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Organized for What? Recasting Theories of Social (Dis)organization

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The concepts of "community" in general, and "social disorganization" in particular, have made remarkable comebacks in criminological discourse. Once relegated to the intellectual dustbin by the likes of Edwin Sutherland and William F. Whyte, the social disorganization theory—gussied up a bit for the nineties—is indeed alive and well. Among others, Bob Bursik and I have been proponents of the reformulation and resurgence of this classic framework on communities and crime.

This move has not been without its detractors, however. Bursik and Harold Grasmick supply an amusing anecdote in *Neighborhoods and Crime* (1993). Recalling a conversation at the annual meeting of the ASC in the late 1980s, they were told by a respected but unnamed colleague that "social disorganization is the herpes of criminology...once you think it is gone for good, the symptoms flare up again" (1993: 30). Although I have several suspects in mind as the source of this comment, Al Reiss is at the top of the list. In his lead-off essay in *Communities and Crime* (1986), "Why are Communities Important for Understanding Crime?" Reiss trained his critical eye on social disorganization theory. Against a backdrop of admiration for the efforts of Shaw and McKay and others in the social-disorganization tradition, Reiss pointed out that in many so-called disorganized slums, there existed criminal networks, organized gangs, and often a complex density of social ties. Surely it would be a mistake to consider Whyte's North End, to use Reiss's example, as simply *disorganized*. Yet it did have high crime rates, and many of the features of Shaw and McKay's delinquency areas.

Characteristically, then, Reiss raised a paradox: high-crime areas often seem to be both organized and disorganized simultaneously, yielding an uneasy co-existence within the same boundaries. How can this be, one wonders? Wouldn't it be best, as Bursik and Grasmick's critic implied, to simply eradicate social disorganization theory once and for all?

In this chapter, I propose a solution for solving the "disorganization" conundrum. Building upon prior empirical research and a larger theoretical effort (Sampson 1999), I recast the concept of social organization based on an appraisal of what community supplies in modern society. I then trace some of the implications of this theoretical strategy, adding some lessons from ongoing collaborative research in Chicago. The key to solving the dilemma turns, I believe, on the question: *organized for what?* Before explaining and then answering this question, let me briefly rehearse the theoretical stakes.

Community Social Disorganization: Origins

Steeped in the "Chicago school" tradition of urban sociology pioneered by Park, Burgess, and McKenzie (1925), Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay spearheaded a community-level approach to social disorganization. In their classic work, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that three structural factors—low economic status mediated in turn by ethnic heterogeneity and residential instability—led to the disruption of community social organization. Delinquent gangs and the age-graded transmission of delinquent traditions ensued, accounting for time-stable variations in crime and delinquency rates. Delinquency traditions and high crime rates persisted in the same communities, they maintained, regardless of the race or ethnic groups passing through.

As later extended by Kornhauser (1978), Bursik (1988), and Sampson and Groves (1989), social disorganization has been defined, in the abstract, as the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls. This social disorganization approach has been further grounded in what Kasarda and Janowitz (1974: 329) call the *systemic* model, where the local community is viewed as a complex system of friendship and kinship networks, and formal and informal

associational ties rooted in family life and on-going socialization processes. So much for the basics.

Criticisms

In *Street Corner Society*, Whyte (1943) argued that what looks like social disorganization from the outside is actually an internal organization. He discovered through extensive fieldwork an intricate pattern of social ties embedded within the social structure of a low-income Italian area of Boston—the North End. There were organized gangs and an integration of illegal markets with the routines of everyday life. Noting the relative nature of organization in the community, he maintained that the real problem of “Cornerville” was that its social organization failed to mesh with the structure of the society around it. Whyte’s research came to be seen as a repudiation of the then prevalent theory that slum communities were “disorganized.”

A bit later, circa the 1950s and 1960s, ethnographic research discovered thriving urban communities and ethnic enclaves where kinship and friendship solidarities flourished (e.g., Gans 1962). Especially in poor urban neighborhoods, the evidence of dense social networks and local identification remained strong (see also Jacobs 1961; Stack 1974).

Two recent ethnographies in Chicago provide further insight supportive of this line of critique. In an ethnography of a black middle-class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, Mary Pattillo (1998) found that the dense social networks fostered by residential stability did in fact facilitate the informal supervision of neighborhood youth and enhance the mobilization of local institutions. At the same time, however, the incorporation of gang members and drug dealers into the networks of law-abiding kin and neighbors thwarted conventional efforts to rid the neighborhood of its criminal element. In an interesting twist, Pattillo found that the leader of a large black gang was a long-time resident who engaged in multiple acts of informal social control (e.g., threats, payoffs) to keep the neighborhood free of street crime and signs of disorder (e.g., graffiti, vandalism, prostitution). A major reason was that his mother, relatives, and friends—all of whom were neighborhood residents—would have faced potential victimization otherwise. These conflicting and paradoxical

manifestations of dense networks pose a unique challenge to the traditional social disorganization framework.

Sudhir Venkatesh (1997) recently reported on a four-year study of community life in a poor, all-black housing project also on Chicago's south side. He uncovered an interesting transformation wherein the early 1990s signaled the arrival of the street gang as an important element in local social organization. The gangs did not exercise absolute dominion; rather they became "corporatized" through systemic involvement in drug dealing. Defense of turf was no longer the determining agenda as it was for prior gangs. For their part, residents did not welcome the gang, but many benefited materially (e.g., through cash, gifts, repair of property) and all had to take into account gang members through daily interactions in ways not seen previously. Venkatesh, like Pattillo, suggests anew that "disorganization" is not the correct lens through which to view the complexities of urban life in the modern metropolis.

Resolution

How, then, do we reconcile these seemingly disparate views of the nature of community social organization? Let me offer five observations by way of rejoinder.

1. Going back to Reiss's insight, but also Ruth Kornhauser's, we must first recognize that social organization is *goal oriented*. It confuses matters to think about social disorganization in the abstract, absent any content. For criminologists, content is grounded in the common goal of living in an area free of the threat of crime. Here, social organization refers to the collective and concrete efforts of neighborhood actors toward meeting this goal. The North End of Boston might have been organized with regard to intricate social ties, but perhaps not toward the goal of collectively controlling deviant behavior. Ironically, Pattillo's gang leader proves the point in that he assumed a large responsibility for keeping the middle-class black neighborhood relatively free of serious crime.
2. This flows from point number 1. Social disorganization does not imply chaos, and in fact does not mean the lack of social ties. I must confess that I erred conceptually on this point back in my 1989 paper (Sampson and Groves 1989) testing a reformulated social disorganization theory. There we defined the structural dimensions of community social disorganization partly in terms of the prevalence and interdependence of social networks in a community. To be sure, social

disorganization may be influenced by the configuration of informal networks (e.g., the density of local acquaintanceship, intergenerational ties), but they are, nonetheless, independent constructs. In some contexts, such as socially isolated and segregated neighborhoods in the inner city (Wilson 1987), dense social ties may inhibit collective action to tackle local problems. As network theorists in sociology have argued, *weak* ties (or structural holes) are often the most useful form of social organization for getting things done (Granovetter 1973; Burt 1982).

3. Criminologists have too often defined neighborhoods themselves—not just social disorganization—in terms of social cohesion and dense primary ties. As Donald Warren remarked in his masterful study of Detroit (1975: 50), “the belief in the demise of neighborhood as an important social unit, is predicated on the assumption that neighborhood is exclusively a primary group and therefore should possess the ‘face-to-face’ intimate, affective relations which characterize all primary groups.” But this assumption is false, and plays right into Whyte’s critique. Neighborhoods are *ecological* units—the extent of organization (and for what) is an empirical question. Hence, we should not conflate ecological areas or the constitutive elements of social control, such as taking action, with primary social ties, such as with friends and kin. Rejecting a narrow focus on private ties, Bursik and Grasmick (1993) similarly emphasize that we pay close attention to community-wide and extra-community ties—regardless of affective identification.

At the macro level, one might even have an active and shared willingness to intervene among complete strangers. Consider Sweden as a society. There are strong norms about public behavior—drunk driving, hitting children, littering, and so on. Public expectations about responding to such acts leads to high social control, regardless of personal ties among potential participants. The nature of social ties and its relationship to social control is thus empirically variable.

4. The connection of law-abiding citizens with criminal offenders—as Patillo (1998) and Venkatesh (1997) so clearly found, and Whyte (1943) before them—does not undermine a theoretical concern for the conditions under which neighborhood collective action occurs. After all, should we be surprised to find that delinquents have brothers, sisters, grandmothers, and neighbors that know them well? That defend and love them even as they condemn their behavior? It does not seem to me that middle-class parents are any less likely than lower-class parents to disown their children when they get in trouble with the law. The differences we find across communities are largely structural—the disadvantaged are more often exposed to the realities of

crime, breaking down the "we-they" duality criminologists are wont to promote. As Pattillo (1998) and Eli Anderson (1990) have shown, the proximity of black middle-class communities to high-crime areas means that on a day-to-day basis, local residents must negotiate with a streetwise and often criminal element.

5. We should stand firm on the issue of common values with respect to safety. Criminologists have mistaken what Ruth Kornhauser (1978: 122) calls a "jaundiced" view of indigenous crime and gangs for tacit acceptance—thus opening the door to misguided subcultural and differential association theories. To be sure, I believe that the existential reality of living in dangerous environments may reduce one's emotional distance from the criminal "other" — but that does not imply normative acceptance in the deeper cultural sense. Elijah Anderson's (1978) ethnography of Chicago's south-side black ghetto, for example, showed how primary values coexisted alongside residual values associated with deviant subcultures (e.g., hoodlums) such as "toughness," "getting big money," "going for bad," and "having fun" (1978: 129-130, 152-158). According to Anderson, the use of violence is not valued as a primary goal, but it is expected as a fact of life. Much like Rainwater (1970), Suttles (1968), and Horowitz (1987), Anderson's research suggests that in certain ghetto contexts the wider cultural values recede against the daily realities of social disadvantage. Shaw and McKay (1942) offered a similar interpretation, arguing that while the tradition of delinquency and crime is a powerful force in certain communities, it is only a part of the community's system of values. They argued, in fact, that "the dominant tradition in every community is conventional, even in those having the highest rate of delinquents" (Shaw and McKay 1942: 180).

More forcefully, Kornhauser argues that to charge criminologists with "middle-class moralizing" for claiming universalism with respect to definitions of crime and disorder is disingenuous. For this charge implies that it is self-evident that slum dwellers are the apostles of a distinctive morality. Or, put differently, that slum dwellers are the purveyors of a lower-class morality! Surely we do not wish to resurrect Banfield's fantastic conception of lower-class culture. I thus side with Kornhauser—critics of social disorganization assume large cultural differences that have not been shown to exist. Although existential wariness in the inner-city may lead to a greater tolerance of certain forms of deviance (Sampson and Jégglum-Bartusch 1998), it is precisely the acceptance of core societal standards by residents and even gang leaders themselves that underlies efforts to establish

social order and safety—however unconventional these efforts may be (Pattillo 1998). From this view, subcultural tolerance of deviance is contextually shaped and not part of a cultural system writ large.

Recasting Social (Dis?)Organization

We are now in a position to recast disorganization theory, mainly through an enlightened conception of the complex nature of community in mass society. The alchemy, admittedly incomplete, goes something like the following.

I begin by elevating the role of social control, which at bottom is about the articulation of social structure with the realization of common values (Kornhauser 1978; Bursik 1988; Sampson and Groves 1989). Social control should not be equated with repression or forced conformity. Rather, social control refers to the capacity of a social unit to regulate itself according to desired principles—to realize *collective*, as opposed to forced, goals (Janowitz 1975: 82, 87). This conception is similar to Tilly's (1973) definition of collective action—the application of a community's pooled resources to common ends. As noted, one of the most central of such common goals or ends is the desire of community residents to live in safe and orderly environments free of predatory crime. Extant research points as well to a substantial consensus among Americans of all stripes on the virtues of neighborhoods characterized by economic sufficiency, good schools, adequate housing, and a clean, healthy environment. The capacity to achieve such common goals is linked to both informal role relationships established for other purposes and more formal, purposive efforts to achieve social regulation through institutional means (Kornhauser 1978: 24).

In turn, I de-couple social control from the notion of homogeneity, whether cultural or socio-demographic. Culturally diverse populations can and do agree on common goals such as safe streets. And social conflicts can and do rend communities along the lines of economic resources, race, political empowerment, and the role of criminal justice agents in defining and controlling social deviance (e.g., drug use, gangs, panhandling, police misconduct). It is around the distribution of resources and power that conflict usually emerges, not the content of core values (Kornhauser 1978). As Philip Selznick puts it: "communities are characterized by structural differentiation

as well as by shared consciousness" (1992: 367). The goal of community is thus "unity in diversity," or the reconciliation of partial with general perspectives on the common good (Selznick 1992: 369). This sociological conception of social control addresses the longstanding criticism (Whyte 1943) that theories of community social organization downplay social conflict.

As implied earlier, my next move is to focus on communities in ecological space—neighborhoods and local community areas—rather than elevating solidarity or identity to the major definitional criteria. Following Tilly, that is, I "make territoriality define communities and leave the extent of solidarity problematic" (1973: 212). When formulated in this way, the dimensions of social control are variable and analytically separable not only from potential sources of variation (e.g., concentrated poverty, instability), but from the definition and operationalization of the units of analysis.

Furthermore, in contrast to formally or externally induced actions (e.g., a police crackdown), I stress the role of *informal* mechanisms by which residents themselves assume some responsibility for social control. Examples of informal social control with respect to public order include the monitoring of spontaneous play groups among children, the willingness to intervene in preventing acts such as truancy and street-corner "hanging" by teenage peer-groups, and confronting persons who are exploiting or disturbing public space. Not only is much crime committed by and against young people, even among adults it regularly arises in public disputes, in the context of illegal markets (e.g., prostitution, drugs), and in the company of peers. The capacity of residents to control group-level processes and visible signs of social disorder is thus a key mechanism influencing opportunities for interpersonal crime.

Parenthetically, I would argue that informal social control as conceptualized here is not the same thing as "neighborhood watch" interventions as commonly implemented. Such interventions may or may not foster social control; the evidence suggests that neighborhood watch programs targeted specifically to crime are largely ineffective (Rosenbaum 1991). Community policing, by contrast, is more relevant to the extent that it fosters greater civic involvement by residents in the general life of their neighborhoods. Indeed, one of the major goals of community policing is for the police to act as a catalyst in sparking a sense of local ownership of public space and thus

greater activation of informal control. Getting the public to view the police as partners in the effort to establish safe communities is crucial—citizen calls to the police, after all, are a form of social control “from the bottom up.” Thus, informal social controls need not exclude the police, and, in fact, most acts of informal control involve some form of collaboration between the police and the public. There is recent evidence from Chicago that community policing has led to increases in police-citizen collaboration to foster safer neighborhoods (Skogan and Hartnett 1998).

Collective Efficacy

Thus conceived, informal social control is a general phenomenon differentially activated across neighborhoods. It is for this reason that my colleagues Tony Earls, Steve Raudenbush, and I (Sampson et al. 1997) see an analogy between individual efficacy and neighborhood efficacy: both are activated processes that seek to achieve an intended effect. At the neighborhood level, the willingness of local residents to intervene for the common good depends, in addition, on conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors. Indeed, one is unlikely to intervene in a neighborhood context where the rules are unclear and people mistrust or fear one another.

Private ties notwithstanding, socially cohesive neighborhoods will therefore prove the most fertile contexts for the realization of informal social control. In other words, it is the linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good that defines the neighborhood context of what we term *collective efficacy* (Sampson et al. 1997). Just as individuals vary in their capacity for efficacious action, so, too, do neighborhoods vary in their capacity to achieve common goals. And just as individual self-efficacy is situated rather than global (one has self-efficacy relative to a particular task or type of task), in this view neighborhood efficacy exists relative to the tasks of supervising children and maintaining public order. It follows that the collective efficacy of residents is a critical feature of urban neighborhoods which inhibits the occurrence of predatory crime, regardless of the demographic composition of the population. Our empirical analysis of Chicago neighborhoods supported this general theoretical orientation with respect to rates of violence (Sampson et al. 1997).

Institutions and Public Control

The present explication of a theory of community social organization should not be read as ignoring institutions, nor the wider political environment in which local communities are embedded. The institutional component of the systemic model is the resource stock of neighborhood organizations and their linkages with other organizations, both within *and* outside the community. For example, Kornhauser (1978: 79) argues that when the horizontal links among institutions within a community are weak, the capacity to defend local interests is weakened. Moreover, institutional strength is not necessarily isomorphic with neighborhood cohesion in personal relationships. Many areas exhibit intense private ties with friends and kin yet lack the institutional capacity to achieve social control.

Vertical connections to the outside world are potentially more effective. Bursik and Grasmick (1993) highlight the importance of *public* control, defined as the capacity of local community organizations to obtain extra-local resources (e.g., housing development, block grants) that help sustain neighborhood social stability and local controls. The differential ability of communities to respond to cuts in public services—such as police patrols, fire stations, garbage collection, housing code enforcement—also looms large when we consider the known link between public signs of disorder (e.g. vacant housing, vandalism) and more serious crime (Skogan 1990).

More generally, Albert Hunter (1985: 216) argues that parochial or within-community social order based on interpersonal networks and the interlocking of local institutions, “leaves unresolved the problems of public order in a civil society” (p. 216). The problem is that public order is provided mainly by institutions of the state, and we have seen a secular decline in public (citizenship) obligations in society accompanied by an increase in civil (individual) rights. This imbalance of collective obligations and individual rights undermines the effectiveness of public-private alliances as an approach to order. According to Hunter (1985), communities must work *together* with the forces of public control to achieve social order, principally through the interdependence among informal social-control efforts and formal institutions such as the police. To the extent that community policing shares this vision (e.g., Skogan and Hartnett 1998), collective efficacy may be seen as a private-public venture.

Summary

By way of summary, there are at least three advantages to the theoretical conceptualization just offered. One is its emphasis on human agency and social action. Structural factors may be constraining but they are certainly not deterministic. Although it may seem subtle at first, moving away from *disorganization* and toward an analysis of the conditions under which collective efficacy and social action are triggered liberates us from the crippling limitations of traditional models. Not the least of these is the rather invariant portrayal of disadvantaged communities in the literature. One of the striking things uncovered in our analysis of collective efficacy in Chicago was the tremendous variation across communities that shared the *same* structural constraints (e.g., poverty, segregation). Recognizing the interpenetration of constraint and action, then, moves us closer to what we know in our own lives to be true—the future is never fixed and “structures” are built up through socially reproduced action on a daily basis (Sewell 1992; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Second, this conceptualization rests on a theory that makes explicit what community does and does not supply in mass society. In the version I have offered, community is no all-purpose elixir, contra the mantra of current rhetoric. It is unfortunate that the present nostalgia for community has emerged almost oblivious to a vigorous research cycle in sociology of community lost, saved, and liberated (Wellman 1979). The evidence supports the liberated argument, suggesting that community has been transformed rather than lost. Namely, the research evidence is now clear that urbanites rely less on local neighborhoods for psychological support, cultural and religious nourishment, and economic needs/transactions (e.g., shopping, work) than in the past. Spurred by the advances in modern technology we can shop, work, go to church, and make friends throughout geographical and, increasingly, cyber space. This fact alone suggests that interventions in the local community are unlikely to succeed to the extent that they attempt to penetrate the private world of personal relations and consumer choice.

Extending Morris Janowitz's (1975) notion of the community of limited liability, I have argued elsewhere (Sampson 1999) that we do not need communities so much to satisfy our private and personal needs, which are best met elsewhere, nor even to meet our

sustenance needs, which, for better or worse, appear to be irretrievably dispersed in space. Rather, the local community remains essential as a site for the realization of common values in support of *social goods*. As elaborated above, these goods include public safety, norms of civility and mutual trust, efficacious voluntary associations, and collective socialization of the young—in short, for what we can think of as the products of community social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993) and collective efficacy (Sampson et al. 1997).

The local community remains important today for another reason, of course—economic resources and social-structural differentiation in general are very much a spatial affair in the United States. The bedrock of physical and human capital (e.g., income, education, housing stock) is distributed in a highly uneven form across ecological space—often in conjunction with ascribed characteristics such as racial composition. The continuing and in some cases increasing significance of such ecological differentiation is fundamental to a full understanding of what community “supplies” (Sampson 1999). Linking structural inequality with a conception of social capital and collective efficacy thus forms an important agenda for the future.

Dangers of Community

Although a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, the third advantage of the present theory is that its implicit normative conception recognizes the potential dangers in unbridled versions of community. In the pursuit of informal social control, there is always the danger that freedoms will be restricted unnecessarily—that individuals face unwanted and even unjust scrutiny. For example, surveillance of “suspicious” persons in socially controlled communities can become translated into the widespread interrogation of racial minorities (Skogan 1990). Suppose further that a community comes together—through the mobilization of social networks—to block the residential entry of a racial outgroup. Put more bluntly, what if racism is a goal pursued among residents of certain neighborhoods? Such exclusion prompted Gerald Suttles (1972) to warn of the dark side of “defended neighborhoods.”

Consider also the historical connection between official corruption and local solidarity. Whyte (1943) was one of the first to docu-

ment the ironic consequences of dense, multiplex relationships in cohesive communities for law enforcement. He writes, "The policeman who takes a strictly legalistic view of his duties cuts himself off from the personal relations necessary to enable him to serve as a mediator of disputes in his area." By contrast, "the policeman who develops close ties with local people is unable to act against them with the vigor prescribed by the law" (p. 136). It follows that police corruption is an ever-present danger under conditions of social-network closure, even as it aids in dispute resolution and informal social control because of interlocking social ties. The nationwide move to embrace community policing has perhaps not recognized the risks inherent in the community side of the equation.

Obviously we would not do well to think of racism, norms of social exclusion, and instruments of corruption as desirable forms of social capital, and hence we must balance "community" with a normative or cultural conception of social justice. Difficult though it may be, criminological theory needs a language to condemn certain forms of conduct as outside the circle of civil society. It is for this reason that I have focused on widely expressed desires regarding community that *transcend* race and class boundaries—especially social order and public safety. Not just any goal will do, therefore, and even when subscribed to widely, pursuit of common goals must proceed cautiously and with respect for individual rights, diversity, and limits on state power. Fortunately, legal justice and community are not the antinomy common wisdom suggests (Selznick 1992). The constitutional law tradition has long been concerned with balancing individual rights against the need to promote the health and safety of communities (Gillman 1996).

Conclusion

There is, finally, the matter of social *disorganization*. Is it the herpes of criminology? My analysis suggests that the critics of social disorganization theory have it partly right but that they have also become captives of metaphor. To claim that social disorganization is flawed analytically because high-crime communities can be considered in some way "organized" is both true and a red herring. After all, this argument is tantamount to asserting that organization is a constant (i.e., that all communities are organized). If you allow that

organization is *not* a constant, then it must vary. And if it can vary, then logically there can be disorganization.

In conclusion, then, social disorganization does not mean chaos, it does not mean lack of social ties, and it certainly does not mean that grandmothers disown their delinquent grandchildren. What vision of human nature is that anyway? Yet language does matter, and thus I do not think that much would be lost by dropping "social disorganization" from our criminological lexicon. Better to emphasize straightaway the essence of the matter—variation in the articulation of social structure with goal-directed values; variation, that is, in the sources and consequences of collective action. Testable and falsifiable hypotheses emerge from such a perspective: for example, that neighborhood instability undermines collective efficacy, or that informal social control is inversely related to rates of crime. But in the end, I think it is nonetheless clear that when it comes to the fundamentals, social disorganization theorists have been heading on the right track all along.

Note

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