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Built environment and social well-being: How does urban form affect social life and personal relationships?

Kostas Mouratidis¹

Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Personal relationships are among the most influential factors for achieving a happy life. Yet, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the role of the built environment in social life and personal relationships. This paper investigates how the urban form affects social life and personal relationships by applying structural equation models to survey data collected in Oslo metropolitan area. Results indicate that residents of compact neighborhoods are significantly more satisfied with their personal relationships compared with residents of low-density suburban neighborhoods. Shorter distances to the city center, higher densities, and mixed land uses are found to positively contribute to overall social well-being. Path analysis as well as qualitative analysis suggest that compact urban forms enable residents to maintain larger networks of close relationships, socialize more frequently with friends and family, receive stronger social support, and enjoy increased opportunities to make new acquaintances.

1. Introduction

Empirical studies examining relationships between the built environment and social well-being have been focusing on neighborhood social capital (Cabrera, 2013; Leyden, 2003; Wood et al., 2008; Ziersch, Baum, MacDougall, & Putland, 2005), neighborhood sense of community (Brown & Cropper, 2001; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Nasar, 2003; Rogers & Sukolratanamete, 2009; Wood, Frank, & Giles-Corti, 2010), and neighbor ties (Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Hipp & Perrin, 2009; Lund, 2003). This paper, rather than focusing on neighborhood social interactions, investigates the impact of the built environment on overall social well-being. For this purpose, the study focuses on personal relationships; an individual's relationships with friends, romantic partners, and relatives. Empirical research examining how the built environment affects an individual's overall social life and eventually personal relationships is scarce. And since strong personal relationships are considered to be one of, if not the single most important life domain in subjective well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Myers & Diener, 1995; Vaillant, 2002), it is crucial to understand if and how they are influenced by the built environment and by prevalent urban forms such as the compact city and low-density suburbs (Mouratidis, 2017b).

This paper aims to develop and test models that empirically investigate if, and how, the urban form affects personal relationships. The paper answers two main research questions: (1) How does the compact city affect personal relationships? (2) How do urban form

characteristics affect personal relationships? The case for this research is the metropolitan area of Oslo. This study explores its research questions by employing structural equation modeling (SEM) combined with qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and direct comparisons of survey respondents' evaluations of the impact of neighborhood on social life. SEM allows the inclusion of mediating variables between the two main elements of interest, in this case the urban form and personal relationships. These mediating variables, along with the analysis of interviews with residents of Oslo, help explain causal relationships and provide further support for causality.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The compact city and personal relationships

The compact city may have well-established benefits for environmental sustainability (Jabareen, 2006; Meyer, 2013; Newman & Kenworthy, 1999), but its social impact is a subject of academic debate (see e.g. Cao, 2016; Churchman, 1999; Lederbogen et al., 2011; Neuman, 2005; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2016). Early urban sociologists expressed their fears over the impact of large and dense cities on human relationships. Simmel (1903) observed that cities create impersonal social interactions since residents strive to adapt to the intense rhythms of urban life. He argued that big-city residents encounter numerous people in their

E-mail address: konstantinos.mouratidis@nmbu.no.

¹ Postal address: Fredrik A. Dahls vei 15, 1430 Ås, Norway.

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every-day lives compared with residents of small towns or rural areas, and since they cannot engage with everyone, they eventually become emotionally detached. Similarly, [Wirth \(1938\)](#) noted that urbanism generates impersonal and superficial relationships between residents. Indeed empirical research suggests that social relationships at a neighborhood level are weaker in high-density urban forms ([Bramley, Dempsey, Power, Brown, & Watkins, 2009](#); [Fischer, 1982](#); [Milgram, 1970](#); [Mouratidis, 2017a](#)). High-rise buildings are also found to generate impersonal relationships between neighbors ([Gifford, 2007](#)).

On the other hand, [Glass \(1949\)](#) observed that lower densities increase physical distance which can lead to greater social distance and eventually higher social isolation and loneliness. Later on, [Jacobs \(1961\)](#) argued that a high concentration of people is necessary for all functions of a city. She also underlined the importance of sidewalk life for social contact and as she explains, sidewalk life is not possible in low-density suburbia. In addition to high densities, as both [Jacobs \(1961\)](#) and [Alexander \(1965\)](#) point out, neighborhoods with mixed functions are also key to increase social interaction. Mixed functions enable the movement of people locally for various reasons, increasing the use of local public spaces such as sidewalks and parks and offering opportunities for people to meet and interact. [Putnam \(2001\)](#) argues that sprawled development, typically found in suburbs, contributes to lower levels of social interaction. The reasoning is that as suburban dwellers travel longer distances to approach workplaces and facilities, they have less time for involvement in groups for leisure activities. In that regard, [Mitrany's \(2005\)](#) empirical study suggests that one of the advantages of high-density urban forms is that they offer increased opportunities for socializing. A study by [Balducci and Checchi \(2009\)](#) demonstrates that friends and neighbors may play a catalytic role in subjective well-being, and suggests that this relationship is affected by the accessibility to shops and meeting places as well as local opportunities for meeting people and for volunteering. Accessibility to so called “third places” (e.g. community centers, cafés, restaurants, parks, and malls), which is higher in compact areas ([Burton, 2000](#)), has been suggested to have a positive impact on quality of life ([Jeffres, Bracken, Jian, & Casey, 2009](#)). Likewise, this is supported by [Leyden, Goldberg, and Michelbach \(2011\)](#) finding that local facilities have a positive impact on quality of life in cities. Leyden and coauthors attribute the importance of local facilities for quality of life to increased opportunities for social activities and gatherings.

[Talen and Koschinsky \(2014\)](#) conducted a literature review of the impact of compact neighborhoods on neighborhood social relationships observing that most empirical findings suggest that this impact is positive and significant. However, most studies examined in the review, and most existing studies in general, focus on cases relevant to New Urbanism rather than typical high-density urban cases. The cases examined are, in other words, walkable and mixed land use suburbs or small towns which are compared with typical sprawled suburbs. Limited relevant research exists on high-density neighborhoods found in cities.

What is even more important though is that most relevant empirical studies still focus on neighborhood social interactions rather than switching focus to overall social well-being. The importance of local social relationships is declining ([Popenoe, 2005](#)). As [Dunkelman \(2014\)](#) explains, in the past people paid more attention to neighbor ties since they did not have other alternatives, but nowadays they have the opportunity to spend time with those they love the most. This can be achieved either through face-to-face contact enabled by the increase of mobility or from distance via the rise of technology. Furthermore, since education levels and levels of specialization increase, social relationships are not built primarily based on residential proximity but rather based on common interests ([Pløger, 1997](#)). Therefore, empowered by high mobility and technology, people can develop and maintain friendships and romantic relationships with those they share common interests with, independently of whether they live in the same neighborhood. Taking all these aspects into consideration, it seems necessary

that urban researchers do not only investigate neighborhood social life, which is of course still important, but pay greater attention to the impact of the built environment on all relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners.

To sum up, it seems that compact urban forms – characterized by high density, high accessibility, public transport, and mixed land uses ([Burton, Jenks, & Williams, 2003](#); [Lee, Kurisu, An, & Hanaki, 2015](#)) – may create more opportunities for socializing; whereas, suburban forms may foster closer social ties at the neighborhood level. These two aspects, opportunities for socializing and neighbor ties, are, however, just some of the components of overall social well-being. There is still little evidence on how urban form affects overall social well-being. This issue could be assessed by investigating satisfaction with personal relationships, which is a more inclusive measure – since it encompasses relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners – and thus a stronger predictor of happiness ([Diener & Seligman, 2002](#); [Vaillant, 2002](#)).

2.2. Predictors of personal relationships

Marriage or intimate relationships and relationships with family and friends, defined as personal relationships, are important predictors of subjective well-being ([Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008](#)). The happiest people tend to have stronger personal relationships ([Diener & Seligman, 2002](#)). On the other hand, loneliness is increasing ([Wilson & Moulton, 2010](#)), posing threats to physical and mental health ([Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010](#); [Holwerda et al., 2014](#)) and affecting mortality similarly to other well-established risk factors ([Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010](#)). But what are the predictors of strong, satisfying personal relationships?

Marital status, number of close relationships, frequency of meeting friends and relatives, support received from close relationships, and opportunities for social contact are all relevant indicators ([Masi, Chen, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2011](#); [McDowell, 2006](#); [Sirgy, 2012](#)). Empirical evidence shows that marriage and romantic relationships have an important impact on subjective well-being ([Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004](#); [Helliwell, 2003](#); [Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006](#); [Myers, 1999](#)). Furthermore, people who have many friends are found to have higher levels of subjective well-being than those who have few friends, and people who see friends more often are happier than those who spend more time alone ([Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006](#)). Those with more friends are also found to have less mental distress ([Hintikka, Koskela, Kontula, Koskela, & Viinamaeki, 2000](#)). In addition to socializing with friends, spending time with family members is also positively associated with subjective well-being ([Dolan et al., 2008](#)). Positive relationships with both friends and family are suggested to have a positive impact on health ([Seeman, 2000](#)). Improving social support – which depends on both the number of relationships as well as the frequency of socializing ([McDowell, 2006](#)) – and enhancing opportunities for social contact have both been suggested as measures to address loneliness and its associated risks ([Masi et al., 2011](#)).

Conceptual models explaining the influence of urban form on personal relationships satisfaction have not been developed and examined adequately in previous empirical research. This study aims to develop and empirically examine such models. The number of close relationships, frequency of socializing, social support, and opportunities to meet new people are all aspects relevant to personal relationships that play a role in subjective well-being. Since personal relationships satisfaction is a strong predictor of subjective well-being and these aspects are all relevant to personal relationships, this study will examine these aspects as intermediate variables between urban form and personal relationships satisfaction. In other words, they will be examined as predictors of personal relationships satisfaction that could be influenced by the urban form. Living with a spouse or partner will also be examined as a control variable as it may influence some of these intermediate variables as well as personal relationships satisfaction.

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