

Is Urban Space Able to Affect Community Participation? a Research Proposal between Urban Sociology and Environmental Psychology

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Abstract

This paper will deal with the study of the relation between the urban spaces and social phenomena. Today the world is considered as a "global village", where the borders and differences between the places seem to lose their meaning; it would be interesting to ask whether the space is still crucial to understand social phenomena in contemporary societies. This opens the big question that we will try to give an answer: may the space be considered as a variable able to affect social behavior? In last decades sociologists have further increased the interest about this issue, coming to what has been defined "spatial sociology". In social science we rarely find out researches which try to answer to the key question: how space affects inhabitants? How can we measure this relation? We can insight more and more this very fascinating issue looking at other disciplines. For instance, environmental psychology has developed a long tradition in the identification and measurement of the perception of space by people. This different point of view allow us to deepen the relation within spaces and people, measuring several aspect of the impact of space in individual's life, such as place attachment, urban quality perceived, and so on. In this paper I will present my PhD's research project, endorsing the environmental psychological as useful theoretical and methodological framework to study the space-people relation in urban sociology.

Keywords: urban space, environmental psychology, community participation, place attachment, urban sociology.

1. The role of space in sociology

In an era where the world is considered a "global village" (McLuhan, 1992), where the borders and differences between the places seem to lose their meaning, we wonder if the space is still crucial to understand the contemporary society. The sociological literature shows since the beginning the awareness about the importance of space in social analysis. Simmel (1908) was the first sociologist which explicitly considered space in his micro-social analysis. Goffman (1959, 1971, 1963, 1974) dissects in detail the behavior of individuals interacting in different environmental contexts, typical of everyday life, identifying the variability of attitude into the so-called "public sphere" and the "private sphere". Foucault (1964, 1984) identified on one hand the reification of governance power into the space, and on the other hand discovering the capacity of the physical locations to evoke other places (heterotopias). Harvey (1978), despite being a geographer, was the first who draw attention to an holistic approach to space, putting it in close connection with the social spatial analysis. De Certeau (1990) speaks of space daily "invented" by the people, who are engaged in social practices by creating and re-inventing the space they live. Other authors have highlighted the effects of the explosive social transformations driven by capitalist transformations (Sennett, 1974) and, consequently, the impact of globalization on individual lifestyles (McLuhan, 1992). The final result of this processes, according to Giddens (1990) is the "disembedding" of space and time. We actually live in a society composed of individuals alone, virtually connected, but physically far. The perception that the variable space had lost weight in sociological analysis, led some authors to resume intuition of Simmel. At the beginning of 2000s, Thomas Gieryn publishes the article "A Space for Place in Sociology" (Gieryn, 2000). Here, the scholar proposes to reconnect the bond broken between the spatial dimension and social analysis; he states that consider space into the analysis is not the only goal of geographers and architects, but also for sociologist. It is echoed by a contribution of Herbert Gans, when in 2002 he published the article "The Sociology of Space: A Use-Centered View" (Gans, 2002). For Gans, space becomes

important in the research when it becomes "social space" and individuals are fostered to use it for their own purposes, changing the boundaries, filling it with meanings and symbols. Also in the Italian context, since the 90s, the research has made its way into the renaissance of the space in sociology; for instance, Arnaldo Bagnasco (1994) insists on the returning to an urban sociology with its specific vocation to study social facts in conjunction with the spatial dimension. More in general, the theories about space and place in sociology are strongly present in the literature, but what that seems is the lack of interest in empirical efforts, with the aim to test these theory into the field. We can find some of our research interests in the quality of life's studies. In this area of interest, sociology shows a long tradition, for instance on the topic of quality of life in neighborhood (Russ-Eft, 1979) or about the civic engagement as indicator of quality of life (Baker-Palmer, 2006; Grillo-Teixeira-Wilson, 2009). These works are a good starting point, but we stress the role of environmental psychology as an alternative source of knowledge, because the key concepts as space, place, and the operationalization of the relation within people and places has been very meaningfully studied and codified.

2. The environmental psychology as framework to understand space-people relation

The seminal works of Proshansky and colleagues (1970) started the studies on the relationship between people and physical spaces. That point was the beginning of the so called "environmental psychology". The development of the discipline was strongly connected to architecture and the physical planning of the buildings. The growing interest on space in psychology led the development of different paradigms, among which we include the transactional one, taking over the definition given in the works of Dewey and Bentley (1949), for which the environment as we know it is the product, not the cause of perception (Ittelson et al., 1974). This paradigm was the one best suited to the needs of environmental psychology research. However, the approach so far developed by environmental psychology was based primarily on an individual dimension. Stokols and Altman (1987) proposed to use the transactional approach, as part of environmental psychology, in a social way rather than individual. This made it possible to refine the theoretical framework recovering a holistic view of the phenomenon, that is, considering concept of place as an embedded system of social, symbolic and physical factors.

The goal of environmental psychology research is focused on the analysis of the modality in which individuals relate with their environment. This concept can be declined in two ways, depending on the research question: observing the environmental practices of individuals (Ittelson, 1970; Sommer, 1969) (practice's dimension – qualitative methods), or studying the environmental attitudes and the environment evaluation (Bonnes-Secchiaroli, 1986) (symbolic and perceptive dimension – quantitative methods). We are talking about two radically different approaches; in the first one the scholars notice how people move into the spaces, whilst in the second approach the aim is to measure the symbolic and perceptive dimension, related to the space, carried out into the individuals mind. According to the different approach, we will actually use different methods and instruments. In our case, we will established to observe the double dimension of symbolic-perceptive approach, using quantitative methods. This means that the symbolic and perceptive dimensions of the relation with the space, will be operationalized in several variables as we show below. The quantitative method used by environmental psychology is equal to that typically adopted by social research; we set-up a questionnaire composed by lots of variable, either scale-based, or socio-demographic (age, gender), social and economic (employment status, income received) and time (residence time/frequency of place-use), subsequently administered through a websurvey. The process which led the development of conceptual operationalization of key concepts and their transformation in variable, took place early in environmental psychology. Regarding to the perception of places, Craik (1971) could be considered as a milestone in this sense, because developed a way to operationalize the quality of the sites referring to physical properties, type and quantity of objects, typical characteristics of the various rooms, functional aspects of the environmental elements, the institutional aspects of the social climate. Early studies had been focused on the quality of life in buildings (Ackin-Kuller, 1973; Herberger-Cass, 1974) and about the quality of interpersonal relationships in institutional places (Gavin-Howe, 1975; Insel-Moos, 1974; James- Jones, 1974; Moos, 1975). Still, other scholars have studied the quality of life in the common neighborhood (Marans, 1976; Onibokun, 1974; Smith, 1976), or on the impacts of environmental modification interventions can have on communities (Wolf, 1974, 1975). The final output is the setting-up of indexes of space perception (Craik-Zube, 1976). As regards to the symbolic dimension, environmental psychology has developed the key concept of "place attachment", in which several literature has been produced during the time, and recently we reported a considerable return of interest (Lewicka, 2011). The concept of place attachment comes from the emotional-affective component emerging from the relationship between people and places. The place attachment is an emotional-affective bond which grow-up between persons and meaningful places (Scannell-Gifford, 2010). These emotional factors are highlighted by Shroeder

(1991) as “thoughts, sensations, memories and interpretations evoked by places”. In fact, Ittelson (1973) stress that the first level of response to the environment, is affective; the direct emotional impact governs the directions taken by the subsequent relationships with the environment. In the evaluation process of an environment, individuals develop a set of emotions that Mehrabian and Russell (1974, 1975) have identified to be composed of three factors: pleasure, stress and dominance. The tangible outcome of these intangible instances, leads to adopt an attitude of “approach” or “leaving” from the site. Even this variable is measured through scaling method; the work of Williams-Vaske (2003), for instance, offer a 12 item-based scale in order to catch the double dimension of place identity and place dependence. Many researches were based on that scale (Brown-Raymond, 2007; Kaltenborn-Williams, 2002; Vaske-Kobrin, 2001), but recently an Italian team reviewed this scale (Fornara, 2010).

In conclusion, focusing on the double direction of environment evaluation (symbolic and perceptive) we can estimate some effect of the place (as socio-physical variable) into a sample of individuals. Moreover, we can associate these output with many social behavior, such as community participation, civic engagement, sociality propensity, etc. In this way we could explore the association within spatial variables and the social behavior ones, trying to answer to the main question leading my project: is space able to affect social behavior?

3. Testing the theory: the research proposal

We propose to test the sociological literature about space through an empirical and interdisciplinary approach, as we stated above. We begin from the hypothesis that different socio-physical patterns are capable to affect in different ways social behavior. We'll test this hypothesis in three different neighborhood of the city of Milan, which differ in socio-physical characteristics. We are conscious about the complexity of the conceptualization of what a neighborhood is; therefore, in order to ease the analysis, we decided to use the spatial division provided by Comune di Milano (Local Identity Unit), in which we can refer stable cultural and historical area of the city. We'll observe two variable, one “spatial” (environment evaluation – symbolic and perceptive) and one “social” (community participation). The first variable we test will be split in “place attachment” and “place perception”, using a set of stable indicators developed by Fornara (2010); in particular we will measure an indicator of urban quality perceived, either social or physic (accessibility to the spaces, cleaning, pollution, building density, size of buildings, level of social interaction, level of privacy perceived, freedom of expression, perception of being controlled, vitality, etc.) and place attachment (importance of the place, emotion fostered by a place, the meaning of the place, etc.). Both these variables will be measured in each neighborhood we inquire, in order to highlight any difference of affecting the participation and the place evaluation based on the specificity of the neighborhood. Observed variables will be controlled by usual socio-demographic ones (sex, age, education, etc.) and specific predictors stressed by literature, such as residential time (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Brown et al., 2003; Brown-Perkins-Brown, 2004; Krannich & Greider, 1984; Lewicka, 2005), mobility propensity (Bolan, 1997; Gustafson, 2009; Elder-King-Conger, 1996; Cuba-Hummon, 1993) and house holding (Bolan, 1997; Brown et al., 2003). The second variable we observe will be operationalize taking in account key variables already stressed by the literature, such as interest in what happens in the community (Goudy, 1982; Theodori, 2001), knowledge of who governs the territory (Groves et al., 2003), often you look for news related to local life (Kang-Kwak, 2003), interest in taking a form of leadership in the area (Crew et al.), participation in organizations and associations involved in the specific problems of neighborhood (Woolever, 1992; Kang-Kwak, 2003; Robinson-Wilkinson, 1997) and participation in other activities as volunteer (Cuba-Hummon, 1993); from these variables we will calculate an index of community participation. A sample of citizens will be interview through a websurvey administered through the newsletter database provided by Comune di Milano. Potential under-representation of the population will be correct subsequently calculating post-stratification weights. We split data analysis phase in twice: confirmation phase and explorative phase; first of all we aim to verify theory stressed about each variable we observe, in order to confirm them on our case study; latter, we wish to explore the association within these two variable on each urban neighborhood, in order to explore how independent variables (space and controls variables) are able to affect the dependent variable of community participation index.

Conclusions

The topic of the space-people relation is very old-fashioned in urban sociology. Sociologist has been covered this topic earlier, focusing on various aspect of this relation, adopting many point of view which contributed to define the actual sociology of space. If on one hand the theoretical endeavor has been very intense, on the other hand the empirical effort hasn't been equally decisive. Many questions are still opened: which operative definition of space/place should we use? Which is the sense of importance of space in sociological analysis? How does space relates with people? How can we operationalize this relation? Which methodology are we going to use? As we tried to highlight, environmental psychology could be a possible source of answers. Using an interdisciplinary approach we aim to find new solutions in order to foster a sociological analysis that really takes in account the essential role of the space, especially in urban studies. The main output of this research could be useful to offer new tools to the local governance, in order to support decision-making processes involved into the essential topic of the quality of life in contemporary cities.

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