



# Neighbourhood research from a geographical perspective

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## Abstract

The neighbourhood has a very multi-faceted history in geographical research. For a long time, it was the framework for descriptions in Regional Geography and later a normative concept for a 'better' society. Today, neighbourhood research has become a laboratory where social problems and their local consequences are identified, analysed and to a certain extent resolved. Essentially, the evolution of geographical neighbourhood research has proceeded in harmony with the development of geography and its epistemological intentions. Thus, the neighbourhood in geography has not been narrowed down to a territorial scale, but rather it is also interpreted as a framework for social interactions, as a place of emotional relationships and, more fundamentally, as a discursively dissolvable category. This article is intended to clarify the contours of neighbourhood research from a geographical perspective in order to foster a further step towards a (critical) reconstruction of the object neighbourhood as an object of study and the discipline of geography in its positioning.

## Zusammenfassung

Das Quartier hat in der Geographie eine vielfältige Geschichte. Lange war es ein „geräuschloser“ Hintergrund in länderkundlichen Beschreibungen; später diente es als normatives Konzept zur Gestaltung einer „besseren“ Gesellschaft. Heute hat sich eine Quartiersforschung als Subdisziplin der Geographie herausgebildet, die sich als Labor versteht, in dem soziale Probleme und ihre lokalen Folgen identifiziert, analysiert und bis zu einem gewissen Grad auch bearbeitet werden. Dabei verläuft die Entwicklung der geografischen Quartiersforschung zumeist parallel zur Debatte über die Aufgabe von Geographie und ihrem wissenschafts- und erkenntnistheoretischen Beitrag. Insofern ist das Verständnis von Quartier heute nicht einfach auf eine territoriale Dimension reduziert, sondern es wird auch als Rahmen für soziale Interaktionen, als Ort emotionaler Beziehungen und, noch grundlegender, als diskursiv auflösbare Kategorie interpretiert. Mit diesem Artikel sollen die Konturen der Quartiersforschung aus geografischer Sicht nachgezeichnet werden, auch um in einem weiteren Schritt die (kritische) Auseinandersetzung mit dem Quartier als Gegenstand geographischer Forschung und Praxis zu fördern.

**Keywords** geography, neighbourhood, epistemology, social mix, social cohesion

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### 1. Introduction

Any search for a possible motivation, which led geography to begin to take scientific interest in the neighbourhood, must start from the work of the Chicago School, and, in particular, that of the sociologist *McKenzie*. In 1921 and 1922, *McKenzie* presented a five-part debate in the American Journal of Sociology entitled "The Neighbourhood: A Study of Local Life in the City of Columbus, Ohio" (cf. *McKenzie* 1921a, 1921b, 1922a, 1922b, 1922c). *McKenzie* described how the City of Columbus was differentiating itself into distinct neighbourhoods, as a result of immigration. Although these territorial areas could also be called 'localities' or 'districts', he opts for the term 'neighbourhood' because "the neighbourhood is one of our oldest social institutions" (*McKenzie* 1921b: 344). And in the concept of neighbourhood, *McKenzie* recognises the two meanings he uses to form his theory: "physical proximity to a given object of attention, and intimacy of association among people living in close proximity to one another" (*McKenzie* 1921b: 345). Physical proximity and intimacy give rise to specific social forces, shape the differences between neighbourhoods and lead to distinctions – a prerequisite for residents to feel that they belong to a certain neighbourhood. Although geography subsequently adopted *McKenzie's* work and thoughts and integrated them into its sub-disciplines, geography itself was not an important contributor in theorising this phase of neighbourhood research. Finding a starting point for a *geographical* discussion of neighbourhoods is associated with many uncertainties, especially if we are looking for geography's contributions conceptualising and theorising the neighbourhood.

In order to identify geography's pathways into neighbourhood research, we conducted a scoping review following the procedure defined by *Arksey* and *O'Malley* (2005): (1) We formulated the research question: 'How is neighbourhood and neighbourliness conceptualised and theoretically framed within existing geographical literature?'. (2) To identify the relevant studies, we searched the following electronic databases: Web of Sciences, Scopus, Science Direct and Jstor. The keywords used for searching the databases were combinations of 'neighbourhood', 'neighbourliness', 'neighbouring' as well as 'city', 'town', and 'urban' (timespan: all years until 2017; publication language: English). We intentionally searched across all social science disciplines, and Web of Sciences generated 824 results (searching title and document type

'article and proceedings papers'), Science Direct 634 results (searching title and keywords), Scopus 542 results (title and keywords), and Jstor 841 results (title and topic). All documents were recorded in Endnote including detailed information and abstract. After deleting duplicates, and a first rough elimination of 151 articles (in which neighbourhood was understood as a concept of governance between countries), our database collected 1875 journal articles or proceedings papers written in English. (3) We selected from the 1875 documents by identifying geographical work in three dimensions: geographical journals, 'geography' as a keyword and where 'author(s)/research team address' was a Department or School of Geography. This resulted in 646 documents. The further selection of studies was framed by a qualitative interpretative approach: we read and discussed all abstracts in the light of the research question and extracted 83 out of the 646 articles as the basis for this article. We then decided to organise the answer to the question largely according to chronological order, as the following considerations illustrate. In some places, further documents were used in order to clarify the argumentation.

### 2. Neighbourhood as a fact and its societal idealisation

As already mentioned, geography was not an important contributor in theorising this Chicago-phase of neighbourhood research. Its main hallmark was a transformation of sociological ideas into concepts. Urban planning – as a sub-discipline of geography – was particularly involved. Driven above all by the thesis that neighbourhoods can be comprehensively designed and that they have a direct influence on social processes, geography began to search for the 'ideal neighbourhood'. The development of a geographical perspective towards neighbourhood planning was mainly influenced by *Clarence A. Perry*, an architect and planner, who submitted a first draft of his view as early as 1929. His concept of 'neighbourhood units' was motivated on the one hand by discontentment with the city's subordination to the automobile and the associated change in planning from facilities for settlement to facilities for movement (*Perry* 1929). On the other hand, *Perry* was a member of the settlement movement that formed around *Canon* and *Henrietta Barnett*. They were concerned about the impoverishment of large sections of the population in American cities and founded the Toynbee community houses to

address this (Rasmussen 1957). In the context of this committed understanding of planning, *Perry's* idealisations are obvious. The basic positivistic attitude of geographical neighbourhood research at that time is particularly clearly expressed in his optimal calculation of the size of the neighbourhood (160 acres), the number of students (1600 students), the green space (one acre per 1000 persons), a decentralised distribution of care facilities, and, above all, the community centres. Everything is mathematically calculable and predictable – urban planning is able to create social proximity through spatial proximity. And where face-to-face contact and 'gossip' are missing, there is a disorganised neighbourhood and this "is one of the first signs of failing ability for collective action" (Taylor 1939: 175).

In the following decades there were numerous worldwide imitators of *Perry's* idea of social neighbourhoods, but also critiques (see Waldorf 1967). Criticism was expressed from various theoretical directions: *Perry's* assumption of a 'neighbourhood as nature' could not give an answer to the increasing segregation and impoverishment in the city – neighbourhoods were not only social but, above all, also historical phenomena and opposed any form of standardisation. But it was precisely the social problems in the cities that prompted geographers and other scholars to repeatedly defend *Perry's* approach. Lewis Mumford argues particularly clearly here. He defends the principles of *Perry's* urban social security, defining "a need for a definite building to serve as a meeting place for the local community" and the "elementary school provided with halls, offices, and community rooms to serve both children and adults, and to function both by day and by night" (Mumford 1954: 261). But while defending *Perry*, he used his ideas to open geography to a social science understanding: "The neighbourhood is a social fact" (Mumford 1954: 269), which entails not standardising neighbourhoods, but rather paying attention to the respective context. "The neighbourhood should [...] be an adequate and representative sample of the whole" (Mumford 1954: 267) and this requires planning, i.e. "neighbourhoods as a mixed community" (ibid.). Mumford (1954: 268) argues that "not every neighbourhood can be fully equipped with all the social apparatus". Instead, there should be "a certain amount of undetermined space, for later occupation" (ibid.: 268), which serves as a "subject of experiment" (ibid.) for the urban dwellers and in the meantime "can be used for allotment gardens" (ibid.).

It is not crucial here how the neighbourhood unit concept was further negotiated. From the point of view of geographical neighbourhood research, the debate on the different positions of the meaning, nature and perception of neighbourhood offered geography a theory-led discussion – a discussion that makes use of both planning and sociological research results.

### 3. The humanistic turn in geography

But until well into the 1960s – the period of the urban crisis in Europe and the U.S. – neighbourhood research remained true to its 'conceptual illusiveness'. Functioning as a "rallying ground for numerous schemes designed to revitalise the nation's urban centres" (Mooney Melvin 1985: 357), the research tended to be applied and uncritical (Stever 1978). Disciplines such as history, political sciences and anthropology confronted geography with the limitations of its work, accusing it of: (1) being ahistorical and thus neglecting the social context of a given period and misunderstanding the realities of life (Hunter 1979; Mooney Melvin 1985); (2) planning out entire urban spaces in the spirit of 'comprehensiveness' and not leaving any room for the dynamics of liveable neighbourhoods that would become visible within the framework of a strategy of humanisation of the planning process (Ahlbrand and Cunningham 1979; Cohen 1979); (3) cultivating the close understanding of a neighbourhood as a social entity instead of being concerned with the cognitions and sentiments of inhabitants, symbolic representations of neighbourhoods or the residents' relationship with place (Conzen 1979).

If the debates on neighbourhood published in geographical journals are influential, then it is the humanistic turn in geography that has made a decisive contribution to the opening and scientific foundation of geographical neighbourhood research. There are a number of works that, towards the end of the 1970s, increasingly argued against a geography based exclusively on the epistemological foundations of the natural sciences (e.g. Buttmer 1976; Tuan 1976; Johnston 1984). The representatives of the humanistic turn freed themselves from the basic positivist and structuralist attitudes and began to explore the objects of geography more strongly from a subjective, curious, open and micro-geographical perspective (Relph et al. 1977). Accompanying similar debates in sociology and social philosophy (such as those initiated by Henry Lefebvre 1971, and later introduced into geography,

see *Merrifield* 1993), models were formed which redirected geographical neighbourhood research towards the meanings of place. People and their relationship to place and space were the focus of these new lines of research, as seen in *Ralph's* (1976) triangle of place identity (meaning, activities, physical setting), places seen as centres of meaning constructed out of lived experience (*Tuan* 1977), or the insider and outsider concept in *Buttimer's* (1976) writings. At the same time, this new interpretation of the person-environment relationship has generated a broad and also very controversial debate. Formerly distinct key terms such as 'neighbourhood', 'place' and 'space' began to intersect and be combined theoretically (cf. *May* 1996 for the debate on 'place matters' between *Massey* and *Harvey*). As a result, sub-disciplines of geography found new reasons to see and apply their relevance, such as behavioural geography. Geographers like *Aitken* (1990) called for research into perceptions and decision-making processes at the neighbourhood level: "There are dynamic relationships between neighbours and neighbourhood, and the real consequences of change cannot be understood without an appreciation of the perception of residents" (*Aitken* 1990: 249). Through micro-research into neighbourhoods, benchmark theories such as the 'neighbourhood life-cycle' (see *Guest* 1974) became the focus of a critical geography, were specified and thereby also exposed for their unreflective notions of normalisation (e.g. intertwined with constructed family life-cycles).

To sum up, the humanistic turn in geography provided geographical neighbourhood research with a well-founded discussion of the philosophy of science, epistemology and methodology. And because of the geographer's ambition to be relevant, urban and neighbourhood planning benefited from numerous empirical studies.

#### 4. Neighbourhood research as a laboratory for dealing with social problems

Increasing urbanisation and related problems such as segregation, demographic change or shrinking cities, the new urbanistic ideals of densification and social mix, together with the global concepts of sustainability or sufficiency, led to a complete change in the debate in geographical neighbourhood research. Theoretical questions for neighbourhood research, the relationship between city and neighbourhood, neighbourhood and place, or between neighbour-

hood and neighbourliness were now seldom asked. Instead, the neighbourhood became part of the governing logic of politics, and geography discussed almost every problem in relation to the problem-solving contribution that seemed possible by focusing on the neighbourhood. Theoretical debates went only as far as was useful for dealing with a specific problem. At the same time, other disciplines intensified their application-oriented research. Neighbourhood research became a multidisciplinary, but highly heterogeneous and disjointed field. Still dominated by sociological approaches (represented in the classical community research by the Chicago School), new research areas became important: community psychology (e.g. the research on a 'sense of community'; *McMillan* and *Chavis* 1986), political science (e.g. *Forrest* and *Kearns* 2001; *Kearns* and *Parkinson* 2001), economy (e.g. *Alesina* and *La Ferrara* 2000), anthropology (e.g. *Licari* 2011), or clinical psychology (e.g. *Greenbaum* and *Greenbaum* 1985). Geography was thus participating in the 'competition' of theory-building disciplines and was at the same time responsible for developing specific recommendations for its applied fields of work (in particular regional, urban and communal planning). In this phase, which continues to the present, geographical neighbourhood research has multiplied. According to the scoping review there are three topics that have framed geographical research up to today:

##### (1) Social stratification and the neighbourhood

The vast majority of research activities can be assigned to the question of urban fragmentation, the appearance of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the development of recommendations for neighbourhood development. In the context of the social decline in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, according to *Friedrichs* et al. (2003: 797) the question "Do poor neighbourhoods make their residents poorer?" i.e. does the neighbourhood structure exert an effect on the residents (behavioural, attitudinal, psychological) even when controlling for individual characteristics on social opportunities for residents?" emerged. This topic is particularly suitable for geographical neighbourhood research. On the one hand, it involves theoretical research, and on the other hand, it directly serves planners by providing proven knowledge.

In the highly competitive field of science, geographical neighbourhood research provides important synoptic work. *Galster* (2012), for example, summarises the state of the art in research along four 'mechanisms'

with 'potential causal pathways'. Effects become visible through social processes (social contagion, collective socialisation, social networks, social cohesion and control, competition, relative deprivation, parental mediation), environmental mechanisms (exposure to violence, physical surroundings, toxic exposure), geographical mechanisms (spatial mismatch, public services), or institutional mechanisms (stigmatisation, local institutional resources, local market actors). If and to what extent the effects are seen, however, depends on their intensity, duration or frequency, and these effects are not automatic. For this reason, *Galster* (2012) also recommends observing appropriate neighbourhoods with regard to health, employment and housing, as the relevance of the individual effects can be seen here. Other groups of geographers carry out neighbourhood health research by using GIS methods (e.g. *Hawthorne and Kwan* 2012) or develop transatlantic comparative neighbourhood research (*Musterd and Andersson* 2006). From this latter comparison, a bridge to social policy is built, for example, by discussing the question: what scale matters? (*Andersson and Musterd* 2010). In particular, in the context of the European welfare states, *Andersson* and *Musterd* (2010: 41) justify "pure interventions in poor neighbourhoods" and state "that this finding supports the stigmatisation hypothesis". However, effects like employment or income "primarily operate at a higher spatial scale [...] at least in a well-developed welfare state of the Swedish kind" (ibid.: 40).

Whether they are known as 'neighbourhood effects' or rather 'municipality effects', overall research on neighbourhood effects has been decisive for urban policy in several respects in Europe and America. Here, too, geographical research has taken on the task of systematising programmes and thus providing policy guidelines. For example, five years after the Leipzig Charter, the German Institute of Urban Affairs classified the landscape of neighbourhood development approaches into countries with comprehensive national programmes (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, UK), countries with less comprehensive national or regional solutions (e.g. Austria, Hungary, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain) and countries with predominantly local approaches (e.g. Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Slovakia or Turkey) (*Federal Ministry of Transport and German Institute of Urban Affairs* 2012). These results, in turn, influenced American geography (for the HOPE-Programme, see *Clark and Negrey* 2017) and led to some differentiation, for example

when attempts are made to use longitudinal data and to construct neighbourhood change processes. In this context, there are also recommendations to deal more closely with postmodern forms of neighbourhoods (e.g. *Delemelle* 2015, who distinguishes between struggling neighbourhoods, blue collar neighbourhoods and new start neighbourhoods, among others).

## (2) Social cohesion and the neighbourhood

This complex area overlaps with the work on neighbourhood effects. And again, geographical neighbourhood research is very close to issues that are primarily motivated by politics. These include: (a) Can social capital be created through a social mix of neighbourhoods and does it have a socially integrative effect? (b) Can focusing on places in the sense of an urban and social intervention in a neighbourhood give rise to a positive image, and does this lead to the inhabitants acquiring a sense of identity? (c) What forces develop processes such as gentrification and how can urban policy counteract them?

As *Bolt and van Kempen* (2013: 391) observe: "Policy makers in many Western countries have been battling segregation and its presumed negative effects for decades". The authors point out the socio-political context in which the planning ideal of socially-mixed neighbourhoods emerged and ask critically "whether these policies solve any problems. Does mixing population groups really lead to a better, more liveable neighbourhood? Does it create social cohesion and better communities? Does it generate more social contact and social capital, less criminality, a better atmosphere, a higher degree of satisfaction with the housing and neighbourhood, and less residential mobility because people tend to stay in such neighbourhoods?" (ibid.: 391f.) A review of the state of knowledge of geographical neighbourhood research has the merit of unmasking this ideal. The attempt to systematise the different research work done over recent years highlights four dimensions of justification for this ideal and their respective theses (see *Table 1*).

## Neighbourhood research from a geographical perspective

Table 1 'Social mix' ideal – critiqued principles and theses. Source: Johnston et al. (2004); Schnur (2005); Bolt and van Kempen (2013); Liu et al. (2017b)

Reasons for desiring socially-mixed neighbourhoods	Theses (examples)
<b>Social mix supports the quality of life in the neighbourhood</b>	<p>Social mix leads to greater cohesion</p> <p>Spatial proximity stimulates interactions between different residents</p> <p>Cohesion supports spatial and social bonds</p> <p>Interaction between different residents promotes social control, increases safety and reduces antisocial behaviour</p>
<b>Social mix leads to the influx of higher-income groups into neighbourhoods</b>	<p>Wealthy residents promote (also with their own funds) a qualitatively and quantitatively better offer in the residential environment</p> <p>A more prosperous residential area provides incentives for companies to move in</p> <p>Politicians are more resolute in their efforts to improve their own services in the residential environment</p>
<b>Social mix helps to avoid negative neighbourhood effects</b>	<p>The mobility of residents increases (more arrivals and departures, continuous exchange)</p> <p>Social capital is formed (binding and bridging)</p> <p>Unemployed residents find positive role models (employees) and are supported in their search</p>
<b>Social mix has a positive effect on the perception of a neighbourhood</b>	<p>Discrimination by companies decreases (better image, more open to employees from the residential environment)</p> <p>Discrimination by educational institutions (especially schools) decreases (labelling effects on pupils and the residential environment)</p>

However, the research shows that social mix has no positive effects in evaluations:

- socio-demographic characteristics are not important predictors of neighbourhood embeddedness or attachment (Fonseca and McGarrigle 2013);
- living in a mixed neighbourhood does not imply integration (Oldfield 2004);
- socio-economically mixed neighbourhoods are more likely to begin to separate from each other (Lelévrier 2013);
- higher income citizens are most frequently co-cooned in residential spaces (Boterman and Musterd 2016);
- mixing ownership structures in neighbourhoods leads to no, or even negative, cohesive processes (Bond et al. 2011);
- the endowment of a residential environment with social services does not increase with the income level in the neighbourhood, and because socio-economically higher-level groups of immigrants supply themselves city-wide, the consumer supply in the residential environment does not grow either (Bailey et al. 2015);
- in strongly mixed residential environments, along

life situations and age groups, the social groups tend towards processes of closure instead of opening (Blokland and van Eijk 2010);

- and it is not the level of homogeneity but the degree to which there is an openness of the community that provides change in social status and expectations (Ögdül 2000).

In addition, the implementation of the ideal of the social mix has negative side-effects:

- older housing stock is often demolished in the course of taking control of the ownership structure (Inzulza-Contardo 2016);
- displacement leads to social stress on an individual level and to suboptimal housing location decisions (Lees 2008), and public services are not withdrawn or reduced as rapidly as private investments ('public service bonus', see Wolpert and Sely 1986);
- residents of disadvantaged residential areas usually move to comparable residential areas and are uprooted from their social environment;
- and those neighbourhoods into which the displaced people move face even greater challenges (Posthumus et al. 2013).

Finally – and works from post-socialist countries whose housing sector changed in times of turbo-capitalism have recently drawn attention to this – the idea of socially-mixed neighbourhoods does not address the real problem, because the cause of the emergence of disadvantaged environments is not the people themselves who live there, but the urban policy that causes social and territorial inequalities to arise in the first place (*Chelsea and Popescu 2015*). *Permentier et al.* (2008: 852) therefore rightly point out that “it is very ironic that creating sustainable mixed neighbourhoods might require substantial policy intervention to keep neighbourhoods mixed”. Instead of the current top-down strategy in dealing with segregation and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the administration should strive for governance that involves all actors – including the population of the affected neighbourhoods themselves – in a strategy.

Geographical research on the nature of place and space also entered the socio-political arena and application-oriented debate. Space became place, and place became a politics of place. The theoretical considerations of the 1980s were used only to justify the empirical approach or reduced to their conceptualisation as an “interchangeable relationship between the physical-spatial and human-social characteristics of space” (*Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira 2016: 239*). In many studies, the container model of space was imposed on the neighbourhood and from there, on place. For *Bernardo* and *Palma-Oliveira* (2016), place becomes an intermediary between processes of group assimilation and group distinctiveness. For *Hickman* (2013), places in disadvantaged neighbourhoods can serve as intervention mechanisms. In addition to your own home (first place) and workplace (second place), third places such as shops, bars and community centres can be used specifically to build social interactions and thus bonding and bridging social capital. According to *Hickman* (2013: 233), “policy makers should therefore look to maintain and replenish third places and they do have a number of policy instruments that they can draw on to do so”. Studies such as that of *Martin* (2003), who resolutely advocates in geography that place “is socially constructed through several complex and intertwined elements, including interactions among people and groups, institutionalised land uses, political and economic decisions that favour some places and neglect others, and the language of representation” (*ibid.*: 731f.), were background noise in this phase and were only recently introduced more clearly into the discussion of the geographical neighbourhood (see Section 5).

### (3) Sustainability and the neighbourhood

Energy and environmental programmes around the world and models of sustainable urban development (e.g. smart cities, sustainable cities, the compact city approach) build on cohesive neighbourhoods, or assume that local actors will promote the ideas in the context of their local activities in the neighbourhood. Similar expectations exist in sustainable economic development models that consider neighbourhoods as markets: informal economies or slow food/local food concepts depend on existing local networks and the hope that certain sustainable life and consumption patterns will be communicated and legitimised in the local context. New models of a sustainable economy of local solidarity that have emerged (i.e. urban food security, urban gardening activities, time banking, freecycling, crowdsourcing, pop-up spaces for local activities, social enterprises or peer-to-peer businesses) are often based on local networks and communities and require structures of local communication and interaction.

Geographical neighbourhood research has contributed a large number of studies to sustainable neighbourhood issues. And if we are to formulate a fundamental comment on the relationship between geographical neighbourhood research and sustainability research, it is probably best to state that the global debate is being used for formulating innovative ideas, transforming them into concepts and testing them with the help of the professional community. However, the concept of sustainability, and here especially social sustainability, has made largely unreflective use of the concept of social capital, and has woven political demands into it, and this is today referred to as standard (*Bramley and Power 2009*).

Nevertheless, geography is exploring conceptual themes at neighbourhood level: critiquing the relationship between density and social mix (*Fieldhouse and Cutts 2008*), or a local or ethnic economy (*Coen et al. 2008; Parzer and Huber 2014*). And it is application-oriented in relation to knowledge neighbourhoods (*Spencer 2015*) or climate justice in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (*Ambrey et al. 2017*). Studies that are future-oriented to the post-growth society are innovative, in that authors like *Liu et al.* (2017a) demonstrate that neighbourhoods with mixed use, accessible public transport and more pedestrian-friendly street design tend to be travelled in a ‘low carbon’ manner and give rise to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (*Liu et al.*

2017a). This is complemented by geographical studies on walkability, which develop a new integrated planning ideal for neighbourhoods under the title CWD (compact-walkable-diverse, see *Burnett* and *Lucas* 2010; *Talen* and *Koschinsky* 2014).

Geographical neighbourhood research also uses the sustainability discussion to give new format to its postulates for participation, collaboration and spatial justice. Concepts such as age-friendly neighbourhoods (*Day* 2010), child-friendly neighbourhoods (*Ansell* 2009), living in community/ageing in place (*Andrews* et al. 2007), community gardening (*Tappert* et al. 2018) or place friendship (*Ramezani* and *Said* 2013) are used to network geographical neighbourhood research worldwide as an interdisciplinary field of research and to help new concepts reach a broader audience of experts. And connected with these activities is the question of governance and informal process design. The participation of geography has led to governance becoming a governance of locality with numerous proposals for new collaborative forms (*Nikolaïdou* et al. 2016).

These activities confirm that geographical neighbourhood research has opened up topics from other disciplines and has found its own focuses. Neighbourhood research under the umbrella of sustainability also indicates that geography has regained a critical view of its themes; a view that has repeatedly been obscured over the past few years because scholars focussed too strongly on establishing an application-oriented approach, thereby eclipsing the debate about what distinguishes geography as a science. In this respect, geographical neighbourhood research has tended to participate in the general movements seen in geography overall.

### 5. Geographical neighbourhood research on the eve of discursive theory

In recent years, a further understanding of geographical neighbourhood research has emerged alongside the previously described paths of a geographical engagement with neighbourhood. This is mainly fed from three sources: (1) a strongly critical attitude towards urban development policy, which is not only visible in geography in the course of the economisation of cities and which above all takes up and develops the Marxist theories of the 1970s; (2) the increasing complexity of urban society, which allows few generalisations

about neighbourhood, and thus interprets almost all phenomena as hybrid, processual and the result of daily practice; and (3) geography, as a science that is increasingly open to the social sciences, rediscovers its enthusiasm for theory and is also prepared to actively tolerate contradictions in the debates on neighbourhood.

The critical attitude towards urban policy in geography became increasingly strong with the studies on the neighbourhood development programme. In 1994, *Stewart* (1994) formulated the thesis that politics focused on areas of poverty and disadvantage at the expense of a more strategic and comprehensive concern with neighbourhood development and citizen participation, and that this is a 'new localism' that basically masks a process of centralisation, fragmentation and organisational proliferation. "A market-led approach involving the decentralisation of responsibility, but not power, from the national to local level" (*Bailey* and *Pill* 2011: 927), that tends towards "a culture of short-term 'delivery', incrementalism, and measurable outputs" (*ibid.*: 928). This thesis has intensified since the mid-1990s after repeated economic crises and their subsequent austerity policies. In the years since then, the writing of *Lefebvre* (1991) has mostly been reformulated. Methodologically, this has resulted in an expansion of qualitative approaches since the humanistic turn. Ethnography, in particular, is widely used in neighbourhood research today when the three-part dialectic between everyday practices and perceptions (*le perçu*), representations or theories of space (*le conçu*) and the spatial imaginary of the time (*le vécu*) is at the centre of research (e.g. *Arampatzi* 2017). This is also accompanied by an increased emphasis on the sociology of knowledge rather than ontological questions. In concrete terms, the question is not so much what neighbourhood is, but how it is constructed, by whom, and why. For *Arampatzi* (2017: 51), neighbourhoods are then "struggle communities" and through their analysis "spatialised dimensions of socio-political processes, hegemonic power, resistance and subversion" (*ibid.*: 48) are revealed. The concept of neighbourhood then is replaced by the term 'space', facilitating its connection to radical geography, which at the end of the 1960s provided the journal 'Antipode' and its editor *Richard Peet* with renowned theoretical thoughts of their own.

No less critical is the demand by *van Kempen* and *Wissink* (2014) for a 'new mobilities paradigm'. They call for neighbourhood to be no longer understood as

an entity; rather, postmodern society is characterised by flows (of people, goods, information). This results in a de-territorialisation of social practices. "We argue that the neighbourhood has to be re-imagined as a collection of hybrid nodes connecting a multiplicity of flows" (*van Kempen and Wissink 2014: 95*) – a thesis they put against any attempt at "closed spatial categories, like societies, states, regions, cities, and neighbourhoods" (*ibid.: 102*). But that does not mean that everything is liquid; that would be too apolitical. Instead, after its de-territorialisation, space would subsequently become re-territorialised, albeit with political intentions, leading on the one hand to "zones of connectivity, centrality and empowerment" (*ibid.: 102*), and on the other to "zones of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility" (*ibid.: 102*).

The work on ethnic neighbourhoods by *Kalandides and Vaiou (2012)* also fits into this interest in the dissolution of categories. They call for a shift in focus: instead of researching into the spatial concentration of strangers, neighbourhoods should basically be "conceptualised as a particular form of non-bounded spatial scale, a place [...] constituted by far-reaching relations or trajectories but in particular by everyday practices" (*Kalandides and Vaiou 2012: 262*). Such a perspective would open the debate to the political issues and a re-definition of "the subject of rights as they activate processes of access, participation and inclusion/exclusion in/from the urban public sphere" (*ibid.: 254*). In this sense we can certainly speak of geographical neighbourhood research as a project in the spirit of a critical toponymy, which understands spatial categorisations as an expression of spatial identity, and which is thus the cause of conflict. Categorisation is therefore a political act. In this understanding, it would be scientifically naive not to re-attribute central concepts of geographical neighbourhood research, such as neighbourhood development. Instead of describing neighbourhood development as a 'territory of homogeneous ideals such as loyalty, truth, service and kindness', a 'community of quasi-kinship contacts', an 'organic whole', a 'socially-mixed community' or a condition of 'social cohesiveness' (see above), neighbourhood development is "a normative societal vision and a political intervention scheme. This vision and the form of the political intervention depend on dominant political ideas for the development of cities and society at large" (*Drilling and Schnur 2019: without page numbers*).

An understanding of the conditions of construction of neighbourhood development has recently led to numerous critical positions in geographical neighbour-

hood research with regard to politics and practice, but also with regard to its own extensive knowledge base, thus sharpening the scientific positioning of geography: *Masuda and Bookman (2018)*, who deal with neighbourhood branding, then understand neighbourhood "as a rich site for geographic investigation of local socio-spatial dialectics between rights and place as well as a locus for linking together local and global activism against intensifying dispossessions now occurring everywhere around the world" (*ibid.:166*). *Proudfoot and McCann (2008)* interpret offers of state support at street level (such as neighbourhood centres, community workers, community police), as "expressions of hegemonic discourses which provide a normative framework for how urban change should be managed" (*ibid.: 348*). *Pinkster (2016)* concludes that neighbourhood development programmes lead to narratives of "loss of belonging" (*ibid: 888*) among residents – not to their neighbourhood, but to the governing institutions. And for *Derickson (2015)*, the critical view of neighbourhood research is the necessary answer and basis for theory formation on "refusing Eurocentrism and 'provincializing' urban theory" (*ibid: 647*).

## 6. Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the analysis presented here (restricted by method to journals and proceedings papers published in English, which favours an Anglophone discourse), it is clear that geography has increasingly been able to develop by focussing the discipline on the concept of neighbourhood. Geography emancipated itself from sociology, and acquired knowledge resources which have, in turn, influenced other disciplines right up to the present. Thinking of neighbourhood in different ways and recognising these ways of thinking as constructions, as well as employing on-going self-criticism will continue to make geographical research valuable into the future, when it is even more important that science should problematise solutions that are decided on quickly, enabling it to point out ambiguities and uncertainty, or enabling it to criticise a one-sided economic orientation of the city and its neighbourhood development. Neighbourhood research from a geographical point of view has to take all facets into account: the neighbourhood defined by territorial shapes (container), by political idealisations towards better social cohesion at a local level, or by planners who need plannable and thus dividable spatial units. But it is not a case of following

Woods's (1914: 578) view that the neighbourhood "is large enough to include in essence all the problems of the city, the state, and the nation. It is large enough to present all these problems in a recognisable community form". It is rather the case that geography has the role of deconstructing all those assumptions that have to do with the connotations of neighbourhood in order to identify the levels of discursive power (e.g. planning power) for which it acts as a science-based practice. When geography is done this way, reflective and scientific-based solutions for the urban future can be the result.

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