Residential choice and neighbourhood experiences in a Dutch urban poverty area

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Abstract

1. Introduction

Life is about making choices, but with the demise of the welfare state citizens are expected to make increasingly more choices about different aspects of their lives. Freedom of residential choice has been the buzzword of the 1990s in the debate on the future of housing (Smit 1999). Having left a period of seemingly endless economic growth behind us, the market for social housing has become tighter. In 2005 we are (again) discussing existing inequalities between citizens with regard to their position on the housing market. The debate centers on differing degrees of choice between particular categories of residents, such as young starters, migrants and elderly people. In much of the debate solutions are discussed to the problem of segregation and access to particular urban areas, both in an ethnic and socio-economic sense. As the dissatisfaction with living conditions of residents in such urban neighbourhoods mounts, no connection is being made in the debate between the way residents experience the neighbourhood and the degree of choice they had when they entered the area or now that they are living there.

1 This research is part of a research project called ‘Residential choice, limitations of choice and neighbourhood experience of residents in concentration areas’.
There are many aspects to residential choice, ranging from being able to determine the monthly living costs and being able to determine where to live, to being able to determine whether to buy or rent, or to articulate and realize certain architectural preferences. In essence, freedom of choice is the freedom to realize particular residential aspirations: the ideal dwelling and residential environment given the height of the rent a household can afford and the housing market circumstances (Burgers 1978: 91). In this paper we focus on the relationship between the way residents experience their neighbourhood and the degree of freedom they had while choosing or staying in a dwelling. Our aim is to explore how a structural factor like residential choice influences the way residents experience the neighbourhood.

First we discuss the structural context in which residential choices are made, followed by a discussion of the issue of urban experience. Next, we introduce the Spaarndammerbuurt, one of the poor neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. We have interviewed residents living in the Spaarndammerbuurt and discuss the results crossing residential choice with satisfaction about dwelling and neighbourhood.

2. Residential choice

In many Western cities the unequal distribution of categories of people in urban space has all but declined during 1980s and 1990s (Musterd & Ostendorf 1998). In this paper we approach these dynamics of urban segregation from the point of view of residents of low income concentration areas, who in differing degrees (from zero to plenty) were able to choose their place of residence. Their housing preferences combine with certain means and certain constraints and result in a particular residential choice (Özüekren & Van Kempen 2003: 169). When constraints dominate the choice of neighbourhoods and dwellings, the freedom of choice is limited. It could mean that those who want to leave the neighbourhood, are unable to do so. The meaning that residents give to the residential atmosphere will often be negative. We hypothesize that when people settle somewhere as a result of lack of choice, this turns concentration into a social problem. Lack of social cohesion might be at the base of that social problem. On the other hand, well-considered choices may lead to a healthy and pleasant residential atmosphere.

The larger part of migrants in the Netherlands live in cheap urban social housing [ref PM]. Concentrations of migrants and low income households in urban neighbourhoods are the result of the fact that many migrants earn low incomes, and cheap social housing is concentrated in particular urban areas. These concentrations as such do not necessarily constitute a social problem. People may gain from concentration in several ways, like economically (e.g. as an entrepreneur), socially (e.g. by establishing rewarding social relations) or culturally (e.g. by promoting ‘multicultural’ tourism in the neighbourhood) (cf. Wilson & Portes 1980). Residents in these concentration areas however do experience more stress with regard to fulfilling their residential aspirations than residents outside concentration areas (Bolt & Van Kempen 2003). This goes especially for migrants, low-income groups and renters. Residents with low incomes are known to be less satisfied with their housing circumstances than people who earn high incomes, just as renters are less satisfied than buyers (Relou 2000: 155), indicating a more negatively
inspired neighbourhood experience. Maybe households with little choice are also less likely to invest their social capital in their home and their neighbourhood, as Brown and King suggest (2005: 71).

In many Western societies a full grown welfare state has taken responsibilities away from citizens and penetrated deeply into the daily lives of individual households. The degree of freedom of residential choice among individual residents depends for a great deal on the housing system and changes within that system. It is therefore a highly conditional freedom. Seen from the perspective that residential choice is very much a function of the system to allocate dwellings, the acquired freedom of choice is in many ways an apparent freedom, because its future is decided by forces hardly within individual reach (cf. Brown & King 2005). We can still refer to the ‘iron law’ of the housing market: households from low-income groups are forced to accept the least attractive dwellings (Priemus 1984: 278). Brown and King suggest that the term choice is maybe overstating the matter: “choice is an illusion unless there is an actual capability to take decisions” (Brown & King 2005: 73). In this paper we of course refer to choice as having different degrees, ranging from a very weak to a very strong capability to take decisions on where to live and under which conditions.

Societies differ with regard to the way relations between state and citizens are translated into welfare state arrangements, and similarly, in the extent to which housing regimes determine individual degrees of freedom (cf. Musterd & Ostendorf 1998). In the Netherlands, the degree of residential choice for low income groups has strongly improved during the post-war decades. The most recent and important change has been the introduction of the so-called supply model of housing allocation (also called choice-based letting mechanism in the UK). In early years, people were simply offered a dwelling by the local council or the housing association, based on criteria like income and household size and –type. Nowadays, home seekers try to find a home themselves. Applications for dwellings are ranked according to criteria like waiting time or residency time (the period of time one has lived in the current dwelling), income, age and/or household size (Ouwehand & Van Daalen 2002: 50). These criteria face home seekers with both means and constraints. Means can be derived from the allocation mechanism, like residency time or waiting time, or the possibility to be allowed the status of priority. Constraints relate to the available housing stock, the link between income and rent, and the link between household size and the size of the dwelling. Another important element of the housing system, which increases freedom of choice, is the rent-subsidy system (Ouwehand & Van Daalen 2002). Recently, (restrictive) criteria like income or household size are being abolished by a growing number of housing associations, or dwellings are allocated by drawing lots.

3. Experiencing the neighbourhood

Many factors on different levels of scale influence neighbourhood experiences. On a personal level, besides income and education, the way and the area where one has been brought up are important (Potters 2001). Of crucial importance is the period of time a person has been living in the neighbourhood. The strong correlation between duration and growing mentally attached to a neighbourhood has been
documented by several authors [ref. PM]. On the level of the dwelling many elements of the dwelling can be differently rated, but residents often value their dwelling as a ‘whole’ experience. For many residents the dwelling is of prime importance to their overall assessment of their living conditions (Priemus 1984) and for low income groups this even even more so than for higher income groups. The role the neighbourhood plays in the lives of residents has also been discussed extensively. Here we suffice to note that the social networks of poor residents in concentration areas are to a greater extent restricted to the neighbourhood than those of residents in middle and upper class groups. This means that to have a well functioning social life poor residents are more dependent on the neighbourhood. When they experience the neighbourhood negatively, this might have consequences for the way in which - and the extent to which - they participate in the neighbourhood. Reasoning the other way around, they can keep their appreciation of the neighbourhood on a satisfactory level by withdrawing into their dwelling to a higher degree than they would in a more pleasant neighbourhood.

The central hypothesis of this study is that when housing circumstances differ strongly from the aspirations of people, i.e. when the degree of residential choice is low, the experience of the neighbourhood is more negative than when choice is abundant. In other words, we want to know if the relationship between degree of choice and experience of the neighbourhood is straightforward (and positive), or if matters are more complex.

The appreciation of the neighbourhood and different ‘elements’ of it, like amenities, public space, friends and local colourful people or the ‘atmosphere’, constitute an important aspect of experiencing the neighbourhood. Levels of appreciation change over time. Residents have certain expectations when they enter a neighbourhood. The degree to which these expectations will be met, determines much of the satisfaction they have with their housing conditions. When evaluating how residents judge their neighbourhood it is also important to know their long term perspective (Hoogvliet 1992). To stay only for a couple of months and then to move to another neighbourhood might mean that residents pay little attention to certain weak qualities of the area. Indirectly it will also influence their experience of the neighbourhood, through the level of participation in neighbourhood social networks. Residents will probably not join a neighbourhood organization when they know they will move out of the area.

Certain authors claim that residents make their own mental maps of the neighbourhood, with routes and landmarks often being important elements. All elements on the map are prioritized against each other. Residents who have e.g. moved from a very unsafe area shall possibly be sensitive to elements which have to do with safety in their new neighbourhood (cf. Burie 19..). Priority can also be given to the dwelling, so much even that the mental map of the neighbourhood ‘around’ the dwelling is almost empty because it hardly carries any meaning. These priorities are central to the experience of the neighbourhood as they function as the lens through which the neighbourhood is perceived.

Another aspect of experiencing the neighbourhood is the feeling of attachment to the neighbourhood. What does the neighbourhood mean for individuals? Do they feel at home there? Are they proud of the neighbourhood or of specific aspects in it? There is a correlation between the period of time people have lived in an area and their feeling of attachment to it. Having developed attachments, the
satisfaction with the dwelling or the neighbourhood looses its importance as an indicator for moving out of the area. This is why in another case-study we found that residents stay put in the neighbourhood where they have been living for a long time, despite the fact that they are very unhappy with changes in the population the area has witnessed (Van der Land, Van Daalen & Kruythoff 2004).

4. Spaarndammerbuurt

We will analyse the relationship between degree of residential choice and the experience of the neighbourhood by zooming in on the Amsterdam neighbourhood called Spaarndammerbuurt. In 2003 we interviewed professionals from the largest housing association there, the local council, social work and police, and we interviewed 20 residents. The residents were both established residents (who have been living in either of the two neighbourhood for more than five years) and recent residents (who have been living in either of the two neighbourhood for six months or less), 50/50 distributed over the two categories. They all earned very low incomes and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. A topic list was constructed to structure the interviews, which took place in the resident’s homes.

The Spaaarndammerbuurt is one of those areas where low incomes have concentrated. It is a neighbourhood with predominantly pre-war housing (1915-1930), situated close to the historic centre of Amsterdam. It consists of 5,000 dwellings, partly renovated during the 1980s. Dwellings are small: 30 per cent are dwellings of less than 40m², 62 per cent are less than 60m². 87 Per cent is social housing. The neighbourhood faces a period of restructuring. Leases on dwellings have been terminated and people have been facilitated to move to other dwellings. Restructuring will result in a more strongly differentiated housing stock, i.e. more well-to-do households should be able to find a house there.

The Spaarndammerbuurt houses 9,500 residents of whom 52 per cent receive rent subsidy. The Spaarndammerbuurt is the place for single households who want to enjoy urban living (58 per cent of all households). Many people live on social benefit, most often pensioners and older migrants. Ethnically, the neighbourhood is very diverse, however, the largest subgroups are born Dutch (48 per cent), born in the former Dutch colony of Suriname (12 per cent) or have migrated from Morocco (11 per cent). Many (social) professionals who work in the neighbourhood (police, social workers, etcetera) claim that there are many ‘multi-problem households’ in the neighbourhood. Crime figures, however, have dropped and are relatively low, compared to other neighbourhoods in Amsterdam. Many communal activities in the neighbourhood are prove of a lively social climate and sense of community.

According to professionals of the housing association who work in the Spaarndammerbuurt, many residents are satisfied with their housing conditions. Much dissatisfaction among residents has to do with the size of the dwellings in relation to household size. They also claim that many residents are hesitant to settle in the Spaarndammerbuurt, because of the bad reputation the neighbourhood holds among outsiders, but after settling down residents redefine their image of the neighbourhood in more positive terms. Many residents from ‘problematic households’ have settled in the neighbourhood, who often have a complex history of psychological, emotional and financial problems. The professionals still
feel however that many residents have developed a certain attachment to the neighbourhood, showing in a reasonably low rate of moving. This also shows in the fact that some residents who could leave the neighbourhood with an urgency status because of the restructuring that takes place, have decided to stay.

By extending the housing stock with more expensive dwellings the housing association claims to extend the residential choice for people who can afford to occupy a better dwelling in the same neighbourhood. This should have beneficial effects on the social cohesion in the neighbourhood.

5. Towards a typology of residents in poverty areas

Freedom of residential choice is a complex phenomenon and has therefore been explored in several ways. When e.g. residents state they have left their former dwelling involuntary, we have interpreted this as a relatively low degree of choice, because these households urgently had to find a new place to live. On the other hand, when they claim to have refused many dwellings before settling where they live now, or when they say they have considered a lot of other neighbourhoods, we interpret this as a relatively high degree of choice. The level of satisfaction with housing conditions was scored by simply using a five-points scale.

In order to analyse our interviews, we constructed a straightforward coordinate system, with the two axes being the concept of freedom of residential choice and the level of satisfaction. Four combinations of freedom of choice and satisfaction are logically possible:

cluster IV
- residents with a relatively low degree of freedom of choice,
- who are satisfied with their housing circumstances

cluster I
- residents with a relatively high degree of freedom of choice,
- who are satisfied with their housing circumstances

cluster III
- residents with a relatively low degree of freedom of choice,
- who are not satisfied with their housing circumstances

cluster II
- residents with a relatively high degree of freedom of choice,
- who are not satisfied with their housing circumstances

Based on the interviews we placed residents in the above scheme and attributed residential types to them, according to their specific residential careers (Figure I). As we are in the initial stage of trying to develop such a typology, the discussion has a strongly heuristic character. In this section we shall discuss these residential types in the subsequent clusters. Most of the respondents have been placed in the clusters I and
IV, instead of clusters I and III as we would have expected following our hypothesis. This means we can do more than analyzing only the relationship between degree of residential choice and experiences of the neighbourhood. We are able to extend the analysis to include the relationship between experience and other factors. Which are these factors influencing neighbourhood experience? How do we explain that the low degree of choice of some residents does not negatively influence their experience?
Figure I. Residential types in the Spaarndammerbuurt

Cluster 1

Most of the interviewees can be placed in cluster I (positive values on both axes). Early starters on the housing market form a major category in this cluster. In the Spaarndammerbuurt they are a rather specific category of tenants, who made their actual start in the private or informal rental sector, i.e. outside the formal social housing system. In contrast to the situation on the buyers-market, there are many small-sized apartments available for young, single households in the Spaarndammerbuurt. In the future the freedom of choice of many of these households will increase, because of their high credentials in the labour market. Many of them are students, who can make an important contribution to the liveliness of the neighbourhood, but who are also prone to leave after graduating.

One female respondent, aged 28, has consciously chosen for a dwelling in the Spaarndammerbuurt, after looking for a dwelling for 4,5 years, despite its bad reputation. The fact that it is a poor area does not mean much to her. She tries to neglect the neighbourhood as much as she can. For her, location is the prime reason to have settled here. This means: living close to a central transport hub as well as the centre of Amsterdam. The neighbourhood is of little importance to her identity, she says. Also, she does not feel responsible for making the neighbourhood a good place to live. That is a job for the local council and housing association. She claims not to know much about how people get along in the neighbourhood. In the bus and in the supermarket she sees neighbours and children playing on the street, but her own activities
usually take place somewhere else. Her house is located near to the station, which she visits often. She has accepted the neighbourhood as it is. Her house, however, is much to her satisfaction: it is a pretty, light and well kept but old house, the garden of which she has recently re-designed. (resp. 1)

In the same cluster we defined late starters. These are genuine ‘urbanites’, often in their thirties, who are looking for an affordable, small apartment, close to the city centre. More than once they lived in the better parts of the neighbourhood, e.g. in a monumental building or in apartments with a courtyard.

A 34 year old Portuguese woman has occupied a dwelling, together with her girlfriend and child almost a year ago, when we interview her. The house was in a very poor state when they started renting it, but they like the feeling of it, as well as its location: close to their former dwelling, on the other side of the canal in another neighbourhood. When they applied for this dwelling they were 12th in line, but the other 11 turned down the dwelling or did not meet the criteria. She did not know the neighbourhood well, but had the idea that it was not such a good area to live. This turned out better than she expected: it is lively and diverse. She likes the mix of people coming from all corners of the world. The area is good for walking to the IJ (the river dividing the city and the northern part of Amsterdam) or along the many shops. She likes meeting other people, helping them with little practical stuff. At night however she feels unsafe on the streets. Youngsters with their pitbulls give the impression they are on their way to a fight. (resp. 32)

In contrast to these recently settled starter-households, there is a category of so-called locals, who in theory enjoy a high degree of residential choice, because they have accumulated precious residency time (the number of years in their current residence), which counts as an important asset for acquiring a new lease on a subsequent dwelling. However, people still need to have enough money to be able to move.

For a 61 year old Suriname man, living alone but who is accompanied by his girlfriend during the interview, the neighbourhood has no secrets. He knows almost everyone, he claims, except those who very recently moved in. He lives in the Spaarndammerbuurt since 1972, after he divorced his wife. In those days the neighbourhood also had a bad reputation. Nevertheless the neighbourhood had a better social climate. There were many bars where he played with his band. These days the streets have become unsafe because of fights and robberies. His social life has nevertheless turned from inside to outside: he used to play ball or cards, but today his social life takes place on the streets. (resp. 27)

This example represents the situation of a large group of residents in the Spaarndammerbuurt who can leave the neighbourhood if they want to, but have grown strong attachments to the place. The other category with a relatively high degree of residential choice, the starters, seem to be a category who may be
willing to grow such ties with the neighbourhood like the locals have done, but who first and foremost experience the neighbourhood as a place to be in easy reach to other places, like work or the centre of Amsterdam. It is a matter of preference and exchanging advantages and disadvantages, as the dwellings are small and not up to standard, public space in the neighbourhood is sometimes in poor physical state, acts of criminal behaviour limit the freedom of moving around the area and the reputation of the neighbourhood is relatively bad. What matters is that the neighbourhood is no hindrance for them. It should be safe and clean enough in order to facilitate other activities outside the neighbourhood. For the late starters there other qualities of the neighbourhood besides its location. They will also be oriented at the social and cultural atmosphere of the neighbourhood. They feel attracted to the liveliness of the area, as long as basic conditions of safety etc. are met.

**Cluster 2**

Not in the Spaarndammerbuurt, but in another neighbourhood, we found residents who had a relatively high degree of choice, but were unsatisfied with their housing circumstances nevertheless. In the particular area this had a lot to do with severe changes in the composition of the population. A high rate of inflow of migrants there turned many locals into unsatisfied residents. Instead of leaving the neighbourhood however they stayed, because like one respondent claimed, “they would not have themselves being chased out their neighbourhood.” In the Spaarndammerbuurt the presence of many migrants has developed very gradually, causing much less stress among the population present. Partly because of this we did not come across residents with a relatively high degree of choice who were unsatisfied with their housing circumstances, but decided to stay in the neighbourhood nevertheless. (Of course, the small sample of residents we interviewed is the most important reason.)

**Cluster 3**

This cluster did not consist of many residents. It concerns a ‘classic’ category of people who are, metaphorically, ‘prisoners’ of the neighbourhood. These residents would like to move out, but are unable to do so, because they lack the means. Incomes of these residents are too low to cover the costs of moving, or people have accumulated little residency time, e.g. because they have only recently accepted their current dwelling.\(^2\) In theory we might expect that this combination, when occurring on a large scale, would lead to social problems in the neighbourhood. The only way in which their situation could improve is when the government or housing association removes so-called ‘dissatisfiers’, like crime, unsafety, dirt, noise, etcetera.

We spoke with a 30-year old Turkish woman who, because of personal circumstances, was forced to move out of her former neighbourhood to the Spaarndammerbuurt. Here she was able to move into a two-bedroom flat through an exchange of dwellings. This flat however is very

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\(^2\) This is the situation in the formal housing system of course. Many more captives however might be found in the informal housing market.
expensive for her, although it has no central heating and windows are not double-glazed. She does not feel at home very much in the neighbourhood. Her ten-year old son and other young children are being harrassed by older kids. She complains about shops having moved out of the area, like the shoe store, the toy store and the clothing appliances store. Despite her dissatisfaction she has some friends in the area and helps out at the school of her son and the community centre. It is not the area as such which is making her want to leave, but there are no larger and more modern dwellings she can afford. (resp. 24)

There is often a history of an involuntary move into the area, which makes people unsatisfied if they do not have the capability to change their circumstances, as is e.g. the case with asylum seekers who cannot escape the socially isolated position they are in:

A 19-year asylum seeker from Angola, who is single and looking for a job, has been living in the Spaarndammerbuurt for seven months as we interview him. His recent past has left marks in his psychological state and his social behaviour. He wants to establish contacts with other residents, but finds it almost impossible to do so. He feels unaccepted and misunderstood by many. The choice of neighbourhood has not been good for him, he claims. Although the neighbourhood has its good qualities too, like its quietness in certain areas, he is disappointed with it and wants to leave. He has no money however to do so and nobody wants to help him. (resp. 31)

The respondents of this cluster are the negative equivalents of the people we will introduce in the next cluster and who also experience little residential choice, but are satisfied nevertheless. The aim of many policymakers is of course to try to prevent the growth of ‘captives’ in neighbourhoods. As we shall see later they are not primarily doing so by extending residential choice, but try to do so in other ways.

Cluster 4
Residents in this cluster were (generally speaking) either those who were placed in the neighbourhood by an institution, mostly asylum seekers, or people who came from neighbourhoods that were even worse than the Spaarndammerbuurt. The histories of these residents refute the hypothesis about a lineary relationship between residential choice and neighbourhood experience, which therefore does not seem acceptable any longer.

The first category of residents, those who have been placed in a dwelling by an institution, have witnessed a (considerable) improvement of their housing situation, but had little say in it. In both neighbourhoods they were often asylum-seekers or psychiatric clients.

A father (44) and son (17) from Azerbaijan live in the neighbourhood for six months. The son has studied at the arts university and the father is a musician. The COA, the national organization that supports asylum seekers, has placed them in the Spaarndammerbuurt. For them,
Amsterdam was not their first choice. A dwelling elsewhere in the Netherlands would have been just as well, but turning down the COA offer would have meant that they were to look for a dwelling by themselves. Now that they live here, they want to get to know the other residents, but so far they have not made many acquaintances. They do not think the community centre is the place to do so. Its visitors steal and use drugs. The neighbourhood is an attractive place to live: it is close to the centre, the air is clean, there is a spacious park. It is relatively quiet, although their road is rather noisy, especially at night. They do not favour the fact that there are so many migrants. They would prefer to live among native Dutch citizens. (resp. 36)

Both asylum seekers seem to be optimistic about their future. They are going to make the best of it. For them, basic conditions to do so are met.

Another category are those residents who, like in cluster I, despite their lack of freedom of choice have been able to improve their residential situation considerably, and who are very satisfied with their new found dwelling. Many of them come from even poorer, run-down neighbourhoods, where their large households occupied small, often privately rented dwellings. They often have had to search for a dwelling for several years, because of the shortage in supply of large and cheap dwellings.

The 51-year old Surinamese single woman we spoke, has been able to move into the Spaarndammerbuurt with help of an urgency-status. The last couple of months she lived with family and friends and before that occupied a dwelling in the Bijlmer, a large housing estate in the south-east of Amsterdam. She considers her move a fast improvement, being close to the city centre and living among less migrants than she did in the Bijlmer. She is happy that she has found a rather anonymous residential area. Her one bedroom flat is well located in the neighbourhood. If she moves out it will only be to find a larger dwelling, but she doubts she will be able to afford such a move. She avoids places in the neighbourhood where Antilleans, Turks and Morroccans gather, but she is “friendly to those who are friendly to me”. She has not been able yet to break loose from her past, as she owes some friends sums of money. She is late with paying rents now too, which makes her reserved to get into contact with other residents in the neighbourhood. In the future however, she wants to become active in e.g. a neighbourhood comitee. (resp. 37)

Both categories (‘placed’ and ‘upwardly mobile’) have in common that much of their satisfaction results from the improvements they have accomplished in their living conditions, despite their low degree of choice. It would be interesting to know if their neighbourhood experience in the future will be still generally positive. In the first cluster of satisfied respondents with relatively much choice, the residents had a negative impression of the neighbourhood at the start, which improved over time. If this has to do with the fact that these residents often have the objective to stay in the neighbourhood for just a short period of time, is not clear. It does however seem plausible that the satisfaction of the respondents with less choice and a long term perspective could just as well decrease as increase over time. The way they
experience the neighbourhood depends strongly on neighbourhood improvement initiatives from the local council and housing associations compared to residents who do have choice.

6. Conclusion
The subject of this paper is the connection between freedom of choice and satisfaction with housing circumstances among inhabitants of a so-called urban poverty area. Based on the ‘iron law of the housing market’ and the supposition that less attractive dwellings and neighbourhoods provide less satisfaction, our hypothesis was that the degree of choice linearly relates to experience: people with choice will be more positive than people without choice. Besides the two clusters with residents for whom the relation between both concepts was indeed positively related (clusters I and III), some residents belong to the other two clusters (II and IV), in which both concepts were negatively related. Some residents, who we called ‘placed’ and ‘upwardly mobile’ were satisfied with their housing situation, despite their limited freedom of choice. There is reason to doubt that residents who have few possibilities to fulfill their residential aspirations are automatically experiencing their neighbourhood negatively. The findings suggest that when constraints are dominant in the residential choice, this does not necessarily mean that the concentration of migrants and/or poor households in poverty areas constitutes social problems.

The interviews showed that in poverty areas there are residents whose restrictions to realize certain preferences do not influence their experience of the neighbourhood in a negative manner. The reason for this is that beside residential choice, there are other factors who influence neighbourhood experience. As we have seen in the analysis the overall state of the neighbourhood is important. A neighbourhood can be poor, but this does not necessarily mean that basic conditions, such as relative safety and a well kept public space are not met. In comparison with other even ‘worse’ neighbourhoods conditions can be ‘good enough’ for some. There can also be specific aspects too which meet someone’s particular preference, such as the presence of many different ethnic cultural traits in the area.

Of particular importance to explain the relationship we have studied is the fact that experiencing the neighbourhood is dynamic. Residents can discover certain aspects in their neighbourhood as time goes by, making them doubt the choice they made earlier or ascertaining that choice instead. They can also get used to particular traits – they do not spot the deteriorated houses anymore after having passed them so many times, taking the edges of the opinion they had when they entered the area. Residential choices can turn out better or worse than was expected before. Experience of the neighbourhood as such is influencing residential choice, which they can evaluate and which can lead to a new choice: moving out or consciously deciding to stay.

Residents who have little choice than to stay where they are, retune their feelings of satisfaction as a result of a the cognitive dissonance they experience (Van der Pligt en De Vries, 1995). In a poverty area this means that the perception of the area is adapted in favour of the particular circumstances. The reduction of cognitive dissonance among residents of poverty areas explains why people can survive – or even be satisfied – with living in poor housing conditions.
Another aspect of the dynamics of neighbourhood experience is the attachments that often go hand in hand with passing time in a neighbourhood. The period of time a resident lives in a particular area is a strong predictor of the degree to which he or she feels attached, independent of personal preferences and the question if these preferences differ from the current housing conditions.

For housing associations, keeping residents satisfied and reducing social problems in poverty areas, means trying to prevent turning satisfied residents into ‘captives’. We have seen that many satisfied residents with little choice are prone to be changing their opinions about the neighbourhood in a negative direction, whereas those who were satisfied and did have choice could leave the area more easily. This means that in poverty areas there is a strong urgency to improve housing conditions continuously, in order to tie those with the means to leave to the area.

There is also a need to keep a close watch on the degree of residential choice among deprived residents. Although our research suggests that inhabitants of concentration areas in the Netherlands generally enjoy a relatively high degree of choice, their situation is becoming increasingly critical. Residency time, waiting time and priority status contributed heavily to their degree of choice, and are important assets for those in a weak socio-economic position. However, more and more housing associations introduce experiments to abolish these criteria. Ironically, those experiments are often legitimated by an increase of freedom of choice for housing candidates, because in theory they can choose from a wider range of dwellings. It seems more plausible, however, that an increase for one, means a decrease for the other. Changes within the housing system thus have a big impact on the degree of solidarity that was once a central principle of the modern welfare state.

References


