Challenges and opportunities of living

amidst diversity

Utrecht University

Challenges and opportunities
of living amidst diversity

Introduction

In December 2017 the PhD-thesis Dealing with diversity: Challenges and opportunities for social cohesion in deprived neighbourhoods (Tersteeg, 2017) was published. The main research question of this dissertation was: How do residents of deprived neighbourhoods face the challenges of living among diverse others and how do the residents seize opportunities for positive relations across difference? The study was part of the DIVERCITIES (Governing Urban Diversity: Creating Social Cohesion, Social Mobility and Economic Performance in Today's Hyper-diversified Cities) research project[1]. Fieldwork for this project was undertaken in in 11 EU cities: Antwerp, Athens, Budapest, Copenhagen, Leipzig, London, Milan, Paris, Rotterdam, Tallinn, Warsaw; and 3 non-EU cities: Istanbul, Toronto, and Zurich. In this contribution, which is based on research in deprived and diverse areas in the cities of Rotterdam and Antwerp, we will answer the research question and discuss some implications for further research.

Challenges of living amidst diversity

A first important conclusion is that diversity was not perceived as the most important challenge for residents in the deprived study areas. Rather, the main challenges related to the disadvantaged socioeconomic position of many residents are for instance poverty, unemployment and children dropping out of school. This does not mean that diversity was never experienced as a challenge. One aspect of diversity that residents commonly perceived to be a problem was language barriers. The research areas in Rotterdam and Antwerp house many people with a poor socioeconomic position and a migration background who do not speak the Dutch language. They settle in these parts of the cities because of the affordable housing stock and the presence of co-ethnics, family and friends. Language barriers turned out to frustrate interpersonal communication, to generate feelings of exclusion in semi-public and public spaces and to provoke feelings of frustrations between nearby neighbours. Furthermore, interviewees worried that language deficiencies of parents negatively affect the

socioeconomic prospects of children. In the Dutch research context, language courses have become increasing inaccessible to lower income groups. Different from the Flemish context, in urban policy in Rotterdam the 'integration' of newcomers, for instance following a Dutch language course, is seen as the individual responsibility of these newcomers. Hence, language courses have become hardly affordable for low income groups.

A second major challenge of living amidst diversity was conflicting resident expectations about the uses of shared spaces due to the variety of lifestyles, cultures and household types. A common point of concern was for instance noise nuisance by nearby neighbours, caused by deviating understandings about the noise level and timing of e.g. music and children's outdoor play. Other common concerns included unauthorised garbage disposal and young people loitering which sometimes evoked feelings of unsafety. Undesirable behaviours of fellow residents were experienced most negatively in spaces that residents could not avoid, most notably spaces in and around the home.

A third negative experience of diversity related to the high pace of change in the population of the deprived study areas in the previous two to three decades. Some long-term residents who had lived in the area before it became highly diverse expressed a nostalgia for changing social relations and connections. A sharp decline of early resident groups – identified as white Dutch – affected their sense of community (see also Pinkster 2016). Also changes in neighbourhood facilities resulting from the inflow of diverse ethnic groups did so.

Perceptions of diversity

Interviewees encounter diverse others on a daily basis in the spaces around their house, within public spaces in the neighbourhood, within local facilities and amenities as well as in other parts of the city, and most perceived the complex diversity in their residential environment as a normal, everyday reality (see also Wessendorf 2014). This for instance reflects in the fact that interviewees rarely used the words diversity or difference themselves.

In their perceptions of fellow residents, people made sense of complex everyday diversity by distinguishing between social groups. These groups are defined by attributing markers. People used a variety of markers, including demographic markers (e.g. ethnicity, class, religion and duration of residence), to which they attach different meaning. This leads to multiple and dynamic symbolic boundaries in which the relative importance of the boundaries differs between neighbourhoods as well as between persons. In addition, the boundaries are often interrelated and sometimes used interchangeably. People continuously position and re-position other residents around these boundaries. This for instance became clear when people experienced that they themselves, or people they perceive as being similar to themselves, are situated on the other side of 'the boundary'. The interviewees then used various strategies to contest existing boundaries, depending on the dimensions of diversity that they identify with in their residential environment and the meaning that they address to the boundary. While some people blurred boundaries for individual residents or the collective, others only contested their own position. Nevertheless, demographic markers, particularly ethno-cultural ones, were more prominent in the narratives of adults than in those of young people. Young people more often used geographical markers (e.g. children of a particular area), a particular local school or subcultures (e.g. skaters and rappers) to identify social groups in their neighbourhood. For them, diversity thus appeared to be a more ordinary and practical part of their everyday lived experience (Visser 2014; Wessendorf 2014) than for adults.

Diversity practices

Residents deal with the diversity in their neighbourhood in practice by being selective about their uses of neighbourhood spaces. Adults spend less time in public and semi-public spaces of the neighbourhood than young people, which entails that they are less exposed to diverse others. Young people spend more time in public spaces such as parks and playgrounds than adults. Similarly, adults with a relatively high socioeconomic position spend less time in shared neighbourhood spaces than residents with a lower socioeconomic position (see also Van Kempen

and Wissink 2014). The former choose to use spaces that are less accessible to lower income groups, such as commercial children's playing facilities and coffee bars. In these spaces they mostly meet other people with a high socioeconomic position, rather than people with a low socioeconomic position. In the neighbourhood spaces in which it is impossible to avoid diverse others, residents ought to negotiate their different expectations.

Opportunities for positive relations across differences

Diversity was not only perceived as a challenge. In the highly diverse research areas in Rotterdam and Antwerp, many residents seized the opportunity to develop positive relations across differences. Relations across differences started off around specific commonalities: shared demographic features (e.g. a shared ethnic, religious, educational and/or occupational background, age, household type and/or gender), shared interests (e.g. a passion for knitting) or shared needs (e.g. regularly being in need of a baby sitter). Among adults, positive relations across differences mostly involved weak ties of neighbours and acquaintances, while young people more often considered their diverse ties friendships.

Neighbourhood spaces that facilitate recurrent encounters between people across differences offered most opportunities for positive relations across difference. For adults, shared spaces with neighbours around the house and local institutions and activity spaces such as community centres and schools appeared key facilitators of diverse ties. Young people repeatedly met and developed friendships with diverse others in parks, plaza's and playgrounds as well as neighbourhood-based amenities including schools and sports clubs.

Although residents seized the opportunity to develop relations across all sorts of differences, socioeconomic lines appeared to be hard to bridge. In Rotterdam, relations between different income groups – weak and strong – were rare. This can be explained by the divergent activity patterns of income groups. Residents with a high socioeconomic position spend less time in the neighbourhood and use more exclusive social spaces in the neighbourhood, than those with a low

socioeconomic position. Two other factors that contribute to the socioeconomically segregated networks are the spatial concentration of households with a relatively high socioeconomic position in the area's closest to the city centre and the absence of mixed-tenure housing blocks and streets in the area. In our research areas in Rotterdam people with a high and low socioeconomic position are rarely next-door neighbours.

The importance of weak ties for social cohesion in deprived areas

Close ties of family and friends – Grannovetter's (1973) strong ties – have received most attention in the literature on social networks in diverse, deprived contexts, particular in quantitative approaches. This study chose to not focus on strong ties a priori, but to look at other types of bonds as well, including ties with neighbours, acquaintances and colleagues, when examining the locality-based ties of residents in deprived contexts. The approach demonstrated that these ties – which are weaker in strength than ties between close family and friends – provide more opportunities for relationships across difference than stronger ties. Fieldwork in Rotterdam indicates that diverse weak ties provide all sorts of support that close friends and family could sometimes not provide (enough) including companionship, information and advice and practical support. Furthermore, Peterson (2016) demonstrated that the diverse weak ties in our research areas in Rotterdam contribute to a sense of belonging, acceptance of differences and public familiarity. Finally, our interviewees in Rotterdam exchanged information about work and educational opportunities through locality-based weak ties, indicating that the weak ties offer opportunities for social mobility as well.

Rethinking conceptualisations of urban diversity

The choice to not focus on specific dimensions of diversity such as ethnic and income diversity a priori, but to include multiple dimensions of difference that are meaningful to the research population, provided a comprehensive understanding of social cohesion in deprived areas. It demonstrated that in highly diverse contexts residents build relationships around many

sorts of commonalities, which can be demographical (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) but can also regard specific interests or needs. Furthermore, the approach showed that the relationships develop around a certain commonality but always bridges other dimensions of difference including age, gender, ethnic, cultural, religious, household type, educational and occupational differences. According to these insights, social cohesion levels in the diverse, deprived areas are not low, as studies with a narrow conceptualisation of diversity might conclude.

The study demonstrated that research on social relations and experiences in diverse contexts can be enhanced by conceptualising diversity more comprehensively and focusing on resident perspectives of diversity rather than using pre-defined categories of differences; and by being more specific about the dimension of difference under investigation when drawing conclusions about social cohesion.

The implication of conceptual definitions for research outcomes also became apparent in the way in which this study approached ethnic diversity. The research outcomes in Rotterdam and Antwerp on ethnic diversity in neighbourhood-based social networks were not in line with the literature. This can be explained by differences in definitions of ethnic diversity and social networks. It has long been a tradition in Dutch/Flemish studies on social cohesion across ethnic groups in deprived areas to identify white Dutch/Flemish people as one category and to lump minority ethnic groups into one or two other categories (for instance western and non-western minority ethnic groups). In this dissertation, a plural definition of ethnic diversity was used in which minority ethnic people were not lumped together. This led to the finding that locality based social networks were generally diverse. Researched this way, the locality-based social networks of interviewees with a Dutch/Flemish background even appeared to be slightly less diverse than those of other interviewees.

Using white Dutch/Flemish people as a standard category against which other ethnic groups are measured strongly negates the existing ethnic diversity in social networks. In order to grasp the full picture of social cohesion across ethnic groups in deprived contexts, research needs to treat all ethnic groups as equals.

References

Granovetter, M.S. (1973), The strength of weak ties. American Journal of Sociology, 78 (6), pp. 1360–1480.

Peterson, M. (2017). Living with difference in hyper-diverse areas: how important are encounters in semi-public spaces?. Social & Cultural Geography, 18(8), 1067-1085.

Pinkster, F.M. (2014), I just live here: Everyday practices of disaffiliation of middle class households in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Urban Studies, 51 (4), pp. 810–826.

Tersteeg, A. (2017) Dealing with diversity: Challenges and opportunities for social cohesion in deprived neighbourhoods. Utrecht: Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University.

Van Kempen, R. and B. Wissink (2014), Between places and flows: Towards a new agenda for neighbourhood research in an age of mobility. Geografiska Annaler B, 96 (2), pp. 95-108.

Visser, K. (2014), Navigating the neighbourhood: How youths deal with displacement and life in a deprived neighbourhood. Utrecht: Utrecht University, Faculty of Geosciences.

Wessendorf, S. (2014) Commonplace diversity: Social relations in a super-diverse context. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.

DIVERCITIES
governing urban diversity

Dr. Anouk Tersteeg
Dr. Gideon Bolt
Faculty of Geosciences – Utrecht University
Tel: +31 30 253 1399
g.s.bolt@uu.nl

Further reading:
https://books.ipskampprinting.nl/thesis/514607-Tersteeg/

A sustainable future for cities is within our grasp

Abdeluheb Choho, deputy mayor of Amsterdam and chair of EUROCITIES Environment Forum shares his thoughts on the sustainable future for European cities

As European cities, we are committed to making the transition to a circular economy. Building a more sustainable economy is an urgent environmental necessity and vital to our efforts to future-proof our cities and improve people's quality of life.

The circular economy encourages the reuse, repair and redesign, rather than disposal of materials and is set to provide new and sustainable competitive advantages for Europe.

As the level of government closest to citizens, we see that our societies are already on the path towards a circular transition through citizen and community-based commitments and initiatives. We have a responsibility to facilitate and accelerate this transition, while ensuring that opportunities generate benefits for citizens, leaving no one behind.

Amsterdam's ambition is to become a frontrunner in this transition and we were the first city to commission in-depth research into the potential of the circular economy. This led to the creation of Amsterdam's integrated strategy and the dedicated programme, 'learning by doing'. For example, Amsterdam integrated the principles of circularity from the start in the urban planning strategy of the cities' largest transformation area 'Harbor – City' with 70,000 houses.

Other cities are following this model and the recent EUROCITIES conference, which took place in Ljubljana, focussed on the crucial role cities play in boosting this transition, marking a real step up for cities' engagement.

Local inspiration

The circular economy will lead to changes in the value we place on product lifecycles, with implications for jobs and skills. Moreover, work streams related to product design, repair, reuse and recycling which are all labour intensive will become more prominent.

Brighton & Hove recently hired a 'reuse manager' to work on a modernisation programme that changed the way the council thinks about its offices, assets and approach to work. The King's House project, which involved emptying the largest office block in the city of 1,000 staff along with all their furniture and equipment, was used to benefit residents, organisations and community groups. In total, 150 tonnes of materials were reused, which is equal to £150,000 of economic value re-entering the local community.

As facilitators of collaboration and matchmakers, cities are well placed to involve all sectors of society – citizens, civil society, entrepreneurs, businesses, financial institutions, all strands and levels of government in the circular transition.

Gothenburg's smart map is a digital map based on the participation of local inhabitants and a public partnership. Developed in 2016, it promotes a sustainable lifestyle by encouraging citizens to find alternatives to consumption, such as sharing or lending. Through several public 'map jam events' local initiatives helped to give shape to the project, which now shows around 100 organisations. It is a continuously evolving map, to which any citizen or organisation can propose new initiatives.

As buyers of public goods and services, cities can lead by example, using our public purchasing power in full support of a resource efficient, environmentally friendly, circular transition.

Dusseldorf's city administration consumes about 40 million sheets of office paper annually. With this in mind and with a primary aim of stimulating demand and ensuring a price reduction for recycled paper, the administration started procuring recycled paper for its office needs. This now accounts for 85% of the city's paper use.

As urban planners' cities can trigger new integrated approaches that reduce pressure on urban resources while providing economic growth and social opportunities.

Oslo has been developing a waste management system based on circular principles to ensure separate waste collection is maximised and transform waste into secondary raw materials. To do so it has actively engaged with citizens, farmers as well as with its city's public transportation company. For example, Oslo transforms food waste into biogas, which is used as fuel by buses and garbage collection trucks in the city. Find out more about Oslo's circular economy best practice.

Working together towards success

The EUROCITIES conference was a good opportunity for cities to share experiences and learning with other cities to jointly build capacity and speed up the transition towards circular cities. We shared many case studies publicly, through the EUROCITIES Awards and agreed on other key points going forwards.

To maximise the potential benefits of a circular economy, we need EU leadership, backing our efforts at the city level and setting a strong enabling framework. This will include reviewing EU current and forthcoming legislation from the perspective of removing possible barriers to accelerating the circular economy.

Driving investment in jobs and skills will create a workforce ready to embrace the circular economy in

Europe and promoting sustainable business models will mean considering the whole value chain.

The European Commission and member states should also do more to help facilitate the creation of a market for secondary raw materials, developing a level playing field between virgin material and the reuse of treated material. Developing common indicators of the circular economy, which are agreed by all stakeholders, would also help to create standards and speed up progress.

As cities, we are ready to work with all partners, including through the urban agenda partnership on circular economy, business organisations, the EU institutions, member states and the circular economy stakeholder platform to support policy and programme developments at EU level from a city perspective.

Together we can work towards success. Together we will build a sustainable future.

EUROCITIES is the network of major European cities, with over 140 members, representing more than 130 million people.

Abdeluheb Choho
Deputy mayor of Amsterdam and chair
of EUROCITIES Environment Forum
EUROCITIES
Tel: +32 2 552 08 88
info@eurocities.eu
www.eurocities.eu

Utrecht University

Visit website