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Commonplace Diversity: Social Interactions
in a Super-diverse Context



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Abstract

The London Borough of Hackney is one of the most diverse areas in the world. It is not only characterised by a multiplicity of different ethnic and migrant minorities, but also differentiations in terms of variables such as migration histories, religions, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence and economic backgrounds both among ethnic minorities and migrants as well as the white British population, many of whom have moved to Hackney from elsewhere. This paper attempts to describe different types and levels of social relations in such a super-diverse context and reviews the existing literature and policy discourse on diversity in urban neighbourhoods. It aims to identify patterns of social relations which cross categorical boundaries, and discusses the spaces in which such interactions and relations take place. The paper describes a phenomenon conceptualised as ‘common-place diversity’, referring to ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity being experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life in Hackney by local residents, and not as something particularly special. Closely related to such perceptions of diversity are certain patterns of behaviour or intercultural skills which are needed to facilitate everyday social interactions in a super-diverse context. These skills and competences are described as ‘corner-shop cosmopolitanism’, referring to the localised and everyday nature of such intercultural social skills and the existence of a certain openness towards people perceived as ‘different’. Furthermore, the paper discusses the limits of corner-shop cosmopolitanism and the co-existence of mixing and ‘parallel lives’, characterised by different degrees of interaction and mixing in public as opposed to private space, and depending on different stages in the life-course.

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Research diary, August 2008:

I'm at a supermarket looking for a hair dryer. As I stand in front of the electronic household equipment, I observe an elderly Turkish woman asking a young white British shop assistant for advice. I hear him say: 'Do you understand?' She says, 'No, no English, only Turkish.' She takes her mobile phone out of her bag and calls someone, indicating to the shop assistant to wait. Once she has spoken to the other person on the phone, she hands the phone to him. The person on the phone now seems to be doing the translation, and the phone is being handed back and forth between the shop assistant and the Turkish woman. It seems completely normal for the assistant to deal with a customer via an interpreter over the phone. He is very friendly all through the interaction and he seems in no way surprised about the translation service over the phone.

This is one of many social interactions which I have observed during my fieldwork in the London Borough of Hackney, one of Britain's most diverse areas. Hackney's diversity is characterised not only by a multiplicity of different ethnic and migrant minorities, but also by differentiations in terms of variables such as migration histories, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence and economic backgrounds, both among ethnic minorities and migrants as well as the white British population, many of whom have moved to Hackney from elsewhere. This 'diversification of diversity' (Hollinger 1995) which characterises an increasing number of urban areas across the world, is what Vertovec defines as 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007). The concept of super-diversity serves as a conceptual device with which to observe complex societies. It points to the changing conditions of diversity and the multiplication of variables, a phenomenon which differentiates today's urban societies from previous demographic conditions. Related to theoretical approaches of intersectionality (Collins 2000), albeit not specifically focusing on power relations, it draws specific attention to the interplay of factors ranging from legal rights, labour-market experiences, age profiles, religious backgrounds, etc., and it highlights the importance of going beyond the analysis of conditions of multi-ethnicity when analysing diverse urban areas.

This paper attempts to describe different types and levels of social relations in such a super-diverse context and reviews the existing literature and policy discourse on diversity in urban neighbourhoods.¹ It aims to identify patterns of social relations

¹ This paper is being written at the early stages of data analysis. Its focus is therefore more theoretical than ethnographic in nature, although various ethnographic examples from my fieldwork are included.

which cross categorical boundaries, and discusses the spaces in which such interactions and relations take place. The paper describes a phenomenon that I conceptualise as ‘commonplace diversity’, referring to ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity being experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life in Hackney by local residents, and not as something particularly special. Closely related to such perceptions of diversity are certain patterns of behaviour or intercultural skills which are needed to facilitate everyday social interactions in a super-diverse context. I describe these skills and competences as ‘corner-shop cosmopolitanism’, referring to the localised and everyday nature of such intercultural social skills and the existence of a certain openness towards people perceived as ‘different’. Furthermore, I discuss the limits of corner-shop cosmopolitanism and the co-existence of mixing and ‘parallel lives’, characterised by different degrees of interaction and mixing in public and private space, and depending on different stages in the life-course.

Although the research on which this paper is based focused on social relations ranging from family and friendship relations to more casual relations in associations and in public space, in this paper, I mainly focus on the latter. Because of different degrees of ‘visibility’ of categorical differences in public space, this paper therefore draws on observations of social relations and patterns of behaviour across those categorical differences which are either visible or ‘hearable’, for example between people who speak a different language or who are of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. I situate this, however, within the framework of super-diversity, where simple visible difference does not imply knowledge about the other person’s actual place of origin, socio-economic background, migration history, etc. This stands in contrast to urban areas where specific migrant groups dominate, for example groups from post-colonial areas that migrated to Britain after the Second World War. In such areas where sizeable ethnic minorities of the same background can be found, for example, South Asians or West Indians, the delineations between minority and majority groups are much clearer, and people can more easily categorise who belongs to which group. In a super-diverse context like Hackney, however, visible and ‘hearable’ difference takes on a different meaning. People have little knowledge about which country the ‘other’ person is from, whether this person is a newcomer or not, whether s/he is rich, educated, a student, businessperson or asylum seeker. ‘Otherness’ thereby becomes unpredictable and people are not easily categorised. At the same time, however, difference becomes ordinary and commonplace, because most people come from elsewhere.

The paper draws on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the London Borough of Hackney, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and an ongoing quantitative survey on social relations and attitudes, developed in collaboration with social psychologists. A large part of the fieldwork was dedicated to an ethnography of everyday social interaction in public space and local associations.

From multiculturalism to social cohesion and interculturalism

Hackney is certainly not the only place where the diversification of diversity is so concretely noticeable and where diversity is lived and negotiated in a multiplicity of ways. Despite an increasing number of such super-diverse areas, research on diversity in the UK has been dominated by a focus on the relationships between postcolonial migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean and the majority population (Tyler & Jensen 2009). Such studies have shown the complex interplay of both tensions and positive relations between and within these groups (Back 1996; Baumann 1996; Hewitt 2005).

This focus has recently begun to shift towards a more complex view on new patterns of immigration and the emergence of super-diverse areas (Hickman et al 2008; Hudson et al 2007), a shift which was paralleled by increasing criticism of multiculturalism policy, practice and ideology (Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). This backlash against multiculturalism came to the fore in reaction to events such as the riots in northern UK towns in 2001 and the 7 July 2005 terrorist attacks in London. A government report written in response to the Oldham riots painted the infamous picture of groups living ‘parallel lives’ that do not touch or overlap by way of meaningful interchanges, and called for the urgent need to build social cohesion in the ever more ethnically diverse British society (e.g. Cattle 2001; Home Office 2004). While multiculturalism policies were blamed for enhancing such parallel lives and widening the gaps between different ethnic groups, the new cohesion discourse emphasised the need to facilitate more interaction between different ethnic and religious minority and majority groups, and create a shared sense of belonging and civic pride (Grillo 2010).

As described by Amin (2005) and, more recently, Tyler and Jensen (2009), this focus on cohesion and interaction is closely related to an increasing policy interest in ‘local communities’. It is in neighbourhoods where civic pride and responsibility, positive inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations and public participation are to be fos-

tered. This policy shift towards the local has also been reflected in academic research. Although neighbourhood studies have been an integral part of urban sociology and anthropology for several decades (see, among many others, Baumann 1996; Bott 1957; Mitchell 1969; Young & Willmott 1957), there has been a recent increase in studies which specifically look at multi-group contexts within urban neighbourhoods. These studies have shown the existence of both 'parallel lives' and social interaction (Blokland 2003a; Jayaweera & Choudhury 2008; Ray et al 2008; Sanjek 1998; SHM 2007; Tyler & Jensen 2009), but they have primarily focused on how and whether people interact across ethnic, racial and religious differences. The project on which this paper is based has taken other categorical differences into account, too, for example socio-economic background, legal status and length of residence. It paid particular attention to the possible relevance of such variables in terms of whom people relate to and make friends with. However, seeing as this paper primarily focuses on social relations in public space, categorical differences such as race, ethnicity and language are the central focus here.

Recent more policy-oriented research and theory in the UK and across Europe has drawn more concretely on the criticism of multiculturalism and attempted to develop new ways in which to analyse increasingly diverse and complex societies. In the UK, the so-called 'contact theory' and debates surrounding 'interculturalism' are among the most prominent approaches to tackle questions of social cohesion and 'parallel lives'.

Contact theory forms part of a research tradition in social psychology with its long-standing interest in inter-group relations. This approach focuses on processes by means of which individuals categorise themselves and others into 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', and recognizes that individuals may come to think or feel in terms of and act upon these collective categories (Hewstone et al 2002). Such social categorisation and identification processes contribute to intergroup dynamics, particularly in light of the fact that individuals belong to multiple social groupings with different levels of inclusiveness. Groups are thereby not necessarily defined by ethnicity or country of origin, but may be associated with language, locality, socio-economic position, immigration status or other variables of super-diversity. Importantly, positive contact with individual out-group members has been found to reduce prejudice and promote positive attitudes towards the out-group under certain conditions (Brown & Hewstone 2005). The current policy shift towards stipulating inter-ethnic or immigrant-'host' interaction is partly based on this social-psychological approach, also known as the 'contact hypothesis' (see Hewstone & Brown 1986).

Interculturalist approaches are more closely linked to the criticism of multiculturalism, emphasising the fluidity of cultural boundaries by taking an anti-essentialist stance towards group identities, and underlining the need to facilitate dialogue and understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds (Bloomfield & Bianchini 2004; Sandercock 2004; Wood & Landry 2007). They are thus concretely linked to ethnic and religious diversity, whereas social-psychological theories of inter-group contact draw on research with more openly defined ‘groups’, ranging from school classes and professional groups to religious congregations or age groups.

Despite this move in academic research and policy towards a focus on inter-group relationships and interaction, there has been little research which looks at super-diverse contexts where no majority group can be found, and without focusing on specific groups within such contexts. How do people of various religious, ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds and different legal statuses negotiate their relations with each other through everyday contact and interaction? To what extent do people develop ‘intercultural competences’ in a place that has experienced massive diversification over several decades? Can such competences become an everyday feature and, in fact, an essential skill to get along in super-diverse contexts? And to what extent does the existence of such skills point to the development of closer social relations across categorical boundaries?

The London Borough of Hackney is probably one of the most adequate places to address these questions.

The London Borough of Hackney: a long history of diversification

If there is a general characteristic to describe Hackney, it is the continuity of change over the past half century, change in both the built environment and the population. These changes are currently accelerating at a greater pace due to the 2012 London Olympics, which will take place at the Eastern edge of the borough. The London Olympics bring in regeneration and huge building programmes, and with these programmes a new attractiveness of the area for professionals who have traditionally not been among the majority in the borough. In fact, Hackney, with its population of 212,200, figures among the 10% most deprived areas in the UK.² This includes

² The last census took place in 2001, which makes an accurate representation of the population difficult. In this section, I have used various resources, ranging from the 2001 cen-

all of its wards, and the average deprivation score makes Hackney the second most deprived borough of the country, with 53% of Hackney's children living in families receiving benefits (City and Hackney 2008), and 47.7% of the population living in social housing.³ Parallel to this deprivation, there has been a steady increase in house prices in the area, and an increase in people with managerial and technical occupations, which already started in 1971 (Hackney Council 2006). Today, and despite being among the poorest local authorities in the UK, Hackney is highly polarised, with about 10% of the population earning more than £ 40,000 per year and specific pockets of Hackney being transformed by gentrification. This is also reflected in the increasing number of galleries, bars, lofts and art cafes, set up by one of Europe's largest resident populations of artists, which has recently seen an increase in international creative people (Koutrolikou 2005).

Hackney is also one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in Britain, with only 48.4% of the population being white British. The ethnic diversification of Hackney is not a new phenomenon. Rather, Hackney has been a place where immigrants have arrived as transitory residents for several decades, and some of them settled permanently. Jewish people have been settling in Hackney since the second half of the 17th century, and today, the largest Charedi community in the world, outside of New York and Israel, can be found in the northern part of the borough.⁴ Since the 1950s, sizeable groups of immigrants from West Africa, the West Indies and South Asia have settled in Hackney.⁵ The majority of Turkish, Kurdish and Turkish Cypriot people started arriving in the area in the 1970s, both as labour migrants and political refugees. Numbers increased in the 1980s because of the military coup in Turkey (Arakelian 2007). Vietnamese refugees started arriving in the late 1970s, but today, a

sus, to population estimates of the Office for National Statistics, and surveys undertaken by the local authority itself. I have attempted to use the latest data available. The number of the total population is taken from the Office for National Statistics, mid-year population estimates 2009.

3 Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates 2008.

4 <http://www.hackney.gov.uk/hackney-the-place-diversity.htm>

5 While large numbers of West Indians and South Asians arrived in the post-war period, West Africans arrived in different waves. For example, Ghanaians migrated to London for educational reasons until the late 1960s. Their number, however, increased noticeably during the 1980s and 1990s with many of them migrating for economic reasons. This has been particularly noticeable since the 1990s in public places such as Ridley Road Market. The diversification of educational and socio-economic backgrounds of Ghanaian migrants is a typical example of super-diversity (Krause 2010).

number of newly arrived undocumented Vietnamese migrants, including children, as well as students can also be found (Sims 2007).

Today, among the biggest minority groups are Africans (10.1%), South Asians (9.6%), people of Caribbean background (8.7%), Turkish-speaking people (5.5%), and East Asians (3.2%, meaning Chinese or ‘other ethnic groups’, many of whom come from Vietnam)⁶. This picture becomes much more complicated when looking at the countries of birth of the foreign-born population. According to the 2001 census, 34% of Hackney’s total population are foreign-born, and they come from 58 different countries, ranging from Zimbabwe, Cyprus, Somalia, Iraq and Albania to Denmark, Germany, etc.⁷ Recently, there has been an increase in people from the new EU member states in Eastern Europe, especially from Poland (City and Hackney 2008). This increase in eastern European migration is noticeable with new Polish shops opening and a new ‘Polish shelf’ at one of the major supermarkets. Also, voluntary organisations such as the Shelter, which caters for homeless people, and the Hackney Migrant Centre, which offers legal help to migrants, increasingly support people from these areas.

Furthermore, Hackney has one of the largest refugee and asylum seeker populations in London, estimated to be between 16,000 and 20,000 people. This is particularly noticeable in schools, with Hackney having the third highest number of refugee children in state schools (Schreiber 2006). Research undertaken by London Refugee Economic Action, the Employability Forum and the Black and Ethnic Minority Working Group shows high numbers in asylum applications of people from India, Pakistan, Somalia, Turkey and the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1999-2004. Other groups of asylum seekers include Latin Americans and Somalis (Collard 2005; Dixon et al 2006). The Hackney Migrant Centre has also seen a large number of Ethiopians and Eritreans. Unfortunately, there are no specific numbers available regarding the more recent immigration of small migrant groups.

More than 100 languages are spoken in the borough; the most widely spoken ones, apart from English, being Turkish (5.5%), Yiddish (5.2%), French (2.2%), Gujerati (1.8%), Bengali (1.6%) and Yoruba (1.3%). Other languages spoken include Spanish, Twi, Vietnamese, German, Chinese, Greek and Italian.⁸ Fifty-four percent of

6 Office for National Statistics, midyear population estimates 2007.

7 These are only some of the countries of origin significant enough to be statistically represented.

8 www.hackney.gov.uk/xp-factsandfigures-languages.htm

primary school children's and 46% of secondary school pupils' first language is not English (City and Hackney 2008).

This linguistic and ethnic diversity is also reflected in religion, with 46.6% of the population stating their religion as Christian in the 2001 census, 13.8% Muslim, 5.3% Jewish, 0.9% Sikh, 0.8% Hindu, and 19% stating that they have no religion. These broad categories, however, do not represent the actual diversity in faiths, with more than 10 Christian faith groups listed on the council website (ranging from Orthodox Greek to Pentecostal), and several Muslim and Jewish subgroups.⁹

Importantly, Hackney is not only characterised by ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversification resulting from in-migration, but also by a steady flow of people moving out of Hackney. In fact, in 2001, 15,344 people moved into Hackney (only a fifth of them from outside the UK), and 14,642 moved out of Hackney to elsewhere in the UK (Hackney Council 2006). Qualitative data from my research has shown that many people of lower socio-economic backgrounds, both white British and ethnic minorities, want to leave Hackney due to its poverty and high crime. Based on their own experiences of growing up in Hackney, they do not want to raise their children here and prefer living in one of the greener London suburbs. Especially those who have been upwardly mobile and wish to buy their own property rather than living in rental housing cannot afford to stay in Hackney due to the rising property prices, even if they wanted to.

Thus, Hackney has long been an area characterised by mobility, both immigration and emigration. This long history of population change has resulted in what appears to be a great acceptance of diversity. The Hackney Place Survey 2008/2009 shows that almost four out of five residents in Hackney think that people from different backgrounds get on well together (78%). Interestingly, elderly people are among those most likely to agree with this, with 91% of those aged 75 or over thinking that people of different backgrounds get on well together (London Borough of Hackney 2009). These results are reflected in my own qualitative findings, with elderly people of various ethnic backgrounds generally reporting few tensions with people of other origins. What are the reasons for this general acceptance of diversity especially among elderly and long-term residents? How is this acceptance reflected in everyday social interactions?

9 www.hackney.gov.uk/servapps/CommunityDirectories/BrowseCategories.aspx?DirectoryID=8&DirectoryName=Ethnicity%20and%20Religion&Admin=0, last accessed 23 September 2010.

Civility and ‘commonplace diversity’

Despite my accent, people in Hackney rarely ask me where I come from. Similarly, in local associations such as a knitting club or an IT course, newcomers are not usually asked about their origins, even if they look or speak differently. This seeming indifference about other people’s origin could be interpreted in various ways. It could be explained as disinterest on the one hand, or, on the other, as ‘civility towards diversity’. In her discussions on patterns of behaviour and social life in the public realm, Lofland (1989) defines ‘civility towards diversity’ as one of the main ‘interactional principles’. This principle...

... specifies that in face-to-face exchanges, confronted with what may be personally offensive visible variations in physical abilities, beauty, skin colour and hair texture, dress style, demeanour, income, sexual preferences, and so forth, the urbanite will act in a civil manner, that is, will act ‘decently’ vis-à-vis diversity (Lofland 1989:464-5).

Importantly, Lofland states that this civility towards diversity does not necessarily imply a specific appreciation of diversity, but it means treating people universally the same, and it can emerge from indifference to diversity rather than from a specific appreciation of it.

Civility towards diversity is a feature of public-space interactions which I observed on a daily basis during my fieldwork. While it could be based on indifference towards diversity, the Hackney Place Survey, mentioned above, as well as my own observations point to a greater tendency among many people toward an appreciation of it. However, diversity does not seem to be a specific issue which people pay much attention to in everyday situations. People do not necessarily ask each other where they are from early on in a new encounter, because so many people come from elsewhere. But people’s origins become a subject of discussion when it comes to talking about, for example, food, holidays, or relatives living abroad. In such conversations, not only people of migrant background talk about their places of origin, but also white British people, many of whom have moved to Hackney from elsewhere and have brought with them stories from other areas, just like everybody else.

The fact that so many people in Hackney have come from elsewhere becomes particularly salient when, every once in a while, somebody emphasises his or her roots in Hackney and talks about growing up locally. For many people, this is rather unusual and interesting, and the Hackney-born residents proudly recount how life used to be here when they were children, or how it used to be for their parents during the old times. It seems like in a place where mobility and movement have become such an

integral part of everyday life and culture, immobility, or rootedness, transform into something unusual. Thus, diversity and mobility have become a normal condition in Hackney. This is also reflected in the fact that new international immigration is not specifically noticed. When asked about changes in the area, my informants generally referred to changes in the built environment, rather than in terms of the population. As described in the previous section, such changes in buildings and streets have accelerated in the past 10 years due to gentrification and the construction for the 2012 Olympics. But the area has also seen an increase in immigration from different parts of the world such as Eastern Europe, Central Africa and Latin America. However, when asked whether they noticed new people moving into the area, the most common response of residents refers to white middle-class people with money, also described as 'the professionals'. Thus, the changes in the socio-economic profile of the local population have been perceived as far more noticeable than the immigration of international migrants with a similarly low socio-economic status as the majority population in Hackney. The condition of ethnic diversity is thus experienced as a normal part of Hackney, and the transformation of the actual demographic set-up of this diversity in terms of new international migration is not experienced as specific change. This phenomenon could also be described as 'commonplace diversity'.

This commonplace diversity is also accompanied by the positive attitudes towards the immigration-related diversity mentioned earlier. Such positive attitudes have also been found in other parts of Britain where no one ethnic group dominates numerically, culturally or politically and where the history of immigration is generally acknowledged. Hickman, Crowley and Mai have found that 'the long-term settled (both majority ethnic and minority ethnic) in these places tend to have a more minimal expectation of commonalities, accept cultural pluralism and the necessity to adapt to the social changes introduced by the arrival of new immigrants' (Hickman et al 2008: x).

In Hackney, local public discourses contribute to this acceptance of immigration-related diversity. In its fortnightly newspaper, *Hackney Today*, the council repeatedly emphasises the positive aspects of cultural and religious diversity, presenting it as a particularly positive characteristic of Hackney. Furthermore, no week goes by without the local newspaper, the *Hackney Gazette*, reporting on some kind of cultural festival and celebration. And the Hackney Museum is not so much a museum of the old times of Hackney, but rather the central focus of the permanent exhibition lies

on the population change in Hackney and different groups arriving during different periods of time.¹⁰

In this context of commonplace diversity, where so many people in the area come from elsewhere, civility towards diversity becomes part of everyday life. In their discussion on ‘civility’, Buonfino and Mulgan (2009) define civility as a ‘learned grammar of sociability’. They compare these grammars of sociability with language. Although we are born with the disposition to speak a language, we still have to learn how to speak, read and write. Similarly, civility is based on existing dispositions, but it also has to be learned and cultivated. In a super-diverse context, civility towards people who look, speak or behave differently is learned through everyday contact and interaction in a multiplicity of day-to-day social situations. In fact, this civility, or in Buonfino and Mulgan’s words, these ‘grammars of sociability’, are important skills needed to get along in such a context, as most everyday transactions and conversations in public space take place with people who are different. These patterns of conviviality among people who differ are in line with Sennet’s definition of civility as more than just good manners, but ‘the capacity of people who differ to live together’ (Sennet 2005: 1). In fact, this capacity is something that people living in Hackney consciously or unconsciously share.

However, civility towards diversity can also ensure boundaries. People in any urban context can be civil because they want to avoid further contact. This can apply in relation to people of one’s own group – whether defined in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, etc. – and in relation to members of other groups. But in a super-diverse context, even civility which ensures boundaries requires a certain amount of ‘intercultural skills’. Such skills which facilitate conviviality or ensure boundaries in diverse urban contexts have recently attracted the attention of scholars who work on cosmopolitanism and who have attempted to analyse cosmopolitanism in its everyday practice rather than just as a worldview.

Corner-shop cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism has gained much attention in the social sciences in light of globalisation, the diversification of immigrant societies and increasing transnational

¹⁰ Interestingly, class differences and inequality rarely form part of these positive representations of ethnic and religious diversity.

movements across borders (Vertovec & Cohen 2002). It has been broadly defined as a worldview characterised by openness towards other cultures and the ‘willingness to engage with the Other’ (Hannerz 1992: 252). Such worldviews and attitudes were originally associated with well-travelled elites, but since the 1990s, an increasing number of studies have illustrated the existence of cosmopolitanism ‘from below’, for example, among labour migrants, a phenomenon also described as ‘working-class cosmopolitanism’ (Werbner 1999). This has also been conceptualised as ‘banal’ cosmopolitanism, a ‘pragmatic orientation in which engaging with people and goods from other cultures is everyday practice’ (Noble 2009: 49). To look at these everyday practices implies taking the study of cosmopolitanism beyond a mere description of worldviews and attitudes which enable people to interact and communicate with a range of cultural others. Rather, we should examine cosmopolitanism as social practice, bearing in mind that ‘“openness to otherness” doesn’t tell us much; such openness can only begin an encounter, it is not the encounter itself’ (Noble 2009: 50-1). In the same vein, Vertovec (2009) differentiates between cosmopolitan attitudes or orientations on the one hand, and practices and skills on the other. While attitudes refer to Hannerz’ description quoted above, practices and skills are related to the adoption of cultural skills that facilitate communication and interaction with others, a phenomenon also described as ‘multiple cultural competence’ (Vertovec 2009: 7; but see also Swidler 1986). There are numerous ethnographic accounts of such multiple cultural competences, mostly drawing on research among specific ethnic minorities and migrants (e.g. Alexander 1992; Hall 2002; Wessendorf 2008). But there is now also an emerging research field which looks at urban areas where such cosmopolitan practices are an integral part of everyday life, both among ethnic minorities as well as majorities (Blokland 2003b; Lee 2002; Wise & Velayutham 2009). Wise and Velayutham’s edited collection discusses mundane, everyday encounters in multicultural sites of social interaction, and includes members of the native population which equally need to develop multiple cultural competences where they live and socialise. The authors in their book thereby move away from a celebratory notion of intercultural or cosmopolitan practices and attitudes, emphasising the simple necessity of being able to navigate various categorical boundaries such as religion, ethnicity, race and class in super-diverse contexts. Hackney, a place where diversity is commonplace, is a prime example of this necessity or ‘pragmatic being-together’ (Noble 2009: 51). Noble (2009) describes the ways in which difference is negotiated in unproblematic ways on a daily basis as ‘unpanicked multiculturalism’, contrasting it with the ‘panicked multiculturalism’ which has dominated debates on cultural and religious

diversity and which has focused on tensions and conflicts between different groups (Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). Unpanicked multiculturalism refers to the everyday practices of negotiating cultural boundaries in everyday encounters and interactions.

In Hackney, such unpanicked multiculturalism can be observed in numerous public spaces, at markets, on buses, streets, and in corner-shops. For example, stall holders at a local market in Hackney react rather stoically to the Nigerian customers' repeated attempts to bargain. The South Asian butcher at the same market speaks the Ghanaian language of Twi. He lived in Ghana for a while and now caters to a large Ghanaian clientele who appreciate his language skills. He has even hung up a Ghanaian flag behind his counter. The Algerian tailor is specialised in making West African clothes thanks to the predominance of customers from Nigeria and Ghana, but he is also happy to shorten European customers' trousers. The Turkish owner of the corner-shop has learned a few words in Polish because of an increasing number of Polish customers. He now also sells Polish beer and Sauerkraut. And the young white British sales assistant at Sainsbury's, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, sees no problem in communicating with an elderly Turkish customer via a translator whom she has called on her mobile phone.

This phenomenon could also be described as 'corner-shop cosmopolitanism'. It takes place locally, and it is characterised by the versatile intercultural skills of those involved in social interactions. Importantly, with corner-shop cosmopolitanism I refer not only to interactions which form part of business transactions and take place in shops, but any kind of interaction in public, the corner-shop representing just one of them. Corner-shop cosmopolitanism is similar to what Lamont and Aksartova (2002) describe as 'ordinary cosmopolitanism'. It is not limited to well-travelled elites, but takes on localised forms of intercultural negotiations between long established residents of various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and newcomers.

In super-diverse Hackney, people seem to be so used to differences in language and behaviour that intercultural skills become internalised as a fact of life. A typical example of this is a young British Pakistani man who runs a curry stall at a local market. The stall is very popular among both market stall holders who regularly buy their tea there as well as visitors to the market. It has a large variety of customers of many different backgrounds, some of them regulars, others newcomers like myself at the beginning of my fieldwork. The young stall holder has very friendly relations with his customers and changes his greetings according to the customers: when a young black man arrives he says 'hey broth' [*brother*], switching to 'hi Auntie' when

an elderly Asian woman comes, and to ‘hello Ma’am’ when I arrive. He effortlessly switches between these different linguistic codes according to the customers, and makes everybody feel welcome.¹¹

This phenomenon could also be described as ‘strategic everyday cosmopolitanism’ (Noble 2009: 57), because it often serves the purpose of getting some kind of transaction done. This is in line with Goffman’s concept of ‘facework’, referring to necessary mutual respect and recognition in social interactions, no matter across what kinds of perceived group differences (Goffman 1972). What differentiates a super-diverse context from other contexts with less categorical groups is the amount of information available about ‘the other’, information which could facilitate knowledge about what to expect from the other in a specific social interaction (Goffman 1971). In a super-diverse context, the ‘sign-vehicles’ (Goffman 1971) available for understanding this information are much more complicated than in other contexts. Despite the presence of large minority groups in Hackney such as Turks, Kurds and West Indians, many of whom respectively share similar socio-economic backgrounds, migration histories and legal statuses, there exists a large number of people who are much more difficult to label. For example, the Muslim woman with a headscarf and Moroccan dress whom I met at a primary school turns out to be a native Italian who had come to London as a student, married a Moroccan and converted to Islam. Similarly, a South Asian-looking mother turns out to have been born in Zambia of Indian parents, and came to the UK via South Africa as a child. Her brother has moved back to South Africa, while her mother divides her time between the UK, South Africa and India in order to be with her grandchildren and relatives. And an 80-year-old Indian woman who had originally come to the UK to study has spent several years in Nigeria working as a teacher. I have met countless people who surprised me with their unusual migration histories and backgrounds, and the more people I met, the more difficult I have found easy labelling and categorisation.

These difficulties of categorising strangers seem to lead to a certain cosmopolitan pragmatism, where, in order to get around, buy things, get help to get on a bus, carry a buggy up the stairs, etc. etc., you cannot afford not to be intercultural competent. Importantly, as emphasised by Buonfino and Mulgan (2009) in their reflections on civility as a ‘learned grammar of sociability’, these intercultural competences cannot be taken for granted, but require a specific effort on the part of local people. Despite a general appreciation of diversity, many of the participants in my research have

¹¹ On linguistic ‘code-switching’, see Rampton (1995).

mentioned that language differences sometimes make it hard to communicate with people. One of my informants, a white British woman in her thirties who has lived in the area for eight years and who has a very positive attitude towards diversity, simply said that sometimes she would rather live in an area where more people of the same background live, 'only because it is tiring sometimes always having to consider where the person may be coming from when you meet them, and you can take nothing as "a given".' Not being able to take anything as 'a given' is a fact of life in public space in a super-diverse context. However, there are places of social interaction where more regular and repeated social encounters take place and where different and possibly deeper social relations can be formed.

'Contact zones'

There has been much discussion about the role of public space in regard to social relations and negotiations of difference, and the effectiveness of social contact across categorical boundaries in reducing conflict and tensions. Many of these debates have focused on interaction across cultural differences. In his discussion on the role of urban sites where difference is negotiated on a daily basis and where intercultural exchanges can occur, Amin (2002: 968) emphasises that 'habitual contact in itself is no guarantor of cultural exchange'. He questions the role of public space in enhancing intercultural engagement, because 'the contact spaces of housing estates and urban public spaces, in the end, seem to fall short of inculcating interethnic understanding, because they are not structured as spaces of interdependence and habitual engagement' (Amin 2002: 969). In her ethnography on everyday interactions between Jewish, Korean and African American merchants and their black customers, Lee (2002) similarly finds that despite high degrees of social order and civility which are negotiated through daily interactions and transactions, these routinely positive encounters 'do not preclude the possibility of negative out-group stereotyping and racially charged conflict' (Lee 2002: 185).

However, even if everyday interactions and spatial proximity do not necessarily guarantee cultural exchange and positive attitudes towards people of different backgrounds, the demographic nature of a super-diverse context also brings with it the emergence of numerous 'zones of encounter' (Wood & Landry 2007). In these spaces, deeper and more enduring interactions between people who engage in shared activi-

ties and common goals can take place. Such places can be, for example, a local knitting club, a housing association, a parents' group, a school, the workplace, etc. Amin (2002) conceptualises such spaces as 'micropublics' where differences across ethnic, religious, class and other boundaries can be bridged and stereotypes broken.

The urban sociologist Lyn Lofland has developed a spatial framework in which the difference between the public space and Amin's 'micropublics' is more clearly defined. Drawing on Hunter (1985), Lofland differentiates between social realms which go beyond the concept of the public and the private, but include a third realm, the parochial realm (Lofland 1998). The public, parochial and private realms could also be described as social territories defined by specific relational forms. While the private realm is characterised by relations with friends and kin, the parochial realm is characterised by more communal relations among neighbours, with colleagues in the workplace, or acquaintances through associations and informal networks. The public realm, in contrast, is the world in the streets where one meets strangers. Importantly, the boundaries between these realms are fluid. A market can, for example, be experienced as the public realm by a person who goes there for the first time, but it can gradually turn into a parochial space as a result of regular shopping trips and increased and more personal interactions with stall holders and other customers. Similarly, relationships formed in parochial-realm spaces such as clubs and associations can develop into more private relations. Realms are not always related to specific physical spaces. For example, a birthday party in a park could be described as a 'private realm bubble' in public space (Lofland 1998). Thus, these spatial realms are more defined by the nature of interpersonal relations and engagement than actual physical space.

If the public realm can become parochial in that social relations developed in the public realm become habitual and frequent, even public spaces can become meaningful sites of interaction and intercultural engagement. In particular, they can be spaces where, as mentioned earlier, intercultural competences are learned. Again, a good example of such a site is a local street market in Hackney where stall holders who work side-by-side six days a week have developed relationships of mutual support and intercultural exchange among each other.

Wise (2007) conceptualises parochial-realm spaces in which people of different cultural backgrounds meet as 'transversal places' where intercultural encounters and relationships are formed. With the concept of transversality, she draws on Nira Yuval-Davis' notion of transversal politics, based on the idea of 'rooting' and 'shifting' taking place in a dialogue between two people of different backgrounds who are both

reflexive of their own identity (rooting), while at the same time trying to put themselves into the situation of the other who is different (shifting) (Yuval-Davis 1999). By using examples of a bingo hall and an elderly people's club, Wise (2007: 7) shows how 'the simple fact of regular togetherness ... can facilitate fleeting relations and sometimes friendships across difference, which in turn can impact on their broader feelings of belonging to the local area'. Similarly, Amin (2002: 970) speaks of sites of 'habitual engagement' or, as mentioned earlier, 'micropublics' where 'engagement with strangers in a common activity disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments'. Such sites are, for example, sports associations or music clubs, communal gardens or community centres. They enable the creation of 'a set of relatively stable relations and ways of intercultural being which emerge out of sustained practices of accommodation and negotiation' (Noble 2009: 52).

In many of Hackney's parochial realm spaces such as a knitting club or a parents' group at a primary school, diversity is equally commonplace as in public sites of corner-shop cosmopolitanism. Differences of origin, language, religion, etc. are, in fact, rarely talked about, although they are acknowledged, for example by way of describing others according to their perceived ethnicity or national background. When referring to someone, people would often say 'the Indian lady', or 'the German woman', sometimes also referring to racial differences such as 'the black guy' or 'the Asian woman'. But openly acknowledging difference does not go beyond such descriptive categories, and people rarely ask each other about their cultural backgrounds. Rather, they talk about commonalities such as the education of children, gardening, shopping, problems with the council, the rising gas bill, the construction of new buildings, changes in public space, markets, and, importantly, crime and safety. The latter is particularly dominant in a borough like Hackney, where gun and knife crime have recently been surging, and gang violence is of great concern to people of all ethnic and social backgrounds, an issue I will return to later in this paper.

Focusing on such shared themes does not mean that cultural differences are the 'big unspoken' in such contexts. When prompted, people do talk about different cultural traditions and habits. For example, when talking about the past, those who come from elsewhere would talk about how things were done in their countries of origin, and those who have lived in Hackney all their lives (usually a minority) would report on how their parents used to do things when circumstances were different in the area. As mentioned earlier, being local and having a family history in Hackney is thereby not treated as the norm, but is as special as being from elsewhere. Because such conversations take place within groups that are often characterised by the absence of a

majority group, each voice is an individual account. However, shared themes rather than differences form the main issues of discussion.

Importantly, possible animosities between ethnic groups, stereotypes and assumptions about others seldom find their way into mixed parochial sites of regular encounter. In fact, because many associations and clubs are culturally so mixed, and because ethnic diversity is celebrated both in public and political discourse, stereotyping and prejudice seem to be a no-go area in terms of conversations and behaviour. This does not preclude the possibility that privately, and when spending time with people of one's own background, such stereotypes do exist.

Tensions in a super-diverse context

Tensions in a super-diverse context are as challenging to elicit as social relations. Despite the primarily positive views of diversity among many people in Hackney, and despite relatively positive relations between people of different ethnic, religious, national and socio-economic backgrounds, stereotyping, prejudice and tensions do exist. However, in line with the complexity of the population set-up, such stereotyping goes beyond simple dichotomies between majority and minority groups, but is much more complex in a super-diverse context. They run between ethnic groups who migrated at different times, such as West Indians and Africans; within groups of people of the same national background who bring their differences with them from their home countries, such as Northern Vietnamese and Southern Vietnamese or Kurd and Turks; between people from the same regions, such as Nigerians and Ghanaians or Polish and Romanians; between people of different class backgrounds, such as white British working-class and middle-class people; between people of different religious convictions, even within the same religion, such as liberal Jews and Orthodox Jews; and, more generally, between religious people and non-religious people.

In a super-diverse context, patterns of prejudice, the underlying reasons for them and the social practices resulting from them are complex to a degree that only in-depth ethnographies of specific groups within this context would be able to elicit. In the research presented here, I have found that despite the existence of such prejudice, people manage to go beyond them in their day-to-day lives out of simple necessity. They do not have the choice not to get along with people who are different, even if only on a superficial level.

However, there are instances where differences do become an issue of contestation, and these primarily relate to issues surrounding cleanliness and order, and the competition for resources such as housing and education. This has been shown in various studies across Europe and North America (Blokland 2003a; Dench et al 2006; Hudson et al 2007; Jones-Correa 2001; Mumford & Power 2003; Wimmer 2004). In a super-diverse place like Hackney, resentments arising from such competition and from claims for more cleanliness and order do not run along simple lines of ethnic difference. Rather, length of residence and, implicitly, belonging to the neighbourhood come into play. For example, both white British people as well as long-established members of ethnic minorities complain when newcomers such as students, young ‘trendies’ (i.e. young middle-class people who are dressed very fashionably), Irish Travellers (the permanent newcomers) but also new migrants do not stick to rules of public orderliness, for example when it comes to rubbish.¹²

Danuta, a Polish woman in her 50s who has lived in the UK for 28 years, tells me how she was initially worried about moving to Hackney from West London because of its negative reputation regarding crime. But she got used to it with time and would not necessarily want to move away anymore. In this context, she talks about the demographic composition of the area. Interestingly, in her narrative, she links her positive feelings about diversity with problems with students. When I ask her what she finds special about Hackney, she says the following:

D: It’s also, it’s multicultural, for instance if you go to this park just here, especially during weekends, you will see Asian, Chinese, Polish, English, Africans, all the nations here, which is amazing! In my country it’s not that way.

S: Is that something you enjoy?

D: Yes, yes, yes, because if you sort of have, you could learn something from others. But sometimes you are shocked if you see something, you don’t get used to it, but that’s normal.

S: Do you have an example for something like that?

D: Well, sometimes I feel, I’d like to speak up if I see what they are doing, especially in this estate here, opposite they built a student house, we were all against this, but nobody listens, and if I see what they do, they dump rubbish, they’ve got the bins there, why do they dump it opposite to our place? It makes it dirty. So sometimes you feel you want to say ‘why do you do this’?

S: Where are they from?

D: Students? They are from everywhere.

12 See also Norbert Elias’ classic study on the Established and the Outsiders (1994).

While students and young people are often blamed for a lack of cleanliness and order, regarding housing, it is asylum seekers more generally who are accused of being treated preferentially and taking away housing. However, in the numerous conversations and interviews undertaken for this project, it was very rare that people explicitly mentioned other people's ethnic, national or religious backgrounds when talking about such tensions.¹³ In other words, tensions with people in the area are rarely put down to their origins. Again, this does not preclude the existence of prejudice, but it is not spoken about in the open and people are reluctant to openly interpret conflicts along ethnic lines. This could be interpreted as one of the features of 'commonplace diversity', where diversity as such is not problematised, but it is just part of everyday life. Furthermore, diversity experiences in everyday life are dominated by positive or non-conflictive social encounters. When conflicts do arise, people do not automatically blame them on other people's backgrounds. In our survey, where we ask whether there is a specific ethnic, religious or national group that is problematic, one of our respondents wrote the following comment:

I don't think there is a specific group of people who are problematic, it's mostly people older, younger, and of all ethnic groups who do not seem to be able to behave in an appropriate manner. People in general seem to have lost respect for other people and seem to have no manners.

This respondent's comment points to an issue which I have heard many discussions about in parochial space: lack of respect, especially from younger people who are feared by many as a result of various incidents of street crime. In relation to such issues of crime and safety, diversity as such appears to be a minor problem. However, crime is the area where race comes into play. In recent years, gang conflicts, characterised by turf wars between groups of youth who live on different housing estates or in different postcode areas, have become one of the most dominant subjects in public discourse. No week goes by without the reporting of knife or gun-related incidents between predominantly black youngsters of both African and Caribbean background, some as young as 14. Gang crime is something which many people I spoke to feel affected by, either personally or indirectly. They have witnessed such crime very near to where they live, have a friend whose child went to school with

13 It is, however, different in terms of class. White British people often do refer to categories of 'working-class' and 'middle-class'. For example, many working- and middle-class people are resentful about gentrification and the many young middle-class people moving in, an issue expressed by the word 'trendies'. Such resentment is often expressed quite openly.

someone who was killed, or have felt threatened by groups of youngsters hanging out on street corners.¹⁴

Gang crime and the increasing use of weapons such as knives and guns overshadow other possible tensions and conflicts in the borough, and many people in Hackney define it as the borough's main problem. People involved in these crimes are predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds, they are young, male and mostly black, although there have been recent incidents between Turkish gangs, too. This, of course, leads to much stereotyping of black youngsters being up to no good, an issue which is not unique to Hackney but exists in other London boroughs, too (Hewitt 2005; Kintrea et al 2008). The project presented here did not specifically focus on gang violence, race and youth. However, when asking people about their social relations and life in Hackney, these issues seemed to be much more important than the fact that Hackney is super-diverse. While diversity is generally interpreted as something positive, one fragment of this picture of good diversity does not fit in, namely black youngsters.

An example of this situation is the Hackney One Carnival in 2009, a big event organised by the Hackney Council with a carnival parade and various concerts in a park. The yearly carnival celebrates Hackney's cultural diversity and its creativity, and thousands of people attend the event. But the 2009 celebration was disturbed by the presence of five competing gangs from different council estates and postcode areas who came to the park on their bikes, dressed up for the occasion with hoods, gloves and bandanas. The groups of youngsters provoked fear among the spectators and participants of the event, and their presence resulted in a massive security operation with a large number of police trying to control the competing gangs. This absurd situation in which the celebration of diversity and community is paralleled by the manifestation of what is currently perceived as the main threat to cohesion and the prime example of social breakdown, illustrates how positive social relations can be overshadowed by issues related to socio-economic disadvantage and inequality.

The gang violence and the dominance of black, male youngsters involved in it not only illustrate issues surrounding unequal opportunities and race, but also the existence of parallel worlds in a super-diverse place like Hackney.

14 This has also been confirmed in research undertaken for the Hackney Cohesion Review (2010), which reports that youth violence and 'postcode barriers' are among the main concerns regarding safety and mobility among young people (Hackney Council 2010).

Social intersections, ‘parallel lives’ and the life-course

White middle-class teenagers seem to find it rather easy to stay away from gangs. They do not live on council estates and socialise in different milieus. This exemplifies what one of my middle-class white British informants said, a mother of three children. She emphasised that she likes living in a place like Hackney because you can ‘choose who to make friends with’. Through her children’s schools, she knows people of many different class and ethnic backgrounds, and she has very friendly relations with them and sometimes looks after the children of a Turkish mother. But her closest friends are of the same ethnic and class background. They are people whom she has known for a long time and who share her interests. I have encountered countless examples of such patterns of social relations which combine parochial-realm mixed relations with much less mixed private relations, or in more social scientific terms, which combine both ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding social capital’ (Putnam 2000). Thus, intercultural competences and corner-shop cosmopolitanism are paralleled by more homogenous friendship patterns and social milieus. These social milieus are often divided along class, ethnic, religious and age lines.

In fact, another informant of mine who had previously lived in a neighbouring borough characterised by two main groups, white British working-class people and long-term settled British Bangladeshis from rural Bangladesh, emphasised that the fact that Hackney is so diverse enables you to integrate more easily because you do not stand out as different. Where she lived before, she felt that as white British middle-class person, she did not fit in. Once she was asked by a Bangladeshi man which country she was from, because he did not recognise her middle-class British accent. In contrast, in Hackney, with the presence of other middle-class people, she finds it easier. She has bought a flat on a council estate, but there is a pub across the road frequented by young middle-class people:

If I’m honest, with that across the road [the pub], it’s more mixed. You know, I’m not going to blend into a council estate very well, but, a mixed community which this is, more middle class, is easier for me. I know that there are people here who are ‘like’ me, if you like, not that I speak to them particularly at all, but I know there is a sense of, I don’t stick out too much.

While for her, it is the class composition which gives her a sense of ‘not sticking out’, for Thomas, a Malawian informant of mine, it is race. He used to live in a West London area dominated by white people where he felt utterly out of place. For

him, it was a big relief to move to Hackney where he felt like he had a place and did not stick out. Super-diversity thus facilitates the easier settlement of newcomers, most of whom are very likely to find a few people of the same religion, ethnicity or class.

Despite these separate life worlds and social milieus, what is important and particularly specific to a super-diverse place like Hackney is the habitual engagement across categorical boundaries on a daily basis, and the cultural competences that come with this engagement. Thus, the effort to interact across differences is an effort made in specific places, be it a market or a local association, but maybe less so when it comes to circles of friends. One of my informants compared such social intersections of different life-worlds with train crossings, where trains intersect, but do not stop for long and depart again into different directions. It could also be described as 'selective openness' towards other groups, however these groups are defined. Such openness can go from simple business transactions such as the ones recounted earlier in this paper, to more regular contacts in a local club, for example a dance class or parents' group, to more engaging commitments such as baby sitting. In other words, even if people do not necessarily build close friendships across categorical boundaries such as ethnicity, class and religion, when it comes to negotiating everyday life in a super-diverse area, the crossing of such boundaries becomes commonplace. Again, the degree to which people avoid or engage in such contact, even if only informal, is as complex as the demographic setting of the area itself. For example, many elderly Turkish and Vietnamese immigrants who only speak limited English despite having lived here for many years only minimally engage in mixed associations because of their language difficulties. Similarly, white British middle-class people seem to have formed their own social arenas and spaces where they socialise, such as art galleries, cafes and book clubs. Thus, some groups live more separate lives than others, and equally, some social sites are more mixed than others.

Furthermore, degrees of intergroup engagement also depend on the life course. This is best exemplified by state schools, which are among the most mixed sites of social encounters where people of all backgrounds come together, both the children and the parents (Jayaweera & Choudhury 2008; Mumford & Power 2003). Many of my informants emphasised the integrating influence of their children, and how they met all kinds of different people through them, at school or the playground. And even if these relations between parents do not go beyond these specific places and often fade away once the children grow up, they contribute to a sense of being part of a community and being able to communicate with others.

In much literature on London's East End, but also on other urban areas that have seen increased immigration, accounts can be found of long-term residents' nostalgic recollections of the (less diverse) past as a time when people used to interact to a greater degree and where there used to be more mutual support (Cornwell 1984; Dench et al 2006; Foster 1999; Watson 2009; Watt 2006). In these studies on the social history of specific urban areas, it is often the elderly who are being interviewed and asked about the times when they were younger and the characteristics of social relations in the area. My research, which included conversations with people of different generations, has shown that such nostalgic accounts might also be founded in the informants' life-course and the possibility that by getting older, it is more difficult to find spaces of social interaction such as schools or playgrounds. As young parents, they were likely to have had much closer social relations with local people, relations that can decrease with age and with the children moving away and starting their own independent lives. Thus, subjective feelings of the 'cohesion' of the local community and its loss, often interpreted as a result of a transient population and change, might well be based on life-course changes.

Such changing social relations according to the life-course can also be found at earlier stages of life, for example between childhood and adolescence. In Hackney, children in primary school seem to mix to a great extent, but when they get older and start associating themselves with specific social milieus, for example related to music and fashion, divisions start playing a more important role, and these divisions often run along class and ethnic lines. They are often based on life-style, tastes and shared interests, and sometimes draw on notions of 'racial authenticity', strongly influenced by images of ethnically defined popular culture, a phenomenon observed in various urban contexts (Alexander 1992; Back 1996; Warikoo 2007; Wessendorf 2008). Youth subcultures are only one example of the existence of divisions along ethnic, racial and class lines, especially when it comes to friendships. To explain the reasons for such divisions would go beyond the aims of this paper. But the existence of such parallel social worlds, which stands in stark contrast to the corner-shop cosmopolitanism happening in the parochial and public space, leads to more complicated questions regarding parallel lives and social cohesion which I will discuss in the concluding section of this paper.

Conclusion

People in Hackney have a very down-to-earth approach towards diversity. They mostly appreciate it and many would not want to live in a place that is less diverse.¹⁵ Some of my informants even said that it would be boring to live next to ‘someone who is like me’. At the same time, there exists a great awareness of possible tensions that can arise when people of so many different backgrounds live together. This awareness also includes negative attitudes towards people who are perceived to reify their differences. ‘Some people want to live separate lives’ or ‘they don’t want to mix’ are sentences I have heard repeatedly. Such comments mostly refer to visible signs of difference and ‘community’ of members of certain groups, for example the white middle-class ‘trendies’ mentioned earlier, but also Orthodox Jews and Muslim women wearing hijabs. This visible difference, experienced in public and parochial space and interpreted as unwillingness of members of these groups to interact with others, is often criticised as inadequate. However, this claim is rarely accompanied by a criticism of such separations in the private realm. In regard to private relations, it is seen as quite normal that similar people who share similar life-styles, cultural values and attitudes attract each other. Such social connectedness does not necessarily go along ethnic lines (although it often does), but other categorical boundaries such as class can be important, too, especially among long-established local residents born in the area, some of whom form interethnic marriages.¹⁶

Hence, when differentiating between different social realms and sites of interaction, cosmopolitan attitudes and practices in the public and parochial realm are paralleled by more limited openness towards difference in private. In a densely populated super-diverse area where so many people come from elsewhere and lead very different lives, it is easy to choose to belong to one of many life-worlds or social milieus when it comes to private relations. Furthermore, individuals can choose to engage with people who are different by attending associations, clubs, parents’ groups, etc. But they can also choose not to engage. Sometimes such choices are not made voluntarily,

15 This was also confirmed by research undertaken for the Hackney Cohesion Review (Hackney Council 2010). Importantly, the authors of the Cohesion Review mention the difficulties of including into their surveys the views of people who do not speak English (for example Turkish/ Kurdish and Orthodox Jewish/ Charedi residents). These residents’ views on diversity might be very different and would need to be elicited by further research.

16 According to the 2001 census, there were 6214 households in Hackney with mixed partnerships.

but shaped by the constraints of everyday life and the multiple obligations of work and looking after a family. This also means that living in a super-diverse area does not automatically lead to a deeper understanding of other people's life-worlds or the formation of meaningful and deeper relations across categorical boundaries. Thus, even in a super-diverse neighbourhood, knowledge about different life-worlds can be limited, especially among those people who do not participate in parochial-realm mixed spaces. Again, such knowledge not only applies to the cultural differences of others, but also differences in income, life-style or religion. In other words, cosmopolitanism and parochialism seem to exist in parallel, and there can be a disjuncture between cosmopolitan competences and practices in everyday interactions in public and parochial space on the one hand, and the formation of closer social relations in private space with people who are similar on the other. And importantly, people's closest social relations are not necessarily situated within the area where they live, but friends and relatives living outside of Hackney, London or abroad might be much more important than those in the neighbourhood.

The somewhat paradoxical phenomenon of corner-shop cosmopolitanism in public and parochial space paralleled by much less cross-categorical interaction and contact in the private realm is expressed best by an elderly Ghanaian woman who has lived in the borough for several decades. I met her at a computer course for elderly people attended by people of many different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds, and she has very good social relations with the other students whom she sees regularly at the club. In an email conversation, she tells me the following:

London is a very cosmopolitan city, as such, people are coming from many different parts of the world to live and work. Due to this fact, people do not know each other and also, do not make any effort to get acquainted or to get to know their next door neighbour or to make friends with them, either, in the area where they live.¹⁷

Thus, according to this woman, *because* of diversity, people do not form relationships across boundaries. In other words, commonplace diversity and corner-shop cosmopolitanism exist side-by-side with the continuation of close social ties and social milieus defined by categorical boundaries such as ethnicity, race, religion and class. Ultimately, people in Hackney easily straddle these complexities and do not perceive them as a problem. They are much more concerned with larger issues such as massive inequality, marginalisation and crime. Such issues are faced by many people in one of Britain's poorest and most densely populated boroughs, situated right next to a world

¹⁷ Importantly, I did not use the term 'cosmopolitanism' in any of my questions.

which is truly ‘parallel’, segregated and disconnected from most local people’s lives: the financial district of the City of London.

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