EVERYDAY BEHAVIORIN THEPUBLIC PLACE: THE CASE OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Philip O. Sijuwade

School of Urban and Public Affairs

University of Texas

Arlington, Texas

Abstract

While the balance of public opinion tends to swing toward negative view of urban living, such views are not universally shared and a significant minority of people are pro urban. Some studies suggest that those who are highly educated, employed in professional and white-collar occupations, young or elderly, childless couples, or interested in cultural activities of the city tend to have positive attitudes towards city living and are more likely to be living in urban environments. Certainly, some real or perceived improvements in the conditions of urban living that are now deemed unsatisfactory-such as a decrease in the crime rate-would probably serve to enhance this prospect.

The city can be a human, personal place. If we agree upon the value of creating even more humane cities, we must understand the normative demands of public interaction. We must understand the limitations and potentialities of public city life.

KEYWORDS: Social Organization; Urbanites; Self Esteem;; Social Contract; Collective Behavior; Social   psychology; Social Interaction.

Some of the most transitory and diffuse patterns of urban social organization may be referred to under the general heading of collective behavior. This includes the kind of behavior that occurs in public and semipublic places, such as streets, sidewalks, parks, public buildings, theaters, meeting halls, and other gathering places. This public behavior sometimes takes the form of crowds, mobs, assemblies, audiences, or spectators. What is important here is that such patterns of collective generally involve person-to- person encounters between strangers. The sheer volume of such potential interaction between strangers in a large city is illustrated by Whyte (2004), who has determined that on one short city block on New York City's Lexington Avenue-between 57th and 58th street—some 50,000 people pass by on an average weekday.

Ever since the earlier writing of Simmel (1950), who believed the everyday tempo of city life significantly affects the social psychology of urbanites, many observers have tended to couch the everyday interaction of strangers in public urban in highly negative terms. For example, they have often been described as uncivilized, insensitive, indifferent, uncaring, or blasé, if not downright rude or overaggressive.

Open and flagrant examples of pilfering and looting that sometimes takes place during natural disasters such as floods or during technological breakdowns such as the electric power blackout in the New York metropolitan area in July,1997, feed further the image of everyday city life as potentially chaotic and disorganized.

The problem with these images, however valid they may be in some instances, is that they do not adequately explain how everyday city life is possible in any form. Millions upon millions of urbanites manage to go about their daily business of living in a daily routinized pattern with a minimum of disruption. This, in spite of the negative factors, suggests that there may be some degree of order to the process, no matter how fragile it may appear. In the last decade or so a number of scholars have begun to readdress themselves to the interaction patterns of everyday public behavior to discover whether order or regularity underlies such behavior, and whether such behavior has meaning that can be made sense of by the participants (or at least by objective social observers). Much of this work has emanated from the followers of Goffman (1963), who has suggested that the informal rules of conduct in streets and other public places where people commonly gather should be the object of inquiry if one wishes to understand fully the most diffuse forms of social organization that constitute everyday urban behavior.

Lofland (2007) maintains that public ordered life between strangers is possible because urbanites successfully have created what she calls a workable social contract or a public "social bargain". This is based on the need recognized by urbanites that they must protect one another so that all can carry on the business of living. According to Karp, Stone, and Yoels (1997), this social bargain demands that persons cooperate with one another enough to insure some intelligibility and order in their everyday lives, while seeking at the same time to keep their involvement with one another at a manageable minimum. Urbanites must take others into account at the same time that they seek to protect their personal privacy. They are required to strike a balance between involvement, indifference, and cooperation with one another as they seek to minimize involvement and maximize social order. At a more concrete level, the empirical question they put forth is "What are the types of normative conventions followed by city persons that maximize intelligibility and predictability in their relations with others while simultaneously maximizing their own sense of privacy in public?

Some Recent Researches

Research by Wolff (2013), based on close, careful observations in natural settings, nicely demonstrates how everyday urban life is ordered along the lines just suggested. He studied pedestrian behavior on 42nd Street in Manhattan, and was able to show through a series of video tape pictures thata number of consistent patterns of accommodation were made by a high degree of cooperation among them. These patterns have been summarized as follows:

1. Step-and-slide pattern. As persons pass one another, there is a "slight angling of the body, a turning of the shoulder, and an almost imperceptible slide step—a sort of step and slide." The interpretation here is that pedestrians cooperate with one another by twisting their bodies so as to minimize the amount of physical contact.
2. The head-over-the shoulder pattern. Pedestrians maintains a head over the shoulder relationship with persons walking less than five feet in front of them to see what is occurring ahead, while at the same time avoiding stumbling onto the feet of the persons in front.
3. The spread effect. This involves persons walking in the same direction distributing themselves over the fullest width that the sidewalks will allow. Presumably,this maximizes the efficiency of movement.
4. Detouring. This occurs when a person forced to detour around another person returns to the original path once the detour has been accomplished.
5. Avoiding perceptual objects. People tend to treat perceptually distinct parts of the sidewalk surfaces, such as grating, as obstructions to be avoided whenever possible.
6. Monitoring. Persons tend continually to monitor the immediate environment in order to avoid collisions, as well as to evaluate the potential behavior of others. They scan the faces of persons from the opposite direction and turn or stop in response to out of the ordinary facial expressions that may signal some unusual situation to be monitored.

Karl (1993) has studied the behavior of people in Times Square pornographic bookstores and movie theaters, supposedly the epitome of an anonymous inner city area.. He found that the people, who were engaged in somewhat unconventional behavior, were nevertheless concerned with being defined as "proper" by total strangers in their immediate vicinity, and would adjust their behavior accordingly. They would attempt to hide, obscure, or shield their interest in buying or using pornographic materials from those strangers who might be around them before entering a pornographic bookstore or theater. Once inside, the normative structure seemed to demand a careful avoidance of either eye or physical contact with other customers. Karp concluded that the persons in this semipublic urban setting were involved in a highly structured social situation in which the norms of privacy were highly standardized and readily understood by the participants.

Lofland (2007) has suggested that people will use a variety of ways to protect their self-esteem when in the presence of strangers in public places. She states that "if a person is to exist as a social being, there must be some minimal guarantees that in interaction with others he will receive the affirmation and confirmation of himself as a right. She mentions the following as major techniques or devices used by persons in public places to protect their self-images under the scrutiny of strangers: 1) checking for readiness—persons will check their appearance, making sure that their hair is in place, zippers are zipped, etc., before entering a potential encounter situation; 2) talking a reading—this involves stopping to take stock of the social setting before

entering it; 3) reaching a position—once having decided on the spot or the point they wish to occupy, persons tend to make a direct approach to that spot in as inconspicuous a way as possible in order to avoid remaining under the social spotlight longer than is absolutely necessary.

Karp, Stone, and Yoels (2007) interpret some of these regularities of encounters in public places by suggesting that society provides a baseline of knowledge in the form of rules or norms which provides a shared meaning to the participants, in spite of slight variations of meaning from person to person or situation to situation; without this common-sense sharing of knowledge, social order would be impossible. Such social knowledge is extremely far-reaching, encompassing literally thousands of social conventions. However, they also recognize that the meaning of any social act is situationally specific, and that knowledge must be continually reevaluated as one moves from one social setting to another.

Patterns Produced By Different Cities Among Strangers

Another body of literature focuses on the fact that different cities will produce markedly different patterns among strangers in such public spaces, sidewalks, or parks. Cities differ in their attitudes to

The suitability of using the streets for walking, "people-watching," or other similarly pleasurable participation in the public life of the community. Detroiters, for example, many of whom view their own central business district as unsafe for pedestrian activity, will often comment on the pleasant, safe, and pleasurable ambience of street life of nearby Toronto. Goffman (1963), and others have compared the ambience of public streets in Paris with those in England and the United States. He refers to the greater looseness of the streets of Paris, where one can eat from a loaf of bread while walking to and from work or become heatedly involved in a passionate conversation. These variations in patterns are often accompanied by varying images of different cities as enjoyable places in which to live or visit.

Observers such as Jacobs (2001) and Whyte(2004) focus on those areas within cities that are widely known to provide a diversity of activities and that draw people to them for differing degrees of contact, excitement, or enjoyment with the many other people similarly attracted. Boston's North End, Greenwich Village and the midtown areas of New York City, San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, or the Yorkville area of Toronto are among such places, Jacob suggests that the density and diversity of such areas as well as the effective use of space are the basis for an active, interesting street life, and she criticizes much of current city planning for not taking these aspects of urban design into account. Whyte calls for the creation of parks and plazas having an abundance of moveable seating placed in the areas of highest activity or where those using them can conveniently view interesting activities or objects. Widened sidewalks for greater pedestrian access and comfort, pleasant landscaping, and the availability of food

vendors are some of the amenities advocated by Whyte as ways of enhancing the quality of those areas of highest pedestrian activity. Whyte's observations of such areas in midtown Manhattan over a four –year period showed an increase in the number of persons using open spaces and parks, more street entertainers. As his article concludes, schmoozing, smootching, noshing, ogling are getting better all the time. The central city is alive and well. The value of such observations is that they also may help to explain why many city areas are perceived negatively as depersonalized, lonely. Or potentially dangerous; they can be explained by the absence of characteristics or amenities such as those just described. Thus, there may be some lessons here for the design or redesign of many urban spaces in large metropolitan communities that are now perceived to lack such positive qualities.

Conclusion

The city can be a humane, personal place. If we agree upon the value of creating even more humane cities, we must understand the normative demands of public interaction. We must understand the limitations and potentialities of public city life. To do that, we must not casually take at face value the readily accessible and commonly expressed images of city life promoted by the mass media and frequently sustained by our most distinguished literary and philosophical figures. If our conceptualizations of the urban environment become too rigid or too narrow, we severely restrict the range of possible experiences that urban residents may undergo.

References

Goffman, Erving. Behavior in Public Places. New York: Free Press. 1963.

Jacobs,Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Random House,2001.

Karp, David. Hiding In Pornographic Bookstores: A Reconsideration The Nature of Urban Anonymity.

 Urban Life and Culture 4 (January 1993): 427-451

Karp, David;Stone Gregory; and Yoels, William. Being Urban: A Social Psychological View of City

Life. Lexington, Mass.: Heath,2007.

Lofland, Lyn. Self Management in Public Setting: Urban Life and Culture1 (April 2007)): 93-117.

Whyte, William. The Best Street Life in The World. New York Magazine 15(July,2004):26-33.

Simmel, Georg. The Metropolitan and Mental Life. In Kurt Wolff, The Sociology of George Simmel, New York: The Free Press.1950.

Wolfe, Michael, Notes on The Behavior of Pedestrians. In Arnold Birenbaum and Edward Sagarin,

Eds., People in Places: The Sociology of The Familiar. New York: Praeger,2013.