

## SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SMART CITY – SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REMARKS ON THE ISSUE

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**Purpose:** The aim of the paper is to discuss some social issues of smart city from the perspective of sociology and to show why the viewpoint of residents is so important.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The importance of understanding of social life of the city when planning some changes in it was discussed within the scope of sociology. In the introduction several sociological basic concepts including the viewpoint of the residents in the research on their cities were presented. In the subsequent part of the article some changes in given metropolises have been described and discussed as an example of how controversial or destructive can be the consequences of such changes when a social fabric of the city hadn't been studied thoroughly among others in the scope of sociology.

**Findings:** As a result of discussion in the summary author accentuates the role of the research methods in the practice of planning changes and solutions introduced in a city. Each of the presented methods gives an opportunity to show how the residents perceive their city and changes taking place there. Thanks to these methods the diversity of social fabric of town/city can be understood/analyzed and in the case of action research method the participation of inhabitants in changes implemented in their city can be induced, observed and their views on these changes can be researched.

**Originality/value:** The paper presents some arguments and facts concerning the complexity of social fabric of cities and changes planned and implemented in such an environment of everyday life of people. It is addressed to sociologists, social workers and some other specialists in the scope of social sciences and practical professions dealing with the issues of cities and social processes taking place in them.

**Keywords:** urban sociology, residential environment, humanistic coefficient, research methods in sociology.

**Category of the paper:** in between viewpoint and conceptual paper.

## **1. Introduction**

As a sociologist, I am looking for social and human content in the smart city idea. Therefore, when considering an intelligent city, I would focus my attention on people (inhabitants) and their needs that they want to satisfy in their everyday life environment, which is the city they live in.

The sociological view on this issue seems important to me (among other views as well), because smart city solutions are addressed directly to residents who differ in socio-demographic and psychological terms, and who are also differently distributed in the city space with all its consequences of a cultural, social, civilization nature, etc. Therefore rightly various social issues, including the quality of living, adaptation to human needs, ethnic diversity and social cohesion are cited as important (Jonek-Kowalska, Wolniak, 2019; Kaźmierczak, 2019; Kuzior, Sobotka, 2019; Osika, 2018; Pichlak, 2018; Rożałowska, 2016). The starting point and the center of these considerations I would therefore reduce to the following questions: What city do its inhabitants need and what needs should this city satisfy as the environment of their everyday life? Sociological research can answer these questions and develop a complex picture of the urban environment that influences the diversity of these needs.

## **2. The city (perceived) from the perspective of its inhabitants - introductory remarks on the sociological view of the problem**

Looking at the social sense of the smart city idea, I will recall the theoretical category which in sociology is related to many analyzed phenomena - it is about social creation of reality (Berger, Luckmann, 2018). This term is sometimes used by sociologists when they want to emphasize that the analyzed phenomenon (it may be an object, tool, practice, procedure or other artifact), since it is an element of people's everyday life environment, is certainly reflected in their consciousness, and the image of this phenomenon and the methods of action associated with it (practices) are socially constructed, i.e. created and then preserved mainly in the process of socialization (upbringing). Learning given phenomenon from the perspective of the people also involves capturing it in sociological research with the so-called "humanistic coefficient", and therefore reflecting the feelings, cognitive constructs, emotions, sensations, experiences or memories of these people related to this phenomenon. A look at social phenomena with this coefficient, although it may also apply to phenomena not only social, was proposed by the outstanding Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki (Znaniecki, 1922, 1988; cf. Szacki, 2002).

When the city is a phenomenon that affects the quality of people's life, as it constitutes their everyday life environment, it should also be analyzed through the prism of social creation by human communities and with the humanistic coefficient. The development of sociology, including an urban sociology, has revealed various accurate applications of these two theoretical categories. The aforementioned classic of Polish sociology, Florian Znaniecki, applied the "humanistic coefficient" to the sociological description of Poznań in his book "The city in the minds of its citizens" (Znaniecki, 1931). When it comes to the social construction of the city, one should note the well-known publication of another prominent city sociologist, Bohdan Jałowiecki, entitled "Social production of space" (Jałowiecki, 1988), and when it comes to presenting the city with a humanistic coefficient, once again and its social reality, the book entitled "A socialist city and the social world of its inhabitants" by Marek Szczepański, an outstanding representative of this sociological subdiscipline, turned out to be a very accurate and vivid description (Szczepański, 1981). The further development of urban sociology in Poland resulted in the continuation of analyses in a similar vein within the framework of various sociological schools.

Therefore, if a smart city was to be created, and it is known that it is the environment of people's everyday life, it seems logical that it is worthwhile to establish in research what do the city's inhabitants need in it and how do they imagine the city which makes their lives easier due to the use of technical and social solutions. The accurate "matching" of the idea or concept of a smart city to the collective of its residents therefore requires learning the perspective of these residents - and thus learning about their needs, feelings, and experiences related to the current use of space in the city. In this way, knowledge could be gained about what, in their opinion, constitutes an inconvenience, what is missing in the city (Piróg, Kotarski, 2018), what should be provided in the city. If changes in urban space are planned, it is also worth finding out what places and what characteristics of different places are important for the inhabitants. The implementation of the smart city concept may involve certain changes, and it is important that these changes are such and only such that they do not destroy the social and spatial fabric in which the people living there feel at home. That is why participation of the residents in these changes is so significant and, what is more, this is essential for the idea of smart city 3.0 (Cohen, 2015).

From a sociological perspective, smart city is a citizen-friendly city that provides amenities and these amenities are influenced by the citizens themselves, as such solutions are demanded and verified by them, and after a critical but positive verification, accepted or modified when they do not fully satisfy the important needs. Shaping cities in that manner, with the above mentioned participation of their citizens, makes them real smart cities (Hollands, 2008).

When planning to introduce technological and social smart city solutions in a city, decision makers should ask themselves for which inhabitants they want to implement those changes and how they will affect the quality of life of different groups within that population of inhabitants.

It may be helpful to refer, among other things, to the sociological picture of the social world of the city's inhabitants.

### **3. Solutions applied in cities vs. diversity of residents to which they are addressed**

When thinking about the facilities that should be available to the inhabitants of contemporary cities, it is worth taking into account various processes occurring in them. Therefore, it is worth paying attention to at least several issues and phenomena.

First of all, cities are diverse in terms of social characteristics of their residents, civilization, culture, ethnicity, aesthetics, ecology, and so on. These differences may have their spatial correlates, i.e. they may be closely related to the location of certain social groups or categories in space of a city. Thus, there may be certain neighbourhoods, building quarters, or other distinguishable spatial units in a city that are inhabited by people with certain social, demographic characteristics (e.g. age, nationality, etc.). The lifestyles or cultural capital of these different groups or social categories entail different habits and abilities to use these or other amenities, including technical ones. They have different needs, and by virtue of their very different cultures and lifestyles, they envisage different devices - social institutions and technological solutions - for satisfying those needs. Someone may prefer to exchange views in an Internet chat room, while someone else prefers to talk to a neighbour on a bench in front of a block or apartment building. A bench has two meanings here - it is a technical device used for sitting, and at the same time a device or otherwise a social institution performing several important functions related to maintaining social ties, exchanging information or seeking support in the hardships of life, confirming the rules of neighbourhood coexistence (Niezabitowski, 2010, 2018). Taking into account these differences in the cultural capital and civilization equipment of the inhabitants of different areas of the city, it is difficult to imagine that for each of the inhabitants, the technical solutions introduced, implicitly facilitating life, will in fact be unconditionally facilitating. They may also constitute a barrier for using some services if we are not able to operate certain devices. These barriers do not have to do only with the place of residence, but also with age, education, but also, in order to avoid stereotyping, with individual characteristics of particular people, regardless of age or other socio-demographic features. It is therefore as much a social issue as a psychological one.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that despite those differences, which I only superficially mentioned above, a city should be adjusted to the needs of all its present and future inhabitants. It is a very complex problem, considering that contemporary cities are subject to many dynamic changes and this dynamics are expected to continue in the coming decades - I mean, for example, demographic ageing of the population of city dwellers or a huge increase in the

number of inhabitants and transformations towards the so-called "megacity" (multi-million metropolises). Some ideas born on the grounds of scientific discourse, as well as present in the documents of social policy for some time have inspired postulates for the creation of habitats friendly to different groups of residents. Examples of such ideas include: Universal Design, Built for All, as for taking into account the needs of the elderly among other age and social groups, it is worth highlighting the importance of such a document as the International Plan of Action on Ageing - Madrid 2002, which lists amongst the important priorities of social policy ensuring quality of life among others flat and living environment (Szatur-Jaworska, 2012). An important development of these ideas was, in turn, the guiding principle of the year 2012, which in the European Union was declared European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. This idea boiled down to the slogan – a society for all ages.

This idea was developed in Poland by establishing institutions of the so-called "aging policy" defined in the "Act on Senior Citizens". One of such institutions are, according to special statutory regulations, senior citizens' councils, which can be established in municipalities. As these councils, in accordance with Article 5c.1.(3) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, are entitled to play the role of: 1) consultative, 2) advisory and 3) initiative, they can signal to local government bodies the needs and problems of the elderly, including the need for facilities in the city space. As far as the Council of Seniors of the City of Katowice is concerned, in the previous term it made the following demands<sup>1</sup>:

- elimination of architectural barriers - e.g. narrow and steep stairs in cultural institutions,
- quality of public space - demand for "squats" (benches) for seniors in the city, so that they have something to lean on when they are tired,
- transportation - increasing the font on schedules,
- removal of too high curbs,
- need for escalators at the train station,
- extending bus routes so that every senior can get directly to where they live,
- providing special platforms and curbs high enough to make it easy for seniors to board trams without having to overcome too much height difference.

The problem so far has been the weak position of senior citizens' councils, which cannot hold the city council to account for their actions on behalf of seniors, and which cannot independently apply for grants to finance various activities or infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> Information collected during an interview in September 2019 with a member of the Senior Citizens' Council of the City of Katowice in connection with the implementation of the sub-topic "The aging of society and the needs and problems of older people in the concepts and strategies of senior policy" (task coordinator - Marek Niezabitowski, PhD, Professor of Silesian University of Technology) as part of the directional research of the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the Silesian University of Technology under the direction of Aleksandra Kuzior, PhD, Professor of Silesian University of Technology (work symbol - BK-232/ROZ-2/2018). I also presented this information in: Niezabitowski, M.: Prawa osób starszych – kilka uwag z perspektywy gerontologii i polityki społecznej. [W:] Kuzior A. (red.), Globalne konteksty poszanowania praw i wolności człowieka: współczesne problemy i dylematy. Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2020.

Senior citizens are one of the age groups living in cities. It is therefore important that they are not separated (isolated) from other residents and that the needs of these other groups are also met.

Meanwhile it happens that the phenomena occurring in the city space and its social tissue, as well as the solutions applied in it, contribute to the creation of isolated areas (ghettos) or to the deepening of social inequalities. Moreover, some of such solutions may be beneficial for some social groups, while others are negatively affected by them. When we consider, for example, demolitions of old districts, which are taking place in gigantic metropolises with millions of inhabitants (e.g. Shanghai) and transferring the people living there to newly-built blocks of apartments, this solution is positively perceived by young people (increase in the standard of everyday life), but it is difficult to find themselves in a new place of residence for old people, who are attached to the previous milieu, where they knew every neighbour and every place, knew where the necessary services were located, and the aesthetics of the district was close to their hearts (they felt familiar and safe there).

The solution is beneficial from the civilization point of view, as it offers better space, equipment and sanitary conditions, but psychologically it is too difficult for seniors. The essence of the problem is attachment to a given unique place of residence, whose elusive *genius loci* is difficult to recreate elsewhere. So is it a better solution to leave old people in their current place of residence? In principle, in the light of gerontological knowledge, yes, but preferably with access to a support network from younger people and with technological amenities, provided they are able to use them. Possible relocations (transfers) are recommended within a place of residence recognized by seniors (e.g., neighborhood, district, street, quarter) or with people to whom they have become attached (Frąckiewicz, 1972; Niezabitowski, 2018).

The above example shows that the latest in building technology combined with housing policy can solve problems for some groups and create problems for others. Continuing the reflection on social contrasts, it is worth adding that both technology and architecture in cities can unite and divide people.

A spectacular example of a failed urban project that was supposed to reduce inequality and social distances but contributed to their growth is the changes to the urban fabric carried out in Rio de Janeiro in connection with the 2016 Olympic Games. The idea behind the changes seemed fundamentally correct and positive, since the idea was to give favela children access to education and health services, to increase the sense of security and communication between favelas and middle class neighbourhoods. Indeed, cable cars were introduced there, allowing the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's favelas to move quickly within the vast expanse of the city. In the past, transport difficulties resulting from the distance and density of buildings cut the inhabitants of these favelas off from other districts of the metropolis. Additionally, new important institutions of social life were created at the train stops: a police station (associated with security), a community center, and a health center. It seemed that this was a particularly beneficial effect, since the provision of technical facilities to meet the daily needs

of residents was to be accompanied by the enclosure of this permanent change of environment with further social facilities (institutions).

These transformations, however, turned out to be beneficial for tourists coming to the Olympics and residents with good incomes, while many residents of poor districts did not benefit from it, since despite much shorter journeys to "better" neat districts, arriving there, they were not welcomed and could not get well-paid jobs they needed. Only watching this better world and seeing how they differed from it, they felt even worse - more excluded, marginalized, pushed away from a good, decent life. Overall, the transportation infrastructure upgraded for the Olympics served the tourists, but the residents of poor neighbourhoods suffered a lot of damage as a result of the spatial and architectural transformations implemented at that time. Many families were displaced from their homes in order to build facilities in the area to serve the people coming to the great sporting event. By appropriating space for these sporting and tourist functions, local businesses and services that cater to the needs of local residents were often deprived of their premises and clientele. Unnecessarily degraded areas of the city began to attract drug addicts, thieves and other manifestations of pathology and crime, which only deepened the processes of degradation of some local communities within the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. The project of transforming this metropolis, although with good intentions, turned out to be only a short-term image success for the sake of tourists and the organization of the Olympics. From the point of view of the quality of everyday life of the inhabitants of poor districts, it turned out to be rather a failure - in their understanding, it only increased social divisions, lowered the feeling of security due to fights between gangs and the police, and attracted pathology to places which previously fulfilled important social functions. In the memory of many families this will remain the trauma of displacement and beatings by the police. As a result of the social, spatial, and infrastructural transformations realized, which were supposed to lead to the elimination of social divisions, the feelings related to the effects of these actions and changes divided public opinion even more, worsened the contact between the inhabitants of favelas and those of middle class neighbourhoods - in general, the poor found themselves in even worse situation, and the goodness of the Games benefited mainly well-off people and tourists - social distances deepened, and this state of affairs may remain for years (Szubert-Kotomska).

The most extreme form of dividing/isolating people in the urban space is ghettoization (Jałowiecki, Łukowski, 2007), in which separate areas of cities are inhabited by people of a certain age, ethnicity, income, etc., and this means cutting them off from the rest of the population, removing to the margins. These may be groups excluded from participation in certain spheres of life due to lack of access to certain amenities. The reasons for this lack of access may be a poor material situation (inability to purchase or cover the costs of some devices or technical solutions, including heating – “energy poverty”), disabilities or psychological and/or cognitive barriers to using technology. It may happen, therefore, that where devices serve young people, they turn out to be too difficult to use, for example, for older people. This is of

course a simplistic view of the issue, since the differences in competences related to ICT usage are not only related to age, but rather to individual differences. Practitioners working with seniors, however, often point out that devices designed for use by seniors are not easy to understand and are difficult to use. Therefore, IT solutions installed in urban spaces, which usually serve young or middle-aged people well, may discourage seniors from using certain places (e.g. parking lots, prepaid toilets).

The double face of technology is also revealed as a consequence of another process that concerns an increasing number of contemporary metropolises - I mean the transformation towards "megacity" (metropolises with more than 10 million inhabitants). Technological progress in this case offers solutions to various problems (e.g. rapid construction of housing for the incoming masses of emigrants, construction of tunnels, sewage systems for the growing metropolises, online applications that make it possible to find friends for the weekend when you are alone in an unknown city, etc.), but at the other extreme there is the effect of overwhelming the human being with technology and its specific aesthetics, mechanized, devoid of human characteristics, human scale, and especially warmth. This effect is noticeable e.g. in Tokyo, where, similarly as in other Japanese metropolises, the unpleasant phenomenon of social isolation of young people caused by civilization stress has been noted. This phenomenon was named Hikikomori. According to the concept of spatial order of Marek Szczepański, the urban landscape of Tokyo is an example of disruption of social and aesthetic order of a city (Jałowicki, Szczepański, 2006) under the influence of technological solutions and economic and demographic processes. In addition, some technologies, such as the 5 G's, raise very strong health concerns, even though these concerns may be irrational. Creating change in the urban landscape therefore requires finding compromise and calming negative attitudes towards the latest developments when these attitudes are based on false premises.

#### **4. Research methods in social sciences and planning smart city solutions**

If creating a smart city were to mean shaping urban space and putting amenities to use for residents according to their needs, the humanities and social sciences, including sociology, can offer a look at the city as an environment for people's everyday lives. Learning about the feelings associated with this environment may involve at least several research methods or techniques:

- Survey – depending on the design and content of the questions in the questionnaire, it allows to determine how elements of the living environment in the city, including infrastructure and other solutions, as well as their lack, are perceived by the residents-respondents in the context of their quality of life.

- In-depth or/and narrative interviews – they provide the opportunity to get to know the deeper background of feelings, experiences, memories related to the place/places which are subjectively important for the inhabitants - here, as opposed to the questionnaire, the psychological, social, cultural and economic context of the perception of the city space and the changes occurring in it can be explored in a subtler and deeper way, the conditions of these attitudes and evaluations can be discovered; it is also possible to grasp the evolution of the attitudes of the resident-respondent against the background of the events in the history of the city or the country which influence the course of his/her life, etc.
- Case studies, also comparative – applied in relation to specific coherent fragments of city space, e.g. districts, housing quarters, cities within a wider metropolitan system; it is then possible to capture the social, cultural, and economic diversities of such smaller social organisms within the city - as they determine the fact that the proposed changes or modernizations in some parts of the city will improve the inhabitants' quality of life, while in other parts they may not even reach the inhabitants, or worse, only deepen the existing inequalities; knowledge about such diversities may make it easier to avoid or level out the negative effects of the introduced changes.
- Action research or in other words participatory research – study in which the residents are asked what changes they expect, and at the same time they are involved in the process of implementing those changes accepted by them; the whole process is subject to research, and after the implementation of the changes proposed by the residents the process is followed by evaluation, i.e. obtaining feedback, i.e. information about the feelings, impact on the quality of life and assessment of whether the residents' expectations have been met. An additional element of the evaluation may be a reflection on whether the initiative was worthy of implementation and perhaps repetition in another city or local community.
- SWOT analyses - those owing to different objectives or social groups at which the proposed/considered actions and changes are addressed - are worth preparing in order to assess their sense as investments in economic, social, cultural, etc. aspects. - for example, an analysis of opportunities, threats, weaknesses and strengths (assets) of housing estate can be carried out in relation to the needs of, for example, older or middle-aged residents or youth and children representing different age cohorts.

Irrespective of the possibility of using various research methods and techniques in creating a sociological picture of the city and the changes occurring or initiated in it, the phenomena of "special concern" should be the risk of perpetuating or increasing social inequalities (some people will greatly benefit from new technologies and solutions, while others will be even more marginalized) and ghettoization, which directly consists in spatial and, at the same time, social separation of certain categories and social groups from the rest of the inhabitants of the city.

Technology and other solutions used in the city should unite the inhabitants, not divide or marginalize them.

If the city is not created or modernized with a "humanistic coefficient," i.e. taking into account human needs and the above-mentioned social issues, it is threatened by the specter of the anti-urban, which was once evocatively presented by Lewis Mumford (1938) - showing a city of the industrial era that is difficult to live in and unfriendly to humans (today, of course, it would be a city of the information era that is not adapted to the needs of various groups of inhabitants). Time will show if and to what extent under the umbrella of the smart city 3.0 the needs of residents will be reflected in the changes made in urban space of today's and future cities.

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