Structural and Interactional Approaches to the Study of Urbanism

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Introduction

Those of you who are familiar with my work in the past will know that my training as an anthropologist has led me to adopt a particular approach to the study of human behaviour in cities. This approach pays particular attention to the way in which people behave towards one another in everyday life. But this rather simplistic formulation provides little help in the study of Third World cities or any city if it comes to that. This is because the social phenomena which we associate with living in the city are very complex and there are obviously many different aspects we can take to be the relevant features in understanding city life. I mean by this not only that the analyst is free to select any one of a large number of aspects on which to concentrate. In doing so the analyst must ignore features of city life which other analysts could argue are just as important topics of study. We would however be perfectly justified in asking the analyst to defend his or her choice of topic as against any one of a host of other topics he or she could quite legitimately have chosen to examine.

But quite apart from the plethora of topics any analyst may quite rightly choose of study there is another more difficult epistemological problem to be resolved. This is the question of the level of abstraction that the study of any one particular phenomenon involves. It is obvious I think that the analysis of political processes in a city or of industrial organization operates at a much higher level of abstraction than say the study of family interaction. The field work is vastly different and the sources of data are different. A family study needs the direct observation of the interaction of the different members of the family to enable

the interpretations of the different members of the family by the fieldworker to be recorded and incorporated into the analysis. Someone analyzing the operation of say a political movement in a town or the activities of some industrial enterprise may well need to talk to the functionaries of the enterprise to find out what they think is going on but an analysis of the statistical records of production and marketing would be just as essential.

Yet some academics have been a little rigid in defining what the appropriate procedure for the study of urban phenomena should be. I could quote the reaction of Richard Fox to the sort of studies which A.L. Epstein and I were making of people in towns in the 1950s. Fox referred to the sort of studies which we preferred to make as "romantic". By this he seems to mean that we chose to look at phenomena which he thinks of as the unusual or picaresque. In other words he seemed to think that we chose to look at strange rituals and spectacular performances rather than humdrum everyday activities of people. It is true that I was fascinated by the reaction of the spectators to one of the dances performed during leisure time on the Copperbelt (Mitchell 1958). But the point is that Fox apparently did not appreciate that however much fun the songs of the dancers were, they nevertheless provided a dramatic way in which the general manifestation of ethnicity could be expressed. It would be difficult to argue that in a social situation where there were over one hundred different ethnic groups thrown together by the forces of industrial production ethnic differences would not be a significant aspect of urban living. At the same time the dress of the dancers emphasized how Western social status differentiation had become sufficiently important to be used by these dancers to make a point about the social system in which they found themselves living. In other words the apparently inconsequential behaviour of the dancers provided a prism through which the significant components of daily living could be refracted into its component parts. I presume that Fox would have preferred us to spend our time looking at the history of the growth of the towns in Central Africa and what administrative organization of the towns had grown up to control the people living in the towns. This would certainly be a legitimate field of study - for those people who would like to spend their time doing this sort of thing. Instead I adopted a less direct approach to understand the basis of daily interaction in the new cities. I cannot justify my approach over any other. All I can say is that I found it more fun. But at the same time I argue that the real interest in the study I

was making was not in the dance per se but rather in the social system in which the dance was located at the time.

Ways of Studying Interactional Phenomena

I would argue that the only way to study interactional phenomena is through normal human processes. I mean by this that it is only by interacting with people going about the whole business of getting on with living in the city that we can make the observations about behaviour and the meaning that people attribute to that behaviour. This implies of course that a knowledge of the language of the people and of their beliefs and values is essential. Most of us are forced to make use of talented local assistants to collect the sort of data I am referring to if we are unable to achieve the appropriate level of linguistic skill to manage on our own.

The technique then becomes that of recording as fully as possible the activities of the people in whom we are interested where activities here includes not only what people do but what their interpretation is about those activities. Careful reading of one's notes afterwards and thinking about them in terms of systematic ways of comprehending what they contain will enable the fieldworker to notice where the recording has been inadequate or when the significance of what has been recorded has been inadequately recorded. Note that I say we examine our data in terms of systematic ways of comprehending them. I mean by this simply that systematic academic work of the type we are talking about is always conducted in a framework of disciplined explanation. In other words there is always theory behind it.

As soon as I say that I am in trouble because in the state of the general sociology at present there is little in the way of generally acceptable theory available to us. In the last 20 to 30 years there has been a proliferation of competing epistemological orientations which as far as one can judge appear to be unintelligible to one another. There seems little that an orthodox Marxist approach to urban phenomena can say to those who work within an ethnomethodological approach. There seems to be no escape from this dilemma. The protagonists are simply talking about different phenomena and will usually strongly defend the particular approach they favour without fully understanding what the protagonists of other approaches are trying to achieve.

There is alas no solution to this problem and as far as I know no way of reconciling opposed approaches. They are simply not

the same thing and there is no reason why there should be a reconciliation. A leopard is an animal with many different spots and urban sociology is a very large leopard.

I have tried to accommodate the opposed approaches by means of my distinction between the setting and the situation (see Mitchell 1987, pp. 7-25). In studying interactional phenomena I was of course aware of the fact that the phenomena I was observing were of necessity influenced by circumstances outside the phenomena themselves. The fact that I was looking at a dance taking place in a Copperbelt town undoubtedly coloured my appreciation of what was happening in the dance, but the town itself was not the prime focus of my attention. If I were studying the town in all its complexities I would have needed to have adopted different techniques of data collection and would have had to use a very different mode of analysis. I argued that all that I needed to do to achieve the purposes I had in mind was to select from the vast complexity of the surrounding circumstances those aspects which had a direct bearing on the problem I was examining. And my examination of these aspects need not be of the detail that someone who was studying the town as an entity would need to devote to it. It is in this sense that I used the word "setting" which implies the location of the phenomenon in some theoretically relevant set of parameters.

But as soon as I had drawn the distinction between the interactional phenomena I was concentrating on and the wider setting in which it was located I was immediately aware that the setting itself could be construed at very different levels of abstraction because within the setting itself there was a lower level of phenomena which clearly was relevant to how one analyzed the phenomena of interest. I am referring here to what I have called the situation of the social action. The situation refers to the immediate social circumstances surrounding the actors. This idea came into social psychology about sixty years ago or more when W.I. Thomas spoke of the "definition of the situation" by which he meant how the actors construed the behaviour in which they were involved. Thomas of course was a social psychologist and understood things from the point of view of the individual. For sociological purposes it became necessary to redefine the notion of a "situation". Sociologically it became necessary to argue that the people involved in the interaction were operating with a common framework of beliefs and values. It is essential, however, to argue that the particular sets of beliefs and values were not fixed and rigid but that different people might easily define the

situation confronting them in different ways. For consistent social interaction to take place there must be some common ground in the definition of the situation otherwise social interaction would be chaotic. In reality social interaction as a whole should be looked upon as a set of Chinese boxes each of which fits neatly inside the box just larger than itself.

The Social Network Approach

Those of you who know my more recent work will know that I have found the use of the idea of social networks of great assistance in the study of behaviour in cities. In 1969 I edited a volume about social networks in cities in Central Africa (Mitchell 1969). In that volume a set out the basic principles of the use of the idea of social networks in the study of urban behaviour. Since 1969 there has been considerable development in the use of computers for the analysis of patterns of network linkages, whether in towns or not, so that the technical aspects of what I wrote then have now been surpassed but the general theoretical points I raised then have not. The point about the use of network ideas in the study of urban behaviour is that by concentrating on a limited set of interacting individuals the scope of the study is automatically restricted. In network analysis we record the interactions in terms of which a relatively limited set of actors relate to one another. The records, of course, cannot possibly include everything that goes on. This means that what is recorded depends on what the analyst considers to be important. For example when Kapferer recorded interaction in an industrial situation he was interested in examining the struggle for power among the set of workers and was able to provide a feasible explanation of how a conflict in that particular plant had to end up in the way it did. In the study he reports in the study of two strikes in a tailor factory in Zambia just after independence he is able to show, using network techniques, that the first strike was unsuccessful because he argues the upper level workers in the factory had no feeling of solidarity with the lower level workers. During the six months that followed, however, many personal bonds between the more skilled workers and the less skilled had developed so that when the dissatisfaction with their working conditions arose the whole labour force was able to withdraw its labour.

In the most recent urban study I have personally been involved in the subject of the study was women who were at the time of study living in so-called refuges for homeless women.

Most of them had been assaulted by their husbands or the men they had been living with. By systematically tracing several different types of social relationship linking the people who were important to the particular homeless woman with whom we were at the moment concerned to others in her network, we were able to show how, in her isolation, the woman concerned was able to get support from people in the same refuge but not from her own kin and certainly not from the kin of the man she was involved with.

It so happens that my collaborator and I had been asked by the welfare authorities to conduct this particular study. Obviously the research worker will choose the sorts of relationships the members of the network are involved in terms of the research worker's theoretical interest. Network techniques therefore are very flexible and can be adapted to almost any theoretical problem. This in fact is its major weakness. The data collection could be chaotic if the theoretical underpinning is not strong and there is no way of rejecting those relationships which are not important to the theoretical interest of the research worker. There is no substitute for theory!

Case Analysis

I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell 1983) that one way of relating theoretical interests to empirical observations is by means of using the 'case study' approach. Not all sets of events are necessarily of interest in disciplined observation. Particular sets of events are only of interest to analysts because they can throw light on how apparently random actions of people may be shown to be consistent with the analyst's theoretical interests. In the paper quoted I make use of an incident recorded by Kykken the author of one of the papers in a volume dealing with the discussion significance tests in statistical usage. Kykken was working in a clinical psychology department of an American university. One of the psychologists in this organization was studying anorexia, the disease when some people, usually young ladies, severely restrict their food intake until their health is threatened. The investigator in question was making use of a well know method of psychological study i.e. the use of Rorschach blots. In this technique the subjects are confronted with shapeless ink-blots within which their appear finely graduated shadings. The subject is then asked to 'interpret' the blots. Since the blots are randomly produced there are, of course, no intrinsic forms in the

blots. The interpretation therefore tend to reflect hidden orientations in the subjects psyche. In the study being described the subjects were 31 anorexic subjects and 31 normal subjects. The investigator to his surprise found that the anorexic subjects tended to see shapes they interpreted as "frogs" in the blots whereas the non-anorexics on the whole did not do so. When the investigator subjected his findings to a statistical analysis he was surprised to find that anorexic subjects were likely to see "frog" in the blots to a remarkably higher degree than non-anorexics. In fact 61 percent of the anorexics saw frogs in the blots whereas only 16 per cent of the non-anorexics saw frogs. This difference could only have occurred by chance in one instance in 1000! This finding puzzled him and in seeking an explanation of his statistical findings it struck him that frogs are cloacal animals. This means that in creatures like frogs such as lizards, birds and similar creatures the reproductive canal is the same as the excretal canal. He argued that the anorexic subjects were frightened that if they overate then they would fall pregnant and hence restricted their dietary intake. The writer of the paper then took this suggestion to the other psychologists working in the laboratory. None of them could credit the suggestion.

My argument is that the connection between the explanation and the empirical data was too remote to show the theoretical linkage. This means however that any "case" will not always prove fruitful in developing theory. The reason is that in analysing case material the investigator has to select from a wide range of data to report the case. Much of what the investigator learns about will almost certainly be irrelevant to the theoretical point the investigator wishes to make. The strategy in the use of case material, therefore, is to select those cases which tell the most significant story. Part of the value of the use of case material is to be able to show how the expectations one has from ones theoretical orientation occur in different circumstances when the manifestation of the expectations may be obscured by the particular circumstances. In other words the situation surrounding the case needs to be taken into account.

Conclusions

What I have been arguing for, then, is for a technique to achieve some way of reducing very complex phenomenon to a procedure which provides a method of collecting empirical data which may then be fitted into some sort of theoretical framework. Note that

the technique itself does not dictate what the theoretical framework should be, only that the framework should exist. But the procedure does require that the different levels of abstraction should clearly be distinguished and that if the focus of interest is the social interaction of people living in towns then social situations should be so delineated as to define what particular aspects of social interaction need to be concentrated on. The definition of a social situation in effect determines what particular aspect of social interaction the researcher needs to pay particular attention to.

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