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'Come and live here and you'll experience it': youths talk about their deprived neighbourhood

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‘Come and live here and you’ll experience it’: youths talk about *their* deprived neighbourhood

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This study examined youths’ lived experiences of a deprived neighbourhood in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Previous studies assume that deprived neighbourhoods pose serious risks for youths. What is largely missing from these studies, however, are the experiences of young people themselves. Do they indeed experience their neighbourhood as hostile and unsafe? Do they really experience a lack of resources? We conducted a qualitative study among youths aged 13–18 living in Feijenoord, a district of Rotterdam. The research demonstrates how important it is to discover youths’ views on and experiences of their environments, as their experiences are very diverse and often differ from the hegemonic discourse. While the respondents were aware of problems, such as crime and violence, they also pointed to several positive aspects of their neighbourhood. In the eyes of the youths, their neighbourhood has both instrumental and affective meaning. Neighbourhood effect research might benefit from paying more attention to the idea that place can have multiple meanings, and from looking at the perceived neighbourhood strengths instead of only focusing on the deficits in deprived neighbourhoods.

Keywords: identity; risk; self-esteem

Introduction

The assumption that the neighbourhood of residence has effects on the social outcomes of children and youths has influenced much social research as well as many urban policies. Growing up in a deprived neighbourhood has been shown to have a negative influence on several social outcomes such as education, behavioural problems, aspirations and job opportunities (Andersson 2004; Kauppinen 2007; Sykes and Musterd 2011; Kintrea, St.Clair, and Houston 2011; White and Green 2011; Nieuwenhuis et al. 2013). Several explanations for these neighbourhood effects have been put forward: young people in deprived neighbourhoods do worse than their peers in ‘better’ neighbourhoods because of factors like high levels of crime, negative role models, peer influences, the presence of negative social norms and values, and the lack of institutional resources (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Sampson 2008).

Previous studies on neighbourhood effects, however, have been met with criticism (Bauder 2002; Gotham 2003; Lupton 2003). First, by using census data as a proxy for neighbourhood environments many studies provide insight only into the impact of the structural characteristics of neighbourhoods, and hardly take into consideration the

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complex social processes underlying neighbourhood effects (Martin 2003). Another criticism is that most of these studies focus too much on presumed deficits and pathologies, and overlook the strengths that might also be present in these neighbourhoods (Bauder 2002; Lupton and Tunstall 2008; Sykes 2011). Moreover, although neighbourhood effect studies focus on the importance of spatial location, the meanings of space have been underemphasized (Gotham 2003; Martin 2003). Little attention has been paid to how neighbourhoods are 'multiply constructed', that is, how they are experienced differently by different groups and individuals (Martin 2003; Sykes 2011). Understanding how people give meaning to neighbourhood settings and how this influences their socio-spatial behaviour is, however, fundamental to understanding the neighbourhood as an influential context (Nicotera 2007, 2008).

Youths' neighbourhood perceptions and experiences are particularly understudied. For a long time, the experiences of children and youths were not taken into account in either academia or urban policies (Francis and Lorenzo 2002; Churchman 2003; Knowles-Yanez 2005; Frank 2006; Loebach and Gilliland 2010). Young people have been, and sometimes still are seen as 'less' than adults, lacking the ability to express their experiences and needs (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Sutton and Kemp 2002; Chawla and Malone 2003; Matthews 2003). As a result, many researchers have used adult proxies, such as the interpretations of parents, teachers or other professionals, to measure the experiences of youths (Matthews and Limb 1999; Rasmussen, Aber, and Bhana 2004; Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller 2005; Loebach and Gilliland 2010). Until now, many studies have failed to acknowledge that because the socio-spatial behaviour and perceptions of children and youths are different, they might experience their neighbourhood differently from adults (Rasmussen, Aber, and Bhana 2004; Burke 2005; Loebach and Gilliland 2010). This might be one of the reasons why studies on neighbourhood effects on youths are inconclusive (Burton and Price-Spratlen 1999). The present study fills this gap by answering the following questions:

- How do youths living in a deprived area perceive their neighbourhood? What do they perceive as problems and what as resources?
- How are perceived neighbourhood problems and resources related to the youths' wellbeing?

To shed light on these issues, we discuss youths' reports of neighbourhood problems, their perceptions and experience of resources and their sense of place attachment in Feijenoord, a low-income, multi-ethnic district of Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Interpreting the neighbourhood

Several authors discuss the ways in which different spaces can be made meaningful by individuals and how people can become attached to certain spaces in a variety of ways. Two concepts are important here, namely, that places are constructed through social practices, and that places have several layers of meaning and relationships to other places. Agnew (2005) distinguishes three components of a meaningful location (see also Cresswell 2004; Sykes 2011). The first is place as location or a fixed spot on the earth's surface; for example, Feijenoord is located in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Second is the view of place as a series of locales for social interaction. Examples are everyday social settings, such as homes, schools, squares, shopping malls, football fields and street corners, which structure social interaction and thus influence the formation of norms, values and behaviour. Some locales – for example, social media like Facebook – are not physical locations. The third component is sense of place, which is conceptualized as the subjective and emotional attachment people have to a place (Cresswell 2004).

Understanding how people give meaning to neighbourhood settings and how this influences their socio-spatial behaviour is an important aspect to take into account when researching neighbourhood effects. People (and in the case of this study, youths) can experience their neighbourhood in a myriad of ways. These different interpretations of places, however, are discussed in only a limited number of studies. Spencer (2001), for example, explains how individual and contextual characteristics influence subjective experiences of the neighbourhood. For instance, the presence of police in the neighbourhood may be perceived by girls as a resource, as it increases their feelings of safety, whereas boys might experience it as a problem, as it reduces their feeling of freedom to express themselves (Anthony and Nicotera 2008). Lynch (1979), moreover, shows that there is no one-to-one relationship between physical characteristics and the perceptions that youths have of their neighbourhood. He shows that youths in a deprived Argentinian neighbourhood that has poor quality housing and is near to a prison and municipal rubbish dump, perceive their neighbourhood as nice, safe and friendly. Their sense of belonging to their neighbourhood was quite high and they felt they could freely and safely use their environment.

These studies show that individual perceptions of neighbourhood are very diverse and can play an important role in directing socio-spatial behaviour. They also illustrate that there is a need to include in neighbourhood effect studies the subjective experiences of youths living in the neighbourhood, instead of focusing only on objective neighbourhood characteristics. In this study, we therefore adopted a perspective of heterogeneous space; in other words, we acknowledged that there might be different interpretations of space, and that this leads to different uses of the same environments. It also allowed us to leave the hegemonic discourse of adult perceptions of space behind and pay more attention to youths' interpretations of place.

Place attachment

The notion that places are meaningful to people is related to a sense of place attachment. Place attachment is a 'set of feelings about a geographic location that emotionally binds a person to that place as a function of its role as a setting for experience' (Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992, 139). This emotional place attachment can relate both to the place itself and to the communities that are present in that place, and thus also help to define that place.

It is argued by several authors (Breakwell 1992; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996; Livingston, Bailey, and Kearns 2008) that attachment to a place influences identity formation. According to these authors, four principles of identity may be met through place attachment: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- The first principle of identity is the desire to maintain personal distinctiveness. People use certain places to distinguish themselves from others, such as people in another city ('I'm a Rotterdammer') or another neighbourhood ('I'm from Rotterdam-South').

- The second is the wish to maintain continuity. Places can refer to experiences in the past and can thus offer a sense of continuity to the identity of people.
- The third principle is self-esteem: people become attached to a certain place if that place enables them to make a positive evaluation of themselves or the group with which they identify.
- The final principle is self-efficacy, which refers to the extent to which a person feels that he or she can deal with situational demands, and is often linked to personal agency (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). The environment plays a role in this in that it can hinder or facilitate the extent to which people can exercise their agency. Livingston, Bailey, and Kearns (2008) state that this relationship could work both ways: on the one hand, it could be the case that when place supports a person's sense of self-efficacy, people will form a stronger attachment to it, and on the other hand self-efficacy could also be a potential outcome of attachment.

Place attachment in deprived areas

The relationship between place attachment and levels of area deprivation has been discussed by many authors. Woolever (1992), for example, found that low levels of place attachment were related to high densities and high percentages of low quality housing. Interestingly, average income levels had no significant impact, whereas average educational level did have an impact: place attachment was higher in neighbourhoods with higher educated residents. Based on Woolever's findings, Livingston, Bailey, and Kearns (2008, 15) conclude that: 'the key factor may be one of cultural resources, not poverty, so that higher levels of education in an area may help generate more social involvements and hence higher place attachment'.

Sampson's (1988) study of attachment in the UK shows that place attachment at the neighbourhood level is lowest in communities characterized by residential mobility, urbanization, a high density of youths, a high victimization rate and, most importantly, high levels of fear about neighbourhood safety. On the individual level, a person's length of residence and his or her local friendships significantly increased attachment to the community. In a recent paper, Bailey, Kearns, and Livingston (2012) argue that in the UK place attachment is significantly lower in more deprived neighbourhoods primarily because these areas have lower levels of social cohesion, but these scholars also show that the factors that shape place attachment in more deprived neighbourhoods are the same as in other places. Many authors argue that place attachment is related to the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood. Putnam (2007), for example, states that people who live in more mixed communities tend to withdraw from collective life and to distrust their neighbours. On the other hand, Sturgis et al. (2011) show in their study in the UK that economic deprivation has a larger effect than ethnic diversity on place attachment.

Although these studies give an indication of the relationship between place attachment and levels of deprivation for adults, there are few studies that address the question for youths. In their recent study on youths' perceptions of their neighbourhood, Anthony and Nicotera (2008) plea for future studies that examine the relationship between neighbourhood resources and youths' sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. One study that focuses on youths – albeit slightly older youths than the ones in our study – is that by MacDonald and Marsh (2001). Their qualitative study among respondents in their mid and late twenties revealed that the majority preferred to remain in neighbourhoods that suffered from socio-economic problems and social exclusion.

The reasons they found for this were the strong family and social networks and the normalcy of social exclusion. The young adults did not feel that the problems they experienced were unusual, particularly because they had little experience of other neighbourhoods with which they could compare their situation.

Research design

We carried out our research in Feijenoord, a district of Rotterdam. Feijenoord is located south of the river Meuse (Rotterdam-South), an area that has traditionally been the poorer part of the city. Five neighbourhoods in the Feijenoord district were part of the research: Afrikaanderwijk, Bloemhof, Hillesluis, Feijenoord and Vreewijk. These neighbourhoods are characterized by a low socio-economic status, low levels of education and high levels of unemployment (compared to the city average), and most of the inhabitants are from a non-western background (see Table 1). Moreover, the area is blighted with such problems as low levels of perceived safety, nuisance from youths and drugs use (see Table 2).

We recruited respondents through community organizations and secondary and MBO (secondary vocational education and training) schools. We used a non-random, convenience sampling strategy. In total, we conducted 26 interviews with youths. The group of respondents consisted of boys (54%) and girls (46%) from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Dutch, Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Eastern European, Dutch Antillean, Afghan and Pakistani). The age range was 13–18 years.

The study consisted of three components. First, the youths were asked to use their camera phones to take photographs of the places that were important to them, and the places that they liked or did not like. We chose to use photography as one of the methods since it has a number of advantages: by giving young people control of the camera they can show the places that they, rather than the researcher, think are important; the pictures can be used as a starting point in interviews and help to focus on the topic; and lead to less self-consciousness among respondents compared to drawing or writing (Lewis and Lindsay 2000; Tunstall, Tapsell, and House 2004; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006).

Table 1. Socio-economic and ethnic composition of the selected neighbourhoods.

	Standardized household income[a] (× 1000 euro)	Households living in poverty (%)	Employment (%)	Persons with medium or high level of education[b] (%)	Persons with a non-western background[c] (%)
Afrikaanderwijk	16.4	28	48	25	78
Bloemhof	16.7	25	57	24	60
Feijenoord	17.0	25	47	31	73
Hillesluis	17.0	23	61	31	74
Vreewijk	18.9	16	48	39	21
Rotterdam	21.7	14	61	56	36

Source: De Jong and Van Rhee (2007) and Statistics Netherlands (2010).

[a] Corrected for differences in household size and composition.

[b] Persons who have finished at least an MBO education. MBO is the abbreviation for *middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (secondary vocational education and training). Approximately 40% of the Dutch working population have completed a vocational course to at least a secondary vocational training level.

[c] Persons who have at least one parent who was born in Turkey, Africa, Latin American or Asia (excluding Indonesia and Japan).

Table 2. Safety indicators of the selected neighbourhoods.

	Safety index[a] [1–10]	Persons experiencing drug-related nuisance (%)	Persons experiencing youth-related nuisance (%)	Social cohesion [1–10]
Afrikaanderwijk	5.6	25	23	6.0
Bloemhof	5.5	18	23	6.0
Feijenoord	7.0	5	14	6.0
Hillesluis	5.6	18	17	5.9
Vreewijk	6.5	9	13	6.4
Rotterdam	7.2	8	14	6.2

Source: De Jong and Van Rhee (2007).

[a] The safety index is composed of two main types of indicators: (1) direct indicators, such as theft, violence, drug-related crime, burglary, vandalism, cleanness and wholeness and traffic incidents; and (2) indirect indicators, such as the number of social security claimants, ethnic backgrounds, mobility and satisfaction with neighbourhood.

The second part of the research consisted of a mental mapping exercise: the respondents were asked to draw a mental map representing the places and people that were important to them. The advantage of mental mapping is that it gives respondents the freedom to express themselves with limited intervention by the researcher. Moreover, it is a good method to provide insight into the relative importance of places in their daily lives (Young and Barrett 2001).

The third part of the study consisted of in-depth interviews. We asked the respondents a series of questions about their neighbourhood, namely, the places that were important to them, why they liked to go there and what they did there, with whom and how often. The pictures served as input for this interview. We also asked general questions about their individual and family background. We transcribed the interviews in their entirety and used a standardized QDA program (NVivo) to code and analyse them.

Results

Our respondents' narratives showed that youths have a critical understanding of their neighbourhood. They were well aware of both the positive and the negative aspects. The problems and positive points they perceived are elaborated upon as follows.

'*What I dislike about my neighbourhood*'

Feijenoord is often seen by outsiders as a district with high poverty rates, poor quality housing and relatively high levels of crime and other social problems. The youths pointed to similar problems. First, the interviews showed that the youths were aware of signs of decay and vandalism. Many respondents specifically talked about dwellings that were in a poor state or about graffiti tags on buildings. Poor environmental quality affected the youths' sense of well-being, as illustrated by the words of Christian (19 years old, male, Dutch):

> I don't know what it is, but it's becoming worse. A while ago a house burnt down, and it's still standing there, burnt down, boarded up (…). I think they are planning to demolish it, that's why they are doing it, but it's not a nice place to live anymore.

Second, the youths expressed concern about the people present in public space. When asked why they disliked certain places, most of them indicated that this was because of the people present within these places. Quite a few pictures and mental maps showed places where annoying or 'scary' people often hung around, ranging from a group of boys to drug dealers (see Figure 1). The perception of these places sometimes also influences youths' spatial behaviour. For example, Vivian (16 years old, female, Surinamese) indicated that she dislikes one spot in the park where youths hang around: 'I don't feel comfortable walking past there, most of the time I take another route'. On the other hand, some places were also disliked because of the absence of people: because of the perceived lack of 'eyes on the street'.

Particularly places where boys or men hang around were perceived as unpleasant. Specific places mentioned were train or subway stations, cafes or coffee shops, street corners, parks and places that are dark and have little supervision. Alyssia (16 years old,

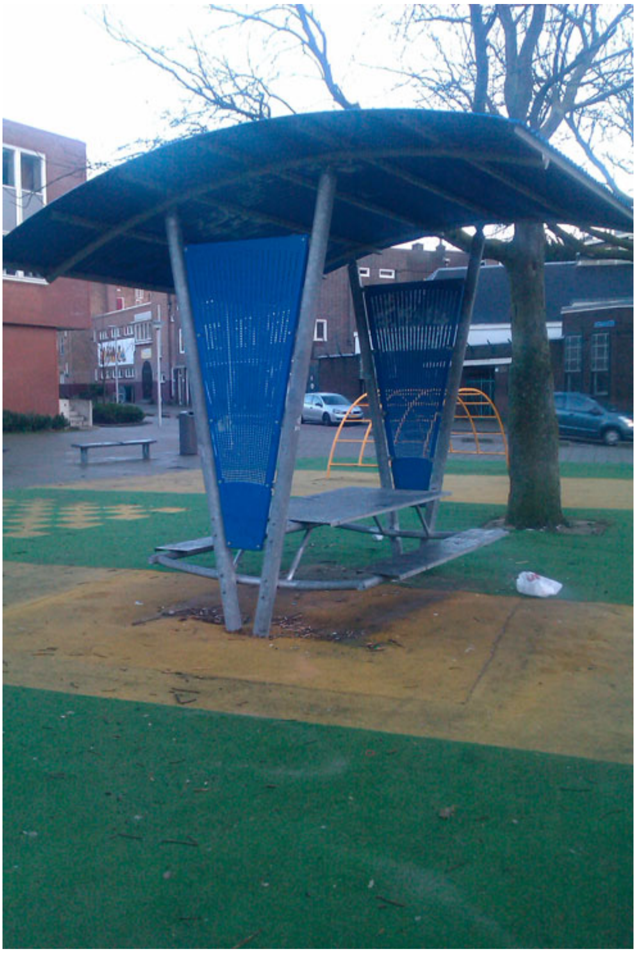

Figure 1. 'Places I don't like'.
Younous (18 years old, male, Moroccan): This is what we call 'the shed', it's kind of a problem, a lot of pot so to say. This is where the guys that smoke pot hang around, people dealing drugs and things like that. I'm not very proud of this.

female, Dutch Antillean) said that she dislikes the area around the grocery store she works at, especially in the early mornings and evenings, because it is quiet and dark, there is little supervision and she had heard someone had been shot there (see Figure 2). Among the other youths the reasons for disliking places were often also related to events that they had heard about or experienced themselves. This is illustrated by the following:

> I have seen some things that a normal person isn't supposed to see, or at least doesn't want to be associated with (…) like drug deals, violence, robberies. Actually, all the things you hear on the news (…). (Mitchell, 18 years old, male, Dutch/Surinamese)

Most of the youths in Feijenoord, however, had high levels of environmental competence; in other words, they had the ability to use their neighbourhood in a skilful way based on their understanding of the different places in the neighbourhood. The narratives of youths showed how they develop ways to use their neighbourhood strategically and to avoid

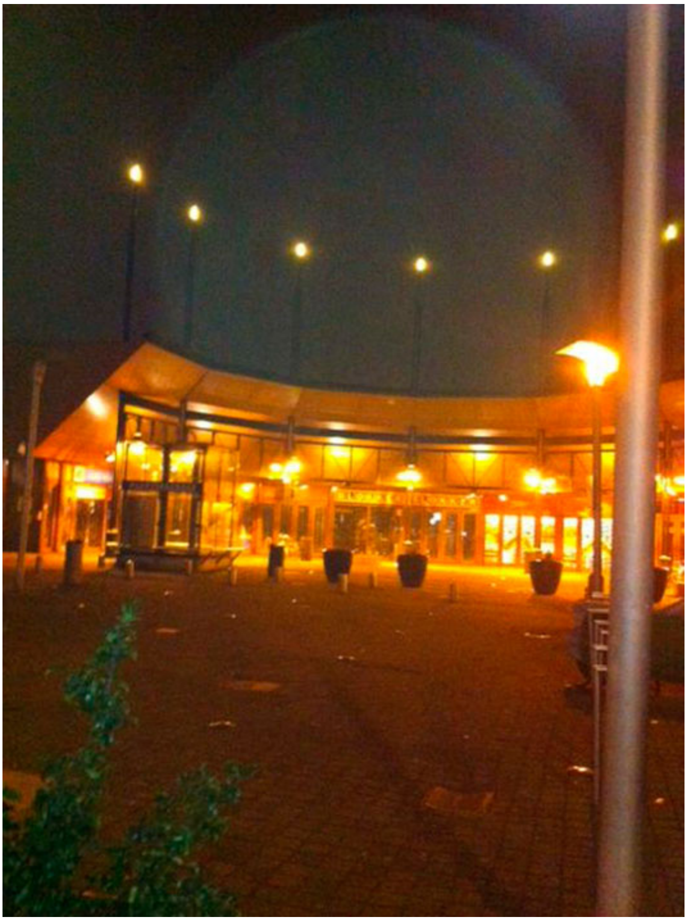

Figure 2. 'Places I don't like'.
Alyssia (16 years old, female, Dutch Antillean): Someone was shot over here. That's why I don't like it. When I have to start work here in the early morning, it's still very dark and quiet. I don't like it at all.

unpleasant settings. For example, Emine (18 years old, female, Turkish) said the following:

> When we've been to the city centre in the evening, I prefer to take the subway home instead of the tram (…) when I take the subway I don't have to cross *het dijkje* [an area she feels unsafe in]. When I take the tram I have to cross *het dijkje*, so I prefer the subway.

Youths' opinions about the above mentioned places were mostly more a matter of dislike than fear. Similar results emerged from studies in the UK. Ormston and Anderson (2010, 11), for example, show that for young adults, 'exposure to some kinds of antisocial behaviour may partially desensitize people to its effects'. Along the same line, Percy-Smith (2001) argues that certain environmental fears might be greater in less deprived neighbourhoods that have low levels of danger. The idea is that in deprived areas – such as the Feijenoord district – youths are constantly aware of dangers, and thus their experiences and behaviours are based on real experiences rather than imaginary fears.

'*What I like about my neighbourhood*' – *the neighbourhood as a source of instrumental and affective meaning*

Although the youths were well aware of the problems in their neighbourhood, most were generally positive about their local environment. For example, Boris (17 years old, male, Eastern European) stated:

> When you live there yourself it's a nice neighbourhood. Nice people. But there are also 'bad boys'; they want to be tough, making problems. But besides that it's a nice neighbourhood. They say it's dangerous, but either I've learned to live with it, or it's just an ordinary neighbourhood. Before I moved here I lived in [a similar neighbourhood in Rotterdam] and people also said 'That's a dangerous neighbourhood, a lot of criminality and things like that', but I didn't notice anything.

How do we explain these perceptions? In the interviews, most youths pointed to several sources of support in their neighbourhood that make them value their local environment. Sources of support are conceptualized as persons, places or activities that provide opportunities for either instrumental or affective meaning (Bryant 1985); that is, a place or a person is considered a resource not only when it has material value, but also when it is of social-emotional value to the respondent.

Instrumental meaning

Most neighbourhood effect theories, of which the social disorganization theory is the most prominent, assume that the structural characteristics of deprived neighbourhoods reduce the likelihood of residents developing social networks that can be sources of support (Sampson and Groves 1989; Osgood and Chambers 2000; Witherspoon and Ennet 2011). From our interviews, however, a different picture emerges.

The youths in our study characterized the Feijenoord district as a place where many people know each other, at least within their own micro-neighbourhood. This allows them to go to each other for instrumental help, such as finding a job, helping with homework or taking care of each other when there are problems. Mitchell (18 years old, male, Dutch/Surinamese), for example, reported that he found an odd job as a security guard through his neighbourhood network:

> A cousin of a friend of mine, his mother has a bar, here in Afrikaanderwijk. It's a Latino bar. I'm studying to be a security guard, and he knew that (…) and then she [the mother] said, why don't you come to work here?

The neighbourhood-based networks also provide a source of support when things are not going well. Neighbours take care of each other when one of them is having problems. Yvette (16 years old, female, Surinamese), for example, explained how her neighbours take care of her when she has to go home because she is ill, and that they also teach her to cook and do household chores:

> I'm quite often ill and my parents can't always come home from work for me. When I'm ill and I can't go to school, I go to them [the neighbours]. I go to their homes and they teach me a lot of things: cooking, household chores, beauty tips, etc.

The youths also indicated several settings that fostered the availability of sources of support in their neighbourhood. Neighbourhood effect studies often assume that deprived neighbourhoods lack such settings; however, the narratives of our respondents illustrate that they perceive that there are several of these settings in their neighbourhood, such as youth centres or sport clubs, and that these settings offer various opportunities. The youths mentioned, for example, playing sports, working on their self-defence skills, getting help with homework and doing cookery courses. This is illustrated by the following:

> This is a football school: there's a football academy and a freestyler who comes from outside the neighbourhood (…) he also helps you with problems, you can talk with him. About school and internships and things like that. (Hamid, 14 years old, male, Moroccan)

Places of worship were also considered sources of support. Many respondents are from an Islamic background, and the mosque often came up in the interviews (as well as in the pictures and mental maps) as an important place for them. These places of worship offer resources in the form of organized activities, which keep youths of the street, as well as spiritual support. For instance, Selami (16 years old, male, Turkish) said the following:

> Every Wednesday we go to the mosque and they teach us about Islam. On Saturdays, we have indoor football and in the evening we watch a film. On Sundays, we go to the morning prayer and after that we have breakfast together. And that's how our week passes by.

It has to be noted, however, that although most of the youths valued the recreational facilities, some indicated that these facilities do not appeal to them. They also talked about having a limited variety of things to do. This is an interesting outcome, as there are relatively many youth organizations in the area. A possible reason for this outcome is that the supply does not match the demand and the interests of the youths.

So far, the youths' narratives indicate that living in a deprived neighbourhood does not necessarily mean that they perceive a lower level of social-instrumental support. Similar results were found by Nicotera (2008), who shows that regardless of the level of neighbourhood disadvantage, youths describe important relationships with neighbours. In both deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods, neighbours provide support such as watching each other's children, fixing bicycles and helping with homework. The findings of our research confirm her conclusion that youths have both positive and negative experiences of their neighbourhoods that are not necessarily dependent on structural neighbourhood characteristics. Our study illustrates that youth perceive that there are several opportunities available to them in their neighbourhoods that can be used to combat neighbourhood risks.

Affective meaning

A second theme that came up in the interviews is the youths' pride in and place attachment to their neighbourhood; in other words, how the neighbourhood is a source of affective meaning. This type of neighbourhood resource is often not taken into account when researching neighbourhood effects, but is important when considering youths' well-being.

The interviews revealed that the youths were well aware of the potentially 'dangerous' settings, but that this generally did not lead to a negative overall impression of the neighbourhood. In fact, the youths' narratives generally showed pride in their neighbourhood as well as high levels of identification with the place and the community. It emerged from our interviews that the four principles of identity – distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy – are met through this neighbourhood attachment.

Most of the youths said that their neighbourhood was one of their favourite places in Rotterdam: they felt at home there, knew the people and generally felt safe. Most of them spoke with pride about the places they took pictures of and talked about 'my neighbourhood', 'my street' and 'my football field'. This neighbourhood pride can be illustrated by the response from Mitchell (18 years old, male, Dutch/Surinamese) when asked whether he would rather live in another neighbourhood:

> I try to stay in Rotterdam-South because it's my neighbourhood, I know all neighbourhoods by heart (…). I have everything I want here, so why should I leave? It's as simple as that.
>
> Interviewer: Are there also places where you feel unsafe?
>
> I think there are some places that are perceived as unsafe by most other people, but there are no places where I feel unsafe. Absolutely none.

This pride is also materialized in the form of identifying with the code of the subway area (5314) or the postcode of one of the various sub-neighbourhoods. These codes can often be seen in graffiti tags, on the walls of school toilets, on youths' bags or in Facebook statuses. This is related to the distinctiveness dimension of place attachment: youths use these codes to distinguish themselves from other neighbourhoods. Mitchell explained this as follows:

> I'm from Rotterdam-South and another person is from Rotterdam-West and then you just having a fight. 5314 is to show where you're from; it's like showing your identity. Like 'I want to put Rotterdam-South on the map, so I'm going to yell 5314 the entire day', something like that.

Some youths also referred to the perceptions the media or outsiders have of their neighbourhood. They were well aware that people from outside the neighbourhood were generally not that positive about it. Nevertheless, most of the youths were proud of their neighbourhood. The following quotation illustrates how Selami (16 years old, male, Turkish) feels about outsiders' perceptions of his neighbourhood. It also shows the relationship between place attachment and self-esteem: since youths' identity is related to their neighbourhood of residence, they tend to overemphasize the good things about their neighbourhood. There was no indication that outsiders' perceptions of the neighbourhood reduced the youths' identification with and pride in the neighbourhood. On the contrary, it might even have made it stronger.

> You always hear about the bad things before your hear about the good things. If you do ten good things and one bad thing, they will remember that bad thing. We did so many good things here in the neighbourhood, but they don't see them. Only bad things, riots, shootings, stabbings, but that all happened in 2009, 2008. We've shown that the neighbourhood isn't like that anymore, but still people think about it as a bad neighbourhood. But it isn't.

That most of the youths felt comfortable in their neighbourhood is a result of familiarity. Most of the youths have lived there all their lives; they know the place and the people there, and they do not know any other living environments. We can link this to the dimension of continuity, as discussed in the theoretical section. The neighbourhood can be seen as a referent to past experiences and actions, and it thus provides a sense of continuity to the youths' identity. Most of the youths perceived other areas where they are less familiar as more unsafe. For example, Xandra (17 years old, female, Surinamese) stated:

> Because I have lived here for a very long time – I've lived here for 11 or 12 years – I am used to it. A lot of people say it's a very vibrant neighbourhood, and a very dangerous neighbourhood, but because I live here I don't notice that.

Since most of our respondents had lived in their neighbourhood all their lives, they – and their families – knew most of their neighbours. Levels of social control were perceived to be high in the neighbourhood, particularly within ethnic communities. This was sometimes perceived as annoying by the youths, as it limited their freedom. On the other hand, it also made them feel safe, as shown by the words of Jenna (17 years old, female, Moroccan):

> To be honest, I'm never scared when I walk on the street (…) I have five brothers and they are well known in the neighbourhood. People can't hurt me. When I walk on the street, people are like: 'Hey, Alaoui!' They don't know my first name, but they are like: 'Hey, sister of Alaoui!'

The above quotations also illustrate that the self-efficacy dimension of place attachment is met among most youths in the Feijenoord district. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996, 208) indicate that 'with respect to the environment (…) feelings of self-efficacy are maintained if the environment facilitates or at least does not hinder a person's everyday lifestyle'. Their familiarity with the neighbourhood induces most youths in the Feijenoord district to feel that they have high levels of personal agency. This is further strengthened by the high levels of environmental competence, as mentioned in the previous section.

On the other hand, this familiarity with the neighbourhood can also have negative consequences. First, it has to be noted that while social networks create opportunities for certain groups, they exclude other groups. When asked if she sometimes feels uncomfortable in the neighbourhood, Janey (16 years old, female, Dutch) replied:

> Yes, in the Feijenoord neighbourhood. There are so many immigrants living there. Not that I'm racist or something, but when you walk on the street over there (…) people look at you like you're from another planet or something.

Second, the familiarity with the neighbourhood is related to what MacDonald and Marsh (2001) call the 'normalcy of social exclusion'. Most of the respondents had lived in their neighbourhood for large parts of their lives; they had gone to school there and their social networks were largely neighbourhood based. They had limited lived experiences beyond the Feijenoord district, which meant they did not have any neighbourhoods to compare the area against. They knew little about how youths in more advantaged neighbourhoods live. Youths' residential history might thus have an important influence on their perception of the neighbourhood, as illustrated by the words of Emine, Meryem and Irmak (three Turkish female friends, 18, 16 and 18 years old). They disagreed over how they felt about Rotterdam, and particularly the Feijenoord district. Whereas Meryem and Irmak had lived in the area all their lives, Emine had just moved there some years previously from a rural area in the south of the Netherlands. Their words also reveal the heterogeneity in neighbourhood perceptions:

> Emine: I don't know, but actually I don't like Rotterdam that much. That has to do with graffiti, but also with people. But I also think that's because I grew up in a village.
>
> Irmak: I don't agree with that. I like Rotterdam, it's a nice city.
>
> Emine: It might be a nice city, but it's also about how you live. People that grew up here, most of them became junkies. They weren't raised the right way, because their parents are 'bad' as well. In a village you rarely have these problems.
>
> Meryem: She's right about that, but I still like Rotterdam.

Finally, the affective meaning of the neighbourhood was reflected in the plans for the future of some of the youths. Quite a few expressed the desire to remain in their neighbourhood, even after they moved out of their parental home. For example, Malih (16 years old, male, Moroccan) said:

> I was born here and I'm gonna die here.
>
> Interviewer: Why?
>
> Because I know a lot of people that had success in their lives, and then they leave the neighbourhood. Then I'm like, you're abandoning the neighbourhood you grew up in. Where I grew up, I also want my children to grow up.

On the other hand, some of the youths said that although they were familiar with the neighbourhood and liked living there, it was not a place they would like their children to grow up in. Jenna (17 years old, female, Moroccan), who was generally positive about her neighbourhood, said: 'When I get married, I'll leave this place, then I want a quiet neighbourhood. Over here I don't have 100 per cent certainty that my child will get on the good path'. This shows that despite doing well herself, she is aware of the problems in the neighbourhood and how these can potentially influence younger children. Particularly the suburbs were perceived to be better, quieter places for children to grow up in.

Discussion

The present study explored youths' perception of neighbourhood problems, neighbourhood support and their sense of place attachment in a Dutch deprived neighbourhood. While the youths were well aware of the problems in their neighbourhood, such as crime and violence, most of them were generally positive about their neighbourhood. How do we explain this? In the interviews, most of the youths pointed to several sources of support in their neighbourhood, which makes them value their local environment. Whereas it is common in neighbourhood effect studies to explain problems in terms of a lack of social cohesion and social capital (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Putnam 2007), the majority of our respondents did not feel that they lacked relationships that could be a source of instrumental and emotional support. Moreover, they indicated high levels of social belonging to the neighbourhood. It was clear that for many of the youths, their neighbourhood formed an important part of their identity. They felt attached to their neighbourhood because it met their needs for distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Together with the fact that most of the youths had few lived experiences outside the neighbourhood, and thus had little knowledge about other, more advantaged neighbourhoods, these factors made the majority of the respondents relatively positive about their neighbourhood.

Our findings lead us to question deficit models, such as the social disorganization theory, which have been common in neighbourhood effect literature. These models assume that neighbourhood disadvantage necessarily means a lack of social capital, positive norms and values, and social cohesion. We found that, at least in the perception of our respondents, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, the youths were generally positive about the social networks and support in their neighbourhood. Our findings support the pluralistic neighbourhood theory of Aber and Nieto (2000), who state that even structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods have strengths that can lead to positive outcomes for youths. Despite socio-economic disadvantage and related social problems in the neighbourhood, there still may be positive social processes. One remark has to be made here, however. As Perri 6 notes, ‘we must not celebrate (…) any kind of network or any kind of social capital (…) some networks may be very damaging for everyone else and perhaps, in the longer term, for themselves’ (1997, 21). Whereas in the eyes of the youths the social processes in the neighbourhood may be positive, some of these networks might also lead them to participate in deviant behaviour, such as criminality or drugs use. Moreover, while these social networks lead to a feeling of social inclusion, they might also lead to a lack of bridging capital and thus limit youths’ opportunities to achieve social mobility (MacDonald et al. 2005). Although the youths in our study displayed conventional norms concerning school and work, longitudinal research is needed to see whether neighbourhood-based social networks impede their chances of getting a good education and good jobs.

Our study also suggests that it is crucial to include individuals’ subjective perceptions of their neighbourhood in neighbourhood effect studies. These perceptions vary among individuals, suggesting different neighbourhood effects for different (groups of) youths. Youths are, however, often still portrayed in a one-sided way in neighbourhood effect studies as well as in the media: they are generally seen as a unitary group with the focus on the negative characteristics. The diversity in youths’ perceptions we found across our small sample shows that we need to guard against adopting a too simplistic description of youths in deprived neighbourhoods (see also MacDonald and Marsh 2001). Neighbourhood effect research could benefit from paying more attention to what a neighbourhood really means in the lives of young people and how this influences their behaviour and choices, and from acknowledging the multiple meanings of place (Sykes 2011).

Finally, we found indications that youths’ perceptions vary considerably from the hegemonic discourse. Understanding how youths experience and perceive their neighbourhoods is essential to understanding their socio-spatial behaviour and how neighbourhoods may influence their social outcomes. It is therefore important to include youths in neighbourhood research as well as in policy-making, and to acknowledge youths as capable participants in this context (Francis and Lorenzo 2002; Sutton and Kemp 2002; Burke 2005; Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller 2005). The challenge is to develop innovative tools – such as the use of visual methods – to adequately capture youths' views and to communicate these views to policy-makers and youth workers (see also Loebach and Gilliland 2010). These methodologies should not only shed light on neighbourhood deficits but also provide insight into the potential resources, so that policy-makers and youth workers can draw upon these resources to stimulate positive youth outcomes despite their growing up in a 'risky' environment.

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