

Social cohesion in hyper-diverse areas: how important are encounters in semi-public spaces?

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Abstract

Worldwide, urban populations are increasingly diverse in their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles as well as in their lifestyles, attitudes and activity patterns. This hyper-diversification complicates the creation of feelings of belonging and community. Because diversity is negotiated at the neighborhood level, micro spaces play a crucial role in building communities. Micro spaces tend to be semi-public and encourage the intermingling of diverse groups, which results in on-off as well as repetitive and structural interactions. It is important to understand how these types of interaction come about in order to stimulate cohesive communities. This paper compares encounters at two micro spaces, a library and a community center, to analyze their influence on social cohesion. The research took place in the highly diverse neighborhood of Feyenoord in Rotterdam, the Netherlands using participant observation and interviews with residents and experts. Interactions at the library were found to be lighter and shorter than at the community center. The paper concludes that, though differing in depth and duration, the interactions at both micro spaces influence social cohesion. At the community center, the encounters are deeper so visitors make acquaintance with local residents, resulting in light as well as deeper relationships. The visitors come to feel more at home because they recognize others elsewhere in the neighborhood. At the library, the encounters are lighter but visitors become familiar with different others and diversity in general, making them feel more at home in the library as well as in their neighborhood.

Keywords: hyper-diversity, social cohesion, encounters, semi-public spaces, home, social networks

Introduction

Cities worldwide are becoming increasingly diverse, particularly as the result of globalization and migration. As cities diversify their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles, they become *super-diverse* (Vertovec, 2007). According to some scholars, urban groups are becoming *hyper-diversified* (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013), arguing that even people who appear to belong to the same group may also have very different lifestyles, attitudes and activity patterns (ibid.). Hyper-diversification might lead to more social exclusion as individuals segregate themselves from others who belong to a different class, ethnicity or lifestyle (Fincher et al., 2014). This complicates the creation of a sense of belonging and community. As people are inclined to connect to similar others, urban residents may prefer to live side-by-side without mixing socially (Reynolds and Zontini, 2013).

The actual *negotiation* of diversity happens at a very local level (Amin, 2002; Berg and Sigona, 2013; Gidley, 2013). In short, diversity is expressed where people live. Differences in lifestyle, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or religion become visible in neighborhood bars, corner shops and cafes (Valentine, 2013). The neighborhood, thus, forms a point of reference for understanding expressions of diversity and how residents deal with diverse others (Berg and Sigona, 2013). Micro spaces are especially important there. They often represent semi-public spaces that encourage the simultaneous use and intermingling of diverse groups (Amin, 2002). Public spaces like parks were long believed to be crucial sites for the negotiation of urban diversity. Yet in reality, shared semi-public spaces reveal much more about how people learn to deal with difference. While these spaces are not completely a *world of strangers* (Lofland, 1973), they are frequented by diverse groups, on-off interactions as well as strong and more structural interactions take place there (ibid.). When entering libraries, community centers, corner shops, cafes or sports clubs, people are leaving their comfort zone. The micro scale of such venues compels people to confront and interact with the others they share these spaces with (Amin, 2002).

The academic literature describes a variety of encounters. Many studies examine their impact on social cohesion, presuming that certain types of encounters can bring about more cohesive communities. Two schools of thought dominate this discussion. Supporters of the first argue that *fleeting* interactions promote feelings of belonging and community by creating a sense of familiarity with difference (Müller, 2002; Blokland and Nast, 2014). Supporters of the second school reject this argument as unrealistic, countering that *fleeting* encounters are lacking in depth and duration (Valentine, 2008). Further, only spaces that stimulate repetitive encounters can create deeper and *meaningful* interactions, which in turn foster long-term contacts

(Amin, 2012; Valentine, 2013). Both positions have been subjected to extensive research (see for example Andersson et al. (2012) for encounters on campus or Wilson (2013) for those at playgrounds). As scholars remain divided on this issue, more research is needed on the particularity of meeting spaces and the influence that different types of encounters have on social cohesion. To shed some light on the subject, this paper presents the results of a study that posed the following two questions: “*To what extent do different semi-public spaces influence the creation of particular encounters?*” and “*How do these different encounters impact social cohesion in highly diverse neighborhoods?*” The research was conducted in the highly diverse neighborhood of Feyenoord, located in Rotterdam South, the Netherlands. Its population is increasingly young and diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds are represented.

Theorizing the link between social cohesion, encounters and semi-public spaces

The setting matters: Linking semi-public spaces and encounters

Today, many urban neighborhoods are not just mixed but *hyper*-diverse. Consequently, different groups use the same spaces for leisure, shopping or sports, causing their life worlds to overlap (Wise and Velayutham, 2009). These spaces are thereby transformed into public *zones of encounter* (Wood and Landry, 2008). Often, spaces are not purely private or public in nature. Their location on the *public-private continuum* (Lofland, 1989) is therefore determined by the ways people interact and how relations, meanings and rules are produced and negotiated within these settings. Lofland (1989) proposes a third kind of space, one that is open to the public but has a certain private character to it: the parochial realm. Otherwise known as semi-public space, the parochial realm is characterized by “a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in inter-personal networks that are located within communities.” Public space, in contrast, is “the world of strangers and 'the street'” (p.10). Each neighborhood has a variety of semi-public (i.e., parochial) spaces like libraries, community centers, schoolyards, corner shops, cafes or sports clubs. Known as *micro publics*, these are zones for intercultural encounter and are deemed important because they offer opportunities for interdependence and habitual engagement (Amin, 2002). Still, purely public spaces such as parks, streets and squares were long believed to be crucial sites for the negotiation of urban diversity. Their design supposedly encouraged an urban civic culture by allowing people to freely associate and mingle with each other (Amin, 2002; Duyvendak and Wekker, 2015). Actually, public spaces do not necessarily support multicultural engagement. Goffman (1963) observed that, as a rule, people do not interact in public places unless there is an obvious reason to do so (p.84). Moreover, contemporary public spaces are often territorialized by particular groups or represent spaces of transit where strangers have very little contact (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

Most semi-public spaces attract diverse audiences. People therefore have to mix and engage with each other to a certain degree in order to bridge their differences and achieve a common goal (Amin, 2002; Wessendorf, 2014). Yet the ways in which people engage are strongly linked to the settings themselves, as interactions are always shaped by the physical and social situation (Goffman, 1963). Some semi-public spaces can be more 'public' in nature, having an open and neutral character, whereas others can be more 'parochial', meaning that people know each other and express a sense of community (Lofland, 1989). To illustrate the fluidity between these realms, Wessendorf (2014) explains that a corner shop can appear 'public' to outsiders but 'parochial' to the regular customers and the staff, who experience habitual and repetitive encounters there.

Van Eijk and Engbersen (2011) propose that the ways people interact in different places are related to four key conditions: *multifunctionality*, *connectedness*, *comfort* and *sociability*. Places can facilitate the intermingling of diverse audiences by allowing people to participate in shared activities that stimulate interaction and collaboration (Amin, 2002). Obviously, these places must be well-embedded and connected to local infrastructure. They must also have a good image, be clean and feel safe to ensure that diverse groups would like to spend time there and would feel relaxed enough to interact with others (Boonstra and Hermens, 2009). Last, successful *zones of encounter* (Wood and Landry, 2008) encourage planned as well as chance meetings by integrating the routes and routines of different groups.

Approaching social cohesion

Social cohesion may be understood as the extent to which a geographical place constitutes a 'community' in which people interact with each other and feel attached to their place of residence.

In that setting, interaction refers to social contacts and relationships positioned within social networks. It is generally assumed that when people expand their networks of both weak and strong ties, they identify more strongly with each other and become more active in their neighborhood (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). However, neighborhoods with strong communal ties may be prone to exclusion and discrimination, thereby

contributing to a divided and fragmented city (ibid.). The question arises, are more and intensified neighborhood-based ties actually what people are looking for today? In an era of high mobility and social media, the neighborhood becomes less important to social interaction (Florida, 2002). Still, not all researchers agree that while the kind of interactions people seek may have changed, the fundamental need to engage with others living in one's vicinity has not (Blokland, 2008).

Feelings of home have been described as place attachment, a positive emotional bond that develops between groups or individuals and their permanent environment, e.g., their dwellings or neighborhoods (Lewicka, 2010). The concept is regaining relevance as society pursues the *rediscovery of place*, not liberation from it (ibid.), leading scholars to consider *where you live* rather than where people work or spend their free time (Lewicka, 2005). But what is 'home'? This attachment is built upon the relationships a person has with other people as well as with non-human objects (Duyvendak and Wekker, 2015). Feeling at 'home', then, is part of localizing these relationships, an ongoing process wherein 'home' is constantly being created and re-created in different places (Nowicka, 2007). Thus, 'home' is a place *in the making*, a space with permeable boundaries that includes material and social elements of people's environments. Moreover, this place is not bound to one locality but is *multi-local* (ibid.).

Do certain encounters result in more social cohesion?

Scholars have identified a variety of encounters and analyzed their influence on social cohesion, assuming that certain types of interaction can make communities more cohesive. Is cohesion brought about by *fleeting* encounters? Some of these encounters are *convivial* in nature: people may be 'civil' to each other and live together without conflict but also without regular interaction. Valentine (2013) highlights *urban etiquette* as one type of convivial encounter whereby societal norms induce individuals to show tolerance and acceptance. For example, by opening the door for an older person, one demonstrates respect and support. Another type is what Amin (2012) calls *studied co-presence*, whereby dealing with difference becomes habitual behavior that we can practice in everyday spaces of collective endeavor such as the workplace. The successful negotiation of difference in that sense is not necessarily the result of interpersonal recognition or the value attached to diversity but a trained habit. Still, some authors argue that the value of *fleeting* encounters lies in their ability to promote feelings of belonging and community by creating a sense of familiarity with difference (Müller, 2002; Blokland and Nast, 2014). As semi-public spaces are typically used simultaneously by various groups, people repetitively engage lightly with one another there. These interactions are believed to make diversity more *commonplace* (Wessendorf, 2013, 2014) and encourage feelings of belonging and community. Direct interaction is not even needed because feeling recognized and familiar with those using the same spaces suffices to make one feel more at 'home' and connected (Müller, 2002; Blokland and Nast, 2014).

Other authors are critical of the idea that *fleeting* encounters lead to an appreciation of difference and have a positive impact on social cohesion. Valentine (2008), for example, argues that "positive encounters with individuals from minority groups do not necessarily change people's opinions about groups as a whole for the better" (p.332). Amin (2002) adds that certain everyday moments such as *fleeting* meetings on the street have no impact on social cohesion because no intercultural exchange takes place. By implication, only *meaningful* encounters of a certain depth and duration can make communities more cohesive. *Meaningful* encounters are then the most desirable form of interaction because they have the power to change people's values and translate into a long-term positive respect for others (Valentine, 2008). Consequently, spaces that facilitate *meaningful* encounters in a repetitive and structural way encourage friendships that transcend cultural, class and ethnic boundaries (Amin, 2002; Wise, 2007).

Taking an in-between stance in the debate, Duyvendak and Wekker (2015) argue that the types of encounters that ultimately create feelings of 'community' and 'home' are related to the interactions people are looking for. Some people need social and physical proximity to feel at 'home' whereas others prefer social distance. Accordingly, spaces that stimulate *amicable* encounters, or acting "as if friends" (Duyvendak and Wekker 2015:19), help certain people feel at 'home' by creating imagined moments of friendship and intimacy across difference. A prime example is a cooking class, where participants have to unite around a common goal (ibid.; Wessendorf, 2013). Other people need spaces that stimulate shorter and more distant encounters, allowing them to be "among others without being in a state of committed relations" (Dokk Holm, in Tjora and Scambler, 2013: 183). By being part of this *invisible community* (Henriksen et al., in Tjora and Scambler, 2013: 94), people can feel both at 'home' and at ease.

Methods

Setting the scene

Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands. As a seaport, throughout history Rotterdam has attracted migrants from all over the world. In 2010, almost half of its inhabitants (48%) were born abroad or had at least one parent who was. As migrants on average have children at a younger age than native citizens, the population is relatively young. In comparison to other large Dutch cities, Rotterdam has relatively high levels of unemployment, income segregation, poor households and low property prices.

Feyenoord, a district located in Rotterdam South, has a past of mixed urban functions: industrial, transport and residential. Housing corporations own 70% of the housing stock and the rents are relatively low. A large part of the population is low-skilled, unemployed, has below-average household income or receives welfare benefits. The low rents attract (disadvantaged) newcomers to the area, while higher-income groups have been moving away to more affluent neighborhoods. Since the 1960s, most of the newcomers have been migrants (DIVERCITIES, 2015).

Within Feyenoord, two contrasting semi-public spaces were selected for this study: the community center (*de Proeftuin*, which translates as Experimental Garden) and the library (*'t Slag*). As interaction is sensitive to the physical and social surroundings, the selected spaces had to differ greatly from one another in terms of *accessibility*, the *chance of meeting the same people again* and *atmosphere*. These shaping characteristics were expected to develop very differently in the two settings and thereby facilitate contrasting encounters. These encounters, in turn, were expected to influence people's feelings of home and their social networks in divergent ways.

Community center *de Proeftuin*

For some time, the municipality of Rotterdam has been cutting back on subsidies for local initiatives. In response, 16 initiatives in Feyenoord in the fields of culture, education, healthcare and sports joined forces. In 2013, they settled in a vacated community center owned by the municipality. The joint initiative is run by volunteers, including the leaders and participants of the constituent initiatives and other visitors to the center. A professional coordinator is in charge of schedules and finances. Currently, 69 project groups participate in the joint initiative. In the long run, the municipality wants this experimental community center to become self-sufficient (Alacritas, 2014). The main goals of the experiment are to foster social cohesion and promote social mobility by providing rooms for neighborhood groups to hold activities and celebrations and by offering financial and social help (Tersteeg et al., 2014). Since the initiative took over the premises in 2013, Eritreans, Moroccans and Hindustani were added to the Dutch, Turkish and Surinamese groups who had already been using the center, while Chinese and Antilleans remain under-represented.

The restyled center was expected to facilitate deeper forms of interaction. Visitors would presumably come there on a regular basis and meet the same people over and over in a personal atmosphere. By participating in the activities and festivities, visitors would supposedly get to know more people living in the surrounding areas and feel more at home in the neighborhood.

Library *'t Slag*

The municipality decided to privatize its libraries in 2013, and since then 18 out of the city's 24 libraries have been closed due to declining use. The main library at the *Zuidplein* (major square in Rotterdam South) was closed as a result of budget cuts. Afterwards, the library *'t Slag* was founded and is currently one of the few remaining libraries in Rotterdam South. *'t Slag* attracts diverse audiences and provides multiple activity spaces, including a newspaper table, a media section, a cafe and a children's area. In the public policy arena, libraries scarcely enter the discussion on neighborhood meeting places. Their low priority is obvious in the municipality's standpoint that the functions of a library can be reproduced at other settings such as schools or homes for the elderly. From the perspective of urban policy, libraries are not crucial for social interaction. Regarding their users, diverse groups seem to be present -- Moroccans, Turks, Hindustani, Surinamese as well as Dutch -- ranging from youngsters to older people.

In this study, the library was expected to encourage *fleeting* encounters, assuming that the visitors might be strangers to one another and given that its atmosphere does not encourage conversation. Thus, visitors were not expected to make new social contacts at the library. However, the possibility of observing others was expected to make the visitors accustomed to the presence of different others, thereby making them feel more at home in the neighborhood.

Collecting data

The study is based on three qualitative research methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and expert interviews. As the primary investigator, I observed each setting three times a week for at least five hours, mostly from 10 in the morning until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon for about three months. I noted who frequented the places, how people behaved, what kind of interactions I observed and which activities people engaged in. At the community center, I also attended various activity groups to 'take a look inside' and to establish trust. Ten follow-up interviews of approximately one hour were held with visitors in each setting. The respondents were asked about their perception of diversity, use of public and semi-public spaces in the area, social contacts and networks and changes therein as a result of visiting the respective settings, and about their feelings of 'home'. Moreover, the interviewees at the center were asked about their relationships and interactions with other participants in their activity groups.

In addition, three expert interviews were conducted. One was with an independent urban researcher occupied with micro spaces of interaction and the social climate of neighborhoods. The other two were with municipal officials in the field of well-being, social services and civic participation.

The visitors interviewed were between the ages of 24 and 65 and from several ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch, Eritrean and Surinamese. Although the sample might not be fully representative of Feyenoord's general population, an attempt was made to capture the range of people frequenting both places.

Encounters were divided into five types: *fleeting*, *urban etiquette*, *studied co-presence*, *amicable* and *meaningful*. Eye contact, nodding, smiling or short greetings indicate *fleeting* encounters. Behavior like holding the door open or being polite hint at *urban etiquette*, whereas working together on shared projects and sitting peacefully side-by-side indicate *studied co-presence*. Acting 'as if friends' suggests that the encounter is *amicable* and having a long talk or touching would signify *meaningful* interactions. The impact of these types of encounter on social cohesion was measured using a list of indicators. Comments about psychological feelings of 'home', bonding with the place of residence and being more neighborhood-oriented or not were taken to indicate 'place attachment'. Comments concerning the number of friends and acquaintances, finding or deepening contacts within and without one's own group, and contacts being more neighborhood-based or not were taken to denote 'social networks and contacts'.

Analysis: approaching semi-public spaces and what they can 'do'

How semi-public spaces differ from one another: accessibility, chance of meeting the same people and atmosphere

Accessibility: location and threshold

The community center is located right in the middle of the neighborhood. It is accessible to diverse audiences "because it's located next to schools and the houses people live in." Given that the community center is a well-placed and *connected* space within the neighborhood (van Eijk and Engbersen, 2011), it can play an important role in the social life of many residents. The library, in contrast, is located at the southern edge of the neighborhood. Its peripheral location discourages parents with small children and older people, who are the prime users, from visiting more regularly.

Yet the community center has a higher threshold for newcomers than the library. When I first visited the center, people stopped talking and checked me out. I felt like an outsider, the 'new' one. This feeling passed once I started coming to the center more often. Regulars can help newcomers across this threshold by "asking [them] to come in", thereby opening up the space. Moreover, as the groups already using the center are diverse, newcomers feel easily accepted and welcome, which in turn can lower the threshold. Consider the story of Mohammed, a man from the Middle East, who explains that "[the staff and visitors] understand people like me. I mean, I can't speak Dutch so well but the people here will try to understand me".

However, the dominant behavior of the Moroccan group, especially that of middle-aged Moroccan men, weakens this welcoming character. A regular visitor explains that "the Moroccan community is a bit the leader" pointing to the daily lunch where "you don't see other groups coming; you don't see one person from Suriname, for example." The Moroccan community seems to self-segregate and form a fixed group that is not easy for outsiders to penetrate. Moreover, I observed that the Moroccan men, who often hang out in the lounge, speak their own language, which discourages others to sit down at their table. Clearly, while speaking a language not known by everybody can stimulate the formation of a tightly knit group, it can simultaneously reinforce existing differences and make newcomers feel unwelcome.

The library, in contrast, feels very open and inviting. Hasan, a man in his early 30s who was born in

the area, compares the library to a cafe to illustrate that “everybody can come inside just right now and try to take a chance. In cafes, you do have certain groups who dominate the place.” The library is perceived as a neutral space with a good image, which attracts diverse audiences (van Eijk and Engbersen, 2011). The layout plays an important role in this. As the library is one continuous space with only bookshelves separating the different sections, the space feels open and inviting. As a result, *multiple activities* are successfully integrated (van Eijk and Engbersen, 2011), so everybody can find a place to 'fit in' and engage in an activity that serves his/her needs.

Chance of meeting the same people: Familiar others versus strangers

The chance of meeting familiar others is much higher at the community center than at the library. As it is mainly residents from the surrounding neighborhoods who come to the center, visitors encounter the same people over and over. This is hardly surprising, as many individuals come daily or at least several times a week. However, there is still opportunity to encounter newcomers. Dora, who attends the knitting group, explains that “I always see somebody new [in the lounge]”. Activity groups are also open to newcomers; I observed, for example, that newcomers regularly joined ongoing groups or activities.

At the library, in contrast, visitors mainly encounter strangers and rarely meet familiar others. Mehmet, a father who visits the library with his children, points out that “I never meet anyone known to me. Not that I don't know people in this neighborhood but my friends are mostly somewhere else.” Still, regular visitors probably do see familiar faces. Richard, a former volunteer, for example, observed that “the older people [came] nearly every day ... to read a newspaper or book.” Thus, the news readers might represent such regulars who know one another:

In the mornings, around four older Moroccan or Turkish men normally come to read their newspapers at different times. When one of them arrives, he is greeted and welcomed by at least one of the others. Two men seemed to know each other better because they patted each other's shoulder and talked a bit before they returned to their readings. (Field note, 24.09.2014)

Clearly, the library can provide a meeting point for some. This is obvious in the cafe area, which merges with the library, where visitors can meet up, sit down and run into acquaintances. For example, three older Dutch women were once having tea there when another Dutch woman passed by. One of the tea-drinkers recognized her; the woman sat down with them for a while before heading into the library.

Atmosphere: Intimacy versus distance

Due to the high chance of meeting familiar others, the community center feels intimate and *homey*, so visitors feel they can *be themselves*. As the center is a lively place with people constantly coming and going, the lounge has a *friendly neighborhood feeling*. This makes the lounge and entrance area a *sociable* space where spontaneous as well as planned interactions take place (van Eijk and Engbersen, 2011). In the coffee corner, for instance, arriving visitors often run into familiar others, people they know from groups or other activities, and get caught up in small-talk or longer conversations.

In the library, one feels relaxed but also distant. There is no background music and the silence is broken only by occasional whispers. What most visitors clearly seek in the library is quiet and possibly social distance. Interestingly, this creates an aura of relaxation, as people are left alone and no one expects anything of them. Leila, a young Moroccan mother, explains that “[as] some people have no place to go to, a library [can be] a really nice, safe and warm place to be.” The library's low threshold allows an openness and neutrality that could be important for groups on the fringe of society. Richard, a former volunteer, observed that many people “who probably don't work” arrive in the morning to read the newspaper or a book as “they don't have to pay for doing that”.

When asked about his reasons to read the newspaper at the library instead of at home, Hasan, a young Moroccan born in the area, explained that he prefers to “sit together with people who do the same as you.” A social dimension of companionship seems to co-exist with the prevailing atmosphere of silence and distance. The effects of this 'passive community' become even more apparent in the cafe area, which adjoins the newspaper table. Although the cafe can get crowded in the afternoon, the liveliness does not disturb other visitors or disrupt their activities. An older Dutch woman, who sometimes reads at the newspaper table, explained that she likes to “just leaf through some magazines or newspapers [and] hear other people chatting in the back [because] you can look over and see what they are doing [or] listen to what they are saying.” The murmur of cafe visitors in the background adds sociability and liveliness. People feel they are among others while still maintaining social distance and getting on with their own activities.

Amicable encounters at the community center versus fleeting encounters at the library

Interacting *friend-like* at the community center

At the community center, *amicable* encounters (Duyvendak and Wekker, 2015) predominate and take place in organized group activities as well as in the lounge.

Amicable encounters often occur in groups organized around a shared interest or ethnicity. Because groups meet repetitively, they facilitate encounters that are more than *convivial*, as recounted by Richard, who experienced deeper interactions after attending the weekly philosophy group:

“[The contact with other group members] got more intense [because] you talk more with them about how they liked the meeting or what they think about the topics ... you always have something to talk about later. For example yesterday, I accidentally met [a group member at the center] and we sat down to talk a bit.”

The repetitive and purposeful meetings create a platform for interaction since the participants suddenly have something to talk about. This unexpected realization of a common interest enables participants to address one another on other occasions too. Similar comments were made about the gymnastics and kickboxing groups. Clearly, activities that bridge ethnic, class or cultural backgrounds by uniting the participants around a shared passion stimulate *amicable* encounters. However, it can be difficult to achieve *amicable* interactions in mixed groups with a *functional* goal like a language class. Carla, who attends a language group, explains that her contact with other participants remains distant and superficial. During the break “the Turkish women talk with each other in Turkish [which] I don't speak ... and the Moroccan women do the same.” In that sense, the decisive factor in stimulating *amicable* encounters is not the degree of mixing. Rather, it is the rate to which people have something in common to bond over, such as knitting or cooking.

Groups organized around a shared ethnicity naturally provide this bonding factor and thereby encourage not just *amicable* but *meaningful* encounters. Through their shared customs, traditions and language, participants identify with each other, which allows them to interact in a personal way. I observed participants of the Dominican, Eritrean and Moroccan women's groups hug, kiss, hold hands and pat backs, talk about family and relationship problems, upcoming family events or raising their children (see section on '*Making new friends: How amicable and meaningful encounters at the community center stimulate the development of positive long-term contacts*' for an extensive analysis).

Regarding encounters in the lounge, many *amicable* interactions result from *purposeful* actions. Once, while waiting their turn at the help desk, two Moroccan women engaged in a deep conversation about their families and an upcoming wedding. Another day, an older Dutch woman explained her worries about some official documents to a volunteer, who then pressed her hand and reassured her that she would get help. These interactions may start out as *purposeful* but take on aspects of *amicability*, like showing compassion, concern and interest in others. Moreover, multiple *fleeting* encounters between newcomers and regulars occur in the lounge. In the beginning, newcomers tend to just greet and nod in recognition but later engage in small-talk with more regular users. Often, regulars actively approach newcomers to “make them part of what is happening”, resulting in multiple instances of small-talk, laughter, short handshakes or comments. Moreover, visitors from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds regularly hang out side-by-side in the lounge. While hanging out, visitors quickly realize that 'being different is nothing special' and come to perceive diversity, in general, as *commonplace* (Wessendorf, 2010). This helps newcomers as well as regular visitors to overcome their initial inhibitions about engaging in *fleeting* as well as more *amicable* encounters.

Engaging in *fleeting* encounters at the library

At the library, light and brief types of interaction predominate, particularly *urban etiquette* and *studied co-presence*. Such encounters were perceived as ‘normal’ because they allow people to “treat each other in a friendly manner and with respect.” According to Harris (2003), certain semi-public places have 'rules of conduct' regulating acceptable behavior. At the library, these may include keeping one's distance and being quiet. As Harris (2003) explains, abiding by these tacit rules helps visitors to feel at ease because they can predict the behavior of others. When meeting somebody familiar, visitors therefore keep their contact to a minimum and just “say something like ‘hey, how are you and how are you doing?’.” Yet chatting is still the exception. Visitors generally keep their distance and do not actively seek contact at the library. Hasan, a young Moroccan who regularly visits the library, explained why:

“People normally don't interfere with other people when they are [at the library] but maybe that's also good

... because everybody also has his or her own problems so you don't always want to meddle in that."

People may also choose to keep their distance so as not to disturb others and their activities. Leila, a young Moroccan mother, explained that "others use the library for studying or reading. I try to respect that so I don't talk so much." Consequently, interactions are favored that sustain the smooth coordination of different needs and activities. This peaceful 'being side-by-side' atmosphere is achieved through more distant and short interactions such as moving to the side when passing others in the aisles. Other *fleeting* yet distant encounters include eye contact, quick glances accompanied by a smile or, at times, greetings.

I distinguished another form of interaction that could be described as *fleeting* but is actually even lighter: casting *observing looks*. I often saw people checking out others and following their movements. However, compared to *fleeting* encounters, these *observing looks* do not necessarily involve reciprocal action. Hasan, a regular visitor, illustrated the value of these *observing looks*:

"[At the library] I can take a look at everybody, check them out. I do that. I sit here and check everybody. I just want to know how people are doing in general, what they are talking about, how they look."

The library fulfills an important social function in the sense that visitors can observe others and thereby learn about different appearances, behaviors and which groups go to the same places as they do. Although *observing looks* might not fall under the traditional definition of an 'encounter', as in 'meeting somebody', these one-sided interactions are important. By enjoying the *silent company* of others without being in a state of committed relations (Dokk Holm, in Tjora and Scambler, 2013), the observed situation is transformed into an 'attraction' and serves as entertainment. The observer can imagine and fantasize about other people's lives while still keeping his/her distance (Oosterman, 1993).

The exception is the cafe area. Not only *fleeting* encounters but also amicable or even meaningful interactions take place there. For example, an older Surinamese man was reading the newspaper when a younger Hindustani or Surinamese man entered the cafe. The younger man recognized the elder and nodded at him before sitting down at another table. The older man nodded back and joked "*Why are you sitting there? For the view?*" The younger one laughed and they started to talk about mutual acquaintances and plans for the week. Although a breach of the implicit rules of behavior might be considered 'dangerous' at the library (Harris, 2003), the cafe may operate by different rules, making visitors feel more free to approach and engage with others.

How *fleeting* as well as deeper encounters impact social cohesion: Broadening networks, making new friends, feeling more at 'home' and seeking 'silent community'

Not friends but acquaintances: How encounters at the community center broaden social networks and what people get out of it

Although people may make many new acquaintances at the community center, these contacts remain light and superficial and without long-term commitment. Toby, who visits the center after boxing training, for example, explained that his "social network grew but it's not like I'm going to hang out with [the people I meet at the center] or ask them 'what are you doing Saturday evening?', no. I have my friends for that." From a psychological point of view, one could say that people need and seek out contacts of a 'less-than-friends' kind because such non-intimate relationships allow them to relax; they are not required to meet the obligations that come with 'real' friendship.

So, is it necessarily bad that visitors separate their private life from their life at the center? Many new-found contacts enrich the visitors' social networks. Though weak, these ties give people access to emotional 'goods' in the form of care, support in daily life and social control. For instance, Carla, who attends a language group, pointed out that the other participants are not her friends. "I don't go to anybody's place but, for example, if somebody is in the hospital, we go there or if somebody dies, we offer our sympathies." Similarly, Laura, who attends a dressmaking class, noted that the other course members "call me if I'm sick and pick up my groceries or they come and cook for me."

Moreover, many of these new contacts answer people's need to escape their daily routines and enjoy the *gezelligheid* (Dutch for coziness or sociability) of others who are not part of their 'normal' life. For example, Marta, a young Moroccan woman who organized activities for Moroccan women, observed that the group prefers to meet at the center because "mostly young mothers with husbands and young children at home [come to the group] ... who want a change from [their home situation] from time to time." In that sense, the new-found contacts are quite functional. They fulfill a certain human need, as Dora, who attends the knitting

group, explained. She visits the center mainly because “I like to talk to other people and socialize [with them] ... I really enjoy the 'gezelligheid' of this place ... but it's enough to see them [at the community center and in the group].”

Making new friends: How *amicable* and *meaningful* encounters at the community center stimulate the development of positive long-term contacts

Despite the trend toward maintaining social distance, some visitors did find new friends at the center and a few even got into contact with their 'best friend' there. The repetitive and often *meaningful* interactions in groups organized around a shared interest or passion stimulate the development of new friendships across categorical differences. Consider the case of Yasemin, an older Moroccan woman who became *bosom friends* with the women attending the same cooking class because she “got to spent so much time with them [that] we really grew really close and fond [of each other].” In groups organized around a shared ethnicity or culture, the intense encounters between participants facilitate not just new friendships but the development of family-like ties. Laura, a middle-aged Eritrean woman who attends the Eritrean women's initiative, is an example. The group's meetings made her and the other women “grow closer together as a group; like family.” However, family-like ties generally develop among members of groups celebrating a certain ethnicity or culture, such as the Dominican, Eritrean or Moroccan women's groups, and mostly among members of the same sex.

Still, also outside these organized and structural meetings, visitors often find something to bond over that lets them befriend others across their differences. As the community center's atmosphere stimulates engagement, visitors feel somewhat obliged to talk to others. As visitors mostly interact in an *amicable* way, newcomers as well as regulars often identify something they have in common, such as a shared ethnicity, birthplace, passion or point in life. This tendency was affirmed by Sandy, a middle-aged woman born in the neighborhood. She happily explained that she “got to know my best friend via the community center [who] grew up in this area as well” because “she just started to talk to me one day”. In the same vein, in Yasemin's case, all the women attending the cooking group are also in their 60s and most of them are grandmothers.

Some of the friendships resulting from *amicable* encounters in and outside activity groups also transcend the boundaries of the community center and become part of people's private realm. That happened to Marta, a young Moroccan mother. She got to know a young Dutch mother during a lunch and with her she later started to “do nice things together [like] shopping or eating somewhere [and even] went on vacation last summer”.

Feeling more at 'home': How *fleeting* as well as deeper encounters at the community center make people feel more connected to others and the neighborhood

Although encounters at the center differ in depth and duration, all of them contribute to a familiarization with otherness and have a positive impact on the bonding between people and their neighborhood.

As the center encourages the open celebration of diversity -- for instance, in the form of festive events -- visitors can interact with people whose cultures, traditions or customs are different. This gives visitors the chance to understand and possibly learn to accept these differences. It also makes people feel more valued and recognized, both at the center and in the neighborhood.

Moreover, as a result of many planned and unplanned interactions in the lounge and in activity groups, visitors get to know many previously unfamiliar others who happen to live in the same neighborhood or close by. Through these interactions, visitors not only become familiar with the others they share the community center with but also recognize more people on the street or elsewhere in the neighborhood. Seeing and/or talking to former strangers at the center reduces the sense of anonymity, which in turn encourages people to greet or possibly talk to one another when “meet[ing] at the butcher, at the supermarket or on the street”. The personal and social bonding attained through light as well as deeper interactions, consequently, makes people feel more at home at the center and beyond.

Furthermore, the heightened sense of connectedness that people have among one another and with their neighborhood also has a positive impact on their feelings of safety and control. Through engaging with others in discussion, deeper conversations, overhearing comments or small-talk, visitors “watch out more for each other [because they know one other] and everybody also knows what's going on in the neighborhood.” For example, I overheard many conversations between Moroccan men in the lounge about the problem of monitoring the youth, who seemed to be partly involved in vandalizing the neighborhood. As a result of these discussions, some Moroccan men set up a task force called *neighborhood fathers*. They started to patrol the neighborhood at night and actively approach groups of youth who were hanging out on street corners and in parks.

'Silent community': How *fleeting* encounters at the library increase feelings of belonging and connectedness as well

Feelings of 'home' and safety can be intensified even without engaging in direct interactions or developing new relationships with other people living in the same neighborhood. These feelings can also be cultivated in the library, where visitors mainly experience *fleeting* interactions and observe others. As the library enables individuals to be present among others while keeping interaction to a minimum, they can enjoy 'silent' companionship. An older Dutch woman, who visits the library to drink coffee and read, explained the added value of this:

“I recognize a lot of people [at the library, partly because] I have lived in this neighborhood all my life [and because] I often see the same people like those reading the newspaper. ... [However] I don't talk to them normally [because] I know most of them only by sight [but seeing familiar others] makes me feel very good and comfortable [at the library].”

By enjoying their silent company, visitors also start feeling they are part of the group. This group might be described as the 'legitimate users of the library', consisting of visitors who come to the library for one of the activities. Iveson and Fincher (2011) found that engaging in activities characteristic of a library, like borrowing books or reading newspapers, makes visitors feel connected to other 'library users' by realizing that they share a common space and participate in similar activities. This subtle association evokes a sense of 'belonging' and feeling 'connected', both with the library and beyond. Basically, people do not need to form 'real' relationships but can 'use' other people to feel more at home and safe. This association among visitors is exemplified by the newspaper readers, who are often perceived as a homogeneous group. As different as the individual newspaper readers may be, they all read magazines or newspapers at the designated table. This shared activity induces others to associate them with one another and see them as a cohesive group.

Discussion and conclusions

Neighborhoods are becoming increasingly diverse, as different groups utilize the same spaces in greater numbers. Within these micro spaces, encounters with different others take place all the time. But what do these everyday encounters with difference bring about? Many scholars have delved into whether certain encounters stimulate more social cohesion or not. Two opinions prevail: some say that *fleeting* encounters are sufficient; others say that only deeper and planned encounters successfully stimulate social cohesion. The comparison of a community center and a library made in this paper suggests that *fleeting* as well as deeper forms of encounters have a positive impact on social cohesion but do so on different levels. To understand how, one has to keep in mind that encounters are always context-bound (Goffman, 1969) and are closely related to conditions that largely determine which encounters can take place and which cannot.

Regarding the community center, newcomers have to overcome a high threshold but meeting the same people over and over again eventually creates an intimate and homey atmosphere. These conditions stimulate *amicable* and *meaningful* encounters, especially within organized activity groups. As groups meet repetitively and many are organized around a shared passion (such as knitting or cooking), participants can identify with each other strongly. Their bonding diminishes the cultural, ethnic or religious differences. Groups that are organized around a shared ethnicity or culture are dominated by *meaningful* encounters, because people tend to connect easily to similar others (Fincher et al., 2014). In the lounge, visitors also interact as if they were friends, expressed in multiple moments of small-talk, laughter, quick handshakes or comments. As a result of these encounters, visitors become acquainted with previously unknown others with whom they establish light relationships. Some build new friendships and, within groups organized around a shared ethnicity or culture, many even develop family-like ties. These new relationships, both light and of a deeper nature, make visitors feel more at home in the neighborhood because they start to recognize others on the street and elsewhere. The argument that repetitive and structural encounters within shared activity spaces (Amin, 2002) encourage people to engage on a deeper and more meaningful dimension with each other is undoubtedly correct. Moreover, the argument that these encounters successfully challenge and break down prejudices and stereotypes about 'the other' (Valentine, 2008) might be true. However, the claim that *fleeting* encounters are of no relevance for social cohesion is incorrect, as shown here.

The library has a very low threshold. The visitors mainly encounter strangers there, which is conducive to a more distant atmosphere. As a result, the library facilitates *fleeting* and more distant encounters. Due to the implicit rule to be quiet and not disturb others, visitors keep to themselves and do not seek contact. However, the cafe area encourages visitors to approach others, which also stimulates *amicable* interactions. As a result of the predominantly *fleeting* encounters, visitors (temporarily) associate with other *library users* (Iveson and

Fincher, 2008) and enjoy their 'silent companionship'. By being *private in public* (Dokk Holm, in Tjora and Scambler, 2013), visitors are in the presence of others without directly interacting with them. These subtle connections increase the visitors' feelings of home because they familiarize themselves with others who use the same spaces as they do. In the process, visitors become more familiar with diversity in general (Wessendorf, 2010) and feel more at ease on the streets and elsewhere in the neighborhood. Moreover, visitors cast *observing looks*. Though less intense than *fleeting* interactions, these encounters are nonetheless important. They allow visitors to study and familiarize themselves with the observed; learning about the different appearances, behaviors and groups they share the library with which can increase their feelings of belonging and connectedness as well. Clearly, spaces facilitating *fleeting* encounters are valuable and have a positive impact on social cohesion. Still, it is probably easier to increase feelings of home and familiarity among different groups sharing a neighborhood through encounters that stimulate more enduring relationships than through temporary associations.

Again, why is it important to consider the role of semi-public spaces in learning to deal with difference? One could counter the generalizability of this approach by pointing out that few interactions between members of different groups take place at the community center. In fact, one could ask whether creating similar spaces is of any use for stimulating intra-group contact. This paper clearly shows that the number of inter-group encounters taking place at the community center is already considerably higher than the number of such encounters would be if each group had frequented their own separate meeting spot where they would not have any chance of encountering others. Moreover, the findings suggest that the intensive encounters and resulting contacts facilitated within groups are not necessarily negative. People do not need to live in a homogeneous environment to feel at home and connected to others, although people often look for others like themselves (Fincher et al., 2014). Thus, strong intra-group contact serves the human need to belong, and a sense of belonging seems to be most easily achieved in the presence of similar others. Still, in hyper-diverse areas, it remains important to stimulate encounters with *difference*. The research at hand shows that this is already successfully achieved within both settings. Inter-group encounters are clearly stimulated at the community center, where visitors can meet and befriend different others in groups organized around a shared interest or passion. And by facilitating more superficial and brief encounters, the library also contributes to familiarity with different others and thereby to building social cohesion.

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