



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can Urban Identity Be Universal? An Anthropological Critique

Amrit Kumar Bhandari 

Prithvi Narayan Campus, Tribhuvan University, Pokhara, Nepal

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Corresponding Author : Amrit Kumar Bhandari, **Email:** amrit.bhandari@prnc.tu.edu.np

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ABSTRACT

Based on the critical review of some of the existing literature on urbanization, urbanism and urban identity by pioneering figures in urban anthropology and sociology, I have attempted to discover if there exists any universal set of characteristics by which the urban identity of a person can be explained. I have supplemented my critical review with some of the useful empirical evidences from my fieldwork undertaken in the city of Butwal, Nepal. Scholars such as Simmel, Wirth and others have been found to be outlining some of the elements of urbanism, urban identity and urban social relations that can be universally applicable. However, their formulations have been criticized by succeeding scholars, especially from anthropology and sociology, by stressing that it is almost impossible to delineate universally applicable set of characteristics of urban identity. Thus, I conclude that some commonalities may exist among the urban dwellers of different cities or urban context across the globe, but there exist no such universal set of elements of urban identity of an urban dweller.

KEYWORDS: Urban identity, superficiality, transiency, individuality, formality

INTRODUCTION

Identity is central to the existence of an individual in any society. However, identity in itself is a much complex issue covering a wide range of dimensions. Castells (2009) defines identity as “people’s source of meaning and experience” (p. 6). Basically, it involves knowing who we are, and who others are. Likewise, it also entails how others know who we are as, us getting to know who they think we are as, and so forth. Furthermore, it is a classificatory term having multi-dimensional nature and helps us in finding our own place in the human world as individuals and as members of the collectivities we are associated with. It is also about how individuals represent themselves or claim themselves to be using one or another element among others in their society.

Identity, in itself, is a social construct (Wendt, 1994), so is urban Identity. Rural society and urban society are characterized

by different types of socio-cultural characteristics. So when a person migrates to an urban area like a city, the immediate tasks for him/her become the experiencing of urbanism, an internalizing of the basic features of urbanity or urban livelihood that characterize that urban setting. However, urban experiences tend to be diverse and dynamic as they are shaped by personal attitude and ability, power and wealth, as well as ingenuity and labor. As Giesking et al. (2014) argue "getting from place to place puts a city dweller in contact with a stimulating variety of people and material conditions" (p. 217). In this context, any of the new city dweller first remains involved in learning and internalizing the basic urban characteristics and thereby creates an urban identity which is peculiar to that urban area. The person may have to replace his/her pre-existing characteristics and habits with those which are considered as the salient features of that urban area. He/she has to strive to learn those aspects or qualities by which he/she can call himself/herself as 'urban'. Thus, in the paper, urban identity is used to indicate to be the identity of an individual that he/she develops while living in a particular urban area. It means that urban identity is specific to an urban area. Thus, by 'urban identity,' I am referring to the personal identity, not to the identity of urban areas as such and I will endeavor to discover if there exists any universal urban identity.

CONCEPTUALIZING URBAN IDENTITY AND THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

"Urban seems like a simple enough concept to grasp, but it actually has many interpretations. Derived from the Latin word *urbanus* meaning characteristic of, or pertaining to, the city urban essentially holds that same association to most people" (Macionis & Parrilo, 2013, p.3). Urban identity looks quite a straightforward term in its meaning at the first glance. However, it is not that easy to conceptualize and

define as it has been used for denoting a multiple meaning. Such dynamism of the term urban identity is well illustrated by Cheshmehzangi (2015), who puts forward that urban identity is defined as "place identity," "placeness," "character of a place," "image of a place," "sense of place," and "spirituality of place," which all pertain to urban identity as the concept of "distinctiveness." Here, it is very important to note that Cheshmehzangi's multiple meanings of urban identity are all but only about the identity of a city or urban area; however the term is even more dynamic. Another important point to be considered is that the most of the literature on urban identity also portray it as the identity of a city, which is incessantly altering and comprised not only of houses, paths and plazas, but also of dynamic involvement of all personalities residing in a setting.

Like the scholars from other disciplines, anthropologists have also found it as a tricky issue to define. In this context, Karpovets (2014) maintains that "defining and classifying the notion of urban identity, which allows various ways of interpretation, is a major problem in anthropological studies" (p. 79). To put it more inclusively, it is used to refer the images and characteristics of a) a city, b) city-life and c) an individual/person from a city. In this paper, I am going to use the term 'urban identity' to denote to the images and characteristic features of an individual or a person from a city i.e. the image and identity of a city-dweller. To be more precise, I used urban identity as an individual's personal identity. While defining personal identity, Karpovets (2014) argues:

It is important to distinguish two levels of questions: "How do others see me?" and "How do I see myself?" These questions illustrate the outer level of the definition that tends to be objective and the inner level of self-identification, appearing to be more subjective and prejudiced. (p.83)

Thus, urban identity, as a form of personal identity, is all about how a person or a group becomes known to other or presents among others as being the separate entity in his/her urban milieu. So, my primary quest is to search for if there are any universally applicable characteristics and images of urban identity by which a person can be labeled as an 'urban' one by making a critical review of relevant literature and then supplementing the critique with firsthand data from my PhD fieldwork.

DIMENSIONS OF URBAN IDENTITY OF A PERSON

Just like the conceptualization of urban identity, delineating its main dimensions is a complex task in itself. In other words, ascertaining the features by which a person can be called to be an urban one or delineating the basic constituents of an urban identity is really a challenging task. Urban identity formation is mainly associated with the development of new social and cultural relations and the development of an urban psychology. Therefore, I have attempted to elucidate urban identity as a 'social and cultural construct' as well as a 'psychological construct' as the two major dimensions of urban identity of an individual.

Urban Identity as a Social and Cultural Construct

Some of the classical scholars have attempted to define basic social and cultural characteristics by which urbanism and urban identity can be defined (Simmel, 1903; Park, 1925; Wirth, 1938; Weber, 1958). These characteristics are largely related to the types of relationships and behaviors that an individual develops while learning to live an urban life, the primary ways in which they are developed and the ways in which an individual fits him/her in the urban social structure.

While arguing about the foundational base of the mental attitude (which he labels as a blasé one) of an urban dweller,

Simmel (1903) highlighted the role played by the intensification of emotional life or psychological distress, money economy and organized and coordinated daily life in shaping his/her mental tendencies. Likewise, in his classical article "Urbanism as a way of life", Wirth (1938) posits that anonymity, superficiality, segmentality, transiency and impersonality are the basic characteristics associated with city-life. Similarly, in the words of Castells (1976) urbanism characterizes:

A high degree of differentiation between individuals, social and personal isolation, role segmentation, superficiality and utilitarianism in social relations, functional specialization and the division of labour, the competitive spirit, a high level of mobility, the market economy, the predominance of secondary relations over primary, the shift from community to association, the subordination of the individual to organization, control of the political process by mass appeals, etc. (p. 65)

Based on the review of the important classical explanations of urbanism, city-life and urban social relations by some of the established scholars, I have found anonymity, superficiality, individuality, transiency, impersonality and formality as being highlighted as the main constituents of the urban identity of a person. In fact, all of these elements stem out of the social and cultural relations that people develop in an urban society. Even I have found some scholars like Wirth telling about alienation and segmentality also as the basic urban characteristics. However, in the succeeding section, I have endeavored to elaborate and thereby make a critical review of the first six elements that I have noted above.

Anonymity

Wirth (1938) highlights the anonymity as a basic urban characteristic by arguing "increase in the number of inhabitants of a community beyond a few hundred is bound

to limit the possibility of each member of the community knowing all the others personally” (p.11). For Macionis (2005), Wirth saw personal ties and traditional morality lost in the anonymous rush of the city. Urban areas are characterized by relatively larger population size. In such a population place, it is almost impossible for an individual to know all of the people around him/her. In this context, Zenner and Gmelch (2004) argue “anonymity stems from the fact that many of the people with whom city dwellers come into daily contact are complete strangers to them” (p. 7). Thus, anonymity serves as a basic constituent of urban identity. This is also the reason why a person walking through the crowded street of Traffic Chowk, Butwal, finds himself/herself entangled among the strangers. There are a number of face to face contacts but rare of them are close and intimate acquaintances. Hannerz (1980) contends that uncertainty becomes a fairly common characteristic of urban social interaction due to anonymity. Due to anonymity, we find an individual in a city knowing only a section of his/her community, neighborhood, work or study place. Zenner and Gmelch (2004) explain about how anonymity prevails in an urban context by positing that “in public places like streets, stores, markets, bus and train stations, urbanites are surrounded by strangers” (p. 7). They further claim that the familiarity amongst city dwellers is contextual.

Superficiality

Another feature that person develops in an urban area is superficiality. Castells (1976) presents superficiality as one of the characteristics associated with urbanism. The nature of the life in a city is such that a city dweller engages in the development of some superficial types of social and cultural relations with people. The question of how an urban dweller internalizes superficiality in the social and cultural life of a city is illustrated by Park (1925) as follows:

The processes of segregation establish

moral distances which make the city a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate. This makes it possible for individuals to pass quickly and easily from one moral milieu to another and encourages the fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, perhaps, but widely separated worlds. All this tends to give to city life a superficial and adventitious character; it tends to complicate social relationships and to produce new and divergent individual types. (p. 608)

Yes, a city dweller may know many people in the place but he/she tends to a close relationship with only a few people around him/her. It means that an urban dweller has the limited number of persons to interact and people in interactions are also abided by more impersonal and formal relations. People meet each other in highly segmental roles. By nature, the interdependency of people is much greater in cities in the sense that people have to get their needs fulfilled from a different variety of actors. However, such interdependence remains only up to a superficial level only.

Individuality

Individuality is yet another characteristic associated with urban socio-cultural life. Generally, city dwellers tend to give more importance to their own vested interests. “One of the consequences of social complexity and cultural pluralism in urban areas is the greater choice or freedom accorded the individual in the selection of appropriate roles and behavior” (Eames & Goode, 1977, p. 42). McAreavey (2010) provides a logical explanation to how a city dweller develops individuality in the city as:

Set in a city environment, individuals develop relations as a result of economic transactions; they seek to exchange merchandise or services to further their own self-interest. Relations are impersonal, artificial, perfunctory,

loose, and superficial. As a result, individuals are cut off from nature, and they experience isolation from one another and from their community. (p. 297)

Thus, it can be said that the social and cultural context of the cities is such that city dwellers are instantly bound to develop impersonal, segmental and superficial relationships among other city dwellers. This is the main reason for leading to the development of individuality among urban dwellers.

Transiency

Transiency is also treated as an important nature of urban social relations as they tend to last for a relatively short time.

The bonds of kinship, of neighborliness, and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations under a common folk tradition are likely to be absent or, at best, relatively weak in an aggregate the members of which have such diverse origins and backgrounds. (Wirth, 1938, p. 11)

Based on Wirth's arguments, it can be posited that the weakened kinship and neighborhood ties in the cities are main causes for transiency of social relations in a city. By pointing out at the instrumental nature of relationship amongst people in the city, Flanagan (2010) doubts the long term value of such relationships and further adds that people use those relationships only as a means for the fulfillment of their personal goals. Urban dwellers continually make new social contacts in the course of fulfilling their socio-cultural needs. Thus, they may forget their older connections with people and engage in developing connections with newer ones. This process of leaving their older acquaintances is eased by the fact that they are less attached with their neighbors.

Formality

Another important characteristic feature associated with urban identity is

prevalence of formal relations. Tönnies (1957) portrayed the urban life as being characterized by impersonal and secondary relationships. He further pointed out that the interaction of people in urban society is formal, contractual and dependent on the special function or service they perform. This implies that the relations among people in a typical urban socio-cultural life tend to lack intimacy and are not based on kinship ties. Furthermore, most of the routine social relations in the city tend to remain not only impersonal but also segmented ones as a result genuine friendliness is hardly developed among people and often formal politeness takes the place of genuine friendliness. As a result people tend to develop only formal relations with others. Importantly, such formal relations tend to be less intimate.

Though, people in cities are crowded physically, there remains a significant social and cultural distance among them resulted largely due to anonymity, impersonality and heterogeneity that characterize cities. Additionally, occupational differences can act as the vital source of such differences amongst the residents of the cities. Quite often, urbanites tend to remain as nigh-dwellers rather than neighbors for each other as exemplified by apartment dwellers who might have been living in the same apartment for years without any acquaintance with other people.

Impersonality

Generally, impersonality is a considered as a necessary and convenient way of urban living. Simmel (1903) explained that the impersonal and utilitarian nature of the socio-cultural ties as the fundamental characteristics of the contemporary city. From this, it can be argued that it is more common for city dwellers to know each other as bystanders than as closely associated individuals.

Wirth (1938) posits that the city environment is such that it tends to overload its dwellers with plenteous as well as varied

stimuli like rushing vehicles, earsplitting horns, blinking signs, as well as odd looking and weirdly behaving individuals. Such overloading ultimately leads to the development of alienation among them. As a coping mechanism to such a stressful and alienating setting, urban residents may possess a tendency to interact with other individuals in a detached and distant manner. Zenner and Gmelch (2004) view much of the impersonality of cities as being associated with and boosted by industrial technology. In simple societies, people are dependent on one another for a number of reasons associated with their livelihood. However, in cities, frequent contact and interdependency among people has largely been shrunk by industrial production. Therefore, impersonality automatically develops among the city dwellers.

To sum up, the above explained six features, which are largely about the types of social and cultural relations and behaviors believed to characterize an urban setting, are basic to the formation of an urban identity in an individual. An individual tends to shape his/her personality and behavior in accordance to these urban characteristics and the existing urban social structure. When an individual starts his/her life in an urban area, he/she gradually learns these urban characteristics from the urban society and endeavors to find his/her place in the urban social structure. In this process, he/she gradually gets transformed into an urban individual or he/she gets an urban identity.

Urban Identity as a Psychological Construct

Urban identity is not only a social construct but also a psychological construct too. As Lalli (1988) remarks “urban identity as part of a person's more comprehensive self-identity is the result of a complex association between self and urban environment” (p. 306). The city contributes greatly to the development of an overall character of a city dweller's

psyche that encompasses his/her multitude of experiences. From psychological point of view, the salient aspect of urban identity is that it enables the locals of a particular part of the city to distinguish themselves from those from other locations like a rural setting. Not only does this sense of belonging gives one the impression that they must be unique but also bestows upon the individuals certain features connected to the city. The network of self (internal) and other (external) constitute the city related attributions. Any newer urban dweller endeavors to instill similar psyche urban after starting his/her life in the cities.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF CONSTITUENTS OF THE URBAN IDENTITY

Despite getting significant popularity within the realm of social sciences, Wirth's conceptualization of urbanism and urban identity, there appeared studies that challenged his notion. One of such challenges came from Zenner and Gmelch (2004), who claim that “soon after Wirth published his article, anthropologists began to challenge the universality of his views. Anthropologists found that some Non-Western Cities were not marked by the heterogeneity, anonymity, alienation, and anomie Wirth described” (p. 8). Early researchers like Lewis (1952), Hannerz (1969, 80), Stack (1974) have found urban dwellers knowing each other very well and treat each other in terms of intimacy and interdependence in urban settings like neighborhoods, workplaces and religious communities. Similarly, some other researchers like Sjoberg (1960), Fox (1977) found preindustrial cities lacking anonymity and disorder of large industrial cities. To elaborate an example, in his study of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, Bascom (1955) discovered that those people had cities from long ago, which were quite dense but their cities lacked the heterogeneity and isolation as presumed by Wirth. In the absence of

heterogeneity, many of the characteristics features that shape the urban identity of a person may not be found to be associated with the cities of Yaruba. Similarly, Lewis (1952) found the Tepoztecos in the Mexico City, originally from Tepoztlan village in Mexico, maintaining their traditional kinship network and continuing to follow own religious practices despite living in the city.

Not only anthropologists, sociologists also have criticized the characteristics of urbanism or urban identity proposed by Simmel, Wirth and the Chicago School. One of the first and most important critiques came from Fischer (1972), who confronted the Wirth/Simmel explanation of the city by arguing that social ties and subcultures that connect people amongst themselves are the main features of a city not impersonality and anonymity. He further insisted that the cities are the places of mutual trust and friendship not that of impersonality. Similarly, Simmel, Wirth and other early scholars of urbanism have been criticized for making a bleak portrait of cities and urban life. In this context, by highlighting the positive aspects of urbanism, Macionis (2005) claims “the impersonal nature of urban relationships, together with the great social diversity found in cities today, makes city dwellers more tolerant than rural villagers” (p. 524).

Likewise, Flanagan (2010) makes a critical analysis of Wirth’s classical work ‘Urbanism as a way of life’ in the following ways:

In it Wirth managed to integrate almost every major sociological observation that had been made about the city up until the time that he wrote. His work also reflects the fact that although many of these early theorists were ambivalent about the conditions of urban life, most were distrustful of the urban future, and many brooded over its prospect. (p. 72)

It seems that in their efforts to draw out the essential features of urban identity, these early scholars were largely oriented

around the disruptive effect of the cities on the social and moral order of society, and the concurrence between rural communities and urban crowds. More often, they were comparing the “old world” filled with moral order with the new urban world, in which density and heterogeneity brought anonymity, impersonality, social indifference, alienation and distrust. In other words they tended to represent the cities only in terms of size, density or heterogeneity, and to emphasize the individual and social costs of urban life, focusing on its “dysfunctions”. In doing so, they largely missed out on highlighting the positive aspects of urbanism and urbanization by which people prefer living in cities.

In my own observations from my PhD field in Butwal city, I have found the city not entirely replicating above explained basic constituents of urban socio-cultural relations. Obviously, I observed characteristics such as anonymity, transiency and superficiality prevailing in the core market area of the city like Traffic Chowk, Rajmarga Chowk, Manigram Chowk, etc. For instance, one of my observations from the fieldwork is that whenever a resident from Yogikuti of Butwal reaches Bhatbhateni Superstores in Butwal to purchase goods and other household stuff, he/she views the salesperson in the stores largely as a salesperson, even if they share the same neighborhood. This observation may support the claim of Zenner and Gmelch (2004) regarding anonymity. However, I discovered that the migrants from various villages from hilly districts such as Gulmi, Arghakhanchi, Palpa, Syangja and others are living a collective kind of life by replicating shared culture as well as network of kinship ties that are characteristics to their place of origin in the villages. During the conversation with my collaborator families, I found that individuality is gradually increasing amongst them. Yet, as remarked by one of my informants, who resides in Resunga Path of Shankarnagar, individuality is now becoming more and a more universal phenomenon rather than

an urban one, owing largely to the ever-pervasive globalization. He further posited that the sense of individuality is easily observable in the rural societies too in the recent days. During my fieldwork in various *Toles* (localities) from Yogikuti, Devinagar, Shankarnagar and other nearby area, I realized that anonymity, formality, transiency and impersonality are less evident there. Rather, their dominant form of social relationship is found to that based on kinship ties. Moreover, they organize family and social rituals and observe various festivals in a collective manner. The *Sarayu* dance (which was performed mostly in the villages of Gulmi and Arghakhanchi districts in the past) is now regularly demonstrated in Devinagar every year during Dashain Festival. This dance symbolizes a classical example of such collective performance as well as cultural continuity from villages to the city.

CONCLUSION

Defining urban identity is difficult because there has been no common agreement among the pioneering scholars on urbanism, city-life, urbanization and urban anthropology. Early pioneers of urban sociology tried to establish anonymity, superficiality impersonality, transiency, individuality and formality as the main elements of urbanism and urban identity of a person. Besides, some scholars further add segmentality and alienation to the list of such urban characteristics. From this, it can be argued that an urban dweller tends to develop or live a largely anonymous individual life in which he/she is bound to others in the society by impersonal, superficial, transient, formal and segmental social and cultural relations. However, some anthropologists claimed that these characteristics are not exhaustive and applicable to only some of the core urban areas. Through their studies, they showed that cities are also characterized by intimate and close social and cultural contacts among its dwellers, and thus they

reject the notion that above characteristics can help define and delineate urban identity of a person.

Thus, based on the review of some of the selected literature on cities, urbanization and urban life as well as from the firsthand information that I drew from my field, it has been concluded that some commonalities exist among the urban dwellers from different urban areas of the world in terms of the type of urban characteristics and social relations that they develop with others in their society. However, there exists no such universal set of constituents or characteristics of urban identity of a person and he/she acquires his/her urban identity on the basis of the historic, social and cultural characteristics of any city or urban area.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.

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