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**Commonplace diversity
and the ‘ethos of mixing’:
Perceptions of difference in a
London neighbourhood**

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Abstract

The London Borough of Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the world. It is not only characterised by a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, but also by differences in migration histories, religions, educational and economic backgrounds, both among long-term residents and newcomers. This paper attempts to describe attitudes towards diversity in such a 'super-diverse' context. It develops the notion of 'commonplace diversity', referring to ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity being experienced as a normal part of social life by local residents, and not as something particularly special. Commonplace diversity is accompanied by positive attitudes towards diversity among the majority of the population, and especially in public and associational space there exists a great deal of interaction across cultural differences. However, mixing in public and associational space is rarely translated into the private space, and despite regular interactions in public space, residents often know little about other residents' life worlds. This, however, is not seen as a problem, as long as people adhere to a tacit 'ethos of mixing'. This 'ethos of mixing' comes to the fore in relation to groups who are blamed of 'not wanting to mix'. The concluding part of the paper discusses the fine balance between acceptable social divisions between groups and unacceptable ones in relation to specific groups who are seen to self-segregate themselves.

Keywords:

Super-diversity, neighbourhoods, London, cultural diversity

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Introduction

The London Borough of Hackney is one of Britain's most diverse areas. Hackney's diversity is characterised not only by a multiplicity of different ethnic and migrant minorities, but also by differentiations in terms of variables such as migration histories, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence and economic backgrounds, both among ethnic minorities and migrants as well as the white British population, many of whom have moved to Hackney from elsewhere. This 'diversification of diversity' (Hollinger 1995) is what Vertovec defines as 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007b).

This paper describes attitudes towards diversity in such a super-diverse context. It develops the notion of 'commonplace diversity', referring to ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity being experienced as a normal part of social life by local residents, and not as something particularly special. In this context of commonplace diversity, attitudes towards diversity are generally quite positive. However, the acceptance of and positive attitudes towards diversity are accompanied by little understanding for groups who are perceived as 'not wanting to mix', a phrase repeatedly used by my informants. This paper develops the idea of an overarching 'ethos of mixing' among Hackney's residents, in referring to the expectation that in public and associational spaces, people 'should mix' and interact with their fellow residents of other backgrounds. It describes the tensions that arise when groups of people do not adhere to this 'ethos of mixing'. Examples, which were mentioned most often during my research, are strictly Orthodox Jews and the so-called 'Hipsters', young, mostly white middle-class people who emphasise fashion and style and have only recently moved into the area. I will contrast these two groups with two other groups: Turkish-speakers and Vietnamese people, who, especially among first-generation migrants, also do not have much contact with people from outside their group. However, they are not perceived to break the ethos of mixing because they have formed certain 'bridges' with the rest of the population by way of running restaurants and shops, and sending their children to state schools.

The paper shows how crucial this participation in mainstream society is in the shaping of attitudes. Importantly, expectations of mixing in public and associational space are paralleled by the acceptance of more separate lives when it comes to private relations, where it is generally accepted that people relate to others of similar life-styles.

The paper draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the London borough of Hackney, including participant observation, interviews and focus groups, as well as two questionnaires.

Neighbourhood studies, such as the one on which this paper is based, have gained increasing attention in Britain in the context of policy shifts towards 'local communities', resulting from growing criticism of multiculturalism policies, which were seen to enhance separate 'communities' and hinder interaction between groups (Amin 2005; Tyler & Jensen 2009; Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). It is in

neighbourhoods that civic pride and responsibility, positive inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations and public participation are to be fostered. This policy shift towards the local has also been reflected in academic research. Although neighbourhood studies have been an integral part of urban sociology and anthropology for several decades (see, among many others Baumann 1996; Bott 1957; Mitchell 1969; Wallman 1982; Young & Willmott 1957), there has been a recent increase in studies that specifically look at multi-group contexts within urban neighbourhoods. These studies have shown the existence of both separate lives and social interaction in urban neighbourhoods (Blokland 2003; Jayaweera & Choudhury 2008; Ray et al. 2008; Sanjek 1998; SHM 2007). While this paper is situated within this field of neighbourhood studies, focussing on relations between people of different backgrounds and patterns of 'everyday multiculturalism' (Noble 2009; Wise & Velayutham 2010), it mainly looks at *attitudes* (rather than actual social relations). It shows how attitudes towards diversity are shaped by a public discourse that positively celebrates diversity, but also by the way in which groups participate and are visible in public space. I thereby define public space broadly in the classical sense of streets, parks, shops and restaurants, but also include places such as school gates where more regular encounters occur. I show how the presence and participation in such places plays an important role in shaping my informants' attitudes towards each other. In fact, academics and policy makers have paid increasing attention to the role of specific places within neighbourhoods where people of different backgrounds meet, like markets, parks, sports clubs, schools, community festivals, trade unions or business associations (Amin 2002; Dines et al. 2006; Hudson et al. 2007; Jayaweera & Choudhury 2008; Watson & Studdert 2006). They have diverging views regarding the role of intercultural encounters in such sites, with some claiming that even fleeting encounters in public space shape attitudes towards others (Boyd 2006; Vertovec 2007a), and others such as Amin (2002) attributing little importance to public space for the development of interethnic understanding. Amin emphasises the importance of more regular encounters and 'habitual engagement' where 'engagement with strangers in a common activity disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments' (Amin 2002:970). The material presented here shows that encounters in public space do not necessarily enhance deeper intercultural understanding, but that the *absence* of such encounters can lead to prejudice. Thus, while mixing in public and associational space is often paralleled by more separate lives when it comes to private relations, the Hackney residents who participated in my research shared a sense that mixing across cultural differences is an integral part of living in Hackney.

I first introduce the Borough of Hackney and describe how, in the context of immigration over several decades, diversity has become commonplace in the borough. I then describe how in the view of local people, the positive aspects of cultural diversity are being undermined when it comes to groups who are seen to lead separate lives, such as strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters. I use examples such as contestations over public space where these resentments have come to the

fore most clearly. With the example of two other groups, Turkish-speakers and Vietnamese people, who are not seen to lead separate lives despite their limited social relations with people from outside their group, I then discuss the importance of participation in local association, the local economy and public institutions regarding perceptions and attitudes. The paper concludes by discussing the important role of both the quality and frequency of contact regarding the building of positive relations between groups.

Hackney's history of diversification and the emergence of commonplace diversity

If there is a general characteristic to describe Hackney, it is the continuity of population change over the past half century. With its population of 219,000, Hackney figures among the 10% most deprived areas in the UK, but it is currently seeing the arrival of an increasing number of middle-class professionals.¹ It is also one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in Britain, with only 48.4% of the population being white British. Hackney has long been a place where immigrants have arrived as transitory residents, and some of them settled permanently. Jewish people have been settling in Hackney since the second half of the 17th century, and since the 1950s, sizeable groups of immigrants from West Africa, the West Indies and South Asia have also settled there. Turkish, Kurdish and Turkish Cypriot people started arriving in the area in the 1970s, both as labour migrants and political refugees (Arakelian 2007). Vietnamese refugees arrived in the late 1970s, but there is also a number of newly arrived undocumented Vietnamese migrants, including children, and students (Sims 2007).

Among the biggest minority groups are Africans (10.1%), South Asians (9.6%), people of Caribbean background (8.7%), Turkish-speaking people (5.5%), and East Asians (3.2%, meaning Chinese or 'other ethnic groups', many of whom come from Vietnam).² This picture becomes much more complicated when looking at the countries of birth of the foreign-born population. According to the 2001 census, 34% of Hackney's total population are foreign-born, and they come from 58 different countries, ranging from Zimbabwe, Cyprus, Somalia, Iraq, Albania to Denmark, Germany, etc.³ Recently, there has been an increase in people from Eastern Europe, especially Poland (City and Hackney 2008), and Hackney has one of the largest refugee and asylum seeker populations in London, estimated to be between 16,000 and 20,000 people (Schreiber 2006).

Hackney's long history of population change has resulted in what appears to be a great acceptance of diversity. The Hackney Place Survey 2008/2009 shows that almost four out of five

¹ In this section, I have used various resources, ranging from the 2001 census, to population estimates of the Office for National Statistics, and surveys undertaken by the local authority itself. I have attempted to use the most recent data available. The number of the total population is taken from the Office for National Statistics, mid-year population estimates 2010.

² Office for National Statistics, midyear population estimates 2007.

³ These are only some of the countries of origin significant enough to be statistically represented.

residents in Hackney think that people from different backgrounds get on well together (78%). Interestingly, elderly people are among those most likely to agree with this, with 91% of those aged 75 or over thinking that people of different backgrounds get on well together (London Borough of Hackney 2009). These results are reflected in my own qualitative findings, with elderly long-term residents of various cultural backgrounds generally reporting few tensions with people of other origins.⁴

The positive attitudes towards diversity are not only reflected in a general acceptance of diversity, but also in diversity not being seen as something particularly unusual. For example, during my fieldwork in local associations, I noticed that newcomers are not usually asked about their origins, even if they look different or speak with an accent. When I asked whether I could do part of my fieldwork at a computer club for elderly people, the teacher of the club welcomed me there, but also told me that although his students came from many different places, diversity is not an issue in any of their conversations. They rarely ask each other where they come from and are not really interested in the other students' origins because everybody comes from elsewhere and it is therefore not a particularly special topic to talk about. In other words, diversity is so normal among the students in this computer club that it has become somewhat banal. The IT students' attitudes towards diversity were also reflected in the reactions to my research project, which was sometimes met with disinterest because it was concerned with diversity, something perceived as ordinary and therefore not worthy of research. This normalcy of diversity is what I conceptualise as 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf 2010). It confirms Mica Nava's argument that the familiarity between groups has 'shifted the axis of belonging in much of contemporary London' (Nava 2007:14). According to her, this familiarity has resulted from residential mixing, with middle and working classes, immigrants and natives living in intimate proximity as a result of the building of municipal housing across the city since the Second World War. In his research in North London (including Hackney), Devadason (2010) has similarly shown that skin-colour no longer marks insider or outsider status. I have found that this also applies to dress-code and, to some extent, language, with African dresses or Indian saris as well as foreign accents not being perceived as worthy of mention.

However, notions of commonplace diversity do not mean that people's origins are unnoticed. This was exemplified during my fieldwork at a knitting club for elderly people and at a parents' group of a primary school, which I attended weekly. Differences of origin, language, religion, etc. were rarely talked about, but they were acknowledged, for example by way of describing others according to their perceived ethnicity or national background. When referring to someone, people would often say 'the Indian lady', or 'the German woman', sometimes also referring to racial

⁴ Such positive attitudes have also been found in other parts of Britain where no one ethnic group dominates numerically, culturally or politically and where the history of immigration is generally acknowledged (Hickman et al. 2008: x).

differences such as 'the black guy' or 'the Asian woman'. At the same time, people rarely asked each other about their cultural backgrounds.

However, differences, be they cultural, religious or differences in life-style, do come to the fore in regard to groups whose members do not participate in associational spaces such as those mentioned above, and who are seen to not participate in the wider society.

The ethos of mixing

Positive attitudes towards cultural diversity are sometimes expressed when diversity is felt to be undermined. In the view of local people, this is the case when specific groups are seen to lead separate lives. Examples which were mentioned most often during my research are strictly Orthodox Jews and the so-called 'Hipsters'.

Strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters could not be more different in their characteristics. Strictly Orthodox Jews are a long established group in Hackney, the group's members have been born into the group, and it is defined by strict religious rules that accompany its members throughout their lives. The Hipsters, in contrast, are a new phenomenon in the area. It is a social milieu to which individuals choose to belong at a certain point in their life, and as a phenomenon of a certain age group, it is inherently transient. While strictly Orthodox Jews are characterised by continuity and tradition, Hipsters are part of a trendy, transient, fashionable and short-lived life-style phenomenon. This paper is not about the actual characteristics of these groups, but about how they are *perceived* by local residents. In the following sections, I will only briefly summarise the history and nature of the groups, and focus on the reasons why people who do not belong to these groups see them as a problem.

Strictly Orthodox Jews

The strictly Orthodox Jewish community is one of the most rapidly growing groups in Hackney because of the high number of children per family. It is estimated to make up 7% of Hackney's population, numbering about 15,400, with over half under the age of 20 (City and Hackney 2008). They mostly live in the northern part of Hackney in Stamford Hill, but use public services and shop in other areas of the borough, too, and therefore form part of the social landscape across Hackney.⁵ Strictly Orthodox Jews are visibly different; wearing traditional clothes of black suits, black hats, beards and long, twisted side locks for men, and modest long-sleeved and long-hemmed garments for women, some of whom also cover their hair with a hat, bandana or wig. But it is not this visible difference which my informants criticise. Rather, it is the concrete social separation that is perceived as a problem. Strictly Orthodox Jews have strict rules of not mixing with people of other

⁵ The strictly Orthodox Jewish community in Stamford Hill is dominated by Hasidic Jews (a subgroup of the Haredi community). On the history of Orthodox Jewish settlement in Stamford Hill and the various Jewish subgroups in this area see Baker (1995).

backgrounds. They have their own schools, shops and housing estates, and their children only socialise with other strictly Orthodox Jewish children.

A lively debate in the newspaper *The Independent* reflects the comments about strictly Orthodox Jews made by my informants. In July 2010, the columnist Christina Patterson wrote describing her experiences of living in Stamford Hill. She accuses strictly Orthodox Jews of being rude to non-Jews, treating them as inferior and totally avoiding social interaction with non-Jews (Patterson 2010).⁶ Within hours of being published, numerous comments appeared on the newspaper's website, now (August 2011) totalling 246. Some people condemn Patterson's article as racist, but others agree with her criticism of what she describes as strictly Orthodox Jews' 'sense of superiority' towards non-Jews. Many of my informants similarly described strictly Orthodox Jews' specific attempts of 'not mixing' as a problem and as uncharacteristic of Hackney. My local hairdresser, who is of Italian background and has worked in the area for about 20 years, says that he gets along with everybody. He mentions the local market close to his shop, characterised by Caribbean, African and (non-Orthodox) Jewish traders, with whom he has formed friendly relations. He always has a nice chat with the people from the egg-stall and the vegetable traders (who are of Jewish origin) and the Pakistani men with the curry stall, and he knows all of their names. He tells me that 'it all depends on your personality. Some people don't want to integrate; they stick to themselves, like up in Stamford Hill', referring to the strictly Orthodox Jews. He continues that 'if you are an open person you'll get along with everybody'.⁷ Other informants reiterated this view about the etiquette of mixing. However, there is also a certain tolerance towards not conforming to this behaviour code. One of the comments to Patterson's column reflects my informants' views on tolerance towards diversity and difference. It is made by Dave, a plumber who has lived in Stamford Hill for 30 years. According to him...

...'there's a sort of aloofness to my Jewish neighbours and they do like to keep themselves to themselves. I recognise that. But it's never in a hostile way. Most groups have some sort of superiority complex, we all like to think we've got it right and others haven't. For me I just abide by live and let live. You lose far too much sleep if you don't.'

Dave and my hairdresser agree that it is unfortunate if people do not mix, but at the same time they accept it. However, group-specific religious traditions become more challenging when it comes to the allocation of resources, for example reserved time at local swimming pools. One of the local councillors told me that it is mainly strictly Orthodox Jews who are making such claims because of

⁶<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/christina-patterson/christina-patterson-the-limits-of-multiculturalism-2036861.html>

⁷ My hairdresser's views on Orthodox Jews and the fact that he gets along well with the Jewish traders at the local market also exemplify that negative views about Orthodox Jews among Hackney residents are not related to anti-Semitism. In fact, several of my liberal Jewish informants criticised the Orthodox Jews' efforts to lead separate lives.

their extremely strict religious rules. Most other religious groups somehow adapt to local rules and circumstances without claiming specific rights. Furthermore, cultural practices which make the provision of public services difficult are also seen as problematic. A local optician, for example, found it rather strange that, when visiting her for an eye test during the summer, a strictly Orthodox Jewish boy ran out of her practice because she was wearing a short-sleeve blouse and he was not used to seeing a woman's bare skin. While she found the boy's behaviour strange and somewhat alienating, she also had sympathy for him, especially because his mother explained to her why he had reacted in that way. In contrast, Patterson, the newspaper columnist, felt enraged about a strictly Orthodox Jewish boy on the bus 'who, when I tried to sit next to him, leapt up as if infection from the ebola virus was imminent'.

The ethos of mixing is also undermined when it comes to disputes about space. A typical example is the fight over a pub in Stamford Hill which was bought by 'the Orthodox Jewish community' (*Hackney Gazette*, 19/7/09), with plans to turn it into a synagogue. This triggered a campaign among the pub's clientele. When interviewed by a local journalist, one of the campaigners described his sense that a public space was taken over by a small group of people as follows:

We need to establish that what we had was a genuine community facility that was used by hundreds of people (...). It is to be replaced by something that is going to be used by only a small minority of people (...). Pubs should be protected on the basis that they are community facilities (*Hackney Gazette* 2009:7).

Another campaigner, quoted in the *Evening Standard*, emphasised that 'everyone is welcome and among the regular clients are members of all the different communities – white, black, straight, gay, born Londoners and new arrivals' (Clout 2008:1). Thus the ethos of mixing is being undermined when a previously mixed space is claimed by a group for its own specific purpose, which, by its nature in the case of a religious place of worship, excludes non-believers.

My informants mentioned very similar issues surrounding the dispute over specific places and 'not wanting to mix' in relation to another group, the so-called 'Hipsters'.

Hipsters

Hipsters are young, fashionably dressed, mostly middle-class people in their twenties. Many of them are students or work in the design and fashion industries and in media. They have moved into the area during the last five years or so. Because of their style, they form a clearly recognisable group concentrated in certain areas of the borough where pubs have been taken over by new owners who refurbished them, and more and more European-style cafes are opening with coffee prices twice the price of those in more traditional English 'Greasy Spoons'. The immigration of these young, trendy people forms part of a larger movement of gentrification.⁸ Also described as 'Trendies' or

⁸ Gentrification in Hackney already started in the 1980s (Butler 1996), but has accelerated since the 2000s. Many of the early gentrifiers moved here because they could not afford to buy property in other parts of

'Shoreditch Twats' by some of my informants, referring to the fact that they had previously been dominating an area in South Hackney called Shoreditch, they have formed their own subculture with their own cafes, bars and clubs. The Hipsters in Hackney have become a social phenomenon worthy of a lengthy article in the *Guardian* (Rayner 2010). But Hipsters are not unique to Hackney. They can be traced back to late 1990s American urban culture, emerging from a youth culture also described as alternative or indie, and they have also been depicted as 'turn-of-the-century poseurs' (Rayner 2010:3).⁹

Hipsters have become such a visible subculture in some areas of Hackney that a resident has started a blog which criticises these youngsters for being inconsiderate, holding loud parties in quiet neighbourhood streets, and caring only about themselves and not their fellow residents.¹⁰ The blog is called Hackneyhipsterhate and has been filled with hundreds of comments, some agreeing with the hateful rant against the Hipsters written by the blogger, some defending the Hipsters. The critics, both on the blog and among my informants, accuse them of committing very little to the local area, not taking much care of their immediate surroundings and leaving litter in the local park which, in the summer, turns into a site that resembles a festival, with hundreds of young 'trendies' hanging out and partying, barbecuing and listening to music. By the end of a hot summer weekend, the park looks as if it had been the site of a huge Rave and the grass is ruined with burnt patches from barbecues, cigarette stubs and garbage. As a result of this trendy youth scene, this park has been described as 'the coolest park in London' by the *Grazia* Fashion magazine (Sparks 2010), and a *G2 Guardian* article calls Dalston, one of Hackney's wards where a lot of Hipsters spend their leisure time, the 'coolest place in Britain' (Flynn 2009:2). While it could be seen as a compliment and a positive development of the area among local residents, the pace at which it has seen an influx of young people who seem to live in their own world is perceived as a threat to the social order of the place. The age of the Hipsters and the fact that they form a transient population and rarely settle down to have a family, further contributes to the sense that they do not commit to the area. The high concentration of them in places like the park, a market and pubs, and the transformation of such places to attract this new clientele, is often experienced as alienating to long-term residents. For example, an elderly white middle-class couple who have lived in the area for over 20 years feel as if they cannot go to the local pub anymore. The husband says that he feels too old, and that 'they have trendied them

London, but also because they wanted to live specifically in an area celebrated for its diversity and rich cultural activities. There has also been a long-established artist community in Hackney already before the arrival of the Hipsters, and the attraction of Hackney for the Hipsters partly results from the high concentration of artists in the borough.

⁹ Greif (2010:3), a New York English professor, traces the term 'Hipster' back to 1940s black subcultural figures in the US, which a decade later became a white subcultural figure and was defined 'by the desire of a white avant-garde to disaffiliate itself from whiteness, with its stain of Eisenhower, the bomb, and the corporation, and achieve the "cool" knowledge and exoticized energy, lust and violence of black Americans'.

¹⁰ See for example: <http://hackneyhipsterhate.tumblr.com/>; and the video 'Being a Dickhead's Cool' on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzocvh60xBU>. The video makes fun of hipsters, specifically showing pictures from Hackney.

[the pubs] all up'. Another informant who is in his 40s, of Caribbean origin and who grew up on a local estate similarly feels that his local pub has been taken over by youngsters:

When I first went in there [the pub] there weren't that many people in there, but obviously it's around like, houses, like if it was in the middle of an estate it wouldn't turn like that because it was around like, Victorian houses and blabla, it's location, location really, yeah? (..) Now, you can't even get in there you can't get a drink, it's all industry blablabla, and it's just packed, you know what I mean, with young pretty people...

In the course of the conversation, he tells me that these people are mainly white, as are his neighbours in the street where he now lives, which is characterised by old Victorian houses. By emphasising that the pub would not change if it was on an estate, he refers to the fact that the new people using the pub are part of the trend of gentrification, and he expresses his resentment against this demographic change. However, as I have shown with the example of the white middle-class couple mentioned above, it is not only long-established people of lower socio-economic backgrounds who criticise the Hipsters, but also middle-class people who feel alienated by this new presence.

The example of strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters shows that in a super-diverse context, difference can be contested not necessarily when it comes to new immigrants, but when it is about social relations and the perceptions that some groups actively attempt to disengage from the society around them. While the strictly Orthodox Jews are a religious group (in itself diverse regarding Jewish subgroups and different nationalities), the Hackney Hipsters form an age group and a social milieu (also in itself diverse in terms of nationalities and, to a certain extent, ethnicity) which has emerged as part of a fashion trend and which has a very transient character. The former have been in the area for several decades and are an established group, while the latter are newcomers and their presence has led to relatively fast changes in a specific area of the borough. Both groups, however, stand out in Hackney because they are concentrated in specific areas, their members are visibly different in dress and style, and they do not attempt to engage with people from outside their group, in local associational spaces such as sports clubs, community associations or institutions such as schools. Thus, whereas established communities both of British and non-British background do not seem to see new international immigration as a problem, difference does play a role when it is coupled with social segregation in the form of separate schools and non-participation in mixed associational sites. Furthermore, both groups are perceived as a problem because they compete for specific public spaces. The Hipsters have 'taken over' one of the local parks on weekends and some of the pubs, while the strictly Orthodox Jews dominate a specific area of the borough where they have opened their own schools, shops, community facilities, and places of worship, sometimes in competition with long-standing mixed places such as a local pub. Blokland (2003) describes a similar process in a Rotterdam neighbourhood where long-term Dutch residents felt threatened in their ownership of a public square where Moroccan boys played football. Their 'norms of public practice

had been violated and their symbolic ownership of the space challenged', because this square was central to their identification as a peer group of neighbours. Similarly, the customers of The Swan in Stamford Hill felt threatened in the ownership of their pub which provided them with a sense of belonging, albeit to a more mixed peer group than that of the Rotterdam square. In fact, the very mixedness of the group forms part of their identity as 'typical pub customers' and Hackney residents.

These disputes over space, coupled with social segregation, contribute to prejudice and sometimes negative feelings about these two groups. The example of other groups in Hackney who live in a similarly socially separate way as the Hipsters and the strictly Orthodox Jews, but who are not perceived to break the ethos of mixing, shows that it is not just social segregation which is seen as a problem, but the coming together of all the above mentioned factors: use of public space, competition over such space and social segregation by way of separate schools and leisure facilities.

Live and let live: Turks and Vietnamese

Turkish speakers¹¹ and Vietnamese people are among the more established ethnic minorities in Hackney in terms of their length of residence. I have chosen these two groups to exemplify the attitudes of 'live and let live', referring to the acceptance of groups who primarily socialise with members of their own group. Turkish speakers and Vietnamese form a good example because they are both visibly recognisable and many of the first-generation migrants do not speak much English. Nevertheless, the local residents' attitudes towards them are characterised by tolerance and acceptance rather than resentment and the perceptions that they reject mainstream society.

Turkish-speakers

Turkish-speakers in Hackney come from three different areas: Cyprus, mainland Turkey and Kurdistan. Turkish Cypriots were the first to arrive in Britain and settled here from 1945 onwards, with the bulk arriving before the worst outbreaks of fighting in Cyprus in 1963–64. They were followed by mainland Turks since the late 1960s and Kurdish people since the late 1970s.¹² Today, a high concentration of Turkish-speaking people can be found in the London Boroughs of Haringey, Hackney and Enfield (Enneli et al. 2005). They make up about 5.5% of Hackney's population (London Borough of Hackney 2004). Turkish, Kurdish and Turkish Cypriot people are visibly present in Hackney with numerous shops, restaurants, barbers and cafes mainly along two high streets, the

¹¹ Turkish-speakers in Hackney are comprised of Turks, Kurds and Turkish-Cypriots. Although I am aware of the political and cultural differences between these groups, I will here use the term 'Turkish-speakers' to refer to all groups (although Kurdish people also have their own language). This paper looks at *perceptions* of difference, and the differentiation between the three groups is rarely relevant for those people who do not form part of these groups.

¹² On a more detailed description of the different backgrounds and migration histories of Turkish speakers in Hackney and the UK see Enneli et al. (2005).

Kingsland Road and Green Lanes. According to a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation about young Kurds and Turks in Britain, 'the Turkish-speaking community is probably one of the most self-sufficient communities in London' (Enneli et al. 2005:2). They have established half a dozen community-based newspapers, various organisations which provide services such as mortgages or a quit-smoking helpline, and taxi companies and driving schools (Enneli et al. 2005). Turkish-speakers are not only present in areas where their ethnic businesses prevail, but also in more mainstream corner-shops across Hackney, many of which are now run by Turkish-speakers born abroad and in Britain.

Because the Turkish-speaking community is so self-sufficient, many migrants of the first generation have very limited English skills. According to one of my Turkish informants who came to the UK in 1977, many of them do not feel the need to learn much English because they get around well enough without it. However, their children who go to mainstream state schools speak English and often serve as translators for their parents. A Kurd in his late 20s who came to the UK at the age of 11 told me that it is not only language difficulties which prevent Turkish-speakers from mixing with others, but also cultural issues. According to him, members of the first generation 'don't want to lose their culture'. Several of my informants told me that there is a great deal of pressure on the second generation to socialise with Turkish-speakers only, and especially when it comes to marriage, inter-ethnic relations are very rarely accepted by the parents.¹³ To summarise, Turkish-speakers fulfil several of the criteria for living in a separate world and 'not wanting to mix': limited language skills, a self-sufficient support network and, especially among the first generation, a reluctance to form social relations with people of other groups. This was also noticed by many of my non-Turkish-speaking informants who told me that they had little contact with Turkish speakers and that they seemed to 'keep themselves to themselves'.

All these characteristics are comparable with those of strictly Orthodox Jews. Why, then, do the residents of Hackney not feel that Turkish-speakers break the 'ethos of mixing'? Before attempting to answer this question, I will shortly turn to another group in Hackney that has similarly created its own social networks and economic niche.

Vietnamese

The first Vietnamese migrants came to the UK as refugees between 1975 and 1981, with more migrants arriving during the 1980s as a result of family reunification. More recently, Vietnamese migrants arrived in the UK as asylum seekers, students, and undocumented workers (Sims 2007). According to the Hackney Household Survey, 0.6% of people in Hackney speak Vietnamese (London Borough of Hackney 2004).¹⁴

¹³ On inter-generational tensions among Turkish speakers in Hackney see Arakelian (2007).

¹⁴ On differences in educational and regional backgrounds, as well as differences of the migration history and reasons for migration among Vietnamese migrants see Sims (2007).

Like Turkish-speakers, Vietnamese people are visible in specific areas of Hackney, especially along two of the major High streets, Kingsland Road and Mare Street, where they run grocery shops and restaurants, which serve both a Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese clientele. The Vietnamese are not only visibly present along these high streets, but also across the borough with their nail parlours. In fact, a *Guardian* journalist called the Vietnamese nail parlours 'London's great Vietnamese success story' (Benedictus 2005:1), and the nail industry is one of the main UK Vietnamese business sectors (Sims 2007).¹⁵ Hackney's Vietnamese residents also regularly make it into the local media with colourful festivals such as Vietnamese New Year and the Harvest Festival (*Hackney Gazette* 2010). Like Turkish-speakers, many Vietnamese migrants of the first generation have limited English language skills, especially those who were among the first wave of refugees and mainly came from rural areas (Sims 2007).

What are the perceptions of non-Vietnamese residents about the Vietnamese people living in Hackney? Interestingly, I repeatedly heard the term 'invisible' when people spoke about Vietnamese. A local primary school teacher told me that 'you don't really see them, you have maybe one or two in a school class but they are somewhat hidden'. According to her, they achieve in school so they are not seen as a problem and therefore do not draw much attention. Another informant told me that they are somehow invisible. 'You read about them in the local papers and you see their restaurants, but that's about it.' And yet another informant told me that they 'keep themselves to themselves, put their heads down and get on with it'. Just getting on with it is a comment some of my informants also made about Turkish-speakers. It refers to the sense of them not sticking out and, despite being a distinct group, somehow melting into the larger picture of diverse Hackney. This is closely related to the use of local institutions and space. In the following section, I attempt to analyse why some groups are perceived to break the ethos of mixing while others are not.

'Bridges' in public and parochial space

When I visit a summer party on a local estate, I am amazed at the great mix of people. Although the residents are most likely to share a similarly low-income level, they are mixed in terms of ethnicity, religion and nationality, some British-born but of parents from abroad, others who arrived recently, and yet others whose families have lived in the area for several generations. They also have varied educational backgrounds and legal statuses. There is a great deal of friendly and neighbourly interaction, and the adults are having fun watching their children play games, getting their faces painted, performing hip hop dances and participating in a jam session with a sound system and microphone. While visible difference does not seem to play a role in terms of who is chatting to

¹⁵ The Vietnamese own more than 300 nail shops in London, despite numbering only about 15,000 in the whole city (Benedictus 2005).

whom, a group of Turkish women, some with head scarves, some without, stands out. They stick together and do not seem to interact much with the others. However, they have come to the party and are happy to see their children participate in the various activities. Turkish women can also be seen at the school gates of the state schools in the borough, sometimes in groups and sometimes alone. In one of the schools where I spent time during my fieldwork, Turkish-speaking mothers have become well-known for their cooking skills, contributing to school fetes with traditional Turkish food. One of these mothers regularly comes to a parents' coffee morning and has helped with the school garden. She is a great gardener and shares her knowledge with the other mothers while they chat during the coffee morning. Her English is very good, but she has also brought along a Turkish friend whose English is not that good, but who is happy to attend the coffee morning too. In fact, one of the teachers tells me that the Turkish parents provide great support for each other and often bring along someone who can help with translating. In the course of time, some of them have become more involved in the school.

Turkish-speakers do not only interact in mainstream society in the context of residential mixing and institutions such as schools, but also in business and trade. They run many Turkish restaurants in Hackney, and even those local residents who cannot afford to eat out get in contact with Turkish-speakers in the many neighbourhood corner-shops that they run. Similarly, Vietnamese people are present both in institutions such as nurseries and state schools, but also in the restaurants and nail parlours mentioned above. These nail parlours are particularly appreciated by women of African and Caribbean backgrounds who are among the most regular costumers.¹⁶ Vietnamese children enter mainstream society via the schools and sometimes sports clubs and other activities during their spare time.

Thus, although Vietnamese people and Turkish-speakers are known as 'keeping themselves to themselves', there are various points of contact where informal interaction happens. Such contact usually takes place in public and associational space. The specifically marked 'ethnic' places such as restaurants or grocery shops which sell products from these areas form 'bridges' between these groups and the residents of other origins. Turkish-speakers also run many mainstream corner shops, which makes it almost impossible for local residents not to get in contact with a Turkish-speaker in everyday life. Furthermore, both Turkish-speaking as well as Vietnamese children enter mainstream society via schools, and the parents represent a visible presence at these institutions. These bridges and points of contact play an important role in shaping people's perceptions about each other.

All these points of contact exist to a much lesser degree, if at all, in relation to strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters. Strictly Orthodox Jews do not send their children to state schools or

¹⁶ See Jamal (2003) on the role of 'ethnic retailers' as cultural intermediaries. See also Lee (2002) on everyday interactions between Jewish, Korean and African American merchants and their black customers. She cautions that these routinely positive encounters 'do not preclude the possibility of negative out-group stereotyping and racially charged conflict' (Lee 2002:185).

nurseries and they do not run restaurants or shops which cater to the rest of the population. Similarly, the Hipsters mainly cater to themselves in that they run and use pubs, cafes and bars that are specifically aimed at them. Since most of them do not have children yet, they do not have contact with family oriented places like nurseries and schools. Furthermore, both strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters make use of much more clearly defined spatial areas of the borough than Vietnamese people and Turkish-speakers. Although many shops and restaurants run by Turkish-speakers or the Vietnamese are concentrated on specific streets, the people themselves live across the borough. In contrast, strictly Orthodox Jews live in a very concentrated area of North Hackney. The Hipsters, even if some of them do not actually live in Hackney, make use of very specific places in Hackney, mainly a park, a high street with lots of nightlife and a market and its surrounding pubs. In fact, residents who do not live in these specific areas do not take much notice of them, whereas the strictly Orthodox Jews form part of residents' mental maps across the borough because they have lived here for much longer, use markets and public services across the borough (especially the health service) and are visibly more noticeable than the Hipsters.

Hipsters and strictly Orthodox Jews also compete over public space with other residents. For example, they dominate a street or a park by sheer numbers in the case of the Hipsters. In the case of strictly Orthodox Jews, they turn a local pub into a synagogue or claim specific hours in a public swimming pool. I have not heard of any such claims being made by Vietnamese people or Turkish-speakers. They also do not dominate specific public areas such as parks or pubs.

'Not mixing' thus is seen as a problem when it is interpreted as 'not *wanting* to mix'. This is the case among the majority of strictly Orthodox Jews who, according to one of my informants, 'don't want to compromise their culture'. In contrast, the Hipsters less consciously lead separate lives and they do not intently distance themselves from the rest of society. Also, many of them appreciate the diverse nature of the borough. However, local residents see them as being absorbed with their own social milieu and the demonstrably fashion-oriented life-style that comes with it.

As I have heard on several occasions, Turkish-speakers and Vietnamese people 'just get on with it'. This is the case for many other groups in Hackney who have lived here for various amounts of time and who might primarily socialise with members of their own group, such as Nigerians, white British middle-class people, Pakistanis, Polish, Brazilians, Western Europeans of various national origins, etc. Stereotypes and prejudice between these groups might exist, but they are not seen to undermine the ethos of mixing. Thus, participation in local life in the area, be it the local economy by way of restaurants and shops, or mixed institutions such as schools, libraries or sports clubs, plays an important role in shaping people's perceptions about each other and their openness towards each other.

The examples of the Hipsters, the strictly Orthodox Jews, the Turkish-speakers and the Vietnamese show that perceptions of difference and prejudice against others are not necessarily

related to ethnicity in a super-diverse context, but to the way specific groups are seen to behave. In a place where diversity is generally valued as a positive feature and promoted by both the local media and the Council, social segregation is seen to harm the social fabric of community.

Conclusion

People in Hackney have a very down-to-earth approach towards diversity. They mostly appreciate it and many would not want to live in a place that is less diverse. Some of my informants even said that it would be boring to live next to 'someone who is like me'. At the same time, there exists awareness of possible tensions that can arise when people of so many different backgrounds live together. This awareness also includes negative attitudes towards people who are perceived to reify their differences. 'Some people want to live separate lives' or 'they don't want to mix' are sentences I have heard repeatedly. Such comments mostly refer to members of certain groups like the Hipsters and strictly Orthodox Jews, who are seen as unwilling to interact with others. This unwillingness to interact is interpreted as inadequate in a place as culturally and socially mixed as Hackney. The 'ethos of mixing' could also be described as an implicit grammar of living in a super-diverse area, and it forms part of the local identity of Hackney's residents. This local identity is shaped by public and political discourse, which emphasises the positive aspects of cultural diversity.

Importantly, however, expectations of mixing in public and associational space are rarely accompanied by a criticism of non-mixing in the private realm. In regard to private relations, it is seen as quite normal that similar people who share similar life-styles, cultural values and attitudes attract each other. Such social connectedness does not necessarily go along ethnic lines (although it often does), but other categorical boundaries such as class and education can be important, too, especially among long-established local residents born in the area, some of whom form interethnic marriages.¹⁷ In general, however, the ethos of mixing is paralleled by the existence of rather separate private social worlds, which are often divided along class and ethnic lines. These separate worlds are accepted as normal, as long as fellow residents do live up to the expectations of participating in one way or another in associational spaces or in the public realm in the form of, for example, local shops and restaurants which cater to the larger population, or by way of children attending state schools.

These qualitative findings confirm the more quantitative large-scale studies about intergroup relations undertaken by social psychologists. These studies have found that the presence of high numbers of 'out-group members' in a neighbourhood can be perceived as a threat, especially if opportunity for contact is not being taken up. But positive contact with outgroup members contributes to improved relations (Hewstone et al. 2007). The differences in perceptions about strictly Orthodox Jews and Hipsters as opposed to Turkish-speakers and Vietnamese people could also be interpreted along the lines of Putnam's theory of bonding and bridging social capital, with

¹⁷ According to the 2001 census, there were 6214 households in Hackney with mixed partnerships.

bridging capital between groups being inclusive and contributing to reciprocity, and bonding capital within groups being exclusive and reinforcing group boundaries (Putnam 2000).

While the examples presented in this paper demonstrate the role that *opportunities* of contact and interaction play regarding the shaping of attitudes, social scientists have also discussed the role of the *quality* and *frequency* in which people interact across difference, and how they impact on positive intergroup relations. These discussions have been particularly prevalent in the context of rising policy concerns about 'community cohesion' since the 2001 riots in Northern English towns. A Home Office report, written in reaction to the riots, painted the picture of people leading 'parallel lives' without meaningful interchanges (Cantle 2001). In 2007, a report by the commission on Integration and Cohesion emphasised the importance of encouraging more than 'random mixing', but the development of deep and sustained and positive interactions 'around shared activities and common issues' (CIC 2007:23). Similarly, Amin emphasises that everyday encounters and 'habitual contact' in itself do not necessarily lead to cultural exchange, but that they can 'entrench group animosities and identities, through repetitions of gender, class, race, and ethnic practices' (Amin 2002:969). However, my fieldwork has shown that more sustained and regular encounters are not always a realistic option, especially in the context of language barriers and socio-economic deprivation. Vertovec (2007a:28) states that despite the desirability of sustained and meaningful interactions, these 'are simply not going to occur among most people in British cities today, whether ethnic majority, minority or new immigrant'.

Although encounters at school gates and in shops are often fleeting, the examples used in this paper show that even such fleeting encounters can play a role in shaping people's attitudes towards each other. In fact, the *absence* of such encounters can contribute to prejudice against those groups which do not form part of this public realm. Thus, despite the limitations of fleeting encounters regarding the enhancement of intercultural understanding, in a super-diverse context where attitudes towards diversity are generally positive, the lack of such encounters can lead to negative attitudes against specific groups of people perceived to stay away from even the most basic participation in local everyday life. As described by Sandercock (2003:89), peaceful co-existence requires 'something like daily habits of perhaps quite banal intercultural interaction in order to establish a basis for dialogue'.

To summarise, separate life-worlds in regard to private relations and social milieus, sometimes problematised as 'parallel lives' in policy discourse (Cantle 2001), are not experienced as a problem by Hackney's residents. But the disengagement from the rest of the population by non-participation in local activities, be they simply economic by way of shops and restaurants, or institutional by way of schools and civil society, is encountered with little understanding. However, only when this disengagement is coupled with contestations over space does it turn into conflict. This is when notions of 'living and letting live' are being broken and residents feel threatened in their

ownership over space. I hope to have illustrated the fine balance between acceptable and unacceptable social divisions in a super-diverse context, and the ways in which people interpret their social surroundings in terms of the participation of their fellow residents in public life.

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