Being Together in Urban Parks: Connecting Public Space, Leisure, and Diversity

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Taylor & Francis Group

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Western countries are facing serious political issues regarding integration and social cohesion in multicultural societies and migration. Dutch society is engaged with these issues in the context of current racial tensions and conflicts. The government recently introduced policy measures to foster interactions between Dutch natives and ethnic migrant groups to promote integration. This research explores the extent and nature of interethnic interactions by focusing on leisure activities in the public spaces of ethnically mixed neighborhoods. Observations and semi-structured interviews are used to gather information about the interactions in and the meaning of urban public spaces. Results show that although not many interethnic interactions occurred, people from various ethnic backgrounds valued being together in parks.

Keywords   ethnic minorities, leisure behavior, public spaces, social integration

Current debates on social integration originated because Western societies have become multicultural societies. For example, the Netherlands now has a multiethnic population, with people from Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, and the Dutch Antilles comprising the largest minority groups. This change in population has led to controversial issues related to processes of *social integration*. This paper focuses on migrants and ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Their presence has raised political questions related to integration and social cohesion. In order to explore the extent and the nature of interethnic interactions, I focus on leisure activities in public spaces of ethnically mixed neighborhoods, spaces in which complex negotiations of spatial and identity formations occur. Although social integration is often defined in socio-economic characteristics, my focus is on the perceptions and experiences of various groups.

Social interactions can create opportunities for a range of largely cursory and informal interactions among ethnic groups. According to Putnam (2000), migrants can benefit from interactions with nonmigrants because such can create feelings of acceptance. Moreover, interactions can increase social cohesion among all inhabitants because contact between people across ethnic divides is one way of creating social capital. Public spaces are places where strangers can either meet or conflict with each other. Dines and Cattell (2006) concluded from their research in East London that public spaces play a role in fostering interethnic understanding by providing opportunities for people to meet, which might not happen in organized settings. Public spaces in living areas such as parks are frequently

used for leisure activities by various ethnic groups. However, such spaces also have their negative aspects. Dines and Cattell noted that "the neighborhood park was a place where people mixed but there were occasions when neighborhood public spaces become sites of conflict or racial tension" (p. x). Madanipour (2004) also noted that the intensive use of public spaces in Rotterdam (the Netherlands) led to problematic incidents involving minorities.

Based on these arguments, the Dutch government created a subsidy arrangement aimed at facilitating interethnic interaction in public spaces to bring about long-lasting social contacts within society (Ruimte voor Contact, 2009). In the context of these political interventions, public spaces in neighborhoods were analyzed as leisure spaces and spaces for social interaction. Since most neighborhoods in Dutch cities are ethnically mixed, the users of these public spaces have various ethnic backgrounds. These spaces can function as a link between the protected space at home and the unknown spaces of the larger urban area. That is, they are transitional spaces of play and creativity that can help to bridge the boundaries between the self and the other (Ellsworth, 2005).

The objective of my research was to explore the meanings of urban public spaces and the interactions leading to social capital and social cohesion in neighborhoods. In line with the dominant definitions used in the Netherlands, non-Western migrants were defined as people originating from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, or Aruba. The respondents comprised both first-generation migrants (i.e., people who were born in a non-Western country) and second-generation migrants (i.e., people who were born in the Netherlands but whose parents were born outside the Netherlands; Dagevos & Gijsberts, 2007). Although born in the Netherlands, many second-generation migrants are raised in a traditional non-Western culture (Phalet & Schönpflug, 2001). An important feature of the members of this group is that most of them are Muslim, which adds a political aspect to the questions raised in this article.

This research was done in Nijmegen, a mid-sized city in the Netherlands. When migration to the Netherlands began in the 1960s, it was mainly labor migration since the domestic labor force could not match the demand for manual labor. Most migrant workers came from southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, notably Morocco and Turkey. In 1975, the independence of Suriname initiated a flow of migrants from Suriname to the Netherlands. The Ethnic Minorities Policy introduced at the beginning of the 1980s was intended to stimulate equality and the equity of vulnerable groups in society (Bruquetas-Callejo, Garcés-Mascareñas, Penninx, & Scholten, 2007). Criticism of the overemphasis on cultural aspects led to the formulation of further integration policies throughout the 1990s. These polices emphasized the individual rather than the group, and the socio-economic aspects of integration rather than the cultural and religious aspects. The beginning of the 21st century saw another shift in policy orientation. The dominant view was that integration processes and policies had failed and the social cohesion of Dutch society was endangered (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2007). Tensions between ethnic groups increased especially between migrants from Turkey and Morocco and the native Dutch population. After 9/11 and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, these tensions increased more.

Four main migrant groups are in the Netherlands: Turks, Moroccans, people from Suriname, and people from the Dutch Antilles. About 10% of the population comprises non-Western migrants. Although predicting the make-up of future populations is difficult, Beer (2007) showed that an increase in the Muslim population of 3–6% is realistic based on the assumption that the percentage of Muslims among Western and non-Western migrants will remain unchanged during the coming decades, and that the number of non-Western migrants will increase from 1.7 million to 2.7 million in 2050.

Although some neighborhoods in the Netherlands are more segregated than others, Dutch policy is to mix ethnicities. Of the country's 4,000 neighborhoods, only 44 have a population that consists of more than 50% non-Western migrants. In 156 neighborhoods, the figure is 25–50% (Dagevos & Gijsberts, 2007). The prediction is that in the coming 15 years the concentration of ethnic minorities will continue mainly in the major cities (Gijsberts, 2004).

Recent discussions about the integration of migrants into Dutch society focus on shared values and the acquisition of the Dutch language (Gijsberts, 2004). Although integration is a problematic concept, it is mostly used to indicate the extent to which non-Western migrants take part in Dutch society by having a job, speaking the language, and acknowledging Dutch values. One way of creating these shared values is by encouraging people to get to know each other through, for example, multicultural encounters. Contact between ethnic groups is a way to integrate migrants and to ameliorate the growing tensions in Dutch society (Blokland, 2003; Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 2005). Although multicultural encounters do not happen often (RMO), the Scientific Council for the Dutch Government (Wetenschappelijke Raadvoor het Regeringsbeleid, 2005) concluded that every day meeting places are important for a peaceful coexistence to help people overcome and accept differences.

Literature Review

The theoretical perspective of this article is the dialectical relation between identity formation and spatial formation and the role of leisure. This discussion highlights the importance of leisure and urban parks for creating social capital and social cohesion within the Dutch context.

Social Identity, Leisure, and Space

The theoretical framework is underpinned by three pillars of leisure studies: social identity, leisure, and space. The links between leisure and identity are well established (e.g., Aitchison, 2001; Henderson, 1998). Williams (2002) affirmed that leisure is a venue for making and expressing individual and social identity. This construction of identities has changed significantly. Instead of deriving identities from the productive sphere, social identities are now largely derived from lifestyles and consumption patterns. Identities are plural and dynamic, which implicitly creates the opportunity to establish linkages among groups. Although people can construct their own identities, context partly determines their degree of freedom. At work or school, rules and regulations can restrict this process, while during leisure, identities can be negotiated and constructed more consciously. When leisure activities are undertaken in public space, there are more opportunities for people to perform their social position by displaying their lifestyle choices (Soenen, 2006). This claim has been explored in contexts that connect sport/leisure and social/ethnic identity. For example, Johnson (2008) illustrated how gay bars provide gay men with a context for reproducing and negotiating identity construction; Hollands (2004) showed how cultural consumption of the media and participation in leisure/sport activities play a role in creating a native identity of the Mohawks in Canada. Atencio (2008) also explored the construction of ethnic identities in salsa clubs.

Identities are formed during daily practices and emerge in spatial settings. Some places are repositories for long histories of visitor interaction with, and the creation of, place (Stedman, 2006). Places are characterized by the dialectical relationship between socially constructed meanings founded through lived experience and the individual everyday reality

of those experiences. Both the formation of identities and the formation of spaces into places are processes that are highly negotiated. Many identities are particularly expressed at the intersection of leisure behavior in public places (Aitchison, 2001; Urry, 2002).

Social Interaction and Social Capital

An identity is needed to have a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is related to the role that leisure plays in people's lives and how it contributes to social capital. The origin of the theory of social capital lies with Bourdieu (1986), who defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). In his critical sociological perspective, Bourdieu emphasizes conflict and argued that social capital is meant for gaining power. Putnam (2000), on the other hand, argued that social capital is important because it contributes to trust, norms, and values. He distinguished between bonding social capital and bridging social capital: The former refers to closed networks of family and friends and the latter to contacts and networks that bridge communities like a sport club where people of various socio-economic or sociocultural groups play together and make new friends outside their own networks.

Encounters with others also happen in public spaces when there is a "gathering" and people sense that they are close enough to see and be seen (Goffman, 1963, p. 17). An expectation of mutual attentiveness is different from the civil attentiveness among strangers in public (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1998). Mutual attentiveness is especially present within social interactions and important in *face-work* between people in interaction. Dines and Cattell (2006) identified prerequisites for social interaction in public open spaces, including familiarity with spaces, regular use, and the availability of facilities that give purpose to a space and enhance its social vitality. They claimed that conversations involve not only words but also indexical expressions, facial gestures, status, voice intonation, past histories, anticipated conversations and actions, turn-taking practices, and a rich, complex, and culturally variable vocabulary of touch. This behavior, including interactions, in public space shows how individuals negotiate public space.

Leisure Interactions, Social Capital, and Social Integration/Disintegration

Leisure encourages the development of social skills because many leisure activities involve social interaction. Migrants can benefit from leisure activities because many migrants initially felt discomfort in their new societies (Stodolska & Yi, 2003). However, some basic skills must be present before leisure activities can contribute to a person's well-being. For example, a common language is needed to use leisure as a way to interact. In Western Europe, first-generation migrants often do not share a common language with the native inhabitants. Cultural disposition and behavioral codes are key factors that discourage minority ethnic communities from using natural areas (Morris, 2003). Researchers have found strong evidence regarding the presence and relevance of discrimination (e.g., Gobster, 1998; McDonald & McAvoy, 1997). Negative interactions often relate to discrimination, which may make users uncomfortable or lead to anger and physical violence (West, 1989). Migrants in the Netherlands seem to participate more in leisure activities nearer to their homes than nonmigrants and spend more of their leisure time with their families than the native Dutch (Jókövi, 2003). These differences can be explained both by the lower socio-economic status of migrants compared to the native Dutch and by migrant cultural backgrounds that often place more emphasis on the importance of the social character of leisure activities, especially on the importance of family. Generally the leisure participation

of second-generation migrants differed less from that of the native Dutch than did first-generation migrants (Jókövi, 2003; Juniu, 2000). Moreover, migrants of the four main migrant groups and the native Dutch mostly spent their leisure time with their own ethnic groups. Moroccan and Surinamese migrants showed a small increase in their contacts with native Dutch in 1994–2006, while Turkish migrants focused more on their own ethnic group. Second-generation migrants maintained more contacts with the native Dutch than did first-generation migrants, although the share of second-generation Turkish and Moroccan migrants who maintained more contact with people of their own ethnic groups increased in 1994–2006. This finding can be explained by the increasing segregation in housing where fewer opportunities occur, the increasing societal tensions, and the lack of reduction in social distance between native and migrant people in the Netherlands (Dagevos & Gijsberts, 2007).

Many leisure activities take place in public spaces where people are co-present with strangers and, therefore, more likely to have such interactions than in private places. In urban public spaces, most people do not know each other (Lofland, 1998). Although encounters between strangers have been characterized as brief and functional (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1998), these interactions can be meaningful (Soenen, 2006). Through these encounters people are confronted with differences that can lead to contrast or even conflicts, as well as new social ties or ways of looking at things. Dines and Cattell (2006) argued that to harness the potential for maintaining and improving interethnic relations, public spaces need to be understood "not simply as sites where people, under the right circumstances or with the necessary encouragement, might come together, but as everyday settings where a range of interests and attachments to place are able to converge and evolve" (p. 38). Blokland (2003) emphasized the importance of seeing and meeting people to become acquainted with one's neighborhood. This *public familiarity* (Fischer, 1982) can be achieved by making use of certain spaces and by being involved in a neighborhood. It can lead to social cohesion and stimulate feelings of comfort.

Interethnic interactions, however, are not necessarily valued positively because they can also lead to social conflict. Hanhörster (2001) concluded from research in Germany that Turkish youths were particularly prone to loiter in groups in centrally located public spaces, and their presence intimidated many German residents. Her research showed that public spaces played an important role in determining both the sense of orientation in space, and feelings of security or insecurity in neighborhoods. Research by Heering and terBekke (2007) in the Netherlands showed that interethnic interactions in such public spaces as cafes can lead to tensions among ethnic groups: "These investments [in interethnic friendships] and ties are not rewarded in the public domain. On the contrary, due to the tense climate and 'bad' experiences with a small group of Moroccans, their ethnic group is in a scapegoat position" (p. 112). Although interethnic interactions can lead to conflicts, too much focus on tensions also can lead to migrants being blamed for disturbing behavior. Religion plays a major role in these potential social conflicts. Although religion may be less important in the future (Van Oudenhoven, Blank, Leemhuis, Pomp, & Fetsje Sluis, 2008), other researchers (e.g., Dagevos & Gijsberts, 2007) have stated that the religious preferences of second- and third-generation non-Western Muslim migrants indicate a more intensive dedication to Islam.

Gender is an inherent aspect in this complex interplay of religion, class, and ethnicity. Researchers such as Alexandris and Carroll (1997) and Jackson and Henderson (1995) concluded that women face more intense leisure constraints than men because of their lack of time and their extra responsibilities, which encroach on their time. They suggested that women's roles and responsibilities within society often limit their freedom of choice. Muslim women, for example, face multiple constraints. These constraints include limited

time, limited social interaction due to prioritizing the needs of other family members (e.g., children, husbands), and limited opportunities (e.g., avoidance of some places because they fear for their children's safety; Yücesoy, 2006).

However, seeing women not as potential victims in public space, but as people who construct and negotiate public space is important. Public spaces in the neighborhood are important because knowledge about public spaces is both plentiful and manageable; as such, there is room for appropriation, that is, the creation of home territories where women are able to develop informal relations with neighbors (Yücesoy, 2006). These spaces can be viewed as transitional spaces—spaces between the safety of home and unknown places farther away where there is a degree of familiarity—where people need to cope with the anonymity and strangeness of the public space. I focus on this concept of transitional spaces in exploring political debates about public spaces as arenas for strengthening interethnic social cohesion.

Methodological Starting Points: Qualitative Research

My research can be characterized as explorative. It involved an interpretive approach to examine the meanings that people brought to public spaces. This approach is an appropriate way to understand and examine the meanings that people construct and use to make sense of their experiences within a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

I used observations and semi-structured interviews to gather information about the interactions in and the meaning of spatial settings for their users during March 2007–September 2008. I interviewed 40 people. Each interview lasted 30–90 minutes and was carried out in Dutch. Some interviews were shorter because the respondents had to leave. Twenty-seven interviews were held in one of the two parks. The respondents comprised local experts and park visitors. More than half of the respondents were female (22). Twenty-four respondents were native Dutch and 16 respondents were migrants (8 Moroccan, 6 Turkish, 2 Surinamese, 2 Antillean). Most of the migrant respondents had mastered the Dutch language. During two interviews, however, daughters helped by translating, and in one case the quality of the interview was low because of language problems. Issues of use, meaning, and interactions in public spaces were the focus. Examples of questions were: How often are you in this park? Do you have any contact with others? What kind of contact? How do you feel about these contacts? Because I was interested in a cross-section of perspectives based on ethnicity and gender, a stratified purposeful sampling was used "to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis" (Patton, 1990, p. 174).

Interviews were conducted with eight experts who were key persons in their districts to gain an insight into the general situation in the districts. These experts provided information about the population, the use of the public spaces, and specific characteristics of the neighborhoods and groups of people. Not all interviews were recorded and transcribed before data analysis. In some cases, tape-recording proved impossible due to the high level of background noise. Thus, detailed note taking was used during the interviews (i.e., summarizing the content of participants' responses and recording their actual words).

About 26 observations were conducted at various times and on different days of the week to trace everyday interactions and to note issues related to people's behavior. I entered the public space and observed people's actions, behavior, and the context of the social situation (Spradley, 1980) and paid special attention to the presence of interethnic interactions. During these observations, notes included the age group, gender, group size, ethnicity (only tentative), activities, and interactions.

All interview data and field notes were analyzed to "obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The notes were subjected to thematic content analysis to illuminate underlying themes in the conversations. I open coded and categorized the responses according to issues that appeared central to the interactions in public spaces. In the second stage of analysis, I examined the symbolic meaning attached to the places and events to which the participants referred. This analysis was guided by theoretical sensitivity and an iterative process that involved continual interplay between the data and the background literature. The analysis was not guided by prior hypotheses, so the themes emerged from the data. The analytical process involved carefully rereading the data to discover common themes and differentiate between the accounts provided by the participants to acquire an understanding and knowledge of phenomena from the point of view of those who were under study.

Three themes emerged from this triangulated process across sources and methods. My research does not offer generalizations or the *truth* but rather describes the meanings of interactions in public spaces. Trustworthiness (i.e., how the study's results capture reality as it was constructed between the researcher and the study participants) included trying to represent data from naturalistic inquiries (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) and aiming to represent the voices of study participants. Since all "analyses are limited and filtered through the lens of the researcher" (Hutchinson & Samdahl, 2000, p. 245), any limitations of the findings of these analyses lie in this lens. Multiple modes of primary data gathering enabled me to combine perspectives from various sources to improve the study's reliability and validity.

I chose Nijmegen because it is a typical, mid-sized Dutch city. Nijmegen had a population of 160,000 inhabitants who are 12% migrants. Public spaces were studied in two relatively mixed districts: Goffert and Bottendaal. Goffert was inhabited by 2,600 people with 10% migrants. In one of the neighborhoods, however, migrants made up 20% of the population. This large district (i.e., 340 hectares) included both a park and a stadium. Bottendaal had more than 4,400 inhabitants including 9% with a migrant background. The size of this area was only 38 hectares and was densely populated with not much public space.

I selected two parks as spatial settings. Goffert Park was the largest park in the city and attracted visitors both from the nearby area and other parts of Nijmegen. Thieme Park was a small neighborhood park that attracted people from nearby. The Bottendaal neighborhood was multiethnic in the 1970s/1980s. From the 1990s on, however, the population changed. Houses were bought by developers and sold to people with high incomes, mainly the native Dutch. The neighborhood was populated by students, Moroccans, and highly educated native Dutch persons at the time of this research. Many houses did not have a private garden, and there were few public green areas.

Findings

Findings were clustered around three key issues that emerged from the data analysis: what happens in the parks, the interactions in public space (e.g., tensions, positive affirmation), and gendered transitional spaces.

Being in Public Spaces: Mingling or Being on your Own?

Both parks were visited by a variety of people for leisure purposes. Goffert Park was mostly visited by couples and families with children, while Thieme Park was mostly visited by couples and groups of friends. The average group size in Goffert Park was larger than in Thieme Park. However, in both parks migrants seem to visit the areas in larger groups

(> 4 people) than natives (2–4 people). This difference in group size was validated during the interviews: Migrants talked about visiting the park with their families (e.g., brothers, sisters), while Dutch visitors said they visited the parks mostly with a friend or their partner (and children). Muslims' leisure behavior tended to be collectivistic in nature and focused on strong family ties (Hasan, 2001). Migrants' recreational and leisure time pursuits involved family and friendship roles, and they seemed to affirm their ethnic ties by engaging in such activities. Although young people also participated in other leisure activities that were not connected to their ethnic backgrounds, both youngsters and parents stressed the strong family bonds and the importance of going on family visits to parks. Stodolska (2000) also noted that migrants were clear about their ethnic heritage and used leisure as a tool for connecting with their old way of life and for retaining their cultural tradition My interviews showed that more than half of the respondents spent their leisure time mainly with people from their own ethnic groups.

Migrant women visited the parks with other women and with men. They chatted and felt at ease. The women laughed, gossiped, and looked after the children in their group. The women enjoyed their visits to the park, as confirmed by Muslim respondents who stated that most of their time was used for compulsory tasks and that visits to Goffert Park were a pleasurable activity. Their leisure activities were limited to going to the local shops and having picnics in the park. Other social visits were mostly restricted to family and friends.

The reasons given for visiting the parks were related to enjoying leisure time in a relaxing or active way. Although in both parks visitors tended to inhabit their own spaces, in Thieme Park most people sat on the meadow, chatting, eating, or reading and not paying much attention to others, which led to a quiet atmosphere. In Goffert Park, people did whatever they liked and expressed themselves more overtly whether playing loud music or having a family picnic. Furthermore, Goffert Park was used for more active pursuits such as football, walking, or playing with children. The diversity in activities and behavior was greater in Goffert Park. The park was popular since it is child friendly, has plenty of shade, and people can picnic in large groups. Furthermore, my observations in Goffert Park revealed that visitors created their own places. They "claimed" certain parts of the park, and since the park was large this did not often lead to conflicts.

There were some differences in the use of the park between native and nonnative users mostly related to music and food. Migrants more often took food to the park and often played and listened to music.

Leisure in public spaces often serves to create and form one's identity. Park users showed their identity by dress code, actions, the language they spoke, and their behavior sometimes according to the rules and other times by negotiating them:

> One sunny afternoon, an Antillean man and two women arrived at Goffert Park by car. They unloaded the car: chairs, table, food, drinks, and a stereo installation—not merely a CD player but a professional table behind which the Antillean man started to play DJ. The music was loud, and the ladies talked and moved about in their chairs. The Antillean man talked between songs. At one moment, he shouted: "Hello Goffert Park! Here's your illegal DJ, playing songs for you even though he's not allowed to!" Several native Dutch people were passing by. None of them complained about the loud music; some of them gave the man a smile and walked on.

The visitors to the two parks did not act the same way. In Thieme Park (i.e., the small park), people were more intimate with each other than in Goffert Park. They acted like they were in a private space, which was confirmed during the interviews. The respondents went to

the park because they did not have gardens and used the park as a kind of extended home. Many respondents said that they were having dinner in the park. I noted that most visitors did not take much notice of other visitors: They tended to focus on their own group and activities, not wanting to disturb others. They did not want to interact with others but rather to socialize with their own group: "People like to be on their own" (Dutch male). This statement relates to what Lofland (1998) calls "mind your own business" (p. 31), which is an integral element of the behavioral code in the public realm.

The situation in Goffert Park was different with more noise and activity. Visitors were more active. They played soccer and children ran about. As a result, they had more contact with other visitors than in the small neighborhood park. They looked around, watched other visitors, and, because they were more mobile, came across other visitors more often.

Interactions in Public Spaces

Two fundamentals that stimulate social interaction in public open spaces are familiarity with spaces and regular use (Dines & Cattell, 2006). My interviews with visitors and experts revealed that the small neighborhood park was visited mostly by people who live nearby, and that most of them visited the park regularly. Visitors to Goffert Park, however, came from all over Nijmegen, and not many had seen each other before in other places. Therefore, more interactions would be expected in the small neighborhood park than in Goffert Park. Although in the neighborhood park more people greeted each other, probably because they had seen each other before, I did not observe much difference between the numbers of interactions.

I also did not observe many conversations between strangers. This observation was supported by a middle-class Dutch woman who lives close to Thieme Park. She said she spent time in the public spaces in her neighborhood but did not engage with strangers. The exchanges that did occur were about specific matters, such as "Do you have a lighter?" The respondents enjoyed this small talk that did not try to turn it into conversation. Other forms of interaction also occurred. People made eye contact and nodded to each other, especially in Goffert Park where the visitors were more mobile. Although these interactions can be positive, they can and often do, create tensions between the users of a specific place. The following scenario demonstrated how the appearance of a couple led to a reaction among other visitors, negotiating values and norms about behavior that is perceived to be *normal* in public spaces during leisure time:

> The sun was shining and it was 79°F. A Dutch couple was lying in Goffert Park. The woman wore a short skirt and a top, the man only shorts. They read for some time. They then became intimate, and started kissing and hugging.
> A group of pre-teen Moroccan boys were playing soccer nearby. A Moroccan man was refereeing. When the game was over, the boys gathered around the Moroccan man, who gave them something to drink. After finishing their drinks, the boys ran over to the Dutch couple and began to laugh and make remarks about their intimate behavior. This went on for some minutes; the boys made their comments either while running about or standing still.
> The Dutch couple looked at the boys but did not make any remarks. After a while, they started to read again. The boys left the park.

Although in other contexts these boys' behavior could be described as childish, Dutch female respondents stated that they disliked this behavior, which they typified as Moroccan and Muslim: "You feel uncomfortable when these youngsters stare, and even sometimes

make sexual remarks. But that's how it is; you'll hear that more often, I suppose" (Dutch woman, 27 years).

In this sense, the image of Moroccan Muslim youngsters was confirmed and their assumed identities were reproduced—an image based on their behavior in public space and characterized as hanging around and annoying other users, especially women users. I observed this type of behavior (i.e., Moroccan teenagers trying to get women's attention by staring at them and making comments) quite often in both parks.

My findings showed that visitors, both migrants and nonmigrants, placed importance on spending their leisure time with people who understood them. Although diversity in public space is appreciated, people tended to interact more with people from their own ethnic backgrounds, which was the case during other leisure activities. Almost all respondents spent most of their leisure time with people of their own ethnic groups. Most of them felt comfortable with this situation. The reason was mostly because they wanted their social life to be relaxing and enjoyable. When spending time with people from other cultural backgrounds, understanding each other is harder and some things need explaining. Turkish women said that although they did have contact with their Dutch neighbors, chatting with Dutch people was not as easy as with Turkish people. The respondents saw language as one of the major constraints but also stated that it is a matter of character: "Turkish people have real conversations, instead of only saying hello." Turkish women, therefore, tended to interact with other Turkish people.

Although people visiting the small park valued that they lived in a multicultural neighborhood, various ethnic groups did not interact with each other either in or outside the park. A 23-year-old Dutch man said, "I don't spend my leisure time with non-Dutch people. . . . Oh, wait, I do have a Spanish friend and one from the UK. But that's all." Similarly a 21-year-old Moroccan-Dutch man stated, "At school I spent time with people from other cultural backgrounds. I play soccer in my neighborhood, but mostly with Moroccan guys."

Although my study showed that in public spaces people see other people, which is valued positively by the visitors, the main question remains: Do parks facilitate social cohesion? The atmosphere in Thieme Park was one in which people greeted each other more than in Goffert Park. The interviews revealed that visitors had a feeling of togetherness, although they did not interact intensively during their visits, as shown by the following quotes from users of Thieme Park:

> I like being in this park. I go when there's an event, or just to walk around. I don't really have contact with people I don't know, except during events, then I talk about common interests, like the tango event. That's sufficient for me. (Dutch woman, 60)
> I often go to Thieme Park, and I always see people I know. But also people I don't know; it's easy to say hello in this park. I like the atmosphere. I don't need more contact; I like it the way it is. (Dutch woman, 48)
> I like living in this neighborhood, and I often visit Thieme Park, mostly alone. I meet other people, many of whom I've known all my life. I like to have contact with them in the park. (Moroccan-Dutch man, 26)

The direct link with and the closeness of the neighborhood created this familiar atmosphere. Visitors established relations with places of proximity such as Thieme Park. Blokland (2003) and Fischer (1982) emphasized the importance of seeing and meeting people for getting acquainted with the place one lives in and thus creating public familiarity. Blokland stated that by using certain spaces and being involved or participating in certain developments in a neighborhood, people get acquainted with their neighborhood, which creates feelings

of comfort and, therefore, stimulates social cohesion. My respondents mentioned the importance of the park as a space where they saw people from their own neighborhood, and gained knowledge about their daily environment. In that sense, people got acquainted with their neighborhood by using this small park. Whether this leads to more social cohesion, however, cannot be answered by this study.

The other park, Goffert, was an open, accessible friendly place. People noticed each other, and a variety of people used this park as noted by one respondent, "It's a great park. All kinds of people come here, and do different things." The park functioned as a place where people met each other spontaneously such as youngsters who came to the park in small groups and played soccer in bigger groups. People saw other people, and because of the variety of visitors, society was represented in the visitors. Knowledge seemed to be acquired and familiarity promoted not only through conversations and other direct interactions but also through being together in the same place as stated by a Moroccan man:

> When the weather's nice, we go to Goffert Park and eat there. Many nationalities go there, which is nice. [. . .] I sometimes have chats with others, which I like very much. If they'd organize more activities, there'd be more contact. I'd find that nice.

The native Dutch respondents did not express a wish to have more contact while migrant respondents did. However, migrants stated that they will not take the initiative. When I discussed this lack of initiative with a group of Turkish women, they referred to schools as places where people could meet each other. These interactions were mainly mono-ethnic as one Turkish woman described: "There were always two groups of parents: the native Dutch and the migrants. [. . .] There was no mixing between the two groups. Children played at each other's houses, but their parents had hardly any contact."

Migrants seemed to like the interactions when they happened spontaneously but most often did not start the conversation themselves. Perhaps they felt that starting a conversation would not be appreciated, which relates to the issue brought up by one interviewee: "I think that we [Muslim migrants] give more respect to the Dutch than we get from them." Deeper ethnic tensions may exist in Dutch society and can be explained by migrants not feeling respected religiously as Muslims. Stodolska and Livengood (2006) concluded from their study that members of religious minorities such as Muslims possess additional and powerful reasons to maintain their customs. These reasons appear strong enough to counteract pressures from the out-group, which tends to isolate and often discriminate against religious minorities. Muslim visitors did not seem to act as they wished according to their Muslim values. However, they did not always feel respected by the native Dutch, as illustrated by a 56-year-old Turkish-Dutch woman's comment: "Things in the Netherlands have changed. In the 1980s, everybody was friendly, but no longer. Dutch people you don't know are less friendly [. . .] I don't feel accepted. Like last week, a boy of only 10 insulted me." A 50-year-old Turkish-Dutch woman also noted: "I am always nice to people, whether they're Dutch or Turkish. But I sometimes think that we give more respect to Dutch people than we receive from them. Things were different ten years ago." Dekker and Bolt (2005) stated that the prejudices of native Dutch residents against ethnic minorities are possibly stronger than those of migrants against natives, which reinforces these quotes and results in migrants being hesitant to start conversations with natives.

Thus, most visitors to the two parks spent their leisure time with their families and friends from the same ethnic background. Not many interactions occurred. The interactions

that did occur were mostly valued positively. Although the native Dutch respondents appeared happy with this situation and did not look for more interactions, migrant respondents would have liked more interactions but tended not to initiate these interactions.

Gendered Transitional Spaces?

During the interviews, respondents described both parks as places where they felt safe, at home, and comfortable. The Muslim female respondents stated that Goffert Park was a place where they go with their family, friends, or neighbors. These women spent most of their time in their neighborhoods doing their daily chores and used public parks for leisure activities. A 68-year-old Antillean woman noted:

> When I go to Goffert Park, I go with my family or with my children. Sometimes, more family members or friends come too. Goffert Park is nice, open, and friendly. You can sit very comfortably over there and watch other people. I find it friendlier than other parks, which I don't visit.

Although other research showed that public spaces can be places of fear, especially for women, my findings do not support this idea. On the contrary, both Goffert and Thieme parks were perceived by all female respondents as places where they felt at ease and relaxed. When asked why they go to these places, they said that they liked the atmosphere and felt safe, as shown by the following quote from a Turkish woman: "Goffert Park is a nice, open place. I like to go there with my family and friends. I really feel at ease there." These places were important to these women because their mobility was low, and sometimes they were unwilling or unable to visit others because they were busy running their households or did not have transport. In their daily lives, the public spaces in the neighborhood played a big role and they felt at home in those places. An aspect associated with the religious background of female Muslim respondents related to restrictions imposed by Islam on females traveling unaccompanied (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). Although Muslim respondents underlined this aspect, Muslim women stayed in the park without men, such as a Turkish woman who often visited the park with her mother and children.

Both parks acted as transitional spaces that allowed strangers and passers-by to interact, which was valued positively. Thieme Park functioned as an everyday space that forms the connective tissue that binds daily life together and served as primary intersections between the individual and the city (Chase, Crawford, & Kaliski, 1999). Whether the concept of transitional space applies as an intermediary space between the private and the bigger public world was not confirmed by this study.

Discussion and Conclusion

A diverse group of people visit the two parks in Nijmegen. In summer, a visit to Goffert Park was an important leisure activity for respondents. While in these parks, most people relaxed, walked, or enjoyed a picnic, and most were with people from their own cultural groups. The trend over the last few decades in the Netherlands has been for people to spend even less leisure time with other cultural groups (Gijsberts, 2004). Leisure tends to strengthen already known relations rather than create new ones. Freedom to choose social interactions results in spending leisure time with friends and family.

Migrants and nonmigrants used parks in different ways: The former visited parks in large groups, while the latter tended to go alone or in couples. Moreover, nonmigrants more often performed active leisure activities than migrants. Finally, nonmigrants more

often participated in sunbathing, while migrants more often had a picnic. These findings indicated that migrants' leisure behavior was affected by factors related to their ethnic and religious backgrounds such as being more collective and women being restricted in their leisure behavior (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006).

Not many interactions among ethnic groups occurred in the two parks. Respondents tended to describe their visits as leisure and being together with family and friends, rather than focusing on interactions with others. For most visitors, the parks provided opportunities for retreat and a chance to escape from domestic tasks. However, the chats and encounters that did occur were valued positively by the respondents. Dines and Cattell (2006) found that people generally provide positive reasons for their interactions in public space and tend not to elaborate on the absence of negative elements. Dines and Cattell identified the prerequisites for social interaction in public open spaces as including familiarity with spaces, regular use, the endurance of a public space over time, and the availability of facilities that give purpose to a space and enhance its social vitality. These prerequisites were present in Thieme Park more than in Goffert Park. However, it is not clear whether this led to a first step towards friendship or "the beginning of a community" (Dines & Cattell, p. ix).

In addition to interactions, noting that people from various ethnic backgrounds saw each other in the two parks is important. These parks seemed to serve as an arena for people from various sociocultural circles and as domains of interaction between representatives of various sociocultural backgrounds (Oosterman, 1992). By welcoming everyone, public spaces can bring together groups of people regardless of their class, ethnic origin, gender, or age, which makes intermingling possible (Madanipour, 1999). A diverse group of people can interact and learn about each other in public spaces (Carr, Crawford & Kaliski, 1992). When people are familiar with the rules and models of engagement used in certain public spaces, they can feel more at home. Blokland (2003) described *public familiarity*, which arises when independent, anonymous people keep encountering each other. The more time spent in public, the more public familiarity arises. Further, not all exchange has to take place through practical activities. Far from a passive activity, people-watching provides a flow of information about a person's fellow citizens—who they are, what they are doing, and what they look like. In the parks in Nijmegen, people enjoyed watching people because of the diversity of people in the park. People from ethnic backgrounds were co-present in the two parks, and they seemed familiar and comfortable in this atmosphere. The small neighborhood park was a public space that could easily be entered as a familiar place. It seems that these parks function as a transitional space—a space between the safe private space and the unknown public space—to bridge the boundaries between the self and the other. It is important to find out in further research to what extent these places contribute to a sense of belonging (Ellsworth, 2005). Although public familiarity was created especially in the small neighborhood park, it is not clear whether this facilitated more interethnic interactions. I did not observe many interactions, nor were they reported by my respondents. Organizing more activities in urban parks to bring people together and facilitate interethnic interactions might be useful.

This study had some limitations: The sample was too small to support claims of representation. However, the findings showed that visiting urban spaces that are open and accessible and where people from various ethnic backgrounds come together is important because cultural changes can occur in places where ideologies coincide. Therefore, these spaces, places where people can meet and interact with each other in a more or less natural way, are important in all cities. Although only the first step toward intercultural understanding, facilitating this step may create open and accessible meeting points where interethnic encounters can take place (Dines & Cattell, 2006). Since mixed neighborhoods

are common in the Netherlands, these parks may create more opportunities for interethnic encounters in the public spaces in these neighborhoods. Cultural integration can occur in common spaces and is furthered by mutual understanding. In an increasingly multiethnic society, the challenge for local governments is to support these processes of cultural change. Thus, a better understanding of the role that urban public places can play is valuable.

This study showed that people from various ethnic backgrounds valued being in parks together with people who were different from themselves. This positive evaluation can be a starting point for creating more understanding among individuals in multicultural societies.

Acknowledgments

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