

Re-visiting NIMBY: From conflicting interests to conflicting valuations

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Abstract

This article presents a new way of understanding local land-use conflicts, also called NIMBY, developing from justification theory and literature from the sociology of engagements. The article builds on the multiple systems of valuation used by people to perceive local land-use cases as conflicts, following the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot. The conflicts are shown to be not only about conflicting interests of the residents, but also about broader conflicting systems of valuation. Empirically, land-use cases in Helsinki, Finland are analysed to show the variety of argumentation used by residents opposing land-use. Over 500 dispute letters are analysed, the vast majority of which base their argumentation on common good. About 40% also use argumentation based on individual interest. Argumentation based on close familiar affinities is rare but existing, which might be because of the type of data used in the article. The framework used allows for the non-moralizing use of the concept NIMBY when describing the conflicts.

Keywords

justification, NIMBY, participation, urban conflict, urban planning, valuation

Introduction

Land-use is always contested. From 19th-century British villagers protesting against mental asylums (Bucknill, 1858; Philo, 1987), to US environmental activists protesting against toxic soil in residential areas (Bullard, 1990), to 21st-century Greeks protesting against landfill sites (Botetzagias & Karamichas, 2009): across different historical and physical settings, people sometimes rise up against developments in their immediate surroundings. These conflicts happen pronouncedly in cities – with a great number of people comes a greater number of interests and opinions.

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How should these protesting residents, and the conflicts (often called NIMBY, or ‘Not In my Back Yard’) be understood? Earliest research on the issue of conflict led researchers to describe the motives of residents primarily from the perspective of individualist self-interests (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992; Wexler, 1996). More recent studies focus on the interplay of local environment, broader cultural factors, citizenship and the individual and her or his interests – and call into question whether the stereotypical NIMBY is based on individual interests exists at all (Bell, Gray, Haggett, & Swaffield, 2013; Burningham, Barnett, & Thrush, 2006; Gibson, 2005; Hager & Haddad, 2015; Lolive, 1997; Neveu, 2002; Thévenot, Moody, & Lafaye, 2000; Trom, 1999).

Recently, NIMBY conflicts have been understood as an integral part of democratic land-use processes (Mannarini & Roccato, 2011), and the residents acting against planning changes as being motivated by something other than purely private interests (e.g. Bell, Gray, & Haggett, 2005; Bell et al., 2013; Kempton, Firestone, Lilley, Rouleau, & Whitaker, 2005; Lolive, 1997); often by more general-level worries about the effects of the particular land-use, or by a familiar attachment to the places in question. Following Wolsink (2006, p. 90), it can be said that local land-use conflicts are always about fairness (or justice): whose voice is heard, whose interests are taken into account and how arguments are valued. But what is ‘fairness’? In these land-use conflicts, actors use it in so many incommensurable ways that the conflicts should be understood as being about *what fairness and justice are*, and how they are valued in each specific case.

In this article, I present a framework for understanding this question of justice and fairness in local land-use conflicts. The framework is based on the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006; see also Thévenot, 2014, 2015). When opposing local land-use projects, in addition to the actual arguments residents use, they also try to *qualify* the dispute and the particular local environment (Lolive, 1997; Thévenot et al., 2000; Trom, 1999). This is done in order to settle which way of valuing the local environment should be seen as the situationally correct one – which mode of valuation should be used (Centemeri, 2014). The primarily self-interested NIMBY-opposition of the earliest research on the subject is but one of the possible modes of valuation, the other two being the familiar attachments to places and common-good based justifications. I argue that a framework like this is needed to understand what these conflicts are about both from the perspective of the residents participating in them, and in a way that is relatable to broader sociological theory on critique.

To empirically show the differences between the systems of valuation, and the difference it makes, I analyse the argumentation used by residents of Helsinki, Finland, when they are opposing land-use projects in their neighbourhoods. I analyse 565 dispute letters concerning 42 land-use cases sent by the residents to the city planning official. I focus on two specific urban development projects, and the critiques presented against them. From the point of view of the resident activists in Haaga, new high-rises are destroying an idyllic, and historically lush and green, neighbourhood; and in Rastila, a locally beloved forest is being zoned for luxury condos. Or are these cases, as the city administration argues, about building more housing for families in a growing city? This article analyses how local residents evaluate these situations, and how they present the conflict to the city planners.

By using a framework based on the modes of valuation, it is possible to empirically look at differences and similarities between land-use conflicts, using non-normative concepts. Thus questions about the general responses towards land-use conflicts (do the 'NIMBYs' who argue primarily based on their own interest exist?) can be answered, and comparisons between cases made in an analytical fashion.

The macro-level empirical perspective is highlighted in this article by focusing on written dispute letters sent by residents to city planners. The way these dispute letters conform to official participation channels also helps to highlight the fact that movements in NIMBY conflicts often work both against and in parallel with the established bureaucratic democratic processes. The aim of NIMBY activists and actors can be seen as not only protesting against planning processes, but in different ways complementing and challenging it, thus ensuring the legitimacy and acceptability of land-use decisions on a larger scale (Gibson, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2008). This helps to highlight that the most 'traditional' NIMBY argumentation, based purely on the self-interest of the actor, should also be seen as a primarily political, not parochial, act.

NIMBY: A label for conflicts

The concept NIMBY has a troubled past that can be traced back to United States of the 1970s. New environmental justice movements were born to fight for the rights of people living in houses built on polluted land. For the activists, the central meaning of these movements was empowerment, righting the wrongs the system had done to them: they were at least partly class-based, from poor white neighbourhoods (Bullard, 1990; Burningham et al., 2006; Engelhaupt, 2008). Sherman (2015) traces the actual term to pejorative use by industry executives working against these local protests.

Within academic literature, NIMBY was introduced by Dear and Taylor's *Not on our street* (1982). In his influential paper, Dear (1992, p. 288) defined NIMBY as 'protectionist attitudes of and oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighbourhood ... residents usually concede that these "noxious" facilities are necessary, but not near their homes'.

Earliest academic discussion was chiefly concerned with giving practical tips to planners on how to conquer the obstacles to building and development (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992; Inhaber, 1992; Wexler, 1996). These early studies saw NIMBY from technocratic planners' point of view (see Mannarini & Roccato, 2011): primarily as a constraint to effective planning. They often describe NIMBY in medical terms, as a 'syndrome' to be cured (Szasz, 1994). In the 1990s, NIMBY was understood as a tool of racial and class separation that better-off areas used to pre-empt problems in their area – sometimes called environmental racism (Hamilton, 1995). More recently, NIMBY has been seen as a hindrance to sustainable development and green infrastructure. The studies on siting wind turbines, nuclear power plants and waste management facilities still find that these projects face considerable opposition, but not all of it is seen as inherently negative as in earlier research (Bell et al., 2013; Botetzagias & Karamichas, 2009; Kempton et al., 2005; Shumaway & Jackson, 2008).

NIMBY and local opposition have also been related to broader ideas of democratic participation (Gibson, 2005; Hager & Haddad, 2015; Lolive, 1997; Mannarini & Roccato,

2011; Neveu, 2002; Richard-Ferroudji, 2011; Roccato, Rovere, & Bo, 2008; Trom, 1999). This participation happens through voicing of concerns or critiques towards the land-uses – often argued on a more general level than purely out of the self-interest of actors – and could be interpreted two ways: either as local and particular critique against new developments (Wolsink, 2006) or as expression of general will: if some developments always meet opposition, maybe they really are against what people everywhere want (Gibson, 2005)? The local opponents are seen as presenting legitimate critiques against land-use cases: rising from the local level, against central planners and big business interests.

The literature has been rather consensual in recognizing conflicts seen as NIMBY (see e.g. Hager & Haddad, 2015). The same cannot be said of the conceptual positions taken by writers, or of how moralities, or questions of fairness and justice, are addressed in these conflicts. According to Feldman and Turner (2010), research on NIMBY has been highly normative, even moralizing.

Kempton et al. (2005, pp. 124–125) offer three reasons for not using the term NIMBY: (1) it has pejorative connotations; (2) it may not accurately describe the phenomenon; and (3) it is a label that leaves the cause of opposition unexplained. NIMBY is seen to connote a selfish view of the residents, acting only out of their own interest (Burningham, 2000; Burningham et al., 2006; Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992; Gibson, 2005; Wolsink, 2006). In reality, the residents are using much more sophisticated argumentation (Lolive, 1997; Neveu, 2002; Richard-Ferroudji, 2011; Trom, 1999).

The term NIMBY, thus, works best as a descriptive term; it is widely used (in virtually all literature referenced here) and does a good job at describing what the conflicts are *about*: residents opposing changes in their local surroundings. NIMBY as a term evokes the clash between what the local actors want, and what the planners or developers want, and an emphasis on the actors. ‘Not in *my* backyard’ has a connotation of active participation, whereas the main alternative, locally unwanted land-use, can be seen to connote attitudes instead of action.

The critiques of the usage of the term NIMBY posit that even when used as a descriptive term, it still contains implicit notions about the role of the private interests of the residents – that it is a normative term at heart. In this article, instead of relying on these implicit notions, I take them explicitly as the research question. Following Hubbard (2006), this article does not aim at classifying ‘some nimby campaigns more “valid” than others’. To avoid the problems of using the term NIMBY with its moralizing undertones, I argue that the most fruitful sociological approach is to understand NIMBY conflicts as being more about conflicting modes of valuation and how situations are evaluated by the actors (Centemeri, 2014; Lamont, 2012) than they are about residents’ conflicting interests in local issues.

These conflicts, and particularly individual people acting against land-use decisions in their own surroundings, are not monoliths: they do not all act based on either a single system of valuation, or a shared sets of common principles. Complex conflicts involving multiple stakeholders include complex sets of moral principles. By taking into account the multiple systems of valuation used by people, local land-use conflicts can be understood in a more analytical fashion.

As many writers (Bell et al., 2005, 2013; Devine-Wright, 2009; Lolive, 1997; Moody & Thévenot, 2000; Neveu, 2002; Trom, 1999) have noted, in local land-use conflicts the

actors refer to their own private interests sometimes – but more often not. Rather, they argue with both more generalized and principled, as well as more emotionally invested, arguments. These arguments are, naturally, often quite aligned with their own interests.

The three-level model of NIMBY, based on pragmatic sociology (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Thévenot, 2015) and presented in the next section, accommodates these different types of argumentation. They range from private interests and deep familiar engagements with local surroundings, to a general-level principle-based argumentation. Thus, NIMBY conflicts can be analysed without making assumptions about the argumentation, or motives, of the residents.

Gibson (2005) sees NIMBY as the voicing of an opposition against a planned development rising from conflicting interests of the people and the planner. In some political cultures (for a comparison of France and the US, see Lamont & Thévenot, 2000; Moody & Thévenot, 2000), this kind of opposition is not only legitimate, but rather a central type of political argumentation. NIMBY protests can be seen as instances of suspicion of central planning (Rosanvallon, 2008), even if they are only based on the self-interest of actors. And if this acceptability is more a feature of political culture than a feature of land-use conflict in itself (Luhtakallio, 2012), it means that even if local residents are only acting out of their own interests, they should be analysed as citizens participating in democratic processes, not as second-class citizens (Neveu, 2002).

NIMBY as a conflict of modes of valuation

The pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) posits that every individual has a critical capacity (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999) – a potential to solve conflicts and criticize situations they find unjust. A land-use decision by the city planner that local residents perceive as threatening the local area is a good example of such a situation: the residents are able to produce a broad range of different critiques against the proposed land-use. The original model presented in *On justification* (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) included six definitions of common good that can be used as sources for this critique.¹

To shift from values to modes of valuation (see e.g. Centemeri, 2014; Thévenot, 2015), I present a framework based on the sociology of engagements (Thévenot, 2007, 2014, 2015) and the advances in the theory made since (Luhtakallio, 2012; Tuomas Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, in press). Thévenot (2007) proposed the idea of three different types of engagement with the world: one based on public justifications, one on familiar close affinities and one on individual interests. When these three engagements operate on the level of community, that is, on the level of political argumentation, Thévenot (2015) calls them *grammars of communality* (later shortened to grammars). I propose to understand NIMBY conflicts via three different systems of valuation, based on the three grammars: individual interests, public justifications and familiar affinities.

In this article, the grammars (Thévenot, 2015) are operationalized within the (at least semi-) public realm of argumentation. The French pragmatic approach has been used in research on local land-use conflicts (Blok & Meilvang, 2014; Centemeri, 2014; Gladarev & Lonkila, 2013; Richard-Ferroujji, 2011; Thévenot et al., 2000). These writers have focused either on developing the theoretical model (Centemeri, 2014; Moody & Thévenot, 2000), or on close inspection of the engagements in single conflict (Blok &

Table 1. Three modes of valuation.

Mode of valuation	Basis of argumentation	Example from the data
Individual interests	Arguments based on private interests	'We cannot accept these new buildings, as they would negatively affect the value of our assets.'
Public justification	Arguments based on common good	'Haaga has always been a lush green area, and it should be allowed to be that way. Each part of the city has a right to stay unique!'
Familiar affinities	Arguments based on strong emotional ties to places and objects	'I was raised here, and my daughters will be raised here. I want to give them access to the dear forest where I spent my youth.'

Meilvang, 2014; Gladarev & Lonkila, 2013). In this article, I take a more macro-empirical perspective – looking at a broad range of land-use conflicts in Helsinki. In this framework, the practical grammars of valuation (Centemeri, 2014) are seen as cultural resources used by actors within society (Luhtakallio, 2012; Swidler, 1986). I next present the three grammars, understood as modes of valuation used in argumentation (for a summary, see Table 1).

The individual interests system of valuation is based on the self-interest of actors, or residents in NIMBY cases. Rosanvallon (2008, pp. 25–26) identifies a type of fundamental suspicion and opposition against elected or otherwise ruling political organs, being based on a liberal disbelief about whether general will exists at all. This suspicion is central for some NIMBY analyses (Gibson, 2005): the idea is to protect the individual and her or his interests against the central planner or decision maker. The fundamental of scale of valuation is that of the individual interests – and the stress is on the legitimacy of these interests (Moody & Thévenot, 2000; Thévenot & Lamont, 2000; Thévenot et al., 2000).

Many earlier analyses of NIMBY conflicts were rooted in the idea of the private interests of liberal individuals (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992; Gibson, 2005). Common good is not only hard to define in some cases, it might be completely misleading as a concept. This conception of democracy argues that the greater good emerges through a system in which all actors act purely out of self-interest. On a rhetorical level, the actors might make demands, broker deals and issue ultimatums, not argue about principles on a general level (Moody & Thévenot, 2000; Thévenot, 2014, 2015).

For Thévenot (2014, 2015) the *individual* is the crucial actor in the grammar of individuals. There is, however, no fundamental reason why the analysis could not be broadened to include also small groups of individuals. This is only possible, if this mode of valuation is based on the usage of interests – non-justified political claims – instead of the way of engaging the world through plans or the continuation of normal action, as has been previously done (Centemeri, 2014; Thévenot, 2007). The context of urban land-use conflict seems to be particularly well suited for this kind of expansion of the role of these private interests within the sociology of engagements – thus far underdeveloped – because of the role private interest plays in the 'classical' idea of the NIMBY (Burningham, 2000; Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992).

On the most general level, the level of *public justification*, all argumentation and valuation is based on the common good – which can be defined in many ways. These

definitions are acceptable and recognizable for all actors in a given society. Even though we might disagree with the use of a particular common good in a particular situation, we recognize that it might be legitimate in a different situation. (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). This is the style of argumentation which is mostly easily understood as ‘political’, or value-based and principled, and what many writers refer to when talking about ‘justified’ or ‘prudent’ NIMBY (Freudenberg & Pastor, 1992) – or ‘qualified opposition’ (Bell et al., 2013; see also Richard-Ferroudji, 2011).

For the definitions of common good (*orders of worth* in Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993), in this article I focus on nature (green worth), monetary good (market worth) and tradition (domestic worth) as the basis of valuation. Tuomas Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (in press) have developed the idea of these valuations used in the public into an analytical tool they call Justification Analysis (see also Luhtakallio, 2012).

In comparison with the mode of valuation based on individual interests, the grammar of public justification is marked by a rise in the level of generality (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), a move from the individual or the small group to the level of the whole community. Lolive (1997) presents this rise as a strategy used by residents to sidestep being labelled (or analysed) as NIMBYs.

The politics of NIMBY conflicts cannot be reduced to either individual interests or abstract dealings of common good. Many NIMBY conflicts are all about the particular – particular place, particular land-use and particular people. Land-use conflicts are filled with specific material arrangements with meanings attached to the most intimate surroundings of people.

In the valuation based on *familiar affinities* and ties to the material and immaterial surroundings, places and ideas are most important. This mode of valuation is based on emotions and strong personal connections. These feelings are not easily generalized (Thévenot, 2015), but can be used politically because of their almost visceral importance to the individuals (Tuukka Ylä-Anttila, in press). The relation of personal affinities and urban commonplaces, and urban protest movements is elaborated by Blok and Meilvang (2014): the abstract diagrams of urban planning can be made sites of protests and conflict by supplementing them with tokens and explorations of personal relations to these places. Devine-Wright (2009) has used the term ‘place-protector’ to denote a similar type of argumentation or participation.

Within this framework, all argumentation uses the local environment as a resource. This environment is not an objectively existing thing, but rather has to be constructed as such by the people living there, by using some sort of evaluative criteria (Centemeri, 2014; Lolive, 1997; Trom, 1999). When one argues for the conservation of a forest area, one constructs the forest as a meaningful, perhaps even unique place within the environment. At the same time, the planning official might just see an underdeveloped plot of land.

To sum up, argumentation in local land-use conflicts can be said to have three different modes of valuation usable for critique: (1) valuation arising from individual interests (endangered forest-views and property values of a single resident); (2) a publicly justified general political position (required amount of green recreational space in residential areas); and (3) the importance of close familiar affinities to a particular environment (the strong emotional importance of a specific small forest). These three modes are summarised in Table 1.

Land-use and planning in Helsinki

The Finnish Land-Use and Building Act, which regulates planning and urban development, was renewed in 1999 to include ideas influenced by communicative planning and deliberative democracy (Bäcklund, 2007; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Finnish Ministry of the Environment, 2014, pp. 151–156; Haila, 2002; Saad-Sulonen, 2014, pp. 40–43; Staffans, 2012). The Act gives residents of a city the right to be heard when urban plans are amended and significant new developments are planned, and to challenge the legitimacy of these changes in court.

In Helsinki, the hearing process is organized both via specialized events and by giving residents a chance to send dispute letters to the city planners. According to the law, these letters have to be ‘taken into account’ in the planning process. After drafting and comments, the Planning Authority creates an official plan proposal, which is then approved, rejected or amended by the City Planning Board of Helsinki (City of Helsinki, 2015). This implementation grants individual citizens, even without any formal organizational ties, a guaranteed way of receiving at least the formal attention of the city planning officials. Where the local planning officials in Finland used to see themselves as being in a position where they could *define* what is a good city, they now have to be part of a *discussion* about what is the common good (Bäcklund, Kallio, & Häkli, 2014; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). The use of deliberative instruments in itself does not necessarily lead to a more egalitarian participation, despite the nature of the participatory systems employed. It can also work to hide power relations (Richard-Ferroudji, 2011).

While the Land-Use and Building Act itself might be influenced by the ideas of deliberative democracy, at the same time it also legitimizes any elements of liberal or aggregative democratic participation (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). The law and the practices and implementations it encourages are built on the ideas of common good and deliberation, but it also grants ample rights and ground for individual interests. It does that by recognizing them as legitimate. Richard-Ferroudji (2011) uses the sociology of engagements, and a similar framework to the one applied here, to present different participation methods that would be relatable to different modes of valuation. In the Helsinki participatory planning process, all arguments are presented, in a way, as equal: they are all presented as letters to the planning officials, expressing written argumentation (see Centemeri [2014] for a pragmatic approach to this kind of incommensurability).

This article uses the dispute letters sent to the Planning Authority by individual residents in land-use cases. These letters were mostly sent using email, with a few letters each via a comments form on the City Planning Office website, via mail and postcards. Using these dispute letters as data gives us an interesting view of the local land-use conflicts. Since the process is something less than explicitly public in nature, participants do not face the fears of publicity, losing face or having a negative comment associated with them.² It is possible to directly assess the actual action and critical capacity performed by these residents (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999), and, at the same time, rely on their belief that their argumentation is legitimate to the context – were it not considered legitimate by the residents themselves, they most probably would not have engaged in it. Legitimacy is thus defined by the residents: the argumentation they use is the one they, in practice, consider legitimate.

Haaga and Rastila – two changing urban environments

The analysis uses, first, a subset³ of all the dispute letters sent by residents to the City Planning Authority. They were processed by the City Planning Authority during 2012. The subset includes dispute letters on 42 different land-use changes, and 321 in total. Of these letters, 72% were against the proposed planning change (with 10% ambivalent and 18% in favour).

I focus on a more detailed analysis of two specific land-use conflicts. In Haaga, the proposed changes were mostly incremental in nature: the plan was to build 700 new apartments, in the same price range as the existing apartments in the area. The City Planning Authority received 107 dispute letters. The Rastila case was more radical in nature. The central idea was to replace a small forest area, currently used for recreation, with a new urban development for 15,000 residents. The City Planning Authority received 137 dispute letters. Thus, together with the citywide sample, the total number of letters in the data set is 565. These areas are middle-class, with Haaga in the more upper and Rastila in the lower end of the spectrum.

These two conflicts were chosen because they both contained a high number of dispute letters, but were different in nature: the first local and conservative in nature, the second more radical and widely contested.

Valuations in land-use conflicts

The comments in the dispute letters were divided into three broad non-exclusive categories based on the system of valuation used: (1) those using individual interests as the primary mode of valuation; (2) those in which a more abstract common good was presented as the main rationale for the opinion; and (3) those which based their valuation on the close familiar affinities and emotional ties between individuals and their surroundings. The central function of the dispute letters analysed here is to oppose specific changes in specific areas – the senders try to ensure that their specific mode of valuation and the things they consider worthy are taken into account in the planning process. They do this, partly, by presenting the local environment in a way that supports their claims. The classification is based on a close reading of the letters: each letter was categorized based on the mode of valuation which was used as the base of the argument. Letters using multiple modes of valuation were counted in each class.

Figure 1 presents the distributions of the modes of valuation used in the dispute letters. Over 40% used argumentation that directly referenced the individual interests of the writer. In Haaga, these were often rather straightforward economic arguments. For example, one commenter wrote: ‘the planned new building would affect the economic interests of the current residents significantly, in a negative way’.

Another way of using *individual interests* as the basis of argumentation is to open the conflict up for trading. In many situations, the interests of the people currently living in an area are different from the interests of potential future residents. Some current residents of Haaga threaten the city of Helsinki with moving away from the area, if the plans are executed: ‘If all of [the proposed changes] really become reality, I shall pack up my family and move to greener and more lush surroundings. When I have discussed this with my friends here at Haaga, they have all said the same.’

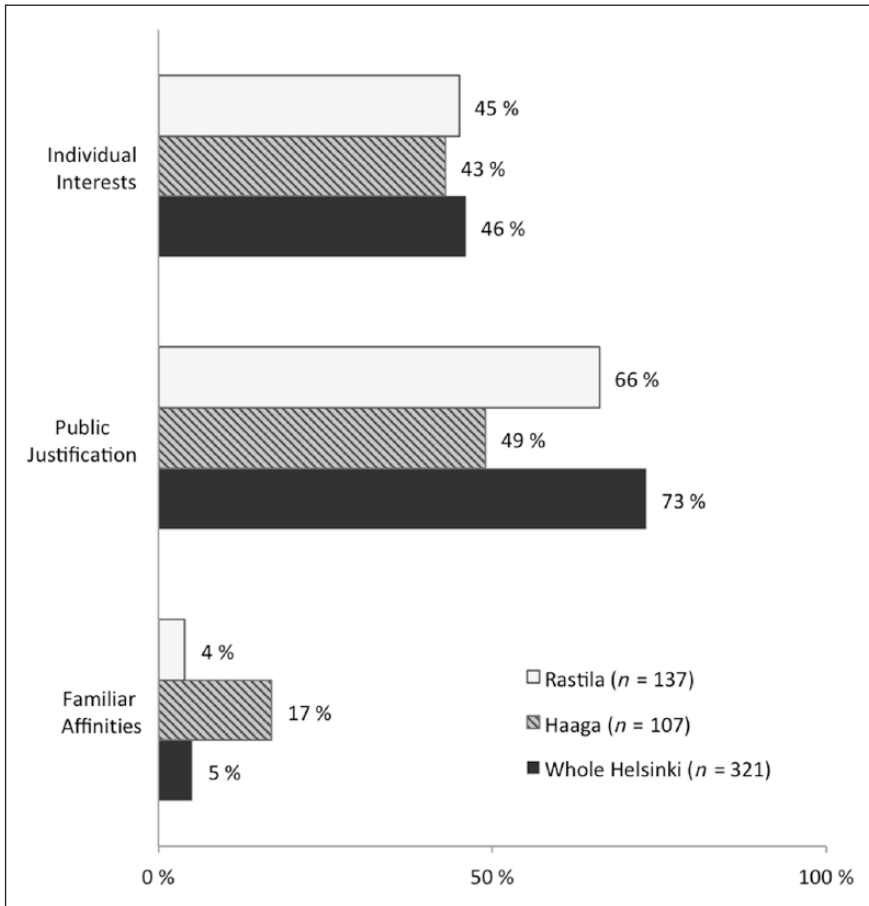


Figure 1. The distributions of the three modes of valuation, with non-exclusive categories, in percentages.

One commenter from Rastila highlighted the choice made by moving into the area: ‘I ask that you would also value the opinion of the people like me, who have chosen to live in this area!’ The fundamental value placed on individual opinion also manifests throughout the city as disputes that simply state their opinion without justifying it or explaining it in any way. One can assume these commenters think that voicing one’s interest in the subject is an effective way of influencing the decision. The (legal) rights of the individuals figure prominently, such as in the concern that the city is using its powers over land-use in a way that is harmful to them, or their small community.

Interest-based valuations are not always presented from the point of view of a single individual. The residents often present themselves as spokespersons for the ‘greater community of the Area’. This community is always seen as a unanimous actor, and is constructed by the speaker to back her or his claim. In the next quote, a shift from ‘I’ to

‘we’ can be noted: ‘Hey. I’d like to express my opinion on this matter. Haaga is already dense enough as it stands. Once the green areas are refurbished and a new park building is built to replace the old one, it’s enough. ... And we don’t want more traffic on our streets.’ Here, even though the community is invoked as a rhetorical strategy, the mode of valuation does not include higher common principles such as common goods – it relies on the construction of the local community as a rights-bearing subject, similar to an individual. A similar shift happens in Rastila: comments based on individual interest often focus on how valuable the green area under threat is for the *current residents*, and how much they are benefiting from the area.

This community-based way of presenting the argument does not alter the underlying assumption about valuation: what residents see as valuable, should be seen as valuable by the planners as well. This is the core logic of the valuation based on individual interests. It is not based on principled arguments about common good, or about deep and meaningful bonds with nature, but on statements of preferences.

In both Rastila and Haaga, using *public justification* was most common (66% and 49%, respectively, compared to 73% at city level). The argumentation in these letters is on a more abstract level. If comments based on individual interests are always grounded in the individual or small group, common good by definition calls for universal valuation.

One explanation for the dominance of arguments based on common good in Rastila was that the debate about the case did not remain between the city planners and the local people. It spilled over to newspapers, demonstrations and TV. A group of volunteer city planners created an unofficial alternative city plan for the area (OurCity 2012). All in all, the residents of Rastila had organized themselves as a social movement, and the conflict could be seen as a local power conflict which one side tries to ‘upscale’, to win it on a more general level of discussion (Hogenstijn, van Middelkoop, & Terlouw, 2008, p. 154).

Public justifications show differences between Haaga and Rastila. In Rastila, a third of the residents argued for using ecological values in the assessment of the planning change: ‘The Forest is a habitat for a diverse group of animals and plants, including foxes and birds. It should be preserved for future generations.’ In the letters, the residents construct their environment as valuable chiefly because of its flora and fauna, not because its beauty or use-value.

In Haaga, the by far dominant justification was based on the traditional outlook and heritage of the area. Residents argued that the proposed changes would demolish the green and lush nature of the area: ‘All the new buildings should adhere to the original design principles of the area: they should be small-scale and open, to preserve the park-like nature of the area. This lush park-like feeling is the unique aspect that creates the uniqueness and charm of Haaga.’ The local environment was constructed as a heritage site, a place with history and a unique design. Even though both conflicts are about urban green areas, the justifications used in defending them were different.

Familiar affinities were rarely used in the dispute letters. They were used in 5% of the letters in the citywide sample, 4% in Rastila and 17% in Haaga. Their rarity in Rastila can be explained by the public nature of the conflict: in discussion where public justifications are assumed to be the norm, personal affinities can be easily pushed out of discussion (Thévenot, 2015). It might also be because of the nature of the data: personal engagements are not easily presented in a (semi-)formal complaint letter.

When these personal affinities are used as the basis of argumentation, it happens in the form of a story that establishes the deep personal connection the commenter has to the area, such as in the following example from Rastila:

I was born in this area and as a child I loved roaming in these forests. I lived elsewhere, in other cities and also abroad, but when it came time to start a family, I knew I wanted to do it here. It is really important to me that my children can play in the same forest in which I played as a kid. Yesterday, my daughter asked me, 'mommy, can you promise me that they won't destroy our forest?' Oh, how I wish I would have been able to promise her that.

While the writer is, naturally, arguing for her own good, inasmuch they all are, the difference between colder, more calculative and interest-based language – and thus mode of valuation – presented earlier is clear. The writer here states her personal, deep and over-generational affinity with the place, and wishes thus that her opinion is given more weight in decision-making. Not because it is *as valuable as any other opinion*, but because her deep connection makes it *more valuable* (see also Devine-Wright, 2009).

Conclusions

In this article, NIMBY conflicts were seen as political conflicts over local land-use, in which residents (as citizens) act to influence the land-use decisions, through having disputes over the systems of valuation used in the decision-making. In future research, the concept of NIMBY should be used to denote the conflicts, not actors participating in the conflicts. The argumentation of the residents was analysed using a framework of three possible modes of valuation, based on individual interests, public justification, or familiar affinities.

This kind of meta-moralistic macro-level perspective is needed to understand NIMBY and related phenomena in an analytical way – to see what is common between different cases, and what is shared between political cultures. These cross-cultural comparative projects would provide an interesting avenue for future research.

Empirically, in the cases of both Haaga and Rastila, as well as in the citywide sample, a range of different arguments, and different modes of valuation, was found. The conflicts are different, the stakes in them are different, and the argumentation and modes of valuation used are different. And yet, the arguments and modes of valuation are based on a limited number of cultural tools – and are thus available for research.

When contrasting the results with Bell et al. (2013), it would seem that there are, after all, quite a lot of people arguing in ways traditionally identified with NIMBY: those who oppose land-use based mostly on their private interests. As noted in Thévenot and Lamont (2000) and Moody and Thévenot (2000), the specific legitimacy might vary greatly between political cultures. Interestingly, there was great variation in the definitions of common good used in the argumentation within the mode of valuation based on public justification. Whereas in Haaga the local environment was mostly constructed through heritage and tradition, in Rastila it was done using green values, the flora and the fauna of the place. And as was expected, the grammar of familiar affinities was present but in a minimal role. This is most probably due to the limitations of the data: more

ethnographically focused studies have often found these place attachments in a more prominent role (e.g. Blok & Meilvang, 2014; Richard-Ferroudji, 2011) than is possible with a macro-level study focused on written dispute letters like this.

The written dispute letter data used in this article emphasize the democratic nature of the NIMBY conflict. Even if the arguments are based on individual interests, they were expressed through the participatory channels available to residents – and the legitimacy of this kind of position can be thought to vary between political cultures. In the case of Helsinki, the residents clearly saw it as a legitimate way of doing local politics: they assumed that simply stating a preference would be enough to convince the planners.

The framework can also be used for analysing conflicts using more ethnographic or statistical data. Gladarev and Lonkila (2013) compare similar NIMBY conflicts in Russia and Finland, and find the main difference in the primary mode of valuation – in Finland the activists use public justification, in Russia the emphasis is on the familiar affinities and connections between residents and nature. Similarly, the Greek landfill site protesters presented by Botetzagias and Karamichas (2009) can be said to use the public good of efficiency as the basis for valuation, and the 19th-century British villagers protesting against the building of mental asylums offer a mixture of private individual interests (property values) and common good (the mental patients would cause a danger to the residents), when seen through the framework presented here (Bucknill, 1858; Philo, 1987).

The definition of ‘private interest’ had to be amended, to include not just the lone individual, but also the small-scale community around her or him. This was possible because despite the collective nature of these claims, they referenced the private interests of this small group, not general-level common goods. In future research using frameworks derived from pragmatic sociology, these issues of *representation* need more attention.

Because of the rather low-intensity level of these conflicts, they allow us to transcend the idea of NIMBY as something that happens only in highly contested siting or urban planning projects. And, the (in theory) open and democratic nature of the planning process in Helsinki helps to highlight that adding participatory elements to land-use is most certainly not a silver bullet which would help planners forgo NIMBY-style opposition, as many writers have suggested (Hager & Haddad, 2015; Richard-Ferroudji, 2011; Wexler, 1996). This is what NIMBY conflicts look like, when the argumentation is analysed from the perspective of the residents using the argumentation, and when the conflict is understood to be about systems of valuation. Each conflict is unique, but actors use shared cultural tools to participate in the conflicts. And the conflicts are about how decisions should be made within the democratic system.

Through this three-category theoretical distinction, it should be possible to better understand NIMBY conflicts, whether they are based on place attachment, private interest or general principles, as conflicts of justice.

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Notes

1. This critique has a somewhat problematic relation to critical theory. Boltanski (2011) has seen this mode of situated everyday critique as supplanting the need for critical theory – but Diken (2015) finds fault with this view of critique, blaming it for losing the radical potential for broad social reconfiguration that is at the heart of critical theory.
2. The dispute letters sent to the City Planning Authority are available to the public in the foyer of the City Hall by request, so even though they are not confidential, they are not exactly public either.
3. The subset includes a single comment letter from each individual commenter who included an address in the comment letter.

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