

**An Anthropological Account of
Ephemeral Relationships on
Public Transport. A Contribution
to the Reflection on Diversity**

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An Anthropological Account of Ephemeral Relationships on Public Transport. A Contribution to the Reflection on Diversity

Summary

An ethnographic study into brief and more limited relationships in western urban areas is presented. In this world of ephemeral relationships people have limited relationships with a diversity of other people. Focussing on the case study on public transport (a moving space) this presentation contributes to the reflection on community and public space in which diversity is a central tenet. Brief relationships can transform into multiple types of relationships. The result can be a temporarily being together with others. For instance the presence of small children can be seen as enhancing 'light' forms of community. The attractiveness of light community lies in its ambiguous nature. The ephemeral relationships are not only important to the individual but the continuous succession of these small interactions contributes to the social atmosphere in urban space. They have a collective effect on the personality of the city.

Keywords: Ethnography, Ephemeral Relationships, Community, Public Space, Diversity

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1. Ethnographic research on public transport: methodological diversity

This contribution starts from an ethnographic description of the everyday life on public transport. This ethnographic study is situated in a broader PHD project: ethnography into brief and more limited relationships (ephemeral relationships) in western urban areas.

The ethnographic research into these ephemeral relationships involves different case studies in the city of Antwerp (Belgium): (1) a study into the relationships in two shops and one department store, (2) a study into the everyday life of a small number of city inhabitants and (3) a case study of a tram.

In this ethnographic project we didn't follow the anthropological tradition in which fieldwork is an intense dwelling in a specific place with a specific group (see the influence of Malinowski, discussed in Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). The research population does not exist of a specific group with its own culture, subculture or lifestyle. So we didn't focus on a segmented population in the city (Burgess, 1985), which is often the case in urban anthropology. We were especially interested in the study of the relationships between a diversity of people. The focus was not on relationships associated with a social group but rather on relationships between people from different social groups. The crosscutting ties (Hannerz, 1980) that run through delineated groups and geographical boundaries form the core of the research.

Traditional fieldwork concerns itself with social as well as spatial encapsulation. Most of the time one location far away from the researcher's home is studied and isomorphism between space and culture is taken for granted. This correspondence of geographical and cultural entity (see also the Chicagoschool) has been under critique (Hannerz, 1980) and more recently in the context of 'modernity at large' (Appadurai, 1996) or 'supermodernity' (Augé, 2000) the disjunction between space and identity is discussed. Because of this discussion there is now attention for transnational research (see Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003) but studying one far away location is still popular (see for instance PHD themes in my own department of social and cultural anthropology).

In our study different places in the urban environment in Northern Europe (a not popular anthropological geographical area) are studied. In general the research concerned itself with the home, the neighbourhood and (semi)public space. But in each case there are also different spatial layers. The case of public transport illustrates this very well. Because public transport is a moving space it involves different kind of spaces and places. The tram literally crosses different spaces in the city from working class neighbourhoods to shopping areas, from residential spaces to the city centre, from parochial to public spaces... This moving through spatial borders is also relevant because the research took place in Western (public) space which is close to the researcher's own world; the presence of friends, family and especially the researcher's children is more obvious. The distinction between 'home' and 'field' is looser (see also Amit, 2000) and is more blurred. Doing groceries and picking up children from

school were also done when the researcher was in the field. Personal and professional life, private and public space are not separate matters.

It is also important to mention that the tram is an owned space. These kind of spaces are by anthropologists often seen as conspicuous spaces (see for instance Low, et al, 2005) or as 'non-places' (Augé, 2000) and therefore not authentic and pure. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have mentioned there exists a hierarchy in the purity of the anthropological field. From the point of view of this traditional hierarchy this study is not pure at all and is ranked very low on the hierarchical ladder.

Diversity in this research has to do with what counts as the field. The field in our study is not a uniform and fixed setting but represents a multilayered and complex situation. Doing fieldwork meant working with different case studies. So we didn't follow the classic view on fieldwork where one small delineated setting is studied in depth, which has been seen as the best way to study social phenomena in a holistic way. By setting out three lines in the research, diverse facets (as 'specimens' (Alasuutari, 1996)) were studied in a broad range. So the classic vertical approach (in which it is possible to a certain extent to have a practical overview of the situation) was replaced by a more horizontal approach. Depth and totality as is the case in a traditional anthropological field were not necessary to do justice to the complexity of everyday relationships. It seems an interesting challenge to think about the meaning of fieldwork dissociated from the perspective of depth in which it had been set apart from quantitative research for so long (Soenen, 2002: 92). This has nothing to do with representativeness, since that would imply that we could overview and control all data. The broad range has to do with a specific combination of different elements and sources to analyse a complex setting. For instance next to field notes and scientific literature other non-scientific or non-professional sources can be relevant. Reading an article on small talk in a popular women's magazine meant a break through in my research. Diversity is about connections between different elements and about a more dynamic perspective on the field. So diversity also means bypassing classic dichotomies like for instance field-home, private-public and personal-professional in doing fieldwork.

2. Attention for ephemeral relationships

Reading Granovetter's (1973) famous article 'the strength of weak ties' also inspired us to have attention for ephemeral relationships. Granovetter (ibid.) uses the network approach from an economic point of view within his study on how people are getting a job. He makes an important conceptual distinction between strong and weak ties and stresses the importance of weak ties. Strong ties are in depth relationships with family and friends within a homogeneous group. Weak ties are less enduring relationships within different small groups like for example colleagues, schoolmates and acquaintances. It's about potential relationships which can be activated when necessary. In a footnote however Granovetter mentions 'absent ties': "*Included in "absent" are both the lack of any relationship and ties without substantial significance, such as "nodding" relationship between people living in the same street, or the "tie" to the vendor from whom one customarily buys a morning newspaper. That two people "know" each other by name does not remove their relation out of this category if their interaction is negligible.*" (1973, 1361, footnote, the underlining is mine). These ties without substantial meaning are given attention in the work of Goffman. Goffman (1963) called these relationships more positively traffic relationships. According to him "*the study of ordinary human traffic and the patterning of ordinary social contacts, has been little considered.*" (1963: 4). Goffman was especially interested in the patterns of public behaviour: how to make

one's way through crowded streets, choosing a seat in a bar, bus, escaping unwanted attention, joining in a queue, avoiding to what appears a dangerous scene, ... He is interested in rules and patterns to map the public social order and in the normative legal system of the public realm. More recent work to be mentioned is that of Lyn Lofland, a student of Goffman and professor in urban sociology in San Francisco. In 1973 she wrote the book 'A World of Strangers'. "*To live in a city is, among many other things, to live surrounded by large numbers of persons whom one does not know. To experience the city is, among many other things, to experience anonymity. To cope with the city is, among many other things, to cope with strangers.*" (Lofland, 1973: ix-x). This world of strangers also described as 'the public realm' (Lofland, 1998) forms the core of her work. She presents a more relational approach next to the normative approach of Goffman. Although she is only interested in the public realm, she briefly mentions the other two realms of city life: the parochial and private realm. Realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space. They are social territories. Whether any actual physical space contains a realm at all is not the consequence of some immutable culturally or legally given designation. So, a parochial realm exists when a dominating relational form found in some physical space is communal. This is a type of relationship that is characterised by a feeling of communality between people such as friends, colleagues, acquaintances (cf. weak ties of Granovetter). A private realm exists when the dominating relational form found in some physical space is intimate as between family members or friends (strong ties). The "*public realm*" (1998: 10) is the world of so-called superficial and fleeting relationships, or the relationships between strangers. So does for instance a personal residence when it is empty of human beings, contain no realm at all. When it is populated it is usually a private realm; but it is quite possible for it to be transformed into a public realm space when it rooms strangers that have paid for a house tour.

According to Lofland there is only attention in anthropology for what she calls the "*parochial realm*" (1998:10). Also Hannerz (1980) mentions that in urban anthropology in western society anthropologists retreat to encapsulated groups (as for instance ethnic groups) or in 'urban villages' (Gans, 1965). They often avoid the complexity of the metropolis (Amit, 2002a). Also relational approaches as network theory and social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) deal with those social relationships that are deeper, more enduring and more frequent or in other words with 'strong' or 'weak' ties. The world of ephemeral relationships in supermarkets, on public transport,... is the world in which people have limited relationships with a diversity of other people and not with equals. Although we shall see that the experience of diversity has less to do with the different types of people and more with the different actual relationships between them.

3. Everyday life on the tram

The fieldwork on public transport was done on tram 12 in the city of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium) and was carried out over a period of 8 months. Participant observation was done on one specific tramline and its stops; drivers were informally interviewed and the researcher took part in the ticket control with inspectors of the public transport company.

3.1. Multiple relational spheres on the tram: 'three-in-one'

On the tram contacts are fleeting so the public realm is obviously present. Goffman (1963) claims that behaviour between strangers is regulated by the 'civil inattention rule'. According to this rule of behaviour, people show that they have noticed each other, but immediately afterwards they draw their attention away to show that they don't see the other person as

weird or special. One does this out of politeness. This ‘civil inattention rule’ also applies to our data.

But there are also brief helping relationships with strangers (see also the notion ‘restrained help’ in the work of Lofland, 1998). They aren’t limited to people with the same ethnicity or background. For instance, a young Moroccan man prevents one of the little sons of an Indian woman from falling. Offering help shows a kind of ‘civility towards diversity’ (Lofland, 1998), in which diversity is discounted in the ephemeral relationships between passengers. Relationships of avoidance and brief helping relationships can evolve into floating social relationships which create a temporarily form of being together. When the tram suddenly has to brake and passengers help each other not to fall, people often talk or laugh briefly. The presence of small children and dogs on the tram has the number one position in establishing floating social relationships. An example:

“An allochthonous couple (man in costume and the wife with a headscarf like some Muslim women use to wear) with a buggy just got on the tram and is standing in front of the middle doors. They carry groceries from the market in plastic bags. The small girl in the buggy, a toddler tries to get in touch with the black man (...) sitting close to her. She grabs his arm and giggles. The black man lets her, strokes her, talks to her and makes funny faces. (...) The child in the buggy pulls the black man’s hand again and wants to pull him even closer to her. Her father calms her down and tells her she shouldn’t do that. The men exchange a few friendly words. (...) At the National Bank a lot of people get on the tram: an elderly Flemish couple, a Flemish middle-aged man, and a young couple. The family with the toddler in the buggy gets off. The Flemish middle-aged man who just got up, smiles at her when they cross each other.”
(Soenen, fieldnotes tram 12, September 28, 2002)

People also want to impress strangers. Macho behaviour is a striking element in the public realm on the tram. Male macho behaviour implies that one looks explicitly at everyone in the tram, especially at women, when entering the new territory. The ‘civil inattention rule’ is deliberately broken. The man behaving like a macho often stands at the back of the tram. He holds the bar in a specific way: always with his hands above his head. If he sits down, it is always crosswise on a chair, so he can keep looking at everyone. He usually sits with his legs apart. When in group, they will never sit next to each other, but on different benches. When getting off the tram, he will not go and wait at the door in advance, but he will get off at the very last moment. Also young women want to impress men.

There are obviously also negative relationships and conflicts between strangers on the tram. The examples often contain small moments or situations of conflict. People are often irritated when taking the tram can’t happen well-organised and when there is a physical disturbance or threat which prevents one to do what one has to do. These small eruptions and irritations don’t seem to be important, but can cause stereotypical images about each other to be confirmed.

Only having attention for the relationships between strangers (like in the American tradition of urban sociology) would deny the complexity of social life on the tram where the private and parochial realm are also present. The public realm is most prominent on the tram, but the parochial and private realm can reconstruct themselves.

The private social realm can be present on certain moments like a bubble in the broader environment of the public realm on the tram. Examples of these relationships in the public realm are the contacts with intimates through mobile phones. Mobile phones are dominantly present in the tram and the telephone conversations are often with intimates. You hear people discuss with their partners, you hear mothers give instructions to their husband or children,...

The telephone conversation can also discuss the public realm on the tram. Through the mobile phone, the private realm enters the public realm. People show themselves and their private lives in the public realm and cross the traditional boundary between private behaviour in private space on the one hand and public behaviour in public space on the other. Another example of the presence of the private realm is the face-to-face contact between parents and children and between couples and friends on the tram.

Also conflicts can occur in the private realm. People don't hesitate to show their private affairs. There are arguments between children and parents, between couples and between friends. Reactions from other passengers are diverse. Some people are irritated, others ignore it and some even burst out in laughter (for them it's a form of sensation).

It is possible to plug in from the private realm on the public realm. One establishes a floating social relationship with the strange other (for example parents through small children), one wants to impress the strange other (for example with regard to the way one raises his children), one shows how one is in private life through having mobile telephone conversations or through parents and children or couples having a fight.

The parochial realm is characterised by a feeling of community between people like neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances. This doesn't involve primary relationships between people, but secondary relationships (or 'weak' ties). On the tram passengers reconstruct the parochial realm when they travel together in small or larger groups with friends, when they travel together with neighbours who are heading in the same direction, or when they travel together with colleagues to work. On the tram, people often sit with people with the same ethnic background. Especially on Friday or Saturday evenings, when people are going out, ethnically homogeneous small groups are creating parochial or private realms on the tram. But the mosaic image of different worlds existing next to each other is representing only one side. There is also inter-ethnic contact, not only ephemeral but also in relationships with acquaintances. We especially, but not exclusively, observed this inter-ethnic contact between youngsters. There are also inter-ethnic contacts between grown-ups who for instance work in the big department stores on the 'Meir' (the central shopping street in Antwerp).

Groups of people who know each other can relate to the unknown other in different ways. Conflicts in the parochial realm of school children (in ethnically mixed groups or not) cause large and real nuisance on specific times of the day. In our observations it are especially school children between 12 and 16 years old on their way home from school, in small or large groups, who disturb things by standing on the doorstep, pulling the alarm bell, knocking on the windows, etc. These moments and situations of conflict are not as frequently present as the irritations about the organisational course of using the tram, but they are very intense. Parochialisation by groups doesn't have to be negative. Groups can also politely avoid the unknown other or establish a floating social relationship with strange others. The conversations of small groups can also cause laughter amongst strange bystanders and create a temporary social atmosphere: "I am waiting for the tram with a number of people, when a small group of Nigerians joins us. Just when they arrive, the tram comes and one of them loudly says in Pidgin English: *"Hallelujah, the tram is already there, this is a miracle, the tram is on time, how is this possible?! We are just 5 minutes here, say Hallelujah!"* He continues for a while and the other people who are waiting smile and some of them start talking." (Soenen, fieldnotes tram 12, 2002)

3.2. The relationships of relationships

Our ethnographic descriptions of everyday life on the tram reject the one-sided image of the tram as a passage where people only ‘rub shoulders with millions of others’ (Augé, 2000). The public realm contains different relationships directed towards avoiding strangers, but also relationships directed towards contact, like brief helping relationships, floating social relationships, negative relationships and relationships in which one wants to impress others. Through ephemeral relationships in public space people express who they are just like in the rest of their lives. We don’t have identities but construct them all the time (Baumann, 1996; Jenkins, 1990). Even though these relationships are ephemeral, they show that we aren’t indifferent to strangers and that there is orientation towards the unknown other. The public realm is therefore a real social realm or in the words of Lofland “*a quintessential social territory*” (1998: 9).

Ephemeral relationships are characterised by “*relational fluidity*” (Lofland, 1998: 59). This means that ephemeral relationships can change from one form into another. An ephemeral contact can evolve into a weak or even strong tie. Contrary to strong and weak ties they also have the possibility to become ephemeral again. They have more transformation options at their disposal. “*As relationships metamorphize from one to another form, there are points in a process in which they are neither one form or another.*” (Lofland, 1998: 60). The moment in processes in which relationships are neither one form nor another is very interesting because it is temporary and will surpass itself. Therefore room is created for new potential, for the future, for a third term. Ephemeral relationships have an ambiguous character and bypass the dichotomies of strong and weak ties, of being and becoming. Instead, they have at their disposal a potentially unlimited number of ways of relational forms. They allow multiple forms.

The everyday life on the tram is a situation of ‘three in one’. The tram forms a home for multiple spheres. But the three relational spheres are in a specific way connected to each other. The public realm forms the décor, the broader frame of the everyday life and is in the tram the world to which one always returns. Routines, avoidance and brief encounters are most of the time the starting points in the relational world on the tram. The public realm is the frame in which the other two realms can manifest themselves and forms the realm to which every time again the everyday life on the tram returns to. The world of ephemeral relationships has a privileged status because it can contain different poles, worlds, fields,... In this world there is at the same time room for avoidance, next to conflict and next to togetherness. Different modes of interaction and interpretations are available. This social life is characterised by a multi-polar relational structure which is not static and carries in it the possibility for transformation. The world of ephemeral relationships has an open structure so there is room for other relational forms. In urban literature (especially the one that is reacting against anti urban sentiments and against the one-sided attention for the parochial realm) however the public realm is often celebrated because it is the only world in which there is room for the other and in which contact is possible with people that are different from ourselves. The presence of the stranger has to be read as the presence of the ‘cultural other’. The strength of the everyday life on the tram however doesn’t lay in the presence of cultural others ‘an sich’. It is the open character of ephemeral contacts and the relationships (specific combination) of the relationships (of the three realms) that are essential. This specific interconnectedness between the different relational spheres creates the strength of the social life on the tram (Soenen, 2006).

4. Diversity and the experience of community

Amit (2002a) states that in anthropological literature there is a tendency away from community as a real social form: *“it has involved a marked shift away from community as an actualized social form to an emphasis on community as an idea or quality of sociality. And this has been associated with a translation of community as collective identity rather than interaction.”* (2002a: 3) Following Amit our reflection on community is directly linked to actualised social relationships. The tram is a kind of in between space where different interpretations, relational options and roles are available. A lot of passengers do not only sit on the tram to go from one place to another but are in the meantime also developing ephemeral relationships or even primary relationships with each other. Spontaneous intercultural interaction (with no guarantee of success) with moments of conflict and community are an integral part of the everyday life on the tram. But what do we mean if we mention ‘moments of community’. We don’t mean thick or total versions of community, the ones that are essential for how we see ourselves and that are more or less constant givens in our experiences (see Hunter, 1974; Eade, et al, 1997). In depth relationships however don’t have a privileged status concerning community issues. We have seen that brief relationships can transform into multiple types of relationships. The result can be a temporarily being together with others. If the tram suddenly stops and people prevent each other not to fall they have a chat. People who don’t know each other start talking when they see something outside the tram like a fight, a local festival or a car accident. These unexpected events, which suddenly arise and which are hard to ignore, make a web of potential contacts visible. At these moments the ‘civil inattention rule’ is broken. A previously invisible string of small talk and small gestures between people comes to the surface. In this way a temporary being together in a group or between different small groups is created. Also small children and dogs give rise to longer conversations. Children are intermediaries for contacts between people from different ages and for inter-ethnic contacts. In these moments people have an experience of community which has nothing to do with the making of a new group of likeminded people, a collective identity. The relational web on the tram has the potential to create a temporary experience of being at ‘home’. More limited relationships between people such as in our case on the tram, can enhance a kind of ‘light’ form of community with others to whom we otherwise would not easily relate.

Taking into account only strong ties, often between equals, leads to more thick and complete versions of community which are oriented toward ‘homogeneity’. Thick versions ignore the importance of contextual and temporary forms of belonging (Amit, 2002b). Looking into the role of weaker ties for community formation brings in more diversity. The parish-like world of neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues, etc. can be central here (e.g. Putnam, 2000 with his notion of bridging). This less thick version is oriented towards ‘recognisability’. Dyck (2002) also questions the necessity of frequent and long-term intense contact for community formation based on his ethnographic research into children’s sports. *“Instead, drawing upon ethnographic evidence, I suggest that relationships of community may be relatively narrowly circumscribed in time and space and decidedly partial or situational in content, and yet salient as means of affiliation. That these relationships may be restricted in range and episodic or even ephemeral in duration does not, however mean that they are lightly felt or inconsequential.”* (2002: 107). Duration doesn’t seem to be the essential marker for the experience of community. Also ephemeral relationships can be a social base for the experience of community. This form of community deals with ‘ambiguity’¹.

¹ The three forms of community towards ‘homogeneity’, ‘recognisability’ and ‘ambiguity’ are presented in Soenen (2006) and are the result of our work for the ‘Task Force on city policy’, Flanders. Based on these three forms of community also a manual with regard to community building was written.

This temporary form of community, and therefore light form of belonging, is situated in a specific time and context. The relationship with the unknown other will end when one leaves the tram. So this being together in a specific context will be disconnected again. Community is a dynamic process of stitch and split. The conversation with the African mother of the child ends when we leave the tram; a chat with the sympathetic driver is not possible today because he has a late shift; being together with colleagues every morning stops when we change jobs; the togetherness with schoolmates on the tram ends when we leave school. These forms of community are inscribed in time and space and therefore always contain an element of disconnection, distance and split (Amit, 2002b). But “ *some of the personal links that arise through those experiences carry on*” as Amit (2002b: 64) states. The possibility that some relationships will carry on is not a priori excluded. “*So this restricted form of belonging can give the possibility to take some personal links with you to another context, to leave others behind, or to renew an even older relationship. Some part of our everyday relationships seems to reflect a continuous succession of ‘mix & match’-processes*” (Soenen, 2003a: 10).

The attractiveness of light community lies in its ambiguous nature. It is ambiguous because this form of community cannot be captured by the division between the same and other, stranger and host, us and them. In this light form of community we are neither the same nor the other. It has nothing to do with an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991) where in the mind of people lives the image of their communion which they express in their everyday lives. They express that they belong to each other and that they are ‘the same’. Through an ephemeral contact the unknown other can be transformed into something more than ‘the other’ but also something less than ‘the same’. It is a shifting form of community that bypasses classic dichotomies.

Too easily community is associated with specific relationships: “*Primary relationships and the social organizational forms they create (families, friendship groups, neighbourhoods, tribes, communities) have been judged to be the best relationships and organizational patterns – the sine qua non, as it were, for the creation of “healthy” children and “healthy adults”.*” (Lofland, 1998: 61) Also certain settings are seen as more favourable for community, as for instance formal social initiatives. To measure only the degree of participation in formal initiatives like clubs and associations with regard to social capital and community spirit (Putnam: 2000 and in Flanders e.g Elchardus, Hooghe and Smits, 1999 and 2000) is not sufficient. This ignores the potential meaning of ephemeral relationships for community life. Community is also associated with certain types of people with specific features (stated in nice round percentages, for instance the percentage of people who daily read a newspaper) that are able to contribute to community. The fact that people every time again relate to each other and what this means for their experience of community or the lack of it, is often not considered thoroughly enough. So community cannot be disconnected from an actual social content even when this is on first sight very superficial, not pure or authentic.

5. Diversity and the social personality of the city

We don’t describe the tram as a ‘non-place’ (Augé, 2000) but as a ‘collective space’ (de Solà-Morales, 1992). Collective spaces are not necessarily public (on the tram you have to buy a ticket) but are experienced and used by people as public space. The tram is an important connecting node where people of different groups encounter each other in random

configurations. So, the ephemeral relationships are not only important to the personal experience of people but the continuous succession of these small interactions contributes to the social atmosphere. An example:

“It is a Wednesday afternoon and school has just finished. We get on a terribly crowded tram: a majority of school children from different ethnic backgrounds between 12 and 16 years old is present. They are very noisy and omnipresent. In a seat at the door there is a Flemish boy with an asymmetric punk haircut. He has got longer locks of hair, also by his ears, (therefore he resembles the orthodox Jews in Antwerp). A Moroccan kid of 14, sitting at the other side of the tram shouts ‘*Juif!*’ (a nick name for Jewish people) at him. A younger Moroccan kid (12 years old) goes to the seat of the Flemish boy and looks at him. The Flemish boy doesn’t say much and tries to avoid him and looks the other way. (...) One of the Flemish boys at the back slaps another Flemish boy against the head, so that his cap falls from his head. Another slap and the cap flies through the open window and falls down in the middle of the street. The boy with the cap jumps up and starts hitting his attacker. He quickly stops and pulls the emergency brake, just as the tram is in the middle of a crossroad near the Antwerp football stadium. (...) We continue and there are still a lot of people getting on. (...) The boy who is being called “*Juif*” still feels intimidated and gets out. He stays at the stop, probably waiting for another tram. The girl who sat behind him doesn’t back off and clearly occupies her territory. She is chewing gum and doesn’t look away from the Moroccan boy.”

Other passengers don’t have to be worried that this violent situation will be directed to them. The youngsters claim the space of the tram. Therefore there is no room for others. Passengers try to avoid eye contact and some elderly people don’t feel at ease. Others sigh and are irritated. It is however interesting to see that a small connection can have a powerful impact on the social atmosphere on the tram. This aggressive atmosphere between youngsters on the tram changes when a Flemish, common looking and extremely talkative woman with a poodle gets on the tram.

“At the next stop, a lot of people get on, amongst whom an older woman dressed in a legging and a red jacket. She’s got a purple scarf on her head, knotted like a peasant’s wife. She’s got a pair of glasses on top of her head and a white poodle with her. While getting in, she quite assertively says: *‘out of the way, I also have to fit in!’*. People look up surprised by this firm action, others deliberately look the other way and try to avoid the event. The woman, however spontaneously starts talking to the Moroccan girls in school uniform. She says there isn’t much space: *‘But that’s normal on Wednesdays, with school and all, that’s normal, isn’t it?’*. The girls friendly nod back. She also starts a conversation with the young fashionably dressed Moroccan woman, who looks back empathically. After a while she suddenly calls out to the young Moroccan who was shouting ‘*Juif*’ all the time: *‘Hey, let me sit down there! I can sit there, can’t I?’* The boy hesitates for a moment and then stands up. She sits down, smiles at everybody and starts talking to the 14-year old Moroccan boy and the younger Moroccan kid. They nod friendly. The passengers (sitting close to her) all smile at each other because the woman is extremely talkative. The teenagers smile at me. (...) In the meantime I have moved towards the front of the tram (...) an elderly woman (..) comes over to my side and says in Antwerp dialect: *“Well, her mouth doesn’t ever stop; I guess she has to keep her lips moving.”* And she mimes like the old woman with the purple scarf. The bystanders smile (...)

The Bolivian woman with child (...) now stands next to the woman with the purple scarf. She cannot help also talking to this woman and asks her whether everything is all right holding a child on her back. The Bolivian woman indicates that she doesn't understand it (she does not understand Dutch). The old woman promptly sticks up her thumb and asks in French "Ca va!? Ça va!?". The Bolivian woman nods and the others start talking about this specific way of carrying a child.
(Soenen, fieldnotes tram 12, April 17, 2002)

The small talk of this chatty woman has an impact on the social climate on the tram. At first it only touches people in the physical neighbourhood of the woman but afterwards the effect of her chit chat spreads itself over the tram in general. There is a change in the situation from aggression to a collective social atmosphere. The aggressive atmosphere has not disappeared through the intervention of an authority figure. The elderly lady is just one of the passengers; she is someone from the system itself and not from the outside. She does not decide what others have to do but through her local interactions with the other passengers there is a kind of transition from one state to another. There is no outside intervention; there are only the passengers who relate to each other which points to an emergent situation.

In mentioning the notion of emergence we have to refer to Jane Jacobs' (1972) 'Death and life of great American cities. Failure of town planning'. In the 1950's and 60's she analysed social life in Brooklyn, NY. The basic insight of Jacobs goes back to the presence of a complex order in the city. The first thing to understand, following Jane Jacobs is that the public peace – the sidewalk and street peace – of cities is not kept primarily by the police. "*It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by people themselves.*" (ibid.: 41). Safety has to do with a constant succession of eyes on the street. So it is important that buildings not turn their back to the street. The sidewalk must have users (strangers to each other) on it continuously (day and night) to add the number of eyes on the street. The presence of terraces where one can play the game of watching people is not only pleasure and fun but also necessary for safety in the city. Our ethnographic data present situations in which several dozens of small interactions are all varying simultaneously and in subtle interconnected ways. "*This order is all composed of movement and change (...) an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations*". (ibid.: 60-61). The trust of a city street is formed by many little public sidewalk contacts. This notion of trust, in contrast to the notion of trust in the social capital theory involves no private commitments at all.

Johnson (2002: 91-100) sees the work of Jane Jacobs as a good example of emergence in the city. He is quoting extensively from her book and writes that "*The real magic of city living comes from below*" (2002: 92). Emergence belongs to another field of study, that of complexity theory and self-organizing systems (for example the world of ants and slime molds). Emergence has to do with bottom-up systems. It's about local interaction that creates a higher collective order. Cities are created "*by the low level-actions of borderline strangers going about their business in public life*" (2002: 92). These small interactions can contribute to the social character of the city, the personality of the city. Johnson points out that Jacobs' work is often misread. Since her book appeared there arose a kind of celebration of sidewalk culture in which the city is seen as a political theatre in which people should be exposed to diversity for their own good. Sidewalks are in this (mis)reading not seen as a self-organizing

system, the reason why Jacobs had embraced the sidewalks in the first place. “*According to the gospel of Death and Life, individuals only benefit indirectly from their sidewalk rituals: better sidewalks make better cities, which in turn improves the lives of the city dwellers. The value of exchange between strangers lies in what it does for the superorganism of the city, not in what it does for the strangers themselves*” (Johnson, 2002: 96, the underlining is mine). Relevant to us is that diversity in the work of Jacobs (1972) is a central notion and Johnson (2002) reminds us about what kind of diversity she is writing. Not the simple actual diversity of discourses, people, etc and not a kind of mosaic of different segments, places, and groups is of relevance. It is all about the complex, nonlinear interconnectedness of local interactions. So, ephemeral relationships seem to be trivial but the continuous succession of these relationships is not banal at all.

6. Conclusion

Studying a collective space like the tram is dealing with ‘unaverage clues’ (Jacobs, 1972). The attention for ‘unaverage clues’ means that ephemeral relationships become an essential part of the analysis. Although the study of ephemeral relationships don’t have a rich tradition in anthropology, anthropologists/ethnographers but also other qualitative researchers seem to be well equipped to be sensitive for small things. Small details and exceptions always have had a special place in qualitative research. We don’t throw them away easily. If details don’t fit in the puzzle of relevant meanings, ethnographers will rethink this cluster and start all over again to gain a better understanding of the everyday life. This is the opposite of traditional quantitative research in which exceptions are dismissed from the beginning and are lost in the process of generalisation.

In this study into ephemeral relationships diversity is a central tenet which had implications for the different stages in the research. In analysing the gathered data it became obvious that the notion of diversity was crucial. Diversity became an instrument in doing fieldwork and at the same time it became a perspective from which to look at social reality and a concept to reflect on. Diversity is not about actual diversity concerning types of people or the presence of different encapsulated groups in the city. Diversity is all about connections. It is a relational matter. It’s about ordinary and common relationships which are important for the personal experiences of passengers on the tram and about the sum of these local connections which create the social personality of the tram, the ‘city on wheels’ (Soenen, 2006).

Everyday life on the tram is like an entire city on the move and what happens in this everyday life on the tram is important for the passengers themselves as well as for the social personality of the city. On the one hand the tram is every time again returning and repeats itself, so it is recognisable and redundant so that we can feel comfortable. On the other hand this repetition involves each time again new layers, combinations and transitions. You never really know what lies on the other end of this transition. There is only one thing you can do, take the tram and find out.

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