NEITHER TRUST NOR DISTRUST:

Social relations in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Copenhagen

Abstract

This article deals with the politicised notions of trust and social cohesion in urban spaces through a focus on practices of everyday relations in a mixed neighbourhood. Quantitative studies maintain that ethnically diverse neighbourhoods lack in trust and solidarity. However, the very meaning and effect of concepts such as `diversity`, `contact` and `trust´ are often unclear. This article challenges both the politicised assumptions and methodological basis for statements on trust as a condition for coexistence. Drawing on fieldwork in a multi-ethnic social housing estate in Copenhagen, this article explores residents´ understandings of diversity, contact and trust. The article argues that trust and strong ties may not be the prerequisite for coexistence in neighbourhoods, where the micro-politics of everyday contacts predominate.

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Introduction

With the last decade of multiculturalism backlash (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), public debates have deemed the existence of urban ethnic `diversity´ as a hindrance to trust, inter-ethnic contact and social cohesion. Quantitative research within politicised fields such as social cohesion and social capital maintain that ethnically diverse neighbourhoods are lacking solidarity, trust, mutual cooperation and friendships, and that diversity has negative effects on social interactions (Putnam 2007). However, qualitative studies on multi-ethnic neighbourhoods produce different and less problem-focused images of neighbourhood relations that reveal various forms of informal everyday contact (Hansen et al. 2010; Peters 2011; Wessendorf 2014). My own experiences of doing ethnographic fieldwork on neighbourhood relations in a multi-ethnic social housing project in Copenhagen showed similar results (Jensen 2015, 2016).[1] The fieldwork was part of a major research alliance on `social cohesion and ethnic diversity´ in Denmark. Consequently, the issue of trust was a central research question. When interviewing residents about the nature of neighbourhood relations, my attempts to ask questions about whether they had trust in their neighbours often appeared as highly irrelevant and made no sense for their conceptualisations of neighbourhood relations. Instead, they evaluated neighbourhood relations in much weaker terms, expressing relations based on distance as fundamental for good neighbourhood relations.

These different research findings on the meaning of trust reflect a difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. Research on social cohesion and social capital is generally quantitative and tends to construct notions of trust on presumed parameters based on an idea that with trust is essential good to neighbourhood relations (Hooghe et al. 2009; Lancee & Dronkers 2011). Furthermore, this particular research field reflects ways of sharing the worry and vocabulary of policy-making, and may thus have a legitimising effect in service of political statements. The purpose of this article is to challenge both the politicised assumption of the statement that trust is a condition for coexistence and essential to good neighbourhood relations and the methodological basis for such statements. Much quantitative research on social cohesion treats trust as a concept that can be applied to measure degrees of social cohesion, and relies on external constructions of parameters and qualities of trust used in surveys. Furthermore, the research tends to associate trust with conditions of similarity and homogeneity, implying that diversity stands in opposition to trust and therefore has negative effects on trust. This implied problematic relationship between trust and diversity is no less critical. This article treats `trust´ and `diversity´ as emic rather than as analytical concepts, exploring local perceptions and uses of such terms. The article offers an ethnographic case study on residents´ perceptions of diversity, contact and trust, arguing that the social relations of everyday life in mixed housing estates provides a picture of coexistence radically different from the politicised concern with trust and social cohesion in urban spaces dominated by diversity.

The article is based on fieldwork carried out in 2010 and 2011 in Green Park, which for many years has been characterised as a multi-ethnic Copenhagen neighbourhood. Fieldwork included

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participant observation, and involved different types of qualitative interviews with 34 residents with different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.[2] Moreover, data included a master plan and a survey on neighbourhood relations in Green Park (Niras 2008).

The first sections conceptualise diversity, contact and trust and contextualise the issues of trust in the Danish public debate on urbanity and integration. The following sections based on fieldwork in Green Park explore the residents´ notions about diversity, neighbourhood contact and trust, and show how the weak ties that arise from sharing space predominate over strong and personal ties.

Conceptualising diversity, contact and trust

The American political scientist, Robert Putnam, is known for arguing that ethnic diversity in residential settings leads to declining solidarity and reduced levels of trust (Putnam 2007). This thesis is, among other things, based on observations that residents from neighbourhoods with high ethnic diversity have weak formal and informal networks and less trust in others. Other scholars have criticised Putnam´s thesis for not being adequate for European countries where levels of trust are generally high (Hooghe et al 2009) and for relying on single-level analysis (ibid.; Lancee & Dronkers 2011). Critics of Putnam´s thesis furthermore point to the contextual, dynamic and multi-layered dimensions of diversity (Hooghe et al 2009), arguing that different forms of diversity such as socio-economic, religious and linguistic diversity may affect trust in different ways (Lancee & Dronkers 2011). This critique is internal in the sense that it still subscribes to the foundational premises and methodological framework of the cohesion discourse (see Gressgård & Jensen 2016). From a qualitative and anthropological approach, however, conceptualising diversity requires attention to the variety of differentiation and belonging, and how they come into play in social life, e.g. in relation to time and place, processes of interaction and power relations. Diversity is thus relative and a matter of perspective rather than an absolute phenomenon (Olwig 2013).

Another concept crucial to Putnam´s thesis is contact, which is no less problematic than the concept of diversity. The very question of whether inter-ethnic contact in neighbourhoods and other public places reduces or enhances prejudice has been discussed amongst scholars for decades (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Literature on social cohesion often presumes that residents have less contact with one another in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (Gijsberts, van der Meer, & Dagevos, J. 2012). Yet, such findings are often based on quantitative data that does not consider the actual practices and interactions amongst neighbours. What `contact´ implies is often unclear, and, if defined, contact relies on strong notions of sociality such as loyalty and trust. Theories on contact as promoting meaningful relations and social integration thus depend on unclear notions of `contact´ and naïve imaginings of contact as directly leading to respect for diversity (Amin 2006; Valentine 2008). Discussions about whether inter-ethnic contact can actually lead to changing values and prejudices with respect to diversity thus appear to rely on certain ideas and sentiments about the quality of social relations and of contact as leading to affectionate bonds.

The Oxford online dictionary defines trust as `a firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something´. The scholarly rhetoric about trust in relation to social cohesion associates trust with reliance, confidence and dependence and with other terms such as loyalty and solidarity. Research on diversity and trust emphasises generalised (versus localised) trust specifically

as trust in one´s fellow citizen as a crucial prerequisite for collective action and patterns of cooperation (Levi 1998 in Hooghe et al 2009: 200). Yet, as in the question of contact, `trust´ tends to remain undefined in surveys, thereby bringing into question the validity of measures of experienced trust. Notions of contact and trust seem to be based on notions of sociality that are too simple and limited. The British human geographer, Ash Amin, argues that trust is not a qualified or unqualified given of human nature, defining instead `trust´ as a collaborative and situated practice that is relationally constituted (Amin 2012: 37). Amin´s point reflects a growing focus on the interplay between physical places and social relations (Amin 2006; Galster 2007; Gehl 2007; Peters 2011; Wallmann 2011). Furthermore, studies on 'everyday multiculturalism' in urban spaces focus on practices of routine and unreflective forms of intercultural encounters and interactions (Werbner 2013), exploring ways and conditions for 'living together,' thus focusing on everyday practices and lived experiences of diversity (Noble 2013; Wessendorf 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2009).

These different positions on neighbourhood contact reflect various or even contrasting levels of analysis and methods that point to different internal and external perspectives on places (Mazanti 2002). Statements on social cohesion, diversity and trust rely on quantitative research data that does not capture the ways these terms are – or are not – used and practiced in the everyday lives of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. This article offers an analysis that challenges assumptions about the very notions of diversity, contact and trust that form the basis of the scholarly discourse on social cohesion.

Contextualising trust and safety in social housing areas

In September 2014, the Danish People´s Party, a political party with a strong anti-immigration platform, launched a campaign on `Safety and Trust,´ with the slogan `fighting for securing a safe every day for all Danes´ (Dansk Folkeparti 2014). The party´s rhetoric presents immigration and multi-culturalism as threats to `our culture of trust´, associating immigrants with `countries without culture of trust´ (Kattrup 2013). With this campaign, the Danish People´s Party bought into the global politicised rhetoric that associates trust with homogeneity and community based on `common´ values, challenged by ethnic diversity. This kind of rhetoric appears to be gaining ground (see Grünenberg and Freiesleben 2016), despite Demark being the country with the highest levels of trust, and a country where trust is perceived as a condition for national welfare and thus is part of national pride (Svendsen 2012).

The concern with ethnic diversity in Denmark particularly involves urban issues and worries of ethnic segregation. The history of urban policy is characterised by a negative focus on ethnic minorities, with urban regeneration serving as a tool for developing ethnic minorities´ capacities for integration. The increase of ethnic minority residents in social housing areas since the 1980s has involved a focus on these areas, which are often termed `vulnerable,´ `endangered´ and `pockets of deprivation´ because of their concentration of people who are classified as poor, unemployed, criminal, `un-integrated,´ mentally ill or addicted. One area of the government's debate on values concerns migrants´ settlement patterns in multi-ethnic residential areas. This debate focuses on `ghettoisation´ and `parallel society´ as synonyms for `bad integration´, i.e. problems of segregation, social housing and social isolation (Pløger 2004).

During the late 2000s, a concern with safety (*trygded*) has begun to play a crucial role in the Danish discussion of ghettoisation, revolving around issues of unemployment, crime and vandalism in `vulnerable´ social housing estates (see also Gressgård 2016). This national concern is based on assumptions that residents in such areas are less safe than in other areas. The concern is manifested in master plans aimed at reducing crime amongst youth through creating initiatives such as jobs and clubs. As in other European cities, the municipality of Copenhagen has organised a `safety index´ measuring the amount of lack of safety based on indicators such as exposure, vulnerability and crime (www.kk.dk/tryghedsindeks).

Green Park

The field site Green Park, a social housing estate, is situated in a Copenhagen neighbourhood that is less associated with immigration compared to the other neighbourhoods in this city. Nevertheless, about 50 per cent of Green Park´s residents are of immigrant descent. Green Park was constructed in the mid-1960s as a new modern residential area in a neighbourhood on the southern outskirts of Copenhagen, and constitutes thirteen blocks of three storeys each, in a total of 470 apartments with balconies. About a thousand people reside in Green Park, which is almost equally represented by ethnic majority Danes and ethnic minorities belonging to major non-Western immigrant groups, primarily from Turkey, Pakistan, Somalia, Iran and Lebanon. Other types of diversity involve socio-economic status and family structure with residents who are unemployed, retired, ill, studying, married, single (with or without children), divorced and widowed. Categories of residents include people diagnosed with various mental illnesses as well as alcohol and drug addicts whom the municipality has `placed´ in Green Park.

Although the Danish government does not categorise Green Park as a ghetto, it has attracted some attention as an area at risk of negative development due to incidences of vandalism and other crimes committed by so-called gangs of youth. Since the early 2000s, the municipality of Copenhagen has focused on Green Park as a `deprived´ social housing project because its residents belong to socially exposed groups such as old-age pensioners, drug addicts, ethnic minorities with `integration problems´ and `marginalised´ youth, and because of its general worn-down appearance. The master plan for Green Park points to lack of safety amongst especially the elderly residents, vandalism and a bad image in the local neighbourhood (reference not included to protect anonymity of the source). The visions of the master plan thus include reducing vandalism, creating initiatives for children and youth, creating social networks across social and cultural backgrounds, encouraging the residents´ sense of collective and individual responsibility for their neighbourhood and raising the attractiveness of Green Park through renovation to invite `resource strong´ people to the area. The target group are especially the youth – of whom most are of immigrant descent – and the elderly most of whom are ethnic Danes. The master plan is particularly focused on ethnic minorities and `minority problems´ expressed through a lack of sense of responsibility for or ownership to the neighbourhood, default residence maintenance, lack of participation in `resident democracy,´ and unemployment and vandalism amongst the youth. The master plan describes the elderly residents as unsafe and lonely, without mentioning other residents, such as the mentally ill or drug addicts as potentially problematic; its focus is explicitly on ethnic minorities as playing a major role for developing Green Park into an `exposed´ neighbourhood.

Such an external perspective (as represented by the master plan) tends to be static, locked in time and place by perceiving the place as an entity, reflecting the dominant discourse on social housing projects as `exposed´. Those working in the social housing association, with whom I talked, reiterated this perspective by defining Green Park as a `vulnerable´ residential area and by making an association between the share of ethnic minority residents and the extent of the problems in the area. I often encountered this association between `immigrants´ and `problems´ during field work, an association that Gregory (1998) describes as a global phenomenon for multi-ethnic residential areas. The external perspective represented by politics of urban planning contains various prejudices about everyday life in social housing areas often both reproduced, yet also contested, by the internal perspectives of the residents (Mazanti 2002).

Narratives of places tend to be distilled into myths expressing the qualities of the area, explaining the way people are, live and relate to one another (Wallmann 2011: 123). Generally, the residents´ stories about Green Park both confirmed and contested the external perspective of urban planning politics. Their common narrations about their residential area often revolved around dramatic events such as car chases, shooting incidents, deaths, robbery, gang crime and vandalism. Some of these stories were about the ethnic minority youth as trouble-makers, vandalising the residential area by setting it on fire, and about increasing crime related to the arrival of immigrants. Such stories tended to emphasise ethnic minority residents as problems in the social housing estate, e.g., to be blamed for turning Green Park into a ghetto. The stories thus constituted the external perspectives on the locality, substantiating boundaries between ethnic majority Danes and ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, the repertoire of internal perspectives on Green Park was broad, and the stories covered various categories of residents beyond `the ethnic´ (*de etniske)* or `the foreigners´ (*udlændingene*) including `those who have lived here from the very start´ (*dem der har boet her fra starten af*), `the drinking people´ (*drikkefolkene*), `the drug addicts´ (*narkomanerne*), `the ill ones (*de syge*) and `the single men´ (*de enlige mænd*).

Perceptions of safety and trust

The choice of Green Park as a field site was motivated by its many forms of diversity, which made it an appropriate laboratory site for exploring social relations among residents. When starting fieldwork, I was surprised to find that there were no entry phones outside the staircases; anyone could enter the building. Furthermore, when I walked around the neighbourhood knocking on doors to interview residents, they often invited me into their homes without having a clear idea of who I was. However, they knew me as somebody they had met in the neighbourhood, often mistaking me for either a resident or, more likely, someone working in the local project office of the social housing association. Such fieldwork moments may reflect trust as a situated practice that is relationally constituted (Amin 2012: 37). Yet, when I interviewed residents about their neighbourhood relations, they rarely mentioned the word `trust´ (*tillid*). The residents generally said that they did not `trust´ (*stole på*) their neighbours, but they felt `safe´ (*tryg*) in the Green Park neighbourhood, emphasising the place and its social and relational features over quality of social relationships with individual residents. Their emphasis on issues of `safety´ reflected the national political concern with urban development in multi-ethnic housing estates. According to a 2008 survey, 91 per cent of the residents in Green Park felt safe both in

their own apartment and in the public areas (Niras 2008). In our conversations, the residents used the word `safety´ for people in general and for places in Green Park in particular. Such perceptions reflect the concept of place as inherently relational, as inseparable from and coming into existence through human experiences and practices (Massey 2005).

Female residents and the elderly in particular were preoccupied with lack of safety, which they associated with danger, expressing gendered aspects of space. These associations were related to being afraid of walking through Green Park in the dark, particularly at certain places and on deserted paths. Open-lighted places created feelings of safety and isolated dark places gave a sense of lack of safety. During the renovation of the neighbourhood, the row trees in front of each block were removed to prevent crime, based on the assumption that the trees served as hiding places for criminals. Moreover, as part of this renovation, the housing association had placed a surveillance camera at the main entrance. As an interviewed representative from the social housing association told me, `It creates safety and trust [among the residents].´

The residents´ stories about those endangering their safety included residents with psychic disorders, alcohol and drug addicts and youths. One particular group of teenagers – teenage boys of immigrant descent – often hang out at the deserted places that the female residents, in particular, expressed reluctance to walk by. Yet, many residents expressed empathy and even loyalty towards these young boys by indicating that others outside of Green Park tended to misunderstand and therefore misrepresented them. Eva, a 29-year-old ethnic Danish woman who had lived in Green Park for five years and was married to Sultan from Iraq, told me that when she had first moved into Green Park, into a block that included many immigrants and addicts, she was very affected by the external perspectives on Green Park as an unsafe place. Nonetheless, living side by side with drug addicts changed her perspective. She thought that the general negative image of immigrant youth affected the attitude to the group of teenagers in Green Park:

> There at the path [describing its location in Green Park in detail] I have felt unsafe while walking there. Because suddenly a bunch of 14-year old guys are standing there, so, okay, I have to get through… Because there was nothing else, a bit deserted. But they have never actually done anything to me, and they have never made a move to do anything to me. It´s more like, although even I live together with someone from another country, then you get influenced by the media image about immigrant gangs, and then there´s this group standing there. But they just stand there. Well, what else should they do, they are out playing. And some groups of young guys have like a harsh tone of voice toward each other, and like a bit of an attitude, but it´s only part of their playing, of their way of being together. It´s not anything that makes them threatening toward others. But it may seem a bit threatening when you come across them like that [bumping into them].
>
> (Eva)

Other residents were also aware of the presence of these teenage boys and the potential danger aroused by their presence. Still, they were conscious about interacting with and creating a kind of relationship with them, through greeting when passing one another on the paths of Green Park. Gustav, a 67-year-old man who had lived in that part of the city most of his life, said:

> But I do feel safe, well, yes safe, I do. I go out [in the area of Green Park] in the evening. I don´t care. And we [he and his wife] go for an evening walk once in a while and look at what is happening. And well, we also know a lot of the others… and greet them. Also the young foreigners there, with football and such things, we talk and I tease them, `Well, who´s winning Champion´s League´ and things like that. I also think that the way you yourself approach things matters a lot. If you ignore them right away, they get angry.
>
> (Gustav)

While Gustav, when speaking about the presence of the troublesome teenage boys of Green Park and about creating a kind of relationship to them through greeting practices, may not mean that he trusted them, he was obviously aware of the positive effect of greeting them and talking to them. Greeting and chatting were countermoves to reduce the feelings of lack of safety. Gustav´s insistence on contact with the teenagers may thus reflect both the habits of negotiating shared place, and a mutual empathy arising from the principles of co-presence on common ground (Amin 2012: 78).

The racialisation of space produced by the ethnic minority teenage boys, together with other `social problems´, most likely served to endanger the space. Still, the residents considered these teenagers as belonging to Green Park – and therefore seemed careful about their ways of talking about them, and even defended them from the stigmatisation of others. Many residents talked about real crime such as theft and assault as coming from people and groups represented by major gangs outside of Green Park. These actors appeared to be the real causes for feelings of lack of safety. The association of lack of safety with unknown outsiders manifest in the ways that some residents felt insecure about not having entry phones at the doors to the staircases or about peepholes on their front doors being placed too high. Lack of safety was reflected in the residents´ stories about (unknown and outside) troublemakers running around in the neighbourhood. Part of the neighbourhood activities the residents mentioned was thus neighbour watching, i.e., keeping an eye on neighbours´ homes to prevent harmful accidents, which generally constitutes a major neighbouring activity (Laurier, Whyte and Buckner 2002). The renovation of Green Park made the new apartment windows larger than the older ones, providing an immense view of Green Park and its surroundings. The residents – particularly the elderly – often spent a lot of time window watching, usually through their kitchen windows, which faced the large open court. They could easily observe who was moving around in the area and entering and leaving the stairways.

The residents´ feelings of safety depended in other ways on other residents. What constituted `safety´ (*tryghed*) for residents was `having others nearby,´ `[the] many people in the neighbourhood´, `to know people in the neighbourhood´, and `good neighbourhood relations.´ Thus, safety was primarily associated with other neighbours, possibly explaining their understanding of the teenagers and attempts at representing them in more positive ways that normalised their behaviour. Danger and lack of safety were associated primarily with outside intruders.

While residents often spontaneously embarked on a discussion about `safety´, interviewing them about trust was both awkward and difficult. Some people did not know the meaning of `trust´ (*tillid*). The few residents who spoke about `trusting´ (*stole på*) other Green Park residents emphasised trust as a personal relationship, a question of whom one was talking to, and of how others treated their talk (e.g. gossiping and giving information about them that may harm them in

different ways). For many, trust meant feeling confident that people would not gossip. The question of trust was related to what kind of categories of residents one could or could not rely on. The residents particularly mentioned residents with psychic and drug-related problems as people whom they did not want to let into their home and did not trust.

Most residents appeared to find the word `trust´ unimportant or irrelevant when speaking about neighbourhood relations, apparently because the word indicated a (perhaps strong) personal relation, in contrast to the residents´ sense and evaluation of place as not explicitly involving other residents. To my question of whether she felt trust in her neighbours, Eva said: `I don´t have less trust in people here that I have in people in other places.´ This statement may reflect a distinction between the private (home) and the public places of Green Park, with interaction mainly limited to the shared public spaces. In this context, the issue of trust revolved around who one was willing to let into one´s (private) home.

For the residents, neither trust nor safety were issues of worry. Although they were influenced by the public discourse on lack of safety in multi-ethnic social housing estates, they generally perceived Green Park as a `safe´ area and lack of safety as coming from outside intruders. This perception reflects the difference between an external and rather static perspective and an internal perspective revolving around the residents´ senses of belonging (Mazanti 2002).

Residents´ perspectives on diversity

Different perspectives on cultural diversity were at stake amongst the residents of Green Park. The national rhetoric on cultural diversity in urban spaces, revolving around ghettoisation as a social stigma, had an effect on their perceptions of their residential area. Aware of the term `ghetto´ as a possible marker for Green Park, they would accuse the ethnic minority residents of developing the area into a ghetto. Ethnic majority residents often reproduced dominant stereotypes of immigrants as `problems´ or as `un-integrated´ and `violent´ people with `different mentalities,´ indicating a potential for discrimination and conflict. Ethnic minority residents harboured stereotypes about their ethnic majority neighbours, such as their implicit demands for assimilation and sameness. Such comments allude to the Danish dominant rhetoric that conceptualises integration as an assimilation into Danish culture and society.

Generally, the way the residents talked about one another reflected the `us´ versus `them´ inter-ethnic relationships that prevail in the public Danish debates. However, the residents were also aware of their use of stereotypes and prejudices about one another, and they expressed a need for transcending stereotypes. The majority residents were aware that the media and public debates on immigrants and social integration had an effect on their perceptions, while ethnic minority residents expressed the necessity to move beyond their own stereotypes of ethnic Danes. The residents would often go against the cultural essentialist representations of `Danes´ and `foreigners´, expressing an alternative demotic discourse (Baumann 1996) that reflects a complexity with respect to identities, thus indicating multifarious ways of being `Danes,´ `immigrants´, `Muslims´ etc.

As part of my research project, I asked people in Green Park about the public debate on integration and cultural diversity. They generally had many different positions on the government´s integration politics. Both ethnic minorities and majorities tended to either incorporate or reject the dominant discourses on integration in different ways.

Overall, they shared a rather abstract notion of integration in the broad sense of `conforming to Danish norms and rules,´ a notion that mirrors a prevalent understanding of integration in the Danish public debate. Some residents articulated a rather rigid rhetoric on integration as assimilation to Danish culture, which presumably expressed opposition towards the existence of cultural diversity. Yet this rhetoric was in sharp contrast to the ways in which they talked about the cultural diversity of their ethnic minority neighbours.

During my fieldwork, the residents on rare occasions embarked on a spontaneous talk about the diversity of Green Park. When talking about diversity, they mainly pointed to `culture differences´ (*kulturforskelle*) and mentioned language, food, smells, alcohol, noise, clothes and gender roles, conceptualising diversity as a social fact. When answering my questions about how they experienced living in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, they often did not really care about the existence of cultural diversity in the neighbourhood. They would express ideas about following rules in Denmark without having to abandon their own culture. Thus, the residents did not engage in the public debate on `right´ or `wrong´ culture, or culture as an `obstacle´ to integration.

Most of the time people in Green Park showed a relative indifference and pragmatism towards the question of cultural diversity. After all, people lived their everyday lives inside their private homes and did not care so much about the outside surroundings. 50-year-old Yvonne, who had lived in Green Park for 10 years, expressed clearly that the question of ethnic identity or difference was less important than sharing place and having one´s home in Green Park:

> I think it´s totally unimportant what nationality my neighbour has, but I also presume that …. well, we have our lives here .… Well, we are perfectly able to be friends even though we don´t have the same nationality and language and political conviction and religious and sexually and so forth. In fact, I couldn´t care less about that. But what we do have in common is that we live here, and that we want to have a nice place to live. It´s our home, this place.
>
> (Yvonne)

The residents´ indifference towards issues of cultural diversity appeared to be related to their general ways of practicing neighbourhood relations based on common experiences of living in that particular neighbourhood, to their general de-emphasis of private and personal neighbourhood relations and related to general forms of community that arise from sharing place. In Green Park, the visible presence of immigrants was generally experienced as a normal part of social life, constituting `commonplace diversity´ (Wessendorf 2013). This lack of interest in diversity may thus reflect a habit of seeing the strange as familiar, based on principles of multiplicity as the defining norm and of co-presence in terms of being on common ground (Amin 2012: 75).

The residents´ positions on the existence of diversity in Green Park reflect different dimensions of diversity. One dimension was diversity as a social fact, given the multiplicity of ethnicities and countries of origin in the area, another dimension was diversity as a political concern (Berg and Sigona 2013) related to integration and ghettoisation. These dimensions reflect different perspectives and emphasis on diversity as something that makes a difference and sometimes not, illustrating diversity as a matter of perspectives rather than of existing substantial entities (Olwig 2013). These different meanings and perspectives were manifested in a main difference between residents´ narratives about cultural diversity,

based on reified notions of ethnicity and culture, and separate lives and their `colour-blind´ practices of social relations in everyday life (Jensen 2015, 2016).

Neighbourhood relations, public space and contact

During the interviews, when speaking about why they liked to live in Green Park, residents mentioned the quiet, the sense of space, the light, the view from their balcony. Such evaluations, however, did not include social relations with their neighbours. When answering my questions about neighbourhood relationships, most residents had difficulties reflecting about this issue. They said that they did not want close contact with other neighbours and gave little importance to neighbourly contact. Overall, residents distinguished between weak local neighbourhood relationships and private, personal ones such as `real friendships,´ i.e. between the weak ties of acquaintances and the strong of friendships (Granovetter 1973). They thus illustrated the practice of distanciation as fundamental to neighbourhood relations as a way of avoiding intrusion (Gullestad 1992; Laurie, Whyte and Buckner 2002).

Amongst the interviewed residents, the most common attitude was that neighbourhood relationships had little or no meaning to them, although still giving them a sense of safety. However, they emphasised that neighbourhood relationships consisted primarily of sharing common space, as Yvonne (in the preceding section) expressed by saying `what we do have in common is that we live here, and that we want to have a nice place to live´.

Nonetheless, in practice they revealed multifarious ways of practicing good neighbourly relations based on weak ties. The most basic forms of interaction were based on greeting each other when out and about in the area, chit-chatting about everyday stuff, helping each other with minor and larger things of practical nature and engaging in relationships of exchange, such as sharing food or inviting one another to participate in activities.

Neighbourhood relations in Green Park were mainly rooted in ways that the physical surroundings instigated the residents to relate to one another: outdoor places (e.g. paths), common rooms (e.g. the laundry and fitness rooms), windows, balconies and living side by side. Bumping into others (Noble 2011) at such places constituted informal contact situations. The outdoor areas entailed several opportunities for sitting and standing. I observed residents leaning against the block walls, sitting on benches and hanging around on playground equipment and decorative sculptures. These places constituted `buffer zones´, arenas between the private home and the public spaces (Haugen 1978). The residents would create possibilities for contact in public spaces by meeting in a `third space´ where they could be able to be themselves while mingling with strangers.

Relations across balconies

The relationship between two neighbours, Gustav, aged 67, and Cenk, aged 38, living on the top floor along separate but adjacent staircases, illustrates the ways that the physical places may facilitate the development of social relationships. Gustav was born and raised locally, and he and his wife had lived in the same apartment in Green Park since its construction in 1966. Cenk had migrated with his family from Konya, Turkey, in 1981. His family had moved to Green Park in

1988, and he and his sister had remained there, moving into their own apartments. When Cenk married Gülay in 1998, they moved to their present apartment.

During an interview, Gustav told me that the neighbours living in the stairways around him had talked a lot about their new neighbour (Cenk), saying `Oh, now we get someone like that,´ referring to Cenk being a non-Western immigrant. Gustav continued: `But he is very nice, there´s nothing there. It depends on how people harmonise, you can stand and talk across the balcony.´ With time, the two men had developed a relationship across their balconies that were connected and facilitated the sight and sound of activities on each other´s balconies. Cenk often commented on the activities at Gustav´s balcony, for example while Gustav played board games with his grandson on hot summer evenings. At other times, Gustav and Cenk had conversations from their respective balconies. Their relationship had developed into knocking on one another´s doors to ask for practical help, e.g. scraping snow off their respective cars in winter time, and talking when occasionally meeting outside their respective staircases.

The case of Gustav and Cenk illustrates both visual and auditory contact emerging from the physical conditions forming certain spatial arrangements that place neighbours in situations of contact (Laurier, Whyte and Buckner 2002). The relationship between Gustav and Cenk was limited to practical activities, including a bit of chit-chat, which they initiated while accidentally meeting, or asking for help in more acute situations. This relationship likely created a form of community and solidarity between them based in sharing and helping one other in everyday life. However, whether their relationship developed into trust, or actually led to changing values and respect for diversity, is difficult to tell. Gustav said that he may have had some prejudices against immigrants before Cenk became his neighbour. Moreover, he said that he had nothing against the many neighbours of immigrants descent in Green Park `as long as they are kind and nice,´ expressing an obliviousness to ethnic prejudice and an emphasis on personal qualities. He also tended to cultivate a general image of ethnic minority neighbours – save Cenk– as `weak in resources´. Cenk told me that he had been discriminated against by other neighbours when he and his family had first moved into Green Park. As this behavior somewhat had abated, he reasoned that the racial discrimination in Green Park had diminished with the increase of ethnic minority residents. Nonetheless, he said that he had never liked living in Denmark and perceived himself as very different from his ethnic Danish neighbours. His relationship with Gustav had apparently not led to major changes in this self-perception, other than that Gustav was an exception. Their relationship primarily illustrated `quotidian transversality´ (Cockburn & Yuval-Davies in Wise 2009) and the ways of using particular modes of sociality to produce or smooth relations in everyday spaces. Gestures of recognition may create feelings of connection among diverse people who share a place, translating `abstract´ others into `concrete´ ones (Wise 2005: 183). However, their interaction most likely did not lead to neither affectionate bonds nor to `meaningful contact´ such as changing values and general respect for diversity as much `contact hypothesis´ indicates (for a critique of contact hypothesis, see Valentine 2008). Their relationship was not one of trust in the sense of `reliance´, `confidence´ or `dependence´ (all of which imply strong ties and personal relationships); neither trust nor distrust characterised their relationship. This finding contrasts with the dominant politicised discourse on social capital and cohesion in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.

The predominance of weak ties

As in other residential areas, the prevalent form of interaction in Green Park constituted contact situations (occasional meetings in or around the block). It was of some significance to the residents whether their neighbours nodded at them, greeted them or simply ignored them when passing on the walking paths in the area. Such minor contact situations apparently made a great difference by transforming people who at the outset were strangers into persons with whom one can have a kind of relationship, `nodding contact´ being important for people´s identity as social beings (Asplund 1991). Daily interactions in Green Park involved gestures of recognition, presumably leading to feelings of connection amongst the many different people who shared the place.

The prevalent forms of interaction constituted weak ties (Granovetter 1973) based on contact situations such as acknowledgement, greetings, and helping others. Interaction in the public spaces of Green Park primarily reflected universal ways of behaving and relating that primarily involved `infiltration´ or permeation between people and the material and visual aspects of public spaces rather than with the quality of the social interaction itself (Amin 2006). Much of the neighbourly interaction reflected 'everyday multiculturalism' in the form of practices of routine and unreflective forms of intercultural encounters (Noble 2013; Werbner 2013; Wise and Velayutham 2009). Forms of neigbourhood contact were characterised by the flow of everyday life constituted in shared places and practices (Pink 2012). Such forms of contact were primarily characterised by `sociation´, that is, concrete ways of togetherness in everyday life. Everyday practices thus expressed the ability to co-operate (Sennett 2012), for example in ways of approaching one another, co-ordinating gestures and movements in shared spaces. Neighbourhood relationships in Green Park were primarily characterised by consociation, a co-operative association consisting of a sense of collective fellowships through daily opportunities for participating in a friendly connection, while still not constituting any strong sense of community (Amit 2012). Different geographical sites of contact both form and limit the nature of social relations; living together as neighbours generally entails co-habitation and collaboration, yet without strong expectations of mutual empathy (Amin 2012: 75). In this perspective, trust is hardly a given qualified of human nature (ibid.: 37).

Conclusion

Discourses about ethnic diversity as an obstacle, or even a threat to highly politicised urban concepts such as social cohesion, social capital, trust and safety are prevalent in both the fields of policy and research. The researchers´ approaches to social cohesion and social capital tend to reproduce the pre-fabricated problematics posed in policy and represent external and static perspectives on places. The purpose of this article has been to challenge assumptions about social capital and trust as conditions for coexistence by pointing to the weaknesses of quantitative methods that dominate research into this field. The article has explored residents´ `emic´ understandings of notions of neighbourhood relations and trust, diversity and neighbourhood contact through qualitative data from ethnographic fieldwork.

Despite Denmark being considered a country of trust and safety, a panicked rhetoric about immigration and ethnic diversity as challenging trust, safety, cultural homogeneity and community based on common values is gaining ground. This concern particularly focuses on the existence of multi-ethnic social housing estates, and on `ghettoisation´ as synonymous for `bad´ integration. While this panic is partly reflected in resident narratives about Green Park, the ethnographic field study shows that neither safety nor trust were major issues for them. The residents perceived trust as a strong personal relationship that was not part of their understandings of neighbour contact, which revolved primarily around sharing space and maintaining weak ties. Consequently, the issue of ethnic diversity, although complex and mirroring both affirmations and contestations of the national public debate on immigration and integration, was generally not considered important to the residents´ everyday lives.

These ethnographic findings challenge and contradict common discourses on what constitutes `social cohesion´ and `trust´ in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, which rely on pre-fabricated and erroneous assumptions about what constitutes good social relations in such neighbourhoods. The article suggests that ethnic differences are relative and a matter of perspective, illustrating the complex meaning of contact, trust and neighbourhood relations. It has argued that trust and strong ties – which tend to overemphasise active positive relations and interdependence among people who are alike – may not be a prerequisite for coexistence in neighbourhoods. Instead, `weak ties´ and the micro-politics of everyday contacts predominate.

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