thirds of the respondents are home-owners. The average length of residence is almost 10 years. Most respondents have a job and partners often work as well. In terms of class positioning, the majority of the respondents hold intermediate white-collar jobs, such as executive secretary, nurse, administrative employee in a hospital, ICT-employee, elementary school teacher, supervisor in construction companies or owner of a small business. A much smaller of respondents group hold higher managerial or professional jobs,

which would require a university degree rather than professional training and could be typified as 'new middle-class'. 7 respondents has recently retired or on temporary sick leave. Half of the respondents is single, 9 respondents are part of a couple without kids, and 15 respondents have children. A third of the respondents is of minority background.

### **Neighborhood choice and emotional attachment**

Despite their diverse backgrounds and residential history as well as their different residential settings, most respondents moved into their neighborhood for the favorable price/location ratio. As a female respondent explains: "*we wanted a newly-built apartment and these apartments are affordable compared to the number of square meters. You get a lot for little. It's a good price/quality ration*". Another resident of Turkish descent discusses the value-for-money in relation to his old neighborhood explains: "*If I could have afforded it, I would have bought something there. But this is much more reasonably priced.... For the price of this apartment, I wouldn't have been able to get a bigger apartment there than what I had before as a renter. There wouldn't have been a point...* ". This value-for-money perspective refers both to the size of the apartment and to the relative location within the urban region. In the more peripheral post-war neighborhoods this refers to the relative location to highways around the city. In more centrally located pre-war neighborhoods appreciate the favorable relative location to the city center. In addition, this value-for-money motive for neighborhood choice was described by some respondents as a first step in their housing career. Specifically so-called 'starters' in the job market, living in a restructuring area was seen as a temporary stepping stone to get into the housing market and as a smart investment, because the high rents in the private rental sector would be "*throwing away your money*".

Besides the favorable relative location and housing prices, the neighborhood setting was rarely mentioned in these stories as a factor that might play a role in their moving decision, as if the place itself didn't matter. In fact, some respondents explicitly state that they are "*just not a neighborhood person*". Few respondents indicate that they feel particularly attached to the area. A much heard response to the question whether they felt 'at home' was "*I would feel at home anywhere*" or "*Well... feeling at home... it's just that I am familiar with this*". This sense of familiarity is not as strong as a sense of home or belonging. Respondents do not describe it as a form of emotional attachment, but rather as a form of practical attachment, such as knowing how get from home to work or other places in the city or knowing the nearest post office. Belonging is thus described in a more practical sense from the perspective of everyday routines.

The neighborhood is thus mostly seen as an operating base for leading one's life in the city. A 30-year old young professional explains: "*Not at home in the sense that I have lots of contact with neighbors, for example. It's not like we constantly greet each other or visit for coffee. That's what it's like in my parents' neighborhood. But, yes, I feel at home in the sense that I like living downtown in a big city, in a lively area. But that's much bigger than just the neighborhood*".

### **Describing the neighborhood: "It's not as bad as it seems"**

In short, the respondents talk about their relationship with the neighborhood as indifferent or as a non-issue. As a 32-year old female residents of Turkish descent sums up: "*it's a*

*place to reside, not to live*". Nevertheless, most respondents are very aware of the negative reputation of their neighborhood and have been confronted with this in different ways in their own lives. One respondent in Amsterdam describes his discomfort about his neighborhoods' reputation when a colleague came for a visit: *"his first question was: 'is it okay to park my car here? Because I have heard some bad stories about X-town'. That's what it's like here. The name of this place haunts you... If you say that you live in the Newtown [the entire district], they go 'oh you mean X-town' with a note of discordance"*. Respondents describe how conversations such as these with friends and relatives have over the years cause respondents to feel discomfort about their neighborhood, even if they are not necessarily dissatisfied with their residential situation. What stands out is that many respondents feel that the status of 'problem neighborhood' is associated to the influx of ethnic minority residents, at least by the outside world. They also mention on the neighborhood stigma associated with being appointed as a restructuring area.

Respondents have developed different ways of downplaying the neighborhoods reputation. First, many respondents emphasize that the discrepancy between actual problems and perceptions about the neighborhood. Some respondents in fact experience little social and physical disorder in their direct surroundings, because they live away from problem hotspots. This also becomes apparent in the spatial boundaries that these residents draw between their direct surroundings and the larger neighborhoods, which they often describe as a 'neighborhood inside a neighborhood'. A resident in a post-war neighborhood in The Hague positions her own apartment building at the edge of the neighborhood to apartment buildings a few streets over: *"These apartments were more pricy, not the cheapest of the cheapest. So you don't see tokkie's [Dutch slang for white trash] here, if I may use that term. You know, people who don't care about anyone else, who walk around cursing and yelling or threaten to cut your head off... you don't see that here"*. The drawing of such boundaries between 'better' and 'bad' places in the neighborhood take place at the very micro-level, whereby respondents might be pointing to a flat across the street, distinctions that would be invisible to most outsiders but that clearly carry a weight of meaning for the respondents themselves.

These spatial boundaries between one's own residential surroundings and the rest of the neighborhoods overlap with social boundaries. Many respondents first describe the 'other' in ethnic terms. However, this distinction between minority and native Dutch is often corrected by respondents after the first complaints: the difference is not necessarily one of ethnicity, because many respondents have neighbors of minority background *"who are hard-working people with a mortgage, just like us"* (a residents from Westtown, The Hague). On reflection, respondents describe it as a difference in between decent people and people who are inconsiderate towards other residents and display improper behavior, ranging from letting their children play outside too late and talking too loud to harassment or criminal activities. A resident in an apartment building in pre-war Greentown in Amsterdam explains: *"In this apartment complex we have Surinamese and Iranian neighbors, but they don't bother us. We say hello in the elevator, smile... it's those others out there that ruin the neighborhood"*.

Another way in which respondents downplay the problematic nature and low social status of their own residential surroundings is by comparing their own neighborhood to a handful of 'real' problem areas in the two cities. A respondent from a post-war

restructuring neighborhood in The Hague describes how her neighborhood is not nearly as bad as others: *"I used to live in Marketville, so I know how low you can go. Anywhere else was a step up"*. Another respondent in The Hague describes his impression of the same neighborhood: *"some people just throw the trash from the balcony onto the streets. You really don't want to be found dead in the place."* Most respondents, however, don't base their descriptions of these 'other' neighborhoods on personal experience, but on the same media items and hearsay they have criticized with respect to the stigmatization of own neighborhood, thereby reproducing these stigmas of other places.

Finally, residents downplay the problems in their neighborhood by describing how problems in the neighborhood are not necessarily problems of the neighborhood. Social and physical disorder are seen part of city life that might be encountered anywhere. One respondent in a pre-war neighborhood in Amsterdam says: *"Every neighborhood has something. But if you live somewhere, you get used to your surroundings and the things going on there. Every neighborhood has a good side and a downside. Residents thus describe their neighborhood as ordinary, similar to the respondents of Allen et al (2007), although 'ordinary' is described from an urban perspective rather than a suburban one.*

### **Everyday life: avoidance and coping strategies**

In talking about their neighborhood, the different respondents thus emphasize that it is not so bad. Most respondents, in fact, conclude that they like living where they do *"just fine"*. In their everyday life, most respondents spend hardly any time in the neighborhood. As 40-year old residents in a post-war neighborhood in Amsterdam explains: *"I work a lot, so I am not home much. So do I spend a lot of time in the neighborhood? Not really... I live here [laughs] but that's about it"*. Most residents indicate that the neighborhood plays a marginal role in their free time. Their friends live elsewhere, they often shop elsewhere and they go into town for dinner. However, for many respondents this detachment from the neighborhood in daily life is not merely a side effect of their daily activity pattern or the lack of adequate services and shops in the area, an issue which is discussed extensively by many. Their detachment is actively maintained through concrete practices.

This can be illustrated by the interview with a female residents in of Hindustani-Surinamese origin. At the start of the interview she describes her relationship with her neighborhood as neutral: *"Well, I'll tell you honestly... I am more of an indoor person. I work, I come home, I don't need to be best friends with my neighbors. I am just a homebody. I like to relax at home after a long day of work. And it's a nice house. So, I mean, about the neighborhood... I don't have much to say about it either way"*. However, throughout the interview her ambivalence towards the neighborhood becomes clear. She gives examples of being scared on the street, her husband being intimidated near the ATM-machine and of her teenage son being harassed by local youths of Moroccan and Turkish origin. She describes how her son starts running as soon as he gets off the tram, because he is scared of those youths and how she has changed her way of walking through the neighborhood, assuming a 'don't mess with me' attitude.

Although this might be a somewhat extreme example, other respondents, who similarly present themselves as being indifferent to the neighborhood and describe their neighborhood as *"just fine"*, recount a variety of strategies to avoid coming into contact with the less savory side of local social life. For example, one form of avoidance is related

to care. Respondents describe that they park “*just across the street*” so that they “*only have a short distance to walk*” or because they drive straight into the parking garage of their apartment building. These apartment buildings are often described as fortresses. A resident in a newly constructed high-rise apartment building in pre-war Greentown in Amsterdam explains that she feels quite at home: “*You know, we’re up high, it’s not like they can break in. I am safe here. Our apartment is burglarproof and I don’t let anyone in. So I feel safe, even if the neighborhood is not safe*”.

When they do have to cross the neighborhood, respondents have developed strategies on how to avoid conflict. One respondent, who recently moved away from a post-war restructuring neighborhood in Amsterdam, explains that she didn’t mind the fact that the neighborhood is largely minority, but “*it is just a little troublesome in the evening, when I got home by myself. It didn’t matter if they [men of muslim background] were 6 or 60, every time someone bothered me. So I started wearing a headscarf, and they would leave me alone. My boyfriend got very angry about that, but it helped, so who cares? I just put it on when I got off the tram and took it off when I got home*”. Other respondents describe that walking a dog helped them feel safe. A former male resident of Greentown in Amsterdam: “*The last few years things really went downhill. I didn’t feel at ease, especially in the evenings. [...] those kids hanging around on the benches in front of our house. Drinking, smoking up. But if I took the dog, it was fine... they would jump off, because they are scared of dogs. They [ethnic minorities] all are*”.

Current residents describe such strategies as being streetwise (Anderson, 1990). Many respondents refer to a process of ‘getting used’ to how things work in the neighborhood and navigating through the neighborhood accordingly. From this perspective, the interviews with former residents were particularly interesting, because they describe this process of habitation most explicitly. The contrast between their previous restructuring neighborhood and their current neighborhood has made movers reconsider their perceptions about their old neighborhood. It was ‘fine’ when they lived there, but they realize now how much they had adapted to their surroundings. As one former resident explains “*West End is getting more and more deprived. If I come there now, to visit a friend... it’s horrible. I think to myself, how did we manage to stay for so long?*”.

## **Discussion**

The question addressed in this paper is how we can understand the continuing presence of middle-class residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Dutch cities, as a form of disaffiliation *in place*, as part of a particular middle-class discourse about the social significance of housing, or as an expression of residential attachment. What stands out in the interviews is the difference in how on the one hand middle-class residents in restructuring areas talk about their neighborhood as ‘not as bad as it seems’ and how they evaluate their neighborhood as ‘just fine’, and on the other hand how they relate to the neighborhood in daily life and distance themselves from neighborhood through discursive and sociospatial practices.

In terms of emotional attachment and sense of belonging, the dominant response seems to be one of indifference. Respondents do not show a strong sense of solidarity with the neighborhood (Veldboer, 2010) or seem to appreciate its diversity as a reflection of a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Eijk, 2010), as has been suggested in studies on mixed

neighborhoods. On the other hand, only a few of the residents show outright criticism or rejection of the neighborhood. Many respondents are quick to differentiate between their direct surroundings as a pleasant place to live and the rest of the neighborhood as problematic. To some degree, such distinctions are based on the fact that their residences are often sheltered from hotspots of social or physical disorder. However, these same discursive practices of drawing socio-spatial boundaries within the neighborhood and comparison to other stigmatized neighborhoods are used by residents who live in the middle of these hotspots. These sociospatial boundaries are drawn at the very micro-level. Moreover, in their daily lives respondents disengage from the neighborhood in their daily activity patterns. When they do move through the neighborhood, they employ different strategies to avoid getting into trouble, suggesting that at least in some cases social and physical disorder are experienced as threatening and serious.

This contradiction between describing personal indifference to the neighborhood, downplaying the problematic nature of these neighborhoods and the strategic avoidance of neighborhood spaces are intriguing. Clearly, the respondents in this study are managing the spoiled identity of their neighborhood by disaffiliating *in place* through both discursive and socio-spatial practices. They validate their residential choice through a value-for-money discourse and some residents, specifically young urban professionals, also present their residential choice as a temporary investment at the start of their housing career. This discourse clearly differs from the discourse of distinction associated with gentrification and centrally located middle class neighborhoods. An explanation might be that the majority of respondents do not fall into the category of new urban middle-class, but rather as 'middle' middle-class or 'marginal' middle-class as described by Allen et al (2007). For these residents, residential setting does not provide a similar source of distinction or social status. Rather, they consume the favorable housing prices and convenient location and otherwise disassociate from the neighborhood as much as possible.

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