

## Permeability of Low Income Neighbourhoods

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One of the major debates in the context of urban cohesion focuses on so-called context effects: Living in deprived areas can have negative effects on the life chances of inhabitants (Galster et al., 2010). Empirically, however, it is still unclear *to what extent* the spatial context (the neighbourhood) influences the economic and social prospects of local residents. The degree of permeability of a neighbourhood, in terms of residents' access to external resources, therefore seems to be an important clue to the power of neighbourhood-related contextual effects. The context or *foci* of interaction outside the neighbourhood might be an important resource to strengthen the functional, social and symbolic integration of the local population. Nevertheless, the bridging potential of networks of residents outside their neighbourhood is still insufficiently explored in urban research. Nor do approaches to neighbourhood renewal focus appropriately on such external or inter-neighbourhood linkages.

The underlying research question is: Which linkages outside disadvantaged neighbourhoods (looking at the context of the city and beyond) have such a bridging power? Interactions and institutions governing trans-neighbourhood movements or interactions are discussed at three different levels. First, we look at individual or group networks within the city, second, the bridging power of local institutions such as schools is discussed, and finally, discourses on the neighbourhood which contribute to either the strengthening or weakening of existing boundaries are explored.

### **Introduction and outline of the problem**

Various studies, especially in the US-American context, indicate the disadvantaging effects of disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Galster, 2008). Although empirical findings suggest neighbourhood effects in the USA (see for an overview Dietz, 2002), equivalent effects in Europe are to date unclear and are thought to be slight (Schönwälder, 2007; Doff, 2010; see for critical discussion: Farwick, 2009; van Ham et al., 2012). What is, however, clear, is that particularly disadvantaged districts are usually characterised by a high proportion of immigrants (Friedrichs and Triemer, 2008; Doff, 2010). Thus immigrants are especially affected by spatially concentrated poverty.

The influence of place of residence on the likelihood of inclusion forms an important background to neighbourhood-based renewal in European cities. The need for spatially focused policies is also confirmed in the fifth cohesion report of the European Commission (EC, 2010b, p.187). In Germany as in other countries (e.g. the

Netherlands, France and the USA), the social mixing of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is a programme objective (Münch, 2009; Beauftragte der Bundesregierung, 2007, p.113; Doff, 2010, p.4). It is thought that the presence of middle-class households in these neighbourhoods will have a “healing” effect.

But why are the results of investigations into context effects in European and also in American cities not always clear-cut and, indeed, at times even contradictory? Lupton (2003) mentions a number of factors that complicate measurements and evaluations in this field. First, the measurement of neighbourhood-related contextual effects is influenced by the choice of spatial investigative unit: the results of analysis can be expected to vary with the choice of spatial scale (e.g. the block, the neighbourhood, the district). Farwick (2009) emphasises, for instance, the significance of the immediate neighbourhood for the effective measurement of the formation of networks and intercultural contacts. Second, the effects are more or less pronounced according to the group being observed, particularly the social positions and ethnic origins of residents are of relevance here (Galster et al., 2010). The “sensitivity” of individuals and groups to the parameters of the neighbourhood thus varies.

Particularly households of higher social position are less restricted to their proximities in the structuring of their everyday life (Savage et al., 2005). Such spatial differentiations in practices have been empirically proven in the work of Wellman (1979) using the example of individual networks. It can thus be assumed that residents use individual “bridges” into other spatial contexts to access resources and to compensate for the disadvantaging effects of the neighbourhood. In the US-American context, Zelinsky and Lee (1998) discuss the “heterolocalism” of migrants, expressed in social and spatial multi-situatedness.

In addition to these processes of boundary crossing and bridging *out* of the neighbourhood, various pieces of research show that residents construct small-scale boundaries and practise processes of social distinction *within* the neighbourhood. Empirical studies have thus contributed to a “disenchantment” with mixing strategies by demonstrating the existence within neighbourhoods of these small-scale separate worlds of residents of differing social positions (Atkinson, 2006; Watt, 2009). These small-scale dissociation processes can mean that even when households of higher social position reside in a neighbourhood they do not necessarily compensate for neighbourhood effects.

In addition to the composition of the population of a neighbourhood and the “granularity” of the mixture there are thus other factors to consider when evaluating context effects. In this paper we argue that residents’ bridging to the outside and their construction of boundaries within are important indications of the permeability of neighbourhoods and thus the strength of neighbourhood effects.

### **Permeability of neighbourhoods: constructing boundaries and bridges**

The concept of the **permeability** of neighbourhood boundaries refers to the simultaneousness of **boundaries** and **bridges**. The permeability of neighbourhood

boundaries can vary with direction, point in time, individual or group of individuals. The construction of boundaries on the one hand, and boundary crossing using bridges out of the neighbourhood (or, alternatively, into the neighbourhood) on the other hand, can provide indications of the “permeability” of neighbourhood boundaries. This perspective can creatively augment the analysis of neighbourhood-related contextual effects.

The proportion of disadvantaged residents in an urban district thus only provides limited information about the chances of integration for its inhabitants. Neighbourhoods with comparable proportions of immigrants and disadvantaged population groups (measured according to the proportion of recipients of transfer payments) can take on quite different functions in the urban context. They may be an arrival and orientation space, a transit space for the mobile, or a place to stay for the mobile and immobile. The resources available to the residents of a neighbourhood are, we argue, significantly influenced by the degree of permeability of a neighbourhood. We therefore supplement and broaden the analysis of neighbourhood effects with discourses on physical, social or symbolic boundaries and bridging.

### ***Boundaries and the construction of boundaries***

*“Neighbourhoods often have sharp boundaries, either physical or atmospheric, but the layers of neighbourhood life are like an onion with a tight core and a loose outer skin” (Power and Wilson, 2000, p.1)*

Of interest for our research is the perception of boundaries and the process by which the boundaries are produced and reproduced (bordering) or changed (boundary change: Tilly, 2004a). Individuals move around in a complex web of “hierarchical borders” (Newman, 2003, p.22) and play with numerous group affiliations and identities. In the context of boundary studies Newman (2003, p.20) recommends examining “bottom up” processes in the sense of the everyday practices of residents of neighbourhoods and “top down” processes focusing on the role of institutional actors. Newman draws attention to various levels of analysis for boundaries. As well as examining physical boundaries and the perception of boundaries from the residents’ perspective, he suggests considering the significance of semantics (discourses, representations, images, story-telling). Finally he mentions the so-called “management mechanisms” that structure boundaries through forms of governance and institutions and distributions of power.

The production and reproduction of boundaries is thus based on the attitudes and actions of different actors, networks, institutions and media discourse (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Zerubavel, 1991, 1996; Newman, 2003). These are included in our research design in the dimensions *institutional*, *social* and *symbolic* bordering and further developed with reference to their respective physical-spatial dimensions.

Boundaries, however, have two sides. Thus in line with the perspective taken, they do not always act in a limiting fashion. Boundaries simplify the overall view and aid orientation. In the same way, social boundaries are also drawn by individuals, helping them to orientate themselves in urban space. Simmel (1995/1903) points out

that the blasé and distant attitude typical of city dwellers enable them to live together in a heterogenic urban space. Bordering is thus particularly important for individuals in heterogenic contexts. A broadly based investigation from the Netherlands also indicates the significance of small-scale boundaries *within* neighbourhoods for the explanation of middle-classes remaining in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Wittebrood and Permentier, 2011).

Living in such districts thus seems to be possible for many middle-class households because they develop an emotional distance to the local problems and demonstrate little loyalty to the neighbourhood. The study from the Netherlands mentioned above establishes that the importance of upwardly social mobile and middle-class households for districts needing renewal should not be overestimated. Interestingly, the investigation discovered differing trends. Considering residents of Netherlands origin, it was primarily middle and higher income households that moved out of neighbourhoods needing renewal, while middle income households with an immigration background moved into these neighbourhoods (following appropriate urban renewal measures).

Boundaries can also create space for interactions. At boundaries transition zones and borderlands can develop, offering opportunities for contact and forums for exchange and interaction. This dimension should also be taken into account.

### ***Bridges out of the neighbourhood context***

Decisions by households on where to locate emerge from the interaction between external framework conditions (the housing market is especially relevant here), and the resources and preferences of the household itself. That an individual resides in one particular neighbourhood does not, however, necessarily mean that the action spaces of that individual are primarily oriented on the neighbourhood space (Pinkster, 2007). As early as 1935 the psychologist couple Muchow and Muchow used the differentiation between “spaces of action” and “spaces of possibility” to draw attention to the difference between the space *in which a person lives* (the allocated space of possibilities), the space that the person *experiences* (the space of actual experiences, influenced by the individual’s biography) and the space *that the person lives* (in the sense of behavioural use dependent on range of movement). These multiple “spaces of possibility” are differently formed by individuals according to their resources, preferences and external restrictions (Muchow and Muchow, 1998).

In particular, people in higher social positions find themselves interacting in multiple spatial contexts (from inner-city to transcontinental) (Savage et al., 2005). Savage et al. differentiate between, on the one hand, situative belonging in the context of daily routines and everyday practices and, on the other hand, closer bridging linkages, for instance to “best friends”, that may also be located outside the individual’s neighbourhood. These linkages of inhabitants beyond the neighbourhood boundaries are also important for explaining their local sense of belonging: “Most residents talk about their local belonging in terms of the connections which it allows with other places and its convenience for everyday life” (Savage et al., 2005, p.204).

Based on the understanding of bridging and bordering described here, the following section focuses on the refinement of possible research questions and discusses dimensions of analysis for the permeability of neighbourhoods.

### **Initial considerations for the investigation of permeability**

The significance of boundaries within neighbourhoods and bridges leading outside them brings us to the question of the *permeability* of neighbourhoods. We assume that households of higher social position remain particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are characterised by permeability to the outside.

The permeabilities and boundaries of a neighbourhood can be observed and investigated from various perspectives. Alba and Nee (2004, p.29) point out that boundaries gain significance only through the perceptions and everyday practices of individuals and groups: “The effect of a social boundary is to mark a categorical distinction that the members of a society take into account in their everyday activities and on which they align their orientations and behaviour (...) Such boundary constructions aid orientation and at the same time contribute to the ignorance of each group about the real living conditions of the others”. It thus seems worthwhile examining the permeability of a neighbourhood from the perspective of the individual, his or her everyday practices and affiliations. This shows which boundaries are relevant for the structuring of the everyday life of residents of the neighbourhood, for their social mobility and also for their group affiliations and spatial belonging.

It seems important to capture in more detail the spheres of action and multiple situatedness of individuals both outside and within the neighbourhood. Our line of argument is thus based on an understanding of space in which space emerges “as the result of the human capacity for synthesis, as a kind of synopsis of the individual ‘places’ through which the locally divided is brought together in a simultaneous connection, in a spatial framework” (Läpple, 1991, p.37).

In the first place, the intention is to empirically investigate, from the perspective of individuals/households, which bridging and bordering is undertaken by people of higher social position in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Our thesis is: The continued presence of middle-class households is distinguished by characteristics of bridging *out* of the neighbourhood and bordering *within* the neighbourhood.

- Households of higher social position that remain in disadvantaged neighbourhoods exploit resources outside the neighbourhood and so can individually compensate for the disadvantaging effects of the neighbourhood. Their bridging and also their experience of boundaries give important indications to the permeability of the neighbourhood.
- The continued presence of households of higher social position in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is accompanied by small-scale processes of dissociation from other social groups. In this way their individual resources

are of little benefit to other residents and the extent to which neighbourhood effects are cushioned by their continued presence is limited.

Expressed in somewhat exaggerated terms, this could be said to mean that only the dissociation within and the bridging out of the neighbourhood can explain the continued local presence of middle-class households. How though are pertinent findings on the practice and perception of individuals to be gathered so as to give indications about the permeability of neighbourhood boundaries? In our opinion it is worthwhile considering three different analytical levels. The permeability of neighbourhoods can:

- be institutionally anchored (e.g. through an international school, through a firm's network, through the accessibility of various submarkets on the housing market),
- be individual in nature (in the form of action spaces, networks of friends or family), or also
- be symbolic or discursive, acting upon groups and spaces in the form of boundary constructions.

These three aspects are further differentiated and specified in the following discussion.

### *Institutional contexts*

Institutional contexts can significantly promote the social upwards mobility of residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In particular, educational institutions with their accessibility and quality influence the systemic integration and social inclusion of residents. Thus the international studies of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) reveal that academic success in Germany is more closely associated with social origin than in all other participating countries (Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, 2010). Especially students with immigration backgrounds from socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, who often live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, are impacted by these deficits (Baur and Häussermann, 2009).

Educational institutions thus support residents in their social participation and functional integration – or through their structures and mechanisms can exclude groups or individuals. Indications for the permeability of neighbourhood boundaries can therefore also be captured through institutionalised forms of bridging or, indeed, exclusion. The accessibility of such structures is influenced not only by spatial accessibility but also by knowledge about such facilities and the “felt” permeability.

Educational institutions as institutional contexts play a key role not only for permeability in the functional sphere (individual social mobility). They are also significant for social interactions. Educational institutions play an important part in the process of communitisation of children and parents. Empirical work by Savage et al. (2005) shows that in the course of starting a family new coalitions and groups are formed and that educational institutions can take on a binding or a dividing function

here. Watt (2009, p.18) demonstrates that the educational orientation of family households is a key driver for moving to suburban districts. How then do middle-class households that remain in the neighbourhood choose the appropriate educational institution?

Wellman and Wortley (1990) also confirm the significance of contacts made in the context of school, work and free-time. These contexts have a particular quality for contact-making because they enable regularity, so that a routine can develop in the meetings or exchanges. Such contacts are more than occasional chance encounters, and they also offer an important basis for testing images of the other, and thus for the symbolic construction of boundaries or permeabilities (see further discussion below).

In addition to the institutional accesses that neighbourhood residents exploit outside their neighbourhood, it is also important to discover how accessible and attractive institutions such as schools or also other infrastructure/meeting places *in* the neighbourhood are for visitors from the outside. Which institutions in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are regularly sought out by actors that live outside the urban district in question?

### *Social networks*

A further factor influencing the context effects of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is the form of the social networks of its residents. In particular, the significance of networks that extend beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood should be more closely investigated. Wacquant (1998, p.27) points out that a concentration of social networks *in* disadvantaged neighbourhoods can hinder or even prevent the upward social mobility of residents: “Ties that bind and keep you down”. Filsinger (2010, p.23) also observes the danger for inhabitants of segregated districts of a long-term limitation of social circles to their place of residence: “It is decisive whether enough exchange relations exist to allow linkages to be made”.

Granovetter (1973) draws attention to the particular strength of “weak ties” that offer residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods important support, allowing them to access information that is outside the reach of their own peer group. These networks extend beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood and are associated with bridging capital: “They are wide ranging and are likely to serve as bridges across social boundaries” (Blokland and Noordhoff, 2008, p.107). Bridging is also in this context dynamic. The production or change of social boundaries is a central part of social interactions: “People everywhere organize a significant part of their social interaction around the formation, transformation, activation, and suppression of social boundaries” (Tilly, 2004a, p.213).

It is thus meaningful to investigate the bridging and/or bordering strength of individual networks in disadvantaged districts. Middle-class households are judged to possess particular strength in this context. The bridging character of such social networks can also create social corridors between places and spaces: “Just as places are connected to other places through the organisation of a network of the imaginary, so one’s network of best friends connects you to other places” (Savage, 2005, p.151).

Early network analyses (see Wellmann, 1979) already confirmed the increasing differentiation of the spatial and social relations of households, a differentiation that went hand in hand with developments in communication and transport. Nauck (1988) argues, for instance, that ethnic concentrations and close access to family networks has little significance for the choice of place of residence for migrants to German cities. Farwick (2009, p.225) similarly draws attention to the declining coherence of local social community. This thus opens up the possibility that the importance of spatial proximity to ethnic neighbourhoods with their infrastructure, sites of crystallisation and chances of contact may be disappearing.

Schnur also refers to forms of individual networks that cross neighbourhood boundaries. He calls neighbourhoods “Fuzzy Places” in recognition of their indistinctness: networks are both “a bit inside” - in the form of neighbourhood contacts - and at the same time “a bit outside” - in the form of, for instance, transnational social networks (Schnur, 2008, p.41). From a network perspective neighbourhoods can thus be described as “clusters in the rather sparse, loosely bounded structures of urbanites’ total networks” (Wellman and Leighton, 1979, p.385).

Network theory is a good way to approach the question of which contacts a person maintains, how these are shaped, and where they are spatially located. The significance of neighbourhood for social relationships is discussed in three polarised models (see Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Hennig, 2007). Thus the “decline of community” thesis argues that neighbourhood has limited significance for the existence or creation of social contacts. In contrast, the “community saved” thesis states that the neighbourhood is still of great value for social contacts. The wish for social control and the self-selection of households into certain neighbourhoods leads to the survival of “community” (see Pahl, 1991). Finally, the “community liberated” thesis suggests that primary relationships are still of great significance but that these are no longer embedded in localised “communities”. Wellman and Wortley find proof for this third thesis: “Routine contact at work and the widespread use of automobiles and public transit mean that people do not have to live nearby to see each other often” (Wellman and Wortley, 1990, p.568).

### *Symbolic bordering and permeabilities*

The third analysis dimension that can provide indications of the permeability of neighbourhood boundaries is symbolic bordering and bridging. People define “self” and “other” in order to draw up categories that reduce the complexity of everyday life. “The essence of a border is to separate the ‘self’ from the ‘other’. As such, one of the major functions of a border is to act as a barrier, ‘protecting’ the ‘us insiders’ from the ‘them outsiders’ (...)” (Newman, 2003, p.14). Only through the process of bordering are we able to develop activity routines and to enter into social relations with others (Jenkins, 2008, p.27).

Reuber (1995, p.63) draws attention to the importance of boundary construction that results in a better “readability” of neighbourhoods and that thus functions as a framework for orientation in daily activities and also as a memorable space for

residents: “Easily perceived boundaries at the edges of a district as well as between homogeneous, closed subareas promote the small-scale and the transparency of the physiognomy“.

The extent to which a space is determined by the power of one group also influences encounters between individuals and groups. Savage et al. (2005) argue that it is not enough to reduce understandings of dissociation mechanisms to the old-established residents of a neighbourhood on the one hand and the newcomers on the other hand (see also Elias and Scotson, 1994, on the established/the outsiders). Rather these dissociation mechanisms are related to different groups, contexts and also concrete places according to individual residential biographies and worlds of experience.

Atkinson (2006) uses the example of the middle-classes to discuss the deeply anchored quest for like-with-like spatial association and the accompanying process of symbolic dissociation from the “others”. The negative image of the urban district (re-)produced by media and discourses in the city does not, however, match the social position of the middle-classes that remain there. Thus small-scale dissociation processes become highly significant in positioning a household in comparison to other social groups. Watt (2009) uses the concept of “selective belonging” to draw attention to these many small-scale contexts of local belonging. Based on their own empirical investigations, Blokland and Van Eijk (2010) confirm the limited interaction between different social and ethnic groups.

Tilly (2004b) discusses the significance of “stories”, the telling of which contributes to the communalities of “us” and constituting of “the others”. This can express itself through the “badmouthing” of particular spatial subareas of an urban district. Verbal constructions of boundaries (“power of naming”) were discussed early on by Bourdieu (1991) as a mechanism for safeguarding status, and were illustrated by Watt (2009, pp.14f) using the example of a suburban residential area. Watt draws attention to the reproduced discourse of fear and uncertainty that divides the small residential area perceived as being safe and status-worthy from its surroundings. In this way households of higher status seeking to belong, dissociate themselves from the surrounding stigmatised urban district and thus save their image (“managing the spoiled identity”, see Goffman, 1986). Wittebrood/Permentier (2011, p.104) also draw attention to the strategy of small-scale dissociation by middle-classes who remain in disadvantaged districts.

As well as using small-scale processes of dissociation middle-class households can also position themselves in relation to symbolically important locations outside the neighbourhood by using bridges. Such bridging processes provide indications about the permeability of a neighbourhood and its “external image”.

### **Planned research project**

Building upon the arguments outlined above, we plan in 2012-2013 to conduct an empirical study on the permeability of segregated neighbourhoods. The study should investigate more closely the linkages, including those that extend beyond the neighbourhood, used by middle-class households both with and without immigration

backgrounds. The aim of the research is to trace down these bridges out of the neighbourhood, so that conclusions can be drawn about the permeability of the neighbourhoods and the power of context effects. In addition, indications about networks or about social and spatial boundary construction *inside* the neighbourhood should be gained.

The empirical work is planned in two steps. In 2012 an explorative investigative research design will empirically test and modify the research assumptions. In a further step the aim is to conduct a larger comparative study in an international context. Case-studies should investigate segregated inner-city districts in various conurbations.

The explorative investigation will be conducted in a German city with a research focus on the German and Turkish middle-class. A qualitative survey of a total of ca. 30 middle-class households of German and Turkish origin is planned.

### **Key research questions:**

- What is the significance of the neighbourhood in the perceptions of residents, which other linkages and also boundaries do they experience?
- Which **bridges** out of the neighbourhood are formed by middle-class households of higher social position that remain in segregated districts? How are these spatially manifested?
  - Individual social linkages (e.g. friends)
  - Institutionalised linkages (e.g. attending school outside the neighbourhood)
  - Belonging to groups and spaces, (re)production of media discourse (dissociation from the “bad areas”)
- Which differences between German and Turkish households can be observed? What is the significance of linkages back into the neighbourhood of those that have moved out?
- Which social, institutional and symbolic **boundary constructions** by Turkish and German households within the neighbourhood can be observed? How are these spatially manifested?
- What are the implications of the identified bridges and boundaries for the assumption that middle-class households have a positive effect on “the neighbourhood”, that is in terms of social cohesion, role-models, stigma, etc.

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