"AFTER-SCHOOL" CHICAGO: SPACE AND THE CITY[1]

Robert J. Sampson[2]
Department of Sociology
Harvard University

Abstract: This commentary updates the "L.A.-Chicago School" debate on urbanism by highlighting the stable nexus of social and spatial processes. Spatial interdependence looms large even in global cities and across multiple dimensions of social life. I use Chicago and Stockholm to underscore the continuing if not increasing salience of place, and to provide an example of a research program that seeks to make general sense of space and the city in a comparative urban framework. I conclude that whether the Chicago or L.A. School is uniquely right is a distraction. "School" is out. We need to turn to the empirical pursuit of theoretically motivated research that can adjudicate among competing ideas and pave the way for comparative integrated knowledge. [Key words: urban social processes, spatial interdependence, Chicago school.]

I appreciate the invitation to extend the vigorous and intellectually stimulating debate on the "L.A. vs. Chicago School" of urban studies. But please forgive me for a slightly irreverent main title to my musings, "After-School Chicago." For I must confess that I largely agree with Harvey Molotch's comment on the L.A.-Chicago debate in *City and Community*—schools are rather confining. Or as he put it, and as I borrow the term, "School's Out" (Molotch, 2002).

Of course, there is still something appealing about a community of scholars united by a school of inquiry, and truth be told, I was schooled in Chicago for many a year—intellectually but also literally in the form of everyday observation and the study of its streets. So I confess also to ambivalence about discarding wholesale the benefits of a school. Fortunately for the Chicago School, there is some saving grace in considering the nature of what it was *not*. Howard Becker (1999) makes the useful distinction between schools of thought, which imply unanimity of intellectual outlook, and schools of activity. If the Chicago School of urban sociology between the two World Wars can be said to be a school, it was more in consensus forms of empirical activity (which were in fact quite diverse) rather than a lock-step set of theoretical commitments. Note, too, that schools of thought, with all their imagined conformity, are usually constructed after the fact by outsiders (Abbott, 1999). It is these types of schools that I think Molotch (2002) was referring to, and from which I too wish to graduate and move on.

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[2]Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert J. Sampson, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; telephone: 617-496-9716; e-mail: rsampson@wjh.harvard.edu

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My strategy in this short space is therefore to offer what I hope are positive implications and directions for future research on cities, in "After-School Chicago" fashion. My assessment is ultimately optimistic as it was in *City and Community* (Sampson, 2002), in part because I think that a new generation of original research activities is being carried out unencumbered by the strict theoretical baggage evident in the new L.A. and the old Chicago Schools, and indeed any "school" as commonly understood. On the Chicago School's missteps, I agree fully with L.A. proponents on concentric zones and the "center-organizes-periphery" argument that characterized early Chicago (Dear, 2002). These are dead horses, so let us move on.

I move on by emphasizing not so much geography per se but social processes and mechanisms as they intersect with urban space. In *City and Community*, I posited seven general themes that characterize my approach to cities, an approach inspired by Chicago-style thinkers: (1) a relentless focus on context, especially place; (2) a focus on properties of communities and cities as interdependent social systems; (3) a relational concern with variability in forms of social organization as opposed to population attributes (or composition); (4) continual attention to neighborhood change and spatial dynamics (time and space); (5) an eclectic style of data collection that relies on multiple methods but that always connects to some form of observation; (6) a concern for public affairs and the improvement of community life; and (7) an integrating theme of theoretically interpretive empirical research (Sampson, 2002, p. 46).

If this approach constitutes the "scientific/quantitative" approach that so irks the LA schoolers, then I plead guilty. But I disagree that my approach is empiricist. A key *modus operandi* worth retaining from the classic Chicago style of urban research is the working reliance on theoretical concepts to make sense of the empirical world of the ever-changing city (not other theorists). As Robert Merton might have had it, this is "middle-range theory" for the city, an approach that attempts to unite method and theoretical principle. Although not a terribly pleasing phrase, the concept of the "middle range" (Merton, 1949) has much to offer in the way of eliding the unhelpful divisions that still rile much of social science and thus the present debate, such as between basic/applied, theory/research, and positivist/interpretive (Sampson, 2007). More than 50 years ago Merton argued that "like so many words that are bandied about, the word 'theory' threatens to become meaningless" (Merton, 1949, p. 39). There is still evidence to back this claim, and also the claim that many "theorists"—then as today—tend to see their role as sitting high above the data, without standards for assessment of competing ideas. Merton worked hard to overcome this straitjacket, insisting that theory bears on empirical research just as much as empirical research bears on theory. The thesis of the middle range was that the two worlds were inextricably intertwined. And unlike the naïve positivism he was accused of, Merton argued that empirical research was not passive but played an active role in shaping theory, which itself was needed to understand facts on the ground. Such a stance is constructive to the task at hand.

My aspiration is thus to conduct systematic social inquiry with generalizing theoretical import to the extent warranted empirically. As such I proceed by treating generalization as an empirical question rather than rule it out *a priori* (as seems to be fashionable in some quarters). I conceptualize a social mechanism as a plausible contextual process that accounts for a given phenomenon, in the ideal case linking putative causes and effects. Put differently, social mechanisms provide accounts of the processes and actions that

bring about change in a given phenomenon. Elsewhere I have referred to this focus as the "process turn" in neighborhood-effects research (Sampson et al., 2002). I take as a central theoretical goal the study of urban social mechanisms and processes, and how (or whether) they vary across time and space.

This framework provides a simultaneous empirical and theoretical framework from which to proceed in assessing the similarities and differences between Chicago and L.A. on core issues such as structural differentiation by social class, immigration, race/ethnicity, and violence. To me the jury has returned overwhelmingly in favor of broad similarities of the things that count most. For example, I have yet to see a study in any city that overturns the durable patterns that have linked concentrated disadvantage, segregation, and violence ever since the time of early 20th century Chicago. To be sure, some forms of race-linked segregation are new to American cities in the post-Fordist era (and remain more entrenched in Chicago), but a large research literature has attacked this very issue. I could go on and make similar points with regard to spatial inequality, the persistent concentration of services and lifestyles in global cities, hinterland sprawl and edge cities (Chicago has both), and other matters of interest to urbanists (Sampson, 2002; for a review of neighborhood effects research, see Sampson et al., 2002).

In short, I would argue that the real question turns on underlying processes and dynamics, not surface manifestations. Are the spatial forms in L.A. really connected to new or contingent social processes, and if so what are they and with what consequences? Do general processes yield different manifestations depending on spatial practices? These are some of the unanswered questions that I believe need to be tackled, questions that geographers are well suited to explore.

THE CHICAGO PROJECT

The good news, I believe, is that a new generation of research is directly assessing processes of urban change, social mechanisms, and spatial dynamics in Chicago and elsewhere—in fact, around the globe. My own research is part of an ongoing collaborative initiative, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). Although descending in part from the Chicago School, we recognize and are busy theorizing the changing nature of social relations in city and community, teasing out implications for a variety of social behaviors. Empirically, for example, we have mounted original surveys of city residents (e.g., through multilevel contextual sampling), network studies of organizations, systematic social observation of city streets through videotaping, and partial ethnographies of selected neighborhoods. I believe that systematic inquiry, especially systematic social observation, takes researchers to the streets in a novel way, integrating visual techniques for "seeing" cities with more traditional forms of data. Theoretically, this research program has aimed to provide better social explanations for violence and urban disorder, the causes of the reproduction of racial, ethnic, and economic segregation, the nature of spatial dynamics, and the sources and consequences of collective efficacy and other collective action processes (e.g., shared expectations for action, mutual trust, intergenerational closure, institutional efficacy, civic engagement).

Concrete results from this research program can be identified. For instance, we found little empirical support for the "broken windows" theory of urban disorder, a major policing initiative around the country, including Los Angeles (the current home of William

Bratton, who earlier transformed New York City policing to a disorder model). Disorder is linked to crime, as commonly believed, but its association is largely explained by pre-existing structural conditions in the community (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). We have also elaborated the mechanisms through which concentrated poverty influences violence, the importance of the activation of social ties rather than their density as posited by the old urban village model, how the larger political economy is manifested in spatial regimes of advantage and disadvantage, and how contemporary immigration is related to multiple dimensions of social cohesion (for publicly available papers on these issues, see http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/faculty/sampson).

The Chicago Project has special intellectual relevance to the study of cities undergoing widespread social change. In a recent study, we showed the remarkable stability over time in select community profiles—poverty, crime, collective efficacy, and trust—despite vast secular changes in the United States at large and in Chicago. The crime rate dropped significantly in the 1990s, for instance, but the relative ranking of communities on crime changed hardly at all. The correlations over time are substantial, on the order of 0.8 to 0.9, with major implications for policy intervention. We posited a theory of "poverty traps" that are self-reinforcing cycles that help explain the social dynamics of cities undergoing structural change (Sampson and Morenoff, 2006). Relatedly, we have extended this approach to show how individual actions of moving, or what others often refer to as neighborhood selection, actively reproduce existing patterns of racial and economic inequality even if unintended (Sampson and Sharkey, 2008).

Another finding pertains to dramatic changes in immigration to American cities. For the first time in decades many U.S. cities since 1990 have grown in population because of immigration, with transformed economies and cultural changes as well. Despite widespread beliefs to the contrary, this massive change was accompanied by dramatic reductions in crime (Sampson, 2006). In Chicago we also found that first-generation immigrants have the lowest violent crime rates compared to the second and third generation (Sampson, Morenoff et al., 2005). Scholars are still trying to tease out the reasons why (correlation does not equal causation, of course) but the patterns are intriguing and thus far appear applicable to several other cities. Indeed, New York today is a leading magnet for immigration, yet it has for a decade ranked as one of America's safest cities. Crime in Los Angeles dropped considerably during the late 1990s (45% overall) as did other Hispanic-influenced cities such as San Jose, Dallas, and Phoenix. The same can be said for cities located on the border like El Paso and San Diego, which have long ranked as low-crime areas. Cities of concentrated immigration are some of the safest places around.

A third example involves the study of change in protest and collective action across time and space in the city. Using new methods to pinpoint the location of collective-action events, PHDCN-related scholars published a paper that showed not only that "civil society" did not decline in the United States over the past three decades, it actually increased in key ways when we shift attention to collective civic engagement. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, the biggest predictor of collective action is organizational density, not compositional characteristics such as race, class, or even immigration (Sampson, McAdam et al., 2005). Work in progress also shows that changes in diversity are unrelated to changes in collective action participation.

Simply stated, then, I would claim that the "After School" Chicago project as reflected in PHDCN aims to reinvent the classic concept of community study by placing social and spatial processes on a firm theoretical foundation, and by taking advantage of modern technology to collect new and demonstrably reliable forms of data to study continuity and change in the 21st century city. What Stephen Raudenbush and I (Raudenbush and Sampson, 1999) call "eco-metrics" is a method for the study of the contemporary city but it derives from a theoretical concern with urban social process. The theoretical and empirical are thus deeply intertwined.

TWO CRITICAL PATTERNS

With that radically oversimplified précis, I now turn to a brief elaboration of two empirical patterns that bear directly on the L.A. School's model vis-à-vis the present-day city of Chicago. One assessment sheds light on the explicit argument of Michael Dear (2002, p. 24) that urban processes are occurring "on a quasi-random field of opportunities." Like Dear I reject the center-driven model of the old Chicago, and I think he is absolutely right about fragmentation and what he calls "disjointed" and "seemingly" unrelated urban outcomes at the metropolitan level—the city as a nonspatial gaming board. But upon closer inspection, I would argue the vast majority of urban processes are hardly chaotic in the manner that seems to be implied. Old-fashioned contiguity matters within the spatial regimes of the city. That is, what happens in one place is not "a seemingly unrelated affair" to another.

In fact, I find it rather ironic that geographers seem to have discarded one of their own classics. As a sociologist, I feel odd reminding the discipline that, retro as it may appear, Tobler's (1970, p. 236) "first law" of geography ("everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things") stands tall to this day. I use the term "law" in the lower-case-l sense, referring not to a straw-man argument of determinism but rather to a remarkably durable pattern that demands our empirical and theoretical attention. From my reading, that is what Tobler argued and originally intended (for an interesting debate, see Sui, 2004, and Goodchild, 2004, with response by Tobler, 2004). A pattern of spatial dependency is seen for many urban phenomena, whether L.A., New York, or Shanghai. Even social contact patterns across the famously "non-place" Los Angeles region suggest Tobler was more prescient than most.

Back in Chicago, we observe significant spatial clustering for everything from homicide and low birth weight (Sampson, 2003) to the spatial separation of what Richard Florida (2002) calls the "creative class" (Fig. 1) to the distribution of a visible symbol of globalization—Starbucks (Fig. 2). Applying Tobler's Law to current debates on the new wave of immigration and the concentration of economic resources also yields an updated demonstration that what is close by geographically is disproportionately similar in character. Specifically, chance alone does not produce the spatial dependencies demonstrated by the Moran's I scatterplots in Figures 3 and 4. There we see profound "what is near is alike" patterns for contemporary immigration and socioeconomic resource disadvantage. Spatial patterns of interdependence for urban processes are about as far from random as imaginable.

A second critical pattern turns on a fundamental agreement with Dear's most recent intervention in the debate where he calls for comparative urban inquiry (Dear, 2005). In

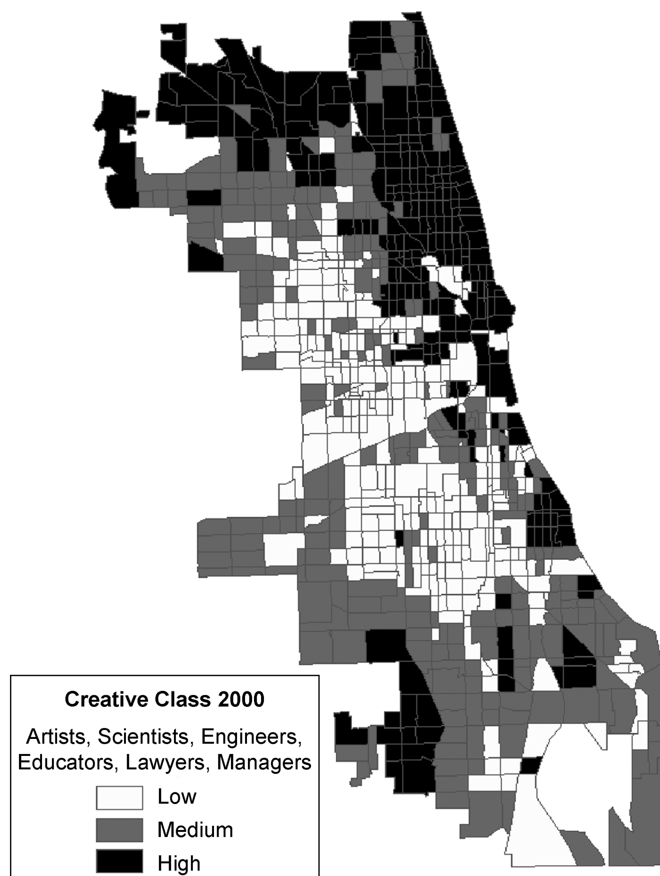

Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of the Creative Class in Chicago, 2000. Based on U.S. census counts per 100,000 and divided into equal thirds (low, medium, high).

ongoing collaborative work, I have attempted just such a comparison by systematically studying Chicago and Stockholm (Sampson and Wikström, 2008). This comparison of interest is at first blush counterintuitive—why Chicago and Stockholm? After all, Sweden and the United States are worlds apart along a number of dimensions, including the concentration of poverty, welfare support, the planned nature of housing, and not least, violence. Compared to Stockholm Chicago is violent, segregated, and characterized by great economic inequality. Yet from a comparative perspective, this is analytically strategic if our goal is to uncover general, structural characteristics that transcend cultural and national boundaries. Following the "most different" research design for comparative studies, our motivation is to discover whether there are common relationships in highly disparate cities, and if so along what dimensions. Chicago and Stockholm not only fit the bill but represent the third-largest and largest city in the United States and Sweden, respectively.

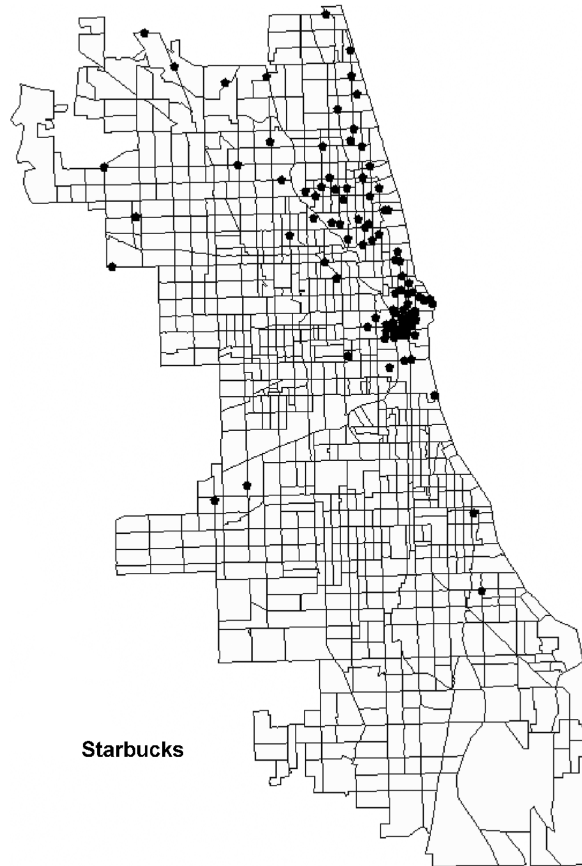

Fig. 2. Globalization embedded: Distribution of Starbucks in Chicago, 2004. Based on geo-coding of store location from Starbucks website directory.

We accomplished this goal by integrating census data on structural differentiation, geo-coded police records on violent events, and coordinated original surveys of individual characteristics and neighborhood context. By constructing comparable measures we are able to assess the differential effects of concentrated inequality and community-level social order on rates of violence. In accord with theoretical expectations, the findings reveal that the combination of social control and social trust, conceptualized as neighborhood collective efficacy, predicts lower violence in both cities even after adjusting for compositional differences. The concentration of socioeconomic disadvantage and residential instability are linked to higher rates of violence in both cities as well (Fig. 5), although the association of disadvantage with the geographic isolation of minority-group status varies in intensity by city. In addition, key social processes such as the collective involvement of residents in the social control of public spaces is negatively associated with violence in an identical way in both cities, adjusting for compositional features of the population (for details, see Sampson and Wikström, 2008).

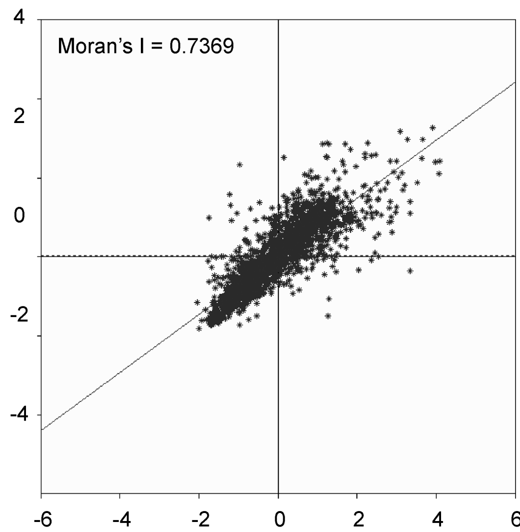

Fig. 3. Spatial Moran's I for concentration of socioeconomic disadvantage, Chicago 2000. Based on U.S. census block groups, principal components measure of the concentration of poverty, welfare, and unemployment.

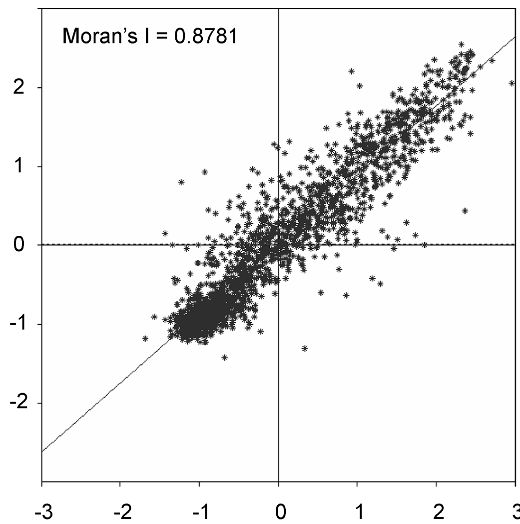

Fig. 4. Spatial Moran's I for concentration of immigration, Chicago 2000. Based on U.S. census block groups, principal components measure of the concentration of foreign born and Hispanic origin population.

In sum, the nature of the relationship between community social structure and violence is remarkably similar at a broad conceptual level. Because the same features account for violence in both cities, while the very same features are differentially allocated by neighborhood according to broader principles of societal organization, we have in essence

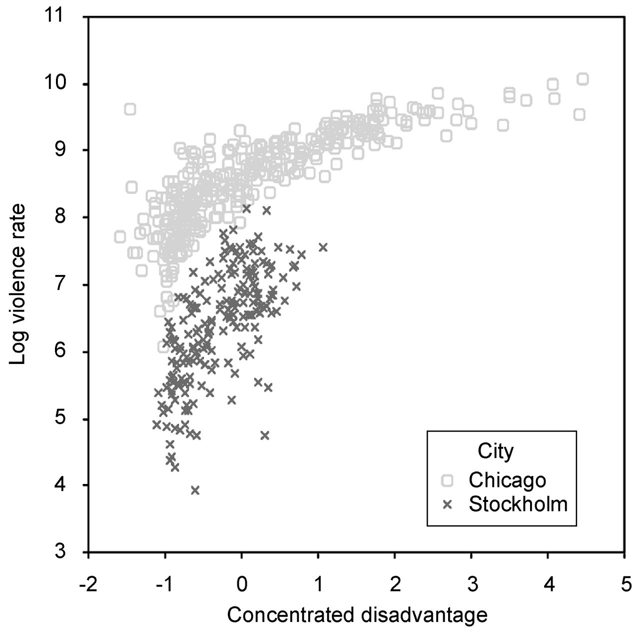

Fig. 5. Concentrated disadvantage by violence in Chicago and Stockholm, 1995. Based on community survey and official police records (Sampson and Wikström, 2008).

tapped into a possible explanation of city differences in violence. It remains to be seen how well this framework stands up to future tests, and it remains the case that the "Chicago" effect looms large, possibly owing to cultural differences. Still, it appears that there is something fundamental and generic about community social organization and violence that cuts across international boundaries. It appears that the "after-school" Chicago approach proves generative for comparative urban study just as it does (or always has) for intra-urban inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Simply put, the death of distance and the notion that cities are now developing in chaotic form reflect popular and in some sense appealing concepts. But they are largely invalidated by a slew of increasing evidence. The advent of GIS modeling and new data sources on social interactions and networks of spatial connection are revealing the profound spatial ordering of a bewildering array of urban phenomenon. One reason for this confluence appears to be the selection mechanism of neighborhood sorting, whereby aggregate racial and economic patterns of social inequality are reproduced through individual moves in a way that ensures lack of meaningful exchange between neighborhoods of different social rank (Sampson and Sharkey, 2008). This general process reinforces concentration effects across a wide variety of behaviors.

Perhaps more interesting, there is emerging a striking parallel in findings across cities with radically different cultural, political, and geographic landscapes. I used Chicago-Stockholm in this commentary as an example, but there are others in the making, including ongoing studies of collective efficacy and the spatial dynamics of social life in Brisbane, Australia, Peterborough, UK, and Moshi, Tanzania. Is the L.A. School, no School, or a modified "Chicago School" best able to make sense of empirical regularities across cities in radically different societies and consequently engage in generalizations? If pressed I would put my bets on Chicago-style thinking, but in the meantime I appreciate anew the pitfalls of "schools" and will go about incorporating the real contributions of L.A. scholars such as Dear. Stubbornly promoting one school over the other seems rather silly in the first place, and ultimately what matters is empirical adjudication and theoretical integration. To that end, hopefully of the sort outlined here, we might better expend our energies.

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