

Module-17

URBAN SOCIOLOGY



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INTRODUCTION

Urban sociology is the sociological study of life and human interaction in metropolitan areas. It is a normative discipline of sociology seeking to study the structures, environmental processes, changes and problems of an urban area and by doing so provide inputs for urban planning and policy making. In other words, it is the sociological study of cities and their role in the development of society.^[1] Like most areas of sociology, urban sociologists use statistical analysis, observation, social theory, interviews, and other methods to study a range of topics, including migration and demographic trends, economics, poverty, race relations and economic trends.

In the first quarter of this, century, the theorizing and research of the sociologists established the main direction of much of the work in the following decades.

Two major currents came to characterize urban sociology in the early period. The first came from the sociologists at the University of Chicago, emphasizing the demographic and ecological structure of the city, the social disorganization and pathology of the urban normative order and the social psychology of urban existence. The second current has come to be called 'community studies.' It consists of broad-gauged ethnographic studies of the social structure of individual communities and the ways of life of the inhabitants.

These two orientations are divided into the culturalists' approach and the structuralists' approach in the urban sociology. The culturalists emphasize on how urban life feels, how people react to living in urban areas; and how the city life is organized. This approach tries to study and explore the culture, organizational and social psychological consequences of urban life. Louis Wirth's works belong to this approach.

The structuralists' approach investigates the interplay between the political and the economic forces, the growth, decline and changing spatial organization of urban space. They consider city as the physical embodiment of political and economic relationship. They argue that the city itself is an effect of more fundamental forces and cities are shaped by social powers that affect all aspects of human existence.

The sociologists like Park, Burgess and McKenzie of the Chicago School belong to this approach. Thus, any study of urban sociology must include both the approaches. Therefore,

urban sociology is not a subject with distinct individuality but the combination of both the above approaches.

Scope:

The scope of urban sociology is very vast and multidimensional. Urban sociology relies on the related sciences and borrows from history, economics, social psychology, public administration and social work. As stated already, the subject-matter of sociology is cities and their growth, and it deals with such problems like planning and development of cities, traffic regulations, public waterworks, social hygiene, sewerage works, housing, beggary, juvenile delinquency, crime and so on. Thus as urbanism is many-sided so is urban sociology.

The scope of urban sociology becomes wider as it not only tries to study the urban setup and facts but also tries to give suggestions to solve problems arising out of dynamic nature of the society. The scope of the urban sociology can be studied under the following heads:

The main aim of urban sociology is to study the basic principles of the city life. Under introductory scope, the study covers the following areas:

a. Urban ecology:

Urban ecology studies the facts of the urban environment. It also emphasizes on the study of population in the cities.

b. Urban morphology:

Under urban morphology, the study of social life of urban areas and that of urban organization is taken up.

c. Urban psychology:

The area of study under this covers the behaviour and the mode of living of the people in urban areas.

d. Analytical scope:

Analysing of urban sociology is another important field of study. Under the analytical scope, various concepts and important phases of urban life are developed and studied.

Reformative scope:

Under reformatory scope of urban sociology, the problems of urbanism are studied. This includes some of the important issues such as the impact of urbanization on urban society leading to urban disorganization, urban planning and development.

Thus, the scope of urban sociology is much wider as it covers the whole spectrum of urban life and its changing environments.

THEORIES OF URBAN SOCIOLOGY

Louis Wirth: "Urbanism as a Way of Life"

Wirth was an important member of the Chicago School and he was inspired by Simmel. He wrote his doctoral work on the ghettos of Russian Jewish immigrants in Chicago. Wirth and his colleagues came to view the spatial patterns in the city as a result of powerful social factors such as competition and struggle for survival. They viewed urban space as a container, a built environment that enclosed action. Wirth's work marks the culmination of what we have been referring to as the classical view of urban sociology. Wirth studied the characteristic of the people in the city and how the life there might produce a distinct urban culture. Thus urbanism as a dependent variable became a thing to be explained. His theory of the city isolated several factors that were universal social characteristics of the city. He makes a case for contrasting between urban/industrial and folk/ rural societies. He draws attention to the peculiar characteristics of the city as a particular form of human association.

Wirth begins with argument that what is distinctively modern in our civilization is best signalized by the growth of great cities. Like Simmel before him, Wirth pointed out that nowhere has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the condition of life characteristic of great cities. For Wirth, the concept of urbanism is not delimited in space. Urbanism is a goal and a value. Where does this dominance of the city come from? The dominance of the city emerges from the concentration in them of:

- Industrial and commercial centres
- Financial and administrative facilities and activities
- Transportation and communication lines
- Cultural and recreational equipment such as the press, radio station, theatres, museums
- Hospitals, institutions of higher education.

Working towards a serviceable definition of urbanism, Wirth locates the problem in the great variations between cities. Cities are different from one another—industrial cities from the commercial, mining, fishing, resort, university and the capital city. Therefore, a sociologically significant definition of the city seeks to select those elements of urbanism which mark it as a distinctive mode of human group life. For sociological purpose Wirth defines city as relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals.

Wirth proposes that the central problem for the sociologist of the city is to discover the forms of social action and organization that typically emerge in relatively permanent, compact settlements of large numbers of heterogeneous individuals. City as upholding heterogeneity—the city has been the melting pot of races, peoples, and cultures, and a most favorable breeding-ground of

new biological and cultural hybrids, it has not only tolerated but rewarded individual differences. Size and density of the population aggregate—ever since Aristotle's *Politics* it has been recognized that increasing the number of inhabitants in a settlement beyond a certain limit will affect the relationships between them and the character of the city.