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Creating active citizens? Emotional geographies of citizenship in a diverse and deprived neighbourhood

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Abstract
National and local governments in Western Europe formulate normative notions of active citizenship to regulate the attitudes and behaviours of their subjects. Focusing in particular on diverse and deprived urban neighbourhoods, local interventions target residents’ presumed lack of attachment to the neighbourhood and their alienation from ‘mainstream’ white middle-class society. This paper argues that – contrary to policy assumptions – residents are emotionally attached to and engaged with their neighbourhood. However, their everyday practices of citizenship fall short of the standards prescribed by policy-makers. These two perspectives intersect and clash in the local neighbourhood centre. Staff members of this semi-governmental intervention mediate different citizenship conceptions by creating personal relations with participants while simultaneously reinforcing dominant norms. The findings highlight the messy and ambiguous reality of neighbourhood governance and underscore that local understandings of citizenship can simultaneously work with and against policy frameworks.

Keywords
Citizenship, neighbourhood belonging, governmentality, urban policy, emotional geographies

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 on the district’s tasks and role but also demands a contemporary [Dutch: eigentijds] concept of citizenship. (Amsterdam Southeast, 2011: 1)

Place-based interventions in deprived urban neighbourhoods in Western Europe often employ highly normative notions of active citizenship (De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016; Koster, 2015). As the above quotation shows for the case of Amsterdam Southeast or the Bijlmer, local policy-makers exhort residents to ‘show more interest’ in their neighbourhood and view it as a ‘shared responsibility’. This proposed ‘contemporary’ conception of citizenship goes beyond formal membership of the nation-state to include desirable ways of relating to the neighbourhood. Such substantive 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 and Duyvendak, 2016; Fortier, 2010).

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 their intended subjects (Flint, 2018; Raco, 2009). Therefore, this paper asks how urban policies that portray residents of diverse and deprived neighbourhoods as lacking in active citizenship align with perspectives from below, based on the emotional attachments and everyday practices of neighbourhood residents. I focus on the Bijlmer, an ethnically and racially diverse and socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which has been subjected to policy interventions that aim to stimulate active citizenship among residents. Starting from the perspective that citizenship performances are context-specific, scripted through space (Lawson and Elwood, 2014), I compare three different spaces: the abstract neighbourhood as it is represented by officials working for the local government, the lived neighbourhood as it is experienced by residents, and a neighbourhood centre created by the local government as the location where these two perspectives intersect.

In the following, I briefly discuss the literature on citizenship as a moral category within urban policy, where it is employed to incorporate and/or control marginalized and racialized populations and places. I relate this to studies that take a more subject-centric perspective, by looking at how individuals perform citizenship through their everyday activities and emotional connections with others. As this study will show, many residents experienced a strong sense of attachment to the Bijlmer that fuelled their engagement in informal citizenship practices. Their sense of belonging stands in stark contrast to the policy narrative of a neighbourhood lacking engaged and socially responsible residents. Emotional dynamics were not only “central to understanding residents’ relation” to their neighbourhood, but also and especially their experience of the neighbourhood centre as a semi-governmental space designed to stimulate citizenship practices in line with policy objectives. While emotional and experiential proximity between staff and residents within the centre allowed for relationships based on notions of care and sociability, rather than judgment (Jupp, 2013; Lawson and Elwood, 2014), emotionally charged interactions also reinforced moralizing interpretations of citizenship. As Staeheli (2008: 16) notes, ‘the reworking of citizenship through community by citizens does not necessarily imply resistance to particular government policies or to formulations of citizenship’. In fact, governing in collaboration with citizens may reproduce rather than subvert socio-spatial inequalities (Bartels, 2018). The findings point to the importance of deconstructing neighbourhood governance by looking at its embodiment in the actions of local staff, and the need to take into account the role of emotions within policy implementation (Flint, 2018; Jupp, 2013; Mountz, 2003).
Urban policy and the good citizen

Governmental efforts to regulate the behaviour of their subjects are socially and geographically uneven: they target some groups and places more than others. In particular, residents of migrant background are often expected to demonstrate good citizenship qualities by being self-reliant and taking advantage of opportunities for social mobility (Hoekstra, 2015; Kofman, 2005). In this respect, Schinkel and Van Houdt (2010: 697) talk about the ‘twin process’ of moralization and responsibilization of citizenship to which residents of migrant background in the Netherlands are subjected, which combines a communitarian focus on their assimilation into the Dutch national culture with an emphasis on individual responsibility and participation. Consequently, Dutch integration policies see active citizenship as a solution to issues such as failed integration, low social cohesion, and unsafety in migrant-concentrated neighbourhoods (Hoekstra, 2017; Verloo, 2017).

Contemporary urban policies in Western Europe similarly focus on interventions in ‘problematic’ places (Cochrane, 2007), notably ethnic or racially diverse and socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods. Studies employing a governmentality lens argue that such policies delineate marginalized and racialized areas 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 residents to engage with each other and with governing institutions to improve their personal circumstances (Marinetto, 2003; Raco, 2009). The latter types of strategies are increasingly framed by policy-makers in terms of active citizenship (De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016; Koster, 2015; Marinetto, 2003).

The notion of active citizenship thus encapsulates the contradictory demand that residents become active agents who desire autonomy and responsibility, yet at the same time enact their subjectivity in accordance with state aims and interests. For example, in his discussion of welfare state reform in the UK, Raco (2009: 438) 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 responsibilized to strive towards self-reliance and participation in white middle-class mainstream society. Although they claim to realize empowerment, these policies have a strong top-down, normative bent: they seek to ‘infrastructure the social’ to ‘provide specific paths along which life can and should be lived’ (Birk, 2017: 774, emphasis in original). As noted by Cruikshank (1999), empowerment then becomes a measure of how well residents are able to govern themselves. Such an approach privileges individual characteristics over structural explanations of social problems, and may consequently result in an increased conditionality of citizenship. Those who do not want, or are not able to participate in government-sanctioned ways may then become seen as problematic and subjected to punitive measures (McKee, 2011).

Emotional geographies of citizenship

Contrary to the perspective on citizenship as a means for the state to impose a moral framework and discipline its subjects, several scholars have proposed to view citizenship as something citizens practice in their everyday life (e.g. Askins, 2016; Staeheli, 2008; Staeheli et al., 2012; Verloo, 2017). For example, Staeheli and colleagues’ conception of
ordinary citizenship ‘fuses legal structures, normative orders, and the practices and experiences of individuals, social groups and communities’ (Staeheli et al., 2012: 631) and as such it is ‘inseparable from the geographies of communities and the networks and relationships that link them’ (641). Similarly, Askins (2016: 515) develops the term emotional citizenry which she describes as a ‘process, embedded in the complexities of places, lives and feelings’ and which implies a desire to ‘(re)make society at the local level, beyond normalised productions and practices of citizenship as bounded in/outsid[ers]’. Affective relationships to others and to place are thus seen as a central element of everyday practices of citizenship.

The role of emotions also figures prominently in work that seeks to understand how everyday citizenship practices relate to formal policy strategies. In their editorial on emotional geographies, Anderson and Smith (2001) critically discuss the ‘policy turn’ within geography for its relative neglect of how emotions shape the formulation, implementation, and consequences of public policy. Government institutions do not simply implement policies but also mobilize values, affects, and moral judgements (Fassin, 2015; Flint, 2018). Fassin (2015) argues that the moral dimension of institutions can be understood through their moral economy, or the values and affects around a policy issue that are the result of a particular time period and social environment. At the same time, institutions possess a moral subjectivity expressed in the ethical practices of individual employees, who often have the autonomy to decide in a particular instance whether and how to enforce official regulations. Studies of immigration officials (Mountz, 2003) and welfare office staff (Lawson and Elwood, 2014) demonstrate that how employees of government institutions relate to their subjects depends on their own social positioning, and that their views may align with but also contradict policy. For example, Mountz (2003) discusses how government officials come to identify with undocumented migrants, bringing them to question narratives of bogus asylum seekers, while Lawson and Elwood (2014) show how middle-class professionals’ judgements of the legitimacy of welfare claims are informed by their own knowledge of local labour market conditions. These studies therefore direct our attention to the individuals involved in policy implementation, highlighting that ‘it is not just the state which dictates a policy to its agents, it is also the agents themselves who make the policy of the state’ (Fassin, 2015: 5).

At the other side of implementation, there is the question of how residents position themselves in relation to policy demands of active citizenship. Isin (2008: 38) proposes a focus on acts of citizenship, or the events and everyday habits through which subjects articulate claims and form subjectivities. Acts of citizenship bring into being ‘activist citizens’ who break with prevailing practices to claim their rights, and thereby enact themselves as citizens. In contrast, ‘active citizens’ adhere to the role carved out for them in policy narratives and do not seek to change the boundaries of citizenship itself. Others have identified ways of doing citizenship that operate in between acceptance and contestation of the status quo. For example, Flint (2018) discusses how subjects of conditional welfare regimes in the UK accept government rationales of self-reliance and responsibility, yet at the same time critique the lack of attention for structural causes of marginality. Similarly, McKee (2011: 8) identifies tenants who ‘problematised empowerment, [yet] also recognized the benefits this offered and aspired to maximise these’. Whilst they fall short of being acts of citizenship in the way proposed by Isin (2008), residents in these studies nonetheless pushed back against government frameworks in pragmatic ways, through everyday acts.

Setting the scene: ‘Reclaiming’ Amsterdam’s deprived Bijlmer area

Described as the ‘quintessential symbol of urban decline’ (Aalbers, 2011: 1696), the Amsterdam area called Bijlmer or Bijlmermeer is one of the most stigmatized urban areas
in the Netherlands. Built in the 1960s and 1970s to the southeast of Amsterdam, it was an experiment in social engineering following modernist planning principles. Light, spacious apartments in high-rise apartment blocks, surrounded by greenery 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 many apartments remained empty from the beginning, causing a downward spiral of criminality and even fewer inhabitants (Helleman and Wassenberg, 2004). 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). During the 1980s, it increasingly became a refuge for marginalized and undocumented residents who could live there in relative anonymity. Consequently, the Bijlmer gained a reputation as a place of dangerous, racialized deprivation, as newspapers frequently referred to it as the ‘Dutch ghetto’ (Aalbers, 2011: 1698).

Discussions about the demolition and urban renewal of the Bijlmer started in the mid-1980s, although the area’s large-scale remaking did not take place until the 1990s. Central to the urban renewal operation was the perception that the high-rise flats and their semi-public spaces (including parking garages, storage spaces, and walkways) resulted in a lack of defensible space and thereby contributed to the existing social problems (Helleman and Wassenberg, 2004). Therefore, around half of the original high-rises were demolished and replaced with single-family housing and mid-rise apartment buildings to attract and maintain different resident types, including the upcoming Surinamese-Dutch middle-class. Notwithstanding these efforts to ‘reclaim’ the Bijlmer in both 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 and Jaffe, 2017) and in the media. However, the Bijlmer is also widely recognized as a point of positive identification for black Amsterdammers, who experience a strong sense of attachment to the Bijlmer as a place where black culture is dominant and mainstream (Aalbers, 2011).

The part of the Bijlmer where this research was conducted mostly consists of high-rises that have been touched up but not renovated substantially, 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. As such, it has been subjected to a multitude of small-scale policy interventions. I look at the effects of one recently (2014) started intervention: neighbourhood centre De Handreiking [hereafter also referred to as ‘the Centre’]. This type of centre, of which there are three in the Bijlmer area, are called ‘neighbourhood work centres’ [Dutch: buurtwerkkamers]. Although a private initiative, the centres are financed by the district administration and several local housing associations, and many participants are referred to the Centre by the municipality as a part of job training or civic integration classes. As a semi-governmental space designed to guide poor residents towards labour market participation, it is an example of what Lawson and Elwood (2014: 213) call the ‘governmentalization of social life through specific projects and practices (…) as state or non-governmental actors aspire to shape the life of poor others’.

Between April 2015 and January 2016, the author and two student assistants conducted 34 interviews with neighbourhood residents, of whom 12 did and 22 did not visit the Centre. Visitors of the Centre were recruited during activities, while non-participants were reached through the distribution of flyers in Dutch and English followed by door-to-door calls. Interviews were recorded with residents’ permission and lasted around an hour on average.
The interviews discussed residents’ connections to the neighbourhood as a physical and social place and their experiences with formal and informal neighbourhood activities. Over half of the 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 their self-identified ethnic or national background: they originated from 18 different countries, notably Suriname (6) and Ghana (4), reflecting neighbourhood demographics. More women (23) than men (11) were interviewed. Nine women and one man were single (grand)parents. All interviewed Centre participants were unemployed or marginally employed (e.g. on zero-hour contracts), while among non-participating interviewees seven out of 22 were employed, mostly in jobs with low occupational status such as cashiers, cleaners, or construction workers (nine were unemployed, four were retired, and two were students). ‘Native’ white Dutch¹ and Surinamese-Dutch respondents were underrepresented among Centre participants, possibly due to their on average higher socio-economic position and good command of Dutch, making them less likely to be in need of government assistance and consequently referred to the Centre.

Next to the interviews, I conducted participant observation at the Centre between September and December 2015. Participant observation allowed me to capture the Centre as an organizational space with a particular ‘experiential texture’ (Conradson, 2003: 1978), constituted by the everyday interactions between participants and between participants and staff and the emotions these engendered. I attended activities two to three times a week and held numerous informal conversations with participants, staff members, and volunteers. During some activities (e.g. Dutch language classes), I functioned as assistant teacher by taking notes and helping lead group conversations. During other activities, I participated more informally, for example, by cooking or doing crafts together with other participants. I noted down my observations afterwards, and used these as input for the interviews with Centre participants when possible. Finally, the research material includes interviews with three policy officials of the Southeast city district (two of whom were interviewed twice), three social workers active in the neighbourhood, and the founder and manager of the ‘neighbourhood work centres’.

The institutional perspective: Fostering cohesion through active citizenship

While the Bijlmer’s reputation is still mostly negative, the interviewed policy officials offered a more nuanced perspective. They expressed concern about the neighbourhood’s apparent problems, yet also described these problems as exaggerated. For example, the neighbourhood’s area coordinator and its participation manager explained that two earlier reports commissioned by the district administration had sketched a largely negative picture of the area. Poverty and criminality would cause tensions between population groups, and residents were depicted as unwilling to address these issues. While the district officials believed these reports placed undue emphasis on a few incidents, they still identified many problems: residents were generally poor and liveability and social cohesion low. Referring to the functionalist naming of Bijlmer neighbourhoods where all street names start with the same letter, the participation manager argued that the neighbourhood only existed as an administrative entity: ‘there’s no neighbourhood, it just so happens that all the street names start with H’ (Interview, February 2014). Two interviewed neighbourhood social workers agreed with this assessment, with one even stating that social cohesion is ‘non-existent’ (Interview, June 2015). Ethnic diversity and a lack of interethnic contacts were blamed
for this, as the area coordinator noted that, in contrast to other parts of the city that are less diverse ‘the community here is passive and doesn’t have something to bind them together’ (Interview, February 2014).

Therefore, district policy-makers hoped that stimulating resident participation would generate social cohesion and create a true civil society, as is stated in one of several white papers on resident participation:

The district council and board of [Amsterdam] Southeast attach great importance to the societal participation of residents. The ambitions in this area are high (…) This participation must not only have an individual nature, but partly also a collective one. It ensures that a society with active citizens is created, who are mindful of their environment and fellow residents: a Civil Society. (Amsterdam Southeast, 2012: 1)

The neighbourhood’s participation manager also emphasized the centrality of participation in the district’s policy vision, while simultaneously noting that professional support is needed to show residents ‘what is expected’ when they become active citizens:

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. 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. (Interview, February 2014)

The interviewed district officials viewed the Centre as a promising way to realize the districts’ ambitions regarding participation, as it focused on activating residents rather than simply providing activities, thus requiring participants to take on a more active role (Interview, May 2014). In addition, the ‘neighbourhood work centres’ emphasize proximity and local attachment as unique selling points, which would increase social cohesion. One of the Centre’s flyers describes the added value of its methodology as follows:

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

According to coordinator Celia, the Centre’s name De Handreiking, which roughly translates to the outstretched, guiding, or helping hand, was chosen to reflect neighbourhood embeddedness (starting with ‘H’, like the street names) and the desire of staff to reach out to residents. While the founder of the neighbourhood work centres stresses its empowering potential (Interview, May 2014), his methodology also fits the moralizing undertones of district policies on participation and citizenship. For example, in an opinion article entitled ‘Forced participation works and is necessary’, he argues that ‘the downward spiral that is a result of a combination of problems [relating to] social welfare use can only be broken by drawing people out of their isolation, if necessary through mandatory participation [within government projects]’. The vision on participation as expressed by the Centre as well as in district policies more generally thus reveals a central paradox: it encourages self-reliance and initiative on the part of residents yet at the same time specifies how and where participation should take place.
The resident perspective: Emotional geographies of belonging and engagement

Attachment to a diverse neighbourhood

In contrast to the policy narrative of a neighbourhood lacking social cohesion, many residents felt very connected to the Bijlmer. Their sense of belonging existed alongside or despite negative experiences, such as having been a crime victim, or negative interactions with neighbours. Furthermore, it was often based on precisely those elements that are decried in citizenship policies. In particular, their appreciation of the Bijlmer as ‘urban’ – especially compared to former places of residence which were more rural and/or white – contrasts with the kind of neighbourhood policy-makers seek to create.

For example Selena, who was born in Suriname and has lived in the Netherlands since 1994 and in the Bijlmer since 2009, preferred living in the Bijlmer to her previous place of residence: a small town about an hour away from Amsterdam. Even though her apartment there was much more affordable at ‘only two hundred euros [a month]’, the liveliness of her current neighbourhood outweighed her increased rent:

[In small town], 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 differed from other parts of Amsterdam and the Netherlands. Statistically, the area is notable for its very low share of ‘native’ white Dutch. While some residents described the neighbourhood as multicultural, others did not because they saw a few ethnic groups as dominant. Most residents, however, agreed the neighbourhood’s ethnic composition created a special atmosphere and sociability. When I asked Reynaldo, who is of Dominican descent but was born in the rural north of the Netherlands, why he did not want to move away from the Bijlmer, he argued he felt at home because Bijlmer residents were more ‘relaxed’:

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.

Respondents described Bijlmer residents as ‘in your face’ and (too) assertive, but also as easy-going, friendly, and lively. This relaxed attitude was associated with a lack of white Dutch and, conversely, the presence of many residents from the Caribbean and West-Africa. As Reynaldo noted, however, this liveliness has become a neighbourhood characteristic as the remaining ‘Dutch people’ 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 meant being able to build a network and support system of co-ethnics. Quantitative research has shown that living in
neighbourhoods with a high share of co-ethnics increases migrants’ sense of belonging (Finney and Jivraj, 2013) and in-group contacts (Vervoort et al., 2011). Such neighbourhoods can become a ‘second place of origin’, as shown by Fortier (1999: 44) in her discussion of Little Italy in London. Grace, a first-generation migrant from Ghana, described 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 belonging based on the neighbourhood’s liveliness and opportunities for socializing within one’s ethnic group, diversity also engendered opportunities for self-realization. Interviewees from various ethnic and racial backgrounds mentioned being able to express themselves in terms of appearance, but also in terms of cultural and religious practices. Contrary to other parts of Amsterdam, in the Bijlmer they did not stand out because ‘everybody is from somewhere [else]’. For example, Shayma, a first generation migrant from Algeria who has lived in the Bijlmer for 16 years, described how she went from viewing the neighbourhood as ‘black’ and being acutely aware of her racial minority status to experiencing it as 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 cozy. 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 generated the possibility to ‘be yourself’, showing a positive side to the policy and media narrative of high-rise flats as cause of the Bijlmer’s social problems. Living in a high-rise flat engendered feelings of privacy and self-chosen isolation but also offered opportunities for experiencing others and the Other at a distance, as the story of Jan, a long-term ‘native’ white Dutch resident illustrates. Throughout the interview, Jan emphasized his dislike of ‘social control’ and his preference to keep fellow residents at a distance. He appreciated the view from his apartment’s large balcony, stating ‘the city is at my feet’. At the same time, this balcony allowed him a glimpse into his neighbours’ lives. As he recounted his observations of his downstairs neighbours, who would sometimes hold meetings in traditional dress, he noted 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...
While Dutch urban policies view diversity as causing a lack of social cohesion (Hoekstra, 2017; De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016), a view which is also adopted by the interviewed local policy officials, residents clearly valued the diversity of their neighbourhood for providing opportunities for contacts with co-ethnics as well as the possibility to live according to their own preferences without standing out as different.

**Everyday engagement**

Residents described various informal ways in which they or other residents helped out their neighbours and built informal networks of care, support, and mutual understanding. Their activities generally fell short of the district’s definition of participation since they were often, but not always, organized in networks around a common ethnicity or religion, rather than reaching across these boundaries to build a civil society. Furthermore, residents’ activities addressed everyday needs, such as sharing food or repairing bikes, rather than being geared towards learning skills or ‘employability’:

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-Dutch, born and raised in the neighbourhood).

Two interviewees were housebound due to chronic illness and depended on family members and neighbours to help with shopping or watch their children. For Selena, the support of her neighbours was 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.

The previous section discussed how ethnic diversity creates room for both making and avoiding social contacts. Many residents also mentioned 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 and Aksartova, 2002). I argue it can also be understood as a citizenship practice, as it aligns with policy views that see participation as a way to create social cohesion. Yvette, a first generation Surinamese migrant and long-time Bijlmer resident, recounted how she ran into her Ghanaian neighbour 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.

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...
Residents thus engaged with the neighbourhood in a variety of ways, demonstrating the emotional attachments many have developed with the neighbourhood and their neighbours.

In contrast to these informal forms of helping and relating to other residents, respondents hesitated to participate in existing government projects. Precarious personal circumstances meant they prioritized tending to everyday needs. 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. As these examples suggest, non-participation can be a rational choice in a context of economic disadvantage (Mathers et al., 2008).

The neighbourhood centre: Ambivalent implementation of citizenship norms

Fostering affective relationships

Given residents’ ambivalent position towards participation in government projects, local policy officials looked to the neighbourhood Centre to bring residents together and activate them in a low-threshold manner. At the time of research, two staff members were in charge of the Centre’s daily activities: coordinator Celia, a middle-aged woman of mixed Surinamese-Dutch descent who taught Dutch language and literacy classes, and Emma, around the same age and ‘native’ white Dutch, who organized twice-weekly activity mornings during which participants engaged in various crafts such as hairdressing, sewing, or knitting. While all activities would take place in a large shared space, participants nevertheless tended to socialize in small groups based on pre-existing friendships or a common language. For example, on the left side of the room a group of Dominican women would congregate around a makeshift barbershop, while at a table to the right a mixed group of African and South-Asian women engaged in various crafts. Ewa, who is a first generation Polish migrant and had been sent to the centre to improve her Dutch, complained to me that she felt 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 functioned as a contact zone where ‘the simple fact of regular togetherness’ (Wise, 2004: 7) allowed 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, was the Centre’s function as a place where they could perform regular household activities in the company of others and with equipment such as sewing machines or hairstyling tools that they did not possess themselves. Josette, a woman in her forties who was born in the Netherlands Antilles, visited 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: 331) calls the ‘feeling of participation’ among participants of a neighbourhood centre in Stoke-on-Trent. She describes forms of everyday sociability that depend on ostensibly mundane emotions such as ‘feeling at home’ and ‘helping out’. The act of constituting a particular kind of environment (cosy, homely) has been analysed as itself a form of governance whereby staff aim to generate certain affective dispositions to facilitate policy implementation. For example, Horton and Kraftl (2009) discuss how practitioners in a children’s Centre adopted particular emotional and bodily dispositions to be perceived as welcoming and sympathetic by local mothers. Similarly, social workers in a deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in the Netherlands created ‘cosy atmospheres’ to generate neighbourhood attachment (De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016: 979).

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 would often hug in greeting or put an arm around someone going through a tough time. Especially Celia also shared information about herself as a way of connecting with participants. In one instance during a language class, the conversation had turned to family relations when Angela, who is Ghanaian, remarked that one of Celia’s brothers has a Ghanaian name. The two women engaged in a discussion on heritage and slavery, before ending on a lighter note by comparing recipes of Ghanaian and Surinamese crawfish dishes. Such exchanges did not only result in connections across ethnic or national difference, but also destabilized established roles of ‘professional’ and ‘participant’. Participants frequently made efforts to this effect by bringing food, small gifts, or in one case Christmas cards to class. These gifts underscore the personal relations with staff that were formed during activities and recast these as based on reciprocal exchange between equals (as noted by Mauss, 2002 [1950]: 83) regarding the relevance of gift exchange relations to Western societies, ‘the unreciprocated gift still makes the person who accepted it inferior’). Staff members Celia and Emma frequently mentioned feeling proud when participants progressed in their Dutch language skills or tried new things, such as to riding a bike for the first time. However, interactions within the Centre also generated negative emotions as a result of their close relationships with participants. For example, Celia mentioned that not being religious herself, she refused to discuss religion in her classes because she had felt hurt and attacked by past remarks of participants.

Thus, the effects of creating a welcoming atmosphere went beyond the instrumental as staff members were not just professionally but also personally and emotionally invested in the Centre. Their interactions with participants foreground the sometimes contradictory emotions and affects experienced by those who are responsible for policy implementation (Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Mountz, 2003). At the same time, these affective relationships are bound up with the policies that undergird the creation of the Centre.

Practising aspirational citizenship

The Centre’s methodology is based on helping participants’ develop their ‘hidden talents’, in order to ultimately improve their labour market position. Every participant was given an intake interview during which their personal details, job history, Dutch language level, and which activities they would like to do were discussed. Most participants stated that they were just looking for a job, and seemed pleasantly surprised by questions on their skills and what they would enjoy doing. According to Emma, neighbourhood residents tended to expect others to take decisions for them, while she thought it important to develop their individual talents. For example, she tried to encourage Ipek, a Turkish woman in her forties
who is a quick and skilled crocheter, to adopt a more fashionable, western style and sell her products online. However, Ipek seemed unconvinced as she mentioned to me that her eyesight is too bad to work long hours and that she mainly visited the Centre to socialize.

The reluctance of participants to market their activities sometimes elicited exasperated comments from staff, who would interpret this as unwillingness:

[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 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, such as cheating the welfare system to claim benefits for single parents. At the same time, statements such as these also show the emotional investment of staff in the Centre and their feelings of frustration when they believed participants were capable of doing more. Clearly, as shown by studies of how volunteers (Williams et al., 2016) and welfare professionals (Lawson and 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: 1978) that emerges as a result of interactions between participants and between participants and staff.

Personal impressions of participants’ personality characteristics played a large role in how staff members evaluated participants’ efforts. These qualifications also surfaced during the Centre’s quarterly progress evaluations, which mixed assessments of skills with descriptions of demeanour. 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]’. In another case, during one language class a new volunteer aggressively addressed Angela, asking her how long she has lived in the Netherlands, which turned out to be twenty-six years. He then launched into a long monologue on the need to learn Dutch and integrate in Dutch society, while Angela appeared embarrassed and withdrawn. Later, Celia told me his behaviour shocked her. While she herself bemoaned the lack of progress of some of her students on multiple occasions, she hoped Angela would continue taking lessons, as she was a great student who came to the classes out of her own accord (i.e. she was not sent there by the municipality). In contrast, both staff members had an adversarial relationship with Martha, a first-generation migrant from Suriname who lived in the neighbourhood and had been active in the Centre from the beginning. Despite being one of the few participants who met the Centre’s intention to let residents organize themselves rather than being prodded by staff, they thought Martha’s activities were unsuited for the Centre. Moreover, they objected to Martha’s behaviour, describing her as feeling entitled to use the space and the resources provided by the district government. The appreciation of Angela’s voluntary presence and conversely the dismissal of Martha as acting entitled illustrates the paradox inherent in the Centre’s ideology, which seeks to stimulate residents to take initiative yet simultaneously wants to shape how they participate.

However, practitioners also criticized the Centre’s ambitions, especially regarding labour market participation. According to Fassin (2015: 9), policy agents’ moral subjectivity comes into play in ‘contexts in which opposing values can come into conflict, contradictory sentiments can create tensions, or political injunctions can run counter to professional ethos’.
Both Emma and Celia were precariously employed with an income near the poverty line. Their own socioeconomic position created empathy and the awareness that, based on participants’ language skills, qualifications, and family and health circumstances only a few could realistically be expected to find a job. Consequently, ignoring the targets set by the district administration, Celia decided not to aim for a specific level of Dutch language proficiency but to look more broadly at how she could add to participants’ general knowledge. As such, she tried to distance herself from the policy frameworks in which the Centre is embedded and to articulate alternative and broader objectives.

Discussion

This study explored how urban policies that formulate normative notions of active citizenship relate to residents’ emotional geographies. Citizenship discourses have received critical scrutiny, including their geographical application in the form of physical and social interventions in deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. In contrast, less attention has been paid to these neighbourhoods as places where residents encounter ‘civilizing’ policies. This paper has examined how the key tropes and anxieties of place-based urban policies align with perspectives from below, based on the narratives of neighbourhood residents and staff members of a local, semi-governmental intervention.

In line with Birk’s (2017: 767) description of community work in marginalized neighbourhoods in Denmark, citizenship policies in Amsterdam Southeast are ‘seeking to rework the agency of residents and improve the marginalized residential area’ by making residents take responsibility for improving their personal circumstances. At the same time, policy-makers express the need to teach residents how to participate in line with policy objectives. Their notion of active citizenship thus aligns with the ‘active citizens’ described by Isin (2008: 38), who ‘follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created’ rather than challenging the rules of the game. In contrast, residents articulated a very different perspective. Where policies imagined the ideal neighbourhood as a close-knit, village-like community, residents appreciated the area’s urbanity, which engendered a sociable atmosphere with a high tolerance for different lifestyles and self-expressions. The in-group networks as well as the sociability engendered by ethnic diversity were central to residents’ everyday lives in the neighbourhood, yet are largely overlooked or discounted by policy actors. Residents’ also engaged in informal acts of care and support which were often based in ethnic or cultural communities but also grounded in the neighbourhood itself. Even though the engagement of many residents was arguably in line with policy ideas on active citizenship, this was not recognized as such since their activities did not take place within existing policy frameworks.

Policy actors’ and residents’ diverging understandings and valuations of neighbourhood attachment and engagement collided in the Centre and became 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 and 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. As noted in studies on the role of front line workers in government institutions (Fassin, 2015; Flint, 2018; Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Mountz, 2003), the implementation of policies is imbued with emotion and morality stemming from employees’ own convictions but also their interactions with clients. Here, it is important to recognize that the moral subjectivities (Fassin, 2015) of welfare professionals may work both with and against existing policy frameworks. In the case of the Centre, the personal and emotional investment of staff members as well as their personal experiences with economic precarity
resulted in a reframing of their work as creating ‘added value’ for participants, rather than a singular focus on labour market perspectives. On other occasions, emotional involvement worked to reinforce ideas about the undeserving poor or inappropriate forms of participation, which were to a large extent informed by judgments of character.

Interactions between professionals and residents in the Centre thus fostered empathetic and progressive understandings, yet also served to justify normative and moralizing urban policies. This ambiguity 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 between staff and participants is a key characteristic of these interventions and allows them to serve as spaces of sociability and care (Jupp, 2008). At the same time, power differentials between representatives of the state and residents may mean that collaborative and participatory initiatives reinforce dominant understandings of active citizenship while overwriting everyday citizenship practices from below (Askins, 2016; Verloo, 2017). This is an especially relevant insight given the evidence of increasing deregulation and informality at the local level, as the implementation of citizenship agendas is ‘outsourced’ to non-state entities (De Koning et al., 2015) and social workers take on the function of brokers (Koster, 2014) mediating access to state resources.

In conclusion, interactions in the Centre did not simply reproduce state discourses of active citizenship. Governmental citizenship discourses have only limited power to overrule the everyday practices and routines of citizens, as the relatively limited effectiveness of the Centre to instil an entrepreneurial spirit in its participants demonstrates. Rather, they show the messiness of neighbourhood governance and the clash between formal policy strategies and the use of the Centre by residents as an extension of their everyday lives. As this study has shown, the experiences of both groups are more complicated and contradictory than is often acknowledged. Staff members rehearsed policy narratives yet also expressed nuance and empathy in their daily work. Residents did not necessarily resist dominant framings of citizenship but asserted themselves by using the Centre for their own purposes and establishing reciprocal relations with staff. In order to understand the complex effects of these spaces and the consequences for the implementation of active citizenship policies more generally, a focus on the experiences and emotions of those who implement policies as well as those who are subjected to them is imperative.

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Notes

1. In the context of the Netherlands, otherness is primarily defined in terms of ethnicity or migrant/foreign background, rather than race (or other dimensions such as nationality), and official statistics likewise distinguish first and second generation migrants (allochtonen) from ‘native’ Dutch (autochtonen). However, there is an implicit racial component to this distinction, as ‘native’ Dutch are also understood as white. To acknowledge both dimensions of boundary-drawing, I refer to respondents as either ‘native’ white Dutch or with reference to their self-identified ethnic identity and/or migration history.

2. Names are pseudonyms.

3. In the neighbourhood where the research was conducted, around 14 per cent (2016) is ‘native’ Dutch, much lower than in Amsterdam (48 per cent) and the Netherlands as a whole (78 per cent).

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