CHAPTER 10

METHODOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
THE VALUE OF ETHNOGRAPHY FOR HOUSING STUDIES

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Introduction

In Western liberal democracies over the last decade or so, community development, housing policy and neighbourhood renewal have been increasingly underscored by a philosophy of participatory decision-making (see for example, Imre and Raco, 2003, Lo Piccolo and Thomas, 2006; Maginn, 2004). At one level, it appears that central and local governments have experienced a policy and democratic epiphany. This is reflected in a ‘new’ acknowledgment that ‘when citizens themselves are the key to the quality of neighbourhoods, a new avenue of policy intervention is opened up’ (Lelieveldt, 2004: 534; also Crenson, 1983). In this context, participatory models of decision-making are seen as having the potential to ‘empower’ local residents who were previously the subject of ‘top-down’ or command and control forms of planning (Healey, 1999; Meredyth et al, 2004; Barry et al, 1996; Rose, 1996 and 1999; Dean, 2002). On another level, however, there is caution, suspicion even, about this paradigm shift. A perception exists that governments are essentially displacing, redistributing and/or retreating from their historical welfare responsibilities (Chaskin, 2003, 2001; Fraser et al, 2003; Pierre, 1999).

This apparent democratization of decision-making is arguably admirable but it raises more questions than answers in relation to issues such as access, inclusion, equality, social capital and, ultimately, power. Swyngedouw (2005), for example, has noted that participatory based governance is an idealized normative model of horizontality and inclusion, but as such is ‘systematically oblivious to the contradictory tensions in which

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these forms of governance are embedded’ (p. 1992). Nevertheless, in light of the increased importance policymakers have attached to resident participation, it is becoming imperative to understand the mechanisms, processes and outcomes of this form of inclusion (or lack thereof) (Burton, 2003; Burton et al, 2006; Maginn, 2007). It is not enough to simply quantify the numbers and affiliations of those participating in planning processes. Nevertheless, ensuring that representation encompasses all interest groups in terms of race/ethnicity, age, gender, political persuasion and so on, is important. There is a need to ensure that representation is inclusive and broad, thereby reflecting, as much as possible, the dynamic character of local neighbourhoods.

In order to develop a genuine in-depth understanding of the context, culture, machinations and impacts of participatory structures, we need to go beyond the personal accounts of those who claim to represent the whole community and/or particular groups within that community. Participatory governance models need to incorporate different types of knowledge claims and voices so that a full understanding of place, problems and resolutions can be developed. This is no easy task. Healey (1999) has argued that attempts to escape modernist planning thought via the inclusion of participatory forms of governance have resulted in the dismissal of ‘both strategic conceptions of how places were and might develop and models of systematic relationships within places.’ Consequently, she maintains that ‘place qualities have been collapsed in much Western public policy into the design and assessment of projects’ (Healey, 1999: 111). This suggests that policy-making is still underscored by a positivist or, in urban planning terms, a technocratic rationalist philosophy.

In this context, as Jacobs (1961) noted long ago, local neighbourhoods have tended to be viewed as having little or no history, existing in social and geographical isolation and accordingly, lacking a sense of relationality (see Massey, 1991 and 1995b). Moreover, when residents do participate in decision-making and are asked to deliberate and decide upon, for example, the design of a public park or a communal garden, they often face significant challenges in developing and communicating their views about aspects of such projects. Healey (1999) stresses the need for policymakers to recognize the
contextual and cultural dimensions to local places and communities. She favours a perspective that includes both actors and structuring dynamics, emphasising ‘interactive processes of defining governance problems and constituting interests’ (p: 112). Residents, then, should not be seen simply as individual rationalists who merely express pre-existing preferences through participatory structures. Rather, they need to be viewed as actors with complex and dynamic senses of spatial and social attachment, as well as detachment, to their local neighbourhood and beyond. Healey asserts that in recognising these relational issues, policymakers will appreciate how ‘frames of reference and systems of meaning evolve’ (1999: 113). In turn, this will better equip them to design meaningful and contextual participatory processes through which they can engage residents.

Healey’s (1999) call to ‘develop understanding and strategies for evolving more inclusionary approaches to integrated, place-focused public policy’ (p: 111) is articulated via a theoretical exposition of the potential of institutionalism and collaborative planning (also see Healey, 2006). Whilst this is an extremely useful normative framework for understanding how things ought to work in institutional and procedural terms, Healey’s framework says nothing, in explicit terms at least, about the methodological implications of evaluating the efficacy of participatory processes. Our chapter explores this gap. In order for place-focused public policy to develop a more nuanced and contextualized understandings of socio-spatial interrelations, it needs to develop an empirical body of knowledge. Put simply, if any geographical area is ‘the locus of multiple place identities’ (Healey, 1999: 118) and the objective is to engage this plethora of identities, it is incumbent upon policymakers (and researchers) to avoid: (i) be place-blindness; (ii) only listening to the ‘noisy voices’ who claim to represent the local community; and (iii) assuming that peoples’ preferences exist a priori.

How can housing research rise to such challenges given its historical legacy of quantitative and empirical inquiry methods (Clapham, 2002: 59; see also Greed, 1994)? Jacobs and Manzi (2000) have noted that housing research is often ‘reactive to the professional housing lobby’ (p.35) and as such, likely to be ‘methodologically
conservative’ (p.35; see also Allen, 2005). The techno-rationalistic outlook, often assumed by policymakers, has resulted in households being viewed as instrumentally rational and unified agents. Further:

There is little focus on the relationship between the attitudes and behavior of the actors and the constraints and opportunities which they face. In other words, approaches to the analysis of the housing field have failed to keep up with recent developments in sociology, which have taken this agency/structure interface as the focus of their attention (Clapham, 2002: 59).

It is precisely this agency/structure interface that is crucial to developing a new knowledge base about participatory structures and processes. In recent years, a number of housing scholars have advocated that discourse analysis has the capacity to shed new light on understanding and resolving housing issues (Clapham, 2002; Jacobs, 2006; Jacobs et al, 2003; Jacobs and Manzi, 2000; Marston, 2002; Manzi and Jacobs, 2008). Marston (2002), for example, has argued that discourse analysis can help challenge the ways in which ‘housing researchers have tended to take for granted the definitions of housing policy makers […] to be objective facts’ (also see Saugeres, 1999: 94). Moreover, Marston suggests that policy and social change is achievable through the adoption of discursive analysis in applied housing research. Such change is necessary if governments are sincere about creating more genuinely inclusive forms of governance that actively seek to engage residents in decision-making. As Pierre (1999) and Rhodes (1997) have noted, governments need to shy away from their traditional core business of regulation, coordination and control if they are to close the democratic deficits in decision-making that they themselves acknowledge exist.

This chapter works from the premise that ethnography is an ideal means of understanding the place-related systems of meaning that shape residents’ perceptions of housing and their neighbourhoods, together with their participation and non-participation in local decision-making structures. Accordingly, ethnographic research has the potential to expose the cultural and relational characteristics and dynamics of institutionalized micro-settings and thus help resolve policy dilemmas (Maginn, 2007). The chapter comprises several key sections. First, the chapter provides a brief overview of ethnography and its
general utility for housing studies. Next, drawing on empirical research from two case studies, one in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and the other in New Haven, USA, the chapter highlights how ethnographic research produces different knowledges that do not emerge from quantitatively-informed research methods. Specifically, ethnographic research has the ability to detect the ‘not-so-loud’ voices in local neighbourhoods and factors underpinning ‘non participation’. Furthermore, participant observation fosters understanding of the relational contexts that structure practical contestations over housing and other aspects of shaping places. Finally, the key challenges of participatory decision-making are outlined and how these may be (partially) resolved through acquiring different, qualitatively-informed, knowledges.

Ethnography: A Methodological Pathway to Understanding Relationality

Statistical research came to dominate housing and planning studies because social reformers felt the need to ‘prove’ that problems in urban areas required planning solutions. As a consequence, ‘the human element [of planning] got lost’ (Greed, 1994: 121):

Rather than looking directly at the inhabitants of the areas under study as human beings with needs, wants, opinions of their own, and tongues in their heads, they became merely “population data”.

The shift to more participatory forms of decision-making in urban planning and housing in the UK and EU suggests that the human element is being brought back. This does not mean that it is enough to quantify the type and range of local people involved in decision-making to (dis)prove the degree of representativeness. Rather, what is needed is an appreciation of the contextual and cultural nuances of socio-spatial relations and politics within local neighbourhoods and governance structures.

It is fairly common in quantitative research, particularly in statistical modelling, for relatively fixed values and/or characteristics to be assigned to certain variables, especially humans. Moreover, such fixed values are often derived from other quantitatively-informed research that has produced statistically generalised results. Such values, or
labels, are considered to be ‘objective’ given that they are statistically representative of
the wider community. Ironically, however, these ‘objective’ values say nothing about the
subjective meanings and social processes that underscore exactly why and how groups
exhibit certain characteristics and behaviours within different contexts. This is not to say
that there is no merit in quantitative research in analysing participatory structures. Nor
are we suggesting that qualitative methods are superior per se to quantitative approaches.
As Maginn et al (2008) have noted, both methodological traditions have a comparative
advantage over one another. In simple terms, quantitative research is stronger at
addressing questions of a ‘how much/many’ nature, whereas qualitative research is better
suited to exploring questions of a ‘how’ and ‘why’ nature.

This has not stopped some qualitative researchers from trying to quantify their research
and develop generalisations via the use of ‘a “pretend” quantitatively representative
sample’ (Greed, 1994: 125). For traditionalists, statistical representativeness and
generalisability are anathema to qualitative research. As Levi-Strauss (quoted in
Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 7) stated: ‘all that the ethnographer can do, and all that
we can expect of [him or her], is to enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a
more general one’. Ethnography thus serves theoretical generalising of processes and
mechanisms.

What, then, is ethnography? Sociologists and anthropologists have used ethnography to
describe a large set of research, methodologies and writing practices. Some have limited
the use of the word ‘ethnography’ to the process of describing a culture (Low et al,
2005), reserving the methodological term ‘phenomenology’ for ‘total’ involvement with
research subjects and for the study of ‘experiences’. Others have argued that
ethnography as a method is particularly suited for grounded theory (Hammersley and
Atkinson, 1983). Ethnography is defined here as trying to make sense of semantic
spaces: ‘the field of signs and practices in which human beings construct and represent
themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories’ (Comaroff and Comaroff,
1992: 17). From a traditionalist perspective, the role of the ethnographer is not to speak
for others but to speak about them (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 9). This differs from
so-called critical ethnographers who lay claim to variously articulating the plight of minority and excluded groups in the name of emancipation (Hammersley, 1992). For Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: 9), then, ethnography:

…is not a vain attempt at literal translation, in which we take over the mantle of another’s being, conceived of as somehow commensurate with our own. It is a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts, each with its own, perhaps radically different, kinds of subjects and subjectivities, objects and objectivities.

Ethnography is particularly suited to unmasking the relational complexities and dynamics that exist in all manner of semantic spaces. This relational approach rejects the notion that individuals are self-propelling essences. It also eschews a view of the world through a structuralist lens wherein social reality is imposed on people (cf. Tilly, 1998). Instead, social reality is viewed as more akin to a soccer game in which individual players produce shared outcomes that subsequently inform further actions (Tilly, 1998). This necessitates adopting methods that can help see the game itself, together with the stories people tell each other about what happened during the game – not just the end result of winning or losing. Such a relational perspective attempts to avoid the relativism sometimes associated with social constructivism (see Jacobs and Manzi, 2000: 38). It does not reject the notion of a ‘reality’ – it merely argues that the spaces where such realities exist consist of multiple social ties – not aggregates of individual attitudes.

A fuller comprehension of the evolutionary contextual and cultural facets of participatory and community development practices in housing and urban renewal requires a different methodology. We should not simply look for more ‘humane’, ‘bottom up’ or ‘real life’ accounts. Letting people tell their own stories enables us to see how agency is constructed via individual life histories. But such methods do not readily illuminate systems of meaning, and even less, how they evolve. This is because the processes and mechanisms whereby systems of meaning develop, are relational and embedded in bonds, not essences. Nor do we need to take a postmodern turn. Instead, we require ethnography for its ability to shed light on relationality. After all, human understandings about community are not waiting to be registered either quantitatively or qualitatively.
Such understandings are brought into being through interactions with others in communicating the nature of such interactions. The resulting stories may live for long periods of time, whereas others may dissipate quickly, assuming the status of folklore or urban mythology. If this happens the key question that needs to be resolved is the extent to which they are ‘true’ or ‘corrupted’. Ethnographic research provides a way forward.

‘True’ ethnographic research, whereby the ethnographer spends extensive periods in the field ‘living and breathing’ the phenomena under investigation, has never really been a feature of policy research. For sure, there have been several ethnographically-informed analyses of policy settings, but such inquiry has tended to be contained in doctoral theses or academic journals. When ethnographic research has been part of the policy evaluation process, it has been conducted in haste. This is not surprising given the costs of such research and the time constraints generally imposed upon policymakers (cf. Allen, 2005). If, however, there is genuine commitment to realising the ideals of participatory forms of governance in developing effective policies, it is incumbent upon policymakers to develop a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic relationships within local communities. Ethnographic research, through the use of participant observation and interviewing, has the potential to bring community development and participatory policies to another level. To illustrate how this can work, the next section discusses ethnographic research conducted in two urban neighbourhoods – ‘Hillesluis’, Rotterdam, in the Netherlands (Blokland, 2003) and ‘The Ghetto’ (or ‘The G’), New Haven, in the US (Blokland, 2008a, 2008b).

**Relational Understandings of (Non-)Participation: Stories from the Street**

The case study of Hillesluis illustrates why it is important to look beneath the surface of apparent disinterest in participating in local decision-making. While individuals may well lack interest in getting involved, such disengagement may signal deeper meaning and/or context. Policymakers can choose to simply accept non-involvement and declare that they at least tried to include local people in decision-making. If, however, there are serious deficiencies or statistical patterning in participation and non-participation rates, there is an onus on policymakers to find out why and how such situations evolved.
Ethnography has the potential to do this, revealing the institutional and relational dynamics that contribute to the development of people’s views and actions towards participation, especially outside the immediate realm of the participation activity itself.

Hillesluis is an inner city neighbourhood in Rotterdam South. It was built in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries to house increasing numbers of migrants. These residents came from other parts of the Netherlands. They were attracted to the city by expanding employment prospects and declining opportunities in the rural areas from where they came. In 1994 when data was collected, Hillesluis was a diverse immigrant neighbourhood of 12,000 people with native Dutch residents constituting a numeric minority. The area is divided by a shopping street into three main sections, each of which has its own physical characteristics. Nevertheless, all have low-cost housing stock, generally owned by housing corporations and let as subsidised dwellings.

The case of ‘the Ghetto’ demonstrates the power of ethnography in illustrating how systems of meaning evolve relationally. It does this by focussing on the production of social realities of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ residents and the resultant embedded ambivalences. Individual statements about participation, together with actual actions of residents in relation to involvement, are directly connected to such realities. Explanations of non-participation, we argue, are not contained within individual attitudes, preferences or demographic characteristics, but embodied and perpetuated in the local community. ‘The G’ is part of a larger socio-economically, racially and ethnically mixed ward in New Haven, Connecticut. It is a public housing neighbourhood defined by two dead-end streets with a fenced park in the front and a grocery store and package store across the main road. In the late 19th Century, ‘The G’ was home to a working-class Italian migrant community who lived in over-crowded tenements. The area has been the subject of two episodes of urban redevelopment. The first in 1942 saw public housing constitute the dominant tenure. The second in the 1960s resulted in ‘the G’ effectively being cut-off from the rest of the neighbourhood. Data on this case study was collected in 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2004, in periods lasting from as little as two weeks to as long as 13 months. A total of two years fieldwork was conducted.
Using Ethnography to Identify and Explain Participatory Apathy

Historically, policymakers have frequently been blind to the existence of diverse systems of meanings within territorial spaces such as public housing estates or project housing areas (Maginn, 2004). The tenants of such localities have tended to be seen as homogenous in relation to their housing and social needs, wants, aspirations and life chances. Further, their socio-economic life chances have often been marginal. Opportunity for these socially excluded groups has been promoted through urban renewal policies that place a strong emphasis on community participation. Community participation not only offers local residents the opportunity to exert power within decision-making processes, but they also stand to be empowered (Taylor, 2003). But what of those community members who fail, for whatever reason, to participate?

A common and apparently sensible reaction by policymakers seeking to engage large numbers of residents in community development and regeneration decision-making is to note, often through surveys, that people are not interested, and that participation thus needs to become more fun. Creative new ways are being used, often combined with festivals, open days and offers of snacks and drinks, in an effort to entice more people to become involved. Nevertheless, participation rates tend to remain low (see for example Blokland 2002; Williams 2005)

In community meetings with modest attendance, housing officials may conclude that their planned interventions are acceptable because people did not raise objections when given the chance to do so. Opponents of redevelopment plans may claim the contrary, arguing that people were not interested in participating because they did not believe that there presence or views would make a difference. Both of these perspectives point to the simple conclusion that non-involvement does not equate to disinterest. Put another way, how can one possibly be disinterested in a nearby major housing policy initiative involving demolition and redevelopment of a housing estate?
In Hillesluis, community leaders and professionals explained residents’ lack of participation en bloc. It was asserted that inhabitants had no trust in each other nor in the political process. This is in line with broader common understandings of participation in the Netherlands. National advisory reports like those of the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid (WRR), an influential scientific advisory committee to the national government, maintain that residents would participate more if they had more trust in each other (WRR, 2005). However through triangulating ethnographic fieldwork data collected via casual conversations, events recorded in a field diary and notes, taped informal interviews, and more structured interviews, a different conclusion emerged.

Those who stated that they were ‘not getting involved’ because they were ‘not interested’ arrived at this position through very diverse and contextualised processes. Some explained their non-participation as a function of the fact that those who ‘ran the world’ – policymakers and politicians – had never shown any genuine interest in ‘them’ (see Blokland 2003 for details). On the other hand, there were those who, for a variety of reasons, gradually became disinterested over time.

The first group of non-participants were eclectic in their demographic make-up. They comprised a range of age groups and ethnic backgrounds. There was relatively little inter-group contact in this community, but they had a strong bond with their respective peer group in common. Accordingly, young and old people, and different ethnic group members, made intense use of the neighbourhood space to live their lives within and through peer relations (cf. Gans, 1962). Notably, however, their strong relational attachments were not the neighbourhood as spatially understood. Rather, their attachment to the area was a function of the social ties they had with similar people who coincidentally, lived in the same place that they did. Their lack of interest in getting involved in participatory processes was embedded in a general ‘distrust’ towards wider society and not the community development or housing regeneration activities going on around them. It would be erroneous to suggest that they did not have high levels of trust in their neighbours – they did, albeit only with those with whom they were acquainted and with whom they associated as part of their ‘in-group’. Everyday conversations about their relationships with other institutions, such as the
social services department or local schools, revealed a similar kind and level of ambivalence as they expressed in relation to getting involved in neighbourhood planning. Ethnographic research tools were able to reveal the wider meaning of community to the residents, together with the role that neighbourhood and neighbourhood institutions played in their sense of community. In turn, this helped to situate their lack of interest in participating in discussions about housing regeneration within a broader framework (unrelated to the participatory exercise) that structured their attitudes and behaviours (cf. Williams, 1968).

The contextual backdrop to the declining interest in participation by the second group of residents was premised more on the dissolution of traditional values, practices and institutions. This was especially true for older male residents who used to work at the docks or in shipbuilding factories nearby prior to their closure. They recalled the first half of the 20th Century as the ‘Golden Days’ of the Social Democratic Party (SDAP). For this group, the industry in which they worked and the political climate of the day, defined their social identity and relationships (see Lijphart, 1966). At party meetings and the many social functions organised through the SDAP, one could meet others of like mind with whom one could experience and develop a sense of familiarity. These ‘pillars’ of social democracy, alongside the role of the Protestant and Catholic Churches, guided every aspect of daily life. National political elites always found a way of arriving at a compromise. But local life for the working class was very much divided. Politics was inherent: a structuring, relational context in which political and social participation was closely intertwined. But this changed over the course of a century. As the welfare state grew and secularisation gained a strong foothold, the traditional pillars of working class life were slowly undermined.

For this group of Hillesluisians, the diminution of their class identity and ties which provided the basis of a unified and radical culture against dominant, more powerful classes (cf. Williams, 1991: 415) underscored their suspicion of contemporary participatory practices. To them, politics and community participation had become a matter of selfish people thinking about their own gains as opposed to wider community benefits. Neighbourhood affairs and wider politics as a space for sociability had changed,
and the overall rationalization of society worried them. Solidarity had been usurped by self-serving interests.

What appear to be the same attitudes of ‘not interested’ non-participants, are actually quite distinct outcomes of complex accounts of why people do not get involved. Qualitative data can thus help to explain statistical variation. They help us see the processes and mechanisms that underpin categorical inequalities in participation (cf. Tilly, 1998). It is essential to develop an understanding of these processes and mechanisms as these are arguably much more relevant than simply quantifying the attitudinal statements of individuals toward participation if policymakers are to determine alternative means of engaging more people.

In summary, the application of ethnographic research in Hillesluis helped to illuminate that while people may express the same attitudes, this should not be inferred to suggest that they mean the same thing. It is quite likely that there will be different meanings and context behind the same attitude. There are three reasons why this is of importance to inclusive participatory processes in housing policy:

- It shows how residents are actors with complex attachments to place and how frames of reference evolve;
- It highlights the relational and institutional dynamics related to such frames of reference: these concern explanations outside the decision making process of urban planning and community development itself;
- It provides a direction for housing policy, in which carefully selected networks in lifestyle groups form the basis for finding linkages in the neighbourhood, and one that tempers too much reliance on statistical categories. Instead, it invites the creation of categories of residents based on various forms of place attachment (which may or may not reflect demographic categories).

**Thick Description: Understanding Social Contexts of Evolving Frames of Reference**

Ethnography can, as we have seen, reveal disparate and real reasons behind apparent disinterest in community participation. Further, field notes of small and seemingly trivial
matters can provide additional understanding of the relational constructions through which housing researchers assign categories to individuals or groups. Such fieldwork data may, as Geertz (1973: 7) has noted, take the form of ‘thin descriptions’ (e.g. ‘25 people attended a community meeting’, or ‘people enter a community room and take seats’) and/or ‘thick descriptions’ as illustrated below. These notes relate to a community meeting between the local Police Captain and several housing officials after a lethal shooting in ‘The Ghetto’:

… The housing authority official had arranged the chairs in a square around a table with plastic flowers in the middle. [When I entered with the African American President of the Tenants Representative Council] the President started re-arranging the tables right away. She lined up a few chairs behind a table and invited the white, 30-something woman who is the deputy-director and Police Captain to sit there. She ignored the two police officers wearing their bullet-proof vests who stood aside and another female resident entering made a joke to her about them – how they wore their vests even to such meetings. Slowly some female residents, AS and H, both Black, and their Hispanic friend, T, and three women whom I did not know, flocked in through the back door, none of them took the first row seats. A came, she did not sit down but stood in the back with her arms folded, then G. and her girlfriend came and hang against the table that stood aside in the back….

Such descriptions can be used for ‘sorting out the structures of signification’: ‘the thing to ask is what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said’ (Geertz, 1973: 10). Ethnography as a written text, then, comes about through analysing the thick descriptions of events such as the community meeting outlined above. As noted earlier, Healey (1999) stipulates that frames of references evolve in interactive processes. Thick description can demonstrate how existing categories of residents who ‘care about the community’ are labelled positively, while residents who appear disinterested, or who manifest as ‘not caring’, are recreated and confirmed, and how such confirmation hides from view the ambivalences of the apparently clear borders that such categorical labels suggest. In the case of ‘The Ghetto’, notions of active and passive residents were developed along corollary lines of deserving and undeserving. When professionals and local residents engaged with one another, they actively perpetuated such constructions. This became apparent right after the opening of one meeting as illustrated in the edited excerpt below:
Ms Magnolia opened the meeting saying they had called it because “the police have been chasing us out here until it got to the point of a boy being killed”. She connected the shootings, safety and intensive police control. The Police Captain leaned over the table and said: “No one was chasing anyone”. But he first wanted to point out something about trespassing – the dead boy had had a trespassing notice:

“It doesn’t matter if you have a relative here, or even if your own mother lives here, if you have been involved in a problem here, or anywhere else on housing authority property in the city, then you get a notice you’re not allowed on the property... That is how we try to help people keeping people out, and it is your responsibility too to keep them out”.

The Police Captain ignored the ambivalent meaning of ‘safety’ and excluded those stopped by the police from residents, dividing ‘decent’ residents and ‘undeserving’ others. Nobody asked the residents what they thought of this. Nor did any residents take the floor. The Housing Authority managers added that resident trespassing regulations were meant to work “alongside with residents” on “improving their living conditions”, and residents themselves could “play a part in increasing awareness about the regulations.” They had to make sure that people in their community obeyed to rules (that the Housing Authority had set).

By the end of this meeting, those present were engaged in creating an understanding of ‘The Ghetto’ as a place where the ‘deserving’ suffered as a result of the actions of the ‘undeserving’ (i.e. criminals). The ‘deserving’ residents had to assume some responsibility for the community by participating more in its daily life:

When the example of another complex issue, mostly housing the elderly, was brought up, Keesha, a full-time nurse assistant and single mother of three under the age of ten, commented that the elderly “stick together” and young people “are not like that and have their own lives and things to take care of”. But the people behind the table collectively railed against her, speaking at the same time, that “it is all based on the people” and that “right now they are scared”, but that they now had “to set their rules” in the streets. The Social Services Manager said that with “the attitude that is presented here, you’re feeding into it, you’re encouraging it. Don’t just stand there hold out your hand!” The atmosphere got a little tense. Before the discussion evolved into claim and counter claim – “It isn’t!”; “It is!” – the Police Captain interjected:

“Let me give you an analysis from our side... When an area starts to look dilapidated, things get worse and worse. And that’s what you need to do here. I drive through here everyday on my way to work. And I see people throwing their trash out. We have scheduled pick-ups... But there is a lot of junk out here.”
He stressed that this way, people were giving a message: “these people don’t care about their properties, so we might as well sell drugs out here.” A resident responded that the Housing Authority cleaners “don’t do their jobs around here.” A lively discussion about trash followed. Finally, someone said a homeless man searched the trash and threw things on the ground. The property manager asked the captain: “Can he be issued a non-trespassing notice?” The captain laughed: “Sure”. The Social Services Manager then announced that they should bring this meeting to an end. Ms Magnolia thanked all for being present and all went their ways.

At this and other occasions, residents appeared withdrawn. When they reacted that ‘it’s impossible’ to, for example, be the eyes and ears of the community and call the police, they affirmed their position as passive dependents. This impossibility must, however, be understood in the context of complex and competing relationships that residents negotiate in their daily lives. For example, the perpetuators of neighbourhood crime are also these residents’ sons, brothers, lovers and friends. A relational perspective enables the complexity of this situation to be understood. The women at the meeting may reject some behaviour, but cannot cut their ties with the perpetrators given the relationships that they have in everyday life. And in the meeting they could not afford to lose their position as ‘respectable’, constructed by their very presence. So they kept quiet. By remaining silent they helped reproduce the either/or opposition, as well as the imagery of residents as passive victims, dependent on others to take care of their issues, thereby reinforcing the image of the ‘welfare dependent poor’ in public housing. Such a stigmatising representation resulted in references to dimensions of blame, social rejection, perceived dangerousness and visible unattractiveness and disorder being inscribed onto ‘The G’ (Phelal et al, 1997). Such collective categorisations and non-participation resulted in an imagery of ‘people here don’t want to get involved.’

In summary, residents of ‘The Ghetto’ could not be classified from the outset as people who were ‘interested’ in participation versus those who were not interested. Nevertheless, the normative understandings of what it meant to be an active and decent resident and how this linked to broader categories of deserving and undeserving, was an active process. This demonstrates how frames of reference evolve. In housing policy and planning, this process of constructing meanings deserves more attention if we are to achieve more inclusive participatory processes.
The use of qualitative methods in housing research will help inform policy decisions by taking a critical stance through thick description. Ethnography is about giving all actors a voice – the seemingly ‘deserving’ and the seemingly ‘undeserving’. When qualitative researchers are only interested in key informants, usually active residents and community leaders to whom researchers ascribe a representative role, they neglect residents who do not play an active role. Their inclusion is critical as it will reveal contestations among groups of residents and ambivalences in the categorisations that residents employ that would otherwise be hidden. This, then, will provide professionals with a much more complete and realistic, albeit complex, account of social structures of neighbourhoods.

For researchers, these basic lessons can be drawn:

- The inclusion of thick description in qualitative methods is a labour intensive process. Some data will not make it to the actual text because they turn out to be irrelevant for the purposes of the research. However, the subtle mechanisms of agenda setting, inclusion and exclusion, and categorisation in the interactions of, for example, community meetings, provide a wealth of information that help researchers understand how frames of reference evolve. Researchers cannot, however, limit themselves to such collective settings and expect to understand the categorisations. The relational contexts in which such meetings take place are also crucial. At such meetings, as much remains unsaid as said. Only through access to a variety of settings will the researcher learn about ambivalences, enabling a contextual understanding of evolving frames of references.

- In taking ethnographic field notes, researchers may want to focus on details of meetings and exchanges of people about such meetings afterwards. This will help them to see how stories about community participation, including the way residents and professionals position themselves in the process, come about, and how the participatory process itself develops. Such an approach does not deny agency or intentionality. Ethnography through relational understanding, allows for the fact that intentions and preferences do not explain outcomes. It shows how the participation process itself alters and creates frames of reference, within specific contexts, affecting the efficacy of participation.
Conclusions

We started this chapter with the argument expressed by, amongst others, Patsy Healey, for new forms of thinking about planning and community development theory, aimed at a participatory model of housing policy. While housing policy has generally shown a limited interest in theory, and often works from either a statist or a neoliberal perspective for empirical investigations, Healey identified the need for a different approach. She noted that ‘command and control’ perspectives have resulted in ‘dismissing both strategic conceptions of how places were and might develop and models of systematic relationships within spaces’ so that ‘place qualities have been collapsed in much Western public policy into the design and assessment of projects.’ (Healey, 1999: 112).

This chapter focused on the methodological consequences of Healey’s position, arguing that we must understand how structuring dynamics are manifested in practical contestations around shaping places. It is not enough for policymakers (or researchers) to simple listen to the ‘noisy voices’ in community forums, nor is it prudent to unquestioningly accept claims from those who say they are ‘not interested’ in participating. There is a need to comprehend the stories that sit behind such attitudes. This was illustrated through two case studies drawn from ethnographic research.

It was highlighted that disinterest in community participation is rarely one-dimensional. Life histories leading to non-participation are complex, varied and socially and historically embedded. We have seen through thick description how professionals and participating residents alike engaged in the construction of a duality of ‘deserving’ residents versus ‘undeserving’ others, a duality that then hampered further resident participation. We have also seen how ethnography creates the opportunity to go beyond public transcripts into the more hidden transcripts (cf. Scott, 1990) that people construct in casual interactions. These sketches indicated that it is critical to uncover the social processes and trajectories that lead to non-participation. Even when we can establish statistical co-variance between people with certain characteristics and their willingness to participate, their categorical characteristics do not explain their positions towards community participation.
While ethnography may be ideal for the study of processes and mechanisms in community participation, actual research practice does not always allow us to employ such an approach. Ethnography aimed at thick description is a costly and time-consuming method. It is often times highly inefficient, especially when research questions are narrowly defined. Here, then, we may want to do more of two things.

First, we may want to use surveys as quick scans to identify which residents are keen to be involved in more qualitative methods, especially when such surveys are conducted using random samples. But this is not to indicate that qualitative material is reduced to the status of illustrating vignettes in research reports based on statistics. Systematic analyses can and should, after all, be part of qualitative research. Statistical data derived from surveys may provide the questions that qualitative methods can, as a next step in the research process, seek to answer. Second, there is a need to avoid treating so-called community representatives and leaders as the ‘voice of the community’. We should be careful not to conflate interactional community with a spatial definition. This, then, means a stronger focus on the inclusion of all groups that we expect to be present in an area and that we uncover during fieldwork. All of this raises further questions and challenges about access and rapport in the field.

Relational contexts are the sites where frames of reference and systems of meaning evolve. These contexts need to be better understood if policymakers are to encourage more people to participate in decision-making and create better neighbourhoods.

References


