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Living together in a super-diverse London
neighbourhood



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Abstract

The London Borough of Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the United Kingdom. It is characterized not only by a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, but also by differentiations in terms of migration histories, religions, and educational and economic backgrounds, both among long-term residents and newcomers. This paper attempts to describe how people negotiate social interactions in such a 'super-diverse' context. It develops the notion of 'commonplace diversity', referring to ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity being experienced as a normal part of social life by local residents. This commonplace diversity has resulted in people acting with 'civility towards diversity'. While in a public space, people mostly treat everybody the same without acknowledging differences, while in semi-public spaces such as associations and local institutions, here conceptualized as 'parochial space' (Hunter 1985), people's different backgrounds are acknowledged and sometimes talked about. The paper discusses how people negotiate their differences in these two different kinds of spaces. It shows how civility towards diversity is used as a strategy to both engage with difference as well as avoid deeper contact. Civility thus facilitates the negotiation of both positive relations and possible tensions.

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The London Borough of Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. It is characterized not only by a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, but also by differentiations regarding migration histories, religions, and educational and economic backgrounds, both among long-term residents and newcomers. This paper describes how people negotiate cultural differences in such a 'super-diverse' context (Vertovec 2007b). It describes how, due to the long history of diversification in Hackney, residents experience ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity as a normal part of everyday life. I conceptualize this normalcy of diversity as 'commonplace diversity'. Gilroy (2004: xi) has described this process with the term 'conviviality', referring to the processes of 'cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas' (Gilroy 2004: xi). The paper describes how in a super-diverse context, conviviality, also understood in the sense of living together peacefully (Overing & Passes 2000), is characterized by a fine balance between building positive relations across difference and keeping a distance.

While cultural diversity is seen as commonplace, there are differences in the ways people deal with cultural differences in public versus semi-public sites. In this paper I use the differentiation between the public, parochial and private realm (Hunter 1985) to discuss these differences. While the public realm is the world of streets, parks, public transport or commercial spaces where one meets strangers, the parochial realm is characterized by more communal relations among neighbours, with colleagues in the workplace or acquaintances through associations or schools (Hunter 1985; Lofland 1989). Importantly, the boundaries between these realms are fluid. For example, a corner-shop or a market where traders and customers meet on a regular basis can take on the characteristics of the parochial realm because the social relations developed in these places can become habitual and frequent. The differentiation between the public, parochial, and private realm is particularly useful when thinking about the degree to which interactions between people of different backgrounds are meaningful and contribute to intercultural understanding.

In this paper, I show how in the public realm, commonplace diversity is characterized by social interactions that are shaped by 'civility towards diversity' (Lofland 1989: 464), a concept which I discuss in further detail later in the paper and with illustrations from my fieldwork. Civility towards diversity in the public realm means that people treat everybody universally the same while ignoring differences. In contrast, in the parochial realm, people's different backgrounds are acknowledged and sometimes talked about. I show how especially in parochial space, civility towards

diversity can be used as a strategy to both engage with difference and avoid conflict by ignoring difference.

While using the concept of civility discussed by social scientists such as Sennett (2005) and Lofland (1989), the paper also draws on current discussions about the role of encounters regarding the enhancement of intercultural understanding and interaction. Although not conceptualized as the ‘parochial realm’, there has been much discussion about the role of ‘semi-public’ spaces such as schools or associations in regard to social relations and negotiations of difference, and the effectiveness of social contact across categorical boundaries in reducing possible conflict and tensions (e.g. Amin 2002; Blokland 2003b; Sandercock 2003; Sanjek 1998; Valentine 2008; Wood & Landry 2007). The demographic nature of a super-diverse context brings with it the emergence of numerous such ‘zones of encounter’ (Wood & Landry 2007). In these spaces, deeper and more enduring interactions between people who engage in shared activities and common goals can take place.

Amin (2002) conceptualizes such spaces as ‘micropublics’ where differences across ethnic, religious, class and other boundaries can be bridged and stereotypes broken. Such micropublics are crucial in shaping people’s perceptions about each other. Wise (2007; 2010) describes places in which people of different cultural backgrounds meet as ‘transversal places’ where intercultural encounters and relationships are formed. Using the 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.’ As shown by Noble (2009: 52), this enables the creation of ‘a set of relatively stable relations and ways of intercultural being which emerge out of sustained practices of accommodation and negotiation.’ However, some writers caution against generalizations about the positive effects of regular encounters on intercultural understanding. For example, Valentine (2008: 332) shows how ‘positive encounters with individuals from minority groups do not necessarily change people’s opinions about groups as a whole for the better.’ She criticizes discourses about conviviality and everyday multiculturalism as celebratory by demonstrating the co-existence of daily courtesies in public space and the continuity of privately held prejudiced views. Others similarly show how stereotypes and racism can co-exist with daily interactions in multicultural neighbourhoods (Noble 2011; Swanton 2009; Watson 2006; Wilson 2013 [forthcoming]; Wise 2005). In this contribution, I show how conviviality in Hackney is characterized by both avoidance of deeper contact *and* engagement, and that civility towards diversity is a strategy to negotiate both positive relations and possible tensions.

I begin with a short history of Hackney's diversification and a description of how commonplace diversity evolved as a result of this diversification. The following section discusses patterns of conviviality in the public realm. Referring to concepts of civility, I describe how social interactions in public space are characterized by both intercultural competences and a pragmatic approach towards difference whereby everybody is treated the same, independent of their backgrounds, because so many people come from elsewhere. The subsequent section examines how civility towards diversity works in parochial spaces where social relations are characterized by more regular contact. I show how, while diversity is acknowledged and sometimes talked about, actual engagement with difference remains limited and people rarely explore cultural differences more deeply. On the one hand, contact in parochial space can lead to more mutual understanding and acceptance of difference, sometimes leading to relationships of support, but at the same time, civility towards diversity is used to avoid possible tensions. The conclusion summarizes the differences of patterns of conviviality in the public and parochial realm and discusses how civility towards diversity and a certain indifference to cultural difference might be a mode of dealing with diversity. The conclusion also argues that issues surrounding inequality and poverty are far more relevant in the area than those relating to cultural diversity which, over the years, has become so commonplace.

The paper draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the London Borough of Hackney during the period of 2008-2010. The fieldwork included participant observation, for example in a weekly knitting group of elderly women, a youth club on an estate, a parents' group in a primary school, and an IT class for over 50s. All these groups were ethnically and socially mixed. Fieldwork also included participant observation in public spaces such as shops, parks and markets, as well as 28 in-depth interviews with local residents and key people such as councillors, teachers and social workers, and three focus groups. The people interviewed were of various ethnic and social backgrounds, including people of different age groups and legal statuses. At the time of the research, I had been living in Hackney for about four years already. As a local resident and mother, I was and continue to be participating in playgroups and other children-related activities, which has enabled me to deepen my understandings of informal social relations in public and associational space and to have numerous informal conversations with parents of various backgrounds.

Hackney's history of diversification and the emergence of commonplace diversity

If there is a general characteristic to describe Hackney, it is the continuity of population change over the past half century. With its population of 247,182, Hackney figures among the 10% most deprived areas in the UK, but it is currently seeing the arrival of an increasing number of middle-class professionals. It is also one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in Britain, with only 36.2% of the population being white British. Jewish people have been settling in Hackney since the second half of the 17th century, and since the 1950s, sizeable groups of immigrants from West Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia have arrived. Turkish, Kurdish, and Turkish Cypriot people started arriving in the area in the 1970s, both as labour migrants and political refugees (Arakelian 2007). Vietnamese refugees arrived in the late 1970s (Sims 2007). Among the biggest minority groups are Africans (11.4%), people of Caribbean background (7.8%), South Asians (6.4%), Turkish-speaking people (5.5%), Chinese (1.4%), and 'other Asian' (2.7% , many of whom come from Vietnam). 6.4% of the population identify as 'mixed'. 35.5% of Hackney's total population are foreign-born, and they come from 58 different countries, ranging from Zimbabwe, Cyprus, Somalia, Iraq, Albania to Denmark, Germany, etc.¹ Recently, there has been an increase in people from Eastern Europe, especially Poland (City and Hackney 2008), and Hackney has one of the largest refugee and asylum seeker populations in London, estimated to be between 16,000 and 20,000 (Schreiber 2006).

Hackney's 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 (London Borough of Hackney 2009).

The positive attitudes towards diversity are not only reflected in a general acceptance of diversity, but also in diversity not being seen as something particularly remarkable. For example, during my fieldwork in local associations, I noticed that newcomers are not usually asked about their origins, even if they look different or speak with an accent. When I asked whether I could do part of my fieldwork at a

1 The number of the total population is taken from the ONS 2011 Mid Year Estimates. The number of Turkish speakers is taken from the 2004 Hackney Household Survey. The remaining numbers are taken from the 2011 census.

computer club for elderly people, the teacher of the club welcomed me there, but also told me that although his students come from many different places, diversity is not an issue in any of their conversations. They rarely ask each other where they come from and are not really interested in the other students' origins because everybody comes from elsewhere and it is therefore not a particularly special topic to talk about. In other words, diversity is so normal among the students in this computer club that it has become somewhat banal. This normalcy of diversity is what I conceptualize as 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf 2010). In his conceptualization of 'side-by-side citizenship', Van Leeuwen (2011) describes this as 'mild indifference' towards diversity:

(...) cultural otherness in those circumstances simply gets integrated into daily routines and a shared background understanding. In other words, one gets used to it. Such an ethos of relaxed indifference is only possible if one actually lives in the midst of a visible diversity of lifestyles and ethnocultural variety (van Leeuwen 2010: 648).

This confirms Nava's argument that the familiarity between groups has 'shifted the axis of belonging in much of contemporary London' (Nava 2007: 14). In his research in North London (including Hackney), Devadason (2010) has similarly shown that skin colour no longer marks insider or outsider status. I have found that this also applies to dress-code and, to some extent, language, with African dresses or Indian saris as well as foreign accents not being perceived as worthy of mention.

In light of this situation, how is commonplace diversity reflected in the public realm when it comes to social interactions with people of different backgrounds?

Conviviality in the public realm

How do people who live in a super-diverse context deal with the fact that a large number of people whom they meet in public space differ in their cultural background? Do they attempt to adapt their behaviour according to the other's perceived background, or do they treat everybody the same? The skills necessary to communicate with people of different backgrounds have also been described 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.²

Buonfino and Mulgan (2009: 16) take the definition of civility a step further and describe it 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. These grammars of sociability are important skills needed to get along in such a context, as most everyday interactions and conversations in public space take place with people of different backgrounds. 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. Civility towards diversity is a feature of public-space interactions which I observed on a daily basis during my fieldwork, as exemplified by the following vignette:

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 calls someone on her mobile phone, 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 (Fieldwork diary, August 2008).

Goffman describes the nature of such interactions with the 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

2 See also Fife et al. (2006) on different definitions of 'civility'.

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 and West Indians, many of whom share similar socio-economic backgrounds, migration histories, and legal statuses, there exist 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. A black British Muslim nursery school teacher has her origins in Uganda. Her family is Christian and she is the only one in the family who converted to Islam. 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 found easy labelling and categorization. In fact, one of my informants, a British woman in her 30s who came to Hackney from Northern England some eight years ago, said that when you meet a new person in Hackney, you cannot take anything as ‘a given’. While she has a very positive attitude towards diversity, she also sometimes finds it tiring ‘always having to consider where the person may be coming from when you meet them’. These difficulties of categorizing strangers seem to lead to a certain pragmatism, where, in order to get around, get help to get on a bus, carry a buggy up the stairs, etc., you cannot afford not to be civil towards people who are different. This civility is usually expressed by way of treating people universally the same, as described by Lofland (1989). One of my elderly British informants told me that ‘You cannot treat people differently according to their backgrounds because almost everybody comes from elsewhere.’³

However, civility towards diversity can also cement boundaries. People can be civil because they want to avoid further contact. This can apply to people of one’s own group – whether defined in terms of ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, etc. – and members of other groups. In the following section, I show how civility towards diversity plays an important role in parochial space where contacts with people who

3 However, in the context of trade in shops, supermarkets and street markets, traders make use of a large register of intercultural skills in order to sell. Elsewhere, I have conceptualized this as ‘corner-shop cosmopolitanism’ (Wessendorf 2010). See also Lee (2002) and Pécoud (2004) on the use of cosmopolitan skills among traders.

are different are more regular, and how this civility is used to both bridge differences *and* avoid tensions.

Social relations and civility towards diversity in the parochial realm

In parochial realm spaces such as associations, schools or among neighbours, cultural diversity is just as commonplace as in public space, but it is more concretely acknowledged and it is sometimes talked about, although rarely as an issue of contestation. As summarized in the introduction to this paper, research has shown that social relations in the parochial realm can contribute to the reduction of stereotypes and the bridging of differences (Amin 2002; Wood & Landry 2007). At the same time, however, such stereotypes can persist in parallel to positive relations (Noble 2011; Valentine 2008; Wise 2005).

The weekly coffee morning for parents at a local primary school presents an example where contact across difference can lead to the reduction of prejudice, but where civility towards diversity is also used to limit engagement across difference. The coffee morning is attended by mothers from a wide range of backgrounds: There is a white British woman who grew up in the area. Similarly, a British Pakistani and a British Guyanese mother have both grown up just around the corner. There is also an Italian woman who came to London in her 20s, married a Moroccan, and converted to Islam. Then there is a white British woman who came to London from Northern England some eight years ago. Sometimes, two Nigerian women come to the coffee morning; one is Yoruba, the other from the area of Benin. And a Turkish mother is one of the most regular participants of the coffee morning. She is known among the mothers for her gardening and cooking skills.

Although not all of these women attend the coffee morning every week, in a focus group discussion,⁴ they emphasized how, thanks to the children's centre in which the coffee morning takes place (and which is situated on the school ground), they get more opportunities to meet people and socialize. The women also emphasized that having children generally facilitated social contacts with other parents, be it at the school gates or the coffee mornings. Although during the focus group they agreed that they appreciated interacting with 'people from different walks of life', the issues

4 The focus group was organized in collaboration with the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University.

they talked about during coffee mornings were more often those which they shared, rather than their differences. Such shared themes are, for example, gardening or the education of their children. While conversations about gardening are characterized by the exchange of ideas and knowledge, when it comes to cooking, cultural differences form part of the conversations.

Such differences also come up when they speak about religious traditions. The British Pakistani woman, for example, was fasting during Ramadan, an issue the other mothers listened to, but did not discuss any further. Similarly, the fact that the wearing of a head-scarf prevented the Turkish mother from getting a job at a fast-food chain formed the subject of a conversation. The other mothers agreed about the unfairness of it, but did not discuss the issue any further. Thus, while shared themes such as the children, being out of work and the changing built environment dominate the bulk of the conversations, cultural differences came up every once in a while. They were acknowledged as a matter of fact, but they were neither met with much curiosity nor with surprise or estrangement. Often, the conversations about these differences did not go very far, with few questions asked. Cultural and religious differences were thereby treated as personal characteristics of individuals, which the mothers shared with friends and family, but which, most of the time, they left at home. According to one of my informants, you do not ask too many questions about other people's backgrounds because 'you don't want to pry on people's lives'. Thus, also in parochial space, people make an effort to be civil towards diversity, expressed by a somewhat limited engagement with difference. As I discuss further below, this limited engagement can also be grounded in attempts to avoid tension and conflict. Furthermore, curiosity about difference is also potentially seen as an alienating discourse where asking about difference implies that someone does not fully belong to the area.

But even if differences are rarely talked about or engaged with, the existence of such spaces as the coffee morning facilitates contact across difference when needed. For example, the teacher who leads the coffee morning organized a cooking class for Turkish speakers and parents of Caribbean background in order to break down the prejudice which some of the Turkish mothers held against Caribbean people because of gang violence in their area dominated by black male youngsters. The Turkish-speaking women had a much more differentiated view of the Caribbean mothers after the class than before.⁵

5 See also Amin (2002), Bach (1993), and Wood and Landry (2007) on such intercultural initiatives.

While the coffee morning is a more structured place of social interaction where contact goes beyond casual greetings, regular contact at the school gates or when dropping off children at nursery can similarly lead to more friendly and sustained relations across cultural differences (see also Jayaweera & Choudhury 2008; Wilson 2013 [forthcoming]). Sometimes, such relations can develop into important structures of mutual support. For example, a Turkish mother who was going through difficulties with her husband once asked Harriet, one of my British informants, whether she could look after her children for a night. Harriet, whom she knew from her children's school, was the only person whom she trusted enough to be able to provide support in a situation in which she did not want to call on her tight-knit family and kinship networks. Even if these two women are not close friends, the informal relations they have formed through the regular encounters at school provided this Turkish woman with an extra social resource for situations of emergency. Also, even if informal relations between parents do not go beyond these specific places of schools 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 people who are different.

This confirms the so-called 'contact hypothesis' (Allport 1958) developed in social psychology, according to which positive contact 'under cooperative interactive conditions' helps to change stereotypes and negative attitudes towards 'outgroup members' (Brewer & Gaertner 2001: 455). However, the emphasis, here, is on *positive*, and not all encounters in parochial space are necessarily of a positive nature. As mentioned earlier, civility towards diversity can also strengthen boundaries. This was exemplified by a Congolese informant when describing relations with his neighbours.

Christian, who has lived in the UK for 20 years, explains how you 'need to be diplomatic' when dealing with people of other backgrounds, both regarding good relations and in regard to ensuring boundaries. When I asked him about his neighbours, he told me the following:

That's another issue. Neighbours; you know we are different. We live in a place where left: British; right: Caribbean; on top: Asian; bottom: Turkish. Look at that scenario! So you need to be diplomatic, you know, especially as a parent, you need to be diplomatic. (...) you need to understand the temper of the neighbour. I know my neighbour, every time he's angry, I just say hello to him, that's enough. Close the door finish (...). You need to be careful (...) to be open, but sometimes closed.

Thus, although Christian says that he has good relations with his neighbours and generally with people of other backgrounds, he also describes how you have to be consciously civil towards people who are different. He says that politeness is one of

the most important things to get on in this country. His description of dealing with difference by 'being open, but sometimes closed' aptly summarizes the fine balance between engaging with diversity, and keeping positive relations by way of avoiding contact. It also exemplifies an element of pragmatism already observed in the public realm where people treat everybody the same because everyone comes from elsewhere. In the parochial realm, Christian pragmatically negotiates between keeping a distance and at the same time maintaining positive relations.

Thus, in the parochial realm where more regular encounters take place, dealing with difference is characterized by both avoidance and engagement. The more regular and sustained contact in the parochial realm enables people (at least those who choose to participate in interactions in such spaces) to ask each other questions when differences do come up in their conversations. Importantly, however, the bulk of conversations focus on commonalities rather than differences, with people attempting to create a shared understanding of the complexities that come with living in a super-diverse and continuously changing urban context. This focus on shared themes could also be interpreted as a defining factor of conviviality. Furthermore, focussing on shared themes helps to avoid addressing possible tensions. It is part of what Christian describes as 'being diplomatic', being 'open' and at the same time 'closed'.

Conclusion: Convivial relations and polite distance

What are the differences in patterns of conviviality in the public and the parochial realm? While both realms are characterized by commonplace diversity, in the parochial realm cultural differences are acknowledged, while in the public realm, people treat everybody universally the same and somewhat ignore other people's differences. Lofland (1989) has also described this as indifference towards diversity. This indifference is exemplified by rather limited knowledge or curiosity about other residents' life-worlds and cultures. This also applies to the parochial realm where difference is rarely discussed, as exemplified by the parents' coffee morning. My informants' own interpretation of this was that asking people about their background might imply treating them like outsiders. Even if competent in communicating and interacting with people of various categorical groups, Hackney residents of all kinds of backgrounds often have very little idea about other residents' cultural backgrounds. They are perfectly comfortable with muddling through the neighbourhood in day-to-day

life and somehow communicating with various types of people, but many of them know little about other people's ways of life. Neal et al. (2013:318) describe these 'mundane competencies for living cultural differences' as 'cool conviviality' or 'light engagement'.

Hence, while not talking about difference could be interpreted as a way to avoid tensions, it could also be explained with the existence of a general acceptance of people who are different and a sense that as long as people interact and are friendly, things are fine. Noble (2009) refers to the acceptance of people who are different as 'unpanicked multiculturalism', contrasting it with the 'panicked multiculturalism' that has dominated debates on cultural and religious diversity and that has focused on tensions and conflicts between different groups, reflected in the backlash against multiculturalism in public and policy discourses across Europe (Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). Hackney is a prime example of such unpanicked multiculturalism.

The lack of tensions I have observed in both public and parochial space could also be grounded in the fact of super-diversity itself, or in other words, that there is no one dominant group in the borough. A local councillor explained the reason why there was little resentment between different groups as follows:

There are so many ethnicities in this borough that everybody is living on top of each other and knows all manner of ethnicities. There is not a mythical group out there that they can blame.

He describes how 'it is impossible to have enemies' in this kind of mixed context. However, Hackney's unpanicked multiculturalism is manifest as a kind of superficial acceptance of different life-styles and cultures, sometimes paralleled by the appreciation of diversity, but it is not always translated into a deeper mutual interest in each other. In his study on cosmopolitan values among residents of different backgrounds in North London, Devadason (2010: 2954) similarly finds that

(...) the visible ethnic diversity of north London boroughs and residents' perceptions of their neighbourhoods are indicative of a 'cosmopolitan' milieu in the colloquial sense of the word. However, they do not necessarily signal the acceptance of cosmopolitan values, meaning transformative engagement with difference.

For Hackney's residents, many of whom are busy enough just getting by and dealing with their everyday concerns, paying particular attention to other people's cultural backgrounds and actively engaging with their differences might go beyond their capacity. If everybody around you is different, with whom do you start engaging

about their difference? Van Leeuwen states that ‘to argue that modern urbanites should be cosmopolitans by being “open” to cultural difference and by “celebrating” diversity might be too demanding given the state of many cities today’ (van Leeuwen 2010: 635). In fact, it could be argued that ‘indifference to ethnic or cultural differences might be a mode of “dealing with diversity” ’ (van Leeuwen 2010: 639). Thus, *not* dealing with difference could also be interpreted as a way of avoiding conflict and tensions.

This is also exemplified by the fact that parallel to numerous relations formed with people of other backgrounds in the parochial realm, these relations are seldom translated into private space. The in-depth interviews in particular, but also participant observation showed that despite positive relations across differences, people’s private relations are often divided along ethnic and especially socio-economic lines. Despite an increasing number of people in Hackney who identify as ‘mixed’ (6.4%, ONS 2013), this number is still relatively low compared with the rest of the population and the degree of ethnic diversity. While people live together in the public and parochial realm, they dwell apart when it comes to private relations (Wessendorf 2010; [forthcoming]). Importantly, none of my research participants have described this as a problem. Rather, it was described as normal that, as one of my informants put it, ‘similar people attract each other’.

The example of Hackney shows how conviviality in public and parochial space can be paralleled by divisions in private space, but that these divisions do not necessarily present a problem. The existence of commonplace diversity and unpanicked multiculturalism shows how in a place like Hackney, cultural diversity is not the main issue of contestation. Rather, and as I show elsewhere, it is, for example, contestations over public space which can result in tensions between groups, be they defined by ethnicity, religion, life-style or other categories (Wessendorf 2013 [forthcoming]). Furthermore, and as demonstrated by the riots of August 2011, tensions in Hackney lie in social divides along generational and racial lines, with young black people forming the group against which the rest of the population, regardless of their own backgrounds or ethnicity, holds the most prejudice. Rather than cultural differences, it is poverty and disadvantage which present the real challenges to a large part of Hackney’s population. These challenges came to the fore during the riots, where all rules of civility broke down (Wessendorf [forthcoming]). Otherwise, however, they are rarely played out in public or parochial space where people treat each other with civility, independent of their backgrounds.

The fact that diversity has become commonplace among Hackney's residents points to the important role of processes of diversification over time and how people can get used to what is seen as an exceptional demographic situation in other contexts. It also points to how people are able to adapt to their social surroundings, as exemplified by a Kurdish taxi driver who told me that upon arriving in Hackney, he felt scared of Caribbean and African people, but over the years got used to their presence and now has very good relations with them. Although such positive talk about difference does not rule out the co-existence of privately held negative views, it shows that commonplace diversity and relaxed attitudes towards difference emerge over time and as a result of everyday lived conviviality.

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