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# Living with difference in hyper-diverse areas: how important are encounters in semi-public spaces?

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## **Abstract**

Urban populations increasingly diversify in their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles as well as in their lifestyles, attitudes and activity patterns. This hyper-diversification can complicate feelings of belonging and community. Since diversity is negotiated at the neighbourhood level, micro spaces are central in building communities. Micro spaces tend to be semi-public and stimulate diverse groups to intermingle, which results in on-off as well as repetitive and structural interactions. Understanding the creation and impact of encounters is central to capturing contemporary notions of belonging and living with difference. This paper compares encounters experienced in two semi-public spaces in the hyper-diverse neighbourhood of Feyenoord in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Although encounters at the library were lighter and shorter than at the community-centre, all positively impact collective life in the neighbourhood. At the community-centre, encounters result in light as well as deeper relationships, making visitors feel more at 'home' because they recognize others elsewhere in the neighbourhood. At the library, encounters are lighter but visitors become familiar with diversity, making them feel more at 'home' and safe in their neighbourhood as well. The study suggests that fleeting encounters require more serious attention within the context of negotiating diversity.

**Keywords:** living with difference; encounters; fleeting; public familiarity; community; home

## **Introduction**

Hyper-diversity is becoming a trait of an increasing number of contemporary cities around the globe. The majority of cities witness a growing number of highly differentiated migrant streams joining their existing population groups. As migrants always bring with them a variety of customs, traditions, languages and experiences, urban groups diversify in their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles (Vertovec, 2007). As a result, urban groups become not just 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007) but hyper-diversified because even people who appear to belong to the same group express different lifestyles, attitudes and activity patterns (Tasan-Kok, van Kempen, Raco, & Bolt, 2013). Some scholars warn that this hyper-diversification might lead to more social exclusion as individuals segregate themselves from others who belong to a different class, ethnicity or express another lifestyle (Fincher, Iveson, Leitner, & Preston, 2014). As people are inclined to connect to similar others, urban residents may prefer to live side-by-side without mixing socially (Merry, 2013; Reynolds & Zontini, 2013). This self-segregation might further complicate feelings of belonging and 'community' which, in an era of high mobility and social media, are claimed to be put more and more in jeopardy (Amin, 2002).

Within this context, scholars have been increasingly interested in understanding how the condition of hyper-diversity is dealt with 'on the ground'. As the actual negotiation of diversity happens at the local level, diversity is expressed where people live (Berg & Sigona, 2013; Gidley, 2013). Differences in lifestyle, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or religion become visible in neighbourhood bars, corner shops and cafes (Valentine, 2013). The neighbourhood, thus, forms an important point of reference for understanding expressions of diversity and how people negotiate these differences (Berg & Sigona, 2013). Shared spaces are especially important venues regarding the daily struggles of negotiating difference. These spaces often represent semi-public spaces that encourage the simultaneous use and intermingling of diverse groups (Amin, 2002). Although public spaces such as parks were long believed to be crucial sites for the negation of urban diversity, as a rule they do not encourage social interaction (Goffman, 1969). On the other hand, semi-public spaces let us observe in more detail how people might come to terms with difference. Amin (2002) suggests that libraries, community centers, corner shops, cafes or sports clubs are important 'micro spaces' which allow people to disrupt familiar patterns and form new attachments. The micro scale of such venues compels people to confront and interact with one another thereby helping them to "learn to become different" (Amin, 2002, p.970). While these spaces are not completely a 'world of strangers' (Lofland, 1973) but frequented by diverse groups, on-off interactions as well as strong and more structural interactions take place there (ibid.).

Yet, many scholars continue to examine the role social mixing might play in the process of creating more cohesive communities. This trend continues despite the evidence that diversity induced through

social mixing policies might actually hamper community-building (Putnam, 2007). The problem with the literature in question is that the units of analysis of social mix often remain quite abstract and do not reflect people's real-life experiences and narratives. The latter is what we need to research if we wish to capture how people negotiate diversity from day to day. Moreover, encounters happen between individuals in concrete places which are themselves shaped by particular social processes and physical surroundings. According to Lefebvre (1991), the physical acts as an entry-point for understanding social interaction but spaces are most importantly a 'social product' with people subconsciously determining through their behaviour which encounters may or may not take place. This paper adds to the investigation of the particularity of different meeting spaces and the role they play in the stimulation of specific encounters that impact our capacity to live with difference.

While scholars acknowledge the importance of the surrounding social and physical contexts of encounters, they remain divided regarding which types of encounter yield a sense of 'community' and an appreciation of difference. Some argue that fleeting encounters contribute to a sense of familiarity by making diversity appear more 'commonplace' thereby promoting feelings of belonging and community (Blokland & Qdww

public space typically refers to a “city’s street[s], its parks [and] places of public accommodation” (Lofland, 1973, p. 19), semi-public or parochial spaces are open to the public as well but have a certain private character to them. This private character relates to changes in control and behavior with semi-public spaces possibly imposing stricter rules regarding behavior than purely public spaces might do. Each neighborhood has a variety of semi-public (i.e. parochial) spaces such as libraries, community centers, schoolyards, corner shops, cafes or sports clubs. Sometimes referred to as ‘micro publics’ (Amin, 2002), these spaces are zones for intercultural encounter and are deemed important because they offer opportunities for interdependence and habitual engagement (ibid.). Purely public spaces such as parks, streets and squares were long believed to be crucial sites for the negotiation of urban diversity. Their design supposedly encouraged an urban civic culture by allowing people to freely associate and mingle with each other (Duyvendak & Wekker, 2015). Actually, public spaces do not necessarily support multicultural engagement. Goffman (1963) observed that, as a rule, people do not interact in public places unless there is an obvious reason to do so. Moreover, contemporary public spaces are often territorialized by particular groups or represent spaces of transit where strangers have very little contact (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

Within the context of living with difference, we must focus on semi-public spaces as the central venues of the negotiation of diversity. These spaces urge people to mix and engage with one another across their differences in order to achieve a common goal (Amin, 2002; Wessendorf, 2013). The ways in which people engage are strongly linked to the settings themselves and van Eijk and Engbersen (2011) propose that the ways people interact in shared spaces are related to four key conditions: multifunctionality, connectedness, comfort and sociability. By physically designing spaces according to these principles, planned as well as chance encounters are facilitated as routes and routines of different groups are integrated. Yet, spaces are not solely physical. Lefebvre (1991) articulates that the physical side of space might act as an ‘inception point’ or ‘root’ but that “space is [always] a [social] product” (p.26), indicating that people’s activities and experiences create and constantly re-create spaces. As a result of these ‘prosaic negotiations’ (Amin, 2002), some semi-public spaces might appear more ‘public’, having an open and neutral character, whereas others might be perceived as more ‘parochial’, meaning that people know each other and express a sense of community (Lofland, 1989). To illustrate the fluidity between the realms, Wessendorf (2014) describes the case of a corner shop which can appear ‘public’ to outsiders but ‘parochial’ to the regular customers and the staff who experience habitual and repetitive encounters there.

Scholars have identified a variety of encounters that result out of this daily ‘rubbing along’ in shared spaces. The majority of these encounters are fleeting in nature. Occurring between or among individuals unknown to one another, fleeting encounters are short-lived and superficial and often represent convivial forms of interaction. The civilities inherent in many fleeting encounters let people live together without conflict but also without direct or regular interaction. The successful negotiation of difference in that sense is not necessarily the result of interpersonal recognition or the value attached to diversity but a trained habit (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2013). Nevertheless, fleeting encounters are central to our ability to negotiate diversity as these short-lived interactions “challenge the fear of the ‘other’ embedded in relations with strangers” (Ye, 2015, p.2). Through their temporariness, fleeting encounters have the ability to open up space for reflection and change. Light encounters with “personally unknown others of whom we have sufficient categorical knowledge” (ibid. p.2) make former strangers appear less ‘strange’. This stimulates a sense of familiarity with difference resulting in diversity becoming increasingly ‘commonplace’ (Wessendorf, 2014).

However, the relationship between familiarity and living with otherness remains undervalued. Some scholars are critical of the idea that fleeting encounters lead to an appreciation of difference. Valentine (2008), for example, argues that “positive encounters with individuals from minority groups do not necessarily change people’s opinions about groups as a whole for the better” (p.332). Amin (2002) adds that certain everyday moments such as fleeting meetings on the street have no impact on learning to live with difference because no intercultural exchange takes place. By implication, only meaningful encounters of a certain depth and duration can break existing stereotypes and challenge prejudice. As these encounters imply a certain ‘will to engagement’ (Askins, 2015) that requires commitment they have the power to change people’s values and translate into a long-term positive respect for others (Valentine, 2008). Thus, spaces that facilitate meaningful encounters in a repetitive and structural way encourage friendships that transcend cultural, class and ethnic boundaries (Amin,

2002; Wise, 2007). While acknowledging the potential of meaningful encounters, this paper seeks to foreground the importance of fleeting encounters as these interactions clearly highlight that direct interaction is not needed to feel more comfortable with the diversity that surrounds us. Rather, feeling recognized and familiar with those using the same spaces suffices to make us feel more at 'home' and connected to others (Blokland & Nast, 2014). Duyvendak and Wekker (2015) remind us, though, that different people might need varying degrees of intensity of social contact to develop such feelings. Spaces which stimulate amicable encounters or acting "as if being friends" (ibid. p.19) can help certain people to feel at 'home' by creating imagined moments of friendship and intimacy across difference whereas spaces which stimulate shorter and more distant encounters can help others to feel at 'home' and at ease by allowing them to be "among others without being in a state of committed relations" (Dokk Holm, 2013, p.183) and by creating a sense of being part of an 'invisible community' (Henriksen, Skjolsvold, & Gronning, 2013).

Within these debates, 'community' remains a relevant concept. Scholars largely agree that in today's era of high mobility and social media, the neighborhood becomes less important to social interaction (Florida, 2002). Research has shown that neighborhoods with strong communal ties may be prone to exclusion and discrimination, thereby contributing to a divided and fragmented city (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Not all researchers agree that while the kind of interactions people seek may have changed, the fundamental need to engage with others living in one's vicinity has too (Blokland, 2008). Locality and some sense of 'community' continue to play a role in the daily lives of many people. Feelings of 'home' and belonging have been regaining relevance within this discussion as society pursues the 'rediscovery of place' rather than liberation from it (Lewicka, 2010). 'Home' normatively refers to the relationships a person has with other people as well as with non-human objects. Feeling at 'home', then, is part of localizing these relationships in space. 'Home' is a place *in the making*, an ongoing process wherein 'home' is constantly created and re-created in different places (Nowicka, 2007). This reconsideration of feelings of 'home' and belonging made scholars return to 'where people live' as an important indicator of everyday forms of 'community' (Lewicka, 2005). This paper seeks to contribute to understanding the impact different encounters can have on a more contemporary sense of 'community', highlighting that people still want to feel at 'home' in their neighborhood and connected to others. Whether this is achieved through the development of close personal ties or more distant and 'absent' ones (Blokland & Nast, 2014) emphasizes the different forms belonging and 'community' can take.

### **Contextualizing diversity and sites of encounter in Rotterdam South**

Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands. As a seaport, throughout history Rotterdam has attracted migrants from all over the world. In 2010, almost half of its inhabitants (48%) were born abroad or had at least one parent who was. As migrants on average have children at a younger age than native citizens, the population is relatively young. In comparison to other large Dutch cities, Rotterdam has relatively high levels of unemployment, income segregation, poor households and low property prices. Feyenoord, a district in the South of Rotterdam, is a highly ethnically diverse neighbourhood. Native Dutch represent just a third of its population with Turks as the largest ethnic minority (19%), followed by Moroccans (11%) and Surinamese (10%). These percentages are notably higher when compared to Rotterdam and the Netherlands. Feyenoord is one of Rotterdam's youngest areas with one third of its population younger than 25 and just 11 percent 65 years or older. However, Feyenoord is also among the poorest districts. Average household income is 9 percent below the city average and 21 percent below the national average. The weak socio-economic position of Feyenoord is also evident in the low-level education of half of its residents, with one quarter of them depending on welfare benefits. Regarding Feyenoord's housing situation, housing corporations own 70 percent of the housing stock and rents are relatively low. Yet, houses are quite old as half of the dwellings have been built before 1945. Moreover, housing value is 18 percent lower than in the city and 43 percent lower than in the rest of the Netherlands. The low rents attract (disadvantaged) newcomers to the area, while higher-income groups have been moving away to more affluent neighbourhoods. Since the 1960s, most of the newcomers have been migrants (DIVERCITIES, 2015).

Within Feyenoord, two contrasting semi-public spaces were selected for this study: the community-centre *de Proeftuin* (which translates as Experimental Garden) and the library *'t Slag*.

Regarding the former, the municipality of Rotterdam has been cutting back on subsidies for local initiatives for some time. In response, 16 initiatives in Feyenoord in the fields of culture, education, healthcare and sports joined forces. In 2013, they settled in a vacated community-centre owned by the municipality. The joint initiative is run by volunteers, including the leaders and participants of the constituent initiatives and other visitors to the centre. A professional coordinator is in charge of schedules and finances. Currently, 69 project groups participate in the joint initiative. In the long run, the municipality wants this experimental project to become self-sufficient (Alacritas, 2014). The main goals of the experiment are to foster social cohesion and promote social mobility by providing rooms for neighbourhood groups to hold activities and celebrations and by offering financial and social help (Tersteeg, Bolt, & van Kempen, 2014). Since the initiative took over the premises in 2013, Eritreans, Moroccans and Hindustani were added to the Dutch, Turkish and Surinamese groups who had already been using the centre, while Chinese and Antilleans remain under-represented.

Regarding the city's library management, the municipality of Rotterdam decided to privatize its libraries in 2013. Since then 18 out of the city's 24 libraries have been closed. Due to trends of declining use, general budget costs and increasing financial problems of existing libraries, the city agreed that privatization would stimulate collaboration within the sector, improve management and possibilities for funding and be cheaper in the short-term. Also, libraries were not regarded as part of the main responsibilities of the municipality. The city's plan comprises the creation of 6 main libraries that would replace the smaller neighbourhood libraries, and would provide better and more extensive collections and media alongside extended opening hours to their users (van den Bergh and Fritz, 2012). Putting their plan into action, the old main library in Rotterdam South was closed and, as an alternative and in line with the city's expansion plan, library '*t Slag* was founded. '*t Slag* is currently one of the few remaining libraries in Rotterdam South. The library attracts diverse groups including Moroccans, Turks, Hindustani, Surinamese as well as Dutch, ranging from youngsters to older people. The library provides ample activities and spaces to its users such as seminars and workshops, a newspaper table, a media section, a café and a children's area. Yet, in the public policy arena, libraries scarcely enter the discussion of neighbourhood meeting places. Their low priority is obvious in the municipality's standpoint that the functions of a library can be reproduced at other settings such as schools or homes for the elderly. From the perspective of urban policy, libraries are not crucial for social interaction.

As encounters are sensitive to the physical and social surroundings, these sites were selected because they differ greatly from one another in terms of accessibility, use and atmosphere, facilitating contrasting encounters. These contrasting encounters were expected to influence visitors' feelings of 'home' and their social networks in divergent ways. The restyled community-centre was expected to facilitate deeper forms of interaction. Visitors would presumably come there on a regular basis and meet the same people over and over in a personal atmosphere. By participating in the activities and festivities, visitors would supposedly get to know more people living in the surrounding areas and feel more at 'home' in the neighbourhood. In comparison, the library was expected to encourage fleeting encounters, assuming that the visitors might be strangers to one another and that the library atmosphere would not encourage conversation. Visitors were not expected to make new social contacts yet, the possibility of observing others was expected to accustom visitors to the presence of different others, thereby making them feel more at 'home' in the neighbourhood.

### **Collecting data**

The study is based on three qualitative research methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and expert interviews. As the primary investigator, I observed each setting three times a week for at least five hours, mostly from 10 in the morning until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon from September until December 2015. I noted who frequented the places, how people behaved, what kind of interactions I observed and which activities people engaged in. At the community-centre, I also attended various activity groups to 'take a look inside' and to establish trust. Ten follow-up interviews of approximately one hour were held with visitors in each setting. The respondents were asked about their perception of diversity, use of public and semi-public spaces in the area, social contacts and networks and changes therein as a result of visiting the respective settings, and about their feelings of 'home'. Moreover, the interviewees at the centre were asked about their relationships and interactions

with other participants in their activity groups. The visitors interviewed were between the ages of 24 and 65 and from several ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch, Eritrean and Surinamese. At the community-centre, interviewees were mostly of a working-class background with some of them being unemployed and/or receiving welfare benefits. At the library, the social background was very mixed. In general, interviewees came from middle-class backgrounds, and most of them worked. Although the sample might not be fully representative of Feyenoord's general population, an attempt was made to capture the range of people frequenting both places. In addition, three expert interviews were conducted. One was with an independent urban researcher who studied the social functions of libraries, and had worked in the area for over 22 years. The other two interviews were with municipal officials in the field of well-being, social services and civic participation.

Encounters were selected according to their increasing intensity of contact: *fleeting, urban etiquette, studied co-presence, amicable* and *meaningful*. Eye contact, nodding, smiling or short greetings indicate fleeting encounters. Behaviour such as holding the door open or being polite hint at urban etiquette, whereas working together on shared projects and sitting peacefully side-by-side indicate studied co-presence. Acting 'as if friends' suggests that the encounter is amicable and having a long talk or touching would signify meaningful interactions. The impact of encounters was measured using a list of indicators. Comments about psychological feelings of 'home', bonding with the place of residence and being more neighbourhood-oriented or not were taken to indicate 'place attachment'. Comments concerning the number of friends and acquaintances, finding or deepening contacts within and without one's own group, and contacts being more neighbourhood-based or not were taken to denote 'social networks and contacts'.

### **Understanding how certain characteristics shape and differentiate semi-public spaces**

Amin (2002) identifies that semi-public spaces can act as important zones of intercultural engagement as 'prosaic negotiations' are unavoidable in shared spaces. Both venues, the community-centre and the library, represent such important 'micro publics' (Amin, 2002). Due to the location right next to schools and the houses people live in, the community-centre plays an important role in the social life of many residents (van Eijk & Engbersen, 2011). The library, in contrast, is located at the periphery of the neighbourhood which discourages parents with small children and older people, who are the prime users, from visiting more regularly. However, the community-centre feels significantly more difficult for newcomers to enter than the library. When I first visited the centre, people stopped talking and checked me out. I felt like an outsider, the 'new' one. This feeling passed once I started coming to the centre more often. Regulars play a key role in this as they can open up the space by asking newcomers to come in. Yet, some newcomers feel easily accepted and welcome as the groups already using the centre are diverse like Mohammed from the Middle East who explains that "[the staff and visitors] understand people like me, I mean, I can't speak Dutch so well but the people here will try to understand me".

The library, in contrast, feels more open and inviting. Hasan, a man in his early 30s who was born in the area, compares the library to a café to illustrate that "everybody can come inside just right now and try to take a chance. In cafes, you do have certain groups who dominate place". The physical layout offers one explanation for the perceived openness. The library is one continuous space with only bookshelves separating the different sections which successfully integrates multiple activities and allows everybody to 'fit in' (van Eijk & Engbersen, 2011). However, spaces "do not merely exist as physical settings" (Ye, 2015, p. 3) but are most importantly a 'social product' (Lefebvre, 1991). Hasan's comment illustrates this social reality of the library space where not only its open floorplan produces its inviting character but the perceived tolerance and acceptance radiated by its users.

At the community-centre, the social constructedness of space becomes obvious through the dominant behaviour of the Moroccan group, especially that of middle-aged Moroccan men. A regular visitor explains that "the Moroccan community is a bit the leader" pointing to the daily lunch where "you don't see other groups attending, you don't see one person from Suriname, for example". The welcoming character of the centre is weakened by the fact that the Moroccan community seems to self-segregate and form a fixed group that is not easy for outsiders to penetrate. I observed that the Moroccan men, who often hang out in the lounge, mostly speak in Arabic to one another. Another



regular visitor emphasises that this discourages her to sit down at 'their' table. Clearly, while speaking a language not known by everybody can stimulate the formation of a tightly knit group, it can simultaneously reinforce existing differences and make newcomers feel unwelcome. However, situations can be read differently. Whether speaking Arabic is understood as re-enforcing group feelings or as excluding others depends on the position of the person 'reading' this situation. This double-reading clearly accentuates how people 'make space' by using certain acts and signs such as language (Lefebvre, 1991).

The chance of meeting familiar others is much higher at the community-centre than at the library. This is hardly surprising as mainly residents from the surrounding neighbourhood visit the centre daily or at least several times a week. However, there is still the opportunity to encounter newcomers. Dora, who attends the knitting group, explains that "I always see somebody new [in the lounge]". Activity groups are also open to newcomers. I observed, for example, that newcomers regularly joined ongoing groups or activities. At the library, in contrast, visitors mainly encounter strangers. Mehmet, a father who visits the library with his children, points out that "[Not that I don't know people in this neighbourhood but] I never meet anyone known to me [here]". Still, regular visitors probably do see familiar faces. Richard, a former volunteer, observed that "the older people [came] nearly every day to read a newspaper or book". Thus, the newspaper readers might represent such regulars who know one another. Clearly, the library can provide a meeting point for some. This is obvious in the café area, which merges with the library, where visitors can meet up, sit down and run into acquaintances. The integration of different activities and activity spaces at both settings clearly facilitates what Amin (2002) calls the intermingling of diverse audiences; an essential premise for interaction and collaboration.

Due to the high chance of meeting familiar others, the community-centre feels intimate and, as indicated by several visitors, 'homey' where people can be 'themselves'. As the centre is a lively place with people constantly coming and going, visitors commented that the lounge radiates a 'friendly neighbourhood feeling'. This causality produces and is produced by planned as well as spontaneous interactions which, for instance, take place in the coffee corner where visitors get caught up in small-talk or longer conversations. Comparing this to the library, visitors argue that they feel relaxed but distant from one another. Without background music and the silence only being broken by occasional whispers, an aura of relaxation emerges as visitors are left to themselves. Leila, a young Moroccan mother, explains that "[as] some people have no place to go to, a library [can be] a really nice, safe and warm place to be". The library's low threshold could be important for groups on the fringes of society. Richard, the former volunteer, observed that many people "who probably don't work" arrive in the morning to read a newspaper or book as "they don't have to pay for doing that". When asked about his reasons to read the newspaper at the library instead of at home, Hasan, a regular visitor of the library, explained that he prefers to "sit together with people who do the same as you".

A social dimension of companionship seems to co-exist with the prevailing atmosphere of silence and social distance at the library. This mirrors Lofland's (1989) argument that the same spaces might appear 'public' and 'parochial' at the same time to different people. The effects of this 'passive community' become even more apparent in relation to the café area. An older Dutch woman, who sometimes reads at the newspaper table that adjoins the café, emphasises how she likes to "just leaf through some magazines of newspapers [and] hear other people chatting in the back [because] you can look over and see what they are doing." This suggests that the murmur of café visitors in the background adds sociability and liveliness and visitors feel that they are among others while maintaining distance and getting on with their activities.

### **Acting friend-like at the community-centre versus keeping distance at the library**

The described characteristics stimulate primarily 'amicable' or friend-like encounters at the community-centre. In groups organized around a shared interest of ethnicity, participants meet repetitively which facilitates encounters that are more than convivial. Richard, who experienced deeper interactions after attending the weekly philosophy group, explains that "[as] you talk more [deeply] with [other participants during the meetings] ... you always have something to talk about later." The repetitive and purposeful meetings create a platform for interaction since the participants realize that they have a common interest. This enables them to address one another on other occasions

as well. Similar comments were made about the gymnastics and kickboxing groups. This finding is in line with Amin (2002) and Wise (2007) who agree that activities which bridge ethnic, class or cultural backgrounds by uniting participants around a shared passion stimulate deeper forms of social contact. The research finds that amicable interactions are difficult to stimulate in mixed groups with a functional goal such as learning a language. Carla, who attends a language group, explains that her contact with other participants remains distant and superficial as “[during breaks] the Turkish women talk with each other in Turkish [which] I don’t speak ... and the Moroccan women do the same.” The decisive factor in stimulating amicable encounters is not the degree of mixing. Rather, it is the extent to which people have something in common to bond over such as knitting or cooking. This echoes Amin’s (2002) claim that activities with a common goal in mind are central to facilitating deeper forms of encounter. Yet, this common goal has to be of a higher emotional quality which becomes clear with regards to groups organized around a shared ethnicity. Shared customs, traditions and language provide this emotional bonding factor by letting participants identify with each other more easily. I observed participants of the Dominican, Eritrean and Moroccan women’s groups hug, kiss, hold hands and pat backs, talk about family and relationship problems, upcoming family events or raising their children.

Regarding encounters in the centre’s lounge, many amicable interactions result from purposeful actions. Once, while waiting their turn at the help desk, two Moroccan women engaged in a deep conversation about their families and an upcoming wedding. Another day, an older Dutch woman explained her worries about some official documents to a volunteer, who then pressed her hand and reassured her that she would get help. These interactions may start out as purposeful but take on aspects of amicability such as showing compassion, concern and interest in others. Notably, the café area at the library enables visitors to experience and engage in amicable and meaningful interactions as well. For example, an older Surinamese man was reading the newspaper when a younger Hindustani or Surinamese man entered the café. The younger man recognized the elder and nodded at him before sitting down at another table. The older man nodded back and joked “Why are you sitting over there? For the view?” The younger one laughed and they started to talk about mutual acquaintances and plans for the week. Clearly, the purposeful actions or, to use Harris’ (2003) terminology here, the implicit rules of behaviour of being at the café – drinking coffee, sitting down and meeting others - differ from the rest of the library making visitors feel more free to approach and engage with others.

Nevertheless, light and brief types of encounters predominate at the library. Such encounters were perceived as ‘normal’ because they allow visitors to ‘treat each other in a friendly manner with respect’. This perception of ‘normal behaviour’ can be based on the wish to abide the tacit rules of being at the library including keeping one’s distance and being quiet. Harris (2003) explains that abiding these ‘rules of conduct’ helps visitors to feel at ease because they can predict the behaviour of others. When meeting somebody familiar, visitors argued that they keep their contact to a minimum and just “say something like ‘hey, how are you?’” Yet chatting is still the exception. Hasan, a young Moroccan who regularly visits the library, explains that “people normally don’t interfere with other people when they are [at the library] but maybe that’s also good [...] because everybody has his or her own problems so you don’t always want to meddle in that.” People may also choose to keep their distance so as not to disturb others and their activities. Leila, a young Moroccan mother, explained that “others use the library for studying or reading. I try to respect that so I don’t talk much.” Amin (2012) terms this behaviour ‘studied co-presence’ emphasising the habitual training inherent to people’s behaviour when they wish to smoothly coordinate different needs and activities. Being at the library, in that sense, is a ‘collective endeavour’ which, consequently, favours more distant and short interactions such as moving to the side when passing others in the aisles, eye contact, quick glances accompanied by a smile or, at times, greetings. A similar behaviour can be observed in the lounge of the community-centre, particularly in regards to newcomers. In the beginning, regulars tend to just swiftly greet or nod in recognition when newcomers enter and vice versa. Their behaviour can be captured what Valentine (2013) calls ‘urban etiquette’ indicating a certain tolerance and acceptance of others’ presence and behaviour in shared spaces that does not necessarily result from a valuing of diversity. Yet, these initial superficial and fleeting encounters quickly turn into more amicable forms of interaction. Often, regulars actively approaching newcomers to “make them part of what is happening”, resulting in multiple instances of small-talk, laughter, short handshakes and comments.

I wish to distinguish another form of encounter that dominates at the library: casting observing looks. In general, encounters are defined as involving some reciprocal element, thus, some active sign of recognition or of engagement with the encounter. I believe that 'observing looks' represent an encounter even though these looks might occasionally lack the reciprocal element of encounter as in 'meeting somebody'. For example, I often saw visitors checking out others, observing their activities and following their movement. These actions, although probably even more superficial than the notion of fleeting, represent important moments of engaging with diversity and 'difference'. As Hasan commented: "I can take a look at everybody, check them out. I do that. I sit here and check everybody; I just want to know how people are doing in general, what they are talking about, how they look." In this way, the library fulfils an important social function in the sense that visitors can observe others and thereby learn about different appearances, behaviours and which groups visit the same places as they do. Blokland and Nast (2014) argue that processes of recognizing and being recognized are central to developing local attachments and feelings of 'community'. Casting 'observing looks' might link to the process of 'recognizing', by which those who do the 'looking' come to terms with the potential 'otherness' of those also using the library. Also, by enjoying the silent company of others without being in a state of committed relations (Dokk Holm, 2013) the observed situation is transformed into an 'attraction' and serves as entertainment. The observer can image and fantasize about other people's lives while keeping his/her distance (Oosterman, 1993). This peaceful hanging out side-by-side and silently observing others also happens at the community-centre. In the lounge, visitors from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds quickly realize that 'being different is nothing special' and come to perceive diversity, in general, as 'commonplace' (Wessendorf, 2010). In contrast to visitors at the library, this understanding of diversity as something mundane helps newcomers as well as regular visitors at the community-centre to overcome their initial inhibitions about engaging in fleeting as well as more amicable encounters.

### **Living with difference: Encounters and people's social networks and feelings of 'home'**

Fleeting as well as deeper forms of encounters positively influence people's capacity to deal with otherness. In terms of social networks, encounters at the library were claimed to have no impact on visitors' social ties while the predominantly amicable encounters at the community-centre had a twofold effect. Although, visitors emphasise that they broaden their social networks, they do not necessarily deepen contacts with others outside the centre. Toby, who visits the centre after boxing training, for example, explains that his "social network grew but it's not like I'm going to hang out with [the people I meet at the centre] or ask them 'what are you doing Saturday evening? No, I have my friends for that.'" People need and seek out contacts of a 'less-than-friends' kind because such non-intimate relationships allow them to relax; they are not required to meet the obligations that come with a 'real' friendship. This falls in line with Duyvendak and Wekker's (2015) emphasis on amicable interactions being moments of imagined friendship. Although these imaginaries are practiced at the community-centre, they are dropped once visitors leave the centre or encounter each other at other places. It is not necessarily bad that visitors separate their private life from their life at the centre. Many new-found contacts enrich visitors' social networks. Though weak, these ties give people access to emotional 'goods' in the form of care, support in daily life and social control. For instance, Laura, who attends a dressmaking class, notes that other participants "call me if I'm sick and pick up my groceries or they come and cook for me." Moreover, many of these new contacts answer people's need to escape their daily routines for a while and enjoy the 'gezelligheid' (Dutch for cosiness or sociability) of others who are not part of their 'normal' life. For example, Marta, a young Moroccan woman who organizes activities for Moroccan women, observes that the group prefers to meet at the centre because "mostly young mothers with husbands and young children at home [come to the group] ... who want a change from [their home situation] from time to time." In that sense, the new-found contacts are quite functional. They fulfil a certain human need, as Dora, who attends the knitting group, mainly comes to the centre "[to] talk to other people and socialize [with them] ... I really enjoy the 'gezelligheid' of this place ... but it's enough to see them [at the community-centre and in the group]."

Despite the trend towards maintaining social distance, some visitors do develop positive long-term contacts and friendships with others. The repetitive and often meaningful interactions in groups organized around a shared interest stimulate the development of new friendships across categorical

differences (Amin, 2002; Wise, 2007). Consider the case of Yasemin, an older Moroccan woman who became “bosom friends” with the women attending the same cooking class because she “got to spend so much time with them [that] we really grew close and fond [of each other].” In groups organized around a shared ethnicity or culture, the intense encounters between participants facilitate not just new friendships but the development of family-like ties. Laura, a middle-aged Eritrean woman who attends the Eritrean women’s initiative, is an example. The group’s meetings made her and the other women “grow closer together as a group; like family.” This finding supports Askins’ (2015) argument that participants of befriending schemes or activity groups display an active will to engage with others, resulting in the development of explicit relationships. These family-like ties generally developed among members of groups celebrating a certain ethnicity or culture, such as the Dominican, Eritrean or Moroccan women’s groups, and mostly among members of the same sex, supporting Merry’s (2013) observation that people tend to stick to others ‘like them’.

However, the research finds that outside organized and structural meetings, visitors often find something to bond over that lets them befriend others across categorical differences. As the community-centre’s atmosphere stimulates engagement, visitors feel somewhat obligated to talk to others. As visitors mostly interact in an amicable way, newcomers as well as regulars often identify something they have in common, such as a shared ethnicity, birthplace, passion or point in life. Amin (2002) terms this ‘intercultural exchange’ which he and Valentine (2008) see as central to challenging stereotypes and changing people’s values. This tendency of ‘exchanging between cultures’ was affirmed by Yasemin who explained that most of the women attending the cooking group are also in their 60s and grandmothers like herself. Some of the friendships resulting from amicable encounters in and outside activity groups also transcend the boundaries of the community-centre and become part of people’s private realm. That happened to Marta, a young Moroccan mother. She got to know a young Dutch mother during a lunch and with her she later started to “do nice things together [like] shopping or eating somewhere [and even] went on vacation with her last summer.”

Regarding visitors’ feelings of belonging and ‘home’, both the friend-like interactions at the centre and the fleeting encounters at the library result in a heightened sense of familiarity and connectedness with the neighbourhood and others. As the community-centre encourages the open celebration of diversity – for instance, in the form of festive events – visitors can interact with people whose cultures, traditions or customs are different, giving them the chance to understand and possibly learn to accept these differences. This not only helps to turn diversity into a ‘normal’ attribute of everyday life (Wessendorf 2014) but also makes people feel more valued and recognized; a crucial part of feeling at ‘home’ in hyper-diverse neighbourhoods (Blokland & Nast, 2014). Moreover, as a result of the many planned and unplanned encounters, visitors familiarise with previously unfamiliar ‘faces’ and start to recognize more people on the street or elsewhere in the neighbourhood. This familiarisation reduces the sense of anonymity, which in turn encourages people to greet or talk to one another when “meet[ing] at the butcher, at the supermarket or on the street”. The personal and social bonding attained through light as well as deeper encounters, consequently, makes people feel more at ‘home’ at the centre and beyond.

Interestingly, at the library, a familiarisation with difference is achieved while keeping interaction to a minimum. Here, individuals enjoy each other’s ‘silent’ companionship. An older Dutch woman, who visits the library to drink coffee and read, explains the added value of this:

“I recognize a lot of people [at the library, however] I don’t talk to them normally [because] I know most of them only by sight [but seeing familiar others] makes me feel very good and comfortable [at the library].”

Iveson and Fincher (2011) found that engaging in activities characteristic of a library, such as borrowing books or reading newspapers, makes visitors feel connected to other ‘library users’ by realizing that they share a common space and participate in similar activities. This subtle association evokes a sense of ‘belonging’ and feeling connected to the library and beyond. Duyvendak and Wekker (2015) emphasise that people need different degrees of social and physical proximity to feel at ‘home’. Clearly, the encounters experienced at both venues allow for this in different ways. What these encounters have in common is that they stimulate a sense of ‘public familiarity’ (Blokland & Nast, 2014). This has the additional effect of increased feelings of safety and control in the

neighbourhood. Through engaging with others in discussion, deeper conversations, and overhearing small-talk, visitors of the community-centre “watch out more for each other ... and everybody also knows what’s going on in the neighbourhood.” For example, I overheard many conversations between Moroccan men in the lounge about the problem of monitoring the youth which resulted in the setting up of a task force that patrols the neighbourhood at night and actively approaches groups of youngsters hanging out on the streets and in parks. Nonetheless, the library shows that people do not need to form real relationships but can use other people to feel more safe and at ‘home’ in the neighbourhood. Recalling what Hasan, a regular library user, said about being able to observe and check out others while being at the library highlights how a superficial familiarity with diversity suffices to evoke a sense of belonging and safety outside of the library. What is intriguing in both cases is that people’s faces and bodies seem to act as a way of ‘localizing’ the relationships a person has with his/her immediate environments; an essential part of home-making strategies (Nowicka, 2007). Encounters which turn ‘strange’ faces into ‘familiar’ faces seem to temporarily ‘fix home’ in space.

## Conclusions

Within the context of a growing diversification of the majority of today’s urban populations, urban scholarship needs to better understand how hyper-diversity is dealt with ‘on the ground’. Although it is widely agreed that encounters can play a central role in negotiating difference at the local level (Berg & Sigona, 2013), scholars remain divided regarding which types of encounters exactly yield a sense of ‘community’ and an appreciation of difference. Some argue that fleeting encounters contribute to a sense of familiarity with difference whereas others contend that only deeper and repetitive encounters produce lasting relationships with ‘the other’. This study supports both arguments, but emphasises the importance of fleeting encounters. The findings highlight that structural and repetitive encounters have the potential to break stereotypes and challenge prejudice (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008; Wise, 2007). Likewise, the findings provide strong empirical arguments for the positive influence of fleeting encounters on collective life in hyper-diverse areas. I want to discuss the importance of short and superficial social interactions in more detail here as the relationship between fleeting encounters and collective life remains undervalued. In this, I draw from arguments that emphasise the role of fleeting encounters in creating a sense of ‘community’ without actual social contact. In their study, Blokland and Nast (2014), for example, argue that public familiarity is a required condition for urban dwellers to navigate public life because this familiarity equips them with a sense of safety and control. The encounters facilitated at the library – casting observing looks and ‘silent’ bodily co-presence – clearly support this position. Further, I agree with Duyvendak and Wekker (2015) who assert that the resulting familiarity with diversity is key to stimulating a sense of ‘home’ in multicultural and multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.

Moreover, the findings strongly support Amin’s (2002) observation that ‘micro publics’ are key sites for the ‘prosaic’ negotiation of difference. Both the community-centre and the library are shared by diverse groups and individuals, ‘forcing’ them to a certain degree to negotiate and overcome their differences. Yet, are these positive experiences ‘scaled-up’? Valentine (2008) warns that positive encounters with individuals do not necessarily change people’s view about ‘the other’ and can result in the hardening of prejudice. In contrast, I believe that a scaling-up does happen both at the community-centre and at the library. However, the different encounters at these two venues result in quite different forms of ‘community’. While the library’s visitors experience a more distant and ‘silent’ form of connectedness, a more ‘traditional’ form of community characterized by stronger social ties and a network of social control is achieved at the community centre. Indeed, the form of ‘community’ emerging at the library goes beyond more traditional understandings of the term. ‘Collective life’ is a better description of the varying yet equally important forms of social relations and local attachments outlined in this study, because it allows for a looser and less ordered understanding of ‘community’. These varying forms of ‘collective life’ reflect Duyvendak and Wekker’s (2015) emphasis that people need different levels of physical and social proximity to feel at ‘home’ and connected to others. It is important to not presume that ‘community’ in its traditional sense is something everybody wants. The question remains which forms of ‘collective life’ and ‘up-scaling’ are realistic to achieve especially within the context of hyper-diversity. Is it realistic to hope

for a more inclusive form of ‘collective life’ or is it sufficient to acknowledge familiarity with difference and conviviality of contact?

The findings of this research strongly call for more attention among policy-makers to fleeting encounters and their effects in terms of ‘collective life’. In the Netherlands, library closure and privatization are currently favoured by Dutch municipalities as means of accommodating budget cuts. Despite the fact that multiple studies show that libraries are important areas of social interaction (Audunson, 2005; Audunson, Essmat, & Aabo, 2011; Iveson & Fincher, 2011) libraries seem under pressure. This trend stands at odds with the Dutch public policy agenda, which aims for greater interaction between different urban groups. Policy-makers should consider the impacts of library closure has on social interaction, and acknowledge the social value of libraries in addition to their information-providing facilities. In the face of this grim reality, residents of Rotterdam have attempted to preserve places which fulfil a library-function. In Rotterdam West, for example, residents created the ‘Leeszaal West’ (translates as ‘Reading room West’). Examples like this highlight that people need accessible and inviting spaces in their neighbourhoods and go to great lengths to maintain them. Public policy-makers have to re-direct their focus on public and smaller neighbourhood libraries not just to assure easy access to knowledge but to maintain low-level meeting spaces especially in low-income areas.

In a similar vein, the findings support the need for purposefully created sites of encounter. Matejskova and Leitner (2011) warn that the focus of many scholars and policy-makers on sites of chance encounters often goes at the expense of carefully planned projects aimed at the integration of immigrants and those with an immigrant background. The paper at hand highlights that sites of encounters are diverse, ranging from more open spaces such as a library to more regulated and organized venues such as a community-centre. Matejskova and Leitner remind us that we have to remain aware of and value this diversity of potential meeting spaces in order not to downplay the importance of one in favour of the other. This is especially important with regards to purposefully created sites of encounters as these spaces often imply and request more direct (financial) involvements of local government bodies who, as a result of shifting attention to sites of chance encounters, might question the importance of their involvement in such spaces. Within governing bodies in the Netherlands and probably elsewhere, there is the potential to lose sight of the role of experimental community projects and centres - such as the one presented here - in forging a more inclusive society. In the Netherlands, municipalities are faced with the difficulty of managing dwindling funds for local initiatives and projects resulting in a situation “where public subsidies ... are structurally declined” (Tersteeg et al., 2014, p.7). The municipality of Rotterdam therefore aims at making existing community-centres such as the one in question self-sufficient. While this might seem like a positive goal from the perspective of residents’ agency, I concur with Tersteeg et al. (2014) who argue that the city has to preserve and “to acknowledge the importance of such a facility in a low-income area [by providing] more support” (p.7). As scholars, we can contribute to a change in public policy regarding the need to preserve such ‘zones of encounter’ (Wood & Landry, 2008) by researching and better understanding how fleeting and meaningful encounters come about and in which ways ‘micro publics’ (Amin, 2002) can act as important sites of learning to live with difference.

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### **Notes**

1. Most interviews were conducted in Dutch unless the participant preferred English. I translated all transcripts.
2. All names are pseudonyms used to protect the true identity of the participants.

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