



## Positive (?) Social Consequences of Gating

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**Abstract:** *The social consequence of gating have been generally characterized as negative, particularly in regards to raising issues of social injustice such as the privatization of space, estrangement, and segregation. Some authors have found positive social consequences of gating particularly in regard to reducing the scale of segregation and promoting social interdependency as a form of social integration as well as encouraging neighbourhood cohesion and maintaining social capital. The following is a critical review of the positive consequences of gating within the overall trend of commodification of community in new residential developments.*

**Keywords:** gating; social capital; neighbourhood cohesion; social sustainability



## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of some positive consequences of gating within new residential developments. Specifically, the paper delineates the ambivalent outcome for positive consequences of gating in terms of the constitutive dimensions of social capital and neighbourhood cohesion within a framework of production of commodified communities. Gated communities are generally advertised to fill the gap of an increasingly absent sense of community and to counteract the cycle of neighbourhood decline through the establishment of social capital. At the same time, gated communities may be conducive to a ‘non-neighbourhood’ condition and ‘spatial heteronomy’. The question is: Are the positive consequences of gating really positive? The contribution this paper makes is to frame the argument not simply as a one-sided yes or no response; rather, the solution resides in the degree of intersection of societal values with the physical and social dimensions of the gated development.

## Social Capital

Social capital can be simply conceived as a cumulative by-product of social interaction and as the quality of social networks. As a cumulative by-product of social interaction, it lends itself to the larger notions of social cohesion and social sustainability through the establishment of trust, common norms, support and reciprocity. For Dale (2005), social capital is not only a cumulative by-product but also a necessary means of achieving reconciliation and sustainable community development.

The literature, in general, tends to portray social capital as a positive gain for communities in terms of the benefits achievable and facilitated through social capital such as, to name a few, social control, economic growth, development of democracy, avoidance of violence as well as, recently, physical and mental health (Poortinga 2012). Mohan and Mohan (2002) summarize the usefulness of social capital in three principal areas: explaining uneven development at various scales; understanding the comparative performance of governments; and accounting for spatial variations in health experience. For urban planners, a better understanding of social capital resides in linking social capital to space.

## Linking Social Capital to Place

The contribution by Fernandez Kelly highlights the ‘toponomical’ character of social capital as contingent upon physical location and characteristics (Haynes and Hernandez 2008) such that the debate on neighbourhood effects is reinstated. Linking social capital to place was undertaken by Romig (2010). He argues that a higher sense of place is a pre-condition for forming a higher sense of community, which is realized by building social capital, mostly bonding social capital. Interestingly, the sense of place alluded to by Romig refers more to the social environment rather than the physical landscape. The gated master-planned communities he studied were located in Phoenix, where the landscape is generally bland. Residents have chosen to move into the gated communities looking more for a sense of community rather than prestige.



According to Sampson and Graif (2009: 1597), the link between social capital and place has been found to correlate with spatially proximal neighbourhoods. Thus, neighbourhoods that are structurally equivalent, from a social organization perspective, are found to be also geographically proximate. Nevertheless, the role of social capital in being a reason behind or consequence of clustering phenomena is still vague (Staber 2007).

Inconspicuously, there may be a dark side to social capital. Smart and Hsu (2007) bring to light the sensitive balance that exists between social capital and corruption, especially that both rely on networks of trust and obligation. They examine the concept of ‘guanxi’ in China, as a surrogate for social capital, and find that the sensitive balance between social capital and corruption is highly contingent on context and the interpretations of others. Empirically, this dark side is manifested in the chaotic development of gated communities (GCs) in Pilar, Buenos Aires, which, according to Libertun de Duren, is the result of planning *à-la-carte* for developers’ needs in exchange for reciprocal favours to public authorities. The outcome is impressive economic development that is realized at the expense of an increasingly dysfunctional municipality (Libertun de Duren 2006: 322). The power of the elite in transforming social, cultural and symbolic capital into economic capital and political influence is expressed in Smart’s (2008) notion of ‘economy of practices’.

GCs and private residential developments have been hypothesized to enhance the social capital of their residents. The enhancement to social capital is hypothesized to be achieved via cognitive and structural aspects of social capital (Grootaert and van Bastelaer 2002: 343). This brings the concept of social capital close to that of cohesion. The cognitive aspect is concerned with intangible qualities such as common norms and values, while the structural aspect is concerned with the physical presence of formal institutions and formal laws. Although the neighbourhoods studied by Sampson and Graif (2009) were not qualified as gated, their research establishes a link between neighbourhood social capital and the type of neighbourhood social organization. They propose a typology that differentiates neighbourhoods according to four dimensions of social capital. If this typology is applied to the case of gated communities, the Cosmopolitan Efficacy Cluster would best categorize these communities. What is distinctive about communities in this cluster is their high collective efficacy, or strong shared expectations, but low local networks. The positional contacts by elites in these communities result in a high level of linking social capital (i.e. vertical networks as defined by Forrest and Kearns 2001).

Williams and Pocock’s (2010) research of two case studies in South Australia and Victoria show that gated master-planned residential estates (MPREs) contribute to building social capital through familiarity, availability and social bridging, which affect residents’ well-being and their capacity to participate in private and public life. Alvarez-Rivadulla’s (2005) thesis is that GCs in Montevideo, Uruguay, similar to gentrification as defined by Butler and Robson, are an instrument of class reproduction, a way to cope with uncertainty, and a way to maintain and improve cultural, economic and social capital. Alvarez-Rivadulla’s thesis is also empirically more clearly evidenced in the GC of Kemer Country, Istanbul, where prospective residents undergo a strict application process to be accepted as a resident within the GC (Geniş 2007: 784). This application process probes for, in addition to educational and occupational background, a level of cultural and social capital commensurate with the orientation and lifestyle of the GC residents in an attempt to preserve the quality of the place. Access to reside within the



GC is facilitated by referrals from friends or co-workers living within the GC. As Geniş notes, this strategy became widely used in other upper-class GCs in Istanbul. Stated alternatively, the importance of Bourdieu's economic *and* cultural capital is being reinstated.

Interestingly, GCs have also been hypothesized to decrease one of social capital's main dimensions, namely, civic engagement. The decrease in civic engagement and responsibility is argued to result from the creation of alternative realities within the gates (Lemanski and Oldfield 2009) in such a manner that gated residents experience 'a weightless urban experience' (Atkinson and Blandy, 2005: 180). The 'weightlessness' is all the more appealing for residents of those GCs that are well-connected to city-centres via freeways; thus, benefiting from services located within city centres while at the same time not carrying the weight of negative urban conditions (Irazábal 2006). An equivalent term to 'alternative realities' used in the literature, albeit with connotations of an element of the local, is 'spatial heteronomy' (Monterescu 2009). In other words, GCs achieve the difficult balance between being localized and being globalized; between sensitivity to local context and extensity of global and utopian symbolization.

In other words, by fortressing themselves behind gates, gated residents are not only physically separating themselves from the rest of the city but also civically separating themselves in terms of the partial fiscal autonomy of the gated affluent. This has led some researchers of the phenomena of GCs to refer to residents outside the gates as those who would qualify as 'real citizens'. This adds another layer to the shift from 'citizen' to 'consumer' alluded to by Nissen (2008) when discussing the consequences of the privatization of space.

## Neighbourhood Cohesion

Buckner (1988) conceptualizes neighbourhood cohesion as a collective-level attribute, equivalent to 'sense of community', which has three dimensions: psychological sense of community PSOC, place-attachment, and social interaction / neighbouring.

Callies et al. (2003: 183) observe that the term 'sense of community' is borrowed from the field of community psychology and is defined as: 'the feeling an individual has about belonging to a group and involves the strength of the attachment people feel for their communities or neighbourhoods'. Markedly, sense of community is no longer a natural outcome of daily life but must be consciously produced and maintained (Callies et al. 2003). Gated communities are generally advertised to fill the gap of an increasingly absent sense of community and the term 'gated *community*' has become widely used in the literature. The extent to which gated communities actually fulfil this need for a sense of community is very low, as shown in empirical studies throughout the literature. Nevertheless, as Le Goix (2004) emphasizes, the gating of a residential development defines a common territory imbued with shared values and identities and participates in the creation and 'protection' of a sense of community for the gated residents.

A pilot study by Blandy and Lister (2005: 293) showed that expectations of neighbourliness were high but only around half of the respondents moving into the GC were seeking a sense of community. The majority anticipated a low level of informal association with neighbours. The



important role of leisure facilities was highlighted as a factor contributing to a sense of community among residents. Another factor that is theoretically assumed to increase the sense of community of residents is the self-management and social control of the neighbourhood legalized by the role of the HOA. Such an assumption is based on residents' participation as well as norms for standard behaviour for ensuring uniformity of appearance and conformity of the residents. Regaining a sense of belonging, over and above the physical decay and pollution, within the urban environment is one of the reasons for residents seeking to live within GCs (Geniş 2007: 784).

## Commodification of Community

Since the 1990s, people have been sold community as a lifestyle, prestige and security, in the case of gated communities, as well as nostalgia, in the case of new urbanism (Grant 2005: 46). The 'social quality' and 'purchasing power' of those who buy into such communities are prime commercial targets in addition to their sensitivity to 'aestheticization strategies' (Raposo 2006: 51). Gated communities seem to create community through the homogeneity and commonality of their residents, while New Urbanism seems to create community through the character of the architecture and housing diversity (Grant 2007: 493).

The premise underlying the construction of these types of communities is that of a physical determinism in shaping 'community' (Talen 2000). The physical emphasis of lifestyle communities is on amenities such as golf courses and leisure amenities. The physical emphasis of prestige communities is the aesthetics of the built environment and landscape. The physical emphasis of security communities is on the walls and gates. Finally, the physical emphasis of neo-traditional neighbourhoods is on architectural style.

Talen (2000: 178) argues against the stress planners place on physical determinism as a way to create and sustain community; planning such physically-contingent communities, if ever successful, will promote social homogeneity and exclusion. What the types of gated communities and neo-traditional neighbourhoods have succeeded in doing is commodifying and selling community as a 'product' not as a 'process' (Rosenblatt 2005). What are the implications of this commodification on neighbourhood cohesion within such neighbourhoods? Distilling product from process, to quote Rosenblatt (2005: 7), 'engenders a particular 'commodified world view' which impacts on the way we interact with and consider others'.

For example, other people might be considered part of the objects within the sold 'packaged community'. Another example is that residents within such neighbourhoods may not participate in a community-building process (Rosenblatt 2005). In short, 'the social' is purged. The paradox here is residents 'buy into' community without at the same time wanting to become part of that community.

This paradox is resolved by Bauman's (2003: 11) explanation that seeking a 'community of similarity' not only signifies withdrawal from 'the otherness outside' but also from the 'turbulent' interaction inside. He refers to Richard Sennett to describe such a double withdrawal as an avoidance mechanism against looking deeper into the other and the associated effort of



negotiating and understanding the other. The paradox is also resolved in another way by Bauman's (1998: 20) notion of the 'non-neighbourhood' condition, i.e. 'immunity from local interference'. In other words, commodifying community renders community an object of observation not participation.

As a commodified object of observation, the sense of community, and in particular neighbourly social interaction, is reduced to an encounter between 'surfaces' (Bauman 2001a: 147), i.e. an encounter not deep enough to create an interactive form of community. The nature of such a community is best captured by Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities', where people may feel like part of a community that is not contingent upon fact-to-face interaction (Rosenblatt 2009: 131). Other dimensions of neighbourhood cohesion come to the fore such as affective forms of attachment to place and a sense of belonging. This should not, however, preclude the fact that some residents have enlarged their social capital by using 'the commodified community form as a starting point for enlivened community participation' (Rosenblatt 2005: 12).

The findings of a study by Rosenblatt et al. (2009) of a Master-planned Community in Australia confirm that the affective dimensions of a sense of community, rather than the interactive dimensions, are those that are fostered by such types of commodified communities. Thus, in one way (affective), the commodification of community contributes to neighbourhood cohesion but, in another way (interactive), does not.

An important idea, though, that Rosenblatt brings forward, following Appadurai and the idea of ambivalence of the commodity form of community, is the tension generated between those two aspects of a sense of community (affective and interactive) in terms of the impact of the commodification of community. Rosenblatt suggests that such 'affective-interactive' tension may impede the emergence of meaningful social interactions (Rosenblatt 2005).

However, the reverse may well also be suggested: affective forms of community may eventually lead to interactive forms and vice versa. In fact, the literature corroborates such two-way linkages between the dimensions of a sense of community as defined by Buckner. For example, Dekker and Bolt (2005) confirm the dialectic relation between attraction-to-neighbourhood and neighbourly social interaction. Factors positively affecting the former are: length of residence within the neighbourhood, age, and tenure / ownership (Lewicka 2010); Hipp and Perrin (2006) add neighbourhood stability to the above factors. Rosenblatt, of course, is aware of such literature. What Rosenblatt wants to emphasize is a classification of residents into separate categories which do not eventually merge or lead to a larger sense of community that encompasses both groups.

The research by Wilson-Doenges (2000) suggests that there is a difference between the sense of community in gated communities based on income level when compared with an equivalent non-gated community. Her findings indicate that low-income gated communities did not differ from non-gated low-income neighbourhoods, whereas high-income gated communities had a lower sense of community than equivalent non-gated neighbourhoods due to the lack of social responsibility towards territorial functioning and natural surveillance by gated residents. Her



research highlights the importance of socio-economic context when studying the effects of gating.

## Conclusion

The chaotic development of gated communities is the result of planning *à-la-carte*, a manifestation of the dark side of social capital. A landscape that is a physical expression of the power of the elite in transforming social, cultural and symbolic capital into economic capital and political influence. Meanwhile, some scholars found that gated communities contribute to building social capital through familiarity, availability and social bridging, which affect residents' well-being and their capacity to participate in private and public life. At the same time, citizenship and civic engagement are at stake in such 'collective efficacy clusters'. The success of a gated residential development in establishing social capital may reside as much in the physical space of the gated development as the social space. Successfully integrating such developments within the larger scale of the city may be the key to garnering positive consequences that are really positive for society rather than being merely positive at an individual or group level. The onus is not only on the gated development itself but also on the values upheld by the society.

The lesson to be learned is that the socio-economic context is an important framework for defining the role of a gated community; on the one hand, as merely a commodity and, on the other, as actually the real deal for reforming residential suburban development. The scale of such residential clusters may also be a determining factor for whether the positive consequences are really positive at the societal level, especially if social encounters within such developments were reduced to an encounter between 'surfaces'.

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