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Young people: being apart, together in an urban park

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of studies that report on urban park spaces as supporting inclusive city life and promoting tolerance and belonging, the present study investigated the spatial dimensions of gathering and othering in Wilhelminapark, Utrecht, the Netherlands. Using observational research and on-site group interviews, we found a diversity of users performing a diversity of activities. The presence of known or unknown visitors was given as an important reason to visit Wilhelminapark, although our results show that there is little interaction between different groups of users. The latter aligns with a critical strand of literature that suggests that co-presence does not necessarily result in meaningful contact between the users of public spaces. Young people tend to socialize or relax with their own group, which makes park visits mostly an in-group activity. At the same time, being together with other visitors is an important element in the attractiveness of this park space.

KEYWORDS

Public space; park; youth; encounters; Wilhelminapark

Introduction

In recent decades, scholarly research on parks and other urban green spaces has flourished, covering topics such as use, social wellbeing, physical activity and leisure (van den Berg et al. 2010; Peters 2010; Peters, Elands, and Buijs 2010; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; Krekel, Kolbe and Wüstemann 2016). Urban parks have provided important recreational spaces for citizens and have been considered important gathering places in the city since the end of the 18th century (e.g. Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005; Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris 2009; Peters 2010). For young people, parks and public spaces provide settings for socializing and “hanging out” with peers (e.g. van Lieshout and Aarts 2008; Tani 2015), and have been described as an alternative to the private home environment where there is adult supervision and control (Lieberg 1997). Furthermore, snacking in the park with your friends on summer evenings seems to be a popular alternative to the use of commercial leisure spaces. Whereas adults can withdraw to the comfort of their homes, pubs and clubs, teenagers have no obvious rights to these places (e.g. Matthews et al. 2000). As such, urban parks can be considered important places in the social lives of youth where they can socialize with peers in a relaxed setting (Cele 2013).

Several studies on urban parks also suggest that these public spaces provide many opportunities to observe and to encounter unknown others from different social and

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cultural backgrounds. It is sometimes suggested that facing “otherness” in shared spaces may support inclusive city life and is important in promoting tolerance and belonging (Kuo et al. 1998; Peters 2010; Peters, Elands, and Buijs 2010). Recently, however, scholars have also started to question this presumption, suggesting that “contact with ‘others’ [does not] necessarily translate into respect for difference” (Valentine 2008, 325), which would be “meaningful” contact.

Along this line of reasoning, studies report that while groups may come together, visit and observe one another in public spaces, this does not necessarily result in interpersonal understanding, actual mixing or meaningful exchange (e.g. Valentine 2008; Askins and Pain 2011). Indeed, Holland et al. (2007) show that the frequenting of places by many different groups does not necessarily result in contact between these groups. In fact, encounters with otherness might also spark defensiveness, for example young people claiming public spaces as their own and “carving out their own territory” (Valentine 2008, 326). The latter also intersects with major changes in urban public spaces, such as their increasing privatization (e.g. Low and Smith 2006), the creation of exclusive enclaves (Madanipour 1999), gentrification (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014) and increased public demands for policing and surveillance – due to feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety, which are characteristic of late modern societies (Loader 1997; Jones and Newburn 2006) – which could affect young people’s ways of using everyday urban environments, like parks (Tani 2015).

Against this background, the current study critically explores the role of an urban park in Utrecht (the Netherlands) in the gathering, intermingling and interacting of groups of teenagers and adolescents. Our research foregrounds the spatial dimensions of “gathering and othering” using observational research supplemented by on-site (i.e. park) group interviewing. From a third-person external perspective (Madanipour 1999), we focused on the spatial variety in terms of people and activities; from the subjective first-person point of view, we discussed with our respondents the use of the park and interactions between people, practices and particular park places. More specifically, we reflect on how groups of teenagers and adolescents use the park, how they select their own place, and the extent to which they mingle and interact with other people.

We focus on a park for two main reasons. Low, Taplin and Scheld (2005, 4) state that, considering the more general erosion of public spaces in cities, parks may be “the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people of different gender, class, culture, nationality, and ethnicity intermingle peacefully.” Furthermore, these public places play an important role in facilitating leisure activities and, in a more general sense, promoting social sustainability. As L’Aoustet and Griffet (2004, 173) state, “[p]eople’s experiences and interactions in a public park create ties between them.” The social dynamics taking place in urban parks (e.g. Cele 2013; Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005; Neal et al. 2015; Shaftoe 2008) may result in a space where different people, activities and behaviours harmonize in a particular and particularly social, inclusive and convivial manner. At the same time, the major changes described above make urban public spaces “contested” spaces. Although city parks do not necessarily reflect these general tendencies, they cannot be understood as isolated spaces. Below we shall first turn to and address these wider politics and processes in urban (public) spaces.

Theoretical framework

Privatization and commodification of public spaces

Public space is the space of the public (Mitchell 2003); it is characterized by free access for everyone. This shared ownership and co-presence has traditionally been what differentiates between the public and the private. Public space is conceptualized as inclusionary – as places where people from all backgrounds can meet, as sites of interaction and encounters with strangers, for displaying identities and “celebrating diversity and differences” (Young 1990; Mitchell 2003; Valentine 2008). Critics have argued that the ideology of public space is problematic, and the exclusion of specific groups from different urban spaces remains a struggle (e.g. Mitchell 2017); throughout history, public spaces have been spaces from which women, the homeless and people of colour have been disproportionately excluded and displaced (Toolis 2017; Massey 2005). Even when everyone is free to enter a square, street or park, signs and cues may signal that some particular groups do not feel very safe or welcome (Madanipour 2011).

Since de-industrialization, cities have turned their attention towards consumption in order to regenerate inner-city areas and to give local economies a boost (e.g. Bianchini and Parkinson 1993; Hannigan 1998). In the arena of international urban competitiveness, cities try to raise their profile by constructing new shopping streets and pavement cafes, hosting festivals, and allowing food trucks to operate in public squares and parks. This increased commodification of spaces often leads to processes of social inequality and the exclusion of certain groups. People may be hesitant to enter a street lined with upmarket shops because they lack the resources needed to participate in the activities (Madanipour 2011, 191). Free access to public spaces is increasingly threatened by privatization and commercialization (e.g. Mitchell 2017). Staging events in public parks, for example, can promote cities but also restrict access for residents and daily users. Research by Smith (2014) shows the impacts of the Olympic Games on Greenwich Park in London, where advocates claimed that organizers would only “borrow the park” to share it with the world.

With the rise of the consumer city, public spaces become increasingly homogeneous in terms of visitors. The familiarity and encounters with “others” decreases, whereby strangers are sometimes seen as a “problem” (e.g. Koch and Latham 2012). Whilst stimulated for economic reasons, public spaces are kept under increasingly tight control and surveillance in an attempt to mitigate real and imagined excesses (Brands, Schwanen, and van Aalst 2015). Certain groups (most notably homeless people and youths) do not fit into the narrative of the urban renaissance, where city centres are imagined as bustling and safe places. Youths “hanging out” are generally viewed as “others” and must fight for their right to be included in public space (Malone 2002).

In/out of place

Young people lack their own private spaces and are thus routinely found in public spaces such as parks (e.g. Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris 2009; Neal et al. 2015). Using and interacting with others in these spaces affords opportunities to make places of their own (Lofland 1973; Iveson 2007). Uses often conform to some sense of what is appropriate in a particular place (van Aalst and Nortier 2018), which leads to the construction of

normative places where it is possible to be either “in place” or “out of place,” in terms of Cresswell (2015). Particular places have their own norms that govern or regulate behaviour (based on common sense) (ibid), for example how to move through a busy square, how to dress when visiting a park or how to avoid physical contact. Practices and people that are labelled out of place are said to have crossed often invisible boundaries that define what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in that particular place (Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012). This also means that what is considered inappropriate in one particular place may be accepted in another. The concepts of right and wrong are therefore transmitted through space and place, creating a normative landscape that can exclude “other” users or uses.

Human activities and behaviours are thus guided by unwritten rules (e.g. Goffman 1963) about what is appropriate or inappropriate. People are often unaware of these norms until they transgress them or are confronted over them. The invisibility and taken-for-granted-ness of such social norms are partly based on the ways in which different social groups have different interpretations of what is appropriate (Nolan 2003). The above mechanisms can explain why, for instance, “teenagers and adolescents hanging around are considered a threat; they are ‘the others’ with whom many adults are unable to identify” (van Aalst and Nortier 2018, 74). At the same time, one group is usually in a dominant position to dictate which people and behaviours are deviant. As in the quote above, it is the teenagers and adolescents who are considered out of place, and as a result they may sometimes be removed from particular city spaces (e.g. Nolan 2003).

The concepts of “in place” and “out of place” can be useful to reflect on urban parks’ ability to support social interaction and inclusive city life, tolerance and belonging. That is, drawing on the literature, urban parks may be understood as spatial configurations where many different people and practices are “in place” with one another, and where visitors do not express strong beliefs about particular people and activities being “out of place.”

Loose/tight space

Common and accepted behaviour also depends on the design and function of place, and behavioural practices can be limited by the affordances of particular material structures (e.g. Tani 2015). So-called tight spaces can be regarded as functional in cities: all users follow the rules and the space works as intended. For example, when cyclists use the bicycle paths, pedestrians the pavements and cars the streets, traffic can run smoothly. When people in parks use the benches for gathering etc., activities can take place alongside the original uses of the space or at locations that either have lost their original function or never had one (Franck and Stevens 2006, 2). It is a dynamic process. Sometimes unplanned actions happen; for example street musicians play or vendors hawk their goods. When tolerated, space becomes looser. People’s activities and actions make places looser. And the physical structure and location of some places make them “looser” than others.

At the same time, the physical structure specific to many urban spaces can be assessed in terms of the possibilities they provide for youngsters to remain “backstage” or to go “on stage” (Matthews et al. 2000). “On stage” means that they can see and be seen by other young people. Grassy areas, which feature in many urban parks, may for instance be considered physical configurations that enable youngsters to sit amongst others and

therefore be on stage. At the same time, parks often include trees and shrubbery, which provide ample opportunity to remain more backstage. Remaining backstage might be preferred by youngsters who really want their own space where they can socialize and be together with their peers, while keeping away from the adult gaze (e.g. Cele 2013). In addition, Kato (2009) shows that teenagers make themselves “invisible” as a strategy to avoid conflict with other people present in the same space.

Spatial differentiation

The above implies that, when studying processes of gathering and othering in urban parks, we should take into account social differences between places in the park. At the same time, spatial differences and the comparison of places are central to Cresswell's (2015) concepts of in place and out of place. Interestingly, research also suggests that the scale at which we look at a particular place or particular places might be important.

Based on interviews with seaside visitors in South Africa, Dixon and Durrheim (2003) distinguish different territorial levels in organizing gathering and othering at the beach: the most intimate sphere is the micro-territory level or “umbrella space”: “[t]hese territorial preserves are typically marked by personal possessions and act as semi-permanent regions in which activities such as eating, sleeping, talking, sitting and sunbathing can take place” (10). In addition to their role in organizing personal contact within a group, these umbrella spaces serve as a means to preserve boundaries and distance between groups of strangers on the beach. Furthermore, the researchers report broader levels/patterns of occupancy where (racial) groups position themselves at places in specific spatial areas. This means that this beach as a whole can be considered a place that is used by a variety of users. However, when studying the beach at a smaller spatial scale, it is also fairly homogeneous in terms of visitor population. At an even smaller scale, we see that people who are generally considered to be in place may be rendered out of place when unwritten rules and conventions about keeping distance between umbrella spaces are violated. Ideas about “who belongs” in a specific part of the beach are socially produced, negotiated and contested. Dixon and Durrheim (2003) observed that white users continued to label black visitors as out of place even though the beach was no longer segregated and apartheid had been abolished nine years previously. The findings of Dixon and Durrheim (2003) imply that studying places at multiple scales may help to uncover underlying homogeneity. Although our research context is different (an urban park, in Utrecht, The Netherlands), we apply Dixon and Durrheim's approach to investigate sociocultural and demographic diversity such as life-style, age and migration background.

Research context and design

Introducing Wilhelminapark

Wilhelminapark is a park in Utrecht, which is a historic Dutch city with almost 350,000 inhabitants and the fourth largest municipality in the Netherlands. Because of the presence of a large university, Utrecht has a young population: 33% of the inhabitants are younger than 25 years (Gemeente Utrecht 2018). The city is expanding and currently undergoing major redevelopments in the inner city. The reconstruction of the Central

station area and shopping mall Hoog Catharijne takes place in close collaboration with private stakeholders, including the Dutch Rail and Klepierre, who is the owner of the mall (CU2030.nl). Most important goal of the redevelopment schema is to create an attractive, accessible, lively and healthy city for residents, visitors and businesses. Investments in public amenities, squares and parks are also part of the revitalisation. In order to guarantee liveability and safety, surveillance has been increased in public spaces and urban squares. Moreover, playgrounds and alleys are closed off in the evening, some parks are protected with camera surveillance and the presence of security guards (DUIC 2019). These processes take place to a much lesser extent in the Wilhelminapark, which remains an accessible place for a wide variety of people on different times of the day.

Wilhelminapark (Map 1) is located in the eastern, fairly affluent part of Utrecht. It is one of the city's 14 larger urban parks and natural estates, as is highlighted on the Utrecht municipal website.¹ By international standards, however, the 10-hectare² park is relatively small (see e.g. Low, Taplin, and Scheld (2005) for a discussion about American urban parks). The park, which was named after Queen Wilhelmina (1890–1948), was designed by Henri Copijn, who was inspired by English landscape gardens, which are characterized by their asymmetrical design, embodied in its footpaths, ponds, playgrounds and hills, as well as in the differentiation in terms of vegetation, trees and garden ornaments. The park was officially opened in 1898.

Wilhelminapark is a popular city park. A wide pedestrian promenade runs from north to south, where there is a large sunbathing area. In the middle of the park is a pond, complete with fountain. The high-end Pavilion restaurant, a children's playground and a statue of Queen Wilhelmina are located near the pond.

Research instruments and participants

Our findings are based on observational research (March–April 2014) and 17 on-site interviews (May–June 2014) with groups of 3–8 teenagers and adolescents (about 16–25 years), which also included a mapping exercise to differentiate between visitors and activities. Furthermore, the maps were used to enrich the participants' narratives during the interviews and to establish links between their own positions and those of other youngsters. To concretize the link with a particular location, we only interviewed groups that lingered in rather than passed through a particular location in the park. The on-site group interviews were designed to last around 20 minutes, so as not to interfere too much with the visitors' activities. Most groups were very willing to participate (only one refused to be interviewed).

Our final sample of 17 group interviews consisted of seven groups of three, eight groups of four, one group of five and one group of seven. To maximize diversity, we chose to approach or not approach a group of young people based on their appearance. It is clear that such a method is flawed, if not somewhat superficial, because the identity of persons and groups is difficult to read from the outside. Nonetheless, we believe that with this approach, on-site interviews remained spontaneous, casual and open, which they would not have been had we asked respondents in advance about their sociocultural and demographic characteristics. The interviewed groups were mixed in terms of gender (four all female, five all male, eight mixed) and ethnic background (four heterogeneous, 13 homogeneous). The selection of groups also took into account their clothing, hairstyles, drinking and smoking activities, and whether they were sitting/

lying on benches or blankets. We believe that the chosen method ensured that we spoke with many different people and learned many different perspectives on the topics we were interested in.

Before each interview, we obtained verbal informed consent to record the conversation. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo (a computer software package). In our results section, notes drawn from our observational research are indicated by “[observations],” and quotes drawn from our interviews are indicated by “[interview 1–17].” In the interview quotes, “P” indicates words spoken by the visitors/participants, and “R” indicates words spoken by the researchers.

Results

Observations

Wilhelminapark is usually crowded. In spring and summer, large numbers of young people meet in the park after school and in the early evening. It is mainly narrated as a social space. A variety of facilities, such as supermarkets and cafes, are within walking distance of the park. The only permanent facility in the park itself is the high-end restaurant. While few activities are planned in advance in terms of amenities, infrastructure, and rules and regulations, the park hosts a variety of activities and attracts a varied population. The user composition also varies over the course of the day. We observed that families with small children tended to head home at around six o'clock, which is roughly the time that many young visitors arrived, many with food for impromptu picnics. “There’s a lot of barbecuing. Throughout the park there are plumes of smoke from the fires and you smell it everywhere.” [observations].

During the day, we also saw a gradual movement in terms of place picking following the path of the sun. This movement was most prominent on the big lawn in the southernmost part of the park. The eastern part of the park is the last part to see the sun in the evening (see [Figure 1](#)), resulting in a crowded space near the edge of the pond: “It is super crowded around this time. (...) Everyone is very close to each other at the edge of the pond.” [observations] We also observed that places in the shade were more frequently picked by parents with children.

Clear spatial differences were also evident. In terms of assembling, especially the big lawn ([Figure 2](#)) and the area by the pond ([Figure 1](#)) were much more crowded than other parts of the park. In terms of activities, people in the park tend to be preoccupied with “sitting and chatting and [often] drinking a beer.” [observations] The other activities we observed include people-watching, relaxing, eating and sometimes reading or playing football and/or engaging in other sporting activities. A marked difference is that in the most crowded parts of the park, the vast majority of users tended to sit on the ground, often on blankets they had brought with them. In other areas, the benches that can be found throughout the park alongside the footpaths were used more frequently, especially by older users, parents with prams and youths with their scooters.

Why do people visit Wilhelminapark?

A first and obvious reason to visit the park was the good weather: there are plenty of places to sunbathe in Wilhelminapark. Visitors also mentioned the accessibility of the park as an



Figure 1. People near the pond catching the last of the day's sun.



Figure 2. The big lawn is the busiest part of the park.

important reason. For many, the park is centrally positioned, is located along a corridor they frequently used or is close to their home. Some of those living close to the park said they use the park as their “back garden,” especially if their homes did not have gardens. Familiarity with the park was another issue that comes to the fore in our analysis. Participants said that Wilhelminapark is (P) “the most familiar to me. I come here quite often.” [interview 3] Also the “natural” environment – the pond and the abundance of trees – was mentioned as an important reason for visiting the park. Participants also used the terms “beautiful,” “peaceful” and “friendly atmosphere” when explaining why they visited the park.

Of greater interest to our study, however, is that the presence of other visitors was also given as an important reason why interviewees visited Wilhelminapark. As they said: (P) “We don’t go and sit in a park where there’s no-one else.” [interview 1] (P) “Yes, exactly. It’s nice to have some other people sitting around.” [interview 11]

Other respondents explicitly said that Wilhelminapark is a tolerant space: (P) “Yes, to stay away from our neighbourhood.” (R) “What do you mean?” (...). (P) “Away from Zuilen [a neighbourhood in Utrecht]. (...) There’re a lot of police there (...) and they tell us to move on. That’s not the case here.” [interview 5]

They said that, contrary to the public spaces in their neighbourhoods, Wilhelminapark afforded them the possibility to linger. They considered Wilhelminapark a “looser” space (cf. Tani 2015), which was an important reason for them to visit it. From the perspective of these young people, Wilhelminapark enables them to remain backstage (cf. Tani 2015) when hanging out. In other words, it enables them to have their own space where they can socialize and be together with their peers, free from control and away from the adult urban state gaze.

Where we (and others) go and sit

During the interviews, some participants tended to reduce Wilhelminapark to a particular place.

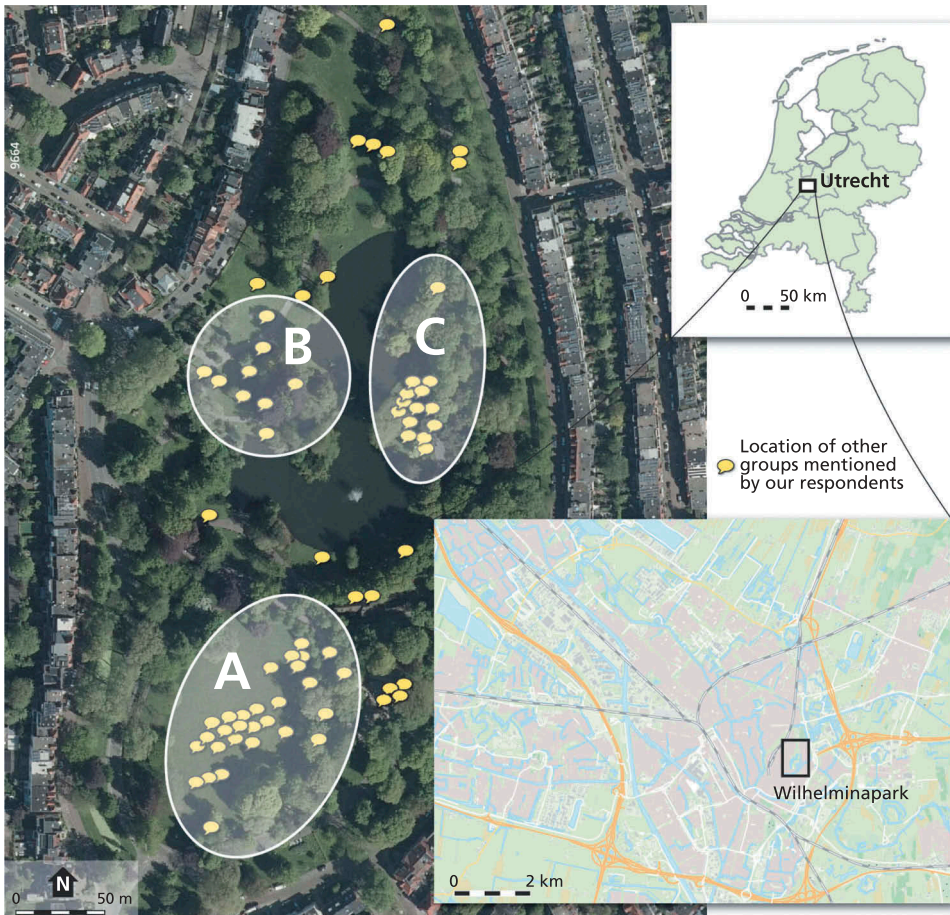
(P) It’s kind of silly, but I’ve never been to the other end of the park. I always come here, and I don’t really know what goes on over there. (...) The other day, someone said to me that Wilhelmina park is pretty small. And I said, I don’t think so. (...) There’s more park all the way in that direction. [interview 3]

This hints at a narrow focus in terms of places visited in the park, which also means that knowledge about other areas of the park may often be based on second-hand rather than first-hand experiences. Taking this into account, we consider it all the more interesting that the participants associated particular uses and users with specific parts of the park, and often quite effortlessly put “others” in place. In fact, three clearly defined areas appeared when we analyse the maps filled in by our research participants (see [Map 1](#)). Below, we refer to these as area A (“the big lawn”), area B (“the big circle”) and area C (“by the pond”).

Area A: the big lawn

Drawing on the interviews, the big lawn is characterized by the presence of larger groups of visitors. Activities such as “just lingering” and drinking, picnic parties, barbeque gatherings and cord-walking were mentioned as taking place on the big lawn. The central part of the big lawn is strongly associated with sporting activities, for example football. When doing the mapping exercise, our respondents said that the big lawn is used by *studenten* (students), *kakkers* (snotties), young people, families/parents with children, *vrije geesten* (free spirits), *scooterjeugd* (scooter youths) as well as *aso’s* (antisocial people). Some participants also said the crowd was “white” or “mainly Dutch,” whereas other mentioned the presence of people with a migration background along the path around the edge of the big lawn. Even though different groups use the big lawn, some of the differences that surfaced from our mapping exercise are also explained by how different groups select and visit different parts of the park and subsequently talk about and refer to “the other.”

Indeed, we find in our data that visitors to parts of the park other than the big lawn more often used another (and sometimes more negative) framing to refer to users of the big lawn. An example is a group of young girls who said they frequently use the park after their secondary school closes for the day. They differentiated between themselves and the



Map 1. Area A: the big lawn; area B: the big circle; area C: by the pond [distinguished based on the maps drawn by the research participants].

“white chicks” who, they said, are the principal users of the big lawn. Another example is a group of boys who frequently visit the area near the big circle (see below). They said that on the big lawn: (P) “[...] is where the preppy people sit with their children. They consider themselves better than everyone else.” [interview 5]

We also noted some differences between the ways the people sitting on the benches around the big lawn and the people sitting on the big lawn itself spoke about one another. For example, we asked a group of boys who were hanging out on these benches:

(R): What sort of people come to this bit of the park? (P): “People who look at things like we do, I think.” (R): How do you look at things, then? (P): “Just like, enjoy the weather, just sit and unwind. Not that we know everyone here; we don’t know who everyone is. But everyone around here is like us.” [interview 14]

While the boys considered themselves to be “together” with other people on the big lawn, some of the other user groups we spoke explicitly differentiated themselves from these boys by stating that the boys on the benches were *hangjongeren* / “hoodies” (boys who “hang out on the corner”). We then asked the boys:

(R): When do you think someone is a “corner boy”? (P): “They just hang out on a bench. All together (...), smoke a joint, cigarettes (...) throw cans on the ground instead of the rubbish bin. Those kinds of things. You know it when you see it. (...). [And] its also about being at the same place every evening. That’s what makes you a corner boy.” (R): So, it is also about repetition?

(P): Yes, exactly (...). It’s not like, when I come here once after school, sit on this bench, smoke a cigarette and drink a coke. That doesn’t make me a corner boy. That’s just me enjoying my cigarette and coke. [interview 14]

For these boys, *hangjongeren* are marked as “different” on account of their behaviour, and because they “claim” and repeatedly use the same place. For other groups we spoke to, the material artefacts – namely the benches and scooters – in a particular park space seem to play a more important role. It therefore seems that the majority of visitors quite effortlessly “over-determine” groups sitting on their scooters or on benches next to their scooters, *hangjongeren*. Park spaces that include benches and scooters can hence be considered intensely socially constructed spaces. An interesting question then is whether these boys would have been othered at that particular moment, had they been seated on the grass, in another place perhaps just a few metres away?

Area C: by the pond

The eastern part of the park, bordering the pond, is clearly differently represented compared to the big lawn. The following is a crucial difference that was mentioned by many participants during the mapping exercise: (P) “There’re more couples here, and larger groups over there [the big lawn].” [interview 7] (P) “Perhaps they like it somewhat more quiet compared to people who go to the big lawn.” [interview 13]

More generally, the participants said that they associate this particular place with smaller groups of visitors. They said it is quieter than the big lawn and romantic due to its more scenic environment, and this is possibly why these specific groups go there. The participants also said that *yuppen* (sometimes specifically young parents, with babies) use this part of the park, as do Dutch and international students. A clear distinction can thus be drawn between the crowd on the big lawn and the people at this site by the pond. This difference is particularly defined in the social relationships that groups are involved in when in the park. More than on the big lawn, this especially seems to be a place to be a parent or with a close friend or lover, people who tend to gather in smaller groups.

Area B: the big circle

There seems to be a relationship between the more unknown parts of the park (that is, unknown from the perspective of the majority of the interviewees), a more negative stereotyping of these areas and the people who visit them. A good example is how visitors talked about the westernmost part of the park (area B: the big circle). Although few of the interviewees visit this part of the park, many said that they knew it reasonably well. They strongly considered it the place of “others” in the park, which is co-constructed through the presence of persons, performing particular activities and using/handling particular objects. During the interviews and mapping exercise, users of this part of the park were referred to as junkies and/or *zwerfers* (“homeless people”). The research participants also mentioned the consumption of alcohol as a marker of lower social class that is co-

produced with the use of benches and the presence of specific, usually small groups. They distinguished between the drinking behaviour of these groups and their own use of alcoholic beverages, which they generally regarded as part of a social activity – hanging out or relaxing.

The low or lower social class of the people who use this area of the park was thus considered a key dimension that “othered” them from those using other parts of the park: (P) “That’s a place for the homeless, right? [interview 11];” (P) “Homeless people always gather over there.” [interview 16]

Contact and encounters between users of different areas in the park

The three areas distinguished in the park seem to be tied to particular users and activities. Several groups mentioned an alternating use of A (the big lawn) and C (by the pond). Some said that their use depended strongly on the group (companionship) and their activities. This indicates that the two sides of the park are not intrinsically exclusive zones regarding the crowd they attract, and some interaction between their crowds may be expected; many persons we interviewed did not feel or consider themselves out of place in either of these places. Only some visitors explicitly said that they stayed away from, for example, the big lawn because of all the sporting activities there. This is what a group of girls told us:

(P) Of course we don’t sit on that ‘sporting pitch’. Those people are way too sporty for us. (P) That plays a role for certain. (P) [...] Why would you play volleyball early on a Sunday morning (laughing)? [interview 8]

These girls felt out of place on the big lawn. It is important to note, however, that this is not simply the result of being actively excluded. Rather, it also seems to show that their “being out of place” is a combined outcome; all things considered, these girls themselves also demonstrate agency, by preferring not to be in a particular place (the big lawn).

Contrary to the above, very little interaction was suggested in the interviews between area B and other parts of the park. Whereas “junkies” and “homeless people” were regarded as being in place in area B, they were generally considered out of place in other parts of the park. Similarly, users of A and C considered themselves to be out of place in area B. In fact, many of them had simply never considered using that area; they did not consider it their place in the park; it was a place of “others.” The following excerpts illustrate this degree of segregation.

(P) “They don’t mingle with other groups [...]. And, if I were a junkie, I would also think, there’s a difference between me and those other people. So, here I can do as I wish. (P) And if the cops arrive, they will send them away. That’s why they choose to sit “undercover.” A bit sheltered. [interview 14]

We also encountered a group of boys who were lingering on or near a bench in the area near the big circle. During our conversation with them, they differentiated between themselves and the users of the big lawn, and confirmed the lack of contact this results in: (P) “There are people with children over there. I’d rather not go over there and smoke a joint near them. It’s a bit antisocial if you do that. That’s why we choose a more quiet spot.” [interview 5]

A lack of interest in the other, as well as the expected “disapproval” of particular activities (here, smoking a joint) – or on the contrary, a lack of common activity – is

important to the differences we found in the particular part of the park visited and people's perceptions of being in or out of place. These excerpts also, and again, illustrate that "being out of place" is a combined outcome in which those considered out of place also hold agency: we found that various groups actively chose to sit apart in the park, avoiding contact with others.

Contact and encounters between users of the big lawn

Because the big lawn is used by different users and for different purposes, we focussed our research efforts on that area as a potential site of contact and encounter between these groups of visitors. The interviews suggested that the users of the big lawn have little interaction with other groups that are co-present in the same space. The distribution of the (fairly homogeneous; see above) groups identified in this particular area has a specific micro-geography. When choosing their place, the groups said they make sure: (P) "Not to sit too close to others (...). It's such a big lawn. You don't sit too close to others. (...) I always think that's kind of awkward." [interview 13]

In this, we encounter an interesting ambiguity, which this group also articulates: (P) "Actually, it's kind of funny. Because it's nice to be in the company of others, but not to sit too close to them. But neither too far from them." [interview 13]

On a micro-geographical scale in urban park spaces then, we see what Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister (2012) refer to as "invisible walls." Some people said that they dislike it when the space between themselves and another group becomes occupied by another group of park visitors. This finding makes us attentive to the point that the spaces in between those occupied by various groups are also normative spaces to which a set of rules and conventions apply. At the same time, park visitors did not only actively produce and take possession of these spaces in between through the practice of "picking a place" or just "being there." We also observed, and learned from the interviews, how actively doing something such as laughing, yelling, talking loudly, smoking, doing sports or using particular artefacts – such as mats, blankets, bicycles or musical instruments/equipment – actively redefined the positioning or repositioning of groups of users of Wilhelminapark, which quite likely also resulted in promoting in-group rather than out-group contact.

Between these specific micro-geographies then, where groups simultaneously share and "claim" particular park spaces, those invisible walls are only seldom traversed. Both our observations and our research participants revealed that there was little involvement with other groups, although small children using the big lawn with their parents sometimes initiated brief contact between groups. Also, asking for a light or joining in a game of football were considered accepted exceptions.

Hence, it might not just be the case that co-present groups do not mingle but, as one group said: (P) "It's just more fun when you sit with your own group of friends." [interview 10]

In this we can recognize what Lofland (1998, 31) referred to as people's tendency to "mind your own business" in public spaces. This also resonates with the findings by Peters (2010), who recognized this tendency in the specific public spaces of Dutch urban parks. In essence, it might very well be that visiting the park is an activity that fosters not so much out-group interaction on a smaller scale, as in-group interaction. Whereas visitors

are “together” in the park as a whole, our research participants tended to be and remain “apart” with their groups for the duration of their park visit.

Conclusion

Our observational research and on-site group interviews revealed that the urban Wilhelminapark accommodates a variety of users: Dutch and international students, yuppies, children, the elderly, homeless people and street youths (*hangjongeren* / “*hoodies*”). The activities performed ranged from eating, drinking, talking, sports and reading, to hanging around or just relaxing. The interviews illustrate that the presence of unknown others is an important reason to visit the park. It normalizes the use of a park, it is cosy, there is plenty to see, and one can see and be seen by others (see also Tani 2015). Indeed, this seems to add to the argument that park spaces can or should be considered inclusive and tolerant spaces that foster social interaction between different groups of visitors and thus promote the social sustainability of cities.

Notwithstanding the above, a more in-depth analysis of our data indicates that the users of Wilhelminapark have their own micro-geographies, linked to particular places or areas of the park. In fact, by making use of a mapping exercise during our on-site group interviews, we found that visitors quite effortlessly put particular uses and users in place, or considered them “out of place.” Like Dixon and Durrheim (2003) in their “urban beach” research, we also found the existence of separate clusters of people gathering within specific areas of the park. We discerned at least three areas in Wilhelminapark that, according to our research participants, accommodate substantially different uses and users. Whereas some participants said that they use multiple areas, overall little interaction takes place between the users of these areas. A case in point is the identification of homeless individuals as the principal users of a particular (disconnected) park area, which mirrors more general tendencies in society to alienate, stigmatize and marginalize homeless individuals. Perhaps more surprisingly, there was also little interaction between groups that shared particular areas in the park. Groups produce their own micro-geographies and the boundaries between them are traversed only when, for example, someone asks for a light or returns a football. On the contrary, people tend to socialize or relax with their own group, which makes a park visit more of an in-group activity than something that fosters interaction between different users.

However, we realize that “togetherness,” although at a higher spatial level, is a precondition for park visits and should not be underestimated. In contrast to many inner-city spaces – which have become homogenized partly due to the rise of the consumption economy, which leads to the development of the same kind of facilities everywhere and the presence of functions designed for specific groups of consumers and visitors – Wilhelminapark is a “loose” space in terms of design and activities: everyone can find a place there. While general tendencies such as those mentioned above can also be recognized in the park (see above in relation to homelessness), processes in the park do not completely mirror them. A case in point here is the way a group of teenagers used and found their place in Wilhelminapark, escaping the surveillance and policing to which they are routinely subjected to in their own neighbourhood. Therefore, even though there is hardly any active interaction between different groups of park visitors ((P) “It’s just more fun when you sit with your own group of friends”), [interview 10] visitors can nonetheless “just be” and/or observe and encounter other people without directly reducing these others to a problem or a danger.

One may wonder whether the park layout and the absence of facilities have an effect on the spatial dimensions of “gathering and othering.” Perhaps more interaction arises by facilitating joint facilities and activities, in terms of allowing the presence of ice cream carts and food vans and organizing festivals and sports competitions. The question then is whether this perhaps also, and at the same time leads to a less public and less democratic space, rather than one where a wide variety of people intermingle peacefully.

Notes

1. <http://www.utrecht.nl/stadsparken-en-landgoederen/>.
2. <http://www.jorncopijnbruinebeuk.nl/parken.html>.

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