Psychology

Understanding how cities shape us psychologically is needed if we are to improve inhabitants' wellbeing and create more efficient, sustainable ways of urban living

by Chris Murray

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If Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* had a sequel, it would be an urban edition. The global rise in city living is so staggering that we must now accept one simple point with myriad, complex implications: the future success of our species is intimately linked to that of our cities. Yet, as Danish architect Jan Gehl put it, "we definitely know more about good habitats for mountain gorillas, Siberian tigers or panda bears than we do about a good urban habitat for Homo sapiens." This is particularly the case for the emotional and mental health impacts of city living.

Moving to the city

The figures tell the story: according to the UN, more than half the world now live in urban areas. This will rise to 70% by 2050, and in the UK about 80% of the population already live in cities. But, in evolutionary terms, cities are very new. Modern humans have been around for 200,000 years or so, cities at most 10,000. So, of the estimated 108 billion people that have ever existed (according to the Population Reference Bureau), only a small percentage have lived in a city, and those only recently.

While we are a highly adaptable species, there are limits. We have evolved to best suit our environments over millennia, but the rapid pace of change of the past few centuries has placed strains on our adaptability. For example, living in cities promotes a linear, sped up experience of time. German philosopher and psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs linked this with depression and anxiety, suggesting it is out of step not only with the cyclical and circadian rythms of the body, but also an older, deeply ingrained experience of time that is linked to seasonal cycles.

The city places constant calls on our attention, when we also need quiet and areas away from constant visual stimulation. Cities are increasingly recognising this, creating spaces for calm reflection and trying to address some of the factors deemed to drive over-stimulation.

São Paolo took the lead in banning billboards, with Chennai, Grenoble and Tehran following suit. And in Italy, the Slow Cities movement puts an emphasis on traditional ways of living, promoting healthier habits and environments, and encouraging local craftsmanship.

But much more experimentation with this agenda is needed. We know, for example, that access to greenery or water can be limited or challenging in some cities, although it is known to lower blood pressure and have other health benefits. High-quality green spaces also increase pro-social behaviour; our ability to empathise, see things from another's perspective and participate in community life.

The overwhelming population sizes of cities can also challenge our 'hardwiring'. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar suggested that humans could maintain relationships with around 150 people, although it has since been posited that this number could reach 200. Dunbar suggests this is the likely size of early hunter-gatherer groups; it also resembles the population of a small village. Perhaps, as I have suggested elsewhere, we still have "the mind of a village living in the body of a city".

Mental health has been described as the 'hidden disability' and, according to a study by Lydia Krabbendam and Jim van Os, levels of serious mental health problems can be twice as bad in cities as non-urban areas. Another study, by a group of researchers headed by Jaap Peen, concluded that "those living in cities were 21% more likely to experience an anxiety disorder; mood disorders were even higher, at 39%". It is clear that we need to examine far more closely mental and emotional wellbeing in cities, at the same time as we continue to tackle more outwardly evident challenges such as climate change, social cohesion and inequality; all of which, it should be recognised, have a strongly psychological component to both cause and solution.

Of course, city living is not all negative. Urban life can also encourage psychological robustness and have positive impacts on emotional health, challenging us as it does to live alongside difference with tolerance and to relate to others. In its 2005 report, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Urban Psychology suggested that although segregation between communities could lead to tension in urban environments, cities also "offer heightened interaction among intercultural and interracial groups that leads to the development of intercultural harmony and sensitivity". Cities can enable us to enjoy freedom of expression and levels of anonymity not generally found in smaller communities. As the report concluded, cities can be the solution to many problems, but at present we

simply know too little about the interplay between cities and human psychology to be able to harness their positive effects.

What is abundantly clear to anyone who has ever visited a city is that cities are emotional as well as physical experiences. Why is it then that psychology is almost absent from urban policy?

In June this year, psychologists, psychiatrists, economists and urbanists from the UK, US and Europe gathered to address this issue at Europe's first Urban Psychology Summit. We posed the question of whether we need an 'urban psychology', exploring the links between urban renewal policy choices and serious mental and physical health impacts. How does the experience of 'place' shape individuals and communities? Do dominant personality types in an area help to determine economic success, and what can neuroscience tell us about urban living? What might localised health and care, and national NHS strategies for urban mental health look like? We wanted to examine these questions in thinking about how we might design cities to better help people from birth onwards. Four key findings emerged.

People and place

Experience of place determines much of our development and wellbeing, and we should not separate the policies for one from the other. They must be seen as interconnected. Place attachment theory suggests that we internalise our connection to community and place in the same way we do our connections to family, and that if our attachment is weak or negative this will have detrimental consequences down the line. Medical studies have shown that the adverse effects of deprivation in childhood can lead to irreversible changes in brain structure and chemistry, and the immune system. Deprivation is also a place-based issue. It tends to be geographically concentrated in cities, in places with a poor quality of urban fabric, limited connectivity or access to amenities and services, and poor housing, which, as acknowledged by mental health charity Mind, is closely linked to poor mental health.

Mindy Thompson Fullilove, an American psychiatrist, spoke at the summit about the profound detrimental consequences that getting urban renewal and economic policy wrong can have on deprived communities. In her work, Fullilove has described how urban renewal policy in the US has resulted in the "serial forced displacement" of vulnerable and deprived communities due to federal, state and local policies.

Understanding the potentially adverse impacts of urban policymaking is of great importance to the future of cities. The summit concluded that it is possible to go further; we can actively create places that have profoundly positive effects, helping us to find meaning and purpose and develop. Professor Tim Kendall, the Clinical Director of Mental Health for NHS England, spoke about 'therapeutic communities', whereby we should be looking to create places that could have a positive therapeutic effect. Instead of 'care in the community', we might create 'communities of care', places and people that understand and help support one another's mental wellbeing, backed up by placemaking policy that is psychologically enlightened.

In the book I co-wrote with Charles Landry, *Psychology and the City*, we began to develop a toolkit for psychologically resilient cities. This has six dimensions that cities need to create or set in motion in order that their citizens can benefit. These are based on psychologist Carol Ryff's six factors that contribute to psychological resilience: personal growth, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose and self-acceptance. A city should be designed and built with the aim of fulfilling all six of these areas, in order that it can meet the psychological needs of its inhabitants.

Developing a different urban future relies on a deep understanding of the psychological impact of urban policy and planning. Psychological impact should become a core concept for local and national policymakers, with planning and design decisions assessed under this remit as standard, in the same way our regulatory framework assesses impacts for the local environment and economy.

Jon Rouse, Chief Officer of the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership, set out compelling ways in which this can be practically achieved. These included an increased understanding of the spatial nature of health inequalities and their connections to place, as described above in terms of deprivation; and the fact that life expectancy can decrease by as much as 10 years as one travels from one side of a city to another. He also showed how health should be aligned far more closely with other services that shape people and place, from planning to transport, culture to education.

Sharing tools and evidence

We are in the process of developing an inter-disciplinary approach to cities, but psychology is still a missing component. As well as work that focuses directly on place, psychology

offers ideas based on the 'person' that can be usefully reframed to look at 'place', which will give us new tools and insights. One such example is the City Personality Test. In writing our book, Charles Landry and I wondered what would happen if a city could take such a test; would it be introvert or extrovert, agreeable or disagreeable? So, we wrote one. It has been trialled by many cities internationally and the results have been fascinating. The questions asked in the test aim to find out how people perceive and think about where they live, drawing on the innate human tendency to humanise everything around us. It is based on standard psychometric tests that use between four and seven scales; introvert-extrovert would be one such scale. So, for instance, we found that Adelaide has suffered from a lack of confidence, but is slowly regaining it, and is aware that although it is not a flashy city, it is paced and purposeful. Bilbao is proud and confident in its identity, ambitious but realistic in its plans. Plymouth has an adventurous spirit; often collaborative, it is open to collaboration but would sometimes just like to be told what to do.

Another example of an important area of research that can be applied to cities is the work of economic geographer Ron Martin. A few years ago, the BBC carried out a simple personality test across all local authority areas in England. Martin overlaid data related to the economic performance of each place on the results and found a strong correlation between areas with a significant proportion of personality types that could be described as entrepreneurial and stronger economic performance in those places. This poses more questions than it answers. Are entrepreneurs attracted to places where the assets they need already exist; are people moving to clusters alongside other entrepreneurs; is there something about these places that helps people born there to succeed; and what are the implcations for places that do not have strong entrepreneurial profiles? It is, however, a fascinating insight that would not have been possible through any other kind of analysis.

Where the evidence exists that a psychologically informed approach will create better outcomes, it is largely unknown by policymakers working on the ground, who due to budget cuts are operating with decreasing capacity. Even if there is awareness, the evidence can be difficult to access or turn into action. We need to find ways of sharing data across disciplines, in order to increase the research and evidence available to planners, policymakers, politicians, citizens and others.

Ego systems

Too often, we still see cities through a mechanical rather than a human lens. We view them as machines to be fixed, instead of as living entities that, first and foremost, are made by, and consist of, people, and which often develop organically based on their inhabitants' needs. Cities are ego systems as well as ecosystems, and both viewpoints must be taken into account if we are to create flourishing city spaces.

The city provides an interactive social space that people can closely connect with. It is a space where complex, multi-layered sets of identities can find coherence and common cause, resulting perhaps in a 'shared individuality'. Supporting a positive shared identity is something nation-states are manifestly failing to do. They have much to learn from cities in this respect.

Yet it seems that urbanisation may also drive greater individualism. American psychologist and researcher Patricia Greenfield analysed 1.2 million books published over a 200-year period in the US and unearthed a direct correlation between urbanisation in the country and a move toward more materialistic language. Her findings suggest a fundamental shift away from deference to authority and a collaborative way of thinking to a more individualistic and materialistic mindset. She discovered that we have moved from an interdependent way of existing to being one of a crowd of individuals. The changes correlate precisely to rising levels of urbanisation.

It is critical therefore that positive civic engagement is encouraged. The philosopher Hannah Arendt said that active civic life was the antidote to totalitarianism. An engaged citizenship immersed in activity and human contact that looks out from the individual toward the collective fosters a sense of shared endeavour alongside a lived experience of difference.

This is what the US psychologist and urbanist James Hillman meant when he said "to find yourself, you must enter the crowd". Human nature is deeply, innately communal and nowhere more so than in the city.

A psychological approach

It is imperative that, given rapidly rising urbanisation and worsening mental health, a stronger focus should be urgently placed on understanding more about the psychological impact of place upon us and us upon place. We need to explore how we can create psychologically resilient places; what the psychological impacts of urban deprivation are;

how to unlock community assets; how we can understand what really makes for 'good' engagement across different groups; and the mental and emotional impacts of increasing inequality.

A new platform is needed to bring all of these aspects together. A research bid is likely, more publications and a further summit focusing on the 'global south'. Participants at the summit are working on a manifesto for change with which to engage key influencers.

To enable a focus on the above four areas, two other things need to happen.

First, psychology needs to engage more with the political and democratic spheres, in order to create widespread awareness of the ways in which it can help policymakers and influencers achieve shared goals. Sociology has always done this, having as it does its roots in the urban dimension. Psychology, concerned at least initially mainly with looking inward to the person rather than outward to the wider environment, is beginning to establish itself in this way as well. The development of a stronger urban psychology movement will do much to strengthen and reaffirm the credentials of psychology as a means for change beyond the individual.

Second, we have to recognise the unique roles and abilities of cities, and empower them to do more. This is particularly the case in the UK, which is still one of the most centralised states in the developed world, despite some good progress on devolution. Empowered cities are critical to enabling place-based policy, aligning all relevant services, agencies and funds at the most meaningful level for a particular issue.

But increased levels of autonomy are also incredibly important to mental wellbeing. This is explored in self-determination theory, conceived by Edward L Deci and Richard Ryan, which demonstrates that we have three overriding psychological needs: autonomy, or the need to exercise self-determination; competence, or the need to experience mastery; and relatedness, or the need to interact, be connected to and experience caring for others. It is not much of a stretch to see how devolving power to local people could enhance this while increasing the democratic health of a nation at the same time.

Some of the biggest issues we face, such as climate change, social cohesion and inequality, have deeply psychological components that need to be properly understood in order that we can tackle them. Understanding the 'other' instead of projecting blame and fear; being willing to make small sacrifices for larger collective gains; or simply accepting a sense of

shared responsibility are all vital for a country's wellbeing and that of its population. Cities are the level at which these challenges play out, and they must be empowered to address them. In the UK, this means greater devolution from the centre, but it also means a broadening out of the current toolkit with which cities equip themselves to include psychology.

The smart cities agenda has made staggering advances that will benefit urban quality of life and indeed the global environment more broadly. We need smart cities to succeed, but we also need our cities to be emotionally intelligent places that organise around people first, structures second.

Hillman also said: "to improve yourself, improve your city". We are intimately linked to our environment; the better that is, the healthier and happier we are.

Presentations and videos from the summit can be found at www.urbanpsyche.org