Strong, weak and invisible ties: a relational perspective on urban coexistence

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Abstract :

The dichotomy between “strong” and “weak” ties is a common theme in sociological scholarship dealing with urban space, yet urban ethnographers have long been describing the prevalence of impersonal relations. Such relations can be described as fleeting encounters between complete strangers, while others – as in the case of “nodding” relationships – are durable and have yet to be conceptualised. The notion of “invisible ties” is proposed as a conceptual handle for studying typical urban relations that complement the established notions of strong and weak ties. Through an empirical study of four residential buildings in Geneva (Switzerland), these “invisible ties” are revealed by means of a systemic approach to social urban life, from which two key actors emerge: “socialisers” and “figures”. This research addresses gaps in the literature on interpersonal relations in urban contexts by focusing on the interplay between different types of social ties, encompassing the whole continuum from anonymity to intimacy.

Keywords:

familiar strangers, neighbouring, social network analysis, social relations, urban space

The obsession with persons at the expense of more impersonal social relations is like a filter which discolours our rational understanding of society; (...) it leads us to believe community is an act of mutual self-disclosure and to undervalue the community relations of strangers, particularly those which occur in cities.

Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 1992, p.4

Introduction

The dichotomy between “strong” and “weak” ties is a common theme in sociological scholarship dealing with urban space (Forrest and Kearns, 2001), yet ethnographers have long been describing the prevalence of impersonal relations in urban contexts (Lofland, 1998). In some cases, such relations are described as fleeting encounters (between people unknown to each other), while others – as in the case of “nodding” relationships – are more durable and have yet to be conceptualised.

This research therefore addresses gaps in the literature on interpersonal relations in urban contexts. Firstly, it focuses on the interplay between different types of social ties, encompassing the whole continuum between anonymity and intimacy. Indeed, I not only look at who interacts with whom and who knows whom, but also who recognises whom. Secondly, while the existing literature approaches neighbouring practices from an individual or social group perspective, this paper offers a structural and relational perspective, by focusing on processes and interindividual dynamics. Finally, it provides an empirical contribution to fundamental theoretical questions: how to categorise social ties? do different types of ties serve different purposes? and what other ties exist beyond the strong and the weak?

The notion of “invisible ties” is proposed as a conceptual handle for studying typical urban relations that complement the established notions of strong and weak ties. These “invisible ties” are revealed through a systemic approach to social urban life, from which two actors emerge – “socialisers” and “figures”, which I discuss in relation to what they have in common, their roles in the social order, and how they came to inhabit these informal social roles. Based on 47 qualitative interviews and observations in four residential buildings in Geneva (Switzerland), combined with social network analysis, I propose to understand urban coexistence as the reproduction of local social orders, which are based on the articulation of strong, weak and invisible ties.

I will begin by discussing the literature on neighbour relations, followed by a presentation of the methodological and conceptual approach. In the presentation of my empirical findings, I focus on weak and strong ties first, analysing the more central residents with respect to sociability, or what I term the “socialisers”. Then, I consider how peripheral residents have become “figures”, who may

have few weak and strong ties in the building, but are nevertheless familiar to many and connected to them through “invisible ties”.

Classifying neighbour relations, a review of the literature

Quantitative studies on neighbouring generally focus on what Mann called “manifest neighbourliness”, that is “observable social interactions and exchanges of help and goods” (Mann, 1954: 164). For example, through their “Personal Neighbor Network Measure”, Campbell and Lee (1992) were interested in how many neighbours respondents knew by name, talked more than 10 minutes to, and had visited in their home over the past six months. They found the most relationships among married middle-aged women with high socio-economic status. Also in the United States, the General Social Survey reveals how often Americans “spend a social evening” with someone from their neighbourhood. Data from 1974 to 1996 show a decline in this form of sociability (Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999). In England, Perren and colleagues (2004) rely on data from the General Household Survey to argue that elderly women living alone are more likely than men living alone to speak to some neighbours at least three to four times a week and to have received or given a favour over the last six months.

These studies provide useful information on socio-demographic determinants and on the evolution of neighbouring practices. However, they either do not define what a neighbour is, or use definitions ranging from living in the same neighbourhood – without defining this polysemic notion (Galster, 2001) – to residing in the same building. Then, these surveys often aim at assessing respondents’ general level of neighbourliness and do not distinguish, for example, between having many superficial relationships and having only a few close relationships. How these relations are structured and distributed remains under-investigated. For example, if all residents of a building know on average four neighbours, it would be useful to find out whether they all know different people, or whether most of them know the same four residents.

More importantly, while this literature focuses on weak and strong ties, it ignores more impersonal forms of relationships. Such relations have been described as “absent ties” by Granovetter who considered them to be “negligible” (1973, p. 1361). This can be explained by a concern for the creation and sharing of social capital among neighbours (Cheshire, 2015; Völker and Flap, 2007). Yet, there is evidence that the usefulness of a relationship does not correlate with its strength and that people also seek support from people who just happen to be present and available when the need arises (Small, 2017). Moreover, qualitative studies suggest that “latent neighbourliness” might matter more than “manifest neighbourliness” (Mann, 1954) when it comes to coexisting. Indeed, the “good neighbour” is not necessarily the active and contact-seeking one, but rather the one maintaining a friendly distance, while being willing to help if needed (Crow et al., 2002). More

generally, authors suggest that strong relationships are not a guarantee of harmony and that social cohesion in urban settings is largely based on forms of impersonal relations governed by civility (Sennett, 2002). Sampson's (2012) notion of collective efficacy illustrates how the propensity and capacity to interact when needed result in much better outcomes than dense social networks.

Far from being negligible, fleeting relationships with “familiar strangers” – those whom the urban dweller recognises and observes repeatedly but with whom he or she never interacts – have an emotional significance as they provide a sense of familiarity (Blokland, 2017: 126; Charmes, 2006: 86; Fischer, 1982: 61; Morrill and Snow, 2005: 17). They help the urban dweller develop “comfort zones” (Blokland and Nast, 2014: 1147), in which he or she feels “at home”. For Jacobs (1992) and Sampson (2012, p. 151), they contribute to social control and increase a sense of security. Although many scholars have underlined the relevance of fleeting relationships in urban contexts, few offer guidance on how to study them.

A theoretical but also practical issue is the distinction between a social tie and a mere interaction. A tie might be defined as a “relatively durable and thus observable flow of interaction” (Azarian, 2010: 326). However, as in the case of familiar strangers, some relations might be durable and yet not consist of observable interaction. A century ago, Weber warned against a “substantialist” definition of social relations. For him, a social relation exists as soon as *Ego* directs his actions according to *Alter*, even if the actions are not reciprocal (Weber, 1978: 24–27). A relationship thus starts as knowledge: it “is initiated when *Ego* becomes aware of *Alter*; the awareness may be based on direct interaction or, in the absence of such interaction, on the receipt of information about *Alter*” (Friedkin, 1990: 240). This kind of social connection has still to be conceptualised as a type of relation in itself and studied together with other forms of relations.

Indeed, familiarity could be seen as a network of ties, the structure and key actors of which remain to be investigated. Urban ethnographers have identified prominent roles in “local social orders” (Suttles, 1970) such as “public characters” (Jacobs, 1992), “old heads” (Anderson, 1999) and “street pastors” (Venkatesh, 2006). These people have become brokers, peacemakers, or simply common reference points in the public realm. This calls for a relational approach aimed at understanding how these roles emerge from a process of differentiation. It therefore seems useful to focus not only on individuals, but also on how they function within a network, and how they can contribute to coexistence.

This review of the literature reveals several gaps, which I will address in the following section. Firstly, anonymous relations between familiar strangers need to be conceptualised and to be distinguished from fleeting encounters. Secondly, there is a need for a methodological and conceptual framework that facilitates the study of these anonymous yet durable relations together

with weak and strong ties. Ultimately, the aim is to understand how these forms of ties contribute to coexistence and whether they are structured around individuals taking a prominent role in sustaining familiarity.

Methodological and conceptual approach

Neighbouring has often been studied in distinctive contexts such as housing projects and high-rises (Baxter, 2017; Ghosh, 2014), and suburban (Crow et al., 2002; Kusenbach, 2006) or disadvantaged areas (Anderson, 1990; Gans, 1962). With some exceptions (Blokland, 2003; Grafmeyer, 2001), functionally and socially mixed city centres are a blind spot in the research on neighbouring. As they attract not only residents but also workers and users, city centres challenge the idea that the neighbourhood is where residents rub shoulders with their neighbours.

In dense urban areas, the residential building is an adequate scale to take a structural look at neighbour relations. Firstly, as opposed to the neighbourhood, it is a well-delimited unit within which residents live in forced close proximity. Secondly, by choosing four small residential buildings, I could reasonably attempt to interview representatives of every household. Unsurprisingly, some people refused and others were unreachable. I nevertheless managed to interview representatives of more than two thirds of the buildings' occupancy, or 47 households in total.

The four buildings were centrally located, in functionally and socially mixed areas of Geneva city centre, in which 50% to 60% of the residents are not Swiss nationals. I chose unremarkable (in terms of size and standard) buildings which had 14 to 21 apartments on six or seven stories, a front door directly on the sidewalk and no common space except for the communal laundry room. Only building #4 differed: a courtyard separated two blocks of nine apartments, the doors of which faced each other on passageways. All interviewees were tenants – like 82% of the canton population – who paid between 800€ and 3,300€ in monthly rent depending on the size of the apartment and the number of years since the lease agreement was established. Two thirds of the interviewees belonged to the second and the third quartiles of the canton of Geneva income distribution. The others belonged to the first and the last quartile in equal proportions (see table 1 for sociodemographic characteristics of the sample).

Table 1 : Description of the sample

<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>N=47</i>
Women	23
Men	18
Heterosexual couples	6
18-29 years old	4
30-39 years old	13
40-49 years old	9
50-59 years old	13
60-69 years old	5
Over 70	3
Swiss nationality	20
Swiss + other nationality	10
Other nationality	17
<i>Their households</i>	
Living alone	8
Couples	14
Families with children (all ages)	23
Shared housing	2

The first part of the interview dealt with people's residential trajectory, mobility practises and uses of the area around their home. The second part was focused on a schematic representation of the building, where each square represents an apartment. Exploratory interviews taught me that "knowing someone" may have different meanings and respondents tended to say that they did not know anyone, although our conversation clearly revealed that they knew *about* some of them. So, instead of asking "who do you know in your building", I asked for each apartment, "what do you know" about the tenants¹.

Reading the interview transcripts and sometimes listening to the recordings, I tried to sort each of the 980 described relations based on their strength. However, the strength of ties varied depending on whether I was considering the frequency of interaction or the exchange of services, for example. Furthermore, such dimensions missed the more anonymous relations. Thus, following Weber (1978), Friedkin (1990) and Morgan (2009), I came to consider a relation to be knowledge about *Alter*, and the strength of the relation as the depth of that knowledge. This is a simplification, as relations are multidimensional. However, my aim here is not to provide a fine-grained typology of social relations, but rather to develop broad categories of ties that can help us reflect on the impersonal-yet-durable forms of relations induced by urban life. Therefore, I have borrowed the

dichotomy between strong and weak ties and suggest complementing it with the notion of the “invisible tie”.

Table 2 helped me to code each relation as strong, weak, invisible, or non-existent. Using social network analysis tools, I represented each building as a multidimensional network with three kinds of relations (see Figure 1 for an illustration), and measured the indegree centrality – a measure of importance based on the number of ties directed to a node (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: 126) – of each household depending on what category of tie was considered. This allowed me to identify the most central households in terms of sociability and intimacy (weak and strong ties) on the one hand and in terms of familiarity (invisible ties) on the other hand. Although the notion of centrality will be key to the theoretical argument, I will not focus on metrics in this paper. I will now consider each category from a qualitative and empirical point of view.

Table 2 : Categories of ties

<i>Type of tie</i>	<i>Realm</i>	<i>Level of acquaintanceship</i>	<i>Alter is...</i>
Strong ties	Intimacy	<i>Ego</i> considers him/herself close to <i>alter</i> and shares intimate details of his or her life with him or her	<i>a friend</i>
Weak ties	Sociability	<i>Ego</i> and <i>alter</i> interact regularly without being close to each other	<i>an acquaintance</i>
Invisible ties	Familiarity	<i>Ego</i> knows about <i>alter</i>	<i>a familiar stranger</i>
Non-existent ties	Anonymity	<i>Ego</i> does not know of <i>alter's</i> existence	<i>a complete stranger</i>

Figure 1: Building #3. The graph is illustrative. Larger names are mentioned in the paper. Grey dashed lines = invisible ties; grey solid lines = weak ties; black lines = strong ties. Node size is based on indegree centrality considering only weak and strong ties (Csardi and Nepusz, 2006; R Core Team, 2013).

Strong, weak, invisible and non-existent ties

Strong ties

Strong ties belong to the realm of intimacy, as they generally refer to our closest and most intimate relationships. Strong ties between neighbours are thus rare; only a few respondents considered neighbours as friends. In such cases, they made a clear distinction between neighbours with whom they get along well and the few “friends” they have in the building. Friendships involved sharing personal problems, and in two cases going on vacation together.

Up there lives Sandrine, with whom I have become quite close too. We went on vacation together with her children. We do not see each other often but we have a really good relationship, we are intimate. With Chiara, we see each other a lot but we are not intimate, I mean we will not go on vacation. It's not a matter of how often you see each other, but it's rather chemistry.

This quote from Hassia points to the relative disconnection between tie strength and frequency of meetings. What she describes as “chemistry” refers to a feeling of social proximity and to an intimacy characteristic of strong ties. Strong ties are less context dependent and more resilient than the others. In this category only, *Ego* is convinced that he or she would continue to spend time with *Alter* if one of them were to move out.

Weak ties

The notion of weak ties is both easy to understand and hard to define precisely. In Granovetter’s definition, weak ties apply to acquaintances from which one can obtain ideas and information. I categorised as a weak tie every neighbour that *Ego* knows personally but not intimately and with whom he regularly interacts. In the context of neighbouring at least, weak ties belong to the realm of sociability, which means that such relations – although they may have practical purposes – are entered into partly for their own sake (Simmel and Hughes, 1949). A typical statement signalling a weak tie is that of Sarah about Celine: “Whenever we bump into each other, we say hi, how are you? We take a few minutes to chat”. Respondents exchanged favours with weak ties. These included lending a ladder or vacuum cleaner, help with changing a light bulb, disposing of bulky waste, calling a locksmith, etc. Babysitting, feeding domestic animals and watering plants (which require the lending of a set of keys) were more likely in friendships.

A weak tie between neighbours does not imply a feeling of social proximity. People chat with the socialisers and do it out of neighbourliness, politeness, or because they enjoy this kind of light sociability. Affinity helps but is not central. As Rosenblum (2016) suggests, neighbours are rarely expected to be more than “decent folks”. However, that implies at least conformity to the same norms of neighbourliness.

Invisible ties

“Invisible ties” are relations with known strangers. These are the anonymous yet recognisable people we pass on the street on a regular basis. At first complete strangers, they become known over time and are no longer interchangeable. Unlike fleeting encounters, “invisible ties” are durable relations with people who are known personally. As Lofland wrote: “To know another personally is always [...] to recognise him either by face or by name or by some other means and to be able to connect with this face, or name, or whatever, bits and pieces of accumulated material” (Lofland, 1973: 16). This process of accumulating knowledge over time characterises the creation of a social relation (Morgan, 2009). However, unlike weak ties, “invisible ties” can hardly be a source of information, as they involve only limited interaction, if any.

Of course, the limit between the two is fluid. Nevertheless, respondents distinguished between the neighbours they were acquainted with (weak ties) and those who they only recognised, as in this quote from an interview with Sandro:

I see who it is [who lives in this apartment], it is a couple who run excessively, I often see them leave in the evening in jogging clothes.

Sandro never went past the stage of greetings, but he got to know them over time: how they look, their habits, etc. The joggers became part of his social environment. However, he would not consider them as part of the people he “knows”. This is one of the ways these ties are invisible. Respondents tended not to see these relations as relations (hence the common and misleading statement “I do not know anyone here”). A second way is that conventional approaches to social ties (as either weak or strong) make them appear insignificant and thus invisible. Such ties would not be considered in a classic social network or a social capital approach. A third way is that even with an ethnographic methodology, such ties are hard to observe visually. Yet, despite their invisibility, these ties are not latent. They do not need to be “activated” by social interaction in order to matter, as I will show later.

Non-existent ties

Ties are non-existent when *Ego* does not even know the existence of *Alter*. In the context of neighbouring, *Ego* would at most suspect that a particular apartment is occupied, but cannot tell if the tenant is a man or a woman, a single person or a family. I realised that even tenants who are considered to “know everybody” have in their building uncharted territories. Even in the small buildings I investigated, the tenants’ turnover made it hard for respondents to keep track of who lives just two or three floors above theirs. This form of anonymity makes “invisible ties” meaningful. Indeed, interviewees sometimes expressed discomfort when an apartment near theirs seemed occupied by ever-changing people, or what they called “ghost neighbours”.

Simplifying ties’ complexity

Categorising ties is a useful heuristic strategy: it allows us to examine different points on a continuum. It does not imply, however, that boundaries between categories are always clear-cut. Then, focusing on the depth of knowledge allows us to consider relations all along the continuum from anonymity to intimacy, without defining a priori which relations are meaningful and significant and which are not. Asking “what do you know” instead of “who do you know” reduces the risk of different interpretations, between the interviewer and the respondents, of what constitutes “knowing someone”. While other dimensions of social relations are overlooked, such as the frequency of meetings, the value attributed to the relation, its reciprocity or its asymmetry, such a

unidimensional approach acknowledges that the various dimensions of relations are not necessarily combined in a linear way. For example, frequency of contact is not necessarily associated with the strength of ties, as we just saw with the case of Hassia.

Furthermore, this four-level scale does not distinguish between friendly and unfriendly relations. Firstly, invisible ties are often considered neutral by interviewees, as they are insufficiently developed to be qualified positively or negatively. Secondly, negative relationships can also be measured by the degree of knowledge of the other. There may be hostility towards people who barely know each other, and conflicts between neighbours who are near intimates. Moreover, a conflict is likely to increase the degree of mutual acquaintance between two people. Clémence's children had organised a party in the absence of their parents, which infuriated a neighbour. According to Clémence: "It did not ruin our relationship, quite the opposite, we started talking with this woman." As Coser (1956: 39) asserts, conflict is a form of relationship, unlike hostility. Because more frequent interactions lead to better knowledge of the other, it seems justified to measure antagonistic and positive relationship using the same scale.

Qualitative interviews allow us to get around some of these limitations. While social network analysis focuses on how ties are structured, qualitative analysis provides more detail on the nature of ties and their context. For each tie, I have verbatim accounts of the person's relation to someone. As for the interview as a whole, it provides contextual elements, which allow a better understanding and interpretation of the network data. I also asked the interviewee's age, income, level of education, occupation and the date of their move. I will focus now on the structure of the social networks. Considering not only strong and weak ties, but also invisible ties, allows us to identify two types of key actors.

Two types of key actors: socialisers and figures

The "socialisers": lots of ties of all types

Within all four buildings, actors with the highest number of weak and strong ties constituted a single core group. I called their members "socialisers". "Socialisers" seek to develop ties with at least some of their neighbours. They take time to chat, invite them over for a coffee, organise neighbours' parties, etc. Their central position leads them to circulate information, negotiate with the landlord and introduce tenants to each other. They are not always liked, as they sometimes enforce social control and can be considered nosy. "Socialiser" refers to a social role more than to a category or type of person. A more detailed examination of particular cases will provide a better understanding of the way people's individual characteristics, skills and resources fit into a specific context, allowing them to become key actors in their building's social order.

Léa and her partner John have lived in building #3 for 10 years and have become the most central household. The fact that they live on the ground floor and that their two young children are the only children in the building makes them well known among their neighbours. Indeed, children have been described as “contacts assets” (Blokland and Nast, 2014; Gayet-Viaud, 2006). Because Léa and John plan on staying in the long term, meeting neighbours has a strategic dimension. Léa said they tried to get to know people they would meet casually around their home and to whom they could say: “We are going to the park with the kids, would you like to join us?”

Parents and especially single mothers are among the most central households. The preponderant role of women – and especially mothers – in neighbour relations is well known (Skjaeveland et al., 1996). Campbell and Lee (1990) explain this phenomenon by the gender division of labour, which assigns to women more responsibilities in the field of social relations. Neighbour relations might also be associated with household-related tasks, which remain disproportionally assigned to women.

Besides these socio-demographic characteristics, I identified resources and skills affecting a person’s ability to become a “socialiser”. Firstly, neighbours’ relations, as with most forms of sociability, involve gifts and counter-gifts (Mauss, 2007). Neighbours’ parties even imply a systematic exchange, since all the participants have to contribute. On one of these occasions, there was a conversation concerning someone who was suspected of having come empty-handed. An elderly tenant, I was told another time, once refused to attend a party because she was not able to bring a “home-made” culinary contribution. In this respect, the ability to buy or craft gifts and the possession of cooking skills are valuable resources in neighbour relations.

Although these examples suggest that neighbouring is easier for those with more resources, the relation is not straightforward. Marcello and Alexander are both retired and have lived next to each other for more than 30 years. While his French is fluent, Alexander – a scientist of German origin – apologised for his mistakes during our interview. He appeared very reserved and remains a stranger to most residents. His next-door neighbour Marcello, on the contrary, is well known as “the Italian man”. He worked in a factory most of his life and despite having lived for decades in Geneva, his French is not fluent. Marcello is nonetheless very talkative and assured me he had never missed a neighbours’ party. As for sociability, this example suggests that personality and social skills might compensate for lack of other resources.

Becoming a “socialiser” can take some time and even unforeseen circumstances. Christelle had been living on the top floor of her building for 22 years and was unemployed at the time of our interview. She became the second most central household in the aftermath of her breakup. Living from then on with her young adult daughter, she initiated a Neighbours’ Day party tradition in her building.

I'm trained as an educator. So, the issue of social relations is of interest to me. When the City launched the [Neighbours' Day] initiative, I thought it was a good idea (...) The first year I said to myself: "Well, let's see if someone organises it". And then nothing happened. I thought: "next year, I'll do it". I went door to door. I decided to do it also because I had a friend in the building (...). It was reassuring to know that we were going to start this together.

This excerpt highlights how Christelle became a “socialiser” after many years. She learned that the City was encouraging the organisation of such parties, and the next year she ordered the official posters – available upon request – and went door to door to convince her neighbours to join the party. Time and self-confidence were necessary, but also social capital in the building. Indeed, she said she would have given up without the support of a neighbour friend.

However, an individual's position within a social structure does not only depend on their individual actions and characteristics. The case of Christelle shows that if others had taken the initiative before her, she would simply have offered her help. Because they did not, she could organise the celebration in her way and is now known as its instigator. The more passive residents also helped by not challenging her leadership or trying to compete with her. Indeed, “role collisions” – when multiple people occupy overlapping roles – is a source of conflict (Willis, 2010). This suggests a division of labour over time, which implies that for people to become socially active neighbours, others have to remain passive. This division of labour is favoured by the core-periphery structure of all four networks. Such structures are considered to have a “greater group harmony” (Johnson, Boster, et al., 2003: 99) compared to structures divided into cohesive subgroups (Borgatti and Everett, 2000).

Individual characteristics can also become relevant in the context of situational similarity. In my sample, several respondents became closer as they all went through a divorce in the same period of time and came to live as single mothers. People who have faced similar predicaments are likely to empathise with each other (Small, 2017). It is one of the many forms of similarity that interviewees underlined. Sandro, a retired teacher and environmental activist, explained how he found some of his neighbours to be “politically on the same side” as he was. This social proximity is reflected not only in shared opinions, but also in practices. “We met the other cyclists in the bike garage”, he said. In the case of the building #4 core group, common practices (like biking or parenting) brought together parents who also happened to share norms and values.

However, it should not be inferred that homogeneity systematically favours cohesion. Firstly, similarities between core groups' members might appear *in contrast* with other tenants. Were all tenants more alike, other forms of distinction might appear. Secondly, exchanges are easier in small

groups. Had all the building #4 tenants had young children, would the eighteen families have helped each other in the same way? The group of parents benefited from the presence of tenants without children, who used common spaces less frequently. One could thus postulate that similarity with some neighbours is a resource for the “socialisers”, although more generally, diversity favours a division of labour and the emergence of a core-periphery structure. Thirdly, core groups are not always homogeneous. In buildings #3 and #4, local sociability is driven mostly by “new urban middle class” families (Charmes, 2006) whereas in the two other buildings, core groups showed greater heterogeneity. They included childless households and families who do not belong to these new middle classes. Also, I have met peripheral households who were sociologically very close to core group members, and yet remained segregated from them. Some had arrived recently, others lived in more than one place, travelled frequently for work, were seriously ill or disabled, or did not like neighbouring and preferred keeping to themselves. In some cases, however, social distance and dynamics of exclusion caused core group members to become opposed to “outsiders” .

The “figures”: lots of invisible ties but only few weak and strong ties

The people I considered so far to be the most central were the ones with the most and the strongest ties. They are the most active with respect to sociability. However, not all forms of social relations pertain to sociability. For every neighbour with whom one interacts regularly, there are many who are no more than familiar faces. Familiarity can be defined as a general understanding of what to expect in a given environment (Blokland, 2017). Elsewhere, I showed that in an urban environment, this understanding builds on affordances which make the environment readable and recognisable. These affordances can be specific shops (Felder and Pignolo, 2018b) or, paradoxically, drug dealers (Felder and Pignolo, 2018a). Here, I will argue that tenants’ sense of familiarity within the building is supported by a few residents who are widely known among people with whom they interact only a little. I call them the “figures”.

Here again, interview data helps us to understand what gives these people particular relevance. Albert and Juliette have been living in building #3 for so long that they were already neighbours as children. Yet, they have almost no contact with each other. Juliette was over 80 years old when we met. She politely declined my request for an interview, while also refusing to let me help carry her grocery bag up the stairs to the elevator. Interviewees told me she regularly rejects offers of help. Nevertheless, she is a familiar figure for many people who see her leaving her home slowly to go grocery shopping. Some of them referred to her as “the pink lady” because of the colour of her clothes.

Juliette got rid of me by suggesting that I knock on Albert’s door instead, arguing that he knew the building and its history better than she did. Having spent almost all of his 80 years living in the

building, Albert now has little contact with his neighbours. Over the years – he told me – his acquaintances moved out or passed away. He was unable or unwilling to get to know the newcomers. However, his round-shouldered silhouette is familiar to most residents. In the same building lives Jean-Marc who is younger and refused to meet me for an interview. His neighbours know him for the smell of his cigars in the staircase and the elevator, as well as for his bad temper. He never participates in events organised by his neighbours. For them, however, his smoking habit is a recurring topic of conversation.

Such figures, familiar to many city dwellers who do not know them personally, inhabit the classics of urban ethnography. Whyte described Manhattan's "street people": eccentric people, beggars, street vendors, etc. For him, these characters should be considered as a sign of the vitality of social life, without which the city is "bland" (Whyte, 2009: 55). The most complete characterisation of this phenomenon comes from Jacobs's pen. She describes the "public characters" of Greenwich Village in the 1950s as:

(...) anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character need have no special talents or wisdom to fulfill his function – although he often does. He just needs to be present, and there need to be enough of his counterparts. His main qualification is that he is public, that he talks to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest. (Jacobs, 1992: 68)

The distinction I make between "socialisers" and "figures" points to two roles of "public characters" that do not necessarily go together. The first relates to sociability, information and mutual help. The second relates to familiarity and refers to people known to a large number of people and serving – unknowingly – as landmarks, improving an urban environment's readability and peculiarity. "Figures" play a key role in processes of familiarisation (Felder and Pignolo, 2018a) by increasing an environment's readability and predictability.

As figures, Juliette, Albert and Jean-Marc constitute a shared knowledge, which in turn can elicit a sense of community. Indeed, I witnessed conversations between tenants who seemed to have little in common but their knowledge of the building's "figures". Reference points do not necessarily help value an environment, but they support a feeling of ease and belonging (Blokland, 2017: 103, 127) and can become meaningful for residents' sense of place (Neal et al., 2019).

"Figures" can also take "negative deviant roles" (Johnson, Boster, et al., 2003: 114), and work as a basis for their neighbours drawing boundaries between themselves – the "good neighbours" – and the others. At worse, they sap their neighbours' will and threaten local cohesion. At best, their behaviour can lead to discussion and assessment among other residents of what is acceptable and

what is not, and thus contributes to establishing and maintaining norms. The case of Jean-Marc, who smokes his cigar in the common areas to the great displeasure of his neighbours, allows his neighbours to remind each other that smoking can be an unneighbourly behaviour.

Limits

Representing neighbour relations in the form of a network can produce a misleading impression of stability, whereas relationships evolve. In building #3, Sofia once found her door broken open by burglars; she rang the bells of the apartments closest to hers. Frederic – who she had never met before – hosted her for the night. Physical proximity in cities creates such opportunities for a fast transition from anonymity to intimacy (Lofland, 1973: 19). Moreover, it is sometimes necessary to seek help where it is immediately available (Small, 2017). The fact that a total stranger can instantly become an acquaintance could make it seem natural that relationships develop over time. However, they can also be surprisingly stable. Alexander and Marcello have been level neighbours for thirty years in building #1 and yet both claim to barely know each other. This example reminds us – if it is still necessary to do so – that physical proximity does not necessarily foster social relations.

On a broader level, networks evolve as people come and go. After finishing the interviews, I participated in a neighbours' party in building #1. Sarah – the most central “socialiser” – had met Ben, a newly arrived tenant from an English speaking country. Fluent in French and English, she told him about the neighbours' party they try to hold every year. Ben offered to host the next event, provided that Sarah takes care of the invitations. Sarah then contacted Céline, another “socialiser”, and the two wrote an invitation message and went door-to-door. As a result, Sarah and Céline have developed weak ties to Ben and his wife, but this change impacted more than just these four people. While the first gathering I attended was Francophone, the conversation was mostly in English during the second one. This change of *lingua franca* due to Ben's growing involvement in neighbourly sociability will probably affect the structure of relations, giving more importance to Anglophones and polyglots. Ben – who does not speak French – and Marcello – who does not speak English – both need Sarah's language skills to successfully gather their neighbours for a drink.

Another limit to my approach is the focus on households. Indeed, people – not households – have relations. Differences between partners with regard to neighbouring practices came up in interviews, especially when I sat with a couple, but also when we were arranging a meeting and residents suggested that I talk to their partners, who have more neighbour relations. However, I noticed that neighbours were often referred to as households (for example “the family above us”). Further studies should pay more attention to the diverse neighbouring practices within a household, including those of children.

Conclusion: the visible and invisible dimensions of urban life

Through a relational and structural approach to neighbour relations within four residential buildings in Geneva, this paper provides an empirical contribution to the study of social ties and coexistence in urban contexts. Based on interviews with residents, I developed a sociometric scale which covers a continuum from anonymity to intimacy, starting with non-existent ties (*Ego* does not know the existence of *Alter*), then invisible ties (*Alter* is a familiar stranger), weak ties (*Alter* is an acquaintance), and ending with strong ties (*Alter* is a friend). This scale could be used in the future to study larger urban settings, and to compare how the three kinds of ties correlate with different measures of social cohesion and of “collective efficacy” (Sampson, 2012).

I used the word “socialisers” to speak of the residents with the greatest number of weak and strong ties within their building. Their central position turns them into brokers. Yet, despite their ability to circulate information and to create new connections, they are not always liked, as they may enforce social control and be considered nosy. “Socialiser” refers to a social role more than to a category or a type of person. I argued that although they have resources and skills that make them feel comfortable interacting with unknown people, the relevance of particular skills and characteristics is context dependent. For example, parenthood turned residents into “socialisers”, but mainly because they could find “like-minded” parents among their neighbours. Also, for residents to become central, others have to stay peripheral.

A final contribution of this work stems from the empirical analysis of what I called “invisible ties”. This concept enables us to reflect on the relevance of impersonal-yet-durable forms of relations induced by urban life. It helps us to move away from an image of urban life as either village-like or anonymous. Indeed, an absence of weak ties does not necessarily result in anonymity. By acknowledging the roles of “nodding” relationships between familiar strangers and including them in the networks, together with the weak and strong ties, I could show that even the most peripheral residents were embedded in a web of “invisible ties”. More importantly, I discovered that some peripheral residents were paradoxically central: although they have only few weak and strong ties, they “receive” many “invisible ties”. I called them “figures”, as they are known to many of their neighbours with whom they never interact. Being peculiar and recognisable, “figures” function as common reference points, bolstering residents’ sense of familiarity and of belonging. I also provided an example in which a “figure” is disliked and provokes discussions on norms of neighbourliness. In both cases, “figures” contribute passively and perhaps even unwillingly to coexistence.

These results have methodological and theoretical implications. Methodologically, “socialisers” are considered good informants. They are willing to talk, are interested in the topic of neighbouring and

can help reach more interviewees. By contrast, peripheral residents are harder to get in touch with and can be reluctant to talk about a topic about which they feel they have nothing to say. Moreover, “invisible ties” are by definition difficult to observe. Thus, there is a risk of focusing on the “socialisers” and mistaking them for “the residents”, while assuming that other ways of residing are negligible exceptions. Indeed, as I hope to have shown, they are all part of the same local social order.

This leads to a theoretical point: social relations do not necessarily appear as “observable flows of interactions” (Azarian, 2010: 326). They can have multiple forms and different roles. Ties can be virtually mediated (Lane, 2015) and even imagined (Anderson, 1983). To analyse them, however, requires breaking with an obsession with face-to-face interactions as if they were the only meaningful relations. It is necessary to further study urban coexistence while bearing in mind that social life in cities has hidden dimensions, made of ties that can be “invisible”.

ⁱ I assured my interviewees that their neighbours would not know what they had said about them. I use aliases to identify interviewees. When the first name reflected the interviewee's national origin, I looked for an alias in Wikipedia's lists (for example https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Greek_masculine_given_names). However, even though direct identifiers have been removed from the data, a few interviewees might be able to identify each other. When quoting these people or writing about them, I have been particularly careful and assessed the risk for them to face embarrassment or other undesirable consequences. When necessary, I omitted non-essential information.

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