Diagnosing a City’s Social Diversity

Jane Jacobs and The Wire’s Baltimore

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Diagnosing a City’s Social Diversity

Jane Jacobs and The Wire’s Baltimore

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Abstract – Of Jane Jacobs’ four conditions for optimal diversity in the city, only the fourth deals with social diversity and it is exactly this condition that continues to spark criticism. To widen the perspective and obtain a comprehensive view of a city’s social diversity it would be helpful to use a broad diagnostic tool like the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model from organizational studies. This model is used to diagnose social diversity in the city of Baltimore as portrayed in the television series The Wire. The perspectives of Jacobs and critics are plotted in the Model, showing what other perspectives are relevant for diagnosing a city’s social diversity.

Key words – Jane Jacobs, social diversity, The Wire, Organizational Discourse Analysis Model

Introduction

According to Jane Jacobs’ The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) the concept of the city as an organism required diversity. Jacobs distinguished several conditions for a city’s diversity, which became commonplace in the domains of urban planning and inner city architecture. Several social sciences disciplines, however, voiced criticism of Jacobs’ fourth condition that addresses social diversity. To gain a full understanding of the concept of diversity, it is wise to investigate it from different angles and different disciplines (Hospers et al., 2015). A multiperspectivist tool that would serve that purpose is available. Developed in the field of organizational studies, it is known as the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model (ODAM). A multiperspectivist tool that would serve that purpose is available. Developed in the field of organizational studies, it is known as the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model (ODAM). This tool is helpful to analyze ‘a body of citizens’ (polis) in the process of organizing. This paper focuses on the question of how the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model enriches Jacobs’ condition of a city’s social diversity. We will briefly discuss the conditions for diversity formulated by Jacobs and her critics. We will then describe the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model and explore multiperspectivism and how this influences the organizational analysis of a city. The model will then be applied to the city of Baltimore as depicted in the HBO series The Wire. We will conclude by showing the angles on a city’s social diversity that are missing from Jacobs’ and her critics’ analyses, but are revealed by the diagnostic model.

Jane Jacobs: The Importance of a City’s Diversity

Jane Jacobs is best known for her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities (Jacobs, 1961), an ethnographic description of urban life. Jacobs views the built environment through an anthropological lens (Wortham-Galvin, 2012) and includes in her book everyday mini-narratives about real-life urban experiences (Hirt, 2012). At the core of her investigation is the question of how livable a city is. Where Le Corbusier sees standardization as the ideal and looks at a city as a machine, Jacobs’ ideas about the city are based on a concept of the city as an organism (Jacobs, 2009; Lengkeek, 2009). She sees the city as an animate object or an organism, with streets, parks and squares full of inhabitants, that has an ability to revitalize itself and is characterized by diversity. Jacobs (1961) distinguishes four conditions that are indispensable for a city’s diversity: 1. A mix of primary functions: living, working, recreation and culture; 2. A mix of old and new buildings that enable the mix of functions; 3. Blocks of mixed sizes, and lively sidewalks; and 4. A sufficiently
dense concentration of people and a variety of people. A city must meet all four conditions to continue to function and to be an economically viable and pleasant place to live. The absence of any one of these conditions undermines the diversity of the city and will eventually facilitate the city’s decline.

**Criticisms of Jacobs’ Views on Diversity**

One of Jacobs’ greatest critics is sociologist Herbert Gans. In City Planning and Urban Realities (1962), he argues that human behavior is not so much dictated by the physical reality of the city—the streets and building—as it is by the culture of the social group to which the city dwellers belong. For example, in working class culture, social life takes place outside the home, while family life takes place inside the home. That is why blue collar neighborhoods have such lively streets, even though the principle of diversity might be largely absent as the inhabitants often form a homogeneous group and the buildings are not very varied either. When this type of neighborhood is close to downtown, it attracts artists and other bohemians. They too spend a lot of time outdoors, adding to the liveliness of the streets. Gans argues that middle class desires dominate urban planning and new developments and that this social stratum does not prefer diversity per se, as Jacobs does. According to Gans, it is social, economic and cultural factors that determine a city’s livability or unlivability for that matter. To him, it is not the city and urban planning that is the problem, nor the absence of diversity, but poverty and segregation. Unlike Jacobs, Gans addresses the issue at a national rather than a local level (L’Heureux, 2012).

A second point of criticism is that Jacobs’ assumptions about people’s sense of community blind her to the political dimensions of city life. She ignores city government and city politics (Harris, 2011). In the same vein, she largely disregards opposing interests and oppositions, i.e. deviants, misfits and local weirdos that live in every city (Mennell, 2011), factors which can inspire exciting creative processes in a neighborhood. In fact, such contrasts partly determine a city’s charm (Page, 2011). Cities are complex places constructed around people (Hollis, 2013).

Both criticisms primarily address Jacobs’ fourth condition—diversity in numbers and types of people. This paper will deal exclusively with this fourth condition of ‘a variety of inhabitants’, which we interpret to mean ‘a city’s social diversity’. In order to get a clear idea of that type of diversity, we will first define a city’s social diversity and then analyze it systematically.

The concept of social diversity is directly connected to concepts such as equality, democracy, solidarity and tolerance (Fainstein, 2010). We acknowledge that this link exists, but for the purposes of this paper we focus solely on social diversity as a research object (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Diversity</th>
<th>Individual differences</th>
<th>Cultural differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observable characteristics</td>
<td>Race/ethnicity, sex, age, body size, visible disabilities, class</td>
<td>Language, group size, customs, rituals, symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset elements</td>
<td>Values, beliefs, attitudes, gender</td>
<td>Morality, ideology, religion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Social diversity as a research object

A City’s Social Diversity as a Research Object

Diversity is about differences, identities and categories. These differences are also constructed in a city, as the production of difference takes place in the social context (Hearn & Louvrier, 2015).

As there are many different lenses through which social diversity is viewed, a classification by levels would be helpful. At surface level, diversity refers to readily seen attributes, such as race or ethnicity, sex, age, body size, visible disabilities or class/socio-economic background. Studies at this level focus on similarities and differences in those demographic characteristics. At a deeper level, diversity refers to a non-observable type of diversity: values, beliefs, attitudes and identity aspects of gender. They can be revealed through verbal communication and nonverbal cues (Lambert and Bell, 2013). Both of these levels (easily observable attributes and aspects of people’s mindsets) concern differences we can distinguish between individuals.

Aside from distinguishing between individuals, we also look at the differences between cultures and subcultures when studying a city’s social diversity. Diversity in cultures and subcultures is about groups that delineate and identify themselves in relation to other groups (Latour, 2005). Group members expect a certain combination of attitudes and behavior from each other. This combination is visible in features like language, group size, customs, rituals and symbols. A combination of attitudes and behavior is justified by a mix of morals, ideology and religion. The field of organizational studies provides a diagnostic model that takes a broad approach to texts and images, the differences between individuals and groups, and the ways in which they collaborate effectively or ineffectively. This model is the topic of the next two sections. Section 4 introduces eight metaphors and assigns them a place in the organizational surface current and undercurrent. Section 5 adds two metaphors that connect both currents and thus completes the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model.

**Eight Metaphors in the Surface Current and the Undercurrent**

Gareth Morgan (1986) distinguishes eight metaphors or perspectives from which to look at organizations. Each metaphor reveals relevant aspects of the organization. Van Es (2011) reinterprets the eight metaphors and assigns them a place in either the surface current or undercurrent of the organization. The surface
current encompasses anything rational, conscious and directive in an organization, while the undercurrent comprises anything emotional, subconscious and associative. Accordingly, Morgan’s eight perspectives are divided into two sets of four.

In the first set of four perspectives, organizations are seen as Machines, Political Systems, Cultural Units and Brains. If we look at organizations as Machines, then we pay attention to input, throughput and output. Efficiency, technology and cost effectiveness are key. Each set of four metaphors has an internal coherence. The first set—Machines, Political Systems, Cultural Unity and Brains—represents the organizational surface current. Together, they give us an idea of how management and board steer the organization. The second set of metaphors—Organism, Moral Concerns, Self-Restriction and Flux—forms the organizational undercurrent. These metaphors provide us with clues about how individuals, co-workers and friends perceive the organization and how they deal with, and sometimes even adjust, the collective course set out by management and board.

### Completing the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model

To connect the four perspectives in their respective currents, we need two additional, interdependent metaphors. These complete the ten perspectives of the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model.

The first connective metaphor is Stratego. It is the game the management plays of drawing as many connections between the surface current’s perspectives in order to reinforce their message. It is a deliberate attempt to leverage the undercurrent. This is a classical example of strategy (Whittington 1993) used as a conscious policy instrument. It is the ninth perspective in the model.

The second connective metaphor is that of the less well-known Rhizome (rootstalk), a notion coined by Norma Jackson and Pippa Carter (2007). The Rhizome is located in the undercurrent and connects the four metaphors there. If we look at organizations from this perspective, we discern desires, beliefs, motivations and experiences that cannot be predicted or caught. In this metaphor, we see behavior in and between organizations as a cluster of accidental connections. Pressure on one point in the undercurrent can lead to unexpected counter pressure with unforeseen consequences at other locations within the undercurrent (before this pressure is even transferred to the surface current). This subsurface exchange is what we see when we look at the organization as a rhizome. Jackson and Carter point to
coincidence, contingency and open-mindedness toward the unexpected. The rhizome draws on a history of old pain, shame and mistrust, but also on old pleasure, pride and trust.

The Stratego and Rhizome perspectives describe the dynamism of the organization’s surface current and undercurrent. The dynamism of an organization can be interpreted as a meeting of perspectives, or as the two layers acting as communicating vessels. The strategic attempt to leverage the undercurrent can never be fully or permanently successful. When the drive for maximum efficiency becomes unbearable, people’s survival instinct kicks in. The perception of unfairness and exploitation is the underbelly of the power play. The unconscious and the unimaginable keep growing, in inverse proportion to the pressure of being forced onto the ‘same page’. A lack of open-mindedness and creativity is the price to pay for a fixation on information processing and fixed learning patterns.

The dynamism in the undercurrent is expressed as a need for operating informally, without pressure or budgets, without accountability and based on personal insight. Like the Stratego perspective, the Rhizome-inspired focus can only be sustained partially and temporarily; coordination, money and a degree of formality are indispensable in the organizational process. They are the antidote to the eruptions of laziness, arbitrariness, unbusinesslike behavior, routine and laissez-faire attitudes that would otherwise become the norm. Surface current and undercurrent keep each other in balance. Table 2 shows the full-fledged Organizational Discourse Analysis Model.

In Section 7, we will apply this diagnostic tool to Baltimore’s social diversity as depicted in the HBO series The Wire. First, we will briefly introduce the series in Section 6.

**The Wire: Portrait of a City**

The HBO series The Wire (2002-2006) takes place in Baltimore, Maryland. For five seasons, this city is the backdrop to the intertwined stories of more than 50 protagonists, including corner boys, neighborhood dwellers, junkies, drug dealers, teachers, students, police officers and politicians (Alvarez, 2009). We look at The Wire as an ethnographic document of an American metropolis that provides both a view of the diversity of its inhabitants and the development of the city as an organization.

Season 1 focuses on the drug trade, and in particular the activities of the Barksdale gang and the Baltimore Police Department’s war on the gang. The scenes take place on street corners and in police stations in the economically depressed district of West Baltimore. On both sides of the law we see “cultures of addiction to power, ambition and dope.” (Alvarez, 2009). We also see great inequality. As Detective Carver says about street corner drug dealers: “They screw up, they get beaten; we screw up, we get a pension.”

Season 2 is largely about the decline of the port. The dockers’ union, headed by Frank Sobotka, has lost most of its clout. To survive, the union has started smuggling goods and laundering money. Sobotka is desperately trying to find self-respect in a world he no longer has any control over, as is made clear by the discovery of 13 unidentified women’s corpses in a container: evidence of human trafficking. Meanwhile, with Avon Barksdale in prison, the drug business continues unabated under the leadership of Barksdale’s deputy Stringer Bell, whose influence keeps growing.

Season 3 introduces a series of new characters—drug dealers, politicians and civil servants. One of these is City Councilman Tommy Carcetti, a rising star in local politics. Major Colvin of the Baltimore police covertly creates a drug tolerance zone called Hamsterdam. The experiment works, until politicians and the media get wind of it. This costs Colvin his job and accelerates business for the drug lords, presenting them with new opportunities and new ways of plying their wares. Some of them, like Stringer Bell, start to think of themselves as businessmen and even enroll in college courses. Others reject this, insisting that “the street is the street.”

Season 4 portrays the public education system by following four pupils and various teachers. On the whole, the level of education is extremely low because of a lack of funding from the school board, a lack of interest from the students and a growing helplessness on the part of teachers. As an experiment, the school starts a special class where students are taught their subjects in a way that reflects the world they know. Ex-law enforcement officers, including Colvin, contribute to this special class with varying degrees of success. Meanwhile, the Barksdale gang has to learn to deal with growing competition from the Stanfield gang.

Season 5 deals with the question of why there is change but no improvement. The extra focus is now on journalism. Who reports what and how? And who is pulling the strings behind the scenes? Everyone is caught in compromises. Together we come up with the biggest lies and, if we can, we live with it. The only thing you can do in journalism is investigate things thoroughly, as editor Gus Haynes of the Baltimore Sun exclaims. “You need a lot of context to examine anything.” And the problem is, those who are doing the examining need to “do more with less.”

Using The Wire as a case study, we remain close to the mini-narratives of real-life urban experience that are so characteristic of Jacobs (Hirt, 2012).

**Diagnosing a City’s Social Diversity in *The Wire’s* Baltimore**

Our working definition of a city’s social diversity is: the ways in which a city organizes and produces the differences between people (individuals and subcultures).

Let us first look at the distribution of four relevant differences—race, sex, age and class—among the main actors in The Wire’s Baltimore. We define those actors as the twelve professional roles that shape the city as an organization: gang leaders, gang members, police commissioners, detectives, dockworkers, union leaders, middle school teachers, the justice department, civil servants, politicians, editors and journalists. There are considerable social differences between those groups. The drug ring leaders are 100% black, while the editors of the local newspaper and the union leaders in the harbor are 100% white. Also, they are all men. There are a few women among the detectives and the gang members. Women dominate the profession of middle school teachers and are a sizable minority as office workers at the justice department and the city administration. Table 3 shows an overview of four of the immediately observable differences between the twelve actors.

Now we are going to look at how the differences in the city are orchestrated and reinforced
Table 3. Four observable differences between the 12 basic actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four differences 12 Actors</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Gang leaders</td>
<td>100% black</td>
<td>100% male</td>
<td>30-50</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Gang members</td>
<td>100% black</td>
<td>90% male</td>
<td>10-40</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Police commissioners</td>
<td>70% black</td>
<td>100% male</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>Higher-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Police detectives</td>
<td>80% black</td>
<td>90% male</td>
<td>30-65</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Dockworkers</td>
<td>95% white</td>
<td>90% male</td>
<td>20-55</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Union leaders</td>
<td>100% white</td>
<td>100% male</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 High school teachers</td>
<td>80% black</td>
<td>60% female</td>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Justice department</td>
<td>60% white</td>
<td>60% male</td>
<td>35-65</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Public officers</td>
<td>80% black</td>
<td>60% male</td>
<td>30-65</td>
<td>Higher-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Politicians</td>
<td>80% black</td>
<td>80% male</td>
<td>35-65</td>
<td>Higher-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Editors</td>
<td>100% white</td>
<td>100% male</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Journalists</td>
<td>80% white</td>
<td>60% male</td>
<td>30-65</td>
<td>Higher-middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the ten perspectives of the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model.

Let us start with the five metaphors that make up the surface current of the city as an organization. If we focus on the differences from the Machine perspective, we see that both the police and the drug gangs are organized strictly top-down. The police commissioners use written reports, data-driven meetings and broad, formal instructions, while their detectives work with photographs and wiretaps. The drug kingpins, on the other hand, use oral reports, informal and personal instructions, and the lower-level drug dealers use pay phones.

If we look at the organized differences as a Political System, we see that negotiation, as well as promises and alliances are use to protect personal (and organizational) interests. Police commissioners can promise promotions and raises to their subordinates. Gang leaders can seldom do the same; you keep working in the role that fits you. There are few opportunities to rise through the ranks, but there is a lot of under-the-counter money to be made. Alliances come and go and only survive as long as everyone clearly sees the benefit. The gang leaders’ co-op for buying drugs survives for a relatively long time, until the upset Marlo Stanfield ends it in a bid for power.

If we look at the organized differences in the city from the angle of Cultural Unity, we immediately feel the tension. The Baltimore Sun strives to be a collective and hence to homogenize values and behavior. But the editors are all white males of 50 years or older who think and write in standard American English. Their ideas about honest reporting are based on their decades of making a print newspaper. Young journalists do not have that experience and may feel differently about this, in part because they feel at home in the world of social media and sociolect.

Injecting a bit of fiction into the facts does not seem all that wrong to some of them. This is why Scott Templeton, a young journalist, invents a source to quote in his articles.

If we look at the organized differences from the Brains perspective, we can see the problems in the school system. Schools can hardly make a difference when there is a lack of money, facilities and good teachers, and the pupils show no interest. The school board’s only concern is that the pupils’ test results are good enough for the school to continue to receive funding, so teachers are just “teaching to the test” and students are forced to play along. They are not interested in the curriculum because it is irrelevant to their lives: “They are not learning for our world, they are learning for theirs.”

Looking at differences from the Stratego angle means looking at the underlying, rational reinforcements of the policy in the surface current of the city as an organization. Officially, this is a type of Public Management, but to many policy makers rational self-preservation and reputation management are key. This is why any changes in policy are piecemeal. They might appear wholesale, but the underlying balance of power must remain undisturbed.

Moving on to the five metaphors that make up the undercurrent of the city as an organization, we can look at the differences from the Organism perspective and focus on individuals’ and groups’ personal space, vitality and health. For example, we see how Cutty’s return to the streets and to his work as a drug lord’s bodyguard after years in prison is not a success. He has changed and no longer fits into the drug gang game, so he wants out. Gang leader Avon Barksdale understands and lets him go, and later even sponsors Cutty.

We can look at the differences from the angle of Moral Concerns too and focus on feelings of respect, dignity and justice. Detective Bunk sits on a park bench with Omar, the series’ informal avenger, and talks about the decline of their West Baltimore district. They were both born and raised there. Despite everything, it used to be a tightly knit community. Bunk tells Omar. But that has all gone down the drain. Bunk holds Omar partly responsible for the decline, telling him he is contributing to it. This gives Omar pause for thought and prompts him.
to later help Bunk collect evidence against a gang.

Organized differences can also be analyzed from the perspective of Self-Restriction and looked at in terms of personal beliefs, taboos and security. The institution of a free zone (Hamsterdam) is a daring experiment on the part of Major Colvin. He takes the initiative based on his personal beliefs. Everywhere else in the city, drugs are now strictly forbidden and the people that live in those neighborhoods are very happy about this. Hamsterdam is a dilapidated and largely abandoned neighborhood where drugs can be freely dealt and used without the police stepping in. This works pretty well until the media, the police commissioners and politicians learn of the experiment. This type of drug tolerance is absolutely taboo in American public opinion and is therefore spun as an attempt to “legalize drugs,” while, in fact, safety in the city had increased.

The organized differences in the city can also be investigated from the angle of Flux, where we look for signs of alertness, pleasure and improvisation. When detective-turned-teacher Pryzbylewski (Prez) tries to teach his classroom full of black students something, he notices how wide the social gap is. His pupils show no interest in his general stories: what relevance do they have to their lives on the street? Prez manages to connect with them by teaching them mathematics by means of estimates and card games that his students use on a daily basis. That improvisation creates commitment and learning outcomes. Learning now becomes instrumental to life on the street. This raises the question whether education should not serve another goal as well, but that brings us back to the Moral Concern perspective.

And finally, we can look at the organized differences in the city from the undercurrent perspective of the Rhizome, where we focus on immediate emotional connections. What is true for many of the inhabitants of West Baltimore is that their lives are fraught with insecurity, that violence is always lurking around the corner, that their jobs, income and health are not guaranteed and that the only thing they can be sure of is that this is not likely to change anytime soon. There are plenty of changes afoot in this city district, but they are seldom improvements.

### Diagnosing a City’s Social Diversity

Jacobs has given us the four conditions that a city must meet to be livable, ranging from the built environment to social diversity. Her fourth condition is that there must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people and a sufficiently diverse population. This was the condition that Jacobs’ critics disputed most often. For example, Gans stresses the cultural differences among inhabitants, while Harris highlights the political differences at play. If we overlay the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model with Jacobs, Harris and Gans’ approaches to social diversity, we can see that these cover perspectives 2, 3, 4 and 6 (see Table 4).

Our analysis of the city of Baltimore as portrayed in The Wire shows that there are six other perspectives that can help us understand the city’s social diversity. In the surface current, we can analyze the diversity in terms of Stratego and look at the differences in how policy areas are rationally reinforced; and we can analyze diversity in terms of theBrains metaphor and focus on how information is learned and processed. In the undercurrent, there are as many as four additional perspectives that we can take: Moral Concerns (differences in feelings of respect and justice); Self-Restriction (differences in personal beliefs, taboos, and feelings of security); Flux (differences in alertness, pleasure, and improvisation); and the Rhizome, which zooms in on immediate emotional connections, often a matter of pride or trust.
Conclusions: Diagnosing a City’s Social Diversity

This paper has investigated how the Organizational Discourse Analysis Model enriches Jane Jacobs’ fourth condition for a city’s diversity, namely social diversity. Jacobs argues that the population needs to be sufficiently large and diverse. Her analysis of how cities function covers two perspectives of the 10-perspective model presented in this paper. She critiques the city as a Machine (in her denunciation of LeCorbusier) and idealizes it as an Organism. The ODAM offers eight additional perspectives from which to examine a city’s diversity. The Political Systems perspective focuses on the promotion of interests and the balance of power, which Harris calls attention to. Gans emphasizes the importance of cultural differences, a perspective which focuses on shared values and behavior within the Cultural Unity angle of the ODAM. From the remaining six perspectives that the ODAM offers us to view the city as an organization, two are in the surface current. From the Brains perspective, we can analyze a city’s diversity with a view to differences in information processing and learning. Taking the Stratego perspective, we can focus on differences in the attempts to rationally connect policies. This leaves four perspectives in the undercurrent, where emotional, associative and subconscious motivations play a role. The Moral Concerns perspective lets us focus on feelings of respect and justice; the Self-Restiction angle turns our gaze to differences in personal beliefs, taboos, and security; from the Flux angle, we look for differences in alertness, pleasure, and improvisation; and finally, from the Rhizome perspective, we construe diversity as differences in immediate emotional bonds, often concerned with pride or trust.

Using the ODAM to analyze the diversity in the city of Baltimore as represented in the HBO series The Wire, we have shown the benefit of using additional perspectives to highlight interesting aspects of a city’s social diversity.

References


