The ambiguity of togetherness
- experiences from a participative open space management initiative in a Swedish residential area

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Abstract

Social cohesion among neighbours in deprived rental housing areas is often something desirable, something that landlords as well as engaged tenants commonly strive for. However, social capital theory suggests that bonding networks may also be problematic. The present paper begins by exploring and developing the concept of neighbourhood togetherness, which is then applied in an analysis of a recent case study on resident involvement processes in a Swedish public housing area. The empirical findings confirm the ambiguity of togetherness: that it may contribute to well-being and safety, but may also lead to conflicts and social exclusion. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed and possible management strategies are suggested, aiming at more bridging, tolerant and inclusive forms of togetherness.
  keywords: togetherness; social cohesion; social exclusion; tenant involvement; housing management; neighbourhood; bonding social capital

Introduction

During the past fifteen years, since the notion of social capital was popularised as a broad 'civic spirit' concept, *the community question* (see Wellman, 1979) has seen a renaissance, and the roles of social norms, trust and networks in the modernising society have been the subject of debate in virtually every scientific discipline. At the core of the discussions is the dominant line of argument urging the rebuilding of lost social capital (e.g., Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Serageldin, 1996), and a number of critical voices castigating many of the social capital catchphrases as scientifically inappropriate due to their vagueness, inconsistency or ideological biases (e.g., Boggs, 2001; DeFilippis, 2001; Lichterman, 2006; Woolcock, 1998). There are also those who have concentrated on describing what Robert D. Putnam (2000), without going into depth on the issue, has called "The dark side of social capital" (e.g., Daly and Silver, 2008; Svendsen, 2006).

   In parallel with the academic disputes over the community question, there has been a growing interest in social capital issues in policy and practice as well, which is tempting to think of as a 'community quest'. This quest concerns tying people together to strengthen organisations and societies, thereby improving health, democracy and economic growth. Among the multitude of initiatives possibly collected under the

community quest umbrella, the present paper deals with one specific type: community building through tenant involvement in urban neighbourhood open space management. More specifically, it deals with the role of *togetherness* in such involvement processes – with the potential positive and negative implications of togetherness for involved and non-involved residents.

Togetherness, tie strength and social capital

The phenomenon analysed here is closely related to concepts like 'social cohesion', 'sense of community' or just 'community'. However frequently used in the academic literature these concepts are also afflicted with a multitude of meanings and they normally aspire to broader phenomena than what is appropriate here. To isolate the specific type of 'community' issued in this article, the more unusual term 'togetherness' has been applied. Three typical contexts in which 'togetherness' has been used previously as an analytical concept are *neighbourhoods* (e.g., Jacobs, 1961, Martinson, 2001, Narayan and Cassidy, 2001, Smets, 2005), *families* (e.g., Björnberg and Kollind, 2005, Marsh, 1989, Miller, 1995), and *virtual communities* (e.g., Bakardjieva, 2003, Nicolopoulou et al., 2006). The concept has also been used in analyses of a multitude of other kinds of groups, such as church congregations, criminal gangs, companies and football teams – sometimes also for society as a whole. Across the different contexts, three levels of meanings have been attached to the concept.

(a) In the most tangible sense, togetherness often refers to the act or habit of being together or doing things together. For example, in several studies of family relations, togetherness is measured quantitatively as the occasions when family members watch TV or eat together, or simply when they are in the same place at the same time (Flouri, 2001, Kusano-Tsunoh et al., 2001, van Klaveren and van den Brink, 2007). In a neighbourhood context, togetherness in the sense of a habit or act could be defined as group activities that are informed by the fact that group members see a value in doing things together rather than alone: talking, smoking, drinking coffee, gardening, etc. The term applied to describe this here is *togetherness-practice*.

(b) A different meaning of the concept is the feeling of having close relations or being connected to a specific group of others. For example, togetherness can refer to the *appreciation* of doing things together with a family member or friend (Wikström, 2004), or the feeling of *getting along* with one's neighbours (Narayan and Cassidy, 2001). Here, this meaning of togetherness will be termed *togetherness-sense*, referring to norms of reciprocity developed within a group of neighbours. Togetherness-sense thus involves a feeling of emotional connection to other members of the group and expectations of certain collaborative behaviours from each other.

(c) On another level, the concept of togetherness sometimes takes on the meaning of an ethical, or even an ontological, principle. For example, togetherness is sometimes used in theological writings to represent the notion that every human should be regarded as part of a single humanity (e.g., Pang, 2008). Similarly, the South African 'Ubuntu' philosophy has been described in terms of togetherness (Swanson, 2007) – the principle that we should respect each other as fellow humans. On a deeper ontological plane, togetherness has been used as a term for

the principle that things are connected and cannot be separated from each other (Wu, 1998). In a neighbourhood context, this *togetherness-principle* could refer to the idea that there is something good in togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense.

Togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense are found within a specific social network, which will be referred to here as the *togetherness group*. They are connected to each other in that togetherness-practice can be assumed to develop togetherness-sense, and that togetherness-sense can be assumed to stimulate togetherness-practice. However, the two refer to principally different things, and it is plausible to think of each independent of the other. While togetherness-practice is concrete and empirically directly observable, togetherness-sense resides in the minds of people and to detect it respondent techniques such as interviews or questionnaires are required. Togetherness-principle is also intangible, and it is not even bound to a network. It has a more peripheral role in the present paper, the aim of which is to study the effects of networking. Therefore, when the term togetherness is used without a suffix, it will refer to togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense without distinguishing them from each other (see Fig. 1).

TOGETHERNESS IN NEIGHBOUR NETWORKS

Togetherness-practice
a group of neighbours do things together

Togetherness- sense
a group of neighbours feel they belong to each other

?

Togetherness-principle
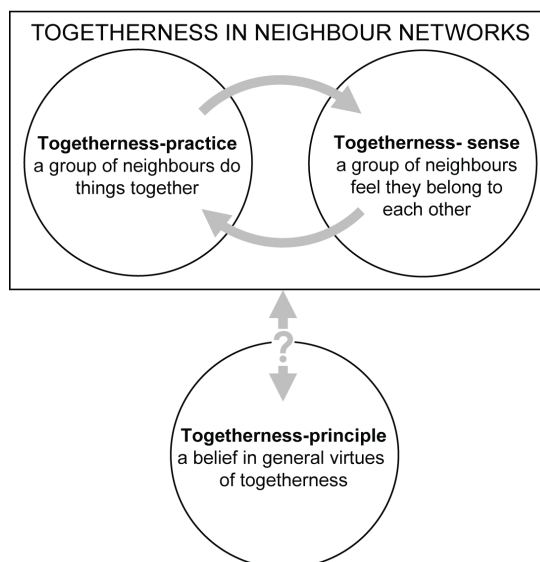a belief in general virtues of togetherness

Fig. 1. Three levels of meaning of the concept of togetherness: as an action, as a feeling and as a principle. The first two are more tightly connected in the neighbourhood context, while the third is not bound to a social network and is not of major concern in the current paper.

The intimacy of social relations plays an important role in network theory. One widespread idea is Mark Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties. In simple terms, Granovetter suggested that strong ties form homogenous networks and that weak ties, although at the time neglected in research, play the significant role of bridging different networks. Granovetter's theoretical construct has been widely adopted but it has also been questioned. For example, Burt (1992) argued that the bridging function has nothing to do with the tie strength per se, but is only a matter of the network structure. According to Burt, strong ties may well be bridges between

different network clusters. The notions of weak and strong ties are useful as theoretical concepts, but there are no obvious and stringent ways in which we can concretely define how to distinguish them. Granovetter himself chose to "postpone" the discussion of operational measures "to future empirical studies" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Ten years later, however, Granovetter's own distinction between weak and strong ties was still not more concrete than defining it as the difference between *acquaintances* and *close friends* (Granovetter, 1983, p. 201). Others have defined strong ties as the contacts that are *important and frequent* (Henning and Lieberg, 1996), or relations with a *feeling of closeness* (Hipp and Perrin, 2006). The point of departure here will be that weak and strong ties are not absolute concepts, but that they indicate relative positions along a continuum of tie strength.

As social networks among neighbours in urban neighbourhoods have often been described, they are mainly a matter of weaker ties. Naturally, stronger ties of intimate friendship and kinship also occur, but more typical neighbour networking involves less intimate relations. Henning and Lieberg's (1996) notions of *acknowledge*-contacts, *greeting*-contacts and *helping*-contacts capture a typical range of weaker ties in urban neighbourhoods. Stronger neighbourhood ties, according to Henning and Lieberg, involve 'frequent' and 'important' contacts. Neighbourhood togetherness, as the notion is used here, could also be characterised by frequent and important contacts: more intimate than just greeting and borrowing tools from each other. However, it is not necessarily on a level of close friendship: using Granovetter's taxonomy, neighbourhood togetherness would be placed somewhere between acquaintanceship and close friendship, but be more related to strong ties than weak ties (see Fig. 2).
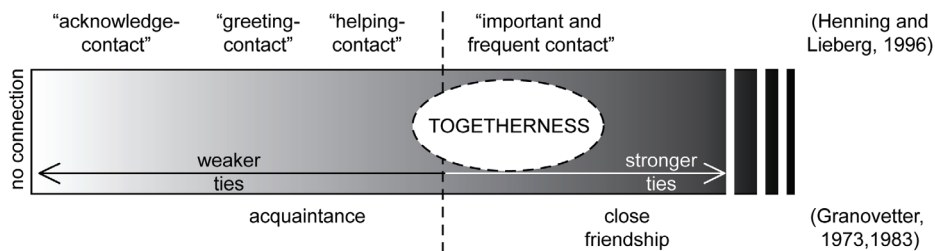

Fig. 2. Attempt to place neighbourhood togetherness along a tie strength continuum and relate it to the tie strength typologies of Henning and Lieberg (1996) and Granovetter (1973, 1983)

Along the lines of Granovetter's discussion of the importance of structural network bridges, more recent debaters have argued for the promotion of *bridging* rather than *bonding* social capital. This distinction seems to be intuitively effective, but is often vaguely defined. The common point of departure is that there is a potential "dark side" of social capital – mechanisms resulting in negative effects for society and individuals (see, e.g., Putnam, 2000). This dark side is usually associated with bonding structures, developed in homogenous and inwards-centred networks. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is assumed to involve more heterogeneous groups that are more open to contacts with others (see, e.g., Patulny and Svendsen, 2007; Svendsen, 2006). It has been suggested that strong ties build bonding social capital, while weak ties are important to bridging social capital (e.g., Middleton et al., 2005). However, equating weak ties with bridging social capital and strong ties with bonding social capital misses one important point: that the level of openness in a social network is

not just dependent on its structural dimensions, but also on its cognitive dimensions, i.e. what kinds of norms, values, attitudes and beliefs it reproduces and manifests (Uphoff, 2000). According to Crawford (2006), the same type of networks can be both bonding and bridging. It has also been argued that bonding social capital may have positive outcomes for both individuals and communities (see, e.g., Reynolds, 2006).

Jane Jacobs (1961) used the notion of togetherness to describe a phenomenon she regarded as an ailment of the malfunctioning suburbia (it is unclear whether she was referring to togetherness-practice, togetherness-sense or togetherness-principle). "'Togetherness'", she wrote, "works destructively in cities [and] drives city people apart" (Jacobs 1961, p. 62). Her disfavoured form of togetherness functions in a bonding and restraining way, which results in closed groups of like-minded individuals. However, narratives of successful neighbourhood regeneration have commonly described togetherness (ultimately referring to togetherness-sense) both as a desirable goal and as a valuable resource. Sören Olsson et al. (1997) emphasised that "the small neighbourhood" (on the approximate scale of one apartment house) will thrive with moderate levels of togetherness. Without togetherness, they claim, the neighbourhood will not function well socially. On the other hand, they also conclude that their interviewees tend to avoid overly intimate relations with neighbours, i.e. what Jacobs refers to as "too much sharing" (Jacobs 1961, p. 62).

Apparently, togetherness has been described both as a supporting factor for a well-functioning neighbourhood and as a hindering factor, causing exclusion and destructive divisions. This ambiguity of togetherness constitutes the thematic framework of the present article, where the findings from a recent case study will be presented. The main question guiding the presentation of the empirical data is which positive and negative functions togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense may have for involved and non-involved residents. One related question, which is brought up in the discussion, is the question of how potential problems can be handled in housing management.

The case study area and methods

The overall aim of the research project[1] has been to explore potential outcomes of collective tenant involvement in open space management, acknowledging that such processes are commonly promoted by tenant organisations as well as public housing companies, primarily as a means to develop togetherness (see Castell, 2006, *forthcoming*; Lindgren & Castell, 2008). A rental housing area was selected for an in-depth case study as a part of the research project. There are several types of involvement processes in different parts of the area, which makes it well suited for studying how involvement and togetherness can be connected and how it may affect the living conditions of the residents.

The housing area is situated next to a commercial and logistic hub in a spread-out and large-scale city district in the outskirts of Göteborg. It was built during the 'record years' in Sweden, when about one million new dwellings were constructed between 1965 and 1974 (see, e.g. Hall and Vidén, 2005). The city district was sketched up as a modern conglomerate township of as many as 300,000 inhabitants (City of Göteborg, 1968), but the growth prognosis was exaggerated and the development plans were put in mothballs during the oil crisis of the mid-1970s. At about the same time, the general image of the area was becoming coloured by media reports about social problems

and inhuman environments, an image that has continued to this day. Since the 1990s, the social and environmental stigmas have been supplemented by an ethnic stigma and multicultural identity (see, e.g., Sernhede, 2002).

The housing area studied consists of about 500 rental apartments, forming ten yards with similar layout (see Fig. 3). The yards are relatively small (about 30x35m), each surrounded by a four-storey apartment house, a three-storey apartment house, and two row house buildings. The yards are open for access in all four corners, and commonly people make their way through others' yards even though it is clear that they are less public in character than, e.g., the streets are. There are low wooden fences in all yards, dividing them into different functional areas that contain elements such as a sandbox, a swing set, benches, a barbeque, and a number of mountain ashes. In the middle of the housing area, there is a reception office for the local management staff. At the moment, there are three employees, two in charge of outdoor management and one coordinating indoor management and taking primary responsibility for contact with the tenants.
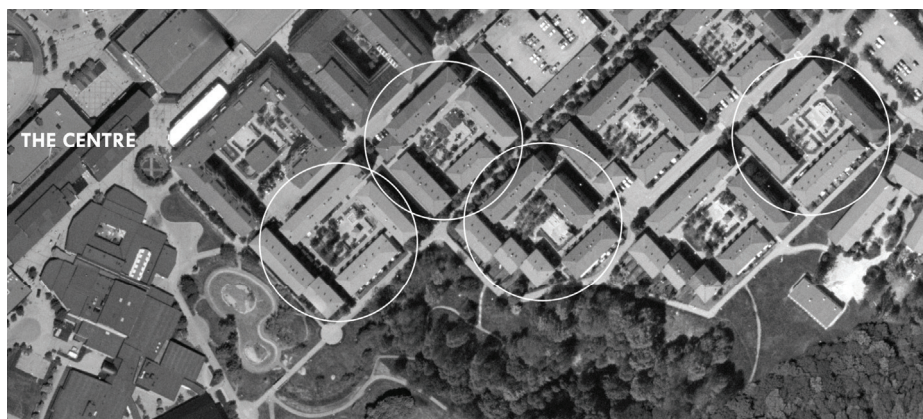

Fig. 3. Areal view of the area, with the four case study yards encircled.

Four of the yards were selected in consultation with one of the local managers as a basis for in-depth studies. The point of departure for selection was to find different types and forms of involvement processes. The 'A yard' lacks any resident involvement; on the 'B yard' there is a group of about five households involved on an informal basis; and in the 'C yard' and the 'D yard' there are formalised yard associations engaging five to seven households each.

A questionnaire was handed out to all households in the four selected yards, and observations were made to collect information about how the yards were used[2]. Moreover, a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted with 19 residents, the three local managers, and a management director with overall responsibility for the company's housing stock in the whole city district. Interviews were digitally recorded and a data coding software was used to facilitate the analyses.

I – An opportunity perspective

In the following three sections, three perspectives on togetherness will be presented, investigating different functions of togetherness and discussing theoretical and practi-

cal implications for housing management. The three perspectives applied are not the only possible ones, and they are not intended to fully cover the effects of togetherness in the study. However, they elucidate the most essential ambiguity of togetherness as it appeared in the case study. This first perspective shows togetherness as an opportunity for residents to achieve certain added values, through potential effects on the physical environment as well as on social structures. Thereafter, two sections will instead deal with potential problems.

A director in the company's management organisation explains that the primary reason for their support of involvement initiatives is the expected social benefits for the residents. Involvement in yard management is first and foremost a means to create a togetherness-sense, which in turn results in other values:

> – If you can see your neighbours under restful conditions you get to know each other, you thrive, the area becomes more stable, insecurity decreases in case there are such feelings and… so it has very many advantages.
> (interview with management director)

Most yards in the area have networks of engaged residents, but on the A yard there is no yard group of any kind. That is why the local managers refer to it as "a problem child". Of the 57 households living in the yard, only two turned up at the annual yard meeting arranged by the local managers, which is a forum to discuss any managerial problems or raise ideas for improvements. The somewhat depressed spirit of the yard meeting has a parallel in the relative absence of life on the A yard. Observations showed that there are between six and nine times more people seen on the other yards. This is also confirmed by Carlos and Claudia, a middle-aged couple who mean that there are many more social activities on the other yards:

> – There aren't many who use the yard.
> – It's only the children who are out there.
> – I haven't seen anyone barbequing for example.
> – No, never.
> – Or drinking coffee or something.

Carlos and Claudia also mean that their yard is much duller and dirtier than other yards in the area, and especially that there are fewer flowers. On other yards, engaged residents plant and tend flowers, do additional cleaning up and reprimand people who litter or cause other disturbances. The managers claim that they do what they can to maintain order and that the rest is up to the residents themselves. Having more flowers and a well-kept physical environment would thus be a reason for residents of the A yard to start getting involved in yard management. Another reason would be to improve the social environment as the management director suggested. Carlos and Claudia continue reflecting on the lack of life and togetherness-sense on the A yard, jealously looking at the C and D yards with their respective yard associations:

> – Never have I seen someone barbequing here. But for example what I've seen in other yards, I think it's very cosy and nice, sometimes they set up a kind of party tent and the neighbours are there and have fun […]
> – It wasn't long ago, they celebrated midsummer. The other yard was full of people […]
> – So that's missing here. We're not good at that.

In contrast to the A yard, the D yard is generally recognised as an active and lively yard with highly involved residents. A number of families have been engaged continuously since the late 1990s in upgrading and maintaining the physical environment of the yard. For example, the laying of new concrete blocks on part of the yard and building of new fences have been two major projects involving many of the residents. Since 2002, there has also been a formal yard association with an elected board and a written agreement on their duties vis-à-vis the housing company. As a yard association, they can apply for funding every year, money channelled through the union of tenants according to a central agreement with the company. The D yard is a kind of a model yard, acknowledged for its achievements not only in the area, but also outside. It was selected as one of the case study yards in a previous evaluation study, where the researchers reported on the great improvements due to the work of the involved residents. Their description of the process at the D yard is as follows (Bengtsson et al., 2003, p. 153):

> The physical results have been tangible and positive. An increased amount of active and stronger engagement has also been clear. Those who have been affected by the activities also agree that they 'have given better cohesion and a better social situation'. Here, increased safety, security and togetherness, as well as better amenity, are mentioned.

The core of the yard association on the D yard is a group of about seven households, many of them larger families with school children. Each has responsibility for a certain part of the yard, which they maintain on a regular basis. In addition to weekly working meetings, they arrange activities for a broader group of residents as well, such as planting and yard-cleaning days. They have also prepared a hobby room with a bicycle and carpentry workshop.

Lena, a resident on the B yard, is very excited about the D yard because of its yard association:

> – The best yard in the whole area, it is actually the D yard. I mean it is… It is the most well-kept, because they have a yard association […] I think it is because they have a yard association. They have a bicycle workshop, they have a… And then it is of course the kind of people who live there, they are industrious people and to get a well-functioning good yard, you need industrious people.

She regrets that there is no yard association on the B yard. However, there is a group of four to five families who meet regularly on the yard and are informally involved in the management. Lena is currently the most active resident in the yard. She has almost daily contact with the local managers, and when she requests it, she usually gets a requisition to buy flowers or food for arranging activities on the yard.

> – It is me and my neighbour, we buy the flowers… And then we put up a poster or we just go out. Poff, then almost everyone from the rowhouses comes

The same group of families who help out with planting, weeding, watering and lawn mowing also spend a great deal of time together smoking, eating, drinking and chatting on the yard; they clearly constitute a togetherness group on the B yard. Much is won by the togetherness-practice, in addition to the mere joy of being together. For instance, Lena mentions the importance of social networks for raising children in an area that many associate with drugs, criminality and social problems:

– Everyone knows who Rosanna's kids are. Everyone knows who my kids are. It means that the kids know there are eyes watching them. It means that they can't make a lot of mischief. […] Most youngsters of the same age, we know them, or we know who their parents are. So it gives security also. For the youngsters as well. 'Cause I think all kids want to be seen, and everyone knows who these kids are. They aren't invisible.

The togetherness-practice implies a certain degree of social control, facilitating the maintenance of norms and a sense of safety. Networking neighbours will interact to help each other and maintain the order of the area. On the C yard, a togetherness group was also formed by residents who combined a wish to improve the yard's environment with an interest in having a nice time together. There, it started with the friendship between the garden enthusiast Birgitta and a big Latin-American family of seven households who usually gathered for dinners on the yard. A renewal of the yard, carried out by the company's managers, coincided with Birgitta moving away from the area, and since then the group has not engaged so much in gardening. However, they have formed a yard association and arranged a leisure room and social events for the residents of the yard, such as the midsummer celebration Claudia and Carlos were impressed by.

Discussion: togetherness as catalyst for amenity

The stories told by residents from all four yards confirm the housing company's ideas that togetherness may bring certain added values to the neighbourhood, notably as a catalyst for amenity of different kinds. The existence of a togetherness group on a yard may thus contribute to a more liveable yard were people feel less isolated and more secure due to frequent social exchange. Quotes from Carlos, Claudia and Lena above clearly illustrate these connections. Even the physical appearance of the yard may be improved, as a togetherness group may provide a platform for mobilisation of own resources as well as influence vis-à-vis the landlord. Through the yard associations at the C and D yards, which can be regarded as formal bodies of togetherness groups, residents' ideas and extra support from the company can be channelled. Also on an informal basis, as on the B yard, extra resources are given to the group of engaged residents. The importance of social control through the togetherness groups' development and maintenance of social norms may also be of importance, both for inducing a sense of security and for preventing littering etc. On the A yard, where togetherness-practice as well as togetherness-sense is lacking, the problem with littering is worse than on the other yards, and summer flowers are dried out since there are no traditions of taking care of them. It is also important to note that the stories bear witness to the potential bridging function of togetherness-practice. For example, the emergence of a togetherness group on the C yard connected neighbours who might otherwise not have had any contact.

So far the focus has been on opportunities. The following sections will provide a more critical examination of the involvement processes and the effects of togetherness in the case study.

II – A first conflict perspective: decision-making

As has been already revealed, however promising togetherness may seem, there are also problems. In Jacob's description of togetherness, it seems as if its main problems

affect the individuals involved in togetherness networks. According to her, the critical point is the culture of sharing private concerns and the damage this culture causes, which hits the sharers themselves. Actually, in the presented study, the problem with togetherness that was encountered was not at all about "too much sharing". Togetherness was not a problem for those belonging to the togetherness groups, but for those who were excluded by different means. The togetherness problem appeared to be a problem of exclusion more than anything else: exclusion from togetherness-sense, from togetherness-practice, from decision-making, and from using the yard. This section deals with the implications of togetherness for residents' influence, emphasising the perspective of those who feel excluded from decision-making.

In the owner's directive of the housing company, one's right as a tenant to have influence over one's own living environment is strongly emphasised (City of Göteborg, 1992; Poseidon, 2005). Democracy and influence are also the main points of departure in the presentation of the idea of yard associations in the company's policy documents (e.g., Poseidon, 1998). In the studied yards, togetherness-practice was intimately connected to the residents' self-organisation to gain influence over yard management and participate in decision-making. However, the interviewed management director stresses that democracy takes time and effort and that influence cannot just be served to everyone without any counter-performance:

> – Everyone has a democratic opportunity to participate in the process. Nobody is excluded from that process, I mean you choose yourself not to participate. And if you don't participate, you cannot influence either. And then you can't blame others who are engaged for participating so to speak. There is only one solution, you have to participate yourself and try to have an influence.

The logic according to which influence is the consequence of involvement is also embraced by some of the interviewed residents who are active in involvement groups themselves:

> – To have an opinion on something, you must also join in the activities
> (interview with resident involved in the yard group on the D yard)

> – Those who use the yard manage it as well so to speak
> (interview with resident involved in the yard group on the B yard)

The reason this kind of argumentation comes up is that there is actually an underlying feeling of discontent among many residents concerning the distribution of the power to influence decision-making. Laszlo, a middle-aged man living on the D yard, who is very interested in issues concerning democracy and involvement, is very critical of how the yard association functions:

> – I think it is a good idea to have a yard association actually, but it must be run in another way. There's a difficulty here for those who ran the yard association from the beginning to break the pattern, they create a pattern of exclusion, and then it is fairly difficult to get others to join. But in that case they must have another procedure for decision-making.

Laszlo and his wife felt steamrollered by the yard association after they lost their struggle to preserve three horse chestnut trees. According to the local managers, the horse chestnut trees had grown too large, were keeping out too much light, dropping too many leaves and there was a risk they would damage underground pipes. Horse

chestnut trees were planted on all the yards when the area was built and were about to be replaced with smaller Japanese cherry trees. The families involved in the yard association supported the company's wish to remove the large trees. The horse chestnut trees stood close to Laszlo's rowhouse on the east side of the yard, and he could not understand why people living on the other side of the yard should have influence over the decision.

The sequels to the tree fight have calmed, but another issue, stemming from the generational division on the yard, is still causing conflicts. There are different views on how ball play and other child activities should be viewed. All yards have signs prohibiting ball play. However, the local managers as well as many residents make quite pragmatic interpretations of this general prohibition, and in reality ball play is allowed under certain conditions. Some residents are not satisfied with this liberal position, as they are disturbed by the playing children. Again, Laszlo and his wife are in friction with the yard association, which is dominated by families with children. According to Laszlo, it is difficult for them to even bring up a discussion among the neighbours about the rules.

> – Then it is these families with children who oppose them who try to turn against the children or criticise or lecture the children. So I have realised that you cannot object. […] There's a bit too much child dominance or dominance of families with children.

On the B yard, there is no formal yard association, but the situation is similar to that of the D yard. The informally involved group of people form the dominant group, which influences decisions and behavioural norms. One example is the placement of the barbeque, which occurred when all yards in the area received one barbeque each from the company. Although intended for all residents, it seems to be used only by the same group of people informally involved in the management of the yard. According to one of the other residents, the barbeque had already been appropriated by that group before it came:

> – We were about to get a barbeque. So we noticed that the group that decided was exactly the same group then. They placed the barbeque just were they wanted it… Many people live here but the others couldn't decide in that way.

Discussion: whose right to influence?

The management director claims that "nobody is excluded", which is of course a formally correct statement. However, what we have seen is that when a group of residents organises to get involved in management of the yard, they also get a kind of preferential right to make crucial decisions about the yard. Togetherness-practice is a form of collective action and it implies power in terms of mere numeric advantage and the added value of collaboration (see, e.g., Sawyer, 2008). Thus, togetherness-practice gives power vis-à-vis the landlord, but also power vis-à-vis residents outside the group. Norms are defined within the togetherness group, because the group constitutes the main forum for discussion, as in the case of the rules for football playing on the B and D yards, which were defined by the groups normally using the yard.

It is also a matter of communication between the landlord and the collective of tenants. From the local managers' perspective, it is convenient to have a group to communicate with rather than a large number of individual households. Information can

be given to each household, e.g. by letters or posters, but it is more difficult to get feedback from more than a few individuals. A 'yard group' of any kind therefore typically takes on the role of representing all residents. The management staff thus often turn directly to some of the engaged residents to discuss issues that concern the whole yard. The question is how well those residents represented the others, what legitimacy they have to decide things concerning the whole yard, who is inside or outside the togetherness group, and who has the real means to participate in decision-making.

Laszlo, who is one of the main critics of the legitimacy of the yard association on the D yard, proposed more formal procedures that could ensure a democratic system. However, it is not easy to define a perfect balance between formal and informal routines. Possible arguments for *formalisation* are: (a) that it may guarantee the formal rights of all residents to have equal opportunities to influence the decision-making; (b) that it may contribute to stability and continuity of the activities; and (c) that it may make other actors view the process as more trustworthy. Possible arguments for *informality*, on the other hand, are: (a) that it may facilitate the involvement of people who are not familiar with the formal procedures; and (b) that it may reduce transaction costs and lead to more efficient action (see a more elaborated discussion on the issue in Bengtsson et al., 2003; Bengtsson et al., 2000). The formal requirements (meeting protocols, activity reports, etc.) of a yard association are actually very low in comparison to traditional civil society associations, which has also been the explicit intention when initiating the project (e.g., Poseidon and The Union of Tenants, *no date*). In spite of the relatively light bureaucracy, there are still transaction costs (time to solve formalities, write protocols, etc.) of the procedures that deter some residents from getting involved.

It would not be fruitful to try to propose a universal rule for which level of formality is best. The aim here is to bring the issue up for discussion and show different possible perspectives that may help to enlighten the analysis of particular processes in particular situations. One possible suggestion is that there should be a connection between how much power the housing company gives to the group, and the degree to which the process is formalised. That is, the more the groups can decide for themselves, the more relevant it becomes to formulate contracts and ask for formal board elections and meeting protocols. A formalised process is perhaps no guarantee for a more bridging network structure. However, if there are signs of conflict or exclusion tendencies, a group with formalised routines is probably easier to monitor and intervene in. Fulfilling the formal requirements alone, such as finding enough board members, may be a stimulus for extended networking, outside the core group of active members. Another point is that reporting on activities, including number of participants in different activities, may trigger a wish to involve more people and thus function as a mechanism for extended networking.

III – A second conflict perspective: everyday life restraints

This third perspective deals with another type of conflict, caused by another type of exclusion. The focus here is not on exclusion from decision-making, but on exclusion from the togetherness itself, from using the yard, i.e. on the everyday life restraints

that some of the interviewed residents perceive based on the ways togetherness is practiced.

There are those who do not want to join in any local community activities and who do not care about being outside. However, there are also those who would like to join but who, for one reason or another, feel discordant with the group. On the D yard, Laszlo represents people who feel unjustly excluded. He means that the yard association has become a closed group of like-minded who do not represent the broad collective of residents:

> – It has become exclusive in that way, it gets exclusive because it is too much them who are together also during leisure time. They are the ones who sit and drink coffee also. So there are many who think it is a bit… well, they police the yard and such. So that… there are some rumours of 'there are the Gestapo' and stuff like that.

A resident from the A yard confirms that the D yard is dominated by a togetherness group of families with children:

> – I have a friend on the same yard [the D yard]. […] And she feels that, at least in the way that the yard association functions there, that it is built only for those who have small children and can do things together. But she says there is no room for us who are a bit older who don't have small children anylonger.

The local manager mentions the D yard as a fairly well-functioning yard, even though he too sees a tendency towards division. And he is tired of being addressed with small complaints he thinks should be solved by the neighbours themselves.

> – That main group on the yard is strong enough so there's nobody who dares to object to it, so then they come here instead.

A division between families with children and middle-aged residents is not unique to the D yard. Children's interest in playing typically conflicts with older people's interest in peacefulness and orderliness. On the B yard, though, other aspects of division were mentioned by the interviewees. There, smoking appears to play an important role for togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense. To keep the apartments fresh, people smoke outdoors. Because they are often in the yard smoking, smokers come into contact with each other. Thereby, smoking functions as a togetherness catalyst. Several interviewees also described smoking as a kind of lifestyle, so that smokers form a culturally homogenous group.

> – First, they're… they are smokers. And then… they've been sitting here out on the yard and felt nice and smoked and… well, some parties and that kind of stuff you know. I guess that's what made the gang so to speak.
> (interview with middle-age woman on the B yard)

Three independently interviewed households on the B yard give a very coherent picture that the 'gang' on the yard represents another lifestyle than they do, and that this is one reason for not wanting to get involved. One of them, Gunilla, is also allergic to smoke, which makes it even more difficult to take part in the togetherness-practice.

> – My problem is that I can't be with people on the yard because I can't stand smoke. […] It's as I say that they often have a great time together and smoke and then I can't join them. […] If you don't smoke you get excluded, you actually do.

Another component of the social networking of the B yard is that there seems to be a division based on ethnicity as well. When Gunilla explains who takes part in the management activities, she says that "it's often those who meet and have a nice time together. It is rarely the immigrants, most of the time they feel a bit outside. So I guess it's mostly the Swedes who do it." She accuses the "Swedes" (which is actually in this case a group with origins in both Sweden, Norway and Finland) of not making contact and not letting immigrants into the social networks. Another resident at the same yard, Ingalill, illustrates the sometimes-subtle exclusion mechanisms using a story from the yearly flower planting days:

> – But I know, both last year and the year before, some of our immigrants who live here came down and asked if they could help with something, but it wasn't necessary because there were enough people already. And I don't like that, because there is certainly something they could have contributed […] For example, one of the ladies who went down there said that 'they didn't need our help'.
> – *So you mean that the way these people, who have formed a little group, the way they act excludes others?*
> – Yeah. And in particular these immigrants and I think it is very sad, because… they will not contact them either of course, I wouldn't do that either if someone told me 'we can manage this without your help' or something like that, then I wouldn't go down there or talk to them at all I think.

A young couple with foreign origins, Maryam and Kourosh, told several stories of how their alienation is reproduced in daily life situations. They experience that their freedom to do things is much more limited than for 'Swedes'. Although they say that they are very calm and quiet, it happens now and then that their neighbour asks them not to make noise. One time it appeared that the problem was the type of music rather than the volume; even if it was a Saturday mid-day and they had placed pillows beneath the loudspeakers, they received reprimands:

> – …and then she said 'I recognise Iranian and Persian music and so I know it's you who had…' […] 'please play some kind of English music and I will also come and listen', she said […] …and so she came in, she knocked at the window, she didn't even ring the bell because she wanted to prove that it's too loud, that we wouldn't hear it. She like 'I knocked so that you would understand you couldn't even hear when the bell rings'…

Cultural suspicion also affects people's opportunities to use the yard. The young immigrant couple explain that they have become more careful about how they behave, so as not to attract suspicion from the group of Swedish neighbours who usually sit around the tables on the yard. For example they prefer not to speak their native language when other people can hear them:

> – But anyhow it feels like you are in some way locked in, 'cause you shouldn't speak Persian and you should speak Swedish. […] And then when you speak people usually stare… you know, 'oh' … like 'ugh', kind of [make disapproving faces].

It is generally accepted among the interviewed residents that there is a cultural clash of some kind between 'Swedes' and 'immigrants', even though neither of the two groups were consistently defined. Clearly, the issue is both well established and quite

sensitive. Typically, there is a moment of hesitation in the interviews when the issue is approached:

– Now a new family has moved in, so there are quite a few… small sweet… children with dark hair, running there.
(interview with middle-aged woman on the B yard)

After some reconciliatory phrases marking that 'I have no prejudices', the ground is prepared for very sweeping statements about what 'immigrants' are like, statements made, in fact, in a rather prejudiced way. The same resident who previously showed appreciation over seeing dark-haired children running on the yard and who had reported earlier engagement in multi-cultural projects, later claims that the increasing littering is caused by the lack of a system to teach immigrants to live according to Swedish forms of order:

– Well my husband is also an immigrant, but I have noticed that many times it is them who send their children to do such things [throwing the garbage in the wrong place] […] We have been travelling a lot in other countries and so we have seen what they do when there is no structured waste management

Another woman on the same yard means that immigrants have another view on child rearing:

– We Swedes are probably more… maybe holding our children than… 'cause if you see these immigrant families, they let their children out. Maybe they have older siblings looking after them then, but we Swedes wouldn't do that… 'Cause that's something you hear now and then, 'they're fucking insane, letting that kid out alone' and such things.

Yet another of the residents asserts that immigrants are louder:

– Their speaking volume isn't like when you and I are talking. […] That's how it is, I tell you, abroad. […] Those kinds of people on the whole have a louder volume when they speak
(interview with woman on the C yard)

These quotes illustrate how people with non-white ethnicity are viewed with some kind of suspicion, even by people who claim to be free from prejudices. And if immigrants are not represented among those who are active in the togetherness group, the tensions will be transmitted. It is particularly on the B yard that the togetherness group is perceived by several interviewees as exclusively for 'Swedes', and some of the stories told illustrate how residents with other ethnicities have faced barriers when approaching them. Actually, the stories did not only involve the problem of people being excluded from togetherness-practice and togetherness-sense, but also problems of people being restricted in their lives.

Discussion: how to handle exclusion?

It was stated in the section on opportunities that the establishment of a togetherness group may have a bridging function in the sense that it may develop ties between different groups of people. However, as has been shown in the two conflict sections, togetherness also often functions in a bonding way, in the sense that it primarily strengthens the ties within the group and sometimes even closes the door to others

who may wish to join. As togetherness has been defined, it is a group phenomenon; it is about an 'us' doing things and about an 'us' to which 'I' belong. This is one of the core problems associated with togetherness, because where there is an 'us', there is also often a 'them', which constitutes a basis for conflicts and exclusion.

There are several dimensions of exclusion from togetherness. The previous section dealt with exclusion from participation in decision-making. This section dealt with more or less subtle social mechanisms restraining groups or individuals from doing what others can do in the area. On one level, there is the feeling of not belonging. An illustrative example is when Ingalill concludes that "it is not a group for me really; we don't have the same interests at all I think, we are very different." She is generally interested in togetherness-practice and would probably be part of the group if its composition were different. But it is her own choice to stay outside. More problematic are the different examples presented above of restrictions imposed by others. These stories bear witness to dominant togetherness groups, conceived as 'families with children', 'the smokers' or 'the Swedes', which appropriate the yard and exercise social control to uphold norms they have developed. For the excluded, this means that they are deprived of their options to freely use the yard, and that they must adapt to norms they may not like. The yard is a semi-public space, intended to be shared equally by the residents in the surrounding houses. Appropriation may be seen as something good, in the sense that residents make the place their own instead of nobody's (see, e.g., Modh, 1998). However, when residents feel impeded from using their own yard, as for example in the case of Maryam and Kourosh, there is a problem. Even more problematic is when social control severely limits opportunities for certain individuals or groups more than for others. Again, Maryam and Kourosh's situation on the B yard is illustrative: They have stopped speaking their native language in public and have been reprimanded for playing certain music styles in their apartment.

Social capital is sometimes referred to as containing a structural component (network configurations: who are the members and how do they relate) and a cognitive component (norms, codes, attitudes, etcetera) (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, Uphoff, 2000). When applying a structural analysis to the discussion on handling exclusion mechanisms in togetherness groups, two related strategies could be suggested. According to one strategy, heterogeneity in the group should be promoted. A common assumption is that the more homogenous a group is in terms of, for example, ethnicity, age and activity preferences (such as smoking), the more likely it is that it will be bonding as opposed to bridging (see, e.g., Putnam, 2000, p. 358, or Jacobs, 1961, p. 62). On the other hand, several studies have shown how high heterogeneity can act as a constraint on or challenge to networking and collective action (e.g., Dayton-Johnson, 2000, Ruttan, 2006, Smets, 2005, Varughese and Ostrom, 2001). The other strategy related to network configuration involves promoting weak ties rather than strong ties in an attempt to better bridge between different groups (see, e.g., conclusions in Crawford, 2006). One-sided and unconditional support of a togetherness group runs the risk of promoting strong-tie bonds. As a complement, more inclusive activities may be needed in which a broad representation of residents meet and develop weaker ties (e.g., so they can start recognising and greeting each other). The midsummer celebration on the C yard, mentioned above, is a good example of such a bridging activity. However, it is also important to note that this activity was dependent on the existence of the togetherness group that arranged it. Hence, strong-tie networks may serve as a basis for development of weak ties.

Of particular importance are the, often neglected, cognitive components of togetherness, such as shared codes, collective conceptions, social norms and attitudes. Lichterman (2005, p. 15) discuss this in terms of group-building customs, defined as "routine, shared, often implicit ways of defining membership". Group-building customs characterised by rigidness, prejudices, and us-and-them differentiation will create conflicts and exclusion, while group-building customs characterised by open-mindedness, tolerance and a culture of self-reflective conversation will enable what Lichterman calls social spiralling, i.e. that social divides between the group and others are diminishing so that enduring bridging relationships can be created. There is a two-way connection between the structural and cognitive components. For example, rigid norms may result in, as well as it may be a result of, homogenous networks. A crucial challenge is to develop inclusive and reflective group-building customs in the togetherness groups. How local managers as well as tenant organisation representatives respond to other residents' attitudes may well be of importance, either in confirming and supporting certain customs or in reacting against them, thereby counteracting their reproduction. In particular, the ethnic-based tensions described above should be a subject for concern. In the present study, there were examples of conciliating responses and, unfortunately, there were also situations in which the company's staff actually contributed to divisions, e.g. by making jokes about ethnic peculiarities on a meeting with the residents.

Concluding remarks

The current study has described how social capital has been exercised in the four yards, focusing particularly on the role of involvement processes and togetherness developed around the residents engaged in these processes. The presented findings confirm what was hypothesised, namely that togetherness may have beneficial as well as unfavourable effects; it may give rise to opportunities as well as constraints for the residents. The different outcomes may also interrelate, so that opportunities for some lead to constraints for others, or for the same individuals but in different situations. For example, there is a close connection between the (positive) effect of being seen and the (negative) effect of being watched. Lena describes how everyone knows each other and that it is a matter of safety to be seen and known, to not be invisible. At the same yard, however, Maryam and Kourosh do not use the barbeque because they believe others would watch them and talk about them. The setting is the same – a togetherness group sits on the yard, they talk to neighbours passing by and comment on things that happen. This deanonymises the residents and gives them roles in the micro-community of the yard. However, one perspective is that it gives safety and the other is that it constrains individual freedom.

Therefore, when initiating and developing processes of resident involvement, one key challenge must be to realise the positive potential of togetherness while at the same time taking measures to avoid its possible negative effects. The fully inclusive, open and bridging togetherness group is probably a utopian ideal that is difficult to achieve in reality. Thus, the aim must be to strive to optimise the benefits while avoiding exclusion and oppression mechanisms. Or, as the task has been formulated by Crawford (2006, p. 973): "to think conceptually about the nature of social interaction and ties that support urban life without promoting stifling forms of 'togetherness'."

Revitalisation of marginalised neighbourhoods and empowerment of marginalised groups continue to be major issues in Sweden, just as in every corner of the world. The concept of togetherness has been applied here to describe and analyse a phenomenon closely connected to these issues, but that appears to be ambiguous and contested. As concluded in Smets' (2005) study of interactions between different groups in a socially mixed Dutch residential area: "[B]eing together is not as easy as it may appear. [...] At present, it looks like if the pattern of living together will be 'living apart together'; frictions caused by different views on the use of the public space will contribute to this process" (p. 304). Although there are important critical perspectives on togetherness, its potential to trigger positive development spirals in deprived areas must also be recognised (see, e.g., Severson, 1990; Alfredsson & Cars, 1996; Glover, 2003). And wherever togetherness develops, conflicts that emerge have to be dealt with. The housing companies and their management staff have a crucial role to play in this regard.

In the present paper, some possible strategies have been discussed, aiming at bridging gaps and countering conflicts. First, informal and flexible arrangements for involvement should be balanced with formal requirements if needed. While informality may reduce barriers to involvement for many, formalisation may better ensure individuals' rights. Second, broad (heterogeneous) representation in the yard groups should be promoted as well as activities aiming at broad weak-tie networking as a complement to strong-tie networking within a limited group. Third, the cognitive components should not be neglected, and group-building customs characterised by open-mindedness, tolerance and reflexivity is essential to establishing a non-excluding network and social spiralling.

Notes

1. The present study is part of the inter-disciplinary research project 'Sustainable management of residential yards', financed by The Swedish Research Council Formas.
2. Out of the 195 households living on the four selected yards, 81 questionnaires were returned. Observation protocols were carried out at fifteen occasions per yard. More details about methods can be found in Castell, 2010, Managing yards and togetherness, Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg.

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