Streets in Suburbia as Spheres of Comfort

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ABSTRACT   How to manage the "self" on the streets of suburbia when everybody knows each other? Due to the social and spatial manageability of suburban spaces, contact with more or less (un)known others is to be expected. Through repeated and continuous contact, residents are automatically and reciprocally assigned the role of acquaintances. This situation requires finding the right distance. The positioning of oneself and others, the perception and practice of distance, results in comfort and freedom from conflict. This coping strategy for public (street)spaces reflects a socio-spatial (con)figuration that is enacted as street management. Although street life is dominated by the notion of nothingness, everyone campaigns to stay private in public by setting up a "public self". The research findings I refer to are based on two case studies in suburban spaces on the outskirts of Hanover (the state capital of Lower Saxony, Germany). In order to understand and explain the life-worlds of suburbanites in general and their manifestation on streets in particular, I conducted exploratory interviews, go-alongs and field observations. To create an atmosphere of comfort, convivial as well as conflictual situations are to be avoided, which is achieved by the residents positioning themselves and others at a distance. Since street life in the suburbs is uneventful and provides a sense of security and familiarity, living together in coexistence is routine. The delegation of responsibility for everything public enables suburbanites to be indifferent to others and the setting. The minimal sympathetic way of interacting with each other is symbolised by greetings, which both facilitates and hinders communication. In the end, the life-world suburbia and its streets are spheres of comfort because they are manageable, expectable and knowable.

KEYWORDS   suburbia, comfort, street management, distance, (con)figuration, positioning, public self

Introduction

> Suburbia is a habit. […] You know the routines. No surprises waiting for you here.
> (Ms. Jaeger)[1]

Suburbia is usually associated with structural monotony, homogeneity, and privacy. Is this also true for suburban streets? And if so, why bother with suburbs when – as the quote above shows – nothing seems to happen there? In contrast, urban streets are characterised as lively but also by an excess of stimuli, stress and lack of silence (Simmel 1903). Confronted

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[1]   The quotations cited in the text are interview excerpts from pseudonymised research participants taken from the author's field study (Göb 2021).

with and affected by difference and diversity, urbanites have pre/conscious tools to enact streets. That means, "when overload is present, adaptations occur" (Milgram 1970: 1462). To channel the steady flux of information and impressions, to handle strangers and reduce stress, senses are anaesthetised. Therefore, social street life is intellectualised by cognition and rationalisation and the self is masked by the suppression of emotions (Hochschild 1979: 561). The urban management of unease and uncertainty stipulates self-enclosure, isolation, and passivity (Brighenti/Pavoni 2017: 4). Simmel's diagnosis of urban (street) life identifies city passers-by as role-taking individuals that appear fragmented and impersonal (1903). Protection of self is embodied by a blasé attitude which functions as a devaluation-taxonomy towards upcoming differences. Blasé, also described as indifference or civil inattention (Goffman 1963: 116), leads to a certain street behaviour marked by an internal withdrawal from others, things, and situations. Similar attitudes and behaviours seem to be present in suburbia, although the initial situation is quite different. Because unlike an urban environment, suburban streets are devoid of stimuli but provide peace and ease.

The literature on urban street life presents short-term tactics and long-term strategies, focusing particularly on high-conflict situations and dealing with violence, crime and deviance. According to Anderson, the street code is the enacted (con)figuration for managing the (dangerous) environment, that appears as an "art of avoidance" (1999: 209). This practice describes the ability to use the eyes, ears and body to navigate safely through the streets. The code – as a set of unwritten rules and informal norms – is applied to stay away from threat and trouble. Emerging from street culture, the code refers to the individual's ability to command respect and represents the broader structure of society at the micro level. "Street etiquette" specifies exactly how to be treated decently. Street-related knowledge ensures that the situation can be read and evaluated correctly. In this respect, knowledge is a source of power and a result of learning to negotiate public spaces (Anderson 1999: 207). However, "street wisdom" is the embodied form of etiquette, wisely implemented and functioning as a sense of the street (Anderson 1990; Skarkey 2006). The paradox of street-specific interactions granting deference is that they simultaneously generate and protect against violence. As such, they can be considered a special form of social capital. These urban mechanisms of recognition seem to offer coping strategies for public encounters and make people feel more familiar with the street and build general trust and belonging with those present. For this reason, it also appears relevant to ask how street management is done in other socio-spatial contexts – such as suburbia. While most studies with a reference to space focus on urban street culture (Ross 2018, 2021; Ilan 2016), the planning of street sociability (Mehta 2013; Moudon 1987) or on violent neighbourhood and youth behaviour (Sharkey 2006; Anderson 1999; Steward and Simons 2010; Keith and Griffith 2014; Intravia et al. 2018; Heitmeyer 2019; Kurtenbach et al. 2021), there is hardly any empirical material on ordinary street life in suburbs. I assume that suburban (street) spaces are spheres of comfort as they appear uneventful. This might be the reason why research on daily routines on suburban streets is neglected. But habituation can also be experienced as a quality of the suburban setting. Following Ms. Jaeger's quote above, the felt nothingness is able to create orientation, certainty, and security in addition to boredom. Nothingness thus evokes ambivalence. Suburban streets seem lifeless and offer no surprises – neither in a constructive

(convivial) nor in a destructive (conflictual) way. This situation of neutrality and nothingness appears to be the desired sphere of comfort that all residents aspire to. In order to preserve suburbia as a "privatopia" (BMVBS 2013: 134), there is obviously less effort put into street life than into personal pleasure. This is done by constructing distance: socially, spatially and temporally. Therefore, I ask how streets in suburbs are perceived and practised by residents and how management strategies are enacted when uneventfulness is to be expected. I address the delineated research desideratum of suburban street life by using qualitative-ethnographic data collected as part of a field study on life-worlds in suburbia.[2] My contribution begins with a description of suburban spaces, their streets and street management. This is followed by a presentation of the case studies, the selected research sites and the instruments used. The findings illustrate the residents' perceptions and practices of positioning in public (street) spaces. The goal of achieving and experiencing comfort is discussed in the conclusion, which also contains open questions and assumptions for further research.

On Privacy and Publicity in Suburbia: Towards Setting and Self

Suburbia as a Life-world

A large part of the German population lives – mostly without knowing it – in suburban spaces (Hesse 2018). "Sub-urbs" are literally any type of settlement on the periphery of a large city or, by Fishman's definition, anything that lies "beyond the city" (1999: 5).[3] They are the (intended) result of socio-economic developments and political-planning considerations, adopted and implemented by a wide range of individuals. These decision-making processes have generated different types of suburbs, which differ worldwide, but also within Germany. They vary in terms of location and regional embeddedness (accessibility), time and shape of construction (architecture) and life cycle shift (amplitude and attractiveness). Due to a multifaceted (re)qualification respectively diversification of suburban spaces, they constitute an "urban-rural-continuum"[4] (Walks 2013: 1472). With regard to their form, function and facilities (Clapson 2003; Keil 2013; Lacy 2016), suburbs nowadays allow for a "more or less" sub-urban or hybrid living to realise diverse household and lifestyle patterns

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2   The study refers to my dissertation and is based on the theoretical concept of "structures of the life-world" by Schütz and Luckmann (1973) addressing perceptions and practises of residents in suburban spaces. Thus, the findings presented here represent a secondary analysis.

3   Like Fishman (1999), I refer to suburbia (the terms "suburb" and "suburban space" are used synonymously), which has a predominantly residential function. This definition mainly refers to the spatial (rather than social and temporal) development of suburban spaces in terms of suburbanisation – the growth of cities over the margins. Accordingly, this definition serves as an approximation.

4   From an empirical perspective, it is still unclear which spaces should be designated as "suburban" (Vaughan et al. 2012; Harris 2010), and which definition and operationalisation should be used to delimit suburbia (Forsyth 2012). These open questions are usually determined by the research agenda and do not follow a uniform system.

(Moos and Mendez 2015; Menzl 2014). However, suburbs are – especially in Germany[5] – still characterised by a structural, social and life-stage homogeneity of their residents (Menzl 2007), i.e. detached and semi-detached houses, families with children of the middle-income class who share similar values and norms. In addition to these criteria, which can be used for a phenomenological delimitation, there are classifications of suburban spaces based on the settlement structure, population density, and the number of commuters, as surveyed and mapped in the BBSR metropolitan regions[6]. The so-called metropolitan region model is grounded in the concept of the city region (Boustedt 1970) and consists of a core and complementary outer zones that transcend administrative boundaries but are interconnected and considered representative of everyday patterns of interaction. As suburban spaces are under the influence of urbanisation – through regionalised, globalised and digitalised action spaces – they can no longer be adequately captured in the dichotomous categories of centre and periphery or with the previous concepts of city, suburb and country (Frank 2003: 327). Apart from the diverse spatial manifestations and temporal developments, there are social aspects that make it difficult to speak of the suburban space in singular terms. It is clearly visible that "suburbia is more than a collection of residential buildings; it expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture that it might be called the bourgeois utopia" (Fishman 1999: 4). As a life-world, suburbia is both the product (spatial setting) and the prerequisite of human actions (social setting). Since the first community studies of the 1950s, suburbia has been associated with a distinctive way of life and assigned attributes such as privacy, security and order, familiarity and homogeneity in a family- and domicentred form (Gans 1967; Menzl 2007). Fava (1956) described the suburban way of life as a result and starting point of self-selective migration of a particular status and life phase group. These "enclaves" were distinguished by close neighbourly contacts, which were on the one hand shaped by mutual help and support networks, and on the other hand by conformism and social control. Whyte also noted that although residents are involved in their neighbourhood and in social organisations, they do not form an emotional attachment to their place of residence (1956: 330). He termed this behaviour a "drive-in culture" (Whyte 1956: 295), which is inherently superficial and artificial. Local contacts aim at sociability rather than friendship, to avoid personal obligations and the assumption of mutual responsibility. Accordingly, it is also typical for the suburban way of life to be inward-oriented, as there is no privacy outside home. Thus, it is not surprising that "social life is largely encapsulated [...] and street life is underdeveloped" (Baumgartner 1988: 10).

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[5] German suburbs cannot be directly compared with suburbs in the USA, Canada, Asia or Australia, as there are significant differences in terms of size and scope, temporal dynamics and spatio-structural effects (Hesse and Siedentop 2018; Siedentop 2015; Siedentop and Fina 2012).

[6] BBSR is the Federal Institute for Research on Buildings, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development: https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/forschung/raumbeobachtung/Raumabgrenzungen/deutschland/regionen/Grossstadtregionen/Grossstadtregionen.html

Streets in Suburbia

Streets are public spaces and as such intended to be accessible to anyone at any time (Gutman 1978; Carmona 2003). They also constitute "micro-publics" (Amin 2002) in and through encounters that are able to create difference and make a difference (Wilson 2017). Encounters thus enable passers-by on the street to distinguish and differentiate themselves from others, but equally to build meaningful relationships with others. This makes streets highly relevant as fields of experience and interaction. Integrated into the daily routines of individuals, streets shape spaces in a ubiquitous but unconscious way: on the one hand, through their physical materiality, and on the other hand, in their function for social practises (Schumacher 1987; Rapoport 1987). As a built environment, they have a permanent effect on the appearance and atmosphere of space. Hence, streets represent the most important technical infrastructure for mobility and accessibility (Mehta 2013). The use of streets implies participation (Moudon 1987). Furthermore, streets serve as an opportunity structure to engender conviviality (Lofland 1998), conflict, but also neutrality. Streets in suburbs are usually considered car-friendly, but are walkable – even if pavements are narrow and often exist solely on one side. They must generally be differentiated by their function and location. In suburban spaces, there are residential streets, which provide a framework for neighbourly togetherness and trust-building (Jacobs 1993; Michelso 1977). As residential zones are often inhabited by families with children, streets function as their extended living rooms and playgrounds. In addition, there are streets that offer access to goods and services of general interest. To this extent, streets combine contradictions: they facilitate passivity and activity, isolate and connect by bringing places and people together. The streets of suburbia, like suburbia itself, are definable by what or whom they include or exclude (Fishman 1999: 6). So, streets (un)make boundaries. These dynamics depend on the respective situation and its openness or closeness to interactions. Whether interactions take place and how they take shape are determined by many factors: the time, the number of people present, their different claims to use the space and their ability to enforce them. The formation of (un)lively streets is influenced by the local culture as well. In this context, street culture links visible with invisible components, which can be translated into appearance (via clothing, language and signs) and actions (Ross 2018, 2021; Cohen 1985; Knauft 1996). Based on the locality, codes can be described as "sociocultural property that shape residents' behaviour in certain spaces regardless of their individual norms" (Bruinsma and Johnson 2018: 48). Thus, street codes are place-based and provide a set of rules to guide oneself safely through the environment (Heitmeyer 2019).

Street Management in Suburban Spaces

The "self" represents the central frame of reference for navigating social space (Markus 1977; Tajfel and Turner 1986). To do so, people develop a self-concept that enables them to identify and position themselves and others in their life-world (Turner 1987). Suburban spaces and streets are (con)figurations of everyday positioning, or more precisely, of the management of distance. "Avoidance, in particular, is an especially prominent method of managing conflict" (Baumgartner 1988: 11). As a strategy of social control,

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one keeps social distance and builds only weak ties within and to the locality. Avoidance is the practice of privacy that distinguishes suburbanity. As residents of suburbia want to maintain their privacy in public, a conception of self – the "public self" – has to be generated that allows for an appropriate positioning. The (con)figuration, the relative social and spatial distance to other residents, is enacted in the street management. This coping strategy only reveals the role of the "resident" and does not expose the whole person. Fundamental to the experience of other street users is the reciprocal classification according to typicity. So, street management is a form of identity management used to build a coherent self while managing privacy and publicity. Due to the socio-spatial manageability of suburbs (given by the size and number of inhabitants), other residents appear as (un)known others or acquaintances (Göb 2021). Contact with each other is constantly and repeatedly given (Schütz and Luckmann 1973) and therefore, expectable. Urban contexts, on the contrary, produce less stable relations than encounters (Wilson 2017). These are characterised as ephemeral moments with (familiar) strangers (Milgram 1977) that remain largely meaningless. Suburban street management is meaningful in the sense of practical (street) knowledge. This "knowing about" (Goffman 1963: 119) includes expectations that help to minimise deep contact and conflict while maximising general trust in others and in oneself. Street management (con)figurates distance – as a social, spatial and temporal coping strategy – to achieve a reasonable positioning by perceiving and practising privacy or publicity.

Case Study and Methods

Area of Study

For this field study, I operationalised suburbia as a space that is phenomenologically distinct from purely urban and rural areas. According to Sieverts, I was looking for "'fields' of different uses, forms of development and topographies [...] [that] have both urban and rural characteristics" (1997: 14). Suburban spaces as a phenotype cannot be sharply delineated, but are characterised by typical spatio-temporal structures such as new residential areas of detached houses, commercial areas on the periphery, remnants of villages. To identify such features, the areas of study were selected through aerial photo analysis, expert interviews and field trips. Finally, I chose the region beyond the core city of Hanover (Germany) for the field research. Hanover is the capital of the state of Lower Saxony with a population of over 500,000 (LSN 2021[7]). The Hanover region comprises 21 municipalities in the proximate commuter belt of the metropolitan region, that are located 10 km to 30 km away from the city centre, with a total population of over one million. The two selected study areas are small towns on the north-eastern and south-western edges of Hanover's administrative city boundary. The research focused on the main centres of the municipalities, Altwarmbüchen with around 9,000 residents and Hemmingen-Westerfeld with around 7,000 residents (HOR*st 2017[8]). Both settlement areas were planned in the 1950s/60s, expanded in each subsequent decade and were gradually enriched with social infrastructures and central functions for local supply.

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[7]   State Office for Statistics of Lower Saxony (LSN): https://www.statistik.niedersachsen.de

[8]   Hannover Online Regional Statistics (HOR*st) provided by the Hannover Region (2017)

Due to their accessibility and amenities, the research sites can be classified as "sustainable self-sufficient areas in highly attractive landscapes" (BMVBS 2013: 16). The suburbs were compared in a universalising and variation-finding manner, as both are structurally similar. A universalising comparison allows one to draw structural conclusions about a phenomenon, whereas the search for variations is about highlighting the gradations of the phenomenon, i.e. the type and intensity within the commonalities (Tilly 1984). Comparison is thus intended to show what is generalisable and what is unique to the suburbs studied. As no differences were found in the analysis with regard to the phenomenon of suburban street life, and local variations (e.g. the location of the market and its connecting streets) had no overarching influence on the perception and practice of positioning, the two study areas are not presented separately in the presentation of results.

Instruments of Study

The qualitative-ethnographic study was conducted between 2017 and 2020. Based on an explorative design (Lamnek 2005), the participants' perceptions of and practises in their life-world were surveyed and reconstructed. To participate in the study, residents were sought who are representative of the suburban population. No pre-selection of participants was made, as I wanted to explore the heterogeneity of the field, its structural breadth and the complexity of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, a catalogue of criteria was used to describe the sample, including age and gender, household status, length of residence and type of housing. The selection of participants was unsystematic at the beginning and based on a (media) call for participation. Iteratively, a more targeted selection of participants followed. This ensured the structural variance of the sample and allowed extreme or deviant cases to be added for contrast until I reached theoretical saturation. The sample comprises a total of 45 persons and reflects the research field in an exemplary way.

Three survey instruments were used and triangulated for the analysis (Flick 2008): explorative interviews (Honer 1994), go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003) and field observations (Friedrichs and Lüdtke 1977). The interviews were openly structured to focus on the subjective experiences of the participants. The symmetrically designed interview conditions stimulated narratives on the following topics: perceptions of self, others and local (public) spaces, practices related to their daily action space, and activities and interactions with other residents. The go-alongs served to share in and engage with participants' everyday lives in order to understand how suburban (street) spaces are actually used, negotiated and appropriated. The observations were intended to reveal how people come into (convivial or conflictual) contact, where and when. Data analysis was done using the documentary method (Nohl 2017) and dense description (Geertz 1979) to uncover participants' perceptions and practises of privacy and publicity in the life-world suburbia in general and its streets in particular.

Findings

Street Management by Perceiving Distance

> "You meet others again and again […] You know each other, you know the name, but that's all" (Mr. Raabe)

The ego perceives itself and others in reflection, through observation and comparison. On the basis of categories, one attributes oneself to others or separates oneself from them. Consequently, others are identified as (dis)similar (Göb 2021). The categorisations made in suburban contexts, especially in public, likewise on streets, are identifications-until-further and function as a working conception of a social type (Anderson 1990, 1999). This differentiation is constantly expanded and supplemented by what one can perceive of the others in the public sphere, meaning how they behave. By doing so, attributions are (re)updated with every contact. In this process, clichéd (self)images simplify categorisation, reduce complexity in social interactions and create certainty of expectations. "We simply know each other" (Mr. Rütten), is the residents' stated perception. Everyone is known to everyone – even if "only by sight" (Ms. Reimann). "Sometimes you also know the name" (Ms. Ahlers). Residents of suburbia get to know each other on the street when they do their daily activities on their usual routes. Since everything is available on site, residents do not necessarily have to leave suburbia to meet their needs. "That's why you see more familiar faces. So, I am able to tell you who can be found where, e.g. 'he lives in that residential area over there'" (Mr. Quellhorst). This type of "knowing" is linked to a form of recognition that consists in the experience of being expected, accepted and respected in mutual presence (Blokland and Nast 2014). Knowing as "categoric knowing" (Lofland 1973: 15) is based on "cognitive recognition" (Goffman 1963: 116). Individuals are assigned according to visible and accessible context information (e.g. name, status, biographical details), which leads to knowing who the other is, in the sense that one knows that he/she can be placed in a category or in categories (Lofland 1973). "It's better to be known" and the longer that people live here, "the more people I know" (Ms. Feger). In everyday life, "knowing about" (Goffman 1963: 119) is adequate for most suburban residents to feel a sense of belonging and general trust. In addition, the continuous and repeatable contact on the street creates safety and familiarity in the public sphere. "When you go shopping, you often meet people you know from somewhere else. This simply gives you more intersections" (Mr. Quellhorst). Thus, "knowing" means to "be acquaintanced". Acquaintanceship is a typified regular contact on the street in the suburbs. The following quotation also shows that people who are perceived and referred to as strangers are actually not strangers if they always appear at the same time and in the same place: "On market days, a single stranger always stands here and sells a street paper of the homeless" (Ms. Ritter). In the contextualised "function as" (role), everyone is working on a conception of self in public that in itself provides privacy. Due to habituation, "mere knowing" transforms into "personal knowing" (Goffman 1963). Even though personal knowledge of others is context-related, it is perceived as holistic and constant. "Of course, you know each other. You know each other briefly and then suddenly you know each other better because you talk a little bit" (Ms. Klötsch). The degree of acquaintanceship emerges from the respective contexts and is influenced by commonalities, similar preferences

and values as well as the (socialisation) experiences of the interactants. Light contact and weak interactions with others in the status of acquaintances are accepted and appreciated by all, as they are without obligations, but still offer reliability and orientation. On streets, however, most suburbanites still want to remain private. "I like my privacy. That is my top priority, my absolute maxim" (Mr. Frey). But when residents take on public roles, such as politicians, it becomes more difficult to stay private in public. "I'm here as a private person, so I don't want to be shouted at in the middle of the street for anything [political]" (Ms. Klötsch). Neighbours try even harder to keep their distance because contact is more frequent and of longer duration. The predominant form of perceiving and positioning oneself and others on suburban streets therefore follows the typology of the functional fractal roles of acquaintances. This typification helps one to distinguish oneself from others and to form one's own identity. Social demarcation is supported by streets, which act as physical boundaries. Since the perception and positioning of others is also influenced by the function, form and facility-provision of the street, an active (con)figuration becomes relevant for the creation of a comfortable sphere. The making and adjusting of comfort is encouraged by the expectability of everyone and everything on the street. Irritations arise, when something unexpected happens or is observed. "You can see directly onto the cemetery from our house. These dead people are very pleasant 'neighbours', they don't complain, they don't have parties. But a few weeks ago, everything was different. […] There were many dark-skinned people standing around a grave and I thought, 'what's going on here?'"[9] (Ms. Klötsch). The interviewee ascertained from the number plates of the cars that these persons were not from the surrounding area, meaning that they were real strangers. The fact that they were temporarily present as guests, reassured her and so she immediately felt safe again. Street management in the suburbs is related to the perception of socio-spatial manageability, continuity and repeatability, and finally to the practical knowledge of who to expect, when and where.

Street Management by Practicing Distance

"We always see each other, greet each other and talk sometimes" (Ms. Gilles)

Practises are unconscious actions of the ego that are embedded in everyday arrangements with others, spatially and temporally. Therefore, they are rarely addressed unless they need to be changed, adapted or (re)learned. One of the most significant but least noticed practices in public (street) spaces is greeting. When people see each other on the street and greet each other, the perceived knowing about becomes visible. Greeting is the communicated positioning of oneself and others, and consequently a symbol of distancing and street-related identity management. "Hi and goodbye" (Ms. Richartz) corresponds to a socio-spatial (con)figuration that is unproblematic, because it is a short, polite, but not intrusive contact. Since residents cannot not come into contact with each other on suburbia's streets,

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[9]   The quotation refers to an external attribute of otherness and is not meant to be judgmental (discriminatory/pejorative). As Ms. Klötsch lives in a suburb that is predominantly inhabited by white middle-class residents, all persons who differ ascriptively from this group are strangers to her.

many interactions evolve in the form of minimal focused attention (Goffman 1963). Similar to the practice of greeting, a friendly glance, smile or nodding is used to keep others away and create a "buffer zone". But greetings also generate a basis for trust and an opportunity for follow-up communication. Depending on the definition of the situation, this practice enables two outcomes and represents a strategy for achieving comfort. But "the contact apart from greetings... It hardly goes beyond a 'hello'" (Ms. Reimann). This is even the case with neighbours: "You can say 'Good day, good way' to each other, exchange ten words, talk about something and then don't speak to each other for a fortnight. We don't do that because we don't like each other, but because that's the way we keep it. That's the kind of relationship we have here" (Ms. Gilles). Thus, greeting becomes an appropriate form of interaction between residents and obligatory to eliminate discomfort when people know each other. For this reason, street contact is reduced to a sign that simultaneously expresses distance and recognition. This "social recognition" (Goffman 1963: 116) is characterised by reciprocity. As a code of conduct between acquaintances, contact always involves a "minimal courtesy" and "minimal solidarity", including the exchange of "civil words" (Goffman 1963: 116). Greeting as a practice of "neutral contact" also enables spontaneous interactions that can initiate and sustain conviviality (Demerath and Levinger 2003). "You can greet each other, you can talk a bit, but you also have to keep your distance. It's also very important [...] that you give each other freedom but still have something in common – even if it's just a greeting or a conversation over the fence" (Mr. Jungbauer) – whereby fences, like streets, serve as boundaries. "There are ways of greeting and helping others that 'ensure privacy, disattention and avoidance' (Lofland 1998: 34) while formally satisfying the requirements of proper parochial conduct" (Kusenbach 2006: 301). In this context, the practice of "friendly recognition" and acting in tolerance and respect towards others is emphasised (Kusenbach 2006; Lofland 1998). Light contact when passing in the street promotes coexistence and is the essential principle of living together in suburbs: "We would like to live in peace with everyone around" (Mr. Ribbek), free of disturbance and conflict. Baumgartner describes this behaviour as "moral minimalism" (1988: 10) and greetings as the best way to minimise unwanted attention and maximise privacy at the same time. Greetings seem relatively superficial and trivial; they do not require much effort and time. This is precisely why they have a subtle effect on the sense of community. Moreover, most residents do not want closer contacts and do not seek interpersonal engagement. Although streets in suburbia are usually considered quiet and boring and frequented by very few people, they can serve "as meeting places, especially when it's market day" (Mr. Quellhorst). Such occasional structures encourage place- and action-based contacts. But these meetings are often short-lived and take place in passing. "Anyone who could implant something for the community around the market place would become a hero. However, this has not succeeded for decades. The street design certainly plays a role, but that's not the only factor" (Mr. Ginter). This quotation underlines that Mr. Ginter does not want to take responsibility for the community(building), but a proxy is expected to do so. Obviously, none of the residents really want to use public (street) spaces for coming together. Generally, there seems to be a lack of interest in building a street community because "I have a nice terrace at home, why should I meet someone on the street?" (Ms. Reinhold). Others are received privately,

if they meet at all. Residents of suburbs normally avoid reducing distances, making friends and taking responsibility for others or the environment in order to live a life characterised by a maximum of self-fulfilment and a minimum of self-commitment. Practices on suburban streets can be reduced to the sign of greeting and spatio-temporally fixed, neutral contact. Street management is thus used to practice distance and to feel comfortable.

Comfort resulting from street management

> "Life is quite comfortable here" (Mr. Dedendorf)

If one feels comfortable in the suburbs in general and on the streets in particular, it is because the (con)figuration of distance succeeds. The notion that nothing (bad) ever happens on the streets makes the atmosphere seem pleasant. Those who meet on the street are known and familiar to each other. This is why street life in suburbia is perceived and practised as a routine. The absence of both conflict (including serious crime) and conviviality reflects the comfortable neutrality of nothingness; it expresses the normality of street life by constituting certainty and predictability. Everyone knows what to expect on the street, because suburbs are simply an uneventful, "pleasantly manageable" (Mr. Jungbauer) place. "Sometimes I get annoyed that you can't get out of your comfort zone here. But I don't want to change anything anymore" (Ms. Jaeger). According to Brighenti/Pavoni (2017: 12 f.), comfort can be classified as a subjective mood, mediated socially and by the external environment and, at the same time, as an objective quality of the surroundings, as a holistic composition. Thus, the concept of comfort maps the atmosphere of suburbia and its streets (Böhme 2013). As a principle of modern society, comfort is constitutive. Comfort is a fundamental need in the perception and practice of humans because it ensures the experience of ease, order and security and integrates these aspects into life in an aesthetic, a normative and semiotic framework. Comfort in suburbia and its streets is only noticed positively and as a condition for an immunity, i.e. for reassurance and reinforcement. The comfort society on suburbia's streets reflects the desire for complexity reduction and a transfer of responsibility. Even though the valuation of comfort may shift, the maxim of privacy seems to be invariable for suburbanites. Therefore, constituting a "public self" in suburban (street) spaces helps one to stay safe in terms of privacy. In this context, street management functions as a coping strategy to reach the required comfort through perception and practice, the (con)figuration of distance.

The experience of everyday comfort is just possible because suburbia is manageable and combines spatial, social and temporal elements of orientation and familiarity. Although behaviour on suburban streets seems to be similar to urban behaviour, the prevailing conditions are different: in suburbs, street management is not about blocking stimuli, but about remaining (un)known in status. In contrast to Baumgartner's findings on suburban spaces, residents in my fields of research tend to distance themselves from others rather than avoid each other in public, because there is no option to fully avoid contact altogether – especially on the streets – as people know each other. Furthermore, people like to meet on the street, albeit reservedly. This is evident in the gesture of greeting, which maintains distance but also

creates recognition. By perceiving and practicing strategies of distancing, everyone can – and does – realise his or her own private, comfortable life in suburbia.

Concluding Remarks

"I find it pleasant that people somehow react to each other, are attentive, but also leave each other alone" (Ms. Quandt)

Suburbia and its streets can be attributed as a sphere of comfort because uncertainties are reduced by street management, the (con)figuration of distance. Nevertheless, the classification of streets as inherent spheres of comfort and immunity should be open to discussion. Even in suburbs that are becoming more diverse, there is a need to address feelings of distress, disorder and discomfort. These feelings should no longer be delegated only to proxies, as they displace suburbanites from their role as residents and contribute to their "de-responsibilisation" (Brighenti/Pavoni 2017: 12). Statements like "I don't do anything" mean that residents of suburbs do nothing at all for the community. It turns out that no one is making a public effort to change anything or take responsibility for the life-world of suburbia or its street life. This is not asked for either, because the main quality of the suburb is privacy. But this is problematic with respect to the tendencies towards social division and polarisation within society, which (can) also become apparent locally through narratives of inclusion and exclusion. Although the delegation of tasks to proxies reflects the power of residents, this type of avoidance marks an unrealised weakness of suburbanites that manifests itself in social isolation and denormalises communication like everyday negotiation. The (con)figuration of distance through street management privatises and concurrently excludes the self, making the building of community nearly impossible. Knowing each other seems to be enough for suburbanites to feel a sense of community, which is by no means real togetherness, but presents itself as a neutral coexistence. Street life in suburbia is based on the principle that "the collective organisation of individuality is a function of the suburban dream itself" (Lupi and Musterd 2006: 806). The focus on the private sphere, the desire for withdrawal, is linked to a "pronounced disinterest in everything public" (Menzl 2007: 400). The establishment of informal forms of communication and cooperation often contradicts the characteristics of the spatial category "privatopia" (BMVBS 2013: 134). Accordingly, politics and planning are unable to enforce processes of negotiation and appropriation of (street) space by residents. The described positioning of the suburbanites and the enacted street management can neither be changed by urban design nor by the upgrading of public (street) spaces. If structurally everything is available on site, there is usually no need for residents to take on public responsibility. A change in one's own habits only occurs when residents are directly affected: "The swimming hall was supposed to be closed. Then there was a fundraising campaign […]. I decided to forego my birthday presents, but I accepted money for the swimming hall. We collected 1500 euros, which we donated to the swimming hall. Now there is a plaque with my name on it" (Mr. Dombrindt). This person rendered outstanding service to the community and gained prestige for his effort that everyone is reminded of by distinction. Social infrastructures like swimming halls

or streets (Klinenberg 2018; Latham and Layton 2019) are highly relevant for gathering people which is, in most cases, not desired in suburbia. As privacy and distance create comfort, and are expected qualities of suburbs, it is up to residents to bring about change. Pointing out individual benefits, which can also be common ones, may provide an impetus to rethink and reshape street life in the suburbs. However, my contribution also illustrates that habituation and nothingness are characteristics in their own right that are perceived and practised on the streets of suburbs for neutral coexistence among acquaintances. Streets in suburbia are generally considered spheres of comfort, as they are free from conflict, surprise and taking responsibility. Since no one has tried to change street life in suburbia so far, everything remains as it is: manageable, expectable and knowable. It can be assumed that the results of the case studies presented here are transferable to other types of suburban spaces, streets and settings, when they also habitualise privacy and (con)figure distance both socially and spatially as well as temporally. It is necessary, however, to continue research on the triviality of everyday life on the streets in order to find out if there are socio-spatial strategies that can be developed (participatively) for public togetherness.

Acknowledgments

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