

RETHINKING NEIGHBORNESS

Introduction

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Neighborhoodness is a fairly obvious object of anthropological and sociological research, as the study of relations among neighbors essentially seeks to answer the main questions these disciplines pose: what makes communal life possible and why and how people live together. Neighbor relations have been studied for a long time, yet, surprisingly, they remain a popular subject matter. Its seeming stability and long-lasting relevance notwithstanding, neighborhoodness is a dynamically changing phenomenon. In Russia, over a period of 30 years, that is, literally, in the span of one generation, several models of neighbor relations have come and gone, and the repertoire of neighborly practices has changed almost entirely. The openness, intimacy, and mutual dependence typical of communal life in Soviet times gave way to post-Soviet walling in and distancing, only to be replaced by diversified relationships in a whole range of scenarios, including both careful maintenance of boundaries and intensive communality. Today neighborhoodness continues to undergo changes. A partial transfer of neighbor relations into digital space yields a variety of communication scenarios and allows for a more efficient management of relations with one's neighbors. Processes of urban gentrification activated by the development of real estate market give relevance to new topics in research on neighborhoodness. Prior to the 2000s, researchers mostly asked "Where do neighbor relations emerge?" and "What kind of relations bind neighbors together?," whereas now, in response to growing social disparity, the most frequently posed question is "Who are neighbors?"

This issue of the journal opens with a collection of articles that, though certainly unable to encompass the entire thematic and conceptual range of research into neighbor relations, may, in our opinion, introduce the reader to basic concepts of this phenomenon and relevant approaches of its examination. This thematic block

^{*} By decision of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, the autonomous nonprofit organization Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) has been included in the registry of nonprofit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent (Federal Law No. 7-FZ "On Nonprofit Organizations").

includes studies of neighborliness in new subdivisions, where relationships among neighbors are only beginning to form, and in the old areas of megacities with their long-standing models of neighbor relations, perhaps even going back to the quite distant past; there are also articles on direct neighbor interactions and relationships taking place in cyberspace. Our authors take advantage of different sources and methodologies. They work with traditional interviews and observations but also with internet message boards and museum installations that are so relevant and crucial for the understanding of contemporary realities. At least three texts in this thematic block are autoethnographic: they grew out of personal experience or address personal experience as part of the study, for self-reflection becomes an entry point into studying themes so self-evident and universal (like neighbor relations) that they are often hard to analyze precisely due to their mundanity.

Geographically, studies presented in this thematic block are limited to two Russian megacities: Saint Petersburg and Moscow. These cities' experience is undoubtedly far from universal and may not always be applicable to other localities and cases. Nevertheless, we believe that precisely the scale of these cities, their heterogeneity and diversity represent neighbor relations in all their variety and may provide a good understanding of the phenomenon in general.

This thematic block of *Laboratorium* came together as a result of many years of research collaboration executed in two stages: as "The Layered Cake of Russian-Finnish Neighborliness: Everyday Interactions at Different Scales," between 2016 and 2018, and "The Big Layered Cake: Towards the Conceptualization of Neighborliness," between 2018 and 2020.¹ Supported by the Finnish Kone Foundation, this project had a complex thematic and research structure and considered neighbor relations at different scales and from different perspectives: from an urban residential neighborhood to relations among residents of border areas between Russia and Finland; from neighborliness manifesting itself over time in relations between the past and present residents of the formerly Finnish territories on the Karelian Isthmus to contemporary experiences.

At first, empirical logic prevailed in the project. Having begun with investigation of a wide variety of cases, we moved towards interpretations and conceptualizations. Simultaneously we looked for relevant approaches and theoretical foundations that would keep their explanatory power when applied to post-Soviet contexts. We paid a lot of attention to contexts. We also took into account the Soviet experience of neighbor relations formed in the absence of private property ownership and within the system of state-managed housing and municipal services. The study paid particular attention to the peculiarities of the process of housing privatization that took place in the 1990s. We also took note of increasing digitization of neighbor communications. Researchers examined a variety of situations of different scales: from daily interactions between neighbors to ideologies and policies affecting (or attempting to affect) neighbor relations. Such an approach enabled us to gather rich empirical material, recognize different levels and aspects of the topic, see the vari-

¹ The project can be found at <http://privet-sosed.tilda.ws/main>.

ous assemblage points of neighborliness, as well as discover a wide range of actors for whom neighborliness becomes an object of influence.

Thus, in this thematic block we concentrate on residential neighbor relations in Russian megacities. The collection opens with texts based on empirical studies. Olga Gromasheva's article examines neighbor relations in new subdivisions of Kudrovo, a locality on the border of the city of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast. Kudrovo is a vivid example of neighbor relations combining online and offline interactions that are intertwined and inseparable from one another and form a new type of relations—a hybrid neighborliness. Gromasheva relies on the actor-network theory and focuses on human and nonhuman actors by studying the role of local residents and digital infrastructure in neighbor relations. The article aims to shed light on the specifics and potential of digital neighborliness, as well as their limitations and strategies to overcome them.

Liubov Chernysheva and Elvira Gizatullina's article continues with the theme of hybrid neighbor relations in new residential high-rises. These buildings' spatial organization is believed to be not conducive to interactions among neighbors; nevertheless, as this study shows, neighbor relations have not ceased to exist but transformed thanks to the incorporation of internet and mobile technologies. Using materials gathered through studying daily life in a large new subdivision, Severnaia Dolina (North Valley), in Saint Petersburg, the researchers lay bare the nature of modern neighborliness. They describe its peculiar hybrid features, such as the twofold role of material environment and spatial proximity, hybridization of public spaces and neighborhood watch, anonymization and crowdsourcing, and customization of neighbor practices. The study adheres to the strategy of digital ethnography and draws on a series of interviews with residents of the subdivision and on evidence of their online communication via the social networking site VKontakte.

Elena Bogdanova turns to examining solidarization and collective actions by neighbors. This study concentrates on the collective strategy of taking care of public spaces in a historic apartment building in one of the districts of Saint Petersburg. The building residents' activity is analyzed through the lens of collective action theory and the concept of materiality. The study demonstrates that, although institutional premises exist for realization of a collective strategy of caring for public spaces in an apartment building, this collective strategy clashes with individuals' strategies for improving their personal living conditions. In today's Russia, neighbors' attempts to unite so as to solve communal problems turn out to be a risky proposition, the results of which are hard to predict. The study builds on the ethnography of everyday life and practices of daily interactions between neighbors, as well as in-depth interviews with residents and the materials of residents' complaints to the building's managing companies.

Olga Brednikova's essay looks at daily interactions of neighbors that enable the creation and maintenance of social networks and connections between people living side by side. Such interactions play a key role in fostering a community: people regularly meet face-to-face in public spaces and engage in various forms of communication. Interaction is actualized through practices of greeting each other and has a

ritualized nature. Contemporary neighbor relations are essentially an exercise in setting boundaries that would help find balance between intimacy and engagement, on the one hand, and keeping distance, on the other.

Pavel Kupriyanov devotes his essay to retro-neighborliness as construed by today's local-history museum projects carried out in two downtown districts in Moscow. In this case it is not routine practices but memory that shapes a community, thus forming a specific model of neighbor relations that combine local-historical and social components. Kupriyanov pays special attention to how local-historical content takes on the form of daily neighborly practices.

Concluding the thematic block is a review article by Elena Bogdanova, Olga Brednikova, and Oksana Zaporozhets that looks at the current trends in understanding and conceptualizing neighbor relations as relevant to Russian realities. As a type of social relations, neighborliness is analyzed through the lens of diverse approaches and concepts, including urban sociology, the sociology of everyday life, community studies, materiality and the actor-network theory, collective action theory, and so on. Each of these approaches interprets neighbor relations in its own vein, but none claims to offer an exhaustive explanation. Different "entry points" allow researchers to form a more complex notion of such a seemingly obvious and familiar phenomenon as neighborliness.