

THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEHAVIOUR OF THE MACROREGION'S POPULATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The City as a Subjective Reality and the Space of Social Practices (Based on Research in Novosibirsk)

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Abstract. This article shows that a city is not only a territorial unit, but also a subjective reality, reflected in the perceptions and attitude of its inhabitants as a result of the surrounding space's development. This attitude manifests itself in social practices, which the townspeople realize in the urban space. In this article, the authors explain a number of statements, including "space sociologising", the movement of interactions from a purely physical space to a social space, the possibility of constructing representations about the urban space based on the media effects, the city as a space for social practices. The results of the empirical study conducted in the administrative centre of the Siberian Federal District reveal the gender specificity of perception in Novosibirsk. A specific social-demographic community perceives the city from the position of what opportunities the urban space, with its network of social institutions, can offer to the representatives of this community. For example, women find important the up-to-date modern standards of life, while men prefer creativity and growth. Both of these groups choose well-known objects as the "calling cards" of the city (for example, Akademgorodok). For men, technical and sports facilities are more important, as well as a dolphinarium combining artificial structures and natural content. The choice of local history museum, philharmonic society and others by women is explained by their more active engagement in the cultural development of their family members. The authors show that the metropolis is often perceived by the townspeople through the prism of problematic aspects (bad roads, inefficient public transport work, lack of parking and interchanges, noisy construction, and environmental violations among others), which, in the respondents' opinions, reflects the unsatisfactory work of the authorities. This article also identifies the prevailing practices of the citizens' social activity.

Keywords: city, urban space, urban studies, social practices, subjective reality.

DOI: 10.21684/2587-8484-2017-1-2-72-81

Citation: Ilyinykh S. A. 2017. "The City as a Subjective Reality and the Space of Social Practices (Based on Research in Novosibirsk)". *Siberian Socium*, vol. 1, no 2, pp. 72-81.

DOI: 10.21684/2587-8484-2017-1-2-72-81

The contemporary sociological view on a city lies in examining the meanings and notions, acquired by a particular space in the context of social life. From this perspective, the city acts as a subjective reality, reflected in the perception and attitude of the population as a result of the development of the surrounding space. This attitude is practiced in the social practices realized by its inhabitants. The city is not only a complex network of socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-political practices, and, consequently, complex relationships between the citizens. The city is also the space of certain meanings, associated by the citizens with their urban habitat.

This article aims to study the city in two combined aspects: both the physical urban space, and the space of meanings and representations that can change the worldview of its residents and visitors.

The problem of studies of the city as an urban space has a long history. The first works, including the ideas of the spread of cultures, the formation of cultural circles and zones in a certain spatial dimension, belong to the representatives of the cultural-historical school of diffusionism: F. Ratzel, F. Graebner, W. Schmidt, and L. Frobenius. Since then, researchers from different fields of knowledge have devoted their research to the urban problems. Thus, the urban space as an organisation of a cultural landscape is considered in the works by V. V. Vagin [26], V. L. Kagansky [11], D. S. Likhachev [14], and I. I. Svirida [22]. The peculiarities of the urban spatial organization is studied by the representatives of the environmental approach to the phenomenon of the city: K. Lynch [15] and L. B. Kogan [13]. “The urban environment” as a special level of urban development, and the urban culture are the objects of A. V. Ikonnikov’s [9], and O. E. Trushchenko’s research [25]. An anthropological approach to the study of the city, focusing its attention on the problem of human existence in urban space, was developed by R. Lynd and H. Lynd [16], R. Redfield [17], W. Warner [28]. The problems of urban space are also represented in the works of R. Altenburger and E. Bentmann [1], D. Bachmann-Medick [2], I. Fisher and H. Delitz [6], A. Becker and J. Mohr [3], and F. Vogelsang [27].

The sociological approach to the category of space was developed in the works of the classics of world sociology M. Weber [29], G. Simmel [19], and O. Spengler [21]. Some very productive work has been done by A. Giddens, who has revealed the concept of social space as an active interaction of social structures and social agents [7]. Through active activity, these agents can influence the transformation of social structures and institutions. This approach has been very useful in analysing how social agents can influence the city and urban space in the course of their social practices. A. Filippov’s work has also contributed to the problems we are studying, since he distinguishes three different aspects of the study of social space, depending on the position of the researcher [5]:

1. the space of social actors’ interaction—the actors’ proximity/distance to each other is considered as it influences the process of interaction;
2. the social space as an order of social positions; a metaphorical space structured by the statuses of social actors;

3. the space as something foreseeable—the location of the bodies, the repository of seats; the first two aspects allow to see that urban space (as an interaction space) is structured not only by statuses, but also by its representations.

To conclude a brief overview of existing sociological works on urban studies, it is worth noting that E. Burgess, R. Mackenzie, L. Wirth, R. Park (among others) also have researched sociological projects on the city, solving different special problems.

In general, based on the work of urban sociologists, there are several points that elude the attention of researchers of other fields of knowledge. The first is that “the *sociologisation* of space” is currently happening; in other words, the space is given sociological characteristics: thus, we have the space of politics, the space of leisure, etc. The society and the individual observe the space that society has constructed at a given historical moment in the course of its activities. This form of interaction between space and society leads to “sociologisation of space.”

The second feature is the movement of interactions from a purely physical space to the social one. The system analysis, involved in the study of urban space, highlights such a fact as the *abolition* of space. Modern information technologies have led to a tremendous phenomenon—the abolition of borders between countries, cultures, generations, and individuals.

As for the third feature—any territorial space (including the urban one) participates in individuals’ *construction of ideas*, meanings, etc. The city is not only one of the most important elements of culture, but also a space for socially significant meanings. It is one of the elements that influence the formation of the social actors’ worldview, and at the same time the city itself is influenced by the evaluation of these social actors. There is some interdependence: the city “manages” the processes forming the townspeople’s worldview, while its inhabitants (on the basis of the formed worldview) control the processes taking place in the city.

In other words, the specificity of the city, in addition to it accumulating the financial, economic, social, political, administrative, and socio-cultural aspects of diversity, also involves the city, stretched for kilometres and hosting huge numbers of people, affects the life of its citizens. Simultaneously, the city itself is under the influence of those ideas, which both the city and the person determine mutually.

It should be noted that the first one who spoke on the problems of describing the concept of space in the social sciences, was I. Kant [12], as he first drew attention to the immanent duality of person’s notions of space. Kant’s idea of duality became the starting point for the analysis of everyday life, including the everyday mastering of the space of the vital world, conducted by E. Husserl [8] and A. Schütz [18]. The development of these researchers’ ideas allowed P. Berger and T. Luckman to develop the concept of social construction of reality [4]. Their collaboration describes in detail the processes of creating and developing social ideas on everyday practices.

The constructivist approach allows to say that the world’s organization by a person comes always from his (or her) own ideas about a number of phenomena,

including harmony, beauty, and order. These phenomena appear in a form, convenient for people, which includes some spatial forms as well. This is most clearly seen in the urban space as a structured environment of a person.

Thus, the study of the city in the context of sociology allows drawing the following intermediate conclusions. First, the urban space today is not only a combination of production buildings, apartments, and infrastructure (among others), but also the space of concepts and notions about it.

Secondly, the urban space can change the worldview of individuals. This process works in two ways, as the individuals themselves and can change the urban space based on their worldview.

Thirdly, the notion of urban space can be constructed not only from the personal experience, but also from the mass media. An individual, who, probably, has never been in this or that district of the city during his or her life, has more or less developed ideas about it.

Fourthly, the city is a space of social practices. The idea of a social space as a space of mutual relations and active interaction of social actors was considered in the works of F. Tönnies [24], G. Simmel [20], and P. Sztompka [23]. In this case, though, individuals are included in the urban space in different ways. The continuum of inclusion ranges from harmonious, non-contradictory to disharmonious, opposed. With harmonious involvement, citizens show social, economic, political, and other forms of activity.

Fifth, citizens choose one or another social practice based on their constructed reality, which allows them to participate in urban life actively or passively. A positively designed and constructed inclusion into the urban space leads not just to the inhabitants' identity (in terms of the harmonious and consistent social self-determination of a particular individual), but also a capable urban community, ready to formulate and defend its own interests, to create an enabling environment for life, and to contribute to the development of its settlement.

Thus, the urban space can be analysed from the point of view of a) its population's lifestyle, b) the dependence of their life on the urban space, and c) the features of consciousness that determines the urban communication. The urban space is explored from the position of the structure of human activity organized in the territorial space.

In 2017 in Novosibirsk, we conducted a study to determine how urban space affects individuals, what views people have about their city, and what social practices they use. The selective aggregate is formed on a territorial basis. The respondents were the residents of 10 districts of Novosibirsk with representation by sex and age (N = 356).

The questionnaire included the question of assessing the city by its residents. That required using one of the "semantic differential" methods. The scale contained dichotomous characteristics, e.g., "light"—"dark", "clean"—"dirty". 57% of women indicated that the city was "light" and 43% "dark"; men showed a similar picture: 51% chose "light", 49%—"dark".

Significantly, similar results were obtained when evaluating it on a scale of "joyful"—"gloomy". 55% of women and 58% of men chose the first option, while

the second one was preferred by 45% of women and 42% of men. These results reflect the abovementioned ideas.

The urban space forms people's images about it. We can also see the peculiarities of such influence. The same urban space divides the opinions of the respondents approximately equally: for one part of men and women, it is bright and joyful, for the others—dark and gloomy.

If the study were conducted at different periods, this could be explained by the influence of, e.g., climate. Yet, here we see only a personal evaluation of the urban space without the influence of any side effects.

It is significant that the majority of the respondents estimate the city as modern and developing. At the same time, 13% of women and 15% of men perceive it as “stagnant”, and, accordingly, 14% and 20%—as “old”. Of course, this is a personal perception of the urban space, but it can also affect the perception of other people outside of this city. Therefore, it is rather important to manage the presentation of the urban space and to construct new meanings in a new way. Table 1 shows some of the properties of Novosibirsk in the mass consciousness of its inhabitants.

Both men and women evaluate the city most often as promising and developing. At the same time, women are more likely to be modern, and men are more likely to appreciate the city's creative aspects. In this case, one may probably say that a particular socio-demographic community perceives the city from the position of what opportunities this space (with its network of social institutions) provides to them as the representatives of this community. In this regard, women find it important to meet the modern standards of life, while choose creativity and growth.

Another indicative aspect is the perception by the townspeople of objects that are the architectural landmark of the city. The residents of 10 districts in Novosibirsk could choose any objects, regardless of the area of their residence. Both men and women most often chose such places as Akademgorodok (80%), the Opera House (73%), the Bugrinsky Bridge (50%), and the Zoo (50%) among others. At the same time, some citizens noted the objects with personal significance. That includes, e.g., the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (5%) and the chapel (2%). It should be noted that if Akademgorodok and other places have a long history, then the Bugrinsky Bridge appeared in the city only in 2015. Choosing it as a architectural landmark can be explained not just by its unusual architecture, but partly because its name was discussed with the townspeople.

As for the gender aspects of the perception of the city facilities, men also named “Siberia” stadium (15%), Expocenter (12%), dolphinarium (12%), technopark (12%), and airport (10%). Women singled out the Museum of Local Lore (15%), Aqua Park (14%), and the Philharmonic Hall (12%). Despite the common views on some objects, the gender differences is obvious towards the others. Men (to a greater extent) noted technical and sports facilities, as well as an object that combines artificial structures and elements of wildlife: the dolphinarium. The choice of women can be explained by the fact that they are often engaged in both the cultural development of their family members and general public activities.

This study has also revealed the most preferred vacation spots for citizens. Both groups of respondents named the Russian National Public Library for Science and Technology (it now contains such public facilities as fountains, walking areas for families with children, riding bicycles, skateboards, and rollerblades)—85%, Pervomaisky Park—82%, and Zaeltsovsky Park—63%. Men also choose sport gyms (10%), while women—cinemas (6%).

The urban space (much more often than any other space) draws the townspeople's attention to different problematic aspects because of its openness and considerable territorial extent. When answering the question on the city's problems, women often named "roads" (65%), "transport" (56%), and "traffic jams" (52%). In some cases, they stated "ecology" (10%) and "noisy construction" (9%). Men noted "roads" (70%), "parking lots" (75%), "interchanges" (45%), and "health care" (34%). Interestingly, in some cases, men named "lack of sports grounds" (10%) and "lack of trees" (6%). In some cases, men pointed to such problems as "indifferent people" (1%) and "the government" (1%). Women did not note any such problems; though, they did mention a specific problem of "the homeless" (5%).

As you can see, the metropolis is often perceived by the townspeople through the prism of such problematic aspects as bad roads, insufficient transport work, lack of parking and connections, noisy construction, and environmental violations among others. From the perspective of the inhabitants, this reflects the insufficient work of the authorities. However, if you look at the problems from the position of the citizens themselves, one may notice that some of the problems can be solved on their own. Yet, as the survey shows, the respondents do not associate these problems with the possibility to solve some of them by themselves. This may mean that the city is perceived by them as some kind of an independent territorial unit. Residents do not perceive the city as a personal environment, which they formed as well.

At the same time, as the gender perspective shows, men point at more abstract problems, such as indifferent people and power; while women—to more specific difficulties, which affect their habitat negatively (like the homeless).

The urban space, as it was shown, is formed not only by the representations of its inhabitants, but also by their actions and social practices. According to the concept of social construction of reality by P. Berger and N. Luhmann, the constructions (stereotypes, representations, etc.) are embodied in actions.

Table 1. Some specifications of Novosibirsk as imagined by its citizens, %

Urban features	Men	Women
perspective	87	89
creative	67	58
modern	78	86
dynamic	76	75
developing	85	87

In this connection, the respondents were asked how they assess the degree of their participation in any kind of activity, related to the urban structure one way or another. It is significant that the respondents, according to their self-assessment, are not indifferent to what is happening in the city. A similar opinion was expressed by 96% of women and 95% of men. At the same time, only one third of the respondents are ready to discuss urban problems (31% of women and 31% of men), and only a sixth of them—to take part in solving problems (15% of women and 17% of men). Even fewer respondents are ready to take the role of an activist (11% of women and 13% of men) or an initiator of urban environment projects (5% of women and 10% of men). Other variants of social practices are presented in Table 2.

Here, we see the absence of a pronounced gender difference [10]. These data clearly demonstrate that the city, urban space, and the attitude towards them require a purposeful management process. Otherwise, we will have the same picture everywhere: nobody likes the city, yet no one wants to improve the situation.

Most of the townspeople (85% of the respondents) are interested in the city's problems, but only 19% of them participate actively in public organizations, which aim activities at eliminating these problems. Almost half of the townspeople, interested in these problems (46%), found it difficult to name any of such organizations.

The concerned residents of the city (85% of respondents) speak actively about the problem areas of the social space of Novosibirsk. However, as for eliminating these problems, they take the position of “waiting” (35% of respondents out of 85%), while the remaining 45% rely on other people with greater influence at the city level, initiative, and attitude.

Based on these data, 85% of citizens are interested in life and problems of the city; at the same time, they do not seek to solve them via their own participation in city events (65% of respondents out of 85%) for various reasons. Most often, this can be explained by the belief that their personal involvement will not change

Table 2. Variants of social practices for Novosibirsk's citizens, %

Responses	Men	Women
Participation in homeowners' associations	13	10
Participation in territorial units and citizens' assemblies	19	22
Participation in city hearings	11	17
Participation in social projects on urban developing	12	9
Participation in solving urban problems	12	13
Participation in citizens' written appeals to the authorities	14	15
Participation in sending their appeals to the authorizes via e-government system	14	12
Unsure	5	2

anything (45% of respondents out of 85%). That is directly related to the fact that citizens are poorly informed about the existence of public organizations dealing with these problems, and the results of their activities are not presented in a way known to the majority of the population.

In this regard, it is necessary to make the work of city public organizations more “public”, e.g., post reports on their activities in public places, actively involve various media, attract the public to their work through active interaction with young people and older people. The most optimal channel for implementing this task is the internet (monthly publication of reports, online polls, and voting among many others).

In conclusion, the city as a subjective reality and the space of social practices is a sufficiently researched object in sociology. Based on the analysis of a number of sociological studies, it can be concluded that in the modern sociology of the city, there are such features as “sociologisation” of space, the construction of representations, and the inclusion in the urban space.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of our sociological study, we can conclude that the residents of Novosibirsk perceived the same space ambiguously, depending on their sex. Gender differences also affect the assessment of both the positive and the problematic aspects of the urban space. A more disturbing fact is that respondents do not always perceive the urban space as their personal habitat, waiting for the authorities to solve the city’s problems.

The results of the empirical study clearly demonstrate the need for purposeful management of the formation of ideas about the urban space that have developed in its population mainly spontaneously, as well as the cultivation of socially active practices by citizens. It is also important to use various social technologies for the purposeful formation of socio-positive ideas about the urban space among the population. It is this direction that seems to be among the most promising ones in the contemporary practice of city management.

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