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Community as Urban Practice

Talja Blokland

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017, ISBN 978-1-5095-0482-4 (pb)

Talja Blokland aimed to develop ‘a modest theory of community’ (p.11), yet she has delivered much more in *Community as Urban Practice*. Building on her past conceptual contributions, she provides a well-rounded, convincing theory on how we ‘do community’. Her opening line gives a sense of what this doing might involve in times of increased mobility and diversity: ‘Some people may have roots and others may have routes, but all do community’ (p.1).

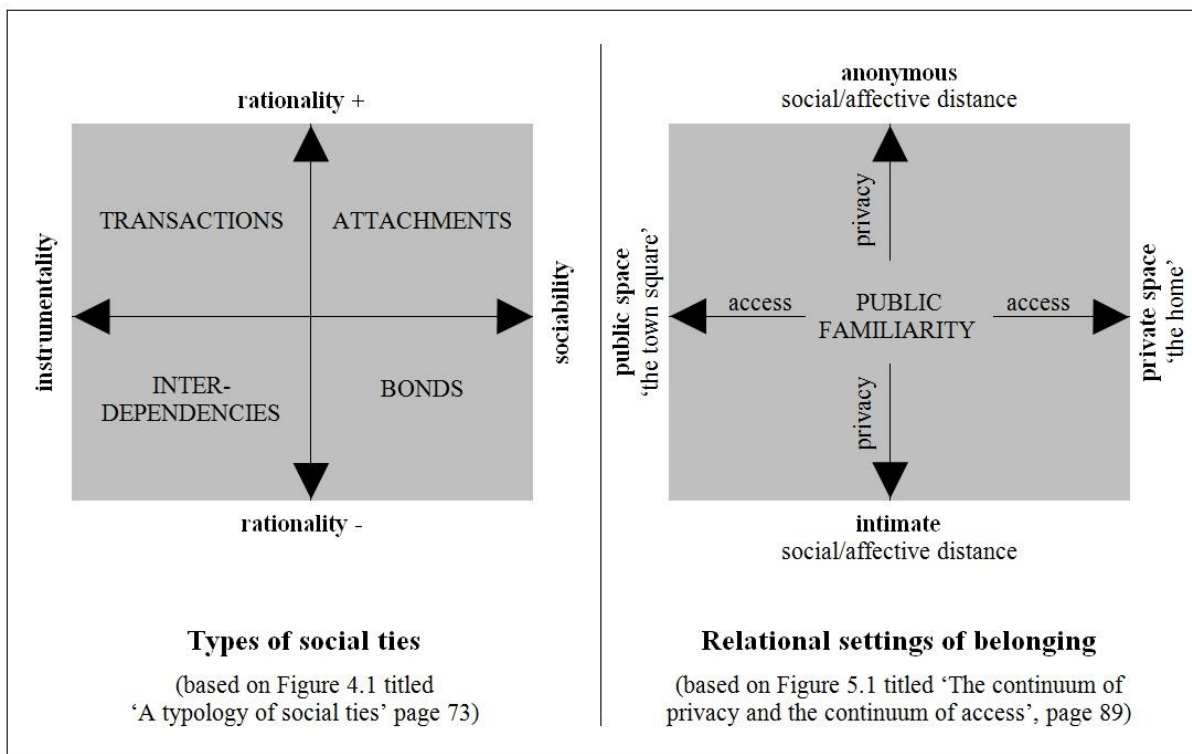
The book’s alluring literary style makes it a pleasure to read and its concepts easy to grasp. Following a short introduction signposting core concepts of the journey we are invited to take, chapters 2 and 3 assemble a vast body of scholarship which has inspired the author’s thinking. Here, the problematic question of neighbourhood as community will particularly interest housing scholars. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide original, empirically-grounded theorizing about community as urban practice while chapter 7 sums up the key arguments.

Chapter 2 overviews two different traditions of theorizing community, ‘Fear of the demise of community’ and ‘The community as a personal network’. The former promotes a place-based concept of community that remains devoid of politics and power and maintains a Global North ethnocentrism. The latter, originating in the Global South, argues that personal networks (later re-conceptualized as social capital) are a more accurate model of people’s experiences of community than place-based solidarity. Blokland takes issue with the problematic categories and distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties and the instrumental view promoted by scholars of social capital, the dismissal of other forms of social ties, and their lack of concern for ‘the role of space and spatiality of community’ (p.41).

Chapter 3 explores community as culture, making the case that urban density matters. Community as a cultural concept ‘means seeing it as a set of repertoires of public practices—or performances—that are above all symbolic. Their meanings, as they are lived, produce belonging as well as disengagement, or inclusion and sharing as well as exclusion’ (p.45). By discussing the social construction of group identification, social identity, social categorization, and symbolic boundaries, this chapter is a particularly important step forward in theorizing urban community as practice.

Chapters 4 and 5 each present a conceptual framework which, taken together, form the core of Blokland’s theory. Illustrated diagrammatically (Figure 1), they introduce typologies as Weberian ideal-types, with dichotomies being deconstructed as continua.

Figure 1 Talja Blokland’s two conceptual frameworks



Source: Author’s graphics

Through the remainder of the book, Blockland demonstrates how the above concepts help illuminate the ways people ‘do communities’. All types of social ties have a potential of constituting communities as well as exclusions. Even transactions (role-based practices, e.g. interactions with social services) and interdependencies (e.g. attending football matches) may do community, particularly through the notion of public familiarity and boundary work.

Along a continuum of privacy and one of access, the right panel of Figure 1 allows plotting various relational settings of belonging, i.e. social-spatial spaces in which social ties are embedded and on which community depends. Public familiarity is seen as a ‘social space constructed in physical space’ which allows individuals ‘to socially place others, to recognize them’, to ‘form narratives of place’ and ‘induce a sense of community’ (p.126-32) through brief, recurring encounters. However, public familiarity or belonging are not community. Community, consisting of ‘practices in which we convey a shared positioning, develop shared experiences, or construct a shared narrative of belonging’ (p.88), requires practices of boundary work through which people distance themselves from others. Chapter 6 discusses in-depth practices of inclusions/exclusions, including identification, labelling, categorization and performances of categories, stigmatisation, normative normalcy and naturalization of arbitrariness.

By discussing concepts of power in relation to boundary work, Blokland evades a romantic, feeble representation of community. By relating community to a variety of social ties and relational settings, she constructs a theory suited to an increasingly global, mobile, privatized and insecure world. She concludes her book on an optimistic line: ‘For resilient cities, an urban community is necessary. Fortunately such communities are everywhere—for those who care to see’ (p.169). However persuaded we may be, we should nonetheless never forget that, while communities may be everywhere, some people belong to none.

This book is a must read for all social scientists and students with an interest in community. Housing scholars have much to gain from its nuanced understanding of community as being de-localized yet still fully spatial and not necessarily disconnected from places of residence, whether these accommodate roots or routes.

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