

“Both Mixed and Segregated”: Fieldwork Portraits on Living with Diversity from Sofielund, Malmö

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With the concept of superdiversity¹, a ‘diversity turn’ has emerged in the social sciences, focusing on how ethnicity intersects with other modes of diversity (such as migration status, social class, lifestyle, and many other variables). This has inspired thorough reflections on the concept of diversity as a matter of perspective rather than an absolute phenomenon². Diversity is not considered a pre-social category but is loaded with attributed meanings and represents perceived and evaluated forms of difference³. Furthermore, a renewed focus on everyday intercultural encounters has led to questions about what living with diversity entails. The literature on urban diversity often criticizes the tendency to emphasize positive and peaceful coexistence, instead pointing to the many nuances and ambiguities of living with diversity, characterized by intersecting contrasts between conflict and conviviality⁴, discrimination and intersubjectivity⁵, tolerance and intolerance⁶. In neighborhoods characterized by diversity, contact between neighbors may not necessarily arise⁷, and they may live very separate and segregated lives⁸. Neighborhoods characterized by diversity may thus appear mixed but without ‘mixity’, i.e., mixing and interaction across diversities⁹. As this empirical piece will show, people may conflate diversity and mixity,

illustrating a contrast between ‘etic’ concepts of diversity and mixity and people’s ‘emic’ use of these concepts in everyday colloquial talk.

This empirical piece is a product of the research project “Urban Governance and Lived Experiences of Segregated and Mixed Neighborhoods in Malmö and Copenhagen - SEGMIX” (funded by FORMAS no 2018-00067). It is based on fieldwork carried out in the neighborhood of Sofielund in Malmö in 2020-2021 and consists of walk-along interviews with residents of Sofielund about their relationship to living in a district often associated with diversity in terms of social class and ethnicity, and mixity, i.e., interaction across diversities. The interviewees were also asked to draw a map of “their” Sofielund, marking the places they mainly frequented. As the fieldwork coincided with COVID-19, some of the interviews were conducted on Zoom.¹⁰

The purpose of this empirical piece is to showcase different experiences of living in a diverse neighborhood and to show how mixity (interaction across diversities) and segregation (no interaction across diversities) can coincide. The empirical piece starts with a contextualization of Sofielund and then gives voice to four interviewed interlocutors who were selected according to their contrasting experiences and reflections on living with diversity.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE DIVERSITY OF SOFIELUND

Sofielund is situated as an extension of the city center of Malmö and the urban superdiverse district of Möllan (Möllevången), bordered by the old industrial area of Norra Grängesbergsgatan. Sofielund is marked by both a diversity of people and architecture, featuring attractive and expensive antique townhouses, multi-story buildings for rent, and condominiums, inhabited by people with different social, religious, educational, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. It is also characterized by social issues such as poverty and criminality. With the intensified immigration to Malmö during the 1980s, many migrants settled in Sofielund. Forty-four percent of Sofielund's inhabitants are foreign-born residents with different migration statuses, compared to the average of 34 percent foreign-born in the whole city of Malmö. The employment level is lower while the percentage of people with higher education is higher in Sofielund than the city average¹¹. Because of these demographic variables, including different migration histories and experiences, languages, religions, and family constellations, Sofielund can be described as a superdiverse urban district¹².

The interlocutors often referred to Sofielund as divided into two parts, "Sofielund South" and "Sofielund North," separated by Lönngatan, a major road. They also spoke of further divisions within Sofielund South and North. Sofielund South is particularly characterized by its diversity of architecture and people, and the media often describe it as "vulnerable" (*utsatt*) and populated by people with low economic and social status and a predominance of foreign-born residents. This particularly applies to Sevedsplan (Seved for short), a public square surrounded by multi-story residential buildings where the street Rasmusgatan is often the subject of media coverage of criminality and social problems. The playground at Sevedsplan is frequented mostly by mothers and their children, and the sound of Arabic and other non-Scandinavian languages prevails. Very close to Sevedsplan is an old neighborhood consisting of antique townhouses owned by middle-class people. The streets here tend to be empty of people and activities apart from residents who occasionally walk their dogs or return

in their cars after working hours. Interlocutors describe Sofielund North as quieter, with few shops and people in the street. Quite a few new public housing buildings have been built in this part of Sofielund during the last decade. Here is the neighborhood of Trevnaden, built in 2015 with the explicit purpose of promoting diversity and inclusion¹³, consisting of a mix of multi-story buildings, terraced houses, and a collective house.

The perception of Sofielund's major and minor divisions seemed to be related to residents' general notion of the area as "both mixed and segregated," which was the spontaneous answer I often got when I asked interlocutors to describe their neighborhood. By that, they indicated that despite its diversity, Sofielund was segregated in the sense that people would stick to their own groups, mainly referring to nationality and race, but at times also by type of residence, e.g., divisions between rental residences and condominiums. Furthermore, the place vibrated with stories about violent encounters and acts of racially motivated vandalism on buildings, as well as both hidden and overt conflicts in everyday encounters (*ibid.*). The following stories are from interviews with four interlocutors from different parts of Sofielund South and North and tell different experiences of living with the diversity of Sofielund and how it involves both interaction across diversities as well as segregation.

IDA, 28 YEARS OLD: "I LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WORLD"

Ida is 28 years old and lives in a one-room apartment in Sofielund North. We conduct the interview on Zoom while Ida is eating her lunch. Ida was born in Stockholm and moved to Malmö when she was 23 years old. Between Stockholm and Malmö, she lived for three years in London. She is doing her MA at Malmö University.

Ida compares Malmö to London and contrasts both cities to Stockholm "where everybody is alike. It's just like it's more interesting that people are more different, and you learn more about the world, and about... I thrive in milieus that are mixed, and I have always thrived in such milieus. I have many different friends of different ages and backgrounds.

I think I get stimulated by learning new things and new ways and so, and not only hang out with people who are exactly like me." Ida speaks about "mix" (*blandning*) in Malmö in terms of: "Economies, languages, perspectives, and characters in Malmö, such as a lady who is always dressed in red; a guy who bikes around with a small umbrella on his head while he plays loud music; another biker who lies flat on his bike while smoking a pipe. They are odd Malmö people whom I love." She compares this to "Stockholm types that are self-assured and condescending." In her opinion, this "heterogeneity contributes to a milieu that is accepting, welcoming, and safe."

Ida thinks that Sofielund is more mixed than Möllan because of the diverse architecture, and especially the contrast between the townhouses and the industrial area of Norra Grängesbergsgatan, where she is part of an office space and frequents the nightclubs and falafel places. She borrows tools at the library Garaget, frequents a bar in the neighborhood - Jesusbaren - which has a "cozy ambience," and shops every day at the kiosk Time, "a typical Malmö kiosk... cozy, and the owner also works as an actor." She often speaks to people she does not know at these and other places. When asked whether she interacts with people who differ from her, Ida says: "Yes, at cafés and bars where you often speak to people you don't know." When asked if she has friends with different ethnic backgrounds, she replies: "Yes. But I don't think so actively about whether people are, for example, Arabs. I have more friends with another ethnic background here in Malmö than in Stockholm."

When asked about her thoughts on the multicultural society, Ida mentions the many migrant shops, for example, the Asian food shops around Möllan, as a cheap way to travel, and answers: "I love to travel. [...] It feels like I learn more about the world here even if I stay in the same place... then I can find new things, because there are so many different cultures."

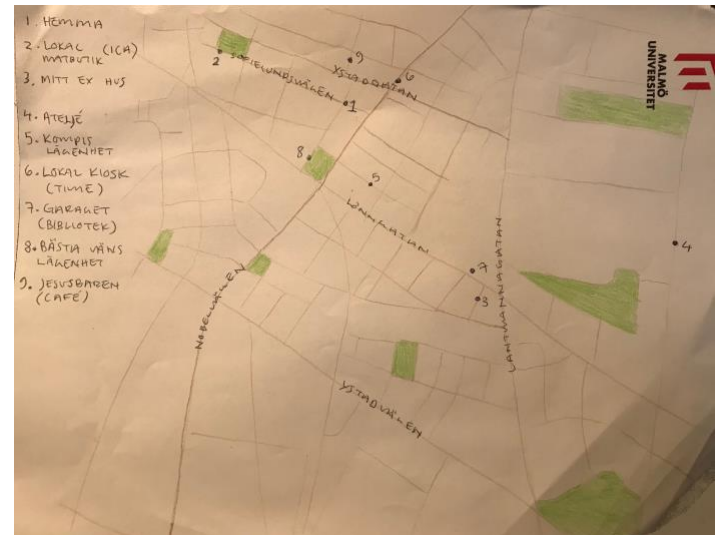


Figure 1. Ida's map of Sofielund

JONATHAN, 42 YEARS OLD: "I WANT TO LIVE IN A CITY THAT BUILDS BRIDGES"

Jonathan is 42 years old and lives in a big old house in Sofielund South, where I drop by unannounced to ask for an interview one Tuesday afternoon in September 2021. He immediately invites me inside. Jonathan moved into the house with his ex-wife in 2012, and now lives alone while his ex-wife lives nearby. Their two children, aged 8 and 12, move between their two homes in Sofielund. In the past, Jonathan lived for a while in New York, which reminds him of Möllevången. Before settling in Sofielund, he lived in Södervärn and Möllevången. Jonathan works as a designer in his own company. He frequents both Sofielund South and North, mainly the nearby kiosk at Sevedsplan where he picks up his parcels and buys snacks, and where he used to go to the playground with his children. His brother used to live on Jespersgatan in Seved, which Jonathan describes as "a bit of the wild West," reminding him of how once his son was attacked by another boy on the playground in Sevedsplan because he refused to lend his toys. Yet, Jonathan does not feel unsafe at Seved, and he wants his son to be able to go alone to the kiosk to buy snacks. Jonathan talks about a young man who was stabbed to death just a few blocks away from his home a few weeks before our interview: "I don't want my son to see these things when I send him out to buy snacks...but then it's often internal conflicts [between gangs]. There aren't really any places that I feel unsafe about. At Rasmusgatan, there are a lot

of gangs... But I'm not worried about my children, maybe I'll be when they are older."

Jonathan's closest neighbors and friends are from creative professions like himself: a journalist, an architect, and a musician. When asked whether he knows people who differ a lot from himself, he says: "Mostly through my kids, I guess. The kids become the bridge, right. Those friends that they have are the reason that I meet their parents... Especially their pre-school was very mixed, so my kids have never seen it [diversity] as something strange, because since they were very small, they have recognized the existence of Arabic kids, of black kids. And that's great, that may combat racism and estrangement. Today, they go to the non-public school of Kastanjeskolan, which is less diverse than the nearby Sofielundsskolan. Politically, I'm against this segregated mindset, still I signed my son up to Kastanjeskolan when he was one year old, and he was accepted." When asked whether Jonathan experiences Sofielund as diverse or segregated, he says: "The area is very mixed, but it feels like there are segregated units in the area. But there are certain places that I think are really positive [examples of mixity]. I want to live in a city that builds bridges, even if I put my kids in a non-public school – so it's a bit ambiguous."

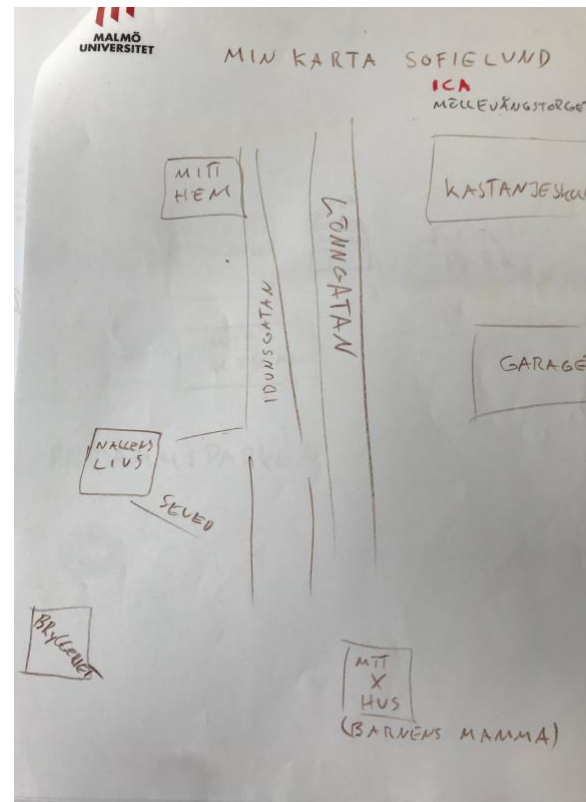


Figure 2. Jonathan's map of Sofielund

DRAGAN, 44 YEARS OLD: DIVERSITY IS HARD WORK

My interview with Dragan consists of a walk-along interview on Zoom, where he shows me his Sofielund through the screen of his smartphone instead of drawing a map of it. Dragan is 44 years old and is the son of Yugoslavian parents who migrated to Sweden for work in the late 1960s; while speaking about his family, he uses the word "assimilated" to identify himself. Dragan was born in a small town in Scania, has lived in Möllervången, and moved to Sofielund in 2015. He now lives in the neighborhood of Trevnaden in its collective house with his wife and two children. His children go to the nearby public school Sofielundsskolan. Dragan works as a freelance journalist and is active in left-wing politics. When asked how he experiences Sofielund, Dragan answers: "Definitely as a mixed area, both ethnically and socially [...]. For me, this is fantastic. I wouldn't like to grow up in a residential area of villas where everybody was alike. I like the mix. I like the closeness to the city center, to restaurants and shops. I like that there are people from all over the world. And it was obvious for us to put our children in a mixed school." Another reason for Dragan to live

in Sofielund is that he associates living with diversity as “super political”: “It is also political to live in a mixed area and see the whole world, see how Sweden is, and not live in a protected bubble. So, our children can get good relations, learn to know the entire world, see how Sweden is, and not live in a protected suburb.” Dragan’s children have friends with different ethnic backgrounds, also from mixed parents: “The positive thing is that you get influences from the entire world, you get to see other cultures, you get an understanding of everybody.” When asked whether diversity is a hindrance to having relations with others, he disagrees, yet adds: “Diversity is not a hindrance for socializing with others... but it’s much harder work to socialize with others who have a situation that is very different from yours... It’s much harder work when you are different in terms of different cultures and class, different experiences.” Dragan says that it is easier to speak to people who are alike in terms of politics and values such as child-rearing.

About living in the neighborhood of Trevnaden that is constructed with the purpose of creating urban diversity and how living with diversity unfolds there, he laughs and says: “I would wish that everything was happy-happy, that we braided each other’s hair and danced dances and were interested in each other’s cultures. But it’s not like that. But that doesn’t mean that it is bad either. There’s a lot of potential for development for both creating the neighborhood of Trevnaden and a Sofielund that is this great thing where everybody can hang out with one another. But we work on it now. [...] During summer it can be fantastic, with lots of children outside. But then, it’s also very conflictual at the courtyard, there is a group of children who terrorize the courtyard, some of them live at Trevnaden. They are between 11 and 14 years old. They terrorize the courtyard by shouting at each other and frightening the other children. My children don’t want to be in the courtyard any longer. There are also small children, who at the age of two years are out on their own; it can be cultural divisions, or class divisions, maybe they don’t thrive, I don’t know.” Dragan speaks about a clash between families due to differences in child-rearing and identifies child-rearing practices as a marker of difference. He wished that he had more relations with other

neighbors who are different from him, but this is not so, he says, and connects different forms of child-rearing to ethnicity: “We don’t socialize with Arab and Somali parents, it’s like there is no connection. And I’m not quite able to take the initiative, but also because they are letting them [their children] out in the courtyard at late hours.” Dragan mentions that partly because of Trevnaden’s inclusive and open architecture, drug-dealing, conflicts, violence, and vandalism affect the residents’ lives. It exhibits the vulnerability of the neighborhood, and he fears that people like himself and his family who moved to Trevnaden to live with diversity may move out.

KRISTIAN, 38 YEARS OLD: “CULTURE MEETINGS IN SOFIELUND LOOK GREAT ON PAPER... IN PRACTICAL LIFE THEY BECOME PROBLEMATIC”

Thirty-eight-year-old Kristian is among those neighbors who Dragan mentions, who may end up abandoning Trevnaden, where he has lived in a three-story building with his wife and two small children since 2019. Kristian was born and has lived most of his life in a quiet neighborhood with large villas in a different part of Malmö. I meet Kristian at his staircase in Trevnaden, and he right away says that his relationship with Trevnaden is “ambiguous.” He shows me the courtyard and mentions that there is a lot of vandalism and wear and tear there. He points at one of the passages, mentioning that many 15-year-old young people use the place to sit and smoke: “Those who sit there, a gang of youth demonstrating tough culture, where you need to be aggressive, and you need to be able to fight, and say ‘fuck you’, that kind of jargon. And I have not at all grown up with that jargon, it is totally strange to me. So, I have difficulties in this culture meeting, and it is extra difficult that it [the courtyard] is open, that there are a lot of new people all the time.”

Kristian does not spend a lot of time in the public spaces of either Trevnaden or Sofielund; he often bikes to other areas of Malmö. Trevnaden’s open courtyard with its occasional conflicts makes him anxious. He feels that in Trevnaden, he lives in a public open space, where anything can happen, and this makes him want to move back to the quiet neighborhood with villas where he grew up: “I don’t

really want to live in a public space, I want my own home... This courtyard, there's a feeling that it's closed, that it's our courtyard. But when you look at it, then it is open, everybody can enter. And these types of courtyards have the worst conditions for the milieu as they signal that this is a space that we should take care of, but at the same time they also signal that anybody can enter... and the feeling becomes that you don't really feel committed to the place. [...] I need my own safe place that I feel is mine, or where I can decide who I want to share it with."

Kristian tells about his experiences of "chaos" in the courtyard: "There are these contrasts, I'm just standing and talking with a neighbor about growing plants, and it's super nice, and then two youths pass by and scream 'fucking bitch' and throw their cigarette butts." About such situations, Kristian says: "This openness [of the courtyard] and these culture meetings look great on paper... in practical life they become problematic." Kristian describes Sofielund as "confusing" because of its diversity. He mostly spends time with neighbors with whom he feels alike: "People who think like me. And I'm not proud about this way of thinking, but at the same time, I can't prevent it. Because they are people who think like me, share my values and such. And this is part of a safety-seeking mentality in me, and in most people."

When asked whether Kristian considers diversity as a hindrance to coexistence, he negates yet says that he needs a safe space "that I know as mine, and where I can choose who I share it with, right.... I definitely think that cultural encounters are possible, but you must also be able to have your own in-group. It can't just be diversities who meet. That, I think, makes you feel bad."

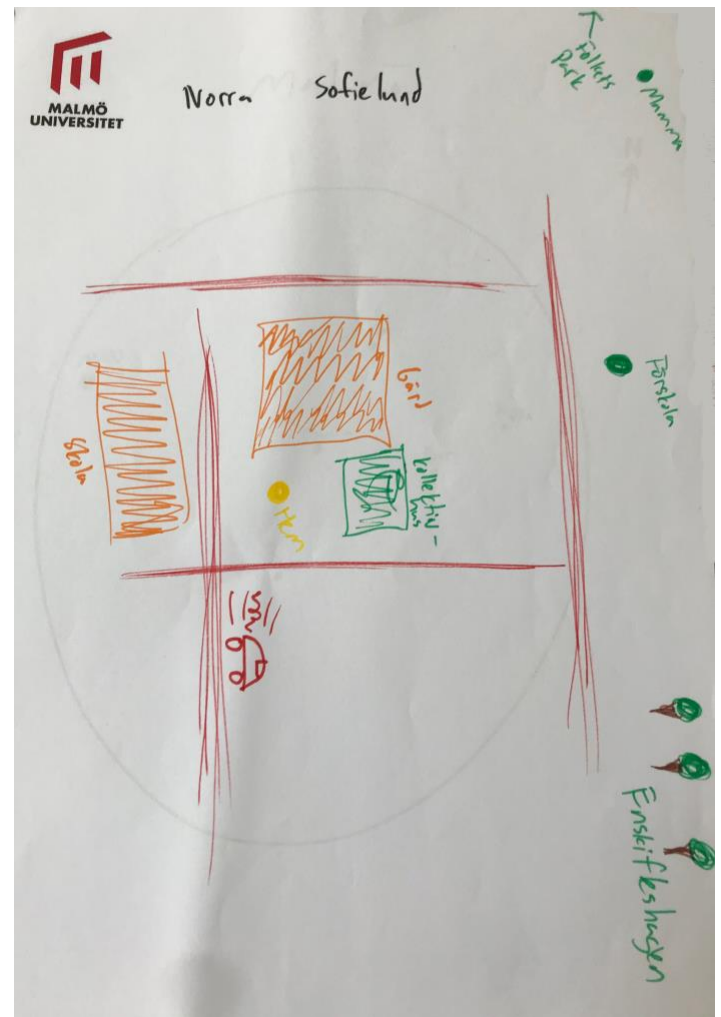


Figure 3. Kristian's map of Sofielund

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