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An Expanded Social Scientific Perspective on Urbanism:[1]

Future Research in the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences
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Michael E. Smith, mesmith9@asu.edu (corresponding author)
Christopher Boone, Christopher.G.Boone@asu.edu
George L. Cowgill, Cowgill@asu.edu
Sharon Harlan, Sharon.Harlan@asu.edu
Alison Kohn, alisonkohn@yahoo.com
Barbara Stark, blstark@asu.edu
Abigail York, Abigail.York@asu.edu

The authors are in the School of Human Evolution & Social Change at Arizona State University, and members of the transdisciplinary research project, "Urban Organization through the Ages: Neighborhoods, Open Spaces, and Urban Life" (http://cities.asu.edu/).

Challenge Question:

- How can scientists adequately understand the social and environmental processes of urbanization and the impacts of cities on the world?

Abstract:

In order to address the complexity of world urbanization today, we advocate a new approach to research that we call the "expanded social scientific perspective on urbanism." This approach is "expanded" in two ways: it transcends traditional disciplinary urban research; and it incorporates disciplines and approaches not normally part of the social sciences. We identify three main components: (1) the built environment and its interaction with people and society, incorporating the fields of environment-behavior studies, architecture, and planning; (2) an explicitly historical orientation, incorporating the fields of urban history and social science history; (3) comparative analysis at varying scales. Without this kind of broad, integrated trans- and multi-disciplinary perspective, it will not be possible to adequately describe or explain the diversity of urban processes operating in the world and their consequences for society and the environment.

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Introduction

The magnitude of global processes of urban expansion renders the comparative and transdisciplinary study of cities an urgent concern, not just for the social, behavioral and economic sciences, but also for scholarship in the natural sciences and the humanities. The majority of the world's population now lives in cities. Human activities in cities generate wealth and provide jobs; at the same time they harm the environment and create poverty, crime, and injustice. Cities are crucial components in any consideration of sustainability today.

Urbanism has too many dimensions to be understood by any single discipline, yet most current research reflects narrow disciplinary perspectives. City life in the U.S. and around the globe is a major topic of research in the social sciences, but a comprehensive understanding of cities and urban life requires perspectives beyond the confines of the social and behavioral sciences. The fields of planning and architecture are central to understanding cities, and urban history (including archaeology) provides crucial time depth to distinguish between recurrent and novel urban dynamics. Yet scholars in fields such as urban policy studies often take a myopic perspective. A recent paper in this area ("What is 'Urban Studies'? Context, Internal Structure, and Content," by Bowen, Dunn and Kasdan, *Jr. Urban Affairs* 32, 2010) concluded that history and comparison are unimportant in urban studies today. We reject this sentiment and call for a broadly historical and comparative perspective on cities. Our challenge question is, "How can scientists adequately understand the social and environmental processes of urbanization and the impacts of cities on the world?" Our answer has two parts: (1) move in a new direction that we call an expanded social scientific perspective on urban research; and (2) strengthen existing NSF programs.

An Expanded Social Scientific Perspective on Urbanism

We propose that productive scientific advances on cities and urbanization will require expanded horizons, both intellectual and organizational. Three approaches offer particularly promising avenues for advance: the urban built environment, historical time depth, and comparative perspectives. When these are integrated and synthesized with existing scholarship, a new understanding of urbanization will come about.

The Urban Built Environment

While some social science disciplines touch on aspects of the built environment, scientific research on cities and urbanism requires far greater attention to this realm. The fields of architecture and planning have expertise which needs to be integrated with social scientific approaches. Urban life takes place within constructed environments, some centrally planned and others more informal in origin. Debates about pressing topics such as urban sprawl, the new urbanism, gentrification, poverty traps, urban environmental justice, and squatter's settlements in the developing world, cannot be understood in social terms divorced from the built environment.

The hybrid field of ***environment-behavior studies***, associated particularly with the work of Amos Rapoport, contains a wealth of insights, concepts, and methods about the human use of the built environment, yet it remains idiosyncratic in its organization and it is poorly integrated

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with social scientific research on urbanism. A synthesis of environment-behavior studies with urban research in sociology, geography, and other fields could be enormously productive. Although much work in ***architecture and planning*** emphasizes normative and aesthetic concerns not typically considered part of science, there is a growing body of scientific and analytical research in these areas. Like environmental-behavior research, this work needs better integration with existing social science research.

Historical Time Depth

A historical perspective on urbanism is essential in order to understand current and future processes of urbanization, but historical research today is fragmented among many disciplines. Often current situations are related to recurrent historical processes, but others are novel compared to past cities, a distinction that needs to be identified through historical research. Two approaches in particular need to be better integrated with social science research on cities.

(1) Urban history, typically carried out within humanities-oriented departments of history, has made numerous advances of great relevance to contemporary urban studies. Path-dependent processes have contributed to the forms and organization of modern cities. A deeper temporal perspective, from the fields of archaeology and ancient history, allows consideration of a much broader range of possibilities in urban organization and change. There is a scientific trend in urban history that can be exploited.

(2) Social science history is a hybrid field at the intersection of history, economics, sociology, and political science (see the journal *Social Science History*). With attention to rational choice models and causal mechanisms, this field has become more scientific in orientation, yet it remains peripheral to urban studies and to the traditional social science disciplines. Without a historical perspective, we seriously limit ourselves in understanding today's cities and their future transformations.

Comparative Perspectives

Each of the social sciences incorporates some level of comparative analysis, but the breadth and diversity of the urban experience require dedicated, comparative research on a scale that transcends disciplines and moves beyond traditional spatial scales such as nations and regions. Systematic comparisons have long been acknowledged for their importance (see, for example, journals such as *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Comparative Political Studies,* or *Cross-Cultural Research*). But comparative analysis has yet to assume a central importance for urbanism and other social domains, in large part because the explosion of information in individual disciplines renders systematic comparison a demanding challenge.

Comparative research involves a variety of methods and approaches, and urban research can benefit from work across the spectrum, from intensive small-n comparisons to systematic large-n statistical analyses. Although some comparative research within social science disciplines is currently funded by NSF, the complexity of urbanization processes requires a more focused and dedicated emphasis on comparison, including the integration of existing comparative perspectives within disciplines and efforts that link the social sciences to other urban fields.

Examples of the Expanded Social Scientific Perspective on Urbanism

The three references in our bibliography provide examples of the potential benefits of this expanded social scientific perspective on urban research. Within the framework of planning and

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environment-behavior research, Khalid Al-Hagla (2008) links the social success and sustainability of urban neighborhoods to the nature and amount of open space they contain. Xavier de Souza Briggs (2004) furnishes a comparative and historical study of the ways that political regimes treat urban ethnic diversity in modern Los Angeles, Imperial Rome, and Medieval Córdoba. Our current transdisciplinary research project, "Urban Organization through the Ages: Neighborhoods, Open Spaces, and Urban Life" (http://cities.asu.edu/), illustrates the expanded social perspective. Our first paper (York et al. n.d.) provides a broad temporal and regional perspective on urban social segregation and clustering, moving beyond the confines of disciplinary research and breaking out of the limited spatial and national perspectives of past work. Targeted projects of this nature permit a broad understanding on fundamental questions, such as the roles of top-down and bottom-up processes in structuring urban life and change, or the distinctions between unique and recurrent patterns in the causes of organizational and social change in cities.

Recommendations

(1) Strengthen Existing NSF Programs

(A) Social Science Disciplines. Current disciplinary-based urban research is making strides toward understanding specific aspects of life and society in cities. Funding for existing SBE programs needs to continue, perhaps with a special emphasis on urbanism, so that each discipline can exploit its strengths in solving the many puzzles of human life in cities. Key SBE disciplines include sociology, political science, geography, anthropology, archaeology, and economics.

Larger samples are desperately needed. To take just one example, sociologist Robert Sampson (Harvard University) has produced rigorous findings on the neighborhood contexts of poverty, crime, segregation in Chicago: these things go together, they are durable over time, and their amelioration will take creative, large-scale intervention. This is important research, but it only describes one city; surveys, fieldwork, and observational research need to be carried out in more places, and not just in the United States.

(B) Large-Scale Interdisciplinary Scientific Projects. Cities are not just social phenomena, and the context and implications of urbanization go beyond the social world. Research on cities has begun to incorporate work in the biophysical sciences—particularly ecology, geology, and hydrology—and data and results from these fields will be increasingly integrated with social research. Productive research programs already exist in the ***Long-Term Ecological Research*** (LTER) projects that have an urban focus, in the newer ***Ultra Long-Term Research Area*** (ULTRA) program, and in some of the urban projects funded by NSF's ***Dynamics of Coupled Natural and Human Systems*** Program (DCNHS). Most of these large-scale projects, however, have a heavy emphasis on biophysical sciences and engineering, with modest input from social science research. We argue for the continuation of broad projects of this nature, directed at urban issues, but with more of an explicit emphasis on social science research as described above. Urban projects with social scientists as the PI should be a priority.

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(2) Create Programs for the Expanded Social Scientific Perspective on Urbanism

The perspective we advocate is difficult to pursue within existing funding structures. We are currently engaged in research in this level, but our project (York et al. n.d.) was only made possible through a special private donation to Arizona State University, coupled with insight and vision by university administrators. There is no granting agency or institutional framework that promotes urban research of this nature, yet we feel this is an extremely valuable approach for coming to terms with the complexity of the problems and prospects of urbanization in the world today. We have several suggestions for promoting the kind of research described above:

- Creation of a special urban initiative or program at NSF that would promote research on urbanism from an expanded social scientific perspective. This program could also target the interfacing of existing disciplinary research and large-scale scientific projects with the expanded perspective.

- Funding of a small number of key site-based projects on a scale intermediate between the DCNHS grants and the LTER programs in order to generate comprehensive research that employs the expanded perspective.

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