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*MMG Working Paper 12-08* ● ISSN 2192-2357

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# Public spaces, social interaction and the negotiation of difference[1]

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

*Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften*

Lars Wiesemann
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MMG Working Paper 12-08

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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## Abstract

This paper explores the daily negotiation of ethnic (and other) differences in public spaces in relation to recent debates in urban studies and geography on urban encounters. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Mülheim, a socially and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Cologne, Germany, the paper examines how prejudices are shaped and challenged by everyday encounters in public spaces. In particular, it highlights moments of transgression and conviviality in public spaces and how such experience can lead to rethinking fixed notions towards Others. In addressing these aspects, this paper seeks to contribute to the discussion on the limits and potentials of public encounters with difference.

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## Keywords

public space, encounter, difference, prejudice, conviviality

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# I Introduction

Data from the Eurobarometer Survey on Intercultural Dialogue in Europe (2007: 4-6) show that "day-to-day interaction among people belonging to different cultures is a reality in Europe" and that "random encounters in public are most typical". However, in academic discourse about 'living with difference' the question arises as to whether such encounters with difference in public spaces challenge or harden prejudices towards Others (e.g. Amin 2002; Valentine 2008). Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Mülheim, a socially and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Cologne, Germany, the daily negotiation of ethnic (and other) differences in public spaces is examined in this paper. The empirical focus here is on the experiences of German residents of the quarter in order to explore some of the limits and potentials of public encounters with difference.[2]

The paper investigates the ways in which encounters with Others in public spaces can reinforce prejudices. In this context, the role of sedimented knowledge about the Other in shaping perception and judgment of encounters is shown. This is crucial for the affirmation of prejudices and the direction of behaviour in interaction. The study also explores how encounters with difference in public life change attitudes positively, which has rarely been the subject of empirical investigation thus far. I want to highlight moments of transgression and conviviality in public spaces and how they can lead to the rethinking of fixed notions towards Others. In addressing these aspects, this paper is more widely situated within the emerging field of geographies of encounters, which focuses on the significance of contact in mediating difference (e.g. Amin 2002; Dwyer & Bressey 2008; Swanton 2010; Valentine 2008; Valentine & Waite 2011; Wilson 2011). The paper starts by outlining the discussion on public spaces as sites of encounter and their potential for encouraging tolerance towards and understanding of Others. It will then discuss the spatial and temporal contexts in which prejudices are hardened or challenged, using original empirical material.

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity as well as at the international RC21 Conference 2011 "The struggle to belong. Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings", July 7-9 2011 in Amsterdam.

2 The overall research project also includes the perspective of ethnic minority groups in Cologne-Mülheim. Forthcoming publications will focus on their experience and encounters with difference in everyday life.

# II The importance of everyday encounters and the role of public spaces

Often highlighted in the discussion on diversity is that living with difference necessarily involves regular encounters between strangers, and with the unfamiliar (Amin 2002; Fincher & Iveson 2008; Hewstone 2009; Sandercock 2003; Wood & Landry 2008). The importance of contact in reducing prejudice and in fostering respect between different social groups has long been emphasised in the field of social psychology. This school of thought goes back to the Social Psychologist Gordon Allport (1954), who developed the so-called 'contact-hypothesis' more than 50 years ago. To put it simply, this hypothesis assumes that "merely by assembling people without regard for race, colour, religion, or national origin, we can thereby destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes" (Allport 1954: 261). The argument underlying this assertion is that – under certain conditions – contact between different social groups leads to broad and differentiated knowledge of one another, whereby mutual feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are lessened, trust and empathy are enhanced and, as a result, negative attitudes are transformed (Farwick 2009; Hewstone 2003). Given the relevance of interpersonal contact in mediating difference, the question arises as to which kinds of spaces could facilitate such positive encounters (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008; Vertovec 2007). In this context, there is also the discussion about the role of public spaces. Their potential is, however, evaluated differently.

*Urban public spaces – a breeding ground for mutual respect and understanding?*

In the urban studies literature, the social value of public spaces is often celebrated. Streets, squares, parks or other shared spaces are regarded as sites where people of various social and cultural backgrounds come together and mingle. Here, they can encounter each other in a peaceful and civil way and personal difference is recognised and acknowledged (Berman 1986; Madanipour 1999; Shaftoe 2008; Walzer 1986; Young 1986). The awareness of sharing the same space in similar ways with people different from oneself could create a temporary bond and a sense of community (Carr et al. 1993; Rogers & Power 2000). As a locus for diverse und unplanned encounters, public spaces offer the opportunity for social exchange among people who would not otherwise experience contact in daily life (de Buhr 2010; Gestring 2005; Paravicini et al. 2002; Shaftoe 2008; Young 1986). For Jane Jacobs (1961), contact between different individuals or social groups emerges primarily on city streets.

She underlines the relevance of sidewalks for small-scale socializing involving different people, by arguing that such casual contacts serve to enhance trust and tolerance among the inhabitants of neighbourhoods.

Lyn H. Lofland (1993) looks at people interacting in everyday public life, for example, when they make way for each other on the street, give or receive minor assistance and so on. She argues that in such mundane everyday interactions, people in the public space of cities can learn that they can act together without the necessity of being the same. For her, such experiences of uneventful interactions with people viewed as different may foster a more tolerant attitude. Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2006) also draw attention to such mundane civil exchanges in everyday public encounters. They regard these interactions as a 'doing of togetherness' which expresses mutual acknowledgement (see also Valentine 2008).

Other authors emphasize the positive aspects of encountering the unknown and the unfamiliar – and here public space also plays a crucial role, being a place where "group diversity of the city is most often apparent"; "one always risks encountering those who are different" (Young 1990: 240). The direct experience of diverse people, cultural forms and behaviours is regarded as an enrichment of everyday life; city dwellers have the chance to enter into unfamiliar lives and get to know the strange and the novel (Sennett 2001; Young 1990). These encounters offer the potential of familiarising oneself with different lifestyles and values as well as gaining an understanding of groups and cultures that are different from one's own (Shaftoe 2008; Young 1986). Furthermore interacting with unfamiliar individuals allows urban dwellers to broaden their horizons in terms of experience. With this in mind, Richard Sennett (1986: 295) claims that people grow only through the processes of encountering the unknown. Without engagement with difference, he sees the danger that people will become increasingly prejudiced and narrow-minded (Sennett 1986, 2001).

In light of the above, public space ought to be designed and managed in such a way as to make it freely accessible and attractive to a broad range of people, so that a vital public life and possibilities for unpredictable encounters and interactions between strangers can emerge. According to Ash Amin (2008: 6), planners, urbanists and academics often link this with the expectation that public space, if organized properly, offers the potential for social communion and increases individuals' disposition towards the Other.

Amin (2002), however, also cautions against having overly high expectations of public spaces. He argues that they are not the most appropriate sites for enabling

intercultural exchange and transforming attitudes towards Others. These spaces provide little opportunity for 'meaningful' contact between strangers. This is because they are either simply spaces of transit, and thus encounters are only fleeting and superficial, or they tend to be occupied by particular groups whose presence precludes other users. Furthermore he points out that people in public spaces carry with them a host of pre-formed orientations (e.g. negative racial attitudes). These dispositions are brought into encounters and could shape them in a negative way, so that, for example, some strangers are treated with rejection or hostility (Amin 2010; see also Swanton 2010). He concludes that "the city's public spaces are not natural servants of multicultural engagement" and they "seem to fall short of inculcating interethnic understanding" (Amin 2002: 967, 969).

Likewise, Gill Valentine (2008) doubts whether encounters in public spaces are sufficient for changing negative attitudes and fostering respect for difference. She also points out how limited contact is in these spaces. Referring to findings of two different studies about social interaction in public spaces in cities in the United Kingdom, she sums up that many everyday encounters between strangers cannot even be seen as contact at all. Although the research sites were used by a range of different individuals or groups, there was only rarely direct contact between them. Rather, the sociability in these spaces can more likely be characterized as a passive and indifferent coexistence. Studies about public spaces in Germany (Tessin 2004; Seggern & Tessin 2002), Switzerland (Bühler et al. 2008) and Canada (Germain & Radice 2006) also show that the simple proximity of people does not inevitably lead to contact and exchange in the research sites surveyed. Here, too, contact between different people using these spaces only occurred occasionally and individuals or groups tended to keep to themselves.

In addition, Gill Valentine (2008) argues that people may indeed encounter each other generally in a courteous manner in public, but this should not be interpreted too quickly as a sign of respect for difference. In a qualitative study of white majority prejudice in three UK locations, she identifies a gap between people's attitudes and their actual practices towards minority groups in public spaces. Some of the interviewees encountered members of minority groups in a polite way, even though they are prejudiced against these groups. For Valentine, behaving in courteous ways towards Others in public results from ritualised codes of etiquette. Therefore, she argues that such taken-for-granted civilities should not be mistaken with respect for difference. Further, the research shows that contact with minority groups in public spaces not only leaves attitudes unmoved, but even hardens prejudices. The mere

sight of young black men, Asians or asylum seekers on the street exacerbates existing prejudices (Valentine & McDonald 2004; Valentine 2010). Similar findings are also evident in Patricia Ehrkamp's (2008) ethnographic study of Marxloh, an immigrant neighbourhood of Duisburg (Germany). Here, the publicity of male migrants in neighbourhood space hardened social distance and images of the Other among the German residents. That casual encounters with members of an outgroup in public spaces do not change prejudices, but rather reinforce them, was already pointed out by Gordon Allport (1954) in his seminal work on prejudice.

### *Sites of encounter beyond 'classical' public spaces*

Given this less than optimistic view of 'classical' public spaces (such as streets, squares and parks), other spaces of encounter where contact might yield positive benefits have been discussed. Ash Amin (2002: 959) suggests that the sites for coming to terms with difference are most likely the "micro-publics of everyday social contact and encounter" such as workplaces, colleges, youth centres, sports or music clubs, theatre groups, communal gardens and so on. In these sites, intercultural contact may be more effective and lasting because they can offer opportunities for meaningful exchange and cultural transgression. They are places of purposeful and organized group activity; places where people of different backgrounds can get together in new ways, disrupting familiar patterns and providing the possibility for new attachments. Through engagement in a common venture, individuals have the chance to "break out of fixed relations and fixed notions", and they can "learn to become different" (Amin 2002: 970).

More recently, another suggestion about forms and spaces of contact has been made by Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson (2008). They propose fostering convivial encounters among strangers, whereby individuals have opportunities to construct temporary identifications with others through common interests and activities. Such shared identifications can emerge through fleeting encounters as well as more purposeful interactions. Fincher and Iveson highlight particular spaces which facilitate convivial forms of encounters beyond 'classical' public spaces. For example, they emphasize public libraries as a site of encounter where conviviality can emerge. They provide free access for people and are spaces with a diversity of uses and users. In the course of various activities within the library (such as reading books or newspapers, drinking coffee, surfing the internet and so on) numerous forms of contacts with dissimilar others can occur. In these moments individuals can build shared identifica-

tions as library users. Such convivial encounters may thus lead to new ways of being and relating that are not confined to prescribed identities.

These points of view on how to change attitudes appear plausible when considering social psychology research on the contact-hypothesis and social categorization. This body of research has outlined different conditions under which intergroup contact can lead to positive effects. Members of different social groups should be brought together in a context where participants can get to know each other properly, where there is intergroup cooperation, where a social climate or norms support contact and equality and where multiple, overlapping identities are possible and participants can share a common status (Allport 1954; Brown 2010; Hewstone 2003).

This paper looks to contribute to the debate on public spaces as sites of encounter by focusing on social interactions in classical public spaces. In light of the argument that public spaces are only spaces of fleeting encounters, which leave attitudes unmoved or even prejudices hardened, the question as to whether we expect too much of public spaces seems to be justified. The paper will show that public spaces can indeed be crucial sites for reinforcing prejudice towards Others. It gives insight into how definitions of difference are (re)produced through public encounters. However, I argue that public spaces are also sites where contact with Others can change attitudes in a positive way. The empirical material demonstrates that moments of transgression can occur in fleeting encounters, in which fixed notions of the Other are challenged. Further, the study illustrates that public spaces provide opportunities for meaningful interactions where forms of conviviality emerge that can lead to greater openness towards Others. In the next section I will briefly introduce the neighbourhood studied and the research methods used.

## III The study

The research was conducted in Mülheim, a neighbourhood of the city of Cologne. Cologne is the biggest city in North Rhine-Westphalia, with around one million inhabitants, and is an important media hub in Germany (Wiktorin et al. 2001). Mülheim is one of the most socially and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Cologne. The quarter is a former working-class and industrial neighbourhood close to the city centre, which has undergone major structural change over the last few decades. From

the end of 19th century until long after the Second World War Cologne-Mülheim was an important industrial location. In the course of the process of deindustrialization in the 1980s, more and more jobs were lost and factories closed (Stadt Köln 2009). In comparison to the rest of the city of Cologne, Mülheim now has a higher unemployment rate and an above average number of welfare recipients.

Alongside the economic restructuring, the composition of the population of the neighbourhood changed as a result of immigration, especially after the Second World War. Cologne-Mülheim is now characterised by increasing cultural diversity. At present, it has inhabitants from 134 different countries. Almost half of the around 41,000 residents of the neighbourhood have a non-German background. This includes workers who came to Germany as *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) and their families who followed, refugees from civil war regions, asylum seekers, Roma and Sinti and ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. The largest groups of foreigners are the Turks, Italians, Poles and citizens of the former Yugoslavia respectively. By far the biggest group of foreigners are the Turks with around 5,600 residents in Cologne-Mülheim; about 50% of the foreign population. The Turkish group, in particular, has changed the appearance of parts of the neighbourhood. Some streets have a high concentration of Turkish businesses, restaurants or tea houses, where an 'Oriental-Turkish' street life (Bukow 2010: 114) has been established; at least from the perspective of the German inhabitants.

This study took a qualitative approach to exploring and understanding everyday encounters in public spaces. A mixed-methods approach was taken, which involved in-depth interviews, go-along interviews and participant observation. The fieldwork took place from February 2010 to January 2011 in Cologne-Mülheim. The empirical findings presented here are based on the interviews with German residents of the neighbourhood. A total of 25 interviews were carried out with this focus group. Interviewees were selected in terms of age, gender and social status, to ensure a broad variety within the sample. The interviews focused on biographical aspects, everyday life in the neighbourhood, the usage and perception of public spaces as well as everyday encounters with Others in public. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. In the following section, I will discuss my empirical findings.

# IV The affirmation of prejudices through public encounters

In this section, I will give insight into how everyday encounters in public spaces in Mülheim (re)produce cultural differences and reinforce prejudices. I will also look at how the images of the Other in everyday encounters can shape behaviour in interactions.

Respondents articulated negative attitudes towards different ethnic minorities. Prejudice was mainly directed at people of Turkish origin. This focus on the Turkish minority is not quite surprising, as it represents the largest ethnic community in Mülheim and is the main object of Othering in public discourse in Germany (Butterwegge & Hentges 2006; Sökefeld 2004) . The interviewees mobilised primarily cultural differences between 'Germans' and 'Turks' to justify their negative attitudes. Here certain aspects were highlighted repeatedly, such as the male culture of honour and the superiority of men over women, which were taken as markers of Turkish culture. These values, which are seen as being old-fashioned and backward, were drawn on as signifiers of cultural difference. The reinforcement of such prejudices and images of the Other are closely connected to the visibility and spatial practice of the Turkish inhabitants in the public spaces in the neighbourhood.

Negatively-experienced encounters in the street are formative for the image of Turkish men. Their Otherness is seen mainly in how they 'hang around' in groups around tea houses, kiosks or on street corners and how young Turkish adults 'strut' around the quarter. The respondents stressed what they saw as being inappropriate behaviour by the groups of men such as spreading out on the pavements, narrowing the path and provocative eye contact when passing. The interviewees saw this as the Turkish men transgressing self-evident rules and norms of public behaviour such as *civil inattention* and respect for *personal space* (Goffman 1963, 1971). This male practice is traced back to cultural specifics. For the male respondents this behaviour is connected to the Turkish culture of honour. Actions like blocking the way on purpose and staring down were perceived to be typical Turkish male rituals with which they try to demonstrate their strength and masculinity. Tim (in his early 30s, office worker) described his daily crossing of the quarter as sometimes having to 'run the gauntlet', particularly because of how the younger Turkish men behave on the pavements. These encounters are, in his eyes, manifestations of how these men are trapped in a Turkish culture of honour.

> **Tim:** You head out and a group of around four people come directly towards you. The pavement is blocked. And then they start to mess with you. With stares and the like. Don't

> even attempt to give way and play being big strong men. It's this honour thing… honour just still is a really big deal in their culture. They just have it in them… I think it's really dubious.[3]

Female respondents read this male practice as being representative of the macho behaviour that is rooted in Turkish culture. They complained about the urge Turkish men have to show off their masculinity to women and pointed out their tactless and disrespectful behaviour like aggressive checking out with stares or the comments made when the women passed groups of men. Erika (mid-50s, self-employed) felt that such Turkish men were overstepping the limits of her tolerance. For her, this behaviour demonstrated that Turkish men are machos and that they see themselves as being superior to women.

> **Erika:** Only the Turks eyeball you like this… When you come across this again and again and it's only the Turks, then I just see that as being what Turks do… it's their macho culture. Women are way down the pecking order for them. They just behave differently. And that's just different to what I know from my own culture.

The construction of difference and the reinforcement of prejudice are also triggered by the visibility and spatial practice of Turkish women in public spaces. Several of the respondents pointed out that these women must lead subjugated, backward, other-determined lives. The reason for this point of view is that they usually see Turkish women wearing headscarves in public. This is seen as a marker for a different way of life and a patriarchal culture. The further observation that Turkish women walk behind men is taken as another indicator for their subjugation and how they yield to a traditional female role.

> **Carmen (mid-50s, retired):** They are always walking behind them. The men are always three steps in front of the women. Is that really alright? I always see that on the street… The men also don't carry things for the women. The women carry the shopping. That wouldn't work with us at all. That they put up with that! Not for me.

The image that Turkish women play a subordinate role to Turkish men is not only connected to their visibility in public spaces. The perception that they are usually not visible in public and are only seen when they go food shopping was also put forward as being a sign of a patriarchal Turkish culture. The following quote illustrates this aspect:

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3 The interviews were conducted in German and the quotes have been translated into English by the author for this paper.

> **Peter (mid-40s, unemployed):** When I do see them, then they're usually coming from doing the food shopping with loads of shopping bags or heading out to the shops. Otherwise not much. That's kind of a sign in itself. The women aren't really allowed to go somewhere on their own. They've to look after the home and are satisfied with keeping their husbands happy and don't really have much say about anything.

The perception and interpretation of such encounters must be seen in connection with existing stereotypical knowledge of Turkish culture, which also includes assumptions about typical characteristics of Turkish men and women. This knowledge is acquired through different sources. When the interviewees were asked why exactly they assume that Turkish men are characterised by macho and honour-related behaviour, or that Turkish women lead subjugated lives, they referred not only to their own experiences in the neighbourhood, but also to media reports and hearsay from friends and acquaintances. This sedimented knowledge about the Other, which is delivered through public and everyday discourse, structures the perception and sense making of everyday encounters (Abels 2009; Berger & Luckmann 2009). By identifying the stranger as being Turkish through his/her body (e.g. skin colour, clothing), his/her behaviour (e.g. body language, gait) and the place of encounter (e.g. in front of a Turkish tea house), this supposed knowledge of Turkish people is brought into encounters and used to define the situation. This means that the observed behaviour is interpreted and made plausible by this stereotypical knowledge of Turkish people and Turkish culture. Male practices of bodies, which are identified as being Turkish, are then read as being macho or honour-related behaviour; as is the phenomenon that a female body walking behind a male body, which are both identified as being Turkish, is read as a cultural practice and is taken as a sign of repressive Turkish culture. Socio-psychological research on prejudice has also shown that the behaviour of members of an out-group is often interpreted using stereotypes (Klauer 2008; Schmid-Mast & Krings 2008).

These attributions lead to these fleeting encounters being taken as the *indubitable truth* (Merton 1948) affirming the otherness of Turkish people. This has the result that prejudices and boundaries between 'us' and 'them' become fixed. At the same time the encounters justify the 'right' point of view, i.e. not prejudice, and brand Turkish immigrants as being *out of place* and *out of nation* (Cresswell 1996).

Such images of the Other, combined with personal experience from previous encounters, can situatively shape behaviour towards Turkish residents during interactions. The recognition of Turkish men and honour-dependent male practices on pavements lead some of the male respondents to enter into a *character contest* (Goff-

mann 1967). They may, for example, steer towards a group of Turkish men, make themselves bigger, seek eye contact and push through the group with the intent of undermining the supposed Turkish self-image of superiority and strength. They want to demonstrate that such displays of manlihood are *out of place* and that they are not going to subordinate themselves to it. Frank (in his 50s and self-employed), for example, described how he forced his way through a group of Turkish men, when he realised that they were not going to make way for him.

> **Frank:** When they don't make way for me, then I just force my way through. I don't dodge the situation. Then I also bluster up. I make myself bigger and sometimes I even stick my elbows out. Because I don't accept that I should have to follow some cultural rites which are based on dominance, space-hogging and demonstrating power and honour. That why I go through on purpose and I also want to signal that I'm not going to give in and that it just doesn't work like that.

Other male respondents avoided having eye contact with young Turkish men, to not risk looking at someone in the wrong way, they moved to the side or went to the other side of the road when they saw a group ahead of them as they expected provocative behaviour. Some of the female respondents used similar avoidance tactics when they encountered 'macho-looking Turks'. They controlled where they looked (e.g. staring at the ground or straight ahead), started to walk faster, dug in their handbags, busied themselves with their mobile phones (e.g. by simulating a phone call) or put on headphones. By pretending to be indifferent, or otherwise engaged, they tried to simultaneously avoid contact and appear normal. A number of the interviewees also situatively changed their behaviour towards Turkish women, who are seen as being different on the basis of their appearance. Some of the female respondents mentioned, for example, that they ignore veiled Turkish women on purpose or throw them a deprecatory look. This *non-person treatment* (Goffman 1963) can be understood as a form of *silent violence* (Gyr 1996). They legitimised their behaviour with the image of femininity that veiled Turkish women embody because it goes against their own self-concept and 'Western normality'.

These findings about how pre-formed attitudes on ethnicity direct perception, judgment, and action in encounters echo Dan Swanton's (2010) research on multicultural life and everyday interaction in public spaces in a British mill town. In his study, for example, Asian men are often sorted and vilified as gang members in light of media representation, gossip and so on, so that they are encountered with intensities of suspicion that in turn shape behaviour in interaction. Further, the character contests or the non-person treatment analysed in this study illustrate how every-

day encounters are situatively used as instruments of power (Gyr 1996; Hüttermann 2010) in order to uphold the cultural values of the majority.

The results show that fleeting encounters in public spaces can become a basis for the hardening of prejudices and illustrate the influence of existing stereotypes on the perception and judgement of encounters. Particularly negatively-experienced encounters with persons, who are identified as being members of another culture (e.g. as here with Turkish men), can entail negative generalisations about the whole group and as such diminish the "willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz 1996: 103). The example of veiled women demonstrates that "techniques of boundary inscription between 'us' and 'them' begin with the body" (Valentine 2010: 531) and here as well, visibility in public space is crucial. Nevertheless the positive aspects of public encounters should not be overlooked and will be examined in the next section.

## V Moments of transgression and conviviality through public encounters

Research suggests that encounters with difference in public spaces can also provide the opportunity to destabilise fixed notions about the Other and to transmit a sense of 'togetherness in difference'. Some respondents referred in their interview to moments, occurrences or situations in everyday life, which were positive experiences with people they saw as different. These encounters generated new insights, put opinions into a new context and allowed them to question or even change certain attitudes. Such moments can emerge in both fleeting encounters as well as in more involved interactions in public spaces.

In the numerous encounters of everyday life, fleeting moments in which the Other is unexpectedly experienced 'differently' can occur. Such incidents break through the haze of everyday routine and draw attention because something happened which does not fit in with seemingly self-evident assumptions and thus irritates *thinking-as-usual* (Schütz 1972). These encounters have something surprising about them, something that could not be counted on, because the Other is experienced in a way contrary to the stereotypical expectation and thus the apparently obvious is questioned. In these situations, fixed notions of the Other can destabilise, despite the fleeting character of the encounter. Such transgressive moments can arise in very different situations in everyday public life.

Anna (mid-20s, student), for example, referred to everyday encounters to illustrate how her stance towards veiled Turkish women had changed. Her initially negative attitude came from the notion that Turkish women disapproved of German women like her because of her liberal lifestyle. However, small gestures of friendliness and consideration by the Other, such as a smile or the offering of an umbrella led to irritation and a change in attitude.

> **Anna:** I just thought, that there were barriers, you know, because we're different to them… then once, on the street, a Turkish woman came towards me and I thought that she'd look at me strange again, because I was, like, dressed more liberally. Then she suddenly threw a smile at me. Or another time, it was pouring rain and I was soaked to the skin, 'cos I didn't have an umbrella. Then a Turkish woman took me under her umbrella. That was really nice and I was totally flabbergasted. And then you ask yourself; they can't think we're that bad. Things like that make the feeling disappear bit by bit and I've become more open myself.

Another trangressive moment, which was triggered by a short, coincidental conversation, was mentioned by Eva (mid-50s, office worker). She talked about the negative image she used to have of young migrants, in particular of those with a Turkish background. Due to the public discourse on deficits in integration and language, and also her own impressions from the quarter, she had thought that Turkish youth could only speak broken German. She assumed that they only spoke strange slang and were perhaps not interested in learning proper German. While waiting at a bus stop she happened to start talking to a group of five Turkish youths, who had just come from the job centre and were talking about their visit there and the situation in the labour market. The conversation stayed with Eva, with the result that she has renounced her generalising assessment of Turkish youth.

> **Eva:** They started talking to me and in such good German and so reflected. I had not counted on that at all. Because when they arrived [at the bus stop] I had already made up my mind about them. Just straight away this typical image of Turkish youth you have. They can't speak German properly and so on… But I was quite pleasantly surprised by the situation. And that was a moment you keep. You carry this experience with you. And I avoid the prejudices I had before, because that's often quite unfair to them.

Although both of these examples are of quite different situations, they illustrate how transgressive moments can emerge from short interactions in public life. What these moments have in common is that the other person is seen as a typical representative of a group which is seen negatively. At the same time the representative is experienced as being 'atypical' because existing prejudices presume and lead to the expecta-

tion of different behaviour. The *thinking-as-usual* is irritated; something unexpected happens and people are left flabbergasted. In that moment – as can be seen in both of the above statements – existing notions about the Other are challenged and can lead to a change in attitudes. Socio-psychological research on prejudice also shows that contact in such circumstances can have positive effects. Negative attitudes can be changed when, firstly, the behaviour of members of an out-group is markedly inconsistent with the associated stereotypes of that group and, secondly, when these members are also seen as being typical for their group (Johnston & Hewstone 1992; Pettigrew 1998; Rothbart & John 1985).

Moments of banal transgression can be prompted, not only by small polite or attentive gestures or small-talk, which allow new insights, but also by unexpected help from the Other. Even when such 'small achievements' (Amin 2006) through fleeting encounters are more random and serendipitous in everyday life, their importance should not be underestimated. They can portray first steps towards overcoming negative attitudes and encouraging greater openness towards people that are seen as different.

Encounters between strangers in public life are not only brief (Lofland 1998). Rather, some of the interviewees recounted public encounters with people experienced as different, that were longer and more sociable. For example, when playing soccer, basketball, boules or when children played together in playgrounds. In these situations forms of conviviality, as described by Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson (2008), can emerge. The situations described in the interviews indicate that the interviewees are drawn into a momentary relationship with people who are otherwise seen as different. In these moments individuals can build shared identifications as football, basketball or boules players or as parents. Such convivial encounters can have a positive impact on personal attitudes towards the Other and/or can transmit a feeling of 'togetherness in difference'.

Philip (18 yrs., secondary school student) narrated the positive experiences he had with Turkish youths when playing football in the park. His distance towards them was the result of their perceived 'lower social status', their 'irritable and aggressive behaviour', and their 'different mentality'. He did not have anything to do with them and tended to avoid them. He and his friends, while playing football in the park, occasionally played with Turkish youths who also happened to be in the park. The shared interest in football allowed them to come together despite their putative differences.

> **Philip:** We just joined forces. And they were Turkish guys, whom we would have otherwise avoided or thought that they're not on the same wavelength. But they just wanted to play football the same as us. And so we played together… You always end up chatting and they were really friendly and not antisocial or aggressive, like we thought. That was a positive thing for me… Playing football is way of getting to know each other. It unites you in that moment.

The quote shows that the joint identification as football players arose during the shared activity. The shared status allowed Philip to socialise more easily with individuals he usually experiences as being different and with whom he does not normally have any contact in any other contexts. Convivial encounters, such as playing football in parks have led to Robin developing a more positive view towards Turkish youths.

Conviviality can also arise when playing boules. Thomas (early 50s, office worker) regularly meets a few friends and acquaintances to play boules in a park in Mülheim. During the game people often turn up who are interested in joining in. This way, Thomas said that he gets in touch with all kinds of people. His account also shows how a temporarily shared identification can emerge from a common activity and encourages cross-group socializing. For Thomas, the friendly contact based on the common status as boules players gives him a sense of 'togetherness in difference'. Such positive experiences affirmed his view that the co-existence of the diverse groups in Mülheim works in daily life.

> **Thomas:** I meet all kinds of people through playing boules. It's a total mix of professions, backgrounds, young and old. These things can be in the way otherwise. But not then, because we've something in common and that's playing boules. The three balls are the main thing… we just play together and chat away… it's a nice feeling, the feeling of being connected, even when the other person is unemployed, retired, a student or from Turkey or Iran. We just get on… And that always gives me the feeling that our co-existence here works.

As these two examples illustrate, 'classical' public spaces can also be understood as everyday settings that enable convivial encounters. The decisive factor is that people, who are different to each other, come together in an everyday context on the basis of shared activities and interests. This allows people to construct temporary identifications with others beside their seemingly immutable identities, which can enable sociability and have transformative potential to change attitudes towards others.

However, it must be considered that such an engagement on the basis of informal and loosely organised mutual interests does not necessarily have positive effects.

John Clayton (2009) shows in his study of everyday multicultural life in the city of Leicester, in the UK, that young people with different cultural backgrounds playing football together in public spaces can lead to tension and conflict between groups. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that such temporary contact situations, like playing football or boules, can give rise to incidents that could unsettle momentary relationships and have a negative outcome.

## VI Conclusion

This paper has examined encounters with, and the negotiation of, ethnic (and other) differences in public spaces. By focusing on the experience expressed by German residents of the quarter of Cologne-Mülheim, the ways in which public encounters can reinforce or challenge prejudices towards Others were illustrated.

The empirical material demonstrates how definitions of cultural difference are (re) produced and prejudices are confirmed through everyday encounters in public spaces. The spatial practices and visibility of Turkish men and women become the basis for hardening the image of Turkish culture, characterised by male honour and the dominance of men over women. In this context, there is a need to take into account the sedimented knowledge about the Other that is brought into such everyday encounters. As the research shows, the knowledge acquired through public and everyday discourse influences everyday interactions and is adapted to interpret everyday life. This knowledge shapes the perception and judgement of encounters, whereby the preformed image is then confirmed and taken as proof of Otherness. This underlines how hegemonic ideas about the Other infiltrate everyday encounters (Simonsen 2008; Swanton 2010). The encounters show in a circular manner that the image portrayed in the public discourse is indeed accurate.

The empirical material also illustrates how everyday interactions with Others in public spaces can change attitudes in a positive way. In casual everyday encounters, transgressive moments can occur in which fixed notions of the Other are challenged, despite the fleeting character of the encounter. These encounters can emerge when politeness and friendliness are experienced when they are not expected, when coincidental small-talk allows insights that were surprising, or when the Other shows solidarity when no entitlement was perceived. In such moments fixed notions of the Other can be destabilised. Alongside such serendipitous encounters, public spaces

also enable convivial forms of contact. Through shared activities or interests such as playing football or playing boules, different people are brought together on the basis of a common status and this offers opportunities for informal social exchange. These more meaningful interactions, in which individuals can construct temporary identifications with others despite their own seemingly fixed identities, can lead to greater openness towards people that are perceived as different.

Even though these two forms of encounters encouraged more positive attitudes in this study, this does not mean that this is always the case. Gestures of friendliness such as a smile or the offering of an umbrella by the Other can also result in rejection, depending on the person's past experience, attitude and mood (Amin & Thrift 2002). Forms of conviviality can also possibly become unstable due to negative incidents during the encounter.

Therefore, the type of context that allows for transgressive moments and convivial encounters between individuals or groups to occur in public life, demands closer consideration. This also applies to the limitations and to the sustainability of such encounters. In other words, to what extent do such positive experiences go beyond the moment in which they occur (Valentine 2008)? In addition to Gill Valentine's (2010: 512) call to look more closely at the spatial and temporal contexts in which prejudices emerge, the circumstances in which prejudices are challenged by encounters in public life thus require greater attention.

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