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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

The Importance of Thinking In-Place with 'Vulnerable' Neighbourhoods for Policy Making

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Abstract

Big data are increasingly being used to understand complex social and economic challenges. While there is much to be learned from such approaches, in-place data remain necessary for a multidimensional understanding of neighbourhoods, and for sustainable and socially just policies. Rather than reinforcing methodological divides, the argument we set forth in this paper is that multiple forms and strands of inquiry illuminate complexities of space, place and community. Decision makers should consider how and why they may privilege certain forms of data, and instead tap into diversified ways of knowing. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities of crafting in-place data as a relational process integral for decision makers and policymaking. To do so, we discuss two case studies in Sweden and The Netherlands that demonstrate the importance of widening the scope of knowledge, and a willingness to decentre singularity and homogenous definitions of community and place.

Keywords

In-Place Knowledge; Decision-Makers; Sustainable Policy; Neighbourhood; Context

Introduction

The endeavour of translating the complexity of spaces, places and communities for policy and decision makers is a central question for geographers. Perhaps one of the most complexing units of inquiry for this task has been the neighbourhood ([Veronis et al. in press](#)). While the spectrum of resident use and access in neighbourhoods varies widely, neighbourhoods are places where residents live, play and even work ([Drozdowski & Webster 2021](#)). They comprise multiple layers of use, from the private spaces of homes and housing to shared public spaces and infrastructures such as stores, streets, parks and greenspaces. Due to the range and scope of social and economic processes embedded within neighbourhoods, they have been studied across multiple disciplines and perspectives traversing humanistic approaches to spatial planning and urban design. Neighbourhoods are ubiquitous; they are at once subject to global structures and forces even as they are uniquely contextual in the specificity of place and to the individual. Approaching neighbourhood as a form of multiple geographies may offer what Liodaki et al. advocate for as, ‘a departure from essentialist and reductionist views of space, toward nuanced, contextualized theories that acknowledge the heterogeneity and fluidity inherent in socio-spatial processes, advancing a relational understanding of space’ (2024, p. 2), but to embrace the multiple relationalities in spaces and places demands thinking *with and through* the ways we create knowledge about and for neighbourhoods and communities.

In-place qualitative studies can be well suited to capture the layers and heterogenous character of spatial experiences of residents. For example, children move through and interact in neighbourhoods differently from the elderly ([Burns et al. 2011](#); [Cele & van der Burgt 2016](#)), and masculinized migrant identities are filtered through public spaces ([Ehrkamp 2008](#)). [Levy \(2021\)](#) found differences across neighbourhoods, in Sweden, of how the unhoused experience policing. Likewise, [Rady and Sotomayor \(2024\)](#) found that, in Toronto, Canada, legal strategies were implemented in ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods to argue in support for evictions. [Veronis \(2006; 2007\)](#) demonstrates how Latin American immigrants employ temporal and spatial strategies to resist and reconstruct images and narratives of neighbourhoods whilst engaging multiple scales. The common thread across many studies is that neighbourhoods are key targets – with problems and narratives often identified and defined externally – for policy interventions for the overall social and economic health of cities, regions and states. Central to these debates is the question of how one should interpret, use and position knowledge on neighbourhoods as part of policy processes. We concur with Guma, who asserts that neighbourhood residents are ‘proactive agents responding in varied ways beyond those that are easily observable and measurable’ (2023, p. 238) and argues that incorporating these complexities into policy realms is essential to urban sustainability. Neighbourhoods are, after all, sites of social interactions and meaning making where residents feel and know with a familiarity that may be challenging for outsiders to grasp.

The ways policy and decision makers frame neighbourhoods and the knowledge used to articulate and materialize these ideas into various interventions may impact policy, plans and measures, and may even extend to how neighbourhoods are perceived more broadly. [Hoekstra \(2019\)](#) found that the stigmatization of neighbourhoods – for instance when government actors classify them in specific and potentially stigmatising ways – impacts how residents feel and identify with the neighbourhood and suggests that such labels negatively impact neighbourhood potential. In a contrasting case, [Gokce and Kickert \(2024\)](#) identified the potential of positively labelled neighbourhoods and even suggest planners and designers should learn from neighbourhoods with a strong sense of place in order to replicate successful neighbourhood experiences elsewhere. These examples lay bare the importance of taking seriously the role of neighbourhood imaginaries when discussing policy and planning towards neighbourhoods (see also [Sharpe 2013](#)). [Hillmann and Samers \(2024\)](#) call for approaches in understanding urban governance which disrupt distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, or in this case ‘good’ and ‘bad’ neighbourhoods, and instead address the spatial complexity of issues of processes and tensions.

The material and symbolic meanings of neighbourhoods matter and are part of the planning process. They must therefore be better highlighted and considered more thoroughly, as are the ways in which we know and learn about neighbourhoods. Developing policy narratives establishes systems of inclusion and exclusion (Webster & Zhang 2025). Thus, while ‘the dominant perception is that expert knowledge has a single and substantial function for policymakers’ (Kourtellis 2021, p. 280), decision makers come with their own sets of expert knowledge that they utilize in these processes (Tate 2020). At the same time, some critiques have pointed out that in efforts to lift and amplify voices from the bottom up, divisions have maintained and reproduced these narratives (Simone & Castán Broto 2022). Moreover, as Lata et al. point out, many community-led approaches do not adhere to planning processes or models and are ‘in constant tension with the pervasiveness of contract-based and top-down policymaking, administration, and funding regimes’ (2024, p.10). Throughout our reflection, we acknowledge and challenge the pragmatics and complexity of planning and policymaking.

We wish to tackle the challenges of speaking about neighbourhoods from a distance, as exemplified by policy initiatives and interventions often made externally to local experiences. We discuss how in-place data can open and widen the ways in which policy and decision makers construct and enact spatial relations in these processes. Rather than reinforcing quantitative and qualitative divides, we aim to delve into and explore the potential and importance of in-place data as a foundation in sustainable and socially just policy. In particular, we champion the inclusion of data, arising locally from a place, that may at times be contradictory and multifaceted but that underscore the relationalities of lived lives. Although some policy and decision makers may be personally familiar with issues and/or neighbourhoods they are addressing or mediating with, more often their knowledge emerges from off-site or distanced data, which in turn is often created or retrieved by actors who are disconnected from the sites of inquiry. We argue, therefore, that centring complex and nuanced data as a way of knowing – rather than relying on top-down homogenous imaginaries – is key to developing policy based on real and complex needs and issues: place-complex data illuminate how everyday experiences may be essential to creating sustainable and effective policies.

In this paper we explore and reflect upon the challenges and opportunities of offering reflections based on community in-place data to policy and decision makers by considering two case studies in Sweden and The Netherlands. The two cases are used to *think with* the role of in-place data in relation to policy, rather than to present research results or findings from these studies (for more details on the projects see – The Neighbourhood Revisited: Spatial polarization and social cohesion in contemporary Sweden) and Almere’s multicultural food environment)¹. The Swedish case draws on data from a large research programme studying the neighbourhood, focused, in this instance, on qualitative in-person interviews. The Dutch case consists of fifty interviews with migrants and their adult children that aimed to understand eating patterns, the role of home countries in these eating patterns, and the way in which local foodscapes can meet dietary needs. Together, the examples serve to demonstrate the importance of in-depth, experiential data based on and stemming from the people and neighbourhoods that policy and decision makers aim to influence, change or nudge. We conclude with an invitation for policy and decision makers to embrace the challenge of shifting from data norms that adhere to the reproduction of unequal power relations – particularly those between communities and structural power – and to recognize and value how including the voices of those who live in these neighbourhoods leads to more in-place, but ‘messy’ research results.

1 For more details see The Neighbourhood Revisited: Spatial polarization and social cohesion in contemporary Sweden <https://www.su.se/english/research/research-projects/the-neighbourhood-revisited-spatial-polarization-and-social-cohesion-in-contemporary-sweden?open-collapse-boxes=research-project-description,research-project-members,research-project-publications>; and Almere’s multicultural food environment <https://www.aereshogeschool.nl/onderzoek/onderzoeksprojecten/almeres-multiculturele-voedselomgeving> English version: <https://www.aeresuas.com/research/professorships/urban-food-issues/>

Case 1

SWEDEN: NARRATIVES OF SPACES AND PLACES IN 'VULNERABLE' NEIGHBOURHOODS

In presenting the first case, we highlight how neighbourhoods are positioned in sets of social relations that are often experienced differently coming *from* the neighbourhood as opposed to coming *to* the neighbourhood. This spatial hegemony may shape how neighbourhoods are positioned and understood within already established perceptions of those inequalities and vulnerabilities. While researchers have noted growing inequalities in and between groups of people in contexts of the global north, and neighbourhoods are often the site where these trends play out in the residents' everyday lives, it is also known that 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods are complex and it is difficult to understand neighbourhood changes, particularly from a resident perspective ([Esaïasson & Sohlberg 2024](#); [Popescu 2024](#)). Sweden has followed these global trends undergoing rapid economic and social change – especially from the 2008 economic crisis to the wave of refugee arrivals in 2016. These changes have reverberated across the country, prompting differing spatial outcomes at the neighbourhood level. The term 'vulnerable' neighbourhood is debated within Sweden. The Swedish Police Authority (*polisen*) has driven a definition of 'vulnerable areas' (*utsatta områden*) in the Swedish context as neighbourhoods defined as having low social-economic status and where criminals have an impact on the local community ([Polismyndigheten 2023](#)), while scholars such as [Kim Roelofs \(2024\)](#) have argued the term has wider meaning in spatial imaginaries and discourses and challenges their usefulness, calling for greater nuance. Thus, key questions to understand impacts of social and economic segregation must consider the neighbourhood as central to comprehending these spatial complexities.

Studies drawing on large data sets have identified complex processes at hand. [Haandrikman et al. \(2021\)](#), for example, examined how issues such as housing structures and systems, state regimes and spatial interventions accounted for differences between neighbourhoods in Brussels, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Oslo, and Stockholm, while [Malmberg and Andersson \(2022\)](#) identified the intersections between spatialities and life course trajectories in shaping neighbourhood mobilities in Sweden. [Westra \(2024\)](#) found lower well-being in segregated neighbourhoods in large Swedish cities along the lines of ethnic and social-economic homogeneity. Correspondingly, in-depth qualitative studies have found experiences of segregation to impact feelings of belonging, place attachment and everyday interactions in Sweden ([Drozdowski & Webster, forthcoming](#)). These studies suggest the neighbourhood is an important scale for understanding socio-spatial change. Consequently, a research programme investigating the role and process of social change at the hyper local scale of the neighbourhood was initiated at Stockholm University, Sweden.

The Neighbourhood Revisited: Spatial polarization and social cohesion in contemporary Sweden is a large scale 6-year programme housed at the Departments of Human Geography, Demography and Sociology at Stockholm University, Sweden that aims to understand processes and outcomes of neighbourhood spatialities by uncovering the social and spatial unit of the neighbourhood in the context of contemporary spatial polarization. The project focuses on neighbourhoods across Sweden, ranging from wealthy to 'vulnerable' and over the spectrum of rural and urban. The project is divided into three subprojects each working with various methods and approaches. The first subproject began by identifying a typology of differing neighbourhoods in Sweden using population register data ([Kawalerowicz & Malmberg, 2021](#)). The typologies revealed a complex spatial pattern of neighbourhood clusters and social change. This was followed by the second subproject that distributed a nationally representative survey in collaboration with Statistics Sweden to targeted neighbourhoods across the country. The survey covered topics such as housing background and history, social interactions, and attitudes, values, and worldviews (technical report: [Haandrikman and Strömblad 2022](#)). The third subproject specialized and focused on the experiences of youth and neighbourhoods. These approaches revealed rich and complex spatial patterns and outcomes in the Swedish context at the national and neighbourhood scales.

In order to address and explore the experienced, emplaced, and contextual aspects of neighbourhood life, members of the second subproject research team conducted qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews building on the survey questions, drawing and mapping exercises on key places in the neighbourhood, and walk-along interviews to the places discussed in the earlier parts of the interview to explore respondents' experiences in those places as much as possible. This team gained a different understanding of how residents experienced and navigated neighbourhoods, and what various aspects of neighbourhoods meant in 'everyday encounters and lives'. The multiple methodological strands gave insight into how such meaning-making processes were related to diverse residents' intersecting identities and feelings. They also gave respondents an opportunity to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings in varied ways, as well as a greater influence over the interview process, addressing matters and issues that the other approaches did not capture, but that were important to and brought up by the respondents themselves. Importantly, this diversity and multiplicity of perspectives also contributed to developing and expanding interpretations from the other methodological approaches in the research subproject.

The interviews in 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods revealed a specific interest in discussing the role of the neighbourhood and in almost all cases we interviewed long-term residents. In particular, the walk-along section of the interviews unveiled the nuances, heterogeneities and multiplicities of places and spaces *within* neighbourhoods that would administratively be understood and counted as a single unit. Regardless of where they lived, residents articulated their places of residence by drawing socio-spatial boundaries within the neighbourhood. In addition to getting a better understanding of such 'micro-territories' ([Garbin & Millington 2012](#)), these findings gave insight into how the notion of 'neighbourhood' was defined and experienced by residents: not simply as a geographical, physical place delineated by administrative boundaries, but as a multi-scalar and social unit shaped by ever-changing socio-material structures and places, cultural norms, and emotions in people's everyday lives ([Finlay et al. 2023](#); [Drozdewski & Webster 2021](#)). What emerged was a multilayered neighbourhood space shaped by multiple relationalities. From the perspective of place, this layering unveiled neighbourhoods as a multiple geography – a place that can be 'vulnerable' yet beloved by residents at the same time. For example, we walked in similar or exact locations with different participants, and what emerged were coinciding and diverging social meanings. A forest trail or shopping square could be described as dangerous and beloved depending on the position of the interviewee and time of the discussion. Sites in the neighbourhood are not homogenous nor are the experiences and meanings of those places for residents.

This multilayering of meanings and experiences was illustrated through the interviews, as there was a desire by most residents to contrast and navigate top-down portrayals of their neighbourhoods – something that did not emerge strongly in the survey data. For example, media portrayals, as well as external studies by governmental authorities, have often emphasized that those who live in 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods tend to feel unsafe due to issues with social order. This heightened sense of feeling unsafe has often been connected linearly to residents' desires to move away from the neighbourhood. Contrasting such narratives, respondents who lived in the most stigmatized places largely did not, in our interviews, express that safety or issues with social order had a significant impact on their everyday lives, nor on their desires to move away during walking or mapping activities. Moreover, although most residents acknowledged issues with criminality or social order to varying extents, many also expressed the stresses that can come from what they perceived as exaggerated negative portrayals of the neighbourhood. Those who lived in the most stigmatized parts of the neighbourhoods also expressed stress and discomfort related to how they may feel in *other places* than their neighbourhoods, such as the prestigious inner city or more affluent neighbourhoods. Particularly, marginalized communities shared that safety and stigmatization were shaped by their experiences of racism and class ([Pinkster et al. 2020](#)). Similar to [Esaïasson and Sohlberg \(2024\)](#), it can be argued that many participants were speaking against power structures, such as local planning authorities, through interview participation. Participants brought an awareness of the structures embedded in how neighbourhoods are

perceived to the research process. In ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods, in contrast to other neighbourhoods, participants often engaged with norms, narratives and other stereotypes to explain how their sense of place aligned or resisted those forms of social ordering. The experiences in the interviews, combined with the open inquiry of the research method, prompted new questions and observations about the relationship between top-down narratives and the neighbourhood as a specific type of power relation, suggesting that although often treated as such, neighbourhoods cannot simply be understood through normative narratives of place but require acknowledgment that they are multifaceted, giving rise to shifting and relational emotions that surface in encounters with places, people and objects in everyday life.

Case 2

THE NETHERLANDS: UNDERSTANDING EATING PATTERNS OF RESIDENTS WITH A NON-DUTCH BACKGROUND

Whereas the previous case clarifies the added value of qualitative in-place data to better understand the nuances of the lived and felt experiences of residents in ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods, in this case we show how an attempt to move away from negative top-down stereotyping can also lead to a lack of urgency in research results. This finding highlights that it can be tempting to focus on perceived issues and problems, in turn reinforcing denigrating stereotypes.

The literature on eating patterns and diets of people with a migration background tends to problematize these diets and their (lack of) healthiness ([Sanou et al. 2014](#)). For instance, a body of literature has discussed the role of the nutrition transition, arguing that people who migrate from the global south to the global north become less healthy as they start incorporating a western diet (e.g., [McDonald & Kennedy 2005](#); [Misra & Ganda 2007](#); [Nicolaou et al. 2009](#)). In the Netherlands, there is also ample policy and research attention to the health status of people in lower socio-economic positions, and the fact that they have a lower life expectancy and may expect to live shorter lives in good health (e.g. [Broeders et al. 2018](#); [Netherlands, Central Bureau of Statistics 2022](#)). As immigrants are overrepresented within the group of people with a lower socio-economic position ([Netherlands, Central Bureau of Statistics 2018](#)), people with a migration background have a higher chance of experiencing ill health than people of Dutch descent ([Dagevos et al. 2022](#)).

Health disparities are a serious problem, and studies do indeed show that people with a migration background have higher chances of gaining diet-related chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (see for instance [Brussaard et al. 2021](#) and [Perini et al. 2018](#) in the context of the Netherlands and [Kumar et al. 2006](#) in the context of Norway). However, this is only part of the story. Clearly not all people who are in less favourable financial or socio-economic positions have health issues, nor do all people with a migration background have a lower socio-economic position. Moreover, focusing on (un)healthy diets only is a performative act: such a focus makes this reality more visible and thus more real, as [Gibson-Graham \(2008; 2014\)](#) point out. Indeed, [Bacchi \(2016\)](#) explains that we are generally governed through problematizations, as policies are designed to bring solutions to specific ‘problems’, that are thereby (re)produced as such. Considering something a problem is thus not a neutral act. Gibson-Graham argues, therefore, that researchers should strive for an ontological reframing, for making difference visible, and for research that emerges from ‘an experimental, performative and ethical orientation to the world’ (2008, p. 613). In other words, following [Butler \(2015\)](#), performative acts can struggle against precarity and open a different future. Or as Gritzas and Kavoulakos phrase it: ‘knowledge has a productive power, influencing not only the world that exists, but also the making of future worlds’ (2016, p. 5). This then calls for research that starts from interest rather than judgement ([Gibson-Graham 2008](#)) and that assists in reframing dominant

ideas ([Gritzis & Kavoulakos 2016](#)): this idea guided our work on the multicultural food environment of Almere, the city in which we conducted our research.

Almere is a medium-sized city in the Netherlands with just over 220,000 inhabitants. It is a relatively new town: it was built in the 1960s on land reclaimed from the sea. The city is close to Amsterdam, but housing is cheaper and there is more space; it is relatively green, and most houses have private gardens. As a result, Almere has become populated by large numbers of former Amsterdam residents, looking for more affordable and comfortable housing. Many of these former Amsterdam residents have a migration background, and today Almere is one of the most multicultural cities in the Netherlands².

When designing our research we took into account Gibson-Graham's message of generating possibilities by making them visible, as well as the idea that it matters how planners and policy and decision makers frame communities ([Hoekstra 2019](#)). Therefore, rather than focusing on health issues, our research team chose to take a more neutral, positive or curiosity-driven stance towards eating and migration. We focused on how people who migrated to the Netherlands currently living in Almere and their (grand)children eat, the extent to which they identified with Dutch food and with the food of their (parents') home countries, and how they navigated the Almere foodscape. By approaching eating habits this way, we hoped to better understand the daily reality of living in a different food environment than where one grew up, or of growing up in a different food environment from one's parents. Through a series of research projects ([Veen et al. 2025](#); [Adriano et al. 2023](#)), we conducted fifty semi-structured interviews. Some respondents in this group were related, and in some cases, two people from different generations were interviewed simultaneously (e.g., a mother and her son, an aunt and her nephew). In other cases, we interviewed people from different generations separately (e.g., by inviting the son of an interviewee for another interview). Respondents had roots in different countries, but Latin America, the Caribbean, and Indonesia were most represented.

The interviews gave clear insights into the lived experiences of, and the daily life around, grocery shopping, cooking and eating by people with a migration background. They showed that, while partially partaking in the Dutch eating culture (a quick sandwich for lunch, for instance), cooking and eating food from the home country was very important and gave feelings of belonging and conviviality. The stories shared also showed a clear pragmatism: people ate what they craved, what fit their time schedules and budgets, and what their children did or did not like. We also found that the Almere foodscape had changed considerably over the last twenty years, and that most ingredients that our respondents would want to use were available to them.

Our work attracted some interest from the scientific community, as shown by the fact that we gave a number of presentations at (international) conferences and more informal occasions. Also, the professional community showed interest: we were asked to present our work at seminars and to write an article in a national journal for professionals in food and health. Nevertheless, the simple fact that the research did not respond to a policy 'problem' made it less appealing for policy and decision makers. At face value this makes sense: the research was not directly commissioned by policy and decision makers with a specific question, nor did it give answers to pressing questions about health and immigration or offer policy and decision makers solutions that they could respond to. Meanwhile, this issue also seems somewhat reflective of the larger debates surrounding how knowledge is taken up and valued in policy arenas. In a diverse city such as Almere, it is important to understand the population beyond the statistics, and to comprehend the city as a place of multiple layers and uses. To know what is important to its inhabitants, how people feel

2 The Dutch Bureau of Statistics registers people born outside of the Netherlands, or people with at least one parent born outside of the Netherlands, as 'people with a migration background'. In 2023 48% of inhabitants in Almere had a migration background: for the Netherlands as a whole this was 27%. For comparison, in the capital Amsterdam 59% of residents had a migration background and for the other three major cities these numbers are: Rotterdam 56%, Den Haag 59%, Utrecht 40%. Almere, however, is only the 8th Dutch city in terms of size. All statistics and explanations taken from <http://allecijfers.nl>.

and think, what they value, and also how they eat, is to unveil the dynamics of the places that create and produce neighbourhoods. Such knowledge might help overcome the problem that Bonnevert discussed after analysing food policies. Her analysis showed that immigrant foodways and foodscapes are often marginalized and rendered problematic in these food policies, that several urban food strategies reify immigrant stereotypes and that they promote ‘nationally defined and white-coded foodways’ (2024, p. 10). A better understanding of the everyday foodways of immigrant communities may result in food strategies that do not recreate stereotypes: these communities may then not be seen as groups that require a specific paragraph in a food strategy but rather as part of the overall urban population to which such a strategy is catered.

The people we interviewed were often of a middle-class background and did not necessarily live in neighbourhoods where health and wellbeing are pressing topics for policy and decision makers. Some of them had led rather cosmopolitan lives and lived in different countries. Similarly, our work did not include respondents of Turkish or Moroccan descent – people who have a higher chance of being of lower socio-economic position in Dutch society. While this omission has arguably impacted our results, one may also question whether the findings would have been so different if these groups had been included: we did not inquire about health status or socio-economic difficulties but rather tried to understand what it is like to live, shop, cook and eat in the city of Almere, while stemming from or growing up with a food pattern that may not be typically Dutch.

In sum, it is possible to choose to not focus on (health) issues, but rather to try and understand daily life of people with differing (socio-economic or ethnic) backgrounds. This way one focusses on people’s ‘normalcy’ rather than on their difference, but such ‘unproblematization’ also means that the urgency for policy and decision makers to engage with the research findings diminishes, and that it requires more persuasion to evidence the value of this type of work. This finding illustrates how knowledge is a reflection of broader relations between research and policy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The two cases presented here highlight, first, the importance of knowledge that is contextualized in and with place, and secondly, that contextualization is part of a multi-layering and way of knowing. The two examples highlight how layering differing experiences from respondents as well as multiple methodological approaches in research design, can lead to a deeper understanding of the nuances and range of needs, practices, meanings and structures shaping local neighbourhoods and communities. As Veronis (2007) points out, marginalized or ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods experience multiple forms of exclusions and ‘othering’. Translating research findings and results into actionable policy is a challenge due to the complexities and uncertainties found in and through these data collection methods. Consequently, there is a tension between the richness, diversity and variety of ways in which a place is understood and the petition for certainty and singularity required to justify and implement planning and policy decisions. These tensions are not unknown but permeate through decision making processes and are of consequence, especially for ‘vulnerable’ places and people (Lata et al. 2024; Young et al. 2024)

The mixed method approach of the Swedish project, The Neighbourhood Revisited, enabled the researchers to fruitfully complement multiple ways of knowing, allowing respondents to develop their answers to questions from a survey. The importance of the everyday experience of places within the neighbourhood was clear during our interviews, as was the emergence of the relation of places in opposition to and from external narratives of the place. During the walk-along and mapping exercises, many respondents showed us places that could not be captured in the survey or other data forms, such as the forested green spaces or hidden courtyards between multifamily housing. Such places ‘in-between’, that were not necessarily designated for particular activities, were of great recreational and emotional

importance in many respondents' everyday lives, where they would go for a stroll, to enjoy nature, meet neighbours and/or play with their children. Respondents used these greenspaces to raise positive experiences of their neighbourhoods and to counter and re-navigate stigmatizing top-down imaginaries ([Wallin 2023](#); [Johansson, forthcoming](#)). Similarly, the Dutch example illustrates that approaching food practices from curiosity opened room for understanding how residents balance culture, practicalities and the everyday. This approach nuanced the understanding of food and eating and highlighted the fluidity through which people create meaning or even lack thereof; food can be simultaneously mundane and significant in context. Moreover, by visualizing daily food practices, we chose not to reproduce stereotypes and hierarchies around food and health. Understanding this nuance gave the researchers insights beyond reinforcing and resisting norms. It reveals the ways in which the research process is co-constructive in defining these norms and the ways in which research shifts them forward into policy and decision makers' purviews.

The two cases show that neighbourhoods and communities are multifaceted and comprise many 'unknowability' spots, as well as multiple ways of being. The same street or grocery store contains multiple materialities and symbols across residents' positionalities and life courses. Diverse narratives of space and place in communities does make it difficult to understand the multi-dimensional roles of places and practices to and for a community, but creating space for the multifaceted character of such a place also provides new opportunities – especially for policy and place-based interventions. Spaces and places shift over temporalities – from a daily basis to the timeframe of generations. These layers and shifts are often discerned only through data collection that is time and place intensive. We argue, however, that a key part to understanding these spaces, places and communities is gathering data that destabilizes top-down ways of knowing and instead creates comfort with other ways and forms of knowing ([Liodaki et al. 2024](#); [Simone & Castán Broto 2022](#); [Drozdowski & Webster 2021](#)).

While at first glance unknowability may seem limiting in practice, in fact, 'messy' or complex data offer opportunities to understand different needs and perspectives, especially in the long term. The willingness to produce complex data that attempts to engage with a socio-spatial understanding of multiplicity can enrich policy, because it leads to greater understanding and helps us see residents as real people with their own wants, needs, and capabilities, rather than only understanding them as, for example, occupying a specific socio-economic position. Homogeneous narratives, the cases highlight, may be easier to work with but are not fair to the complexities of a given community, especially if already 'vulnerable' to broader social orderings. If neighbourhoods are presented and understood as complex and heterogenous, residents may be more open to interventions and information as they recognize their experience in the norms and narratives. This recognition is important when thinking about research for policy purposes. Decision makers often are working 'far' from the sites and may be distant from the experiences of daily life in neighbourhoods of interest. Moreover, the type of data and material used to understand neighbourhoods may also reflect a more distanced way of knowing, reinforcing specific forms of expertise and knowledge. These cases highlight how the relationship to types of knowing shapes how neighbourhoods and residents are positioned externally to the spaces and places of daily life, rather than as those who may be recipients of decisions made about their communities.

While in-place methods can generate complex nuanced data, attending to this complexity is admittedly a challenge. As researchers, we acknowledge struggling with this challenge as well, and we call for closer communications between researchers and policy and decision makers when thinking about neighbourhoods and how to embrace heterogeneity effectively and ethically. For researchers, this may mean contesting the ways problems and even neighbourhoods as units are defined within the literature, and leaving room for questions based more on curiosity and exploration. For policy and decision makers, this may mean finding mechanisms for embracing ambiguity and complexity when considering places that are distanced from top-down initiatives. Working with in-place data requires making room and time for multiplicity and even conflicting data – a neighbourhood can suffer from crime and be a place of safety, and food choices are

based on concerns around health, on symbolic reasons, and on practicalities such as cost and time-pressure. Working with contradictory meanings, may also require confronting biases about certain neighbourhoods and communities and exposing the local strengths as well as the vulnerabilities. This process requires challenging notions of expertise and, of course, larger budgets in money and time scales to make space for these complexities.

Importantly, for the purpose of this text, these brief examples illustrate how our qualitative interviews facilitated opportunities for respondents to share their perspectives, including ‘alternative’ or ‘counter-narratives’, or previously unknown socio-spatial imaginaries, raising positive aspects of their neighbourhoods as they matter to them. Our reflections illustrate that qualitative, in-place and experiential research could be valuable for ‘vulnerable’ neighbourhoods or communities, not only because residents perceived that narratives of their neighbourhood were often defined ‘top-down’, but also because respondents may be reluctant to share part of their experiences if they believe that the research will contribute to negative stigmatizing imaginaries or interventions (Sharpe 2013). People use energy and emotional labour to navigate negative discourses (Pinkster et al. 2020) and may not feel heard if they cannot express concerns that matter to them. It may be useful then to shift the traditional focus of data to one that prioritizes listening to respondents and instead let policy and decision makers, who may hold more power, to sit with the discomfort of messy, contradictory and nuanced data, rather than suppressing voices to prioritize the comfort of systems of power.

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