

## ***This Week's Citation Classic***

Milgram S. The experience of living in cities. *Science* 167:1461-8, 1970. [Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY]

**The individual experiences the density, large numbers, and heterogeneity of city life as overloads which require adaptive adjustments. These adjustments create the distinctive norms and behaviors characteristic of city life. Experiments comparing small town and city behavior test the overload hypothesis. [The Science Citation Index® (SCI®) and the Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited over 260 times since 1970.]**

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September 25, 1981

"I was pleased to learn this paper had become a Citation Classic, and believe the following personal and Zeitgeist factors should be mentioned in connection with it. First, the personal. For many years I lived in New York, Boston, and Paris. The contrast between these cities, and my experiences in small towns, stimulated an interest in 'urban atmosphere.' But it was not until the mid-1960s, while teaching a tutorial at Harvard University on urban psychology, that I tried to analyze experimentally what made the 'atmosphere' of a city such as New York differ from that of other communities.

"Although research into urban questions had a well-entrenched history in sociology, the social psychologist, with his characteristically experimental bent, had not yet thought of 'the city' as a manageable topic for scientific investigation. Sociological theorists such as Georg Simmel<sup>1</sup> and Louis Wirth<sup>2</sup> had speculated on the consequences urban circumstances

had for the mental and social life of city inhabitants, and provided rich hypotheses, but these had not yet come under experimental scrutiny.

"For example, we have long heard that big cities are 'fast' while small towns are slower in pace. But what exactly did this mean? Did it imply, for example, that people in the city walk faster than small towners? One of the first studies carried out in my Harvard tutorial dealt with the measurement of walking speeds in downtown Boston, compared to the pace in the small town of Concord, Massachusetts. We found city people walked about ten percent faster. Since then, more systematic studies have been carried out on this topic (e.g., Bornstein<sup>3</sup>) and the results hold up well.

"In subsequent years, my students at the City University of New York carried out a grab bag of experimental studies on city vs. small town behavior, but one limitation became apparent: because there are so many specific phenomena one could study in a city, it was important to bring the investigations under a more rigorous theoretical discipline. This was provided by the systems theory notion of overload (in which the individual is seen to make adaptive adjustments in the face of environmental demands on his attention, decisions, and actions). Thus, an integrative concept was added to the diverse experimental studies to produce a more systematic presentation of findings and issues. And that is more or less how the article came about.

"Why is the article heavily cited? Probably because questions of environmental quality were just beginning to take hold in the late-1960s, and the article linked this general concern to a specific sociopsychological method and theory for investigating the quality of city life. It helped make the city a fit subject for experimentation."

1. Simmel G. The metropolis and mental life. (Wolf K W, ed.) The sociology of Georg Simmel. New York: Free Press, 1950. p. 409-24.
2. Wirth L. Urbanism as a way of life. *Amer. J. Sociol.* 44:1-24, 1938.
3. Bornstein M H & Bornstein H G. The pace of life. *Nature* 259:557-9, 1976.