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Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife

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Chapter 3 Studying the nightlife of and for ethnic groups

In this chapter I will explain the research design of this study. I will begin with a presentation and explanation of the research questions that guide this work. Then, in the second section, the analytical model for the study of nightlife choice is sketched out. In the third section, I present the case studies, while in the final part the level of analyses is explained by an exploration of the concept of scenes.

3.1 Subject of research

In the first chapter, I demonstrated that some researchers have tried to integrate elements of the subcultural and the post-subcultural approach. This integrated outlook is not, however, particularly satisfactory, because although the influence of the processes of agency and structure on the lives of young people are acknowledged, the interaction between them is not made clear. Furthermore, I have argued that ‘ethnic dimensions’ in the choice of a club or party are largely overlooked by nightlife researchers, even though these are likely to have an impact. In the second chapter, I reflected on nightlife studies conducted from both the producers and the consumers’ perspectives. In doing so, it became clear that some researchers focus on the dividing power of the former, while the main interest of others is the choices that the latter makes. I argued that it is important to include the dividing strategies of both the producers and the consumers, because each set of players in the nightlife market influences the other. So, the producers, who control the supply, affect the nightlife choices of the consumers. For instance, they can limit the number of options open to certain groups of young people by their door policies and the music they play. However, just as in any market, the producers are also dependent on their consumers. If growing numbers of clients do not feel welcome at a venue, or believe that their musical tastes are not represented and, as a result, do not participate in the nightlife on offer, producers are faced with declining crowds. Indeed, this is particularly important in view of the increase in competition between clubs as a result of the growing numbers of them that are opening up in cities.

In this way, the consumers of nightlife also have an impact on the supply side thereof.

Research questions

In this study, the main focus is on the dynamic interplay between the producers and the consumers of nightlife. This is examined in two different ways. Firstly, I attempt to unravel the nightlife choices made by ethnic minority young people. By focusing on the dynamic interplay between the producers and the consumers of night-time activities, it becomes possible to analyze how the processes of agency and social structure influence each other in the decisions that ethnic youngsters make about what they want to do at night. The second way in which the dynamic interplay between producers and consumers is investigated is by learning more about the changes that take place in inner-city nightlife when the urban population becomes more ethnically diverse.

The two research questions which guide this study are:

- 1 How do ethnic minority young people choose an ethno-party?
 - a. How do the producers of nightlife affect this choice?
 - b. How do the personal preferences of the consumers affect this choice?
- 2 How do the choices of a changing urban population affect the supply side of the nightlife market?

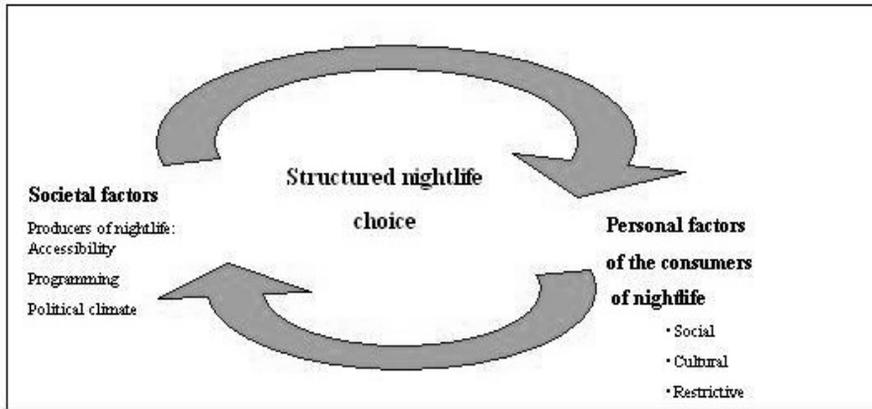
3.2 An analytical model for the study of nightlife choice

In order to conduct this study and answer the research questions posed above, what is required is an analytical model that is sensitive to the interplay between the structural factors of the availability and accessibility of nightlife, and the processes of agency related to the choices of the consumers. This model should be capable of analyzing the nightlife choices of ethnic young people, both as the cumulative result of individual decisions, and as a manifestation of a society imposing behavioural constraints on human beings. I have labelled the analytical framework designed for this study as the *model of structured choice*. It is able to transcend the macro-micro dichotomy because it is sensitive to a flexible use of the processes of agency and structure.

These concepts of agency and social structure are used differently in many studies, and I will therefore first define how both of these processes must be understood herein. The main starting point is the recognition that a social life is more than random individual acts on the one hand, but is also not merely determined by social structures on the other. In this study, I will use the concept of agency as defined by Giddens as ‘the ability of a reflexive, knowledgeable person to exercise discretion in choosing to act’ (1982: 29). In this sense, young people are considered to be making choices as active agents.

In this research, agency is operationalized as the personal factors divided between the social and cultural dimensions. I have also identified three types of restrictions that determine nightlife choices negatively: the regulatory role of parents, door policies and economic resources. The personal factors guide the decisions that young people make about whether or not to attend a particular club or party. Social structures are defined by Giddens (1982) as rules and resources which both enable and constrain the actions of humans in their daily lives. This broad definition highlights that human action can only be understood by taking processes in wider society into account. Social structures are being reproduced, transformed and internalized through experiences in daily life. In this study, the political climate and the nightlife that is available and accessible are determined to be the most important social structures. The nightlife choices that ethnic minority young people make occur in a dynamic interplay between the strategies of the producers of nightlife, who control availability and entry to their clubs, and the personal preferences and tastes of individual visitors. Furthermore, young people are conceived as agents whose knowledge about their day-to-day activities is intertwined with social structures, meaning that the decisions they make about their night-time activities can, therefore, be regarded as a ‘structured nightlife choice’. For analytical purposes, I have divided these structured nightlife choices into personal and societal factors.

Figure 1 is an image of the analytical model of structured nightlife choice.



Societal factors

Societal factors are the social structures of nightlife, and they are comprised of the strategies used by producers to attract a certain dance crowd through their programming and the accessibility of their clubs, as well as the political climate. In this model, the political climate refers to all of the dynamics in the social environment that position young people in society.

The first strategy that producers of nightlife employ to attract a certain audience is the size of the fee to gain entry to their premises. Some clubs charge a significant sum, while others charge very little or nothing at all. In this way, the decisions made by young people of limited economic means about which club to attend are partially influenced by this fee and the price of drinks. Of course, some groups of young people have more disposable income than others, and the entry fee and the cost of drinks, therefore, has less of an impact on where they go for a night out.

The second strategy that producers of nightlife employ to attract a certain audience is the programming of music. Different types of music attract different types of crowds. A trendy and stylish program will attract a small but trendy and, in general, more cash-rich audience, while a club or party that programs predominantly mainstream music is visited by larger numbers of people. Urban and

RnB parties, for instance, are popular with a more ethnically mixed crowd, whereas trance and hardcore house events are mainly attended by white clubbers. In this way, the producers of nightlife can attract the audiences they want. Indeed, the music programming of clubs and party organizations has a clear impact on the number of options that young people can choose from. In general, youngsters with a more mainstream taste in music have more parties to choose from than those with more 'exclusive' or 'exotic' musical preferences.

The third and final strategy that producers of nightlife employ to attract a particular audience is the door policy. Different types of venues have their own set of entry requirements, and use subtle forms of discrimination at the door, based on age, appearance, social class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. With a specific door policy in place, the producers of nightlife control the ethnic, social and cultural make-up of their consumers. As a result, some groups of young people have better access to clubs than others, and this factor also influences the number of options they can choose from.

Personal factors

The personal factors have been subdivided into a cultural and a social dimension, and into three types of restrictions. Because the ethnic background of an individual clubber can play a role in all of the different elements of the personal factors, ethnicity is not listed as a separate category. Furthermore, the way in which ethnic identity has an impact on nightlife choices and experiences can differ among individual clubbers. Some prefer to go to places where 'ethnic' music is programmed, while others favour the more mainstream Hip-hop or RnB. Another example can be found in the presence of co-ethnics in the dance crowd. Some may find this more important than others.

The social dimension refers to the so-called social mechanisms. These involve processes of identification and differentiation. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, young people gravitate towards certain dance places where they identify with the crowds and experience feelings of belonging. Thus, in this subdivision, the role of the social characteristics of the age, ethnicity and gender of the dance crowd in creating the experience of feelings

of belonging are analyzed. Furthermore, young people go out in so-called *peer*-groups and visit places and venues where they expect to meet friends and acquaintances. Questions about with whom and on what grounds they identify with friends, or differentiate themselves from others, are important if we are to learn more about their social positions and preferences. As well as the social characteristics of friends and the dance crowd, social rules also play a part in the sense of belonging to a certain scene or party. The 'rules of flirting' and interaction largely determine the atmosphere in a club. The social composition of the dance crowd and these social rules have a role to play in the choices that are made between different nightlife scenes, but this can also differ in terms of the different parties within one scene.

The second dimension of the personal factors refers to cultural elements. Here, attention is paid to how the social mechanisms mentioned above are displayed culturally. It is this cultural taste that divides young people into different cultural groups and parties. The music that is played, the way in which people are dressed and how they dance all have an important role in the identification and differentiation of the dance crowd and the dance party. In his influential book *Subculture, the meaning of style*, Hebdiges (1979) distinguishes four elements which determine the differences between subcultures e.g. shoes, clothing/jewellery, hairstyle and pose. Every scene has its own music program, with a concomitant dress code and style of dancing. Accordingly, in this dimension, the cultural elements of dress code, music and dance style are analyzed as creators of divisions between and within scenes.

The final element of the personal factors is comprised of three types of restrictions: the regulating role of parents, the door policy experienced and economic resources. These restrictions determine nightlife choices negatively. Although a night out seems to be all about having fun, it also costs a lot of money. Young people differ in terms of the amount of money they have or what they are willing to spend on going out. Clubbers not only have to pay an entrance fee, but must also have enough money to buy themselves and their friends some drinks. Another area in which economic resources are required relates to the issue of transport to a

club or party. Not everyone has access to a car or is able to pay for a taxi or even public transport. Particularly if the party is taking place in a different city, the costs of transportation can be a significant constraint.

For different kinds of reasons, parents can also play a key role in whether youngsters are admitted or denied access to particular venues in the urban nightlife scene or, indeed, to urban nightlife at all. Girls in particular are sometimes limited in their freedom to choose a certain venue. If parents do not allow their children to go out, their opportunities to do so are restricted or even extinguished. What is more, the perceived and experienced door policies of clubs and parties play a role in the nightlife choices that are made. Although it is club bouncers and owners who decide who is allowed to enter their premises, the clubbers' experiences and ideas about accessibility do have an impact on their actions and choices. If they have been refused entry to a club or party before, or if they have had negative experiences with an organization, they are more likely to go elsewhere.

3.3 Choosing the case-studies of the ethnic groups

In ethnography, case-studies are used to limit the scope of a piece of research. It is often defined as an intensive and detailed analysis of a single case, such as a single community, a single school, a single organization or a single event. Furthermore, a case also refers to the particular angle from which a social phenomenon is being studied. Hammersley and Atkinson explain the relationship between setting and case by stating that a setting is 'a named context in which phenomena occur that might be studied from any number of angles; a case is those phenomena seen from one particular angle' (1984: 41). After deciding that my research setting would be urban nightlife in the Netherlands, I also had to choose my case-studies. These are: the Turkish clubbing scene, the Asian party scene and the Moroccan leisure scene. In each case I have narrowed the scope even further by selecting a limited number of parties within each scene.

There were several reasons why the choice of these three cases was obvious. The first and most important is that the parties in these three scenes are organized in popular clubs which belong to inner-city nightlife. Other ethno-parties, such as Somali events, take place

in rented halls outside the heart of the city or in community centres. A second important reason is that the parties which take place in the three scenes occur regularly and are commercially arranged by professional (party) organizations. This is not the case with Surinamese and Antillean events, for example, which are not organized on a frequent basis. The third and final reason is that all three examples can be identified as dance scenes with a number of organizations operating therein, DJs who play at diverse parties, and an audience which travels between the different events and uses different party planners. No other ethno-parties matched these three criteria.

Comparing the three scenes

The reason why I included three scenes in this study, instead of one or two, is because the element of comparison brings added value, enabling the usefulness and importance of the analytical model of structured choice to be demonstrated. Only by making comparisons is it possible to reveal how the processes of social structure and agency interact in the nightlife choices that young ethnic people make. Moreover, comparing three ethno-scenes makes it possible to move beyond reification of their ethnic characteristics. So, instead of ascribing all of the elements of a scene, or the personal factors which influence a choice, as being ‘typically Turkish’ for example, by comparing the three scenes I am able to make distinctions between ethnic characteristics and those that can also be found in other dance arenas, such as RnB or trance house.

A second reason why it is interesting to include all three ethno-scenes relates to the fact that they are each at a different stage of popularity. The Asian party scene has already had its heyday, the Turkish clubbing scene is currently flourishing and very popular, and the Moroccan leisure scene is in the early stages of its development. These three different stages will shed light on the producer-consumer relationship and will help me to answer the second research question, namely whether and how inner-city nightlife is changing as a result of a growing ethnic population.

Research location

After conducting my preliminary fieldwork, I discovered that ethno-parties actually took place all over the Netherlands, but that the most popular and largest events were concentrated in the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Given that I lived and worked in Amsterdam at the time of the fieldwork, the obvious decision was to focus on its nightlife. The initial plan was to also include the nightlife in Rotterdam, but an unequal spread of ethno-parties there caused me to go in another direction. In order to get a good overview of the three ethno-party scenes, I decided not to limit this study with geographical boundaries, but to instead include the most popular and significant party organizations for each scene, wherever they were located. For the Turkish clubbing scene, this meant that I included two such organizations in Amsterdam and two in Rotterdam. In the case of the Moroccan leisure scene, two Amsterdam organizations and one in Waalwijk, a small city in the south of the Netherlands, were utilized. Finally, for the Asian party scene, it transpired that the most popular parties are held in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Bunnik (a small town near Utrecht). Accordingly, I included one organization from each of these places in the study.

The Turkish clubbing scene

The first Turkish party in the Netherlands took place in the early 1990s, following on from the success of similar events organized in Germany, where Turkish club venues have sprung up since that decade (Kosnick 2004: 3). These parties are generally arranged in established and popular clubs in inner-cities. At the time of my fieldwork in 2006, the Turkish clubbing scene was very popular and growing, with several party organizations operating in the Turkish nightlife market. Almost every weekend, events are organized somewhere in the Netherlands. As well as established Turkish party planners, new ones are setting up businesses on a regular basis. However, the four most popular and established organizations, which are the ones included in this study, are: *Keyifland* and *Sahmeran Entertainment* in Rotterdam and *33 Events* and *Club Mahsen* in Amsterdam. The crowds at these parties are primarily comprised of first and second generation young Turkish migrants, and Turkish music is played at all four of these events. Finally, all of

these party organizations have come up with a unique concept, consisting of music programming, ideology, dress code and image, all with the aim of targeting a specific audience.

The Asian party scene

The Asian party scene is the oldest ethno-party scene in the Netherlands, and experienced its heyday in the mid 1990s. At that time, large Asian parties, which predominantly attracted Dutch Chinese youngsters, took place all over the Netherlands on a regular basis. Nowadays, however, the number of Asian party organizations has fallen significantly. Those that are still arranging events and continue to be popular are: *Santai* in Rotterdam, *Asian Escape* in Amsterdam and *HuMan Entertainment* in Utrecht. Accordingly, these are the organizations which have been included in this research. Most Asian parties take place in popular clubs on Friday nights. Although they all promote their events as ‘Asian’, there are differences in the ethnic backgrounds of their crowds. Some organizations predominantly target young Dutch Indonesian or Dutch Taiwanese clubbers, while others have an almost exclusive Dutch Chinese crowd. The music programmed at these diverse events can best be characterized as a mix of RnB and clubhouse. This is also the type of music that can be heard in many mainstream clubs.

The Moroccan leisure scene

The Moroccan party scene is relatively new in the nightlife market. According to the organization, *Marmoucha*, the first Moroccan party was organized in 1999. The reasoning behind it was to put Moroccan music on the Dutch nightlife agenda and offer young Dutch-Moroccans a space where they could listen and dance to rai and Moroccan sounds. These parties are not arranged very often. Most of them take place in the late afternoon or early evening, and last until midnight. The main reason for this is that many Dutch-Moroccan youngsters (especially women) are not allowed to go out late at night. Another detail which makes the parties more accessible to their target audience is that no alcohol is served. In contrast to the Asian party and the Turkish clubbing scenes, most Moroccan parties take place during the daytime and are not centered on the music played by DJs, but instead feature live bands, workshops and

debates. The term leisure scene is, therefore, more appropriate. I decided to include these events in the research because they take place in mainstream clubs and are based on the example of parties in urban nightlife, with their main goal being to offer visitors the chance to dance to music produced by a DJ. The music that is played is popular Moroccan and Arabic tunes. Because the Moroccan leisure scene is relatively new, only a few agencies operate in this market. These are the organization *Marmoucha* and the youth centre *Argan*, both in Amsterdam, and the organization *SMP*, which arranges the popular party Hafla Shaabia annually in Den Bosch. These are the three Moroccan organizations which have been included in this study.

3.4 Level of analysis: places, spaces or scenes?

Chatterton and Hollands (2003) introduced the term ‘nightlife space’ to draw attention to the relationship between the consumers and producers of urban nightlife in Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. They presented an understanding of nightlife spaces, which comprised the three processes of *production, regulation and consumption*, based on the theory of Du Gay (1997). Urban nightlife was divided into three different spaces, the *mainstream*, the *residual* and the *alternative*. In their research, Chatterton and Hollands (2003) stressed the influence of local, national and multinational operators within urban nightlife, and the role of both formal and informal regulations when it comes to explaining divisions therein. Their main focus was on how the producers of nightlife and the processes of regulation create divisions in night time activities. There was little attention paid to the dividing power of consumers. When it came to ethnic minority youngsters, Chatterton and Hollands argued that the producers are pushing these young people out of mainstream nightlife into the residual nightlife space. Their use of the term space reflects their emphasis on the spatial divisions of night-time activities. Instead of drawing a picture of a dynamic and rapidly changing nightlife, they presented Newcastle’s urban nightlife as a map upon which you could mark out the mainstream, residual and alternative nightlife spaces with different colours.

Spaces or scenes?

Because of the changing and innovative nature of both nightlife in the Netherlands and the consumers thereof, I prefer a more flexible and dynamic approach to this issue. This is because party concepts, DJs and consumers travel, even between different cities, signifying a 'subcultural space' that is not bounded or fixed spatially. Young people usually visit several different parties and clubs and do not restrict themselves to one particular venue or event, or even to one city. These days, contemporary clubbers can choose from a range of more or less similar parties which have programmed the same style of music at different venues. Even in one city, young people are able to choose between a number of clubs which play the same sort of music on a typical Friday or Saturday night. Club owners, and the party organizations which program more or less the same type of music, compete with each other to attract the right type of crowd, and there is an exchange of visitors between them. Furthermore, clubs change their programming frequently in order to remain innovative and trendy and, thus, attractive to their audiences. Likewise, the organizers also often change the locations of their parties. The Turkish company *33 events*, for example, commonly changes the clubs in which its parties are held for this reason. Accordingly, instead of referring to separate parties and clubs, and dividing nightlife into fixed, spatial 'spaces', it is better to come up with a concept which reflects the dynamic interplay between the consumers and the producers of nightlife.

Scenes

According to Straw (1991: 379), 'scenes' 'actualize a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups, as these coalesce around specific coalitions of musical style' (Straw 1991: 379). The concept of scene is used to highlight the interconnection between production and consumption within musical contexts that are both global and local. It is a term that is also extensively used in the everyday discourse of young music followers and stylists. Consequently, researchers have used this concept as a descriptor of local sites of cultural, particularly musical cultural, production and consumption (see, for example, Kruse 1993; Bennett and Peterson 2004).

I will therefore use the concept of the dance scene, which I define as:

A non spatially fixed cultural space which may be orientated as much around stylistic as face-to face contact in a venue, club or other urban setting, and which is comprised of producers and consumers involved in a similar musical orientation and similar style-based parties.

An important implication of this concept is that it is not a spatial but a stylistic and musically orientated construct. Nightlife in the larger cities in the Netherlands can be divided into separate dance scenes; e.g. RnB, Hip-hop, trance, ethno-party, Gothic etc. A division today may well be outdated tomorrow. However, because it is not the location but the players in the field e.g. the producers and consumers who are being examined, it is possible to analyze the dynamic interplay between these actors. Furthermore, because of the attention paid to the dynamic interplay between these two groups, the concept of the dance scene makes it possible to examine the changes that are taking place in urban nightlife.

Distinction between and within dance scenes

Because a dance scene is comprised of several separate parties, clubs and crowds (e.g. Turkish clubbing, RnB, trance house), it is possible to analyze the differences *within* one scene. By using the dance scene as a level of analysis, different forms of accessibility and the processes of identification and differentiation between and within scenes can be examined. This leads to a more complete understanding of the experiences and choices that individual clubbers and producers make. The producers of nightlife, like the nightclub owners or the party organizations, compete with each other to remain popular, using different strategies to distinguish themselves from other venues, parties and companies within the boundaries of the scene. Consumers, on the other hand, will draw distinctions both between and also *within* dance scenes to select their favourite party. For instance, they will not only decide between the regular and the Turkish clubbing scenes, but are also likely to have a favourite party within the latter. Processes of choice take

place on these two levels.