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How public space affects interethnic contact:
a methodological conceptualization



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Abstract

In this paper, I address the question of the circumstances under which migrants and non-migrants come into contact with one another. While in the literature the effects of such encounters and interactions are discussed quite frequently, the conditions leading to their occurrence are only rarely considered. In this paper, the relevance of public space for everyday encounters will be discussed.

A detailed comparative observation of fifty neighbourhoods in Germany was conducted. The different types of urban areas, as well as the opportunities for contact in the public spaces of every individual neighbourhood, were systematically analysed. This paper will outline a scheme for a systematic categorization of neighbourhoods according to the contact opportunities offered by their public spaces. It will be shown that public space helps to explain the emergence of interethnic contacts.

Keywords: Public space, contact opportunities, interethnic contact, neighbourhood effects, everyday encounters.

Author

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Introduction

The material or physical environment of a neighbourhood has an impact on its residents and their social lives (Madanipour 2003: 3; Schütz and Luckmann 2003: 71), providing contexts that may be more or less conducive to encounters between neighbours and co-residents in the area. The public space, apart from the workplace and clubs or associations, is a site where unplanned encounters between strangers may happen. As has been emphasized in the literature, encounters between strangers in public space are a part of everyday life in urban settings (Von Saldern 2010: 99). The co-residents of a neighbourhood may recognize others they encounter repeatedly, exchange greetings or have a conversation. In the social sciences, as well as in urban studies, the debate is often about the role of space, and particularly its impact on social life (Läpple 1992; Löw 2001). Although discussions about space and its impact on social life have a long history, empirical knowledge about patterns of interaction and the factors that shape them today are still patchy. The importance of public space for encounters between strangers is still not discussed at all systematically.

In this paper, I address the question of the circumstances under which migrants and non-migrants come into contact with one another. The major purpose of this paper is to introduce a categorization of neighbourhoods according to the contact opportunities offered by their public spaces. I aim to demonstrate a method of categorizing public spaces in a multitude of different urban neighbourhoods.

First I will discuss the importance of public space for the occurrence of everyday interactions. The main theoretical assumptions behind the categorization will be presented in the first section. The main argument will be that shopping streets, being modern market places, have a particular impact on the occurrence of everyday interactions in public space.

In the second section, the research design will be explained. This paper is based on work carried out in the context of a large-scale neighbourhood study in Germany entitled 'Diversity and Contact'. The objects of the study were fifty neighbourhoods in sixteen German cities and their public spaces. Within this project, one main aim was to analyse the relevance of different socio-spatial contexts for the occurrence of interethnic contacts. By interethnic contacts, everyday conversations between people of different ethnic backgrounds are meant.

In the third section, I will present the results of the evaluation of physical spaces. A detailed comparative observation of all fifty neighbourhoods was conducted. The

main aims were to capture the different types of urban areas in Germany, as well as the contact opportunities in the public space of every individual neighbourhood. In this chapter, the wide range of different structures that can be found in the different neighbourhoods will be summarized according to their built environments and the contact opportunities in public space. It will be shown how the different contact opportunities in public space were evaluated. The paper will conclude with a discussion of what has been presented.

Theoretical background: the role of public space in shaping everyday interactions

Cities should be ideal places for interethnic interactions, with their high proximities of people and many opportunities for encounters. Today's cities are hubs for migration, and people with diverse backgrounds share spaces and live in close proximity to one another. It might be assumed that a high concentration of a certain group, for example, migrants, increases the chances of encountering a member of that group (Friedrichs 2008: 385). However, the seemingly logical connection between a high proportion of migrants in an area and a high number of interethnic contacts is sometimes contested. Urban life overall, and not only since the increasing diversification of recent times, is based on individuality, anonymity and sometimes insecurity (Nassehi 2002: 228). A higher proportion of visible foreigners can lead to more prejudice and anxiety regarding them (Esser 1986: 33). Robert Putnam (2007) recently claimed that increasing social and cultural diversity entails disintegrative effects for society as a whole. The residents of a diverse community tend to 'distrust their neighbours [...] (and) expect the worst from their community and its leaders' (Putnam 2007: 150 f.). This eventually leads to a retreat into private space and a decrease in interethnic contacts as a consequence of a rise in the share of foreigners in the neighbourhood.

In contrast, many famous scholars emphasize the positive effects of living in close proximity to 'strangers' and stress the 'social learning' aspect that accompanies this. Stranger encounters can help in the tasks of learning tolerance and living with these differences (Lofland 1993: 101). Already in the 1950s Gordon Allport formulated the 'contact hypothesis', according to which intergroup contacts may entail a reduction in prejudice. However, contact theory has so far mainly focused on the effects of such encounters and interactions, rather than on the conditions leading to their occurrence.

When asking for the reasons for and conditions of personal contacts, one might first search for answers on the individual level based on individual preferences. In the literature, the importance of individual characteristics in determining contact behaviour is often emphasized (Babka Von Gostomski, Stichs 2008: 279; Mcpherson et al. 2001: 418). However, it is not only individual preferences that are expected to have an effect: the physical context also impacts on the (social) life of every individual within it and surrounded by it.

Individual preferences can only affect the choices of associates within limited sets of available alternatives. (Feld 1982: 797)

In urban studies, there is a debate about the effects of an area on the life of its residents (Friedrichs 2008: 383; Kronauer 2007: 76). The argument behind area or 'neighbourhood effects' is that the place of residence has an effect on the social life and working and recreation environments of its residents.¹ Living conditions differ from area to area, whether in the physical and spatial structures or the respective residential structure in the area. In this paper, the focus is on the physical structures, in particular on public spaces.

The urban public spaces of cities are among the very few settings which, on a recurring basis, can provide (they may not and, often, do not do so) the opportunity for individuals to experience limited, segmental, episodic, distanced links between self and other. (Lofland 1993: 102; original emphasis)

Public space can have different uses for a city's population. It is entered and attracts people for a variety of reasons, depending on its features, location and quality. Urban life to a large extent takes place in public space. But what is the role of public space in the occurrence of encounters between strangers in urban life? In this section I will discuss the importance of public space for everyday social interactions. Some aspects will be explained rather briefly, mainly because they are tangential to the framing of this paper. However, they should still be kept in mind when discussing the functions of public space. The main purpose of this chapter is to set out the theoretical basis for the categorization of contact opportunities in public space. My main argument is that it is primarily the market function of shopping streets, corners and the more classical forms of market squares and halls that promote interactions between strangers in public space.

¹ Those area effects are often discussed in the context of 'problematic areas' and the living conditions in them (for the German case, see, for example, Volkmann 2012).

Public space and everyday contacts: opportunities and limitations

Some of the most prominent figures in the field of sociology have conducted fundamental work on the meaning of space since the beginning of the twentieth century, first and foremost Georg Simmel and the ‘Chicago School’ centred around Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Louis Wirth, who conducted ground-breaking work in urban research, mainly on social segregation (Herlyn 2006: 231; Kalter 2003: 324; Schroer 2008: 132). Despite this, in the 1980s Anthony Giddens accused sociology of being ‘blind to space’ (see in Schäfers 2010: 142), and at the beginning of the 21st century there is still no coherent or consistent definition of space in the social sciences (Löw 2001: 10). While conceptions of space are (still) being discussed differently, one basic notion about space is nonetheless shared. Space is no longer imagined as a physical ‘container’ that serves as a frame for social life. Certain perceptions and conceptions are always ascribed to urban spaces (Läpple 1991: 36; Bourdieu 1991). Our actions are structured through spatial arrangements, and these physical spaces are ‘overlaid’ with socially constructed symbols, ideas and meanings (Schroer 2008: 141; Schubert 2000: 102). Where social life happens, on the other hand, is always related to its surroundings. As Bourdieu (1998: 160) puts it, people as bodies are attached to one locality just as physical objects are.

The places we occupy and stay in affect our everyday routines, our own behaviour and our ways of thinking (Häußermann and Siebel 2004: 95; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2000: 15). In everyday life, we use or occupy different kinds of spaces: a private space at home, a semi-public space at work and during leisure time, a public or semi-public space. To capture and understand the role of urban space better, it can be helpful to divide it up according to its different functions. In private spaces like our homes, but also in working spaces, strangers usually do not have free access (Wentz 2010: 452). Even in a highly diverse neighbourhood, ‘despite positive relations across differences, people’s private relations are often divided along ethnic and especially socio-economic lines’ (Wessendorf 2013: 19). Public space, on the other hand, can in principle be freely accessed by anyone. To quote Stehen Carr and colleagues (1992: 3) on the value of public space: ‘These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart to the more settled places and routines of work and home life...’.

Scholars, planners and the general public as a whole mostly associate public spaces with parks and squares, streets, public transport stops and stations, green spaces and playgrounds. The collective term is mainly used when referring to open, publicly usable spaces. However, the term ‘public space’ is not clearly defined and

can sometimes be misleading, mainly precisely because it includes the term ‘public’. Often it is assumed that these spaces are communal property and are therefore being maintained by the local municipality (Selle 2010: 19). Quite the contrary, a lot of publicly accessible spaces are not looked after by the local authorities, and therefore they are no ‘public good’.² Examples are church and station squares, the surrounding areas of schools and universities, passages and malls, publicly accessible parts of housing complexes, and agricultural and wooded land (Selle 2010: 19). It might be expected that public spaces can be accessed by anyone at any time (Selle 2010: 20). In reality, however, different kinds of regulations and social mechanisms of exclusion restrict access to many urban areas (Selle 2010: 20).

Despite its partly misleading connotations, the term ‘public space’ is used for the sorts of spaces just discussed above. It might be more intelligible to refer to publicly *usable* spaces, as Klaus Selle (2010: 21) suggests. Carr and colleagues similarly ‘define public spaces as open, publicly accessible places where people go for group or individual activities’ (1992: 50). In this paper, I adopt this notion of public space.

When access to public space is restricted, this has consequences for its potential to enable stranger interaction. Different things can hinder accessibility or the use of public space.

Diversity is thought to be negotiated in the city’s public spaces. The depressing reality, however, is that in contemporary life, urban public spaces are often territorialised by particular groups (and therefore steeped in surveillance) or they are spaces of transit with very little contact between strangers. (Amin 2002: 967)

Ash Amin mentions two limitations. First, the occupation of space by certain groups can lead to access to this space being restricted for other groups. Public space can be used as an alternative kind of private space by some groups, for example (Wehrheim 2009: 90). Specific social-control mechanisms over a space can regulate access to it as much as formal rules. These are often the result of conflicts over the appropriation of space (Bourdieu 1998: 163 f.; Ipsen 2002: 242 f.). When certain groups use a space, it often no longer seems secure for others to enter. The question of security often goes along with marginalized groups. The homeless, drug-abusers and other groups are often seen as a nuisance or a threat, even when they pose no risk at all (Selle 2010: 25). This means that, if certain groups ‘inhabit’ a space, its public character can be lost.

2 Public goods are goods that are not offered on the basis of market principles but are being offered free of charge by the state. Therefore formally no one can be excluded from using them (Selle 2010: 20).

Secondly, Amin reminds us that public spaces are places of transit that people cross and thus use quasi-parenthetically (Schubert 2000: 41; Wentz 2010: 459). Passing through public spaces is usually unavoidable when living in a city, mainly by using streets. The role of streets in the occurrence of interactions will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

In times of high mobility and the virtualization of communications, the overall relevance of physical proximity for communication is frequently questioned (Friedrichs and Oberwittler 2007: 453). The assumption here is that this involves a despatialization of communication, as new forms of communication take place in more abstract spaces (Berger 1995: 100, 103). At this point, however, I would like to evoke Bourdieu's assessment of people in urban space: according to him, everyone is place-bound. New forms of communication can hardly replace all forms of communication. Discussions about the relevance of physical space for communication are mostly concerned with planned communication, for example, in professional settings, which are very different from random or unplanned conversations. Despite new developments in communications, social actions are still clearly limited. The increasing significance of virtual spaces for communication can ultimately also lead to increasing requests to use physical spaces (Wentz 2010: 466). This can be seen as a compensation or counterbalancing of these new ways of life.

Exclusion mechanisms, a feeling of insecurity and an unattractive public space, as well as new developments in forms of communication, can undermine the function of public space as a meeting place. But when do random contacts in public space occur? What promotes their occurrence, and what brings people together? In the next section, I argue that, in the main, the market function of certain public spaces has a particular relevance for the emergence of interethnic interactions.

The market function of the (shopping) street

The city overall is a place of encounters with strangers, encounters that are usually marked by indifference (Häußermann 1995: 95; Siebel 1997: 31). A century ago, Georg Simmel analysed the consequences of life in the city for its residents and described how they develop a blasé attitude towards their surroundings (Simmel 2007: 31 f.) as a defence mechanism to avoid the sensory overload caused by the number and diversity of impressions in the city. Other scholars picked up this concept when writing about modes of urban life. In the 1930s Louis Wirth wrote about mental life in the metropolis. At the beginning of the 21st century, the work of Armin Nassehi (2002:

228) is still strongly inspired by Simmel's ideas.³ However, this indifference towards others changes when entering certain settings. Having a conversation with a stranger usually needs a 'trigger': strangers usually do not simply approach each other and interact. Shopping streets and areas as 'modern market spaces' provide a setting that easily allows stranger interaction. What does this look like?

Max Weber begins his writings about cities with an economic definition (see Weber in Bahrtdt 2006: 81). He understands these settings as cities in which the local population meets an economically substantial part of their day-to-day demands in the local market (ibid.). Bahrtdt (2006) picks up this definition and shows which characteristics feature the market as the earliest form of the public. He deduces urban behaviour from the behaviour in markets, where, as Simmel also sees it, relations work on the basis of economic interests. Thus the market is a public space where social contacts between unknown individuals occur consistently. Every market participant is exposed to people whom she or he does not know. 'Still he has to get along with these people, he cannot keep out of their way...' (Bahrtdt 2006: 88; translated from German by the author). The market enables interactions between strangers in a particular way. Whoever appears as a buyer or a seller is theoretically free to contact other market participants arbitrarily (Bahrtdt 2006: 83). These contact situations usually follow certain rules so that the market can be described as an institutionalized form of order (Bahrtdt 2006: 82). The mutual 'invisibility' of strangers in urban spaces that usually exists (Nassehi 2002: 228) dissolves in the market situation.

Today we can find markets in their (almost) classical appearance in the form of weekly markets, but these are mostly temporary and rare to find in the city as a whole. Nowadays shopping streets – as modern places of trade – carry out some of the functions of the old markets. Neighbourhood streets and local shopping streets with a functional differentiation provide a kind of heterogeneity that today comes closest to the 'ideal type' of the market place (Binken, Blokland 2013: 296 f.). There is a variety of offers for different groups, social classes and individual preferences (Wehrheim 2009: 79). The shopping street therefore attracts large sectors of urban society. But malls, shopping arcades and indoor markets also serve as sites of consumerism with a special attraction (Schubert 2010: 57). These places and the space around them can have the same function as public spaces, although they are often in private

3 However, Elijah Anderson sees a change in the reasons for the attitudes of city-dwellers over time. While back in the first half of the twentieth century a blasé attitude was developed mainly by the wealthy, who were concerned with moral contamination, today 'the public issue more commonly is one of wariness and fear of crime', he claims (2004: 29).

ownership. This is why Herbert Schubert calls these places ‘pseudo’ public (Schubert 2010: 57). Restaurants, cafes, bars and nightclubs belong to the same category. This is where publicness is constituted on the condition of exchanges in trade and services (Schubert 2010: 57). In principle, everyone can participate here. But what does this mean for the occurrence of random interactions between the strangers who use these spaces? In the following I will summarize some of the main aspects that appear in the literature.

One of the most prominent figures to work on everyday interactions was Erving Goffman. He engaged with the behaviour of urban-dwellers, and in particular with the structures and rules of interaction in public space. He was especially interested in the ‘encounter public’, the situation of face-to-face interaction. According to Goffman (2009: 151), one of the most significant breaches of the general rules of communication takes place when one approaches someone else in the street. Consequently the street is a place that allows strangers to come into contact easily and interact with each other. Ali Madanipour (2003: 108) calls the shopping street an ‘interpersonal space’ where face-to-face communication between people who do not belong to the same family or group of friends takes place. This sense of strangeness is levelled through the market and its users by means of shared roles and expectations. Jan Wehrheim (2009: 228) attributes a general ‘openness’ to shopping streets that can be explained with respect to the integrative mechanisms of the market. Market participants dissolve into their roles as consumers and sellers. Contacts between strangers are facilitated by the fact that their ideas of the space they share and the roles they play are identical or at least very similar, which increases the chances of communication between otherwise socioculturally heterogeneous individuals (Wehrheim 2009: 228). Different constructions and imaginations of the shared space impede interactions with strangers. Studying a market hall setting, Elijah Anderson (2004: 20) finds, for example, that ‘[p]eople come to this neutral and cosmopolitan setting expecting diverse people to get along’. He calls this setting the ‘cosmopolitan canopy’. Other scenarios in everyday public life can also lead to a shared understanding of the situation. One example could be the role of spectators of a scene like skaters on a square or a juggler in the pedestrian zone. As a passer-by it is fairly easy to start a conversation with another spectator on the margins of such a scene. Both construct their role relationally in respect of what they are observing, which helps them interact. Elijah Anderson, again referring to the market scene, writes: ‘When taking a seat at a coffee bar or lunch counter, people feel they have something of a license to speak with others, and others have license to speak with them’ (2004: 18).

Today the reasons for visiting a shopping street can differ from those that led one to visit the market in the past. While this was already a meeting point and a site of communication, its main function was that of a place for shopping. In the past, going to the market to find a variety of goods was unavoidable, while today there are other ways of doing this. Visiting the inner city today is mostly a deliberate decision and not a necessary one. The shopping street has become a place in which to saunter and stay as an aim in itself (Selle 2010: 69). This development has been accompanied by the restructuring of inner cities with less space for individual transportation and the introduction of pedestrian zones (Selle 2010: 69 f.). The curiosity of the flâneur marks the difference from the blasé city-dweller, even if he seems reserved to the outside world (Wehrheim 2009: 235). But it is not only the ‘seeing’, but also the ‘being seen’ that is important when visiting the inner city: the public space enables one to present oneself and to present one’s own individuality to the outside world (Schubert 2000: 53).

When walking the (inner) city streets, the possible confrontations with (perceived) insecure situations do not necessarily have to be seen as a barrier here. One of the characteristics of an ideal public space for Lyn Lofland (1993: 103) is that it ‘must – at least occasionally – generate mild fear’ without being viewed as ‘too’ dangerous. Jan Wehrheim (2009: 58) emphasizes that the ‘real city’ is attractive precisely because of the advantages and disadvantages of urban diversity. This can make shopping streets more attractive than the controlled environments of shopping malls, for example.⁴ Those spaces that are perceived as insecure by some might not qualify as extraordinary for others. Whoever is familiar with a public space and with those who might occupy it regularly can get used to it and enter it less shyly (Binken, Blokland 2013: 296; Wehrheim 2009: 108). At the same time, the public space in shopping streets also becomes more and more regulated, due to its commercialization (Altrock 2014: 164, 167-169). Prominent scholars have criticized this development of streets into places of consumption and the consequences of this development. Henri Lefèbvre (1972) stresses the central role of streets for encounters, communication and city life overall. However, he also raised concerns about the development of streets back in the 1970s, arguing that streets have developed into places of transit that only fulfil the needs of consumption and car use (Lefèbvre 1972: 26). Richard Sennett (2009) also criticizes the consumption-oriented modern city. For him the publicly used spaces of the city

4 One restrictive factor when visiting shopping malls is the surveillance that takes place (Binken, Blokland 2013: 296).

today are restricted to consumption and tourism uses, leading to the desolation of urban life. Carr and colleagues, however, emphasise that the consumerist aspect does not automatically involve the vanishing of social life:

Markets combine social and economic purposes. They can be centers for both social exchange and commerce, attraction points that serve essential functions with a social overlay that can draw people out for more than the commodities offered. (Carr et al. 1992: 40)

The present paper has aimed to show the different meanings and functions that are attributed to public space. On the one hand, public space has a contact-enabling or contact-promoting function: everyday encounters are especially possible where public spaces are present and accessible. On the other hand, its public character may be limited: access to and the functions of public spaces may be restricted due to specific formal and social settings.

Research design

The empirical data for this paper were collected by myself within the framework of the study 'Diversity and Contact' (DivCon). The overall aim of the DivCon study is to analyse the influence of residential environments on contacts between and the attitudes of people with and without a migration background. The design of the study allows for an assessment of the impacts of the residential environment on individuals. To capture the influence of the residential environment, the composition of the population, as well as the physical structure of the neighbourhood, are taken into account. I have used the data mainly to analyse the physical structure of different neighbourhoods and to compare the contact opportunities provided by their public spaces.

The 'DivCon' study

In the DivCon study, a total of fifty neighbourhoods in sixteen German cities are being examined.⁵ For this purpose a mixed-methods approach has been chosen,

5 For the debate and empirical findings about the neighbourhood as the level of analysis, see, for example, Lichtenberger 2002: 105; Petermann 2011: 13 ; Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley 2002.

involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. Telephone surveys have been conducted, statistical data for every neighbourhood collected, and in-depth qualitative field studies, as well as explorations of each neighbourhood, carried out.

The fifty areas for investigation were randomly selected. One aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of ‘urban normality’ in Germany. Adopting a stratified sampling procedure (for details, see Petermann et al. 2012) has ensured that the study would include neighbourhoods with lower and higher shares of immigrants and lower and higher rates of unemployment in their populations. The sixteen cities in the study include two cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants, six with 100,000-500,000, and eight with 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants. In many respects, the areas analysed represent the variety of physical and infrastructural characteristics and the socio-demographic diversity typical of current urban life in Germany.

As distinct from other studies, we do not focus on areas with the highest proportions of immigrants or those with a history of conflict. Living in cities does not automatically mean that one is living in a global city or at the lively centre of a large city. Reading the urban studies literature often conveys a different impression.⁶ One has to bear in mind that the suburbs and the outskirts of a medium-size city are also part of the urban landscape. The study presented here compares a representative sample of urban areas with an average of 7,200 (median) inhabitants.⁷ The results overall are representative of the adult population of West German cities of the relevant size, and respondents included people with and without a migration background (for further details, see Petermann et al. 2012: 22-28). The survey data were matched with statistical data for the neighbourhoods. These variables (see Petermann et al. 2012) were compiled on the basis of official data provided by cities.

The overall study was set up as a panel study of the years between 2010 and 2012.⁸ In this paper, only the results of the first panel will be used and presented. This

6 In urban studies, the focus clearly lies on large cities and metropolis. This kind of examination of ‘the urban’ does not reflect the role of those cities in the urban landscape: the urban landscape in Germany is clearly shaped by small and medium-size cities (Hannemann 2002: 266). Today basic knowledge about small and medium-size cities is still lacking (Hannemann 2002: 272, 277).

7 The level of analysis is that of administrative areas (*Stadtteile*, *Stadtbezirke* or *statistische Bezirke*). These are the smallest available units from which one can obtain structural data. These administrative areas have often grown historically or have natural boundaries like rivers or unnatural barriers like railroad tracks or major roads.

8 Germany around 2010 to 2012, the period when the fieldwork for this study was carried out, was a country clearly marked by immigration (BAMF 2013: 15-17, 205 f.; Statistisches Bundesamt 2011: 40). Its cities in particular are in many ways diverse settings. Their

data set comprises fifty interviews from each of the fifty neighbourhoods, i.e. 2500 interviews in all. Telephone interviews were conducted from May to July 2010. The questionnaire includes a battery of questions on the frequency of different kinds of intergroup interactions, their social locations and their evaluation. The study overall is concerned to research the experience of migration-driven diversity in cities. Different forms of interethnic contact and the evaluation of such contacts are the main objects of examination. In this paper, I am only interested in everyday interactions in these neighbourhoods.⁹

To capture everyday interactions in a specific context, such as the neighbourhood, the DivCon survey administers a question to native Germans about the frequency of talking to someone of a different migration background in the neighbourhood: ‘In your neighbourhood, how often do you talk to people who are themselves not native Germans or whose parents are not from Germany?’¹⁰

Exploration of the physical context

To evaluate the physical context of the large number of neighbourhoods, different materials have been used, created and collected in what we call ‘area explorations’. Each of the fifty neighbourhoods was walked through and inspected by one member of the ‘DivCon’ research group to collect data and acquire an idea of the physical structure of the neighbourhood. By means of these neighbourhood walks, additional information (aside from the statistical data) about each neighbourhood was collected. Direct observations allowed us to obtain an impression of the built environment and the public space in these areas. These area explorations took between three and six hours each. Prior to them, a revised map for every neighbourhood was created within the team based on desk research. This map provided orientation and consisted of an aerial view of the area. The maps are satellite images in which the building structure was classified and highlighted and certain institutions and prominent places in public space were marked. These included squares and parks, sports

inhabitants are not only of different ages, genders and social statuses, they also pursue different life-styles, adhere to different values and norms, and may have origins in (and continuing links with) other countries than Germany.

9 The DivCon survey also includes measures on general weak and strong ties, i.e. on acquaintances and friends, as well as on the number of people with a migrant background in these networks.

10 If the respondents have a migration background, they are asked how often they talk to those ‘who are native Germans’.

facilities, allotments, schools and commercial areas, as well as other buildings with special functions, like hospitals, retirement homes and (former) military barracks. The buildings were classified according to their size and the building structure. We distinguished between single family houses, smaller multi-family houses, apartment buildings and high-rise buildings in either scattered arrangements, ribbon developments or (dispersed) block developments. The undeveloped space was classified into agricultural land, forests and simple green areas. These maps allowed a first assessment of the areas to be made while walking through them. During the area explorations, pictures and notes were taken,¹¹ which were discussed by the team afterwards to ensure their comparability. As a result, short reports for every neighbourhood were written which included general impressions and information about the built environment, as well as the public space.

Empirical findings

Based on the results of the area explorations, explained above, I created a database with comparable information about all the examined neighbourhoods. This database provides a detailed view of these neighbourhoods in retrospect, as well as a comprehensive view of urban neighbourhoods in Germany overall. Only a comparison of a wide range of different neighbourhoods allows the specific characteristics of single neighbourhoods to be classified, as well as the common features of various neighbourhoods. With the help of the data mentioned above, a short profile of the physical structure and the infrastructural facilities of every area was created consisting of construction features concerning the density of buildings, the heterogeneity of the built environment and the presence of contact opportunities in public space. These profiles were then compared in order to capture the essential physical characteristics of all neighbourhoods. With the help of these profiles, a summary overview of the built environment was created, as well as a categorization of the contact opportunities in public space. On the following pages, I provide further information about this approach and present the results.

¹¹ Sample maps and pictures can be found in the appendix.

The architectural character of the neighbourhoods

The first and probably most striking impression a visitor receives when entering an area is the nature of its built structure. One has to bear in mind that city life is not typically marked by narrow streets lined by multi-storey buildings. Rather, single houses with gardens are a fairly common feature. Areas with predominantly single-family houses are no exception, but rather constitute urban normality in Germany. Between these two 'poles', a whole range of settlement types can be found. With regard to the type of buildings within the neighbourhoods, we mostly found heterogeneity. Most areas display a mixture of single-household and multi-household buildings, and of one and multi-storey buildings.

Although most neighbourhoods consist of different kinds of buildings, distinctive architectural characteristics of certain groups of neighbourhoods within the spectrum of observed neighbourhoods can be determined. A comparison shows that certain kinds of physical settings can be found in some areas, while other neighbourhoods have a rather different structure in common. In the following, the neighbourhoods will be classified and described according to their building structures and infrastructural endowments. The areas fall into three types, which illustrate the diversity of developed land in German urban neighbourhoods in summary.

Thus there is one group of low-density residential areas located on the edges of cities and dominated by single-household buildings. There are only (very) few shops and services, but often large industrial or commercial areas exist, though residential use predominates. Buses and sometimes underground trains or trams connect these areas with the inner city. The difference between the urban and the rural becomes blurred here. These areas can be found not only in smaller cities, but in cities of any size in Germany. Often they border on farmland or open fields and meadows. About a quarter of the areas observed fall under this type.

A second group of areas is characterized by a mixture of single and multi-household buildings, sometimes with the odd high-riser. These areas are generally a little more developed than those in the first type. Often smaller green spaces interrupt buildings, or buildings and streets. Residential and industrial or commercial uses co-exist. Shopping opportunities are available, but usually concentrated in one street or a shopping centre. These areas often have underground or tram stops connecting the area with the city centre. These kinds of areas constitute nearly half of the observed areas.

A third group consists of areas located in the inner city and marked by uninterrupted lines of multi-storey buildings. A variety of shops and businesses are avail-

able, either concentrated or dispersed, but often along a pedestrian zone or major shopping street. In general, there is at least one big underground station or tram stop which shows how busy these locations are. In this third group of areas in particular, shopping, cultural and entertainment opportunities attract people who are not residents and create a more vivid and potentially more diverse street life. These areas best represent the typical image of ‘the urban’. Nearly one third of the observed areas can be characterized like this.

We should be cautious not to identify urban life with this third type of area or neighbourhood. While German urban areas are generally equipped with basic infrastructure and have public transport connections with the inner city and railway station, they are often pretty quiet and may occasionally even seem ‘rural’. Consequently, the public spaces in such different areas offer different opportunities for encounters between residents.

Categorization of contact opportunities in public space

Squares, parks, attractive green spaces, public transport stations and shopping streets and areas are considered to be spaces supporting contact. In this section, I will show how I compared and assessed the contact opportunities in public space between the neighbourhoods. As a first step, all areas have been examined regarding the presence of these spaces. To assess this, the different material introduced in the section about the ‘area explorations’ has been used: revised maps, pictures and reports. This explorative proceeding served to provide a first overview of the situation in the neighbourhoods, though direct comparisons between neighbourhoods after this overview was difficult, as they are differently ‘equipped’ with contact opportunities in public space in terms of their number and variety. For example, a neighbourhood in the city centre may be equipped with larger stops and stations of the public transport system and a shopping street that invites visitors. In another neighbourhood, there might be a large park, together with only residential houses and no attractive streets.

On account of these difficulties, different methods have been used to make the neighbourhoods more comparable. The contact spaces have been documented and divided up according to their quantity, quality and variety. To record the quantity, their mere existence was the decisive factor. By quality I mean the contact-supportive impact of the different kinds of contact spaces. In the literature it is hard to find any kind of ranking or comparative judgement of spaces in terms of their quality in supporting contact. The classical concept of parks and squares as the ‘main actors’

in public space proved to be unfeasible as a way of assessing the quality of contact opportunities in public space as the only variables, because only a few neighbourhoods are equipped with them. But this is not the only reason why the main focus was not put on these spaces, as I will explain a little further below. In addition to their quantity and quality, the variety of contact opportunities has been considered. Does only one kind of contact space exist in an area, or can, for example, other contact-supporting spaces be found next to a park? Martin Wentz emphasized that public spaces subsist on the varieties of their use: 'The more diverse possible uses of public space are, the more urban, or livelier, colourful and communicative its character becomes' (2010: 460, translated from German by the author). In short, the different kinds of contact spaces have been counted – taking into consideration their variety – and a different weighting has been given to the different types.

For the categorization of the contact opportunities in public space a particular focus is placed on the shopping streets or shopping areas in the neighbourhoods. In the subsection on 'the market function of the (shopping) street', the special role of the market as a space that supports everyday random encounters has been pointed out already. The main emphasis in drawing up a classification will hence be on shopping streets and areas. As mentioned earlier, these spaces and places often are rather classified as pseudo- or semi-public. For the purposes of the classification, however, this is not a problem. The survey did not particularly ask for contacts in public space, but for contacts in the neighbourhood. Focusing on sales areas allows us to simultaneously cover semi-public spaces like those inside shops and cafes as contact spaces, as well as the public spaces outside them.

Furthermore, the larger and more 'classical' public spaces have been captured: parks, squares and green spaces with seating, public transport stops, freely accessible sports facilities and playgrounds have been taken into account in classifying contact opportunities. To include the public transport stops, all the bigger stops and stations on the public transport system, like tram or underground stations, have been identified. Small bus stops are not included in the categorization since they are often sparsely frequented. Besides, a systematic capture of all existing bus stops would be difficult due to their visibility, and only extensive research would allow us to do that.

After going through the material, a first categorization of neighbourhoods was made according to their different characteristics in respect of public spaces. This kind of grouping was based on the criteria listed above. After this step, the internal coherence of the categories was tested. The neighbourhoods within one category were compared to see if their contact opportunities are similar to one another.

If this was not the case, either the assignment of a neighbourhood to a category was changed, or the category itself was adjusted. The result of this procedure was a division of the neighbourhoods into five categories. This classification ranges from category 1, ‘very few contact opportunities’, to category 5, ‘many contact opportunities’. How the categories were defined and what stages exist between them is described in the following section.

Five categories of contact opportunities in public space

Category 1

The area does not have any or just a very few ‘weak’ contact opportunities. There may be one (isolated) shop or take-away, but no shopping area, public transport node or park. Of the fifty DivCon areas, several do not have any sites encouraging encounters.¹²

Category 2

A second group of areas has at least one site that can serve as a focus of encounters in the public space. This may be a small shopping centre, a small shopping area or a park. There is no variety in such sites. Neighbourhoods in this category still have few contact opportunities in the area overall, but those they have are better than those in category 1.

Category 3

The neighbourhoods classified in category 3 are characterised by different kinds of contact opportunities in the public space. For example, there might be a corner with a higher concentration of shops, a park and a public transport node. None of these sites is a dominant feature of the public space, however.

Category 4

A fourth group is also marked by different contact opportunities, but, as distinct from category 3, the infrastructure is more comprehensive. A central supply centre in form of a shopping street or a mall exists, as well as a variety of other contact opportunities.

¹² The number of areas that fall within a certain category will be shown in the section ‘The frequency of interethnic contacts’.

Category 5

A fifth group is formed by areas that have a major pedestrian zone (boulevard) and/or a market area. In general, these areas provide a dense supply structure that attracts people beyond the neighbourhood residents, creating a busy public space. This is often accompanied by larger public-transport nodes and central squares.

The frequency of interethnic contacts

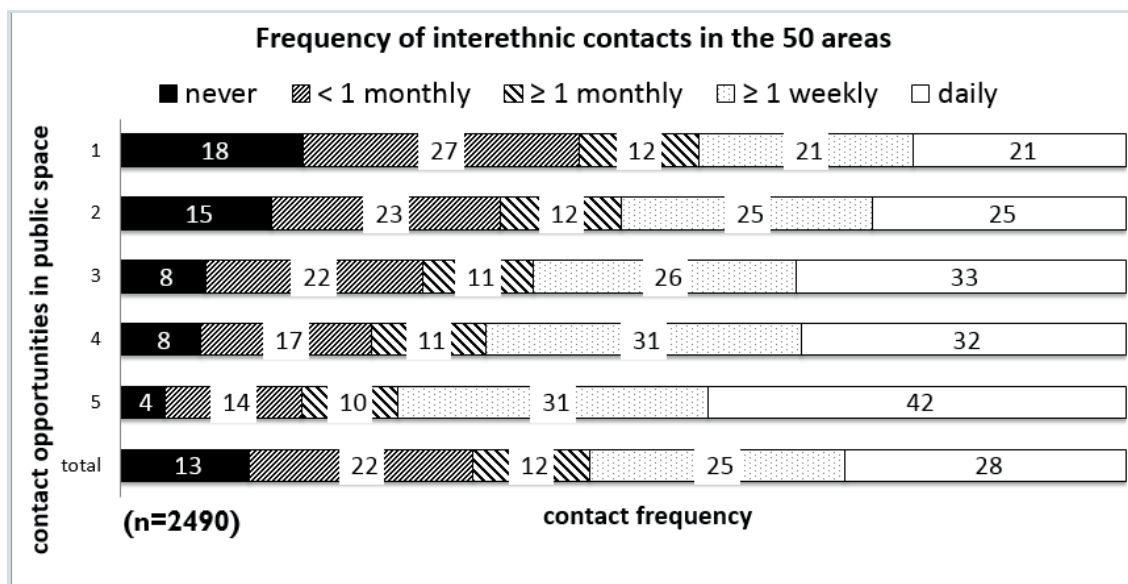


Figure 1. Frequency of interethnic contacts in the fifty areas.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the contact frequencies in the neighbourhoods grouped according to the contact opportunities in public space. Each bar represents all neighbourhoods that fall under one of the five categories of contact opportunities provided by their public spaces (see ‘Five categories of contact opportunities in public space’). Twelve of the fifty neighbourhoods fall within ‘category 1’, nineteen have been classified in ‘category 2’, ten areas fall within ‘category 3’, four are in ‘category 4’ and five neighbourhoods fall under ‘category 5’. The bars show the contact frequencies, which range from ‘never’ having interethnic contact to ‘daily’ interethnic contacts. The last bar (‘total’) shows the average results for all fifty neighbourhoods.

We see that with every category the number of interethnic contacts increases. The fewest interethnic contacts take place in the neighbourhoods in ‘category 1’. The neighbourhoods with few contact opportunities have much smaller shares of fre-

quent interethnic contacts than those with many contact opportunities. The first bar shows that 21% of residents in the areas that fall under ‘category 1’ have daily interethnic contacts, while 18% report that they never have such contacts. Those respondents who fall under ‘category 5’ report much more frequent contacts: 42% have daily interethnic contacts, and only 4% never have them. In the neighbourhoods in categories 2 to 4, the number of more frequent contacts gradually increases, while the number of fewer contacts decreases.

The figure displays the answers of all respondents. The results look different if one considers the answers for the Germans and the non-Germans respectively alone: only 16% of the native Germans (1963 Germans answered this question) never talk with immigrants in their area, about 40% have infrequent contact (monthly or less often), but a larger group of 45% state they have daily or weekly contact with people of immigrant backgrounds.¹³ The results for the respondents with a migration background (527 people with a migration background answered this question) were quite different, as could be expected: 65% talk daily to native Germans and 20% at least weekly, while only 14% have this kind of contact infrequently or never. This is not surprising, as the population with a migration background is smaller than the population of native Germans, and the chances of encountering them in daily life are simply higher. The distribution of the native Germans who have frequent contact and those who do not differs considerably across neighbourhoods. In some areas, more than 70% state they have daily or weekly contact in the area, while in others only around 20% do so. The results of the survey question were supposed to illustrate the contact patterns of the respondents – Using these descriptive data alone, it is not possible to say anything about the possible factors that influence these patterns.

The distribution of answers across the five categories is a first indicator that the contact opportunities do impact on the patterns of interaction. Still, this could be due to other characteristics of the neighbourhoods. To make a more accurate statement about the correlation between the contact opportunities and the frequency of interethnic contacts, it is necessary to take into account the possible influence of third variables on the contact frequencies. Only once those (control) variables have been taken into account can the effect of the contact opportunities be evaluated. To test this, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted, which included different

13 The exact figures are: 18% have daily contact with people of migrant background in their neighbourhood, 27% at least once a week, 13% at least once a month, 26% less often and 16% never.

socio-spatial context factors that might explain the frequency of interethnic contacts within a neighbourhood.

One of the overall results of this regression analysis is that the contact opportunities in public space have a positive impact on the frequency of interethnic contacts.¹⁴ This means that the more contact opportunities exist in a neighbourhood, the more frequent is the number of interethnic contacts. This positive effect of the contact opportunities in public space is significant even when contextual (e.g. unemployment ratios, city size) and individual factors (e.g. age, gender, education, income, class, household size) are statistically controlled. I cannot present the full results of the statistical test here. For this purpose, all variables that have been included in the statistical test would have to be introduced, which is not the main focus of this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has described how contact opportunities in public space were evaluated and categorised for the empirical test of contact-influencing factors. It shows how the category of public space can be used for larger statistical analyses. The categorization of contact opportunities in public spaces was originally implemented to test its empirical effects on the frequency of interethnic contacts quantitatively. The category system described here has been integrated into a systematic quantitative analysis to test the effects of the physical surroundings on interethnic contacts.

Public space, regarding not only its role in the occurrence of encounters, is usually studied using qualitative methods. However, consideration of fifty neighbourhoods using these methods is practically impossible. Also, the study of smaller samples does not always generate comprehensible results. Based on a review of a body of research work that deals with the fields of cities and tolerance, Lyn Lofland states that '[m]any of the ideas and speculations arise not out of well-grounded observations of empirical regularities, but out of 'impressions' about what is the case' (Lofland 1993: 99). A quantitative approach can help to reveal certain patterns by investigating a multitude of cases.

One could argue that it is necessary to carry out an in-depth study to evaluate the quality of public spaces. At the same time, it is not possible to capture the pub-

¹⁴ The detailed results of this regression analysis can be found in Schönwälder et al. 2016: 70 (see Table 4.1, Multilevel ordinal regression on intergroup contact in the area).

lic space in its entirety by using qualitative methods. Trying to observe social interactions in publicly accessible spaces and to evaluate the quality of those spaces usually just allows analysis of a very limited scenery. Interviews can help us understand the social mechanisms and the relevance of physical spaces for interaction more deeply and universally, but they usually only provide information about a small part of the physical and social setting. This means it is very difficult to carry out a systematic observation of a high number of areas or to capture a larger population using qualitative methods.¹⁵

To be able to use a quantitative approach, I tried to capture the numerous contact opportunities and to make them comparable across neighbourhoods. Quantifying the qualitative category of contact opportunities in public space certainly means simplifying reality. A comparison of different spaces always means emphasizing certain aspects while ignoring others. The emphasis on shopping streets and areas, aside from the more prominent public spaces such as parks and squares, still entails the risk of missing certain contact-promoting spaces. The way of evaluating the physical space shown here surely means a limited capture of it. Certain relevant spaces could be missed using the assessment applied here: for example, sometimes a large stairway can develop into a lively meeting point (for the case of the New York Public Library steps, see Carr et al. 1992: 52). This particular space would not be covered by the methods presented.¹⁶ Still, the database used for this paper allowed a very detailed assessment of public spaces in the neighbourhoods that were analysed. The variety of data in particular allowed an in-depth understanding of their physical spaces.

One indicator that strongly supports the chosen emphasis on shopping streets and areas is the results of the qualitative field studies, which formed another part of the DivCon project. Within these field studies, longer observations of the areas and a variety of interviews were conducted. One aim was to reveal the reasons for different frequencies of interethnic interactions in neighbourhoods with similar social settings. The qualitative approach helped us further illustrate how the characteristics of the public space impact on social life within the neighbourhoods and to understand which contact-promoting mechanisms are at work in different neighbourhoods. One of the findings is that a strong presence of shopping streets and markets helps to explain the emergence of interethnic contacts: we identified one particular sociabil-

15 For a recent qualitative comparison of a smaller number of areas in global cities, see: Vertovec 2015.

16 A majority of large stairs are a part of public transport stations or squares though which go into the categorization.

ity style we refer to as ‘intimate market sociability’. This kind of sociability relies on a certain density of retail and eating establishments in the neighbourhood. Contact is mediated by economic exchange; at the same time, the partners in this economic exchange are sometimes perceived almost as friends – the repeated encounter acquires a quasi-intimate character. Thus the theoretically driven proceedings used for the classification of contact opportunities match the results of the qualitative analysis that was carried out subsequently.

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APPENDIX 1B – AREA EXPLORATIONS, EXAMPLE MAP 2

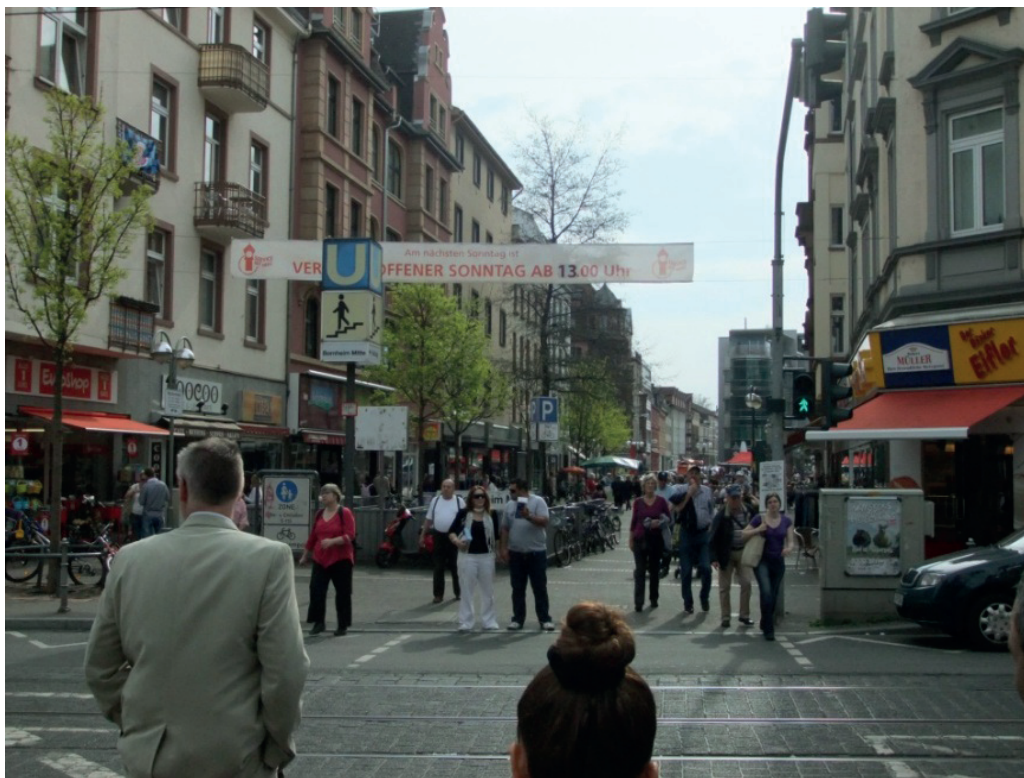


APPENDIX 1C – AREA EXPLORATIONS, EXAMPLE MAP 3

Appendix 2. Contact Opportunities in Public Space, Sample Pictures



APPENDIX 2A – EXAMPLE NO. 1 FOR CONTACT OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC SPACE



APPENDIX 2B – EXAMPLE NO. 2 FOR CONTACT OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC SPACE