

Diversity on the doorstep: coexistence between neighbours in socially and ethnically heterogeneous residential buildings

Maxime Felder*

© by the author(s)

(*) University of Geneva, Pont d'Arve 40, 1211 Geneva, +49 15751101271
maxime.felder@unige.ch

Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on "The Ideal City: between myth and reality. Representations, policies, contradictions and challenges for tomorrow's urban life" Urbino (Italy) 27-29 August 2015. <http://www.rc21.org/en/conferences/urbino2015/>

Structure of the paper

1 Introduction.....	2
2 Literature review.....	4
3 Questions.....	9
4 Methodology.....	9
5 How is heterogeneity relevant in the coexistence between neighbors?.....	11
5.1 Can a buildings population be heterogeneous?.....	12
5.2 How do people refer to their neighbors and how do differences appear?.....	15
6 Conclusion.....	22
7 Bibliography.....	25

1 INTRODUCTION

“Next door lives Carlos. We don't know him so much, I don't know what he does for a living, but he has marbles.

Interviewer : Marbles?

Yes, marbles. Well, we often hear marbles, or I don't know what bouncing on the floor. But it doesn't bother us, it doesn't happen at night.”

In this paper, I will argue that, as this curious quotation suggests, modern dwellers have a peculiar vantage point when it comes to diversity. The idea of urban heterogeneity often goes with two assumptions. The first is that people perceive their neighbors in well-defined categories like same/different, co-

ethnic/other-ethnicity, same-class/lower-class/higher-class. A similar assumption is carried by research on relation between in-group members and out-group members. The second assumption is that such differences are central to issues related to the coexistence of people in urban settings. By analyzing how residents of buildings talk about their neighbors, I want to show why these assumptions might not apply to a European highly diverse city-center.

Drawing on an exploratory study of social relations in six segments of street and in two residential buildings in the centre of Geneva, I will first explain why I chose the residential building as unit of analysis. I will explain why heterogeneity is sometimes to be found within residential building and what kind of heterogeneity it is. Then, based on exploratory interviews, I will analyze how people talk about their immediate neighbors and what it tells us about how differences are perceived, and what role they play in the dynamics allowing coexistence.

Even if they live next door, neighbors sometimes do not know more about each other than a few hints put together: faces seen in the elevator, names seen on the mailboxes, sounds heard through the walls. In a highly heterogeneous context, perception of heterogeneity is characterized by a difficulty to socially identify others. The contradiction is then that on the one hand, one tries, based on these hints, to assess *who* those familiar strangers are, and what one can expect from them. On the other hand, developing a deeper or more intimate relation with them is often not a preferred option (Crow, Allan, and Summers 2002). This peculiar vantage point on heterogeneity, as I will argue, is linked to modern aspects of urban life. It

could explain why, like in the lead-in quotation, when asked about neighbor, one might rather define him as having marbles, whereas the sociologist would expect him to assess his social position or his ethnic origin.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying heterogeneity in an urban context is first and foremost studying urban relations, and how urbanism affects social relations. The literature on this topic is too wide to be summarized in a few paragraphs. However, Wellman (1979) assessment of the community question over the course of the twentieth century is informative. It can be divided in three moments. The first saw urban sociology pioneers like Simmel (1903) or Wirth (1938) concluding on the death of community by urbanization. In a second moment, north American scholars like W.F. Whyte (1943) and H. Gans (1962) and British scholars like Young and Wilmott (1974) rediscovered tightly knit communities in ethnic neighborhoods they called “urban villages”. The third moment is best illustrated by Wellman's expression of the community being “liberated” from geographical constraints. A large literature shows how through modernization, the link between place and social relations became loose. Decompartmentalization of life domains went with a physical separation of private and professional life, and ultimately a spatial separation of different aspects of private life, including social networks. Globalization process as well as telecommunication and transport technologies help mobility and spatial dispersion of people's lives.

Recent depictions of urban dwelling insisted on the fragmentation of people's relation to the local space. New localized communities appear, among other

people living spatially dispersed lives (Albrow 2000). In many European urban areas, the once rather obvious divide between the born and bred and the newcomer immigrants melted into a complex puzzle resulting from multiple waves and types of migration. In this context it can be hard to tell who is a “local”. A large body of literature developed on this topic, notably around Vertovec (2007) and his best-selling notion of “super-diversity”, like in the recent book of Wessendorf (2014). The latter shows that social relations in the Londonian district of Hackney do somehow cross ethnic and class lines, but form new boundaries based on the degree of participation in the local public space. Those sharing an “ethos of mixing” are opposed to those living more segregated lives.

Besides the many studies focusing on an entire neighborhood, the topic of neighbors relations seem to slowly loose social scientists interest. The sociological work led in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in France and Britain all concluded in a fading relevance of neighbors in urbanites social networks (Grafmeyer 2001; Abrams and Bulmer 1986; Buonfino and Hilder 2006; Cukrowicz 1993; Héran 1987; Lemaire and Chamboredon 1970). Modern dwellers would barely be neighbors anymore (Ascher 1995). Existing literature, however, shows that neighboring is about managing proximity and distance, and an ideal relation is often seen as including a “friendly distance” (Crow, Allan, and Summers 2002) or a “respectful distance” Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst (2005) that has to be skillfully worked out. This distance has to do with Goffman's concept of civil inattention (Goffman 1971). It has also be shown how neighbors categorize each others, on notions of order and morality and through gossip (Elias and Scotson 1994; Blokland 2003). The limited knowledge of one another could

lead to emphasizing differences and leading to exclusionary practices (van Eijk 2011).

A large literature examines intergroup relations, often at the neighborhood level. On the one hand, Allport's (1979) famous contact theory suggests that intergroup contacts - under the condition that contact includes interactions - reduce intergroup prejudice. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 515 empirical studies concludes that "there is little need to demonstrate further contact's general ability to lessen prejudice" (idib. p.768). Not only would contact theory apply to other than ethnic groups (which is the focus of most studies), but mere exposure would be enough to have an effect of prejudice reduction. Lee (2001) explains this effect by assuming a reduction of uncertainty and anxiety.

On the other hand, several conflict theories suggest that the exposure to ethnic or cultural differences results in suspicion toward the out-groups members. Most famously, Putnam (2007) has argued that principle of homophily, a feeling of anomie and of threat by other groups, would lead ethnically diverse populations to "hunker down". There are common points between both perspective. The first is that they study intergroup relations, and therefore consider urban social relation mainly as group relations : residents of an area are members of an in-group and accept or reject out-group members. These studies were often conducted in contexts where one aspect of identity is salient : black and white neighbors brought together in a "desegregated housing project", in the USA in the 1960, for example (mentioned in Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). How do intergroup theories apply to contexts where groups are highly fragmented, and which aspects of our

multifaceted identities are actually salient in neighbors relations, is still to be investigated.

A second point about these approaches is the variety of aspects of social life they focus on. Contact theories mostly focus on prejudice, while conflict theories focus on social capital, understood as civic engagement (Putnam 2001), connectedness and membership in networks (Portes 1998), or on social cohesion, which includes a large variety of domains such as shared values, solidarity, network membership, sense of belonging (Forrest and Kearns 2001). However, the link between these aspects and how they favor the coexistence of different people is not straightforward. For example, as Maloutas and Pantelidou Malouta (2004: 451) argued, prejudice and feeling of racial or cultural superiority may produce remarkable cohesion among those who share these feelings.

Moreover, both intergroup relation studies as well as research on social capital and social cohesion often tend to focus on the positive contribution of proper social ties and interactions between people. Arguing that neighborhoods were not (and possibly never have been) communities (Guest and Wierzbicki 1999; Blokland 2003) scholars tended to shift the focus from strong and durable social ties to looser social relations. If neighborhoods are not communities, coexistence cannot only be a matter of dwellers building solid and durable ties. Blokland and Nast showed that “recognizing and being recognized in local space, where one meets some people whom one knows and many whom one does not, but with whom one develops some level of acquaintance, however superficial and fluid — creates a comfort zone that allows people to feel they belong, even though they may have no local friends

or family, never talk to their direct neighbors, and not even like the place where they live”(Blokland and Nast 2014: 1156).

Yet, public familiarity not only leads to cohesion, but also to social distinction and identifications : “they” are not as clean, tidy respectable and civilized as “we” are (Blokland 2003, chap. 5.4). Gullestad (1986) showed how neighbors “use different kinds of symbolic means to establish social boundaries and create distance”. The complexity of this “boundary work” calls for more than one-dimensional references to differences. However, in most of the recent sociological literature, the notion of diversity refers to ethnic or racial differences. As for the notion of mix, in terms like “mixed neighborhoods” for example, it refers to socio-economic variations. However, the literature suggests that other kinds of differences might be relevant in neighbors relations, notably referring to neighborhood use : long-term residents vs newcomers, having children or not, having a local personal network or not (Zito 1974). Therefore, I will use the term heterogeneity to refer to a group of individuals being different in many respects, including – but not limited to – ethnicity, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, education, socio-economic background, lifestyle.

What I would like to explain is how a heterogeneous population deals with its differences, with the forced proximity, and manage (or not) to coexist peacefully. Coexistence refers here to people living near one another without being a significant problem for each other. A counter example would be situation where people consider their neighbors as a problem in their lives, and when the police is called, or violence is used. Unlike social capital or social cohesion approaches, this does not focus primarily on what is often

thought to allow coexistence: mutual trust, shared values, or interconnectedness.

3 QUESTIONS

Supposing that a high degree of heterogeneity is achieved, even within some buildings in the center of Geneva (Switzerland), and that people's investment in their place of living vary greatly because their professional, social or political life might also be elsewhere in the city or beyond, what are the possible meanings and uses of local ties in this context? What dynamics allow the inhabitants of such buildings to coexist? How do people having weak ties or no ties at all do perceive each other and how does it impact their coexistence? How does urbanism influences urbanites' perception and experience of differences?

4 METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a fieldwork carried out by a team. Eleven master students and myself conducted around one hundred interviews with shop-owners/workers, users of the street and dwellers. These semi-directed interviews included questions on people's social, micro-political (associative for example) and economic relations. Divided in six teams, we investigated six portions of streets, in three neighborhoods in the center of Geneva. The choice of the portion of street was led by our search of heterogeneity. We especially paid attention to the presence of shops and restaurants reclaiming themselves of a particular national or regional origin. We also looked for shops targeting clients with ties outside of Switzerland : money transfer

companies, telecommunication companies specializing in international communications. As for socio-economic differences, we looked at a mix of shops and apartments of higher and lower standing. We also carried interviews with most residents of two residential buildings of around ten apartments each. Interviews were about people's daily life and use of the city, about the place they like and dislike, and about their immediate neighbors. However, we did not ask for specific data that could assess the heterogeneity of the building population (income or nationality of the interviewee for example). This will be done in future research.

Our research design included observations on the street and in cafés and bars, where we took notes on interactions during one-hour long sequences. Transcribed interviews and field-notes have been then coded with an open-source “Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software” named *Tams.Analyzer* (Weinstein 2006). Three types of codes were used. A first group of codes related to the daily activities and mobilities people have. A second group focused on the way people objectify places, giving them meanings and roles. These codes were also covering how people perceive transformations. The third group is related to social, micro-political and economic ties of interviewees. We tried to include the relations we could observe but not classify. Some of them have been included in a category called familiarity.

This fieldwork resulted in a report co-written by the students and the leading team (Felder et al. 2015). It also served for the elaboration of my PhD project. The collected data allowed me to draw some hypothesis and define the methodology and theoretical framework of my project.

5 HOW IS HETEROGENEITY RELEVANT IN THE COEXISTENCE BETWEEN NEIGHBORS?

Studies on this topic generally focus on small scale units like neighborhoods, because it is assumed that people living in the same neighborhood have more chances to be in contact, compared to people living in different places of the city. However, literature shows that it is not necessarily the fact. Authors showed that living in the same neighborhood is not actually mixing, since people sometimes live in a “bubble” (Butler 2003), use “tunnels” (Atkinson 2006), or different “airspace” (Albrow 2000) and thus avoid or select, deliberately or not, contacts at the neighborhood scale. But unwanted contact due to intrinsic characteristics of urbanity (density, heterogeneity) are not eliminated by these practices. Immediate neighbors are forced together by their proximity. They share information even if they do not want to. They are interdependent, because their lives partly overlap. Therefore, in order to study how heterogeneous people manage to live “together” in an urban context, the building seems to be a particularly appropriate unit.

This implies considering all kinds of relations, including those without face-to-face interactions. Thus, I will take into account what Granovetter (1973) called “absent ties”, or “nodding” relationships. Drawing on Misztal’s (2001) reading of Goffman, I hypothesize that trust between neighbors results from a relation considered as normal by both parties. Trust is understood here as “the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit another’s vulnerability” (Sabel 1993: 1133). Comfortable anonymity is possible as long as others’ behavior is considered predictable, legitimate and not threatening.

Blokland and Nast (2014) refer to this as an effect of public familiarity. I will detail how people use the incomplete information they have about their neighbors to build coherent characters and stories that can explain potentially disturbing events and behaviors. I will ultimately analyze the process of elaborating stories about neighbors.

5.1 Can a buildings population be heterogeneous?

Urban sociology often assumes that residential buildings population are homogeneous from a socio-economic perspective. It is true that cities usually have low end and high end residential buildings, as they have expensive and rich neighborhoods and unattractive poorer areas. However, lots of european city centers have a much more diversified housing units. The built environment is a multi layered cluster that exists for centuries and that have been gradually modified. Some building have been demolished and rebuild, some are in a poor shape while others have been renovated recently. Once high end buildings could well have turned into poorly maintained unattractive flats whereas once working class or industrial estates could have been renovated in expensive lofts. Moreover, the same building can feature less expensive and more expensive apartments, in the case of tenure mix or in the case of partial renovation. Studies on urban segregation usually consider a two-dimensional city where populations are sorted on a flat surface. This view allows a heuristically rich mapping work, but should not lead to neglect the vertical dimension of the city.

Western-european city centers in the nineteenth century were largely composed of mixed buildings. In a typical Hausmannian building, for example, the ground floor was usually occupied by shops or offices (for a sociological

perspective on Hausmannian buildings, see Lepoutre 2010; 2012). Since elevators were not common, the first floors were the most desirable and housed rich families. They had large rooms and balcony. The two first floors are sometimes still called *piano nobile*, or “noble floor”. The upper stories were much simpler, having smaller rooms and often no balcony. As for the top floor, under the mansard roof, it used to be occupied by lower-income tenants, or by maids and servants working in the apartments below. This vertical segregation has made a come-back, in a reversed order. Today's top floors apartments are usually more expensive than the ones located near to the street. Their tenants benefit from more light, less noise, no upstairs neighbors, and possibly a better view compared to the lower apartments. In Geneva, as a result of a lack of building land and the impossibility to demolish or heavily renovate nineteenth century buildings (often considered as cultural heritage), investors have adopted new strategies. Either one or two new floors are added on top of existing buildings, or existing top floors and attics are turned into high end flats.

There are other reasons leading to big price differences within the same building. One is that rents rise rapidly from year to year, resulting in large gaps between old and new leases. An apartment whose occupants changed often is more expensive than the identical one occupied for thirty years by the same tenant. Subletting practices can also contribute to price gaps. People being discriminated by real estate companies sometimes turn to illegal subletting and end up paying a much higher price. A 2014 Swiss study showed that someone fictionally named Arunan Vaidyanathan has 20% less chances to get a lease compared to a fictional Daniel Fischer (Jann 2014). At the other end of the privilege scale, some apartments are occupied by expats

whose multi-national company pay whatever the real estate companies ask for, leading to largely overestimated rents.

The last and most simple reason accounting for socio-economic diversity within a building is the variable share of income devoted to the rent. It is not unlikely that half or the income of a single parent with children goes in the rent of an apartment too small for a family. For the dual-high-income couple living next door, this very same amount of money could represent barely 20 percent of their income. Adding to this, welfare policies, housing market regulations, a low crime rate, the lack of opportunity for retreat for the rich, the lack of cheaper housing for the less well off, and the average high standard of living, makes social mix a reality even at the lowest scale of the urban puzzle : the residential building. Ethnic diversity also exists at this scale. About half of the 200'000 inhabitants are foreigners¹ and a quick look at the doorbells in the studied streets left no doubt about the ethnic diversity of buildings inhabitants (for more precise statistics on the low measures of segregation in Geneva, see Langel 2013).

An objection could be that even if there is socio-economic and ethnic heterogeneity, there is a sorting in terms of taste and lifestyle. People choose to live in a particular neighborhood or even a particular street because it fits their taste and lifestyle. I am not saying this is irrelevant. However, considering the extremely low vacancy rate, I would say the part of choice is very limited, and the part of coincidence rather high. In 2013, Paris had a vacancy rate of 9.2%. This rate was of 3.8% in London, and around 2% in New York City. In Geneva in 2014, only 0.39% of all existing housing were on

¹ The canton of Geneva is just about to reach the share of foreigners it used to have 100 years ago. This share massively decreased during the two wars.

the market. Reasons for such a situation are numerous and partly unclear, but the lack of building land and legal restrictions on constructions do play an important role. People living in this context have chosen to face this off-putting situation where they could have moved outside of the city. However, there can be many reasons to still want to or have to live in the center, and I would argue there is no homogenization in this respect.

5.2 How do people refer to their neighbors and how do differences appear?

Now that we have mentioned potential differences, how do interviewed people refer to their neighbors when they talk about them? References to socio-economic differences are absent from the descriptions people made of their neighbors. It does not mean, however, that economic capital differences do not play a role in the way neighbors evaluate each other and interact. A reason for this can be that the apartments in the studied buildings seemed to be of similar range, there were no luxury lofts on the top. Ethnic references, on the contrary, are much used. Interviewees often use them as principal identifier: the Indian guy, the African family, etc. This categorization is made on the basis of skin color, accent or name. It can be considered as a mechanism of “othering” where one asserts how the other is different. But it could merely also be a way of distinguishing or describing others. This can be linked to a trivialization of ethnic diversity. As Wessendorf (2014) explains, when reaching a certain level, ethnic diversity can become “commonplace”, which does not mean it is not acknowledged anymore. In a context where half of the population does not have the Swiss passport, considering a neighbor as merely “foreigner” makes little sense. To be relevant, the information

should at least be about the continent or country of origin. Actually, the nationality itself is of little importance, given the limited knowledge neighbors have about each other. The “Syrian” man living here for a long time could well have a swiss passport and still be characterized as “Syrian”.

I would not argue that this categorical thinking does not lead to prejudice (see on this exact topic van Eijk 2011). I do not have data to assess this. Nevertheless, on the basis of our exploratory interviews with inhabitants of two buildings, I would say that the mechanism of “culturalising” or “exotifying” others based on visible markers of ethnicity is also part of a broader process. This process is twofold and linked to the specificities of neighbors relations : the determination by proximity, and an intermediate degree of knowledge of the other. In this process, people built a coherent story about others, turning them into characters, while this implies sometimes some emphasis about differences. A first example shows how a dweller talk about his upstairs neighbor, a woman he sometimes hear shouting and throwing things across the apartment.

“She’s an alcoholic, Denis (a neighbor) told me how he often found her lying in the stairwell between two floors and had to help her join her apartment. She has a burdensome past... she has also invented herself a deceased son, allegedly, well... that is what I heard. We just say hello, if I have to help her I do it of course, but we do not have much more contacts.”

Other interviewees told me similar stories about her, adding some variations about possible mental illness. The point is, gossips helped form a coherent story about this woman, including an explanation for her behavior –

alcoholism – and a reason for her alcoholism – a burdensome past. Labelling her “alcoholic” is a form of prejudice and many of these stories are fueled by prejudices based on gender, skin color and other visible characteristics. But at the same time, it makes her behavior if not acceptable at least understandable. It is a form a normalization of a deviance by the observer. In a famous breaching experiment led by Milgram and Sabini (1978) in the 1970's in the New York City subway, an experimenter asked people to give up their seats, sometimes without justifying his or her request, sometimes explaining “I can't read my book standing up”. One of the result was that people were more likely to give up their seat when no explanation was given. When no explanation were given, people figured a good one out by themselves. By attributing a meaning to the social norm violation – for example by supposing the enquirer is sick and therefore needs to sit –, the violation is being normalized. In our case, labelling the neighbor alcoholic and attributing her a “burdensome past” is a way of normalizing her behavior.

Normalizing does not mean endorsing, however. Misztal shows that normality can have two distinct meanings : what she calls situational normality is based “on our perception of the regularity of events and people’s behavior (its factual dimension)”, while normative normality is based on our “classification of action as rule/norm following (its normative dimension)” (Misztal 2001: 314). She considers trust to be an outcome of situation normality, since trust stems from the predictability and reliability of social order, which helps reducing the complexity of a situation. Her analysis is much inspired by Goffman's framing theory. The example provided above shows that an otherwise deviant, disturbing or worrying situation can become a situational normality, when it appears as predictable and legitimate.

Moreover, I argue than if trust, as “a bet about the future contingent actions of others” (Sztompka 1999: 25), is based on the knowledge we have from others, this knowledge does not have to be accurate. Interviewees elaborating on the possible illness and troubled past of a neighbor did not seem to be worried by the accuracy of their theory. Through gossip, they collectively built a story and were satisfied with the fact it explained norm-breaching behavior events in their building. Blokland and Nast argued that it is “through conversations with people whom we do not know that public familiarity develops and brings about a comfort zone: here we learn to deal with differences, here we acquire information about unknown others, and in such conversations we learn what to expect” (Blokland and Nast 2014: 1157). Actually, this process can also be an individual one. Regular encounters, even with no interactions, can provide with public familiarity. The sense of familiarity we have with our environment creates “a zone of comfort in which we know what to expect” (Ibid.).

Our data shows how this sense of familiarity is build on the basis of few informations or hints. Stories told about neighbors shows some personal interpretations. Essential elements of the characters change depending on who tells the story. Ethnicity, even being an essential reference in the stories, seems to be guessed more than known. Some neighbors where said to be African by some, and South-american by others. Firsthand information, gossip, memories and imagination are gathered in order to complete the story. Thus the latter is personal. About the same person, we heard :

“A man lives here for a long time, a Syrian, always dressed up, with blazer and everything. He was limo driver I think, I have not seen him for

quite a long time, maybe he retired.”

About the same person, from another interviewee, we learnt :

“Here lives an Egyptian. I think he lives with his wife, I am not sure whether he is renting cars or if he is a driver. When I was young he was running a tobacco store on the street Y, he had a lot of Egyptian souvenirs, this kind of crap.”

I argue that this is not only the result of wrong informations. It comes from the fact that people built characters that they find at the same time coherent and peculiar. Interviewees rarely talk of “a regular guy”. I hypothesis that if the person who insisted about how dressed up the Syrian man was, saw him sometimes wearing a sweatshirt, this event would not change the story. The man would still be “a Syrian guy always dress up”. I hypothesis that the emphasis and sometimes the exaggerated way of talking of differences partly result from a preference for drama. Here is another example of the elaboration of stories.

I always wondered what was going on in this apartment. She is very nice, a Brazilian I think. I don't know her. It's funny, because she organized parties... now she stopped... and sometimes a guy was coming, sometimes other girls. Sometimes I don't see her anymore. (In a low voice) I always wondered if it was a kind of brothel. But it's ok, it's very discrete. Maybe I'm totally mistaken, I'm not sure what might be brewing there.”

Lyn Lofland considers as source of interactional pleasure of the urban life, the fact that “one take pleasure in the very incompleteness of the information one is able to gather exactly because incompleteness gives reign

to imagination” (Lofland 1998: 81). She adds : “we overhear or oversee just enough to catch a glimpse of enticing real-life dramas; the filling out of the drama is a work of the imagination”. She explains how she likes watching people. With other guests in a restaurant, she found herself “being amused to elaborate stories that explained the behavior [they] had witnessed” (Lofland 1998: 91). Iris Marion Young also insisted on this aspect of urban life. For her, the “erotic” dimension of urban life is "the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, strange and surprising" (Young 1990: 239). This, she argues, “is the opposite of the security and exclusion homogeneous communities promote” (Young 1990: 239). Even if people do not let themselves be actually “drawn out” of their routine, the fact that it *could* happen might be enough to stimulate the spectator. As Butler argued about “middle-class” people in diverse neighborhood, they “values the presence of others (...) but choose not to interact with them. They are, as it were, much valued as a kind of social wallpaper, but no more” (Butler 2003: 2484). The absence of interaction has consequences regarding the sharing or “hoarding” of resources or opportunities (Tilly 2001), but does not seem to harm the coexistence. Moreover, the coexistence with this “social wallpaper” self-evident.

Of course, this way of telling stories, as a way of giving meaning to event, or as a pleasure to play with imagination, does not always contribute to a peaceful coexistence. The same process of telling stories can normalize a minor norm breaching, or amplify it. What matters here is less the breaching of norms itself rather than the explanation one gives to the breaching, and whether one consider it as legitimate or not. As an example, a tenant came to

“hate” one of his neighbors because she does not always say hello, while the grumpiness of another neighbor did not bother him at all. The first neighbor is a woman, about his age, and allegedly physically attractive. Because she had ignored him (not answering his hello, or doing it to furtively), he despises her.

“Such a bitch, I hate her. Seriously, she's young, pretty, she has a daughter. And you run into her, she doesn't even say hello. If you don't say anything, she will not say anything, she'll just pass by, without even looking at you. I told myself 'what's her problem? You think you're so pretty I'm hitting on you?' What the hell!”

Later in the interview, as we moved to the last square of the schematic representation of the buildings apartments, he told us about the second neighbor : Marco.

“Marco I like him. A lot of people don't because he's bad tempered, grumpy. The guy who don't say hello and just grumble. But I like him. He is 70, can you believe that? It's crazy. He's got more style than me, with his military jacket, his Converse shoes and his Rolling Stones t-shirt! He's in shape, when you see him walking...”

What matters here is not civility as such, but how it fits the stories and the characters our interviewee constructed. The process of telling stories is not specific to urban life or to neighbors relations. However, urban context and neighbors relations presents features that feed this process. A central feature is the role of proximity. As Abrams and Bulmer (1986) argued, proximity defines neither relationships nor their content. However, the fact that the repetition of encounters is induced by proximity and not much else,

is specific to neighbors relations. People regularly running into each other on the workplace have in common, at least, to have been hired by the same company and to have the same work environment. People meeting at the boxing club have at least a similar interest in boxing. People running into each other in the stairwell of their building have just in common the fact that they once needed a flat. It makes neighbors relations more random than other social interactions. A second specific aspect linked to proximity is that it makes difficult to avoid those encounters (as pointed by Abrams and Bulmer 1986). Blokland emphasized the interdependence it creates (Blokland 2003: 80). When in another context, one could manage to avoid people one does not like, one cannot prevent running into a neighbor, or hearing from him through the wall or the ceiling. A third specific aspect of these repeated encounters is the intermediate level between anonymity and intimacy in which they seem to be stuck. People usually know things about their neighbors, and sometimes things which one might much prefer not to have known. But at the same time, the knowledge about others is incomplete and real intimacy between neighbors seems to be rare. And like other studies stated, people rarely desire a deeper involvement in their neighbors life. This leaves gray areas where the imagination is at play.

6 CONCLUSION

On the basis of an exploratory fieldwork led in two buildings and six portions of streets in the city center of Geneva, including interviews with neighborhood users, shop workers and dwellers of two buildings, this paper makes several hypothesis about how heterogeneity can be experienced and

dealt with in an urban context.

I explained why residents of a building can be a heterogeneous population. I plead for a consideration of the vertical dimension of the city, which also induce sorting and segregation. Then I explained how people talk about their neighbors. I showed how ethnic references were constructed as identifier and contribute to the individual elaboration of characters and stories involving these characters. This process helps to normalize behaviors considered as deviant, and is partly collectively achieved through gossip. Pieces of informations are gathered and serve building a story that makes observed events or behaviors appear coherent with the character involved. This coherence reduces the complexity of a situation, and can lead to trust. One can trust his environment when it appears to him as predictable, when it becomes familiar, and correspond to a “situational normality” (Miztal 2001).

Finally, I showed how this process of building stories matches a “pleasure of the urban life” : filling out real-life dramas and telling stories with only incomplete informations. I showed that norms breaching can be accepted or contempt depending on the story in which they appear. I argue that these processes (telling stories to normalize and for the pleasure of drama) are linked to the role of proximity in these social relations. This makes them typical of neighbors relations, that is, of relations determined by proximity.

The relevance of this conclusion is that trust is not necessarily linked with the amount of information one has of another. We saw that people are able to normalize norm breaching behaviors on the basis of few informations or gossip, and with the help of imagination. Not only did my interviewees neither try nor express the will to know their neighbors better, but also the distance

that imply a limited knowledge of the neighbors seems to be a cornerstone of peaceful coexistence. It results from a consciousness of the fact that “the more obvious special feature of nearness as a setting for relationships is the exceptional cheapness with which it can permit good relationships and the exceptional costs it can attach to bad ones” (Abrams and Bulmer 1986: 18).

These results also have policy relevance. Neighbors relations are often considered in a deficit perspective in which public policy should be a remedy. Along with the lament over the loss of the local community goes the idea that neighbors should like each other in order to coexist. Moreover, the more neighbors would know each other, the more they would like each other. The organizers of the European Neighbor's Day, with more than 1'400 partners cities, consider the event as an “opportunity to reconnect with the values of solidarity, brotherhood and friendship that should be at the forefront of neighborly relations”². The city of Geneva also promotes “la fête des voisins”, in order to “strengthens the proximity ties to fight solitude, withdrawal and individualism”³. My point is not to deny the value of friendship and solidarity between neighbors, but to show that a peaceful coexistence does not depend on them. There might be a need to reconsider the goals of such policies : is it about fostering small communities of friends, or allowing people with different needs and interests to share the same urban space?

Further research will be focused on a more systematic fieldwork and investigation of neighbors relations within residential buildings. I will pay more careful attention to conflicts, and to the role of the setting : neighborhood specificities, and building specificities (size, presence of a lift, of a janitor). I

2 <http://www.european-neighbours-day.com/en>, visited on the 23rd of June 2015.

3 <http://www.ville-ge.ch/immeublesenfete/historique.html>, visited on the 23rd of June 2015.

plan to keep using a schematic representation of the buildings apartments to make interviewees talk about what they know about their immediate neighbors and how they got this knowledge. If I manage to lead interviews in all apartments of several buildings, I will be able to elaborate networks of relations ranging from quasi-anonymity to quasi-intimacy, and to understand how familiarity is built and evolve. This should contribute to our understanding of how weak or absent ties can allow the coexistence of a heterogeneous population in a residential building.

7 BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, Philip, and Martin Bulmer. 1986. *Neighbours: The Work of Philip Abrams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Albrow, M. 2000. *Traveling beyond Local Cultures: Sociospaces in a Global City*, In; Eade, J.(ed) *Living the Global City*. London: Routledge.
- Allport, Gordon W. 1979. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Unabridged, 25th anniversary ed. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Ascher, François. 1995. *Métapolis, Ou L'avenir Des Villes*. Paris: Editions O. Jacob.
- Atkinson, Rowland. 2006. "Padding the Bunker: Strategies of Middle-Class Disaffiliation and Colonisation in the City." *Urban Studies* 43 (4): 819–32.
- Blokland, Talja. 2003. *Urban Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Blokland, Talja, and Julia Nast. 2014. "From Public Familiarity to Comfort Zone: The Relevance of Absent Ties for Belonging in Berlin's Mixed Neighbourhoods." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, April, 1143–60.
- Buonfino, Alessandra, and Paul Hilder. 2006. "Neighbouring in Contemporary Britain." The Young Foundation.
- Butler, Tim. 2003. "Living in the Bubble: Gentrification and Its 'Others' in North London." *Urban Studies* 40 (12): 2469–86.
- Crow, Graham, Graham Allan, and Marcia Summers. 2002. "Neither Busybodies nor Nobodies: Managing Proximity and Distance in Neighbourly Relations." *Sociology* 36 (1): 127–45.

- Cukrowicz, Hubert. 1993. "Choisir ses voisins?" *Revue française de sociologie* 34 (3): 367–93.
- Elias, Norbert, and John L. Scotson. 1994. *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. 2. ed. Theory, Culture & Society. London: Sage Publ.
- Felder, Maxime, Sandro Cattacin, Patricia Naegeli, and Alessandro Monsutti. 2015. "Cohabitation, Connivences et Antagonismes. Enquête Sociologique Dans Six Rues de Genève." Université de Genève.
- Forrest, Ray, and Ade Kearns. 2001. "Social Cohesion, Social Capital and the Neighbourhood." *Urban Studies* 38 (12): 2125–43.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1962. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1971. "Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order Basic Books." *New York*.
- Grafmeyer, Yves. 2001. "Les Sociabilités Liées Au Logement." In *Du Domicile À La Ville*, 1–15.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1360–80.
- Guest, A. M., and S. K. Wierzbicki. 1999. "Social Ties at the Neighborhood Level: Two Decades of GSS Evidence." *Urban Affairs Review* 35 (1): 92–111.
- Gullestad, Marianne. 1986. "Symbolic 'fences' in Urban Norwegian Neighbourhoods*." *Ethnos* 51 (1-2): 52–70.
- Héran, François. 1987. "Comment Les Français Voisinent." *Economie et Statistique* 195 (1): 43–59.
- Jann, Ben. 2014. "Diskriminierung Auf Dem Wohnungsmarkt: Untersuchungsergebnisse Und Empfehlungen." Bern: Institut für Soziologie, Universität Bern.
- Langel, Matti. 2013. "Mixité Sociale et Niveau de Revenus Dans Le Canton de Genève." Office cantonal de la statistique (OCSTAT) Genève.
- Lee, A. Y. 2001. "The Mere Exposure Effect: An Uncertainty Reduction Explanation Revisited." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27 (10): 1255–66.
- Lemaire, Madeleine, and Jean-Claude Chamboredon. 1970. "Proximité Spatiale et Distance Sociale. Les Grands Ensembles et Leur Peuplement." *Revue Française de Sociologie* 11 (1): 3–33.
- Lepoutre, David. 2010. "Histoire d'un immeuble haussmannien." *Revue française de sociologie* Vol. 51 (2): 321–58.

- . 2012. “L'immeuble, mode d'emploi. Devenir de l'habitat haussmannien.” *Ethnologie française* 42 (3): 419.
- Lofland, Lyn H. 1998. *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*. Communication and Social Order. Hawthorne, N.Y: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Maloutas, Thomas, and Maro Pantelidou Malouta. 2004. “The Glass Menagerie of Urban Governance and Social Cohesion: Concepts and Stakes/concepts as Stakes.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28 (2): 449–65.
- Milgram, S., and J. Sabini. 1978. “On Maintaining Urban Norms: A Field Experiment in the Subway.” In *Advances in Environmental Psychology*, by A. Baum, Erlbaum, 31–40.
- Misztal, Barbara A. 2001. “Normality and Trust in Goffman's Theory of Interaction Order.” *Sociological Theory* 19 (3): 312–24.
- Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. 2006. “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 751.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1998. “Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology,” July, 1–25.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2001. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- . 2007. “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture.” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2): 137–74.
- Sabel, C. F. 1993. “Studied Trust: Building New Forms of Cooperation in a Volatile Economy.” *Human Relations* 46 (9): 1133–70.
- Savage, Michael, Gaynor Bagnall, and Brian Longhurst. 2005. *Globalization and Belonging*. Theory, Culture & Society. London 磳ousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE.
- Simmel, G. 1903. *Metropolis & Mental Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sztompka, Piotr. 1999. *Trust: A Sociological Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, C. 2001. “Relational Origins of Inequality.” *Anthropological Theory* 1 (3): 355–72.
- Van Eijk, Gwen. 2011. “‘They Eat Potatoes, I Eat Rice’: Symbolic Boundary Making and Space in Neighbour Relations.” *Sociological Research Online* 16 (4). <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/2.html>.

- Vertovec, Steven. 2007. "Super-Diversity and Its Implications." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (6): 1024–54.
- Weinstein, M. 2006. "TAMS Analyzer: Anthropology as Cultural Critique in a Digital Age." *Social Science Computer Review* 24 (1): 68–77.
- Wellman, Barry. 1979. "The Community Question: The Intimate Networks of East Yorkers." *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (5): 1201–31.
- Wessendorf, Susanne. 2014. *Commonplace Diversity: Social Relations in a Super-Diverse Context*. Global Diversities. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whyte, William Foote. 1943. *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wirth, Louis. 1938. "Urbanism As A Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology* 44: 1–24.
- Young, I.M. 1990. *City Life and Difference*. Princeton University Press.
- Young, Michael Dunlop, and Peter Willmott. 1974. *Family and Kinship in East London*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Zito, J. M. 1974. "Anonymity and Neighboring in an Urban, High-Rise Complex." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 3 (3): 243–63.