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The politics of belonging in ethnically diverse places

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Chapter 6

Creating good citizens? The governance of neighbourhood community and how residents encounter 'civilizing' policies

This chapter is under review at an international peer-reviewed journal.

ABSTRACT – National and local governments in Western Europe formulate normative notions of active citizenship to regulate the attitudes and behaviours of their subjects – especially those residing in diverse and deprived neighbourhoods. This chapter critically engages with these policy rhetorics by confronting them with residents' emotional geographies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Dutch neighbourhood where interventions target residents' presumed alienation from each other and 'mainstream' white middle-class society, I argue that – in contrast to these policy objectives – residents do experience a sense of neighbourhood belonging. However, their everyday encounters and practices of engagement fall short of the more 'thick' forms of community prescribed by urban policies. Staff members of policy interventions mediate different citizenship conceptions by creating personal relations with participants while simultaneously reinforcing dominant interpretations of 'good' citizenship. These findings highlight the ambiguous, emotionally charged dynamics of neighbourhood governance.

6.1 Introduction

Residents and entrepreneurs should be enabled to take their responsibility. In practice, this means [they] will be actively encouraged to show more interest in what is going on in their neighbourhood or district. After all, the neighbourhood is a shared responsibility, and many tasks can be done by residents and entrepreneurs themselves (...) This does not only call for a different vision of the district's tasks and role but also demands a contemporary concept of citizenship (Amsterdam Southeast, 2011, p. 1).

Place-based interventions in deprived urban neighbourhoods in Western Europe often employ highly normative notions of active citizenship (De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016; Koster, 2015), as the above quotation shows for the case of Amsterdam Southeast, one of the most deprived parts of Amsterdam. Here, residents are exhorted to 'show interest' in their neighbourhood and to view it as a 'shared responsibility', which presumably they did not do before. This chapter critically engages with these policy rhetorics of active citizenship (Newman & Tonkens, 2011) by studying how they are (not) connected with resident perceptions of and attachments to the neighbourhood. While recent studies (De Koning et al., 2015; Fortier, 2010) have explored how citizenship functions as a normative trope within (urban) policy, less is known about how these policies are enacted in specific contexts and internalized (or resisted) by individuals and communities (Raco, 2009). Following Askins (2016, p. 516), who argues for the 'need to reframe and repoliticise everyday interactions, and the emotions caught up in them, as interwoven through broader (state) politics', this chapter aims to understand how urban policies meet their subjects. How do the mechanisms of subjectification and emotional registries employed in these policies relate to residents' own emotional geographies and everyday acts of engagement?

In the following, I briefly discuss the literature on citizenship as a moral category, and its uneven implementation in specific places and communities that are believed to lack good citizenship qualities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Bijlmer, a neighbourhood which – due to its high ethnic diversity and socioeconomic deprivation – has been heavily stigmatized and subjected to sustained policy interventions, I discuss the contrast between dominant policy narratives and residents' emotional geographies of citizenship. As the 'affective elements at play beneath the topographies of everyday life' (Davidson, Bondi, & Smith, 2005, p. 1),

I suggest that emotions are not only relevant to understand residents' experience of their neighbourhood, but also and especially their encounters within spaces of government intervention. Potentially, feelings of emotional and experiential proximity within such spaces can form the basis of relationships based on notions of care and sociability, rather than judgment (Jupp, 2013). However, they can also reinforce normative interpretations of citizenship as they are used to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' participants. My analysis is based on participant observation in a neighbourhood centre created by the local government to stimulate community among residents and increase their labour market participation. This material is supplemented by semi-structured interviews with participants of this centre and non-participating residents, interviews with representatives from local government and social welfare organizations, and an analysis of policy documents and media coverage on the centre, the neighbourhood, and the wider Bijlmer area.

6.2 Urban policy and the good citizen

Recent studies of urban policy have demonstrated how national and local governments employ the concept of citizenship to describe and prescribe desired attitudes of their subjects (Fortier, 2010; Koster, 2015; Raco, 2009). Here, citizenship does not only denote formal membership of the nation-state with its associated rights and responsibilities but goes beyond that to include standards of morality, distinguishing 'good' from 'bad' or 'deficient' citizens. Such substantive – rather than formalistic – articulations of citizenship frame the good citizen by specifying appropriate norms, values, and behaviour (De Koning et al., 2015) and by stimulating desired feelings and affects (De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016; Fortier, 2010).

Importantly, government efforts to identify 'deficient' citizens and transform them into 'good' citizens are geographically uneven. Contemporary urban policies in Western Europe focus on policy interventions in 'problematic' places (Cochrane, 2007). Urban policy studies employing the Foucauldian concept of governmentality or the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault, 1994 [1980], p. 237) detail how urban policies delineate marginalized and racialized areas and populations and aim to bring these under state control (Dikeç, 2007; Koster, 2015; Uitermark, 2014). These areas are subjected to sustained policy interventions including both direct physical and social interventions (e.g. urban renewal and social mixing policies) and more indirect strategies requiring citizens to take an active part in their own governance, based on 'presuppositions about urban citizenship in terms of activity and obligation,

entrepreneurship and allegiance, in which rights in the city are as much about duties as they are about entitlements' (Osborne & Rose, 1999, p. 752).

Raco (2009) suggests that a central dimension of 'good' citizens' conduct is their engagement with fellow citizens and governing institutions to improve their (local) community. He refers to the creation of 'aspirational citizens' who work together with service providers to co-produce their own empowerment and (eventual) social mobility. Rather than 'expectational citizens', who consider themselves rightfully entitled to government support, aspirational citizens are responsabilized to strive towards self-reliance and participation in the (imagined) white middle-class mainstream. Policies should not simply provide state support but focus on enabling citizens to overcome their underprivileged background and disadvantageous circumstances and realize their ambitions.

This form of governmentality not only aims to create upwardly mobile individuals but also and especially targets communities (Marinetto, 2003; Raco & Imrie, 2000). Social relations in deprived neighbourhoods are decried as pathological and communities characterized as 'low aspirational spaces' (Raco, 2009, p. 441) whose inhabitants are subject to negative socialization effects. Moreover, the ethnic and racial diversity of many poor places is thought to cause alienation among residents, resulting in feelings of unease or even fear (Fortier, 2010). Social cohesion policies, therefore, seek to create new community forms based on a shared sense of belonging among diverse populations who meet and participate together.

6.3 Setting the scene: 'Reclaiming' Amsterdam's deprived Bijlmer area

These notions of good citizenship and community are clearly identifiable in the Amsterdam area called *Bijlmer* or *Bijlmermeer*. The Bijlmer is one of the most stigmatized urban areas in the Netherlands and is considered a 'quintessential symbol of urban decline' (Aalbers, 2011, p. 1696), both physically and socially. Built in the 1960s and 1970s to the southeast of Amsterdam, it was an experiment in social engineering following modernist planning principles. Light and spacious apartments in high-rise apartment blocks, surrounded by green spaces and separated from traffic flows, would house middle-class families looking to escape the overcrowded city centre. However, this failed to materialize. While middle-class households mostly moved to single-family housing in the Amsterdam metropolitan area, service provision in the newly constructed buildings lagged and the area was increasingly

perceived as unsafe. Many apartments remained empty causing a downward spiral of criminality and even fewer inhabitants (Dukes, 2007). The Bijlmer gained a reputation as a place of dangerous, racialized deprivation. Those who did move into the area were households who had trouble finding an entry into the crowded Amsterdam housing market, in particular, migrants from Suriname (many of whom moved to the Netherlands in the years around Suriname's independence in 1975). In the 1980s, it also increasingly functioned as a refuge for the marginalized – including undocumented residents who could live there in relative anonymity (Aalbers, 2011). Discussions about demolition and urban renewal of the Bijlmer started in the mid-1980s, although the area's large-scale remaking did not start until the 1990s. Its design – especially the high-rises – was thought to contribute to existing social problems as it would inspire feelings of insecurity and anonymity, resulting in alienation and a lack of responsible behaviour on the part of residents. During the renewal operation, around half of the original high-rises were demolished and replaced with single-family housing and mid-rise apartment buildings. At the same time, the success of the urban renewal operation was predicated upon the displacement and dispersal of the most marginalized, including many undocumented residents (Aalbers, Van Gent, & Pinkster, 2011), in order for the Bijlmer to become a more 'ordinary' neighbourhood (Smets & Den Uyl, 2008). Social housing – the dominant tenure form pre-renewal – was partly replaced by owner-occupied housing to attract and maintain different resident types, including the upcoming Surinamese middle class.

Notwithstanding these efforts to 'reclaim' the Bijlmer both in a physical and social sense, the area is still portrayed as constituting a different world characterized by crime, poverty, and racialized pathology, both in popular culture (Van Gent & Jaffe, 2017) and in the media. However, the Bijlmer is also widely recognized as a point of positive identification for black *Amsterdammers* and especially Surinamese and Antillean (and increasingly also West-African) communities, who experience a strong sense of attachment to the Bijlmer as a place where black culture is dominant and 'mainstream' (Aalbers, 2011).

The neighbourhood where the research was conducted is part of the 'old' Bijlmer: most of the area still consists of high-rises that have been touched up but not renovated substantially (see Figure 3), and over eighty per cent is still social housing. In fact, many residents moved there because of urban renewal in other parts of the Bijlmer. Therefore, this neighbourhood is one of the places where the social issues and deprivation that underlie the Bijlmer stigma are still highly apparent.



Figure 3 | High-rise ‘honeycomb’ flats in Bijlmer (left – at completion in 1974; right – 2016, newly renovated)

Source: Bijlmermeer Renovation Planning Office (left); author (right)

6.4 The institutional perspective

At the start of my fieldwork, I interviewed a number of street-level bureaucrats and social workers employed by the Southeast city district. A major theme in these interviews, as well as in informal follow-up conversations, was their ambivalence towards the area. They expressed concern about the neighbourhood’s apparent problems and their desire to improve it, while simultaneously defending it from its reputation as ‘the Dutch ghetto’.

At the beginning of an interview with two district officials, the neighbourhood’s ‘area coordinator’ and its ‘participation manager’, the respondents seemed rather reserved. As they explained, their experiences with researchers had not always been positive. Two earlier reports commissioned by the district administration had sketched a largely negative picture. Poverty and criminality would cause tensions between population groups, and residents were depicted as unwilling to address these issues. The two professionals argue that these studies were too simplistic and unfairly contributed to the area’s existing negative reputation. In contrast, they thought it important to stress the socioeconomic diversity of the wider neighbourhood, which includes some owner-occupied housing and a block redeveloped to house students and creative entrepreneurs, and the improved safety statistics.

Although they were eager to provide a more nuanced picture, they still see many problems: residents are generally poor, liveability is low and so are social control and cohesion. Two interviewed neighbourhood social workers agreed with this assessment, with one even stating that social cohesion is ‘non-existent’.

Referring to the functionalist naming of Bijlmer streets – all street names within one neighbourhood start with the same letter – the participation manager argues that the neighbourhood is an administrative rather than a social entity: ‘there’s no neighbourhood, it just so happens that all the street names start with H’. Ethnic diversity and a lack of interethnic contacts are partly blamed for this, as another professional notes ‘the community here is passive and doesn’t have something to bind them together’. Getting residents to participate in neighbourhood projects is seen as a step towards solving this presumed lack of sociability. Shying away from projects targeting specific ethnic groups, the district administration focuses instead on stimulating residents from different ethnic groups to interact meaningfully. The assumption seems to be that this would improve neighbourhood cohesion and liveability, and also stimulate residents’ economic participation by increasing their ‘employability’. The following quotation from the neighbourhood’s participation manager illustrates the centrality of participation in the district’s policy vision:

The biggest challenge is increasing the degree of participation, which is low not because people don’t want to participate but because they’re not used to participating. Participation is a container concept; we should make clear what it means and what is expected of people. Participation is the common theme running through all our projects.

Consequently, the district administration supports several projects to improve residents’ neighbourhood participation, including a recently (2014) started centre called *De Handreiking* [hereafter also called ‘the Centre’]. This type of centre, of which there are three in the Bijlmer area, calls itself a ‘neighbourhood work room’ since the main objective is guiding residents towards (paid or voluntary) work. Although a private initiative, the centres are financed by the district administration (through a national funding scheme for deprived, ethnically diverse neighbourhoods) and several housing associations. Participants sometimes come of their own accord, through word of mouth or having received one of the locally distributed flyers. Most participants, however, are stimulated by the municipality to attend in exchange for receiving social welfare benefits or, in the case of non-Dutch nationals, as a requirement for passing the civic integration exam. Attendance records show that during its first year, *De Handreiking* managed to attract almost 200 participants from various ethnic backgrounds. Of this group, at least forty per cent live in the neighbourhood and many others live in surrounding neighbourhoods.

The 'neighbourhood work rooms' emphasize proximity and local attachment as unique selling points. One of the Centre's flyers poses the rhetorical question:

What makes this group of vulnerable neighbourhood residents become active in the neighbourhood work room, view the room as their own, start to feel at home in their own neighbourhood, and discover in the neighbourhood work room that they are worth something and can do something?

The Centre's name further underscores this philosophy. It was chosen to reflect neighbourhood embeddedness (starting with 'H', like the street names) and roughly translates to 'outstretched' or 'guiding/helping' hand, which, according to coordinator Celia³¹, reflects their desire to reach out and activate residents. Notwithstanding its creation as a consequence of policy ideas on participation with a strongly normative bent – delineating 'correct' ways of resident participation and interaction – its mission statement nevertheless seems to offer opportunity for progressive and potentially empowering forms of engagement. I was interested in how projects such as this Centre function as spaces of encounter between residents and between residents and the state. In particular, I wanted to know how such spaces of state intervention – which according to Lawson and Elwood (2014, p. 213) 'crystallize the governmentalization of social life' – relate to residents' emotional geographies and everyday acts of engagement.

6.5 The resident perspective: Emotional geographies of belonging and engagement

I first visited the Centre in September 2015. Over the following four months, I became a regular visitor, dropping by two to three times a week to attend activities and chat with participants and employees. Initially I envisioned conducting individual and group interviews. However, I soon realized this did not fully capture what was going on in terms of the social and emotional dynamics I observed and experienced. Participants and I often lacked a common language to express nuances of feeling. In other cases, participants expressed anxiety at having 'formal' conversations. Therefore, I decided to try to capture the Centre as an organizational space with a particular 'experiential texture' (Conradson, 2003), constituted by the everyday interactions between

31 Names are pseudonyms

participants and between participants and staff and the emotions these engendered. While participant observation formed the basis of my analysis of interactions within the Centre, I also conducted twelve interviews with participants.

As the Centre's aims – as well as those of neighbourhood policies more generally – presuppose a lack of neighbourhood attachment among residents, I supplemented my visits to the Centre with the perspectives of other residents to understand how they experience their neighbourhood 'outside' of government interventions. Their stories also serve to contextualize the Centre as a (government) space producing specific roles, interactions and affects (cf. Lawson & Elwood, 2014). Between April 2015 and January 2016, the author and two student assistants conducted 22 in-depth interviews with residents who did not use the Centre. Leaflets in Dutch and English were distributed door-to-door explaining the study purpose – formulated broadly as 'what residents think of their neighbourhood' – and follow-up visits were made to houses which had received a leaflet. Interviews (which were recorded with residents' permission) lasted around an hour on average and discussed residents' connections to the neighbourhood as a physical and social place, their sense of belonging, and their experiences with formal and informal neighbourhood activities. Over half of all 34 interviewed residents had lived in the neighbourhood for at least ten years, and many previously lived in other Bijlmer neighbourhoods. Interviewees were highly diverse in terms of ethnic or national background: they originated from 18 different countries, notably Suriname (6) and Ghana (4), reflecting neighbourhood demographics. Among non-participating residents there were more 'native' white Dutch and Surinamese respondents, possibly due to their higher socioeconomic position, on average, and good command of Dutch, making them less likely to be in need of government assistance and consequently referred to the Centre. Indeed, all interviewed Centre participants were unemployed or marginally employed (e.g. on zero-hour contracts). In contrast, among non-participating interviewees seven were employed, mostly in jobs with low occupational status such as cashiers, cleaners, or construction workers, while nine were unemployed (four residents were retired, and two were students). Women were overrepresented, especially among Centre participants. Nine out of 23 interviewed women were single (grand)parents.

6.5.1 Diversity and freedom

In contrast to the policy narrative of a neighbourhood lacking in social cohesion, many residents feel very connected to the Bijlmer. Their sense of belonging exists alongside – or despite – negative experiences, such as having been a crime victim, or having been involved in negative interactions with neighbours. Selena, who

was born in Suriname and has lived in the Netherlands since 1994 and in the Bijlmer since 2009, prefers her neighbourhood to her boyfriend's even though her apartment is expensive:

I like it here, where I live. Look, my boyfriend lives in [nearby neighbourhood], and if I go there I feel, I can't stay long. I don't feel, I don't know, I just don't feel well (...) he also has a nice neighbourhood, but I just don't feel comfortable there. But when I'm home, I'm really happy to be here; I don't know. Even though it's expensive.

When she came to the Netherlands, Selena lived in a small town about an hour away from Amsterdam. She disliked this place so much that she moved in with her sister in Amsterdam while waiting for a social rental apartment. Even though her previous apartment was very affordable at 'only two hundred euros [a month]', she prefers the liveliness of her current neighbourhood:

There, living is quiet, not very busy. Here, I have the feeling that you are more alive. (Why is that?) I don't know, maybe because I like to have some noise [laughs]. Here I, I don't know I like living here (...) I feel comfortable here. Better than in [small town]. I belong here, so, it's buzzing, the hustle and bustle...

Like Selena, other residents frequently mentioned how they thought the Bijlmer differs from other parts of Amsterdam and the Netherlands. Statistically, the area is notable for its very low share of 'native' white Dutch³². While some residents describe the neighbourhood as multicultural, others do not because they see a few ethnic groups as dominant, or they think it is not 'truly' multicultural because there are so few white Dutch. Most residents, however, agree the neighbourhood's ethnic composition creates a special atmosphere and sociability. One of the ways in which this becomes visible is a higher tolerance for noisy neighbours. When I ask Reynaldo – who is of Dominican descent but was born in the rural north of the Netherlands – why he does not want to move away from the Bijlmer, he argues he feels at home because Bijlmer residents are more 'relaxed':

32 In the part of the Bijlmer where the research was conducted, around 14 per cent (2016) is 'native' Dutch (both parents are born in the Netherlands), much lower than in Amsterdam (48 per cent) and the Netherlands as a whole (78 per cent).

My other family lives in [province]; that's even further away, and I wouldn't feel at home there anymore. There it's so very different, a lot of Dutch people and quiet, if you throw a party you'll have the police at your door right away. Here you can have a party at your house until five in the morning, and nobody will come, no police.

Reynaldo – as do other interviewees – associates the ‘relaxed’ attitude of Bijlmer residents with a lack of ‘Dutch people’ and, conversely, the presence of many residents from the Caribbean and West-Africa and the cultural characteristics ascribed to them. Bijlmer residents are described as ‘in your face’ and (too) assertive, but also as easy-going, friendly, and lively. As Reynaldo notes, this is not just an attribute of the people but has become a characteristic of the neighbourhood itself. The remaining ‘Dutch people’ have also integrated into the local culture:

If I look at Dutch people in [province] and Dutch people here, the ones here are more, they are more used to foreign cultures (...) they've lived here for so long with, in this environment that they're used to it. And sometimes they also take over the others' behaviour. Yeah, I do notice that.

For some residents, living in a highly diverse neighbourhood means being able to build a community and support system of co-ethnics. Quantitative research has shown that living in a neighbourhood with a high share of co-ethnics increases migrants' sense of belonging (Finney & Jivraj, 2013) and social contacts within their own group (Vervoort et al., 2011). Sites of ethnic community concentration can become a ‘second place of origin’, as shown by Fortier (1999, p. 44) in her discussion of Little Italy in London. Grace, a first-generation migrant from Ghana, describes how, after the relationship for which she came to the Netherlands ended, she moved from a mid-sized city to Amsterdam and the Bijlmer to be among fellow Ghanaians:

I broke up with my boyfriend, yeah. So I have to get close to my people (yeah). That's why I came to Amsterdam [from mid-sized city]. (So there aren't a lot of Ghanaian people in [city]?) Yeah a lot, but not too many. But that place is not like here, big difference (...) In here, my neighbour is a Ghanaian; downstairs I have a Ghanaian. There no. (...) You feel home [here], but there not.

Apart from feelings of comfort and belonging based on the neighbourhood's liveliness and opportunities for socializing within one's ethnic group, diversity also engenders feelings of freedom and abstract solidarity. This resonates with Chimienti and Van Liempt (2015), who discuss the multiple pathways taken by Somali migrants as they negotiate living in ethnic concentration areas within the prototypically super-diverse city of London. In the present study, the dynamics of negotiating both ethnic community – whether experienced as comforting or stifling – and high ethnic diversity within one's direct environment were also evident and point to the importance of the neighbourhood as a site of both ethnic monoculture and multiculturalism. Interviewees from various backgrounds – including Surinamese and Ghanaian residents, but also those whose ethnic or racial group forms a small minority in the neighbourhood – talk about how the neighbourhood allows you to be yourself in terms of appearance, but also in terms of cultural and religious practices. Contrary to other parts of Amsterdam, in the Bijlmer they do not stand out because 'everybody is from somewhere [else]'. Shayma, who is Algerian and has lived in the Bijlmer for sixteen years, describes how she went from viewing the neighbourhood as 'black' – making her acutely aware of her racial minority status – to a place where she can 'be herself':

In the beginning, I noticed it was a black neighbourhood. Yes, in the beginning I thought 'I will live here temporarily, and then I'll just move somewhere to a family house' and such. But yes, after a few years I couldn't leave anymore, I liked it too much. Strangely enough, I feel safe here. Safer than in other neighbourhoods (...) It's a nice neighbourhood. It's cosy. And what I notice here is you can be yourself without taking other people into account, you understand? Of course you do take other people into account, but regarding being yourself, I don't think you have to here. You understand? Maybe if I'm in another neighbourhood I'll be on my guard, I can't be myself.

Not only the social structure but also the built environment generates a sense of freedom and the possibility to socialize on one's own terms. For Austrian Helga and her Dutch husband, who have lived in their apartment complex since 1984, the sense of freedom and privacy are major advantages to living in the high-rise flats which policy-makers once decried as causing alienation and antisocial behaviour:

They've now built a lot of houses to buy and many low-rises. I wouldn't want to live there (...) it's small, it's cramped. You look into your neighbours' garden. Well look, we have a very large balcony. We like to sit outside and sometimes we sit; we eat breakfast outside if the weather is nice. Wonderful! I can see Abcoude [village near Amsterdam], you see the church tower of Abcoude, I hear the birds singing and so on. And nobody looks inside my house.

Living in a high-rise flat inspires feelings of freedom and (self-chosen) isolation, while it also offers opportunities for experiencing others and the Other at a distance, as the story of Jan, another long-term resident who is 'native' Dutch, illustrates. Throughout the interview, Jan emphasizes his dislike of 'social control' and his preference to keep fellow residents at a distance. Like Helga, he appreciates the view from his apartment's large balcony, stating 'the city is at my feet'. At the same time, this balcony allows him a glimpse into his neighbours' lives. Recounting his observations of his downstairs neighbours, who sometimes hold meetings in traditional dress, he notes he 'doesn't have to buy a ticket to Africa'. While this remark might seem sarcastic, underlying it is an appreciation of diversity that allows for 'doing your own thing':

You see people with their ethnic background pursuing their things. I can also pursue my ethnic things without having to wonder all the time what others will think. Walking my dogs, working at night...

Rather than experiencing diversity negatively – as causing a lack of social cohesion or contributing to feelings of alienation – residents value diversity as offering potential ethnic community but also a sense of freedom and tolerance. Their appreciation of the Bijlmer as 'urban' – especially compared to former places of residence which are more rural and/or white – contrasts with the kind of neighbourhood policy-makers seek to create. Clearly, these residents appreciate exactly those elements that are decried in social cohesion and citizenship policies.

6.5.2 Informal acts of engagement

Residents also described various forms of informal, everyday engagement. Such acts of engagement exist outside the purview of government institutions and are often, but not always, organized in networks of co-ethnics or around a common religious denomination. Although falling short of the district's definition of participation,

these nevertheless result in informal networks of care, support, and mutual understanding. They are not geared towards learning skills or 'employability' but address everyday needs, such as sharing food or repairing bikes:

There is another neighbour, she is Antillean, she can bake very well so you know, sometimes she makes cakes and brings them around. Then we have a bicycle repair guy (...) he just likes making bikes so if yours is broken, you can bring it to him. Probably he's asking for a little bit of money now, though, because of the crisis (Damien, Surinamese, grew up in the neighbourhood).

Two interviewees are housebound due to chronic illness and depend on the help of family members and neighbours to help with shopping or watch their children. For Selena, the support of her (Moroccan and Surinamese) neighbours is an important reason not to move:

The people here are very nice. They really help me, you know. They also help with the children when they see I'm dead tired, exhausted (...) And that's also why I won't move away anytime soon, because I don't know if I'd find that kind of help in another neighbourhood.

Another perceived benefit of informal engagement is developing intercultural competencies. The previous section discussed how ethnic diversity creates room for both making and avoiding social contacts. Many residents also mention having learned about other cultural practices, for example regarding socializing, cooking, child rearing, or house decoration. This knowledge can be seen as demonstrating cultural sensitivity or perhaps ordinary cosmopolitanism (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002). I argue it can also be understood as a form of informal engagement, as knowing the habits of fellow residents not only potentially increases one's sense of neighbourhood attachment, but also offers opportunities to discover common ground. Yvette, a first generation Surinamese migrant and long-time Bijlmer resident, recounts how she ran into her (Ghanaian) neighbour – with whom she did not have much contact before – while on holiday in Ghana. This accidental meeting resulted in a trip where she discovered the shared roots of Ghanaian and Surinamese culture and history:

[We met] my neighbour there by chance and we had an amazing holiday. Because without her we would have stayed in Accra but because she was there we went to Kumasi, we went to Elmina [port town which formed the centre of the Dutch slave trade] to see where those slaves came from, all those things (...) But for us, it was also, you know they say because of slavery, we came from Africa. Because I was like 'I want you to talk to me and understand me because all the habits you have are similar to those I know and I want to say that to you but you don't understand me and I don't understand you.'

Yvette's discovery of cultural similarities fostered a sense of connection to Ghana and Africa as her ancestral home. At the same time, this shared history intensified the relationship with her neighbour and increased her sense of belonging to the Bijlmer as well (cf. Balkenhol, 2011). Residents thus engage with the neighbourhood in a variety of ways, demonstrating the emotional attachments many residents have developed with the neighbourhood and their neighbours. However, these fall short of the more 'thick' forms of community envisioned by policy-makers.

Some interviewees did indicate a willingness to participate in existing government projects or had plans to start their own project. However, on the whole, residents reject the district administration's view of participation. Some point to public investments in the nearby business district and shopping centre and support for student housing in the neighbourhood, and argue they should receive similar (i.e. larger-scale and more structural) support. Moreover, the multiple deprivation faced by many residents means they spend their days tending to everyday needs, leaving less time and energy for 'formal' participation. For example, one interviewee participated in a weekly walking group but decided to stop when her daughter found a job so she could watch her grandchildren. Similarly, when I attended the neighbourhood Centre's end-of-year celebration – a morning of playing games and exchanging small presents followed by lunch – few regular participants were there as it turned out that the municipality was handing out gift vouchers for children's clothes to parents near the poverty line. These examples demonstrate that non-participation can be a rational choice in a context of multiple deprivation (Mathers et al., 2008).

6.6 Practising aspirational citizenship in a neighbourhood centre

Given residents' ambivalent position towards 'formal' participation, local policy officials look to the neighbourhood Centre to bring residents together and 'activate' them in a low-threshold manner. Central to the Centre's functioning are its two front line workers. Coordinator Celia is a middle-aged woman of mixed Surinamese-Dutch descent who used to be a primary school teacher before quitting due to her frustration over the administrative burden of her job and ending up on welfare. Now, she is the Centre's primary contact person and also teaches Dutch language and literacy classes. The other staff member, Emma, is around the same age and 'native' white Dutch. She hosts twice-weekly activity mornings during which participants engage in various crafts such as hairdressing, sewing, or knitting and are expected to engage with and learn from each other. All activities take place in a large shared space, but participants nevertheless tend to socialize in small groups based on pre-existing friendships or a common language. For example, on the left side of the room there is a makeshift barbershop where a group of Dominican women chat loudly in Spanish while creating complicated hairdos. At a table to the right sit a mixed group of African and a few South-Asian women who are engaged in various crafts. Ewa, who is Polish and has been sent to the centre to improve her Dutch, complains to me that she feels excluded: 'Now on Mondays, there are so many Ghanaian people, so many African people. And these people talk in their own language. When I come, nobody talks to me.'

While it is true that participants tended to socialize side-by-side rather than seek out interactions with strangers, the shared activity space arguably functions as a 'zone of encounter' (Wood & Landry, 2007) where 'the simple fact of regular togetherness' (Wise, 2004, p. 7) allows for fleeting contacts across difference. For example, participants were generally aware of the comings and goings of regulars and sometimes inquired after those who had been absent for some time. More important for participants, however, is the Centre's function as another place to go to apart from their home, a place where they can perform regular household activities in the company of others and perhaps with equipment (sewing machines, hairstyling tools) that they do not possess themselves. Josette, a woman in her forties of Antillean descent, visits the centre for this reason:

Well, I don't have anything to do, right? If I don't have anything to do, I think that's dangerous. I've been at home [unemployed] for three years now. So I'm pretty happy I can spend a few hours here (...) I'd do [sew] my curtains at home, too. Now I think oh, I can come here to work.

This example illustrates what Jupp (2008) calls the ‘feeling of participation’ among participants of a ‘successful’ community group in Stoke-on-Trent. She describes forms of everyday sociability that depend on ostensibly mundane emotions such as ‘feeling at home’ and ‘helping out’. While she contrasts this insider perspective with literature that regards participation as ‘[shaping] subjectivities in line with state discourses of citizenship’ (p. 332), others have pointed out that the act of constituting a particular kind of environment (cosy, homely) is also a form of governance in which local officials aim to generate certain affective dispositions. For example, Horton and Kraftl (2009) discuss how employees of a Centre designed to improve the well-being of children in deprived neighbourhoods adopted particular emotional and bodily dispositions to be perceived as welcoming and sympathetic by local mothers. Similarly, urban policy officials in a deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in the Netherlands created ‘cosy atmospheres’ to generate feelings of community and neighbourhood attachment (De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016).

Celia and Emma also attempted to create a welcoming atmosphere, both through their body language and by sharing information about their personal lives. With regular (female) participants, they often hug in greeting or put an arm around someone going through a tough time. Especially Celia also shares information about herself as a way of connecting with participants. In one instance during a language class, the conversation turned to family relations. Celia draws participants’ family trees on the whiteboard, meanwhile explaining the Dutch words for different family relationships. She also draws her own tree, writing down the names of her parents and siblings. Angela, who is Ghanaian, remarks that one of Celia’s brothers has a Ghanaian name. The two women engage in a discussion on heritage and slavery, before ending on a lighter note by comparing recipes of Ghanaian and Surinamese crawfish dishes. These kinds of conversations hold the potential for engagements across difference in ways that unsettle previous identifications. In this case, the acknowledgement of shared ancestry (like Yvette’s Ghanaian holiday) instilled empathy and also facilitated subsequent conversations on everyday practices – such as different cooking styles – which often function as banal markers of Otherness (Haldrup et al., 2006) but can now (also) be approached from a perspective of potential familiarity.

Such exchanges do not only result in connections across ethnic or national difference, but also destabilize established roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’, placing the discussion partners on a more equal footing. Participants frequently made efforts to this effect by bringing food, small gifts, or in one case Christmas cards to class. Such gifts underscore the personal relations formed during activities and

recast these as based on reciprocal exchange between equals (as noted by Mauss, 2002 [1950], p. 83) regarding the relevance of gift exchange relations to Western societies, ‘the unreciprocated gift still makes the person who accepted it inferior’).

While Celia shares personal anecdotes during classes to create a welcoming setting, these interactions are not merely instrumental means to create a certain affective atmosphere (Horton & Kraftl, 2009). They are experienced by staff members themselves as personal and emotional, and as sometimes too much so. Building relationships with participants can complicate professional boundaries, resulting in feelings of anxiety (Turner, 2009). For example, Celia notes that although she does not mind telling participants about her family, she dislikes being asked why she herself does not have children. Thus, interactions within the Centre generated both positive and negative emotions. While this can be seen as a form of governance where staff members strategically stimulate desired feelings and affects to create a sense of community (Conradson, 2003; De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016), these staff members themselves also experience ‘feelings of emotional and experiential proximity’ (Jupp, 2013, p. 540) in their interactions with participants.

6.6.1 Willing and unwilling participants

The Centre’s staff not only supervise activities and teach language skills, but also try to instil in participants a sense of responsibility for their own lives and – by extension – for the neighbourhood. As such, their work has clear moralizing and civilizing undertones. In an opinion article entitled ‘Forced participation works and is necessary’, the initiator of the ‘neighbourhood work rooms’ argues his centres can break a ‘downward spiral’ of multiple deprivation and intergenerational transmission of poverty, clearly illustrating Raco’s (2009) observations about aspirational citizenship. Rather than ‘nudging’ residents towards participation, the initiator suggests participants need to be made to overcome an initial period of unwillingness. The Centre’s staff occasionally voiced similar sentiments about ‘unwilling’ participants:

[paraphrased from fieldwork notes] *I’m tired of the spoiled people here. Many of those African women came here years ago, they worked hard in shitty jobs, cleaning or in hotels. And they’re all single mums, well officially they are, in reality... now they have back problems and are on welfare. Some of them have some talent, well they all have some skills, but they’re afraid to do anything with them. They refuse, always afraid to lose their [welfare] benefits.*

Such quotations clearly reflect a 'culture of poverty' narrative (Lewis, 1969) among staff members, which considers poverty to be perpetuated through a (sub)culture of low aspirations and moral slackness. The Centre employees would occasionally point out participants' lack of 'proper' manners and considered it part of their role to educate participants on 'appropriate' attitudes and behaviour. This includes setting strict rules of conduct – being on time, cleaning up after activities – and reproaching participants if they shake hands 'the wrong way', chew gum, or ask after topics 'the' Dutch would deem private (e.g. personal finances, marriage status, or religious beliefs).

Moreover, staff members often discussed participants' personality characteristics, describing them as shy or friendly, but also back-handed or unhygienic. These qualifications of participants' demeanour also play a role in the Centre's quarterly evaluations. For example, one form reads: '[name], Sierra Leone, 16 years in the Netherlands, single mother of four children' and goes on to characterize her as 'open and spontaneous, her Dutch is improving, she is good at braiding [hair]'. These kinds of evaluations assess progress in terms of language skills but also judge participants' level of integration in terms of the behaviours that would be expected of them in 'mainstream' Dutch society.

However, staff members also criticize the Centre's ambitions, especially regarding labour market participation. Both Emma and Celia are precariously employed and they themselves have an income near the poverty line, which creates empathy and the awareness that, based on participants' language skills, qualifications, and family and health circumstances only a few can realistically be expected to find a job. For example, ignoring the targets set by the district administration, Celia has decided not to aim for a specific skill level but to decide on a day-to-day basis what added value she can bring, not just in terms of learning Dutch but also relating to general knowledge or simply socializing. As such, she tries to distance herself from the policy frameworks in which the Centre is embedded and to articulate alternative and broader objectives. Clearly, as shown by studies of how volunteers (Williams, Cloke, May, & Goodwin, 2016) and welfare professionals (Lawson & Elwood, 2014) encounter poverty, the ethical and political positions of local staff are complex and often ambiguous. They are informed by the 'sociability and experiential texture' (Conradson, 2003, p. 1978) that emerges as a result of encounters between participants and between participants and staff.

Staff members' ambiguous relation to the aims of their intervention becomes apparent in the distinctions they draw between participants who 'really try' and those who are less cooperative. While in the former case they are sympathetic,

the latter evoke narratives of neighbourhood and cultural pathology. For example, during one language class a new volunteer, a Surinamese man in his fifties who himself lives in the neighbourhood, aggressively addresses Angela, asking her how long she has lived in the Netherlands, which turns out to be twenty-six years. He then launches into a long monologue on the need to learn Dutch and 'integrate' in Dutch society, while Angela appears embarrassed and withdrawn. Later, Celia tells me his behaviour shocked her. While she herself has bemoaned the lack of progress of some of her students on multiple occasions, she states she hopes Angela is not scared off and will continue taking lessons, as she is a great student who came to the classes out of her own accord (i.e. she was not sent there by the municipality). This last part is important as Celia's appreciation of Angela's voluntary presence underlines the distinction drawn between 'expectational' and 'aspirational' citizens (Raco, 2009), and also echoes familiar differentiations between the deserving and undeserving poor.

6.7 Discussion

This chapter explored how urban policies that formulate normative notions of active citizenship relate to residents' emotional geographies of belonging. Discourses that frame citizenship in moral terms – distinguishing 'good', 'aspirational', or 'deserving' citizens and dividing rights and responsibilities accordingly – have received critical scrutiny, including their geographical application in the form of physical and social interventions in deprived neighbourhoods. In contrast, less attention has been paid to these neighbourhoods as places where residents encounter 'civilizing' policies.

This paper asks how the key tropes and anxieties of place-based urban policies – which describe residents of diverse and deprived urban neighbourhoods as alienated from each other as well as from 'mainstream', white middle-class society – align with 'perspectives from below', based on the narratives of neighbourhood residents and staff members about their (emotionally charged) understandings and valuations of community and participation. Starting from the perspective that encounters and interactions are context-specific, scripted through space (Lawson & Elwood, 2014), I have compared three different spaces: the abstract neighbourhood as it is represented by street-level bureaucrats working for the local government, the experienced neighbourhood as it is narrated by residents, and the neighbourhood Centre as the location where these two perspectives intersect.

Neighbourhood policies in Amsterdam Southeast primarily focus on stimulating residents' participation in projects that foster meaningful interaction between ethnic groups. Fortier (2010) points to the pre-occupation of policies concerning social cohesion and participation with interethnic contacts. What she calls the 'feel-good politics of cohesion' (p. 5) privileges bridging over bonding and individuals over (ethnic) community. Therefore, this kind of participation is emphatically not directed towards stimulating intra-ethnic sociability nor towards more adversarial forms of resident engagement – such as political mobilization. Instead, street-level bureaucrats were concerned with fostering 'correct' ways of community building and participation, which are thought to decrease liveability problems and increase residents' 'employability'. As such, these policies can be understood as a means to control these areas and their inhabitants (Uitermark, 2014) rather than empower them.

In contrast, residents articulated a very different perspective. Where policies seem to imagine the ideal neighbourhood as a close-knit, village-like community, residents appreciated the area's urbanity. Ethnic diversity and the built environment, in particular the high-rise flats, engendered feelings of freedom, tolerance, and pleasant anonymity. Residents' interactions as well as their engagement in acts of informal care and support are often (but not always) based in ethnic or cultural communities – reflecting attachments to other places such as one's home country or to larger religious or cultural networks – but these are also grounded in the neighbourhood itself. The Bijlmer therefore can represent both a place of multiculturalism and a site of ethnic community (cf. Chimienti & Van Liempt, 2015). The importance of 'in-group' forms of attachment as well as the sociability engendered by ethnic diversity are largely overlooked or discounted by government institutions.

Diverging understandings of participation and engagement collide in the Centre and become evident in the emotionally charged encounters between participants and staff. Social workers in the Centre employed emotional dispositions as strategic resources to make participants feel at home (Conradson, 2003; Horton & Kraftl, 2009). However, these dispositions were never merely strategic. Fostering personal relations also deeply affected staff members as they experienced closeness or distance to participants, demonstrating that 'the processes and outcomes of neighbourhood policy interventions are unavoidably bound up with these complex emotional geographies' (Jupp, 2013, p. 532). In some cases, the personal character of their work resulted in encounters that created empathy and in which staff members countered culture of poverty narratives (Lawson & Elwood, 2014), for example by reframing their work in the Centre as creating 'added value' for participants, rather

than a singular focus on labour market perspectives. On other occasions, emotional dynamics worked to reinforce ideas about the undeserving poor, which were to a large extent informed by judgments of character and behaviour – including judgements of ‘appropriate’ motivations and adherence to white middle-class norms of interaction. The ambiguity of these encounters – creating empathetic and progressive understandings on the one hand, and reinforcing normative and moralizing urban policies on the other hand – is built into the mission statement of the Centre itself as it seeks to simultaneously empower vulnerable residents and force them to participate. This coexistence of punitive and supportive measures has been observed at the level of the city (DeVerteuil, 2014), but these findings show that similar paradoxical dynamics exist in micro spaces of policy interventions. The creation of personal and potentially reciprocal relationships seems to be a key characteristic of these interventions, whereby social workers function as brokers (Koster, 2014) mediating access to state resources. In the present case, staff working in the Centre occupied an ambiguous position: while they implement policies that project white middle-class norms onto non-white and deprived areas, they themselves are arguably closer – in terms of their socioeconomically marginal position if not their cultural identifications – to their participants than to this white middle class. In conclusion, encounters in these spaces do not simply reproduce state discourses of good citizenship, but neither do they necessarily challenge them.

The centrality of personal relationships within spaces of government intervention enables the rise of a governmentality that is both neoliberal and communitarianist (Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010), whereby the inhabitants of deprived areas are cultivated as aspirational and entrepreneurial subjects. This chapter argues for a critical engagement with such policies, taking into account their neoliberal and racialized underpinnings (De Koning, 2015), which present diverse and deprived neighbourhoods as spaces of alienation while discounting or overwriting local place meanings and attachments. However, I argue it is equally important not to lose sight of the potential of participatory policy interventions to function as spaces of sociability and care (Jupp, 2008). The ambiguous emotionality inherent in residents’ emotional geographies of belonging as well as in the interactions between social workers and participants might provide a starting point to reframe current ideals of neighbourhood community and engagement and arrive at more empowering and progressive forms of urban governance.