

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN URBAN PARKS: STIMULATING SOCIAL COHESION?

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Abstract

Green areas have been used for spending leisure time for people with various ethnic backgrounds. However, some areas attract more visitors from ethnic minorities than others. Out of research that will be discussed in this paper it became clear that urban parks are visited by both migrant and non-migrant groups equally. This in contrast to for example nature areas which are visited more by non-migrants. Therefore, urban parks can be seen as possibly favorable spaces for social interaction. It is generally claimed that social interaction can contribute to social cohesion (Maloutas and Pantelidou 2004). It is important to note that interactions are not just conversations between people; eye contact and all forms of non-verbal behaviour are considered interactions as well. Lofland (1998) concludes that different types of relations are formed in the public realm. The objective of this paper is to find out to what extent urban parks are indeed meeting places. It aims at taking a closer look at the use of urban parks and the meaning of those parks for people with various ethnic backgrounds and to see if inter-ethnic interactions do take place and whether those interactions contribute to social cohesion.

Based on both quantitative (survey) as well as qualitative (observations and interviews) research in five urban parks in the Netherlands, it becomes clear that the use and meaning of urban parks of different ethnic groups has many similarities. Different ethnic groups are going to urban parks for relaxing and spending time with friends and family. Besides, although urban parks are public spaces, especially in small parks many visitors use these parks as if it are private spaces. We will argue that in urban parks inter-ethnic interactions happen and that those interactions take place more often during all different types of events. Yet our research points out that those interactions are not that important for visitors. This result essentially questions whether these interactions can really contribute to social cohesion.

Key Words

Urban parks, migrants, social interaction

Key References

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- Maloutas, T. and Pantelidou, M. (2004). Debates and Developments: The Glass Meagerie of Urban Governance and Social Cohesion: Concepts and Stakes/ Concepts as Stakes*. *International Journal of Urban Regional Research* 28(2), pp 449 - 465.