DiverCity. Urban perception of sociocultural minority groups

Katharina Lehmann

Department of Cultural Urban Development and Urban planning.
Leuphana University of Lüneburg. Lüneburg, Germany
E-mail: katharinalehmann@gmx.net

Abstract. *The project "DiverCity" consists in an intersectional perspective on urban spatial diversity and examines the urban perception of sociocultural minority groups with an interdisciplinary approach. The topic of peaceful means of coexistence has been a matter of fact since the early beginnings of colonization and urban settlements. But, in spite of social changes, especially in recent times, the debate about social life seems more rooted in politics than in every day's practice. In the meanwhile, various populations create different solutions and concepts of coexistence. These dynamics are in the general interest of the project named "DiverCity". In particular, the project investigates social minority groups and their perception of urban space. This is studied in large and small cities, hereby exemplified in Lüneburg and Hamburg compared to each other. The examined minority groups are Muslims, Disabled, Homeless and Homosexuals. With methods of empirical social research, especially through semi-structured interviews and participating observations, the urban and spatial perception of these groups were examined. This is caused by the the interest of how minorities experience urban life in Germany and which are their main problems to later design solutions form the urban planning point of view. The theoretic background, the motivation of the investigation process and the results of the empirical studies will be presented. In addition, the planned extension of the project in European and Latin-American contexts will be explained.*

Keywords: Urban diversity, interculturality, urban spatial perception, participatory observation.

Introduction

Motivation and objectives

The project ""DiverCity"" deals with an intersectional perspective of urban diversity and explores diverse forms of urban lifeforms with an interdisciplinary approach. This is realized mainly from a cultural, socio-scientific and urban, i.e. urban-planning perspective.

The United Nations estimates that by the year 2050, the number of people living in cities will increase to 70 % of the world's population. This leads directly to the main question of the project:

How can people live together with increasingly diverse life drafts and cultural socialization experiences in a comfortable and peaceful way? The current migration entails a deep diversification of ethnicity, language, nationality, gender relations, age, social status and personal legal positions. The diversity of the past and the one brought by present immigration are meeting each other, cultural traditions are interwoven with young and migrated cultures into a complex system. This evokes the question of how to deal constructively with the current challenges of growing diversity and how different groups of society create and manage the social diversity in their very individual ways of life.

Ultimately, it is a common goal to contribute to a more equitable approach to diversity with the development of new strategies. The origin

of this focus of investigation is based on the realization that most research about space, cities and gender, urban related sociology, migration and diversity are increasingly realized by intersected perspectives. However, so far neither the social space' dimensions of intersectionality have been comprehensively theoretically understood, nor has the analytical linkage of the axial principles of gender/ sexuality, class, ethnicity and body been empirically investigated. The research project "DiverCity" aims to contribute to this objective.

Since the dynamics of social diversification have been little investigated so far, the project contributes to provide exemplary research on social similarities and differences in urban spatial patterns. This is also to be understood as a basis for later following investigations.

State of Research

The coexistence of people of different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and their attitude towards religion and sexual orientation create a remarkable diversity which is particularly relevant for the recent migratory movements and which changes the perception and design of urban spaces. The sociocultural diversity characterizes the atmosphere of urban life like no other. (Bukow 2007, Dieckbreder 2015, Läpple2011) Whether "diversity", "multiculturalism", "globalization" or "integration", all these slogans are objects of numerous research areas, which have the common goal to enable a more peaceful social life (Leibetseder 2008).

The perspective of the young research field of urban perception thereby allows a multi-directional approach that examines perceptual reactions to social and structural urban life (Here, above all, the individual feeling of quality of life is meant. This especially by observing verbal and nonverbal communication as well as individual well-being and unease). In the present case, this is viewed from the perspective of selected sociocultural minorities. The question of how to deal constructively with current challenges of growing diversity is thereby raised. Secondly, the question about which conception

of space values for which minority groups and how the urban space is appropriated individually by them, are fundamental aspects of the project ("Appropriation" here does not mean a commercial possession. It refers to the individual way of getting familiar with the space). They are are integrated in the intention of developing new design strategies for an improved dealing with urban diversity.

Most of the research ultimately has focused mainly on macroperspectively oriented studies aiming on the prevention of discrimination (Gombos 2015; Nii Addy, 2003;

Rottleuthner 2011) or the promotion of integration through political-institutional measures. An example here is marked by the recent research on homeless people (Kokot 2004; Panier, 2006; Blum1996; Girtler 1980; Höhmann 1971) or by the investigations involving the integration of religious groups, mainly islamic (Kermani 2015; Haug 2014; Hafez 1999; Bötticher 2009) or disabled persons (Düber 2015; Cechura 2015) This is valid both in the german and international investigation context.

The gender specific ,spatial appropriation and spatial perception has been mainly adressed by Martina Löw in her basic work on spatial sociology. Later, in collaboration with Ruhne, she specified the positions of the prostitutes in public perception (Löw 2001; Löw, Ruhne 2011).

However, investigations that focus on urban perception and appropriation of space are hardly ever present, and if, only in the philosophical-epistemologically oriented field of cultural-comparative aesthetics. In most of the cases the history of certain places here is explained by observing the cultural backgrounds; later on these contents are transferred to an examination of which perceptions characterize the aesthetic understanding and the formative language of certain cultural groups and how this affects spatial perception.

Some of these contents are integrated in the proyect „"DiverCity"" (Wood 1985; Sieferle, Breuninger 1999; Zukin 1998; Zimmermann 2006; Schoon 2007; Gibson 1973). Nevertheless none of them offers an empirically oriented approach to cultural perception of spaces or even urban spaces.

Even though the research on gender, space and city, that has developed itself out of feministic criticism of anderocentric urban planning (FOPA), has ultimately been broadly developed (Dörhöfer, Terlinden 1985; Becker 1991; Bauhardt, Becker 1997; Frank 2004), the results generated are still little reviewed (Bauriedl 2013) in the mainstream of urban research and urban sociology. Correspondingly, the perspective on gender relations is very marginal also in studies on the effects of increasing social diversity and differentiation. To a certain amount, these research objects are investigated in research about intersectional percpectives on urban diversity studies. However, so far neither the social space dimensions of the intersectionality concept have been comprehensively theoretically investigated, nor has the analytical linkage of the axial principles sex/sexuality, class, ethnicity and body with the category of space empirically been profoundedly examined (ibid.).

For example, there is little knowledge about how spaces of uncertainty and anxiety in cities, which do also exist form the point of view of a gender perspective (Ruhne 2011), are changing under the conditions of increasing social diversity and differentiation.

And what ist the situation of diversity in coherence with urban planning parctices? The design of public spaces, in particular of squares, is mostly done by planners, sometimes also in participatory procedures with citizens. (Burckhardt 2004; Reicher, Kemme 2009; Selle 1996) In practice, however, these procedures are not shared by all groups of social diversity (Terlinden 1990). Next to that, the approach of participation in design questions does not always lead to solutions which are perceived as aesthetically sustainable.

William H. Whyte's deals with the design of public spaces in his work published in 1980. On the basis of numerous comparative field studies, he compiles a design catalogue for planners, but does not explicitly take into account the different needs due to social diversity. Yet, in his numerous publications, Jan Gehl ocusses on the quality of life of urban spaces for people, however also without entering into the different groups of social diversity also without recording their definitions of quality of life (Whyte 1980; Gehl 2006).

However, in order to urban areas meeting the needs of increasing sociocultural diversity in nowadays' societies, the knowledge and the response to the functional and aesthetic needs of all social groups, especially of social groups that so far not have been taken into consideration, is of significant importance. This is a fact mainly based on the reason that urban spaces are not only functional spaces, but also places of social identification that have a semiotic level (Sieverts 1999; Schubert 2005). Yet this can be very different for the respective actors. In order for places to be accepted on a wide range, they must address as many users as possible; they should offer a welcomming atmosphere, promote communication, and, ideally, offer space for further developments as well as of the city itself than within aspects of integration and inclusion. Places define themselves through an emancipatory potential of cities, which can enable spatial participation and social inclusion at the same time (Mitchell 2003) .

With the interdisciplinary approach, the project "DiverCity" offers the possibility to find answers far beyond the purely functional aspects of the planning. By analyzing the perceptions and usage forms at different levels (perception of individuals, theory, function, design), it offers highly diverse solutions for future urban spaces.

The motivation for the research perpective of the project „"DiverCity"" is originally based on the concept of the "Spatial Turn" (Bachmann-Medick 2009; Belina, Michel 2008; Döring, Thielmann 2008), which defines the "space" as a physical-geographic area that is a result of social relations and gendered minting. This type of definition of the space is especially important for the experience of urban spaces, as it shows that the functionality of the space is dependent on the communication and relationship quality that it produces and vice versa.

So the overall perspective of the research project is based on the idea that the urban space is a result of interhuman relationships. Hence the built urban structures should to follow the necessities of the individuals as built spaces, in

particular urban spaces, stimulate and interact with behaviour of the individuals living in it in a specific way and always based on mutual interactions (Richter 2004).

Objectives and linkages to theoretical base

The project "DiverCity" locates itself in the context of sociologic and gender research on the relationship between power and inequality in urban public spaces. („Space" here ist not only understood as geographical category, but as a place, where persons and cultures interact with the physic-materialistic part of places and thereby represent it in a symbolic-discursive way). This is based on the backgrounding question of how increasing social diversity in central urban districts can shape and overcome the challenges of social integration and stimulate a fair participation in urban life. The project therefore aims on capturing qualitatively and intersectionally the perception of space by members of minority groups, it examines the appropriation practices by the users, it observes their ways of empowerment, polarization and exclusion, all exemplified in the cities of Lüneburg and Hamburg. It furthermore asks for the interactions between the categories of social action, of the symbolic-representative and of the material-physic, all being parts of the urban public spaces.

The concept is based on the usual assumption in urban sociology that space is symbolically charged. Gender-based relations of power play an importat part in every spatial constellation. They are reflected in spatial design and production and also in the perception and appropriation and utilization of spaces. The relations of power are inscribed in the physical structures of spaces, as well as in their symbolism and discursive representation, manifesting and materializing themselves in the social interactions of the active individuals. Urban structures thus offer and limit possibilities of appropriation of urban space, as well as offering and limiting possibilities of designing. All in all, they reflect gender relations and represent sexual identity. These concepts are an important base for the overall projetc's design and it's objectives.

Main Questions of Investigation

The central interest of the project lies in the exploration of the perceptions of urban space by minority groups mentioned in the following. The ways of individual appropriation of space as well as facilitations and obstacles of their individual lifes outline the main interest of the investigations as these aspects reflect the applied reality of diversity in urban settings. I.e., the subjective assessments offer an empirical data basis on how diversity is recently handled in urban spaces and which dynamics are shaping the minoritie´s perceptions.

Within the project, the urban perception of the following four minority groups were examined:
1. Muslims
2. Homeless
3. Disabled
4. Homosexuals

The aim of the project is to identify the perception of urban space by the minorities. It so provides an innovative and, at the same time, fundamental contribution to the current debate on intercultural urban perception research and helps to find out how to deal with globally increasing diversity.

Methodology

The project methodically uses diverse ways: it captures, observes, and visualises situations and interactions in an innovative and qualitatively social-empirical way and develops design strategies. Therefore, it defines concrete spatial planning approaches based on interdisciplinary cooperation and it provides the development of new theories.

The basic methodological structure of the entire project is inductive and allows discovering new and unexpected dimensions and results. This is different from large numbers of deductively oriented studies, which merely check existing theories by means of hypothesis tests. Taking into account already existing results, it is fundamentally necessary to systematically develop new theoretical perspectives based on empiricism and not only vice versa, as it is done in so many examples.

The empirical methodology of the project reflects the inductive character of the overall conception. It develops itself through a methodical process outlined in the following five steps:

1. Collection of existing theoretical data, 2. dialogical survey procedures (eg interviews), 3. Observations (participatory / non-participatory), 4. Evaluation and 5. Theoretic synthesis and 6. Development of new theories.

In this article, mainly the results of the empiric investigations will be outlined as this ist the recent phase of the project that has been realized since the 2014 in the cities of Hamburg (1.814 597 inhabitants) (www.hansestadtlueneburg.de/Home-Hansestadt-Lueneburg/Stadt-und-Politik/Rathaus/Zahlen-Daten-Fakten.aspx) and Lüneburg 76.449 inhabitants, (ibid.), compared to each other.

Both cities are situated in northern Germany at a distance of 50 kilometres from each other. The University of Lüneburg and the university of Hamburg work in cooperation, offering the empirical part of the research project as a seminary class for bachelor and master students of urban planning (Hamburg) and building culture (Lüneburg).

The empirical investigations were made throughout semi-structured interviews and participating observations by several groups of students who realized their participation in the project by a seminar which lasted for 6 months (4 hours weekly, plus workload for homework (3hrs weekly), plus empirical examinations at compact classes on weekends).

The groups (25 persons each semester, starting in October 2014, running until now) were taught the theoretical basements of the project and realized a profound study of the minority groups; later on the interviews and participations were carried out by groups of 4 students each.

The interviews were all semi-structured, lasted 45-60 minutes, accomplished with 6 members of each minority group in single interview-situations (1 interviewed person, 1 interviewers, 2 protocollants, all video-recorded) and evaluated by qualitative content analysis.

The participating obervations were realized by two persons in the situation of particpating

observation and two observers observing the persons who were in the role of a minority member. By that, observations from the inside experience as well as from the outisde perpectives were assured. Each group observed during 8 days (12 hours each), passing through a structured itinerary in Hamburg and Lüneburg. Every itinerary concisted in 20 situations/places, e.g. „riding a bus", „go to a shopping center", „eat and drink in a café", etc. and each observation process was documented in a structured protocol. The results were evalutaed by a qualitative analysis of the contents.

Results

The project has been running since October 2014 as at the University of Lüneburg as at the Hafen City University in Hamburg. The results were compared to each other in order to exemplary determine differences between big and small cities in Germany. All results are transferred to the equality officers of both cities, so every result is taken into consideration by the corresponding urban planning committees.

In the following, the results of the empirical investigations will be explained in short summaries:

The first remarkably result in all studied minority groups (1. Muslims, 2. Disabled, 3.Homeless, 4.Homosexuals), lies in the fact, that genereally the recent individual urban perception is heavily influenced by experiences of discrimination. This does strongly influence the appropriation of urban spaces in every individual's sense. As especially in the exemplified cities of Lüneburg and Hamburg in Germany a good integration state has generally been assumed before realizing the investigations, the results, to various extents, are fairly surprising.

Whether "island formation", i.e. the formation of culturally or socially shaped, isolated accumulations of certain minority groups, or individual coping strategies such as delimitation, resignation, acceptance of detours, extended waiting times, or rejection - all this has become apparent in the numerous study sets.

In the following, the individual results from

the four examined groups will be presented:

1) Muslims:

For the muslim minority group, the results of the investigation were particularly significant: Discriminatory gazes and disgusting comments occurred with great frequency during all the participating observations.

Even in the semi-structured interviews, the image of lack of integration had subsided, many muslims reported that they were marginalized and not taken for serious. Constant connection with terrorist interpretations continued to be a major factor affecting members of the muslim minority in Germany.

Muslim-dressed (wearing burkay with face covering) test persons were often asked to immediately leave from semi-public places like shopping centers or shops in the central parts of the cities of Lüneburg and Hamburg. In Hamburg was happening slightly more often than in Lüneburg, but also in Lüneburg, in most of the participating observations, muslim women were rejected in shops, did not receive help by the staff or were simply ignored.

However, in shops, at some level service professionalism could be registered: muslim women noticed significantly fewer negative comments than in public spaces or in means of public transport. Especially in buses in Lüneburg and Hamburg, comments about wearing a burka and covering the face happened every few seconds. Very often strongly negative looks on the groups of women could be registered. Respectful reactions also happened, but stayed very rarely. The persons who passed through the participating observations mostly mentioned the psychic exhaustion they felt, being confronted to that amounts of discrimination during various days. Hearing negative comments, receiving severe looks all the time and constantly hear that they would be opressed women made it very difficult to endure the observations.

2) Disabled:

The group of people with disabilities (examined as wheelchair using persons, blind and deaf persons) mainly showed experiences with reflected their limitations in everyday's urban life. The interviews in generally outlined problems with urban and infrastructural structures, in most of the cases a lack of

wheelchair accessible train stations, shops or gastronomic offers. This also became apparent during the participating observations. First of all, physical exertion and fatigue became was higly noticeable, as well as increased expenditure of time in coping with everyday activities. Numerous subway stations e.g. are not wheelchair-accessible in Hamburg and require renovations.

The physical and psychological requirements of power, which are highly necessary for coping with everyday life, marked a highly noticeable factor.

Furthermore, it became apparent how people with disabilities suffer from the impossibility to communicate on the same level with non-disabled people, due to the simple fact that throughout their sitting position thereare physically lower than others and therefore do not participate on an equal level in social life. This, also confirmed through the interviews is remarkable point of perception of urban life of the disabled. Similar results happened for blind and deaf persons.

Although the willingness to help of non-disabled citizens could be noticed several times, many distant views and behaviors were to be registered. The constant rejection affect people with disabilities psychologically very hard and costs a lot of personal power and energy. As in the case of the muslim group, the question of how to develop and change urban structures that would improve the communication between disabled and non disabled became prominent.

3) Homeless

Similar results apply to the "homeless" minority group. By their outer appearance, which in most of the cases is not well maintained, the persons belonging to the minority find themselves confronted to strong discrimination and are socially excluded.

In the interviews, e.g., it became clear that the facilities offered for overnight stays from the city of Hamburg during the winter months, are insufficient. The homeless shelters are not frequently used by the minority members, since conflict situations among the users prevail in a way here, that makes staying at the accommodations almost unacceptable for most of the interviewed persons. The city of

Hamburg does not offer anything to handle these conflict situations, e.g. by social workers or psychologists. So a lot of homeless decide to stay outside, for example under bridges.

But as the city of Hamburg doesn+´t apreciate these persons here, watercourses and artificial, large stones were installed. This makes the physical and psychical situation of the minority group much more difficult and increase their perception of not being welcomed in the city.

Social-integrative measures such as streetworking (social workers who offer support for homeless people living on the streets are called „Streetworkers" in Germany) alleviate the situation in a deliberate manner, but hardly really contribute to an improved subjective sense of integration for the individuals.

The participating observations made this evident: the experience of exclusion was dominant in all gathered results, hopelessness and lack of perspective had to be registered in every participating observation situation. Furthermore, a lack of communication between the needs of the city of Hamburg and the minority members was predominant. In Lüneburg, however, the situation in comparison to Hamburg was better: the city offers a place for the homeless to stay, people living on the streets couldn´t be found. Anyway, the interviewed persons in Hamburg did not wanted to change their places as in Hamburg as they felt less visible in Hamburg than in a small city like Lüneburg.

4) Homosexuals

The group of homosexuals made the most positive experiences within the four groups of comparison. It became clear that there is a lot of openness prevalent in Germany. Especially in the urban surroundings of Hamburg, openness and friendliness until partial admiration and curiosity about homosexual couples is dominant.

In the interviews, however, it became clear that the persons who are homosexual passed through a very hard process until they decided to do their comming out. This reflects, that there are still high borders and a long way to go, until homosexuality is profoundedly accepted. A lesbian couple e.g. told, that they do find it hard to openly show and live their homosexuality, as intense looks and a lot of negative clichees are still part of their everyday's life experiences in urban surrounding. Laughter, diminuision, not being taken in serious are experiences which are predominant in the examined cities. In Hamburg less atention could be noticed in the participating observations, but surprised reactions e.g. in the situation when two women asked for marriage rings, were always noticeable.

Here, like in the other three examined minority groups, the city offers very less information or events to better integrate the minority and improve the perception of the city.

Same-sex couples or singles felt left alone, as the consulting services are mostly for persons in the phase of their comming out; later on there are some gastronomic offers, who do create a space, but not really integrate the minority, so their refelcted impression from the interviews. Homosexuals would feel better, if measures of integration would be improved by increased education of the society. What can be done from th epart of urban design is still in process of the project, nevertheless first models like same-sex traffic light figueres already exist and are well perceived as from the minority group as from non-minority group members.

Conclusion

Remarkable for all studied minority groups were the differences between Hamburg and Lüneburg. It could be detected that the individual urban and spatial perception of the minority groups are not corresponding tot he amount and tot he character of established integration measures. Nevertheless, there is a lot already done for the minority groups, as well as in urban design than als from a sociocultural point of view. But, all that has been described in the introduction part, i.e. that institutional measures made on the base of political decisions, seems to be true: the real needs of the individuals themselves are not sufficiently heard and put into practice. The communication with the minority groups is still very less developed, an intensification of investigations that are realized empirically and are based on peoples experiences is a strong need for further examinations.

To improve urban design planning and to better meet the individual needs of the users, it is essentially important to increase urban planning solutions, that increase communication, dialogue and interactivity between the future users. Built structures that bring people into contact with one another, that reduces fears of comunnication and offer possibilieties to easier get to talk to someone and help to develop closeness to other people would significantly help to improve the minorities' perception of urban surroundings.

How can architecture and urban planning help to intensify communication among people, especially between different sociocultural groups? Developing solutions for exactly this taks will be a mission for future forms of highly diverse and at the same time peaceful urban living. It is also a part oft he „"DiverCity""" project which still is in progress.

The discipline of architectural psychology has started to develop first models and solutions meeting these issues within the last decade. However, to better support the practical part of planning processes, there is an urgent need of further interdisciplinary investigations about diversity in urban life forms.

This defines the reason why the project "DiverCity" intends to expand to other regions worldwide, for hence being able to compare the worldwide dealing with diversity.

It also reflects the importance of empiric based investigations: they allow to get results and develop questions and new theories, which from a barely discursive analysis of history and theory could not offer the same, wide range of results.

As a first step, the project will be realized in Argentina, as with it´s history of immigration, there is a lot of century-long experience of dealing with a highly diverse population. The comparison of a small and big city as basic structure will be repeated, as well as the overall "DiverCity"' project design. It ist the aim for the future to expand the project globally and develop knowledge and strategies to get along with diversity in a better way and, on the practical side, to develop corresponding urban design solutions.

As a summarized result of the realized empiric investigations, it can be assumed that built structures like wheelchair accessible infrastructure or centers of consideration and help are a good base, but the real need is defined through a strong requirement of interaction between minority group members and non-minority group members.

Structures that facilitate communication can be observed in various examples, like playgrounds for adults or sport's places in urban surroundings. However, concepts that specially meet the requierements of minorities, such as physically handicapped persons, homeless or religious groups that suffer a lack of integration as well as homosexual or other sexual groups, are rarely existent. It is one of the main objects of the process of the project „"DiverCity""" to design and plan solutions meeting especially these urgent needs.

Technical innovations such as wheelchairs, that allow standing positions and by that enable disabled persons to communicate with noin-disabled on the same physically level, is an example. But there are to develop especially urban strutures that increase the self-esteem of minority members and lead non-minority persons to a better understanding of the society they are living in.

Secondly, education in school and media and cross cultural/sociocultural events that increase communication and contact can aso be defined as urgently to be increased measures. Of course there are exitsing numerous initiatives yet, especially in the media world; so the actual challenge here would be to overcome the separation between the digital and physical world and to bring theories in to active realization. The improvement of that bridging processes is also a future mandate; an assignment also to be carried out by interdisciplinary research and also trandsdisciplinary investigations processes.

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