

INTRODUCTION

Researching Urban People and Places

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This is a book for people interested in examining the city from a street level perspective. Our purpose is to provide readers with tools and examples to assist in conducting research on urbanism, or the everyday experiences of people in cities.

This is by no means the only, most popular, or best way to approach studying cities, but it is an important, and often overlooked one. It is also a vantage point from which one can access data and associated insights that are unable to be captured via quantitative methods.

Researching urbanism entails paying attention to what regular people in cities are doing, who they're doing it with, where they're doing it, and why. These kinds of explorations tend to lead to questions about interaction, place, and culture. Accordingly, the qualitative field methods in this book help researchers examine urban culture. Culture is a tricky concept to pin down definitionally; however, we proceed from the understanding that culture entails the way people make sense of the world *and* the symbolic and material products that express that way of life (Hall & Neitz, 1993 ; Schudson, 1989; Spillman, 2001; Swidler, 2001; Wuthnow, 1987). Place is also an infamously imprecise concept. Put simply, place refers to physical sites that are rendered meaningful through social interaction (Gieryn, 2000; Milligan, 1998). Urban places reflect both senses of culture described above. They are where people make sense of the world around them in cities and they can be invested with meaning and become important cultural symbols themselves (Borer, 2006).

Researching urban people and places, then, is a matter of uncovering how people “experience and give meaning to their lives as urbanites” (Karp et al., 1977, p. v). This is precisely what the qualitative methods included in this book can assist the urban field researcher accomplish. Since qualitative research methods are calibrated to “seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000 , p. 8 emphasis in original), they are better suited than quantitative methods for examining urbanism.

WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT CITIES AND HOW CAN WE KNOW IT?

The approach to researching urbanism presented in this book reflects particular methodological and theoretical traditions, which warrant explanation. **Methodologically**, we are interested in engaging debates over what constitutes useful data and experimenting with methods of data collection. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, paradigmatic critiques of positivism from all directions, including interpretivists, critical scholars, and postmodernists, upended many long-standing methodological conventions. Many of these norms were rooted in the positivist

tendency to adopt the same epistemological criteria used by the natural sciences. Put simply, for positivists, “what counts” as “true” was/is assessed largely by the same measuring sticks one would encounter in the biology or physics: objectivity, validity, reliability, and replicability.

What resulted were simultaneous “crises” of representation and legitimation in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The former refers to the growing consensus among researchers about the impossibility of representing the social reality of the people and places we study with the written word. Some postmodernists responded by rejecting efforts at representation entirely, while others acknowledged the imperfection of efforts at representation in the social sciences but still supported the development of research strategies that rely on representation, albeit in humbler forms (Rosenau, 1991). The crisis of legitimation describes the related problem of how qualitative research should be evaluated given the broad critiques of modernist, positivist methods. Traditional standards of validity, reliability, and generalizability were no longer stable since they all rested on the presumption that it was possible to capture the social reality of research subjects.

One of the dominant ways scholars addressed these challenges was by exploring ways of increasing researcher reflexivity. Since all data—even numbers—must be interpreted, and since all analysis involves the subjectivity of the analyst, many advocated for embracing reflexivity. If it is indeed impossible to represent the social world as it is, field researchers experimented with dropping the omniscient, detached authorial voice characteristic of “realist tales” (Van Maanen, 1988) and demonstrating their personal social situatedness, potentials for bias, and editorial decisions (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). In addition to more reflexive accounts, some researchers have experimented with including multiple voices (from the field), employing literary styles and poetics, and representation through performance instead of the written word (see the introduction to part VI for more on innovations in representation).

Reflexivity is not just relevant to debates over representation. It has also prompted exploration of qualitative approaches that probe the boundaries of methodological conventions. For example, in this book we feature sections on visual methods (Part IV) and sensory or somatic methods (Part V). Each of these approaches requires researchers to attend to aspects of their own, or others’, embodied experience in order to collect data. Even in more traditional practices like participant observation and interviewing, researcher reflexivity can prompt innovations in how they employ the methods.

Methodological responses to the crisis of representation have prompted related changes in the concepts scholars rely on to evaluate qualitative research. Some have advocated for ditching reliability and validity for apparenity and verisimilitude (Van Maanen, 1988). Others propose more context-specific criteria for assessing “situated truths” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). These approaches abandon the traditional evaluative concepts of generalizability and replicability.

Although field research involves going out and being part of the action, the work itself is—or should be—guided by major philosophical and theoretical conversations that ground the practices themselves. Ongoing ontological and epistemological debates are at the heart of these philosophical considerations. The sections in this book represent some of the dominant attempts at engaging with these debates today and the readings included in each section were selected to present variation within these approaches.

ENTERING THE FIELD: TRADITIONS OF URBAN FIELD METHODS

Theoretically, we contend culture is central to an understanding of urbanism. It is important to expand on the brief definition provided above. As a concept, culture refers to interrelated phenomena at both the micro and macro level. At the interactional level, it encompasses the symbols and meanings people create in order to render otherwise chaotic and meaningless experiences into coherent, significant, meaningful ones. People make, modify, and share culture through interaction with one another (Blumer, 1969). Indeed, Kathleen Blee points out that “culture *is* meaningful action” (2012). We also use the term culture to denote a more macro, abstract space where individuals can access dominant collective stories, symbols, and moral orders of the group. Macro level culture sometimes influences individual and group actions, and at other times culture at the micro level influences hegemonic culture. Understood in this dualistic manner, culture operates *both* from the top down and the bottom up; it is created *by* and transmitted *through* interacting in groups. In much of urban theory culture is either absent or treated as a by-product of other social forces assumed to be more important, like the economy or politics.

This book is guided by the urban culturalist perspective (Borer, 2006). Instead of starting with a social problem or phenomenon and *then* searching out a place suitable for its examination, the urban culturalist perspective (UCP) suggests we *start* with a place, then ask the deceptively simple question: *What happens here?*

The selections included in this book were selected because they each represent and support a “culturalist” approach to studying the social life of cities. Looking at culture and communities as “works in progress” and things that are both handed down and built from the ground up, the culturalist branch of urban thought gives culture the attention it deserves but is often denied. Other schools of thought treat urban life, culture, and communities as an afterthought, something that happens because of much bigger and more important changes in the economy, having little or no effect on the way cities are laid out and developed. A review of three other dominant approaches for studying urban life will illustrate our point.

The members of the Chicago school of urban field research, led initially by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, produced qualitatively rich studies of diverse urban environments. Within many of these studies we can find examples of cultural development, adaptation, and innovation. Despite these dynamic counterexamples, the perspective as a whole was guided by a fixed definition: “culture as the social heritage of a group, implies both a locality to which it is indigenous and a constant, rather than a changing, social situation” (Burgess, [1925]1967, p. 150). Conceived as a static feature of groups, Chicago school scholars associated culture with traditional, *Gemeinschaften* societies, not the more modern, rational, *Gesellschaften* social organization of cities. An overall emphasis on social disorganization within the Chicago school shaped how the scholars interpreted the glimpses of social order and local sentiment (Borer, 2006; Hunter, 1974).

Rooted in a neo-Marxist perspective, the urban political economy approach was formulated to challenge urban ecology. Particularly, this new perspective sought to challenge the idea that urban growth and development followed a natural process by foregrounding the power certain

people in cities wield to shape development patterns and distributions of resources, the influence of government in directing resources, and the conflicting and competing interests of urban residents on one hand and businesses and government on the other (Gottdiener, 1994). Scholars in this neo-Marxist, urban political economy tradition tend to view culture as dependent upon economic factors. Cities are conceptualized as “urban growth machines,” whereby individuals come to relate to one another in terms of their specialized roles within an all-encompassing economic growth-oriented scheme organized by an elite class of rentiers and supported by other businesspeople and politicians whose wealth or power is also boosted by growth (Logan & Molotch, 1987). Others drew from the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and, under the umbrella of “the new urban sociology” (also called the socio-spatial approach), have expanded on the growth machine model to argue that metropolitan areas often contain multiple, competing growth coalitions as opposed to a singular, unified one (Gottdiener, 1994; Gottdiener & Feagin, 1988). When scholars in this tradition focus explicitly on urban culture, they conceptualize it as a commodity consumed in market-mediated contexts (Zukin, 1991, 1995). Urban cultural consumption practices are indeed important for our understandings of city life, but the urban political economic approach neglects to incorporate the ways in which everyday people render their lives meaningful through their consumption practices.

The so-called “Los Angeles school” of postmodern urban theory deals more explicitly with urban culture than the previous two approaches. When its adherents specifically discuss culture, they conceptualize it as “texts,” “images,” and “stories,” however, focusing on these cultural forms as commodities to be consumed (see, for example, Byrne, 2001). Culture is theorized by way of “cool abstractions of polarization and fragmentation” (Jackson, 1999) and defined by consumption, simulation, and spectacle. As Kevin Fox Gotham (2001) points out, even as postmodern urban theorists were criticized by urban political economists for being too preoccupied with culture, “their work remains rooted in Marxian theory, highlighting the centrality of economic and material processes in cultural analysis” (p. 66). While this dynamic is certainly *part of* the story of culture in 21st-century cities, there is a sizable oversight in this treatment of culture. Namely, everyday people living, working, and playing in cities are missing.

Such a distanced perspective, like that of the urban political economists and Chicago School, tends to blur their vision of the meanings and values with which people endow certain places through various forms of sentimental, or at least nonrational, attachment. As a result, urbanization has traditionally been favored over urbanism as an object of study. The urban culturalist perspective understands and approaches the two as intricately and intimately connected and seeks to give the latter the attention it’s due.

The UCP emphasizes the diverse ways everyday people contribute to the social life of cities by focusing attention on the symbolic relationships between people and places. This is rooted in the UCP’s assumption that people are actively involved in the *creation* of culture, as opposed to simply receivers or transmitters of culture. Urban places often function as important resources people use in meaning making, interaction, and identity formation. Such an approach allows the scholar to explore both the cultures *of* places and places *as* culture.

The methodological tools and techniques described and demonstrated in this book will help people interested in collecting and analyzing data on people engaged in meaning making in cities. Importantly, one’s work does not have to align with the UCP to implement the methods in

this book. The UCP simply foregrounds culture in a way that could benefit all urban research, regardless of the theoretical framework from which one works. The methods here help uncover the practices and processes that underpin everyday urbanism.

In addition to being interdisciplinary, the reprinted articles in this volume are international in origin. As such, you will notice variations in the spelling of some words. We chose to leave the authors' words alone in this regard, respecting the linguistic norms of the diverse places their work was initially published.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The remainder of book will be divided into six sections, each of which focuses on different aspects and techniques of urban field methods. Each section spotlights different methods of urban qualitative research, with some pieces functioning as “how to” descriptions of the methods and others demonstrating the kinds of data that can be collected using the method as well as how it can be presented on the page.

Part I, “Being With Others in the City,” covers participant observation/observant participation, highlighting what it means to participate in and observe urban communities and collectivities. This section investigates how to observe the intersections of urban social institutions, groups, and individuals. It also explores the dynamics of collaborative participant observation. Part II, “Talking With Others in the City,” illustrates innovative strategies for interviewing in urban contexts. The selected authors explain mobile interview methods and the use of technologically enhanced interviewing techniques. Part III, “Stories From the City,” examines potentials for narrative analysis in urban research and the influence of stories in city life.

Part IV, “Visualizing the City,” explores the contributions visual methods can make to urban research and shows how and where to find and use visual data. Part V, “Feeling the City,” presents the city as dense sensory environment; the selections illustrate how urban researchers can incorporate sensuous methods into their tool kits. Part VI, “Representing the City,” concludes the book with pieces that explore novel ways of re-presenting urban analyses to our scholarly peers and to publics outside of academia. This is an important feature as urban researchers have increasingly been using their findings to raise consciousness and bring about social change.

REFLECTION ESSAYS AND PEDAGOGY

In addition to the excerpts included in each section of the book, we feature one original “reflection” essay from one of the authors in the section. In these short essays the researchers reflect on their experience using the technique featured in their included piece. Some elaborate on how their contribution fits into their broader urban methodological considerations. Many discuss how they have used, or adapted, the method in subsequent research projects.

At the end of each section we include sample exercises intended to prompt hands-on experience with the methods outlined in the section. These activities can be incorporated into courses that use this text and can also stand alone as “seeds” for new research projects.

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