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EDITORIAL

Neighborhood Residents in Vulnerable Circumstances: Crisis, Stress, and Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

The editorial introduces the articles in this thematic issue, which provides a multifaceted analyses on how residents of vulnerable neighbourhoods cope with stressful circumstances and various crises. The aim is to understand daily survival at the neighbourhood level amid rapidly changing conditions. The articles present both quantitative and qualitative analyses that make detailed observations of agency, resilience, and community in diverse sociocultural contexts.

1. Introduction

Today, cities are facing multiple crises, including financial crises, housing shortages, climate change, food insecurity, and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Living in an urban environment is often characterised by insecurity regarding finding a safe living space and obtaining enough income-generating opportunities. Moreover, on many occasions, there is a growing gap between the poor and the better-off. In low-income neighbourhoods, residents must cope with issues such as a shortage of financial means and inadequate housing. This leads to stress about daily survival, and frequently initiates a short-term perspective that obstructs planning for the future. Many poorer segments of society get stuck in poverty stress, while others have developed skills that allow them to escape from poverty. These coping mechanisms can be more or less successful.

In low-income neighbourhoods, people may collaborate to improve their living conditions. There are also social workers who work with the poor, aiming to improve their vulnerable circumstances. Various methods are used for these interventions; some are closely linked to neoliberal principles, while others oppose them and focus on alternative forms of community development. This thematic issue aims to gain a better understanding of the contemporary positions of neighbourhood residents in vulnerable circumstances, by analysing the perspectives of both the better-off and the poor.

2. Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhoods exist all around the globe, but it is not entirely clear what this really implies. The definition of a neighbourhood is not consistent, and one has to cope with imprecision. In practice, we can identify common characteristics, often linked with a community, that are based on definitions in the disciplines of urban studies, social geography, and environmental psychology. Moreover, neighbourhoods must address issues of place attachment and the built environment, both of which are inherent to their local context (Smets & Kreuk, 2008; Watt & Smets, 2014). Various descriptions of neighbourhoods include a combination of references to the home area (psychological benefits that include belonging and identity), locality (residential activities, social status, and position), and the urban and regional area (landscape of social and economic opportunities). Furthermore, neighbourhoods also need physical and social elements (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001).

Blokland (2003, p. 213) distinguishes socio-spatial features of a neighbourhood as "a geographically circumscribed, built environment that people use practically and symbolically." In practice, a neighbourhood is a spatially oriented whole that includes social relations among neighbourhood residents and their shared symbolic issues. Talen (2024, p. 189) elaborates that neighbourhoods need local institutions in public spaces for effective governmental administration, meeting places, and community facilities. To establish connections and nurture inclusion among the residents, mixed functions and housing also include school parks and local shopping areas.

We focus on a wide variety of resilient everyday practices in neighbourhoods by analysing communal horticulture, Covid-19 recovery, and activism. In the first article, the horticultural practices studied in Portugal have approaches that reflect formal, informal, and semi-formal types of urban allotment plots. The authors concentrate on the informal practices, and especially on how they can be considered as liminal spaces in which the gift economy thrives. Informal allotments offer food security, recreation, community building, and take environmental issues into consideration—at the same time, they are under threat and are being demolished. The author approaches the conflict as a difficulty of a formal system of territory management to embrace the informal system of urban allotment plots without annihilating it (Mota Santos, 2024).

The second article studies how the community members in the ex-mining communities of Northern England have had to cope with deindustrialisation. The focus is on how their work communities and identities come together in the everyday activities that play an important role in establishing a sense of belonging and social action. The article examines how residents aged between 60 and 85 consider changes in their experiences of work, community, and place over six decades. The analysis stresses how various projects to ameliorate structural marginalisation in the area have been perceived, and how they have succeeded, especially in relation to the increasingly multicultural community formation and the Covid-19 pandemic (Wallace, 2024).

In their article, Ward et al. (2024) look into youth activism in Scotland and how grassroots community organisations aim to support the improvement of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The young people in the area have had to deal with residential stigma and discrimination on the basis of their cultural beliefs. In the study, participatory parity creates opportunities for issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation. In other words, at the grassroots level youth and community organisations join hands when they face injustice and find resources to create a better urban environment in their neighbourhoods. This also helps them to develop alternative narratives to challenge the misrecognition of their neighbourhoods.

Volont (2024) focuses on changes concerning the future of Wilhelmsburg district in Hamburg, Germany. Its challenges include poverty, industry pollution, and infrastructural decay. In the 2000s local activists joined hands to create a better future for their neighbourhoods. In this respect, their cultural commons is a collectively created symbolic construct. The analysis is based on different types of grammars: justificatory grammar (common good), liberal grammar (openness to the public), and affective grammar. Together they play an important role in opening the future to collective imagination (expressions of affinity). These different approaches offer possibilities for protesting against fences surrounding the main public park to make it more accessible, but they signify also rejection of the construction of the motorway and expansion of the power plant. It is clear that the future often arrives step by step. The study claims that although the Wilhelmsburg citizens in Germany live in vulnerable circumstances, they do not necessarily see themselves as inherently vulnerable. Those who have gathered around the Future Wilhelmsburg initiative do not accept a vulnerable fate, precisely by sharing the time horizons of their spatial environment.

3. Vulnerability

The second section of the thematic issue concentrates on questions of vulnerability. According to Adger (2006, p. 268), "the concept of vulnerability has been a powerful analytical tool for describing states of susceptibility to harm, powerlessness, and marginality of both physical and social systems, and for guiding normative analysis of actions to enhance well-being through reduction of risk." In addition, Springhart (2017) has shown that discovering and revaluing vulnerability is essential to what it means to be alive and human. According to her, improving life means thinking about vulnerability in a way that distinguishes between vulnerability as a value of life and something that threatens and is worth fighting against. To understand the fragility of life, we need to distinguish between universal human (ontological) vulnerability and contextual vulnerability.

The concepts of marginalisation, subordination, and social abjection are often linked to the concept of vulnerability. Marginalisation and subordination are often used to label people who suffer from discrimination. Though people in vulnerable circumstances are often marginalised, marginalisation and subordination appeal to structures and social conditions that produce injustice and political action. In turn, social abjection refers to demeaning and oppressive rhetoric such as the term "scum," which some state leaders have used against the Roma and asylum seekers. Countering this kind of rhetoric requires a call for "justice, equality, and recognition by such revolting subjects" (Koivunen et al., 2018, p. 7). Though the concepts of abjection and vulnerability overlap, abjection "implies disgust, shame, and fear to a wholly different degree than vulnerability, which does not necessarily have anything to do with disgust, but is perhaps most often in relation to compassion" (Koivunen et al., 2018, p. 8). Various senses of vulnerability and social abjection are examined below.

Vázquez Brage (2024) begins the section with a systematic review of how vulnerability is measured in various European cities. It covers over 190 published articles from the last 20 years and provides a novel approach for conceptualising and measuring urban vulnerability. Vázquez Brage's review shows that urban vulnerability is understood to be a circular situation, arising in physical urban space with certain reputational characteristics. The author emphasises the subjective domain to understand the dynamics and relative status of vulnerability.

In the second article of the section, Sointu and Häikiö (2024) take a processual view to understand vulnerability and openness to the social ambivalence among the older adults living in Tampere, the third-largest city in Finland. Their analysis is based on four relational settings: being-with others; cooperation with others; contesting and being contested by others; and ruling and being ruled by others. The research data consists of seven focus group interviews that focus on the experiences and meanings of everyday encounters. The authors argue that in addition to previously identified dimensions of privacy and access, involvement and control are significant dimensions of the relational settings of belonging in an urban community.

In another fascinating case study, Anastasiou et al. (2024) explore how alternative housing initiatives, especially multi-actor housing, support the inhabitants' vulnerabilities linked to the housing crisis. They analyse the complex phenomena as a continuum of strategies of institutions and tactics of the workers and residents in their daily life and homing practices. The article investigates the quotidian practices of the residents and identifies the extent to which this arrangement supports inhabitants individually and maintains their ties to the local urban fabric. The authors consider that the project cultivates mechanisms that go beyond housing and contribute to the inhabitants' agency, security, and inclusion, and address their vulnerabilities.

The final article on the topic of vulnerability examines the multi-faceted consequences of housing displacement in Finland. The authors examine how everyday resistance is significant, even though it is not visible, unlike open protests and activities of the social movements. They break resistance down into four distinct but related categories: reflective, emotional, rejective, and face-to-face resistance. Reflective resistance focuses on unstable housing and living conditions that go together with losing homes and stigmatisation. Apart from reflective emotional resistance, injustice of displacement plays an important role that goes together with power relations. Rejective and face-to-face resistance employ a resistance strategy by refusing non-preferred housing options after evictions. The article represents voices that are rarely heard in the planning of the neighbourhoods and asks a powerful question about who has the right to the city (Juhila & Perälä, 2024).

4. Crisis, Stress, and Coping Mechanisms

The articles in the third section of the Special Issue reveal the complexities of how various groups of residents cope with stressful situations and outright crises. As these case studies show, their coping mechanisms are rarely straightforward, and they bring to light intricate dynamics that guide the reproduction of everyday lifeworlds at the local level. Mostly, the observations and results do not present grand schemes or weighty impacts, but rather, they focus on the more modest coping mechanisms of marginalised groups. This allows us to understand coping and striving for normality as significant senses of agency, despite their ordinariness (Tuominen, 2022). It is noteworthy how the authors have managed to trace down seemingly

quotidian societal dynamics that, often surprisingly, have remarkable consequences. The articles in this section approach the coping mechanisms from various perspectives: from long-term ethnography to large-scale censuses and multi-site comparative approaches among marginalised populations.

Wikström and Eriksson (2024) study the conditions of housing provision for refugees in northern Sweden. Unlike the more conventional approaches to crises in housing, the authors take a strong stance against neoliberal integration strategies that justify restrictive housing policies for refugees. Their qualitative research methods point to the dynamics of "activation" and "individual responsibility" as principles for future integration. A closer look through detailed fieldwork, focusing on the grounds and premises on which the problem production is built, portrays a very different picture. The research shows how the perception of the housing crisis is used as an argument for maintaining a low level of refugee reception and undermining the welfare state's obligations. By a careful examination of how housing inequality is perpetuated, the authors show how the housing problem is represented as an individual problem.

Tkach's (2024) article presents a strong argument to illustrate the intersection of monetary and non-monetary relations and imaginaries in post-socialist Russia. Her case study concentrates on neighbour relations between various categories of homeowners and tenants and shows how their encounters tend to be stressful for the parties, but also involve intricate negotiations to avoid the total commercialisation of their relationship. She presents an anthropologically influenced perspective of the moral economy that includes the extra-economic sphere of norms, meanings, non-instrumental values, and practices that constitute the markets in the analysis of social interactions (see Palomera & Vetta, 2016, pp. 414–428). The ethnographic analysis covers cases in which the total commodification is compromised: a landlady who does not consider herself as selling a service but rather letting a stranger into her former home; a group of neighbours who establish an authoritarian community to resist market-based logics, and, on the other hand, "forced homeowners" who are distressed about their ownership, because it is a burden that ties them unwillingly to a specific location. These narratives portray homes against the totalising explanations of market interactions and reveal the elaborate coping mechanisms that the residents rely on during their everyday lives.

In contrast to the previously discussed detailed qualitative analyses, Zangger and Bank (2024) study the coping mechanisms based on large-scale panel data in Switzerland. The article concentrates on people's subjective well-being, and the analysis examines how it changed during various phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. The specific focus is on the long-term impact of localised social capital on well-being and post-crisis recovery, providing an interesting view of the role of the neighbourhood and coping mechanisms. This allows us to study comparatively the effects of a major crisis among vulnerable groups and other segments of society. The researchers applied sequence analysis and hierarchical clustering to five Covid-19 waves in the panel data. They concluded that people who received a lot of support from their neighbours and friends before the pandemic were also likely to have had stable and very high levels of well-being after the crises. That is, their local support networks facilitated the recovery. Generally, the positive effects of the local social capital are more pronounced among vulnerable groups, but it is necessary to identify risk factors among them other than the rather obvious ones, such as income, health, and close neighbour relations.

Van de Wetering's (2024) work on coping mechanisms at the local level shows how research can benefit from a comparative approach to better understand how marginalised groups negotiate their community involvement.

She studies the changes in urban governance, especially regarding the questions of proximity, at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The ethnographic research takes place in marginalised neighbourhoods in France and the Netherlands and challenges the role of "the local" in their governance. The authors argue that the notion of proximity is central in attempts to bridge the distance between the state and the urban residents but warn about a "local trap" that refers to a simplistic understanding that privileges the local scale to the others by default. Within the context of the pandemic, the article highlights the importance of regular contact between the urban professionals and residents and their physical presence, and notes that the state can be simultaneously proximate and far-away. Drawing on the two cases, the authors argue that the far-away state complicates how living conditions can be improved in marginalised neighbourhoods.

The last article in the section (Sullivan, 2024) focuses on the assessment of how a regeneration programme has been implemented in a marginalised area in the south of Ireland. Here, the data used are both quantitative and qualitative, and they cover a whole decade of observations, surveys, and participatory approaches. The analysis is based on the physical, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable regeneration, to understand the challenges faced by the residents in vulnerable circumstances. The article studies the balance between the promise of regeneration—holistic long-term improvement of the area—and its potentially negative impacts, such as neglecting social investment in favour of large-scale capital infrastructure. The research illustrates especially how the Social, Economic and Environmental Plan (SEEP) has benefited the local community. The authors argue that the benefits are evident, but that there are shortcomings: For example, long-term planning is difficult because the support is based on one-year funding commitments and a narrow definition of estate regeneration.

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