



Diversity in mind: Towards a differentiated understanding of migrants' recreational practices in urban forests



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of a study investigating the relationship between migration and recreation in urban forests in two German cities. Research in this field is growing in Europe, yet in certain countries, such as Germany, it remains underdeveloped. Until now, it has revealed ambiguities and diverging results. Furthermore, it has been the subject of criticism and calls for more differentiation between and within migrant groups, as well as for more reflection on the categorisation of “migrant” or “ethnic group”. This paper builds on these claims and aims to shed new light on forest recreation and ethnicity through a context-sensitive research approach in the tradition of symbolic interactionism. It draws upon the analysis of 42 qualitative interviews conducted with people with a Turkish, Russian-German and no migration background. The analysis leads to the construction of five narratives, each of them regrouping respondents who share a similar perspective on a specific theme. The narratives show how personal life context and its interlinkages with migration influence the individual's perspectives on and uses of urban forest. They also show how lifestyle and gender shape recreational practices independently from migration background. Beyond the focus on individual experience, collective recreational practices attributed to some groups are expressed in the narratives. This paper addresses the social aspect of leisure and discusses how forest recreation affects the social construction of groups such as migrant groups.

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Introduction

International migration characterised the 20th century and is fundamental to current globalisation processes (Thränhardt and Bommers, 2010). The population of industrialised countries around the world is increasingly ethnically diverse, consequently migration and ethnic diversity are increasingly prominent subjects in many research programmes worldwide (see Riche, 2000; Héran and Le Bras, 2008; Thränhardt and Bommers, 2010). This is noticeable in all disciplines of social sciences (Bretell and Hollifield, 2000). Leisure sciences also follow this trend: Floyd et al. (2008) for instance report an increasing number of articles on race and/or ethnicity published in major international leisure journals since the 1970s. Outdoor recreation, preferences and participation in leisure activities as well as leisure behaviour are some of the focal points of these publications (Floyd et al., 2008). While US American scholars began to examine outdoor recreation patterns of migrants and ethnic minority groups in the 1960s (e.g. Johnson et al., 1997), recent years have seen the emergence of such research in a European context. However, while this topic has gained ground

in the institutional research landscape of some Western European countries like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, it remains widely overlooked in others, such as Germany (Jay and Schraml, 2009; Gentin, 2011; Jay and Schraml, 2013).

Outdoor recreation of migrant and ethnic groups: patterns and explanations

A substantial amount of literature has been published in North America on outdoor recreation of migrant and ethnic groups. Research using mostly quantitative survey methods reports evidence for different patterns of outdoor recreation according to ethnic background (see e.g. Floyd et al., 2008). This research focuses mainly on the use of public urban parks, showing for instance that members of certain ethnic groups tend to use parks less frequently than others and that the types of activities, the settings preferred or the size of the group recreating in the outdoors can differ among and within ethnic groups such as Hispanics, Asians, Caucasians and African-Americans (e.g. Carr and Williams, 1993; Chavez, 2000; Gobster, 2002; Tinsley et al., 2002). Two major theoretical explanations for such variations in outdoor recreation are the ethnicity thesis and the marginality thesis (Johnson et al., 1997; Floyd et al., 2008). The ethnicity thesis postulates that observed differences in outdoor recreation are culturally driven and shaped

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by the specific ethnic and cultural background of the members of ethnic groups. The marginality thesis assumes that discrimination and disadvantaged socio-economic situation of migrant and ethnic groups likely influence outdoor recreation choices and behaviours. Beyond this ethnicity/marginality dualism, scholars try to overcome such “single-variable” explanations (Shinew et al., 2006) in considering the interactions between ethnicity and marginality with gender, age and social class or status (see Johnson et al., 1997; Floyd et al., 2008; Ho et al., 2005). The concept of perceived discrimination as a constraining factor for leisure activities is also used to explain differences in leisure behaviours of different ethnic groups’ members (Floyd, 1998; Philipp, 1999). Lastly, in the approach of immigration and assimilation, leisure patterns are partly interpreted as a function of assimilation levels in the host society. Here the reaction to changes in social and natural environments of migrants are considered to influence their leisure habits (Stodolska, 2000; Stodolska and Yi, 2003; Juniu, 2000). Despite a thematic and theoretical diversification in research, several authors observe that leisure research focused on the different participation rates in outdoor recreation, fails to fully explain ethnicity-related differences in leisure (e.g. Shinew et al., 2006; Floyd et al., 2008).

In Europe a growing number of studies focus on diverse natural environments and various ethnic or migrant groups. Nevertheless, the number of scientific publications remains low: a review identified 14 publications on this topic in the last 25 years (Gentin, 2011). As in the USA, existing European research illustrates variations between outdoor recreation patterns of migrant and ethnic groups and the non-migrant, majority-ethnic population. Dutch research focusing on Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch uses and perception of urban parks shows that these groups tend to engage more in outdoor activities with strong social aspects, such as barbecuing or meeting other people, compared to the ‘native’ Dutch population (Peters et al., 2010). Similar results for Turkish migrants were found in a German case study on the use of urban forests (Jay and Schraml, 2009). Conversely, these authors highlighted that migrants from Balkan countries, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were accompanied by fewer friends and family members on their forest visits. In the United Kingdom and Denmark, research results suggest that members of ‘black and minority ethnic groups’ and ‘non-Western migrants’ respectively have lower levels of visiting outdoor green spaces in comparison to ‘white’ and ‘non-migrant’ populations (Morris, 2003; Schipperijn et al., 2010). However, other works reviewed by Gentin (2011) indicate high frequency use of urban parks by young people with Asian, Black or no ethnic background (e.g. Woolley and Amin, 1995, 1999; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000).

Sets of theoretical explanations for such outdoor recreation patterns and preferences in Europe involve the interplay of various factors commonly considered to shape leisure choices and behaviours of individuals. These typically include socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, education or profession, as well as place of residence, upbringing, familiarity and mobility (Van Den Born et al., 2001; Swanwick, 2009; Edwards et al., 2012). Quantitative surveys have also shown that the experience of natural environments during childhood significantly shapes the outdoor recreation preferences of adults (Ward Thompson et al., 2008). However, Rishbeth and Finney (2006) show in their qualitative research with asylum seekers and refugees that migrants may establish unexpected links between familiar landscapes of their home country and their environment in the new country. To explain lower participation rates in outdoor recreation through childhood experiences seems thus rather problematic for ethnic and migrant groups. Independently from age or generation, cultural factors such as religion and feelings of belonging are found to influence the outdoor recreation patterns of people with

migration background (Hohn and Keil, 2006; OPENSpace, 2008) and their perception of nature (Buijs et al., 2009; Nökel, 2009). Which generation of migration individuals belong to is also used to explain different meanings and patterns of outdoor recreation (Edwards and Weldon, 2006; Buijs et al., 2009; Jay and Schraml, 2009). Lastly, comparable to the marginality hypothesis, some authors specifically highlight the role of socio-economic factors in shaping migrants’ recreational patterns and perceptions of nature (OPENSpace, 2008). These factors are often conceptualised as ‘barriers to access’ and related to income or education but also to mobility and distance between forest and home (Edwards and Weldon, 2006).

Critique and research aim

How do the factors outlined above relate to the migration or ethnic background of individuals or groups? As Edwards and Weldon (2006) underlined, it is very difficult to isolate the factors “ethnicity” or “migration” from other factors that simultaneously influence recreational patterns and perceptions of nature. Until now no comprehensive theoretical framework exists across and within these disciplines.

Beyond these particularities, research on ethnicity, migration and outdoor recreation constantly risks essentializing certain population groups. To date, research using ethnic or migration background as a given explanatory factor for observed variations fails to acknowledge the fact that ethnicity and migration background are social constructs (see Floyd, 1998; Shinew et al., 2006; Kivel et al., 2009). European research on outdoor recreation and ethnicity has also been criticised for a lack of recognition of the inner heterogeneity of migrant and ethnic groups (Gentin, 2011). Is the current trend towards more research on recreational patterns of migrants in Europe inadvertently building on and consolidating perceived differences assigned on a global scale to a whole group of people? This concern seems especially legitimate given that similar critique already exists in other fields of migration research. Sociology scholars refer in this context to the process of *othering*, namely the definition of groups in terms of differences between “us” and “the others” (e.g. Said, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2008; Schmidt-Lauber, 2007).

Unreflected use of ethnicity categories in research affects the development of outdoor recreation policies as well as the management of outdoor recreation areas: As Floyd et al. (2008) observe in the Northern American context, “research directions can impact how managers and policy makers frame issues related to race and ethnicity”. This can also be observed in Europe, where strong interlinkages seem to exist between respective national policy regarding issues of access to nature for ethnic minority groups, and the corresponding research (Jay et al., 2012). Each piece of research that enlarges the knowledge base on outdoor recreation patterns of migrants may impact how this issue will be framed in future policy and management.

This calls for research that accounts for a differentiated perspective on recreational choices and behaviours of groups and a reflexive perspective on the social construction of these groups. The present paper addresses this gap in the German context (e.g. Schimany, 2007; Foroutan, 2010). It aims at exploring how a migration background can shape outdoor recreation choices and behaviours of individuals and groups and, conversely, how outdoor recreation choices and behaviours contribute to the construction, consolidation or expression of a (collective or individual) migration background. This paper presents qualitative research carried out in two German cities on how migration can shape urban forest perception and recreation patterns.

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