THE LIFT AND THE PARK
ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTIDISCIPLINARITY FOR ETIOLOGICAL PURPOSE
GIAMPAOLO NUVOLATI[*]

Abstract

The article aims to address the theme of multidisciplinary in the explanation of human action by considering various possible paths in the analysis of a specific behavior: the use of the lift. The possible independent variables refer to fields ranging from medicine to architecture, from psychology to psychoanalysis, from anthropology to economics, and from sociology to accidental situations. In particular, the article intends to underline the relevance of objective conditions and subjective perceptions of the same in determining behaviors. A sort of self-analysis regarding the use of an urban park is also proposed as an exercise for reflection and preliminary testing on the multidisciplinary model. The possibility of comparing different analytical approaches in the study of comportments, being able to outline convergences in results, constitutes an essential frontier for the social sciences.

Keywords: multidisciplinarity, methodology, objective and subjective factors of human behavior, rational choice, everyday life.

1. *The origins of the behaviors*

It is 9:00 a.m. in an office building in the middle of a big city. A person in the lobby is at a crossroads: Should he take the elevator or the stairs to get to his destination (the third floor of the building where he works)? Let us ask what elements will contribute to his final decision and what disciplines should be considered in analyzing this process.

We can identify at least eight aspects, listed below in no particular order of importance, which may affect his choice; we can also refer to as many disciplines.

*Professore di Sociologia dell'ambiente e del territorio, Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca.

The first aspect concerns the subject's health condition. Problems related to his poor physical mobility and his heart and respiratory decompensation might strongly affect his choice. The breathlessness he experiences in

climbing the first few steps will probably make him desist from climbing further. The discipline that deals with these issues is, of course, medicine.

The second aspect has to do with the spatial component: how many stairs the subject has to climb, how clean and fast the elevator is, how practical and clean the handrails are, and how illuminated the ramps are. These are factors that our subject will be more or less aware of and that defer to the disciplines that deal with infrastructure: engineering and architecture, first and foremost, but design too. A building may have features that may or may not make the use of the stairs attractive, *ceteris paribus*.

The third aspect refers to the subjects' personality components and is to be explored through psychology. If our subject characteristically shows laziness and thus a poor predisposition for mobility, he will opt for the elevator. If he suffers from claustrophobia, on the other hand, he is likely to take the stairs. In this category, we can also include the spirit of imitation and empathy toward others that is activated by mirror neurons, as well as the set of biological aspects that affect to varying degrees the genetic component of human behavior.

The fourth aspect concerns past experiences, the subject's lived history into which psychoanalysis can dig to understand how he will behave. If, for example, as a child, this subject was the victim of acts of aggression in an elevator, it is conceivable that he will avoid using it. It is necessary to recognize that certain factors of the subconscious or unconscious (depending on their depth), whether we are in the presence of the Freudian personal experience or the Jungian collective archetype, can affect our choices.

The fifth aspect is cultural. It is through anthropology that we might, for example, understand whether in one community rather than another there is a prevailing tendency to rely on technology (the elevator) rather than on one's own means (legs) to climb stairs. Primitive or more modern populations will exhibit very different attitudes toward means of transportation and movement as a result of habits that have been passed down from one generation to the next in managing their relationship with their spaces and communities of reference. In addition, the aspect of an environmentalist culture needs to be considered: Not using the elevator may mean that the individual intends to save energy.

The sixth issue concerns the economic cost to be incurred versus the benefits to be gained. Suppose that elevator use incurs a fee. How much this point would affect my choice could be the subject of an economic analysis aimed at studying the rational attitudes of actors. Again, we are not always aware of

the importance played by this factor in conditioning, more or less explicitly, our final behavior.

The seventh aspect concerns the social aspect in general and, more specifically, the place we occupy in society. Our choice may in fact be determined by our gender, age, family composition, social class, education, profession, or other sociodemographic variables, just as it may be affected on a daily basis by the messages that come to us insistently from the media or from the organizations to which we belong. In such cases, sociology is the discipline we must rely on to understand how much individual action is influenced by external social factors. Of course, sociology and anthropology, although two different disciplines, have elements in common regarding the study of the sociocultural origin of behavior.

The last theme includes everything that does not fit into the previous points and is the result of a kind of serendipity: a particular event or situation that perhaps upsets the habits we had closely followed over time. We take the elevator or stairs because we are attracted to someone; we have lost a bet with friends; we want to make a religious vow; we find ourselves in a health emergency, as in the case of COVID-19, when it was strongly discouraged to take the elevator with multiple people, etc. We may too have read or heard from friends a story about a bad or good episode that happened in that elevator. We can name these as unpredictable variables that may affect our final choice regardless of the health, architectural, psychological, psychoanalytical, cultural, economic, and social dimensions sedimented over time.

It cannot be ruled out that other types of motivations not considered here govern individual choices. Just as, in addition to those mentioned above, there are other social sciences that help us particularly well in understanding human behavior under certain circumstances: I refer, for example, to social psychology[1], environmental psychology[2], and psychoanalytic geography[3] - bridging different disciplinary fields in studying human behavior in terms of the interplay between the human body, mental states, emotions, social

---

[1] G. Leone, B. Mazzara e M. Sarrica, *La psicologia sociale. Processi mentali, comunicazione e cultura*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2013.

[2] M. Costa, *Psicologia ambientale e architettonica. Come l'ambiente e l'architettura influenzano la mente e il comportamento*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2016.

[3] P. Kingsbury e S. Pile (a cura di), *The unconscious, transference, drives, repetition and other things tied to geography*, Ashgate, Farnham 2014.

situations, and mutual influence with the physical context. However, for now we will consider only the fields listed above.

This article does not set out to estimate which of the previous causes will prevail when it comes to taking or not taking the elevator. We have no data available here that would allow us to test our hypotheses; the literature on this topic has also not been investigated, except for the interesting, though not very recent, article by Licciardello and Scuderi[4], who, however, mainly investigate the issue of discomfort given by proximity with strangers in a confined environment. Many of the scientific articles of a psychological nature concerning elevators are related to phobias, a topic on which, we do not intend to cover here. The article is merely an introductory exercise in sharing a multidisciplinary approach in the study of social phenomena.

2. Elements contributing to a personal decision

Returning to our example concerning the elevator, if we want to understand what our subject is thinking and ultimately how he will behave, we will have to take into account the questions he will try to answer in a split second with a higher or lower level of awareness:

Do my legs hurt, or do I have difficulty breathing?

Does the elevator have short waiting times? Is it comfortable or large enough to hold more people, or are there too many floors to walk up? In more general terms, is there an overall characterization of that building that I recognize and value positively and that therefore drives me to one behavior rather than another?

Do I feel like taking the stairs given my reluctance to go inside the elevator, or do I prefer to wait a few more minutes for the elevator also because of my laziness?

Do I subconsciously fear being in an unpleasant situation in the elevator that may remind me of a very negative past experience?

How much do I trust the technology and therefore the gears of the elevator? How prevalent in my culture of origin (rural or urban, southern or northern, etc.) is the idea that I must instead rely on myself to demonstrate autonomy, vitality, courage, and physical strength?

---

[4] M. Licciardello e G. Scuderi, *L'ascensore come situazione sociale problematica*, Quaderni di Sociologia, Torino 2003.

What are the economic costs I have to bear by opting for one or the other choice? Is it worth going up the stairs to save the few cents needed to run the elevator?

Does my social status dictate or suggest that I either walk or take the elevator? If all other colleagues of equal status walk, do I feel a sense of shame or, conversely, cleverness in taking the elevator? If advertisements focus on healthy performance, how likely am I to follow this pattern?

What specifically happened that day that caused me to make a choice that had been unthinkable until a few minutes before? Did I see a colleague go up, a colleague with whom I would like to bond romantically?

Certainly, the doubt does not arise if the elevator is not working that day, or if the elevator does not even exist, as is the case in many old buildings, or (presumably) if the office is on the tenth floor, or even if I can resort to escalators that remove all doubt (or almost all, at least) about how to behave. However, in all other cases, a decision is required that contemplates elements of a different nature in terms of rationality and emotionality. All of which come into play in a few tenths of a second.

3. Objective condition and subjective perception

Each of these issues presents objective conditions that are followed by a process of subjective perception and processing by the individual that determines the final behavior. Suppose the choice falls on not taking the elevator and therefore taking the stairs. What elements will have contributed most to my decision?

I may have concrete health problems but don't know them well, or perhaps I think they are less serious than they actually are.

Although I usually have no problem adapting to various situations, the elevator is objectively in very poor condition and makes a strange noise.

I am aware of my actual laziness and try to combat it by forcing myself to take the stairs at least a couple of times a day. Of course, much will also depend on not having with me any more or less heavy objects to carry. But maybe that aspect affects feeling performant.

I have had negative experiences of meeting unpleasant people in elevators. Although this subconscious does not always break in explicitly in influencing my choice, it remains in the background of my mind.

The culture to which I belong may more or less explicitly inspire my actions. If, for example, I come from a rural background and go to an urban one, I may soon adapt myself to the latter and decide to take the elevator, but

sometimes the desire to walk and climb stairs may prevail in me, quite independently of any contraptions, just as it does when I go into the hills and tackle the slopes of my lands.

Every gesture has a more or less economically translatable cost, even if it is almost impossible to quantify. If I always take the stairs, my shoe consumption will increase; I will sweat and crease my clothes that I will need to take to the laundry, etc. However, if I never take the elevator and become too sedentary, maybe I will need to join a gym to shed the excess pounds. It will also be necessary to consider that, as already noted, in some buildings the use of the elevator is reserved if not paid for. Therefore, this variable will also affect my decision to take the stairs. Clearly, a precise calculation of pros and cons remains somewhat complicated.

Certain social characteristics, such as my status or my exposure to the media, may lead me to make specific choices, which, however, are not always binding and leave room for freedom in behavior depending on the circumstances. This also includes a question of a "reputational" nature in that we have to correspond or not to the role/image that is attributed to us by the community to which we belong, throughout the media. For example, it might be the desire to adhere to a youthful behavior flaunted in advertisements for diet products or sportswear that makes me opt for stairs.

Finally, a particular and totally unpredictable situation may have affected me to such an extent that I have reconsidered attitudes and behaviors that I used to take for granted. I usually use the elevator, but that day I wanted to avoid a person I disliked who was taking it, and so I preferred to take the stairs. Or, the night before, I had seen a movie in which a person who was locked in an elevator during a weekend in a deserted building was in danger of dying. Psycho-horror cinematography has seen numerous films set on elevators.

What we are faced with is a kind of black box, often inscrutable, where all these components mix and condition each other to give rise to our final behavior. In particular, every action is the outcome of a mix between elements internal to the individual (his personality, his recent or unconscious experiences, his socioeconomic characteristics) and external elements (the quality of space and the meanings of places, the prevailing culture, the structure of society) as they are absorbed and reworked by the individual himself. Often these worlds (individual and collective) can be seen as opposed, calling into question the individual's explicit predisposition and willingness now to resist strenuously, now to adapt meekly to external sociocultural conditioning. The integration or divergence between the

approach of methodological individualism and the collectivist approach (to put it in terms of what is considered the most traditional of comparisons among the classics of sociology: Weber vs. Durkheim, in particular) remains a crucial aspect to be taken into account in the framework of the etiological reading of reality.

This dichotomy has partly to do with the struggle between nature and culture, between what the individual is in its essentiality, including biological items, and what it turns out to be in light of the external elements it absorbs. A division that is not easy to draw at the theoretical level, let alone with regard to the issues outlined above, all of which are strongly intertwined: Think in particular of the psychological, psychoanalytic, sociological, and anthropological aspects, even though in the article we have tried to keep them distinct. How much the sociocultural conditions, habits, rules, and roles in which we are cast determine our behaviors and lifestyles and how much these in turn, in the opposite direction, affect structural elements; and how much everyday practices respect, oppose, or even modify predefined social constructions or are nothing more than the fruit of them represent some of the main questions that sociology has been asking from its foundation to the present day. Simmel[5] (2015), Goffman[6], Lefebvre[7], and Bourdieu[8] are just some of the sociologists who have specifically devoted themselves also critically to the relationship between sociocultural frames and individual conducts, between mind and body, in the practices of everyday life.

4. Fighting against behaviorism

Even if our aim is to detail the causes of human behavior, as we enter the black box of our actor's decision-making processes, we find that there is no chandelier that illuminates the whole room and lets us know unequivocally the presence and strength of the elements at play (Fig. 1). Rather, we enter the black box with a flashlight that from time to time illuminates only a part of the explanation. The fact remains that the person's final choice is the outcome of what mysteriously took place in this box, where objective dimensions, internal and external to the individual (what he or she actually is and what surrounds him or her just as effectively in material and immaterial

---

[5] G. Simmel, *La moda*, Mimesis, Milano 2015.
[6] E. Goffman, *Il comportamento in pubblico. L'interazione sociale nei luoghi di riunione*, Einaudi, Torino 2002.
[7] H. Lefebvre, *Critica della vita quotidiana. Volumi I e II*, Dedalo, Bari 1977.
[8] P. Bourdieu, *Sistema, habitus, campo*, Mimesis, Milano 2021.

characters), are perceived, reworked, and expressed by the individual in everyday life in a subjective and more or less conscious and rational manner[9]. For example, how do we judge our own health condition, physical context, cultural fabric, and social milieu? To what extent are we able to rationalize and put our thoughts and gestures in order, or are they solely the result of our instinctiveness and biological factors? How much are we masters of our destiny, or is this already marked traceable in the genetic makeup? The existing relationship between the social, natural, and built environment and the individual inevitably calls into question a reflection on determinism and free will[10].

Figure 1

Components underlying the decision-making process	Black box	Final behavior
Health conditions	More or less conscious perception and evaluation of these components	Final action and establishing a routine calibrated according to circumstances
Site characteristics		
Personality		
Previous experiences		
Culture		
Economic constraints		
Social context		
Specific contingencies		

Causes of Human Behaviors (Source: Author)

It should be remembered, however, that there is not always a correspondence between the objective and subjective dimensions: Countless are the occasions of so-called dissonance. For example, we decide to take the stairs because we do not recognize the severity of our heart failure. Or we regard a space, again our elevator, as particularly cramped, when in fact it is perfectly within the norm and sufficiently large. Checking whether objective and subjective indicators converge is often a neglected stage of research. Many times, researchers assume that individuals act voluntarily, but we know that automatic processes often occur that people are not aware of.

---

[9] E. Jones, *Rationalization in every-day life*, The Journal of Abnormal Psychology, New York 1908; Friedrichs J. e Opp K-D., *Rational behaviour in everyday situations*, European Sociological Review, Oxford 2002.

[10] D. Dennett e G. Caruso, *A ognuno quel che si merita. Sul libero arbitrio*, Cortina, Milano 2022.

If then it is interesting to observe how choices can be reproduced as the same as themselves (we always take the elevator), giving rise to what are our routines that relieve us from having to start over each time in the choice, it is equally important to recognize that behind similar decisions can be hidden different combinations. For example, we continue to take the elevator not only for reasons of mobility difficulties (which may have been resolved) but also because the administrator in agreement with the condominium landlords has purchased and had installed a more beautiful and functional one to which we have naturally contributed through the payment of the various condominium fees and which we therefore want to take advantage of.

Our personal habits have greater or lesser margins for variation depending on the circumstances, just as a similar type of behavior in two different people may have very different motivations behind it. Elena Bianchi does not take the elevator because she thinks a little exercise is good for her figure; because she was once harassed in an elevator; because she fears contagion. Whereas Marco Rossi does not take the elevator, even though he acknowledges to himself that he is lazy, because neither do all his colleagues and coworkers. It is, moreover, possible that over time, some of Elena Bianchi's and Marco Rossi's motivations will lose strength, leading to behavioral changes. Indifferent to the judgments of his "youthful" colleagues, Marco Rossi may decide to take his handsome elevator without feeling ashamed, indeed with a defiant frown. Elena Bianchi has decided to go on a diet and therefore feels less guilty if she sometimes takes the elevator. However, suppose for a moment that Marco Rossi and Elena Bianchi cannot stand each other. It is often an unpredictable chain of events that dictates human conduct. Marco Rossi had decided to take the elevator that morning because he had severe back pain. Elena Bianchi had been taking the elevator lately, but that day, she opted for the stairs precisely to avoid Marco Rossi, who she disliked terribly. The number of people taking the elevator did not change, but the underlying dynamics intersected with each other. While giving a certain consistency and repetitiveness to our behaviors, it is imaginable that they may change depending on the juncture and mood.

Wanting to translate this causal relationship between taking or not taking the elevator and the various reasons for ultimate choice into a formula, we might think of the following regression equation:

$$Y=b0+b1*X1+b2*X2+b3*X3+b4*X4+b5*X5+b6*X6+.b7*X7+b8*X8+e$$

where
Y = choice of whether or not to take the elevator
X1 = perception and evaluation of one's health
X2 = perception and evaluation of the physical environment
X3 = personality of the individual
X4= previous experience
X5 = perception and evaluation of values conveyed by local culture
X6 = economic evaluation
X7 = perception and evaluation of values transmitted by society
X8 = contingent, casual conditioning
e = statistical error

Imagining that we could measure these variables for a sufficiently large number of cases, we could come to a hierarchy of the causes that generally push people to use the elevator or not.

It goes without saying *that the* elevator is only a trivial example; it is assumed that such questions (obviously in a different form) arise whenever a person has to make a decision of any kind: from choosing a shirt to going to vote or not to vote for the renewal of an institutional board; from refusing a job to deciding whether to divorce; from spending a vacation in one location rather than another to buy a new house.

Emotions such as anxiety, fear, and a sense of loneliness- not only in a psychopathological key but also more simply existential- affect people's choices. It is with respect to these states of mind that individual responsibilities intersect with social and collective ones. Interiority and exteriority distinguish but also contaminate each other in all our behaviors. Let us think of a feeling such as optimism, which is also the result of our character and personal experiences of private life. It is indeed indisputable that it conditions our daily behaviors and our opinion of the world and things. However, all this should not relieve the responsibilities of institutions in solving the problems of individuals by favoring a neoliberal view based on the individual's ability and drive to remedy his or her own problems. Of course, this assumption also applies in the opposite sense; that is, we cannot think that people are happy just because we offer them a range of goods and services from an egalitarian and welfare perspective. It is useless to dwell here on some issues that are the subject of a specific discipline, such as the philosophy of politics. I am thinking in particular of Sen's[11] reflections on the

---

[11] A. Sen, *Capabilities and well-being*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993.

relevance of commodities, functionings and capabilities in generating well-being. Rather, it remains important to grasp the relationships between the objective and subjective dimensions of human life and to recognize that the same context can be perceived and acted upon differently. We should always know people's life histories to understand how social elements have affected their personalities, although many times for reasons of shyness and privacy of the subjects it is not easy to obtain this information. In his fine book on the loneliness of the soul, Borgna[12] reminds us how Leopardi and Rilke help us understand the pains and joys of human beings. Bridges between literature, poetry, and the social sciences should find more space within analyses of the deeper conducts and feelings of individuals, precisely because thanks to these intersections it is possible to look simultaneously at the private and public aspects of our existence.

Going down different paths, accessible mostly through other disciplines, opens up alternative readings of events, allows the researcher to break out of a view that tends to self-reproduce, that does not actually question the hypotheses formulated, but only looks at and underlines the elements that confirm the hypotheses themselves. Instead, we should think that a given reality can be approached differently, using different paths. Ascertaining concordances between different disciplines, that is, arriving at the same conclusions from disjointed perspectives but enriching them with details precisely due to the specificity of the approaches, is surely a goal to which research should strive.

5. The need of interdisciplinary methodology

How to dissect behaviors by looking at the health, infrastructural, psychological, psychoanalytic, cultural, economic, social, and contingent components for how they are determined over time is one of the goals, perhaps the main goal, of the social sciences. If the above set of considerations falls within what is the epistemological sphere, it is now the case to enter methodological issues. In particular, wanting to find, through multivariate analyses, general laws that tell us under what prevailing conditions people will take the stairs or the elevator, we must try to "operationalize" (i.e., make analyzable) all the elements we have listed above. This is a somewhat complicated process that involves the use of different methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative. It is quite likely that some dimensions will turn

---

[12] E. Borgna, *La solitudine dell'anima*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2013.

out to be more easily measurable than others, but this should not exempt us from theorizing upstream about the possible contributing causes of behaviors, just as we have tried to do here regarding the decision to take or not to take the elevator.

What is happening in cities today? How do we behave? Do we take the elevator or the stairs; do we often go out to dinner or eat at home; do we vote left or right? What is almost certain is that post-modernity sees the flourishing of highly differentiated, fluctuating types of conducts, not easily traceable like the more traditional political, economic, territorial, religious cleavages that marked the 20th century, but rather recalling the fragmentation and re-composition of motivations in an individualist key, suggesting the formalization of new interpretative models[13].

From a critical perspective, the shift from "passive biographies" (based on historically predefined and homogenizing paths) to more "reflexive" ones (stressing contingencies, peculiarities and self-determining subjectivities) presupposes the crisis of unitary and long-term interpretations of reality and makes it necessary to gradually define the characteristics of reality itself, step by step. In particular, from a sociopolitical point of view, what is being questioned is the relationship between subjects, intermediate bodies, and institutions with respect to the arising features, functions, expectations and conflicts between the three mentioned components which can no longer be reduced to the old categories but suggest new patterns. Finally, the change from "passive biographies" to more "reflexive" ones- in terms of increased "agency" of the individuals intertwining with the structures[14] - determines a more accurate sounding of concomitant variables that until recently had remained neglected, even for simple methodological reasons. Multidisciplinarity becomes the essential path to combining the analysis of social structures and individual actions.

However, how can we bring together medicine, architecture, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, economics, sociology, and randomness in explaining events and behavior? There is a growing unpredictability of human conduct that can no longer be handed back to the simple schemes of the past but requires ability on the part of researchers to combine various analytical perspectives in an innovative and deeper form. In other words, the complexity of reality can only be addressed through the equal

---

[13] C. Leccardi e P. Volonté, *Un nuovo individualismo? Individualizzazione, soggettività e legame sociale*, Egea, Milano 2018.
[14] M. Archer, *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2000.

complexity of methods. From this perspective, multidisciplinarity no longer constitutes only an oft-vaunted wish but becomes unavoidable and should lead to the next stages: interdisciplinarity understood as effective collaboration among experts of different backgrounds, up to transdisciplinarity that aims at the integration of knowledge in a single discipline. A concept, that of transdisciplinarity, which is not new but boasts an old history, having been introduced by Piaget[15] more than 50 years ago, later to become the workhorse of Nicolescu[16] and a hallmark of Morin's[17] thinking. Without wishing here to refer to the literature on rational choice and the limitations associated with an inevitably limited knowledge of reality, on the psychological processes of self-expression and self-actualization and perception of the environment, rather than on the channels of absorption of cultural and social patterns, it seems appropriate to emphasize how it becomes necessary to find a mesh that seeks to hold together the different approaches-including the formalization of a novel common dictionary and shared experimental methods- and that can be applied for the study of different phenomena.

6. The park

Wanting to propose another example in addition to the elevator one, let us try to step into the shoes of an urban sociologist who is asked to investigate whether or not the residents of a neighborhood frequent a public park. For the time being, let us stay on this population without looking at the needs and expectations of those who transit there for work, consumption, etc., even though often, for some urban realities, this share is equal to or even greater than that of residents. In any case, the outcome of the commissioned research will be extremely important in assessing the necessity and appropriateness of the public policies implemented in the environmental field, assuming that an unused green area can be a problem from the point of view of the failure to match supply and demand for services.

Theoretically, what data might it be important to collect to analyze the issue at hand consistent with available sources? The first variable, the dependent one, is obligatorily constituted by the factual consistency of the use of the green area in terms of frequenters of it out of the total number of inhabitants of a hypothetical catchment area of users. Proceeding in

---

[15] J. Piaget, *Epistémologie des relations interdisciplinaires*, OCDE, Paris 1972.
[16] B. Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinarity. Theory and practice*, Hampton Press, New York 2008.
[17] E. Morin, *On complexity*, Hampton Press, Cresskill 2008.

accordance with the model outlined above, a second variable, again of an objective order, concerns an epidemiological analysis of this area. Who lives in the neighborhood and in what health status? Is it a self-sufficient population with good mobility? Who suffers from particular diseases? Coming then to the characteristics of the physical-environmental context, we might ask how the park is maintained from the point of view of cleanliness, lighting, public safety, etc. Turning then to the cultural and social aspects, we should ask about the characteristics of the residents: Are they people who by country of origin (e.g. natives vs. allochthons) are inclined to use public spaces? What is the prevailing social class, profession, age, gender, with what follows in terms of habitual consumption and leisure-time use patterns? Again, in terms of economics, is access to the park free? Are there other leisure offerings within a reasonable travel distance? Epidemiologists, urban planners, landscape architects, sociologists, anthropologists, and economists can certainly work together to develop an objective grid on the potential expressed by the neighborhood from the point of view of park usability. Should the delta between estimated potential and actual attendance be considerable, it would become imperative to dig into the more subjective, psychological components of people. What makes them not go to the park? Is there any form of dissonance between the reality of the facts and their perception? People's character aspects? Having had a bad experience in the past? Moreover, it is not impossible or even execrable that some individuals do not care at all about green areas. Other entirely occasional factors- such as a lack of a person to go with, an allergy to certain plants, a preference for other activities, a lack of free time, etc.- are not to be overlooked. In these cases, research can only make use of subjective indicators collected through surveys of population samples or the result of in-depth interviews in which sociologists and psychologists can find fruitful collaboration in estimating perceptual and evaluative aspects with respect to the reference context. Ultimately, our researchers, in estimating the relevance, appropriateness, and practical usability of the park for the local community, will do well to proceed jointly, hoping of course that this collaboration will be marked by some reciprocity, continuity, and formalization for research to come on this and other issues.

Certainly, we have assumed that much of the data of our interest are available. We know that this is not always the case. With regard to existing official statistics from various sources, the spatial grain level of the data does not always meet our wishes. Making surveys is increasingly expensive, and in any case, questionnaires are not always able to intercept the deeper and intimate motivations that drive people to behave in a particular way. On the

other hand, qualitative methods are certainly relevant for etiological purposes, but, as is well known, they hardly contribute to the analysis of the numerical distribution of phenomena.

We could go on with a list of other methodological issues that make social science research as problematic as it is fascinating. However, this is certainly not the appropriate forum to address them. We merely note that they should not prevent us from setting up research capable of contemplating and combining, even in a critical form, multiple types of information and methods relating to alternative fields of study and insights. In other words, the toolboxes of the social sciences are rich in tools but need to be continuously updated and supplemented. This *modus operandi* should obviously also apply to the study of park use. Of course, getting multiple scholars from different disciplines around the table is not easy. We therefore leave the role of research leader to the urban sociologist but hope that, as far as possible, he or she will be willing to intercept other expertise.

7. A little autobiographical note on Trotter Park

I hope I will be forgiven for not having data on the issues discussed or even for not having with respect to them a cognitive intent; the article now simply considers a personal experience. Trotter Park (so named because in the 1800s it was a hippodrome) constitutes an important green lung for the city of Milan. It is located in what is now called NoLo, a populated neighborhood located north of Piazzale Loreto, hence the acronym. From what I observe returning home every evening, the park sees a substantial presence of people of various ethnicities and ages, especially in some seasons. The entire park area, which has an ancient history and still houses the buildings of what some 100 years ago were the public pedagogical-health facilities for frail boys and girls, has been redeveloped in several of its functions since the 1990s, thanks mainly to the activities promoted by the Casa del Sole Association. I often wonder why, despite the fact that the park is only a few hundred meters from my home, I have never frequented it, and I have given myself the following explanation, which I hope will not generate antipathy toward me from readers: Although I recognize the beauty of the park and its usefulness also in environmental terms, I am not personally inclined to contemplation of nature, nor do I feel the need to socialize with the neighbor sitting next to me on a bench. In short, I would say that I am a kind of "urban bear" disinclined to impromptu relationships. I prefer sidewalks dense with people, on which I transit at a slow pace; I like to pause

in cafés from whose windows I watch the world like a *flâneur*[18], as Perec[19] did, without necessarily talking to someone. Otherwise, there are no other obstacles. In fact, I have no particular mobility problems, and going jogging sometimes at Trotter Park would be good for me, since I am a little overweight. I consider the park to be a sufficiently welcoming and well-maintained place; I have no episodes that are part of my subconscious (at least that I know of) that prevent me from frequenting a public park. The park sees a very substantial presence of foreign families of different ethnicities, and I particularly like this aspect; indeed, it is one of the reasons why I decided to live in a multi-ethnic neighborhood like NoLo. Admission is free, and the park is really two minutes away from my home. It would really pay me to take advantage of the situation. In addition, my social and employment status would allow me at least once a week to indulge in an evening walk in the park (especially in spring and summer), taking advantage of the free time I have, not a lot but enough to do some outdoor activities. In short, it is really laziness that ruins me. Once, I was fully prepared to go for a run, but an urgent request for an article delivery prevented me from doing so at the last minute. Chance has a special and often unrecognized place in generating social phenomena[20]. At the same time, the vagaries of human beings are also always around the corner, determining often unpredictable life trajectories. Then, let us not forget about the atmospheres of places and the *genius loci* – in their various aspects of experiential and emotional character[21], tangible and intangible[22], connatural, or the result of social construction[23]. To return to our example of Trotter Park, it is likely that the *genius loci* in that place, also due to the school realities it hosted during the twentieth century, may affect choices regarding its perception, evaluation, and frequentation. The few times I have walked in the park, the most pleasant sensation I felt came precisely from the perception of that intangible curative, pedagogical dimension rooted in time and space. Recourse to a discipline, such as history, hitherto only indirectly mentioned,

---

[18] W. Benjamin, *I "passages" di Parigi*, Einaudi, Torino 2002.

[19] G. Perec, *Tentativo di esaurimento di un luogo parigino*, Voland, Roma 2011.

[20] S. Sarti, *Il caso e la società. Il ruolo del caso nei fenomeni umani e sociali*, UTET, Torino 2021.

[21] T. Griffero e A. Petrillo (a cura di), *Atmosfere urbane. Una introduzione*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2024.

[22] J. Markevičienė, *The spirit of the place – the problem of (re)creating*, Journal of Architecture and Urbanism, Vilnius 2012.

[23] G. Jianhui, *No more Heidegger, no more genius loci: A poststructuralist view of place*, Journal of Environment and Art, Nanhua 2006.

may prove indispensable in understanding the situations with which we are confronted, even in their actuality.

I have given this example of Trotter Park to demonstrate how a multi-level multidisciplinary reading is essential in understanding and describing the behaviors of persons as individuals or as part of a collectivity, with respect to a sufficiently stable and recognizable physical context. An introspective process from which to line up the various motivations driving a behavior provides a useful reference. In particular, a researcher who looks at himself/herself does not yield to subjectivity but, on the contrary, opens the analysis to the multiplicity of possible explanations that he/she will later go on to verify through the most orthodox methodologies on more or less large and representative samples of the population.

8. Conclusions

What I am therefore wondering, at the end of the article, is whether current social science methodologies are able to reconstruct the weight of health, environmental, psychological, psychoanalytic, cultural, economic, social, and conjunctural variables, etc., in determining my final behavior and that of the thousands of people who live in the vicinity of the park and who are likely to exhibit a myriad of differentiated behaviors and motivations. In order to understand how responsive a service is to the expectations of the population, but also to what extent and how the objective and subjective dimensions of the human being and the context in which he or she is embedded determine his or her way of thinking and acting, it is crucial to take into consideration all the eight points we have discussed. Precisely for this reason, I think a research group that wants to investigate the causes of frequenting or not frequenting Trotter Park should be composed of scholars from various disciplines working together on the topic, trying as much as possible to systematize a shared model of analysis in which, however, the various components are recognized. Often these worlds do not communicate; in particular, as sociologists we provide predominantly social explanations of phenomena; we do not listen to what people's more or less healthy bodies tell us; we pay no attention to the more or less agile space that surrounds them, or even to the subconscious that originates from their personal histories. Sociological abstractions, in other words, make us lose sight of the most private individual experiences that instead have a not inconsiderable force in

marking human conduct[24]; just as, obsessed with an anthropocentric vision, we often tend to underestimate the environmental and spatial dimensions that affect our existence in ways that are not always taken for granted. Precisely in this regard, today we need to think of new paradigms that can hold culture and nature together[25]. The same is true for architects and urban planners, who, in designing the city – despite the good intentions expressed - do not always consider the infinite uses that a subject can make of the same space according to his or her state of mind and body; nor do they recognize the relevance of sociocultural dimensions in structuring the practices of everyday life with respect to the designed volumes. We may have a general idea of the city, but the ways in which it is transformed, viewed, and inhabited- even in light of the most secret, even unmentionable expectations and behaviors[26] enacted by subjects very different from one another- are not easily predictable, leaving many needs and desiderata subsequently unfulfilled.

In summary, while it remains very difficult to identify all the threads that bind the mentioned disciplinary fields, I believe that the time has come for closer collaboration between the various approaches, already at the stage of setting up the research: a collaboration capable of effectively combining multiple angles of theoretical and methodological analysis.

---

[24] E. Fromm, *Über Methode und Aufgabe einer Analytischen Sozialpsychologie. Bemerkungen über Psychoanalyse und historischen Materialismus*, Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Francoforte 1932; R. Bastide, *Sociologia e psicoanalisi*, Dedalo, Bari 1972; G. Pollini, *Sociologia e psicoanalisi in T. Parsons*, Studi di Sociologia, Milano 2008; A. Russo, *La sociologia di Freud. Una lettura de "Il disagio della civiltà"*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2013; G. Walker, *Jung and Sociological Theory. Readings and Appraisal*, Routledge, London 2018.

[25] A. Mela, E. Battaglini e A. L. Palazzo, *La società e lo spazio. Quadri teorici, scenari e casi di studio*, Carocci, Roma 2024.

[26] A. Vanolo, *Shame, guilt, and the production of urban space*, Progress in Human Geography, London 2021.