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Sampson, Robert J.: Collective Efficacy Theory

Contributors: David S. Kirk

Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox

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Collective efficacy is defined as the process of activating or converting social ties among neighborhood residents in order to achieve collective goals, such as public order or the control of crime (Sampson, 2006a; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Empirically, collective efficacy has been represented as a combined measure of shared expectations for social control and social cohesion and trust among neighborhood residents. The theory of collective efficacy helps explain one of the most robust findings in criminological research, that crime is nonrandomly distributed across geographic space. Collective efficacy also explains why neighborhood characteristics such as concentrated poverty and high levels of residential turnover are positively related to crime. Neighborhoods vary in their capacity for efficacious action, and Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls argue that this variation explains differences across neighborhoods in levels of crime and violence.

In order to understand the theoretical utility of the concept of collective efficacy, it is vital to comprehend the intellectual foundation of the theory. Collective efficacy theory is rooted in the social disorganization tradition in sociology and criminology, yet augments the disorganization model in important ways. In the social disorganization model, neighborhood organization is facilitated by the density of neighborhood social networks; however, empirical research has demonstrated that strong social ties among neighbors do not always lead to the social control of crime and may even foster criminal behavior. Moreover, research by Mark Granovetter has demonstrated that weak social ties may be a more important resource for individuals than strong, cohesive ties. The theory of collective efficacy resolves these apparent inconsistencies related to the importance of social networks by arguing that the social control of crime may be *facilitated* by strong neighborhood ties and associations, but does not necessarily require cohesive ties.

This entry proceeds by first describing early conceptions of social disorganization and then more recent formulations of the theory. Next, the entry turns to a description of how the theory of collective efficacy explicitly addresses criticisms of social disorganization and therefore serves as a more valid model of the utility of neighborly social networks for the social control of crime. The essay concludes with a discussion of future directions in the development of the theory of collective efficacy.

Social Disorganization

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay's conceptualization of social disorganization was influenced by the ecological perspective of their Chicago School of Sociology predecessors Robert Park and Ernest Burgess and the social psychological perspective of W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. Shaw and McKay's social disorganization thesis can be conceived as describing the macro-level processes that lead to variation in rates of delinquency across neighborhoods, and the micro-level (i.e., social psychological) processes underlying these macro-level factors. Shaw and McKay suggest that urban growth processes characterizing Chicago and other United States cities at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century produced neighborhoods marked by drastic differences in physical and economic conditions. Furthermore, they found vast differences in systems of values across these neighborhoods, although they did argue that conventional values were still dominant in all areas.

Shaw and McKay sought to understand why rates of delinquency varied across localities, and why delinquents were concentrated in certain localities. Shaw and McKay mapped the home addresses for over 100,000 delinquents processed by the Cook County (Illinois) Juvenile Court from 1900 to the mid-1930s and found that delinquents were concentrated in four areas of Chicago—Italian delinquents on the near west side, Italians to the near north, black youth on the south side, and Polish delinquents in South Chicago. Shaw and McKay concluded that variation in delinquency across areas was a function of the extent of social disorganization across these areas, where social disorganization refers to the breakdown in the social institutions of a community (e.g., family, schools, churches, and political groups). In other words, these institutions were ineffective at maintaining social order and control. The implication is that to prevent or reduce crime and delinquency, it is necessary to alter conditions of neighborhoods [p. 803 ↓] and not simply focus on the individuals within those neighborhoods.

Chapter 7 of Shaw and McKay's book *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* details the main theoretical points of their argument by describing exactly why variations in community structures and organization lead to variation in delinquency. Central to this discussion is their emphasis on “differential systems of values.” Shaw and McKay note that in both high and low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, the dominant value

system is conventional, but in low socioeconomic status areas there is a competing system of values that residents (particularly youths) must contend with. This is not to say that the more affluent and less delinquent areas do not have unconventional values and behavior, but rather that there is greater uniformity and consensus on values in those areas which insulates youth from the criminal element. In contrast, in high delinquency areas youths are routinely brought into contact with unconventional attitudes and behaviors that conflict with the dominant (conventional) value systems. These unconventional attitudes still emphasize the achievement of status and economic gain, but different means to achieve these ends are formulated and transmitted. In other words, these unconventional values support delinquent behavior.

Related to the arguments of Thomas and Znaniecki, Shaw and McKay argue that the weakening of social institutions in disorganized areas hinders efforts to reinforce conventional value systems. Furthermore, they contend that low rate delinquency areas are more often characterized by a community consensus on how to deal with social problems and how to collectively regulate unconventional behavior like delinquency, but high delinquency areas lack such consensus. Central to this point is that in certain neighborhoods, traditional forms of social control are weakened and ineffective at countering the advance of these unconventional value systems and the resulting criminal behavior.

Extensions and Revisions of Social Disorganization Theory

Recent formulations of social disorganization theory have focused more on the social control and collective action aspects of the theory, and have come to define social disorganization as the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls (Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978; Sampson & Groves, 1989). With an emphasis on the importance of relational networks to facilitate social control, current formulations of the social disorganization thesis have utilized the *systemic model*, which identifies the social organization of communities by focusing on the local community networks. In the systemic model, local community is viewed as a complex system of friendship and kinship networks and of formal and informal associational ties rooted in family life and socialization processes that are fashioned by societal institutions. These social ties facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital, where social capital refers to a resource that arises from

social relations. Social capital, in turn, facilitates social control. Thus, the systemic model of social disorganization posits that the structure and characteristics of these social networks determines the capacity with which a neighborhood can engage in the control of various behaviors, including crime.

A Critique of Social Disorganization Theory

One central challenge to Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory are findings of the simultaneous occurrence of internally organized local communities and high crime rates in those areas. If dense neighborhood social networks are supposed to advance the social control of crime, then how do we explain the observation that some neighborhoods characterized by strong social ties are nevertheless overrun with crime? There are numerous examples of research that have found that high rates of crime occur in socially organized neighborhoods. Some of the most vivid evidence of this can be seen in the work of William F. Whyte.

In the opening statements of *Street Corner Society*, William F. Whyte describes the common perception of the "Cornerville" neighborhood of Boston ("Eastern City") as a crime-ridden and disorganized local community. This perception, he claims, was constructed through secondhand information and sensationalized newspaper accounts. These sources may describe some of the realities of Cornerville, such as the presence of rackets and corruption, but Whyte's work demonstrates that the strength and density of social relations were much [p. 804 ↓] different than commonly perceived by outsiders. Cornerville was not an area in chaos and disorganization, but rather a neighborhood with sure signs of organization. However, in the course of finding a strong, dense network of social ties in Cornerville, he also uncovered an extensive criminal network and an organized gang life. Thus, what appears to be disorganized from outside the local community is actually quite different when viewed from the street corner, even if there is a high incidence and prevalence of crime.

The theory of collective efficacy helps explain why Whyte found high crime in the presence of an internally organized neighborhood. One lesson learned from Whyte's study is that dense social ties among neighborhood residents, and the social capital derived from these relations, are certainly resources available to control crime and

misbehavior, but they must be used or activated toward a specific purpose, like stopping neighborhood crime. Sampson asserts that collective efficacy is “the activation of social ties to achieve shared expectations for action” (2006b, p. 39). Whyte's Cornerville was characterized by dense social ties, yet those ties were not activated to reduce crime.

Collective Efficacy

Sampson argues that social networks and the strength of social ties alone cannot explain the social control of crime, given that strong ties are not always conducive to action. While the systemic model of social disorganization assumes that relational networks are related to, and even facilitate, the exercise of control, they are not sufficient for explaining social control because nonconforming behavior may be tolerated by network members as long as it does not interfere with the attainment of common goals. Again we know from the research of Whyte that dense social networks do not always translate into low crime.

Jeffrey Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush argue that researchers must move beyond a reliance on social capital and density of ties when examining the determinants of crime. They describe social capital as a “resource potential,” but one that must be activated and utilized. To move beyond social capital and strong ties and associations, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls conceptualize collective efficacy as a mechanism through which social capital confers benefits on neighborhoods. Collective efficacy is the process of activating or converting social ties among neighborhood residents in order to achieve collective goals, such as public order or the control of crime. This formulation relies on trust and a shared willingness to actively engage in social control as key dimensions explaining crime. As Sampson asserts, “social networks foster the conditions under which collective efficacy may flourish, but they are not sufficient for the exercise of control” (2006b, p. 39). In other words, when neighbors have mutual trust for each other, this facilitates social control but does not guarantee it. Similarly, Barry Wellman argues that social scientists have become preoccupied with local solidarity, “rather than a search for functioning primary ties” (p. 1202). The point is that strong ties and a union of interests are secondary in importance to a consideration of whether the structure of ties provides some function or benefit irrespective of strength or sentiment. So the emphasis should not be put upon whether social ties are strong, but whether

ties (among neighbors, institutions, and also extralocal entities) provide resources, information, or social control.

The Mechanism of Collective Efficacy

It is vital to ask what exactly is the causal mechanism underlying collective efficacy? Is collective efficacy simply a form of group intervention to stop a criminal event from occurring, or does collective efficacy more broadly involve the collective socialization of youths toward prosocial behavior? Sampson (2006a) characterizes these dilemmas as one of distinguishing between the *situational* and *enduring* effects of collective efficacy. With the former, collective efficacy inhibits crime in a given neighborhood regardless of where the would-be criminal resides, while in the latter collective efficacy in an individual's neighborhood of residence influences her behavior even when she leaves the confines of the neighborhood (Kirk, 2009). Theoretically, the answers to these questions lie in Sampson and colleagues' (1997) conception of social control. While many studies in criminology conceive of social control as the direct supervision of behavior—whether by parents, teachers, or neighbors—Sampson and colleagues define social control more broadly. [p. 805 ↓] Drawing on the definition employed by Morris Janowitz, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls define social control as “the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles” (p. 918). The precise means to achieve these desired principles are many and may include group intervention *and* collective socialization.

Empirically, research to date convincingly demonstrates a situational effect of collective efficacy on neighborhood crime rates, yet research by David Kirk as well as Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush has also shown that neighborhood collective efficacy does not significantly predict individual levels of delinquency. This may result because collective efficacy is situational (as opposed to enduring), with little staying power once residents are outside the boundaries of the given neighborhood (Sampson, 2006a). A necessary next stage in the theoretical development of collective efficacy is to sort out if collective efficacy has an enduring influence on crime in addition to a situational influence.

David S.Kirk

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See also

- [Kornhauser, Ruth Rosner: Social Sources of Delinquency](#)
- [Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay: Social Disorganization Theory](#)
- [Systemic Model of Social Disorganization](#)
- [Whyte, William Foote: Street Corner Society](#)

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