Social Disorganization Theory's Greatest Challenge: Linking Structural Characteristics to Crime in Socially Disorganized Communities

Charis E. Kubrin and James C. Wo

Why do some neighborhoods have higher crime rates than others? What is it about certain communities that consistently generate high crime rates? These are the central questions of interest for social disorganization theory, a macro-level perspective concerned with explaining the spatial distribution of crime across areas. Social disorganization theory has emerged as the critical framework for understanding the relationship between community characteristics and crime in urban areas. According to the theory, certain neighborhood characteristics – most notably poverty, residential instability, and racial heterogeneity – can lead to social disorganization. Social disorganization, in turn, can cause crime. In this chapter, we first describe social disorganization theory, laying out the theory's key principles and propositions. We then discuss one of the most serious and enduring challenges confronting the theory – identifying and empirically verifying the social interactional mechanisms that link structural characteristics of communities, such as poverty and residential instability, to heightened crime rates in socially disorganized communities. And finally, we present some promising new directions for the theory by discussing several theoretical concepts that may be useful for scholars interested in identifying and measuring the theory's interactional mechanisms; these include social capital, collective efficacy, and social networks. We conclude the chapter with some remarks about one additional important theoretical direction for social disorganization theory: incorporating the role of neighborhood subculture in explanations of crime and delinquency.

Social Disorganization Theory

The origins of social disorganization theory date back to the early 1900s. In 1929, two researchers from the University of Chicago, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, began a series of studies using official records which showed that in the city of Chicago, rates of delinquency, criminality, and commitment to correctional institutions varied markedly by area. In particular, rates were highest in slums near the city center and diminished as distance from the center of the city increased, except in areas of industry and commerce just outside of the central district, which had some of the highest rates. Shaw and McKay also found that rates of crime and delinquency exhibited a remarkable consistent patterning over many decades; in particular, the spatial pattern of rates revealed significant long-term stability even though the nationality structure of the population in the inner-city areas changed greatly over time. Shaw and McKay thus determined that crime and delinquency were not the result of personal characteristics of the residents who lived in the neighborhoods but were tied to the neighborhoods themselves. Since areas of high and low crime and delinquency maintained their relative positions over many years, a key theoretical task became to explain the existence and stability of these area differentials over time.

A fundamental part of their explanation involved the concept of social disorganization. Social disorganization refers to the inability of a community to realize the common values of its members and maintain effective social controls. As Kornhauser describes, "Social disorganization exists in the first instance when the structure and culture of a community are incapable of implementing and expressing the values of its own residents." (Kornhauser, 1978:63) According to the theory, a common value among neighborhood residents is the desire for a crime-free community. In essence, then, socially disorganized neighborhoods are ineffective in combating crime.

A socially organized community is characterized by (1) solidarity, or an internal consensus on essential norms and values (e.g., residents want and value the same things, such as a crime-free neighborhood); (2) cohesion, or a strong bond among neighbors (e.g., residents know and like one another); and (3) integration, with social interaction occurring on a regular basis (e.g., residents spend time with one another). Conversely, a disorganized community has little solidarity among residents and lacks social cohesion or integration. Perhaps the greatest difference between socially organized and disorganized neighborhoods is the levels of informal social control in those neighborhoods. Informal social control is defined as the scope of collective intervention that the community directs toward local problems, including crime (Kornhauser, 1978; Shaw & McKay, 1969). It is the informal, nonofficial actions taken by residents to combat crime in their communities, such as, for example, when residents question persons about suspicious activity or admonish misbehaving youth and inform parents of their children's misconduct. In essence, residents act as the "eyes and ears" of the community and their informal surveillance, and

even simple presence, deters others from engaging in crime. According to the theory, socially disorganized neighborhoods have lower levels of informal social control, and thus experience higher crime rates when compared to more socially organized neighborhoods.

Ecological characteristics of neighborhoods influence the degree of social disorganization in the community. This is because certain characteristics can impede the development of social ties that promote the ability to solve common problems, including crime. Ecological characteristics of greatest interest to social disorganization researchers include poverty, joblessness, population mobility or turnover, racial composition, and family disruption, among others. Although community characteristics such as poverty or residential instability are related to crime, these factors themselves do not directly cause crime, according to the theory. That is, ecological characteristics are related to crime only indirectly through various neighborhood processes such as informal social control. As such, poverty, residential instability, and other ecological characteristics are important in as much as they affect the mediating processes of social disorganization.

In light of the above discussion, the basic social disorganization causal model can be expressed as: neighborhood characteristics → social ties → informal social control → crime. Sampson describes the processes by which neighborhood characteristics and crime are associated:

> Neighborhood characteristics such as family disorganization, residential mobility, and structural density weaken informal social control networks; informal social controls are impeded by weak local social bonds, lowered community attachment, anonymity, and reduced capacity for surveillance and guardianship; other factors such as poverty and racial composition also probably affect informal control, although their influence is in all likelihood indirect; residents in areas characterized by family disorganization, mobility, and building density are less able to perform guardianship activities, less likely to report general deviance to authorities, to intervene in public disturbances, and to assume responsibility for supervision of youth activities; the result is that deviance is tolerated and public norms of social control are not effective (Sampson, 1987: 109).

Social Disorganization Theory's Greatest Challenge

Like all other theories discussed in this volume, there are ongoing challenges facing social disorganization theory, some of which have been resolved more fully than others. These challenges have been discussed at length in two important assessments of the theory at different points in time: Bursik (1988) and Kubrin & Weitzer (2003). Although these scholars identify several challenges, perhaps the greatest involves identifying and measuring the social mechanisms that account for heightened crime rates in socially disorganized neighborhoods. Stated alternatively, a major conceptual limitation of social disorganization research is the relative lack of

attention paid to the processes that mediate the effect of community characteristics (see also Byrne & Sampson, 1986).

Given the primitive nature of data analysis during the early 1900s, it is not surprising that scholars were unable to conduct sophisticated analyses that would allow them to fully test social disorganization theory's arguments. Early Chicago school theorists "tested" the theory by plotting the spatial distribution of crime in the city to determine whether it was consistent with the theory's predictions, and then correlated characteristics of neighborhoods with crime rates. Studies were able to document, for example, that poor, mobile, and racially heterogeneous neighborhoods had the highest crime rates but they could not specify the mechanisms (e.g., social ties, informal social control) accounting for this relationship. This was problematic, in part, because it did not allow researchers to rule out competing theoretical explanations such as strain, which also theorize a poverty–crime association.

Even decades after the early work of Chicago School researchers, little progress had been made in this area. Studies included the "front end" of social disorganization models, that is, attributes of the community, as well as the "back end" or crime and delinquency outcomes, but continued to leave out the crucial middle, or indicators reflecting how much social disorganization is occurring in a neighborhood (Kubrin, Stucky, & Krohn, 2009: 91). Significant progress was finally achieved with the publication of Robert Sampson and Byron Groves' 1989 study, which used data from a large national survey of Great Britain to formally test social disorganization theory. Sampson & Groves (1989) constructed community-level measures of neighborhoods (e.g., low socio-economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, family disruption, and urbanization) as well as the mediating dimensions of social disorganization (e.g., sparse local friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups, and low organizational participation) and determined how both sets of measures impacted neighborhood crime rates. The findings were largely supportive of social disorganization theory: communities characterized by strong social ties and informal control had lower rates of crime and delinquency. Moreover, these dimensions of social disorganization were found to explain, in large part, the effects of community structural characteristics on crime rates. This latter finding was important because it verified for the first time that the structural conditions themselves do not influence crime; rather, they are important only inasmuch as they produce social disorganization.

Despite this progress, only a handful of studies (e.g., Elliott *et al.*, 1996; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner & Rountree, 1997) have fully documented the theoretical processes laid out by social disorganization theory. Perhaps more importantly, the findings we do have from this small but critical literature suggest these processes may not be so straightforward. An increasing finding emerging from the literature is that social ties may not play the expected role (see Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003: 375–379). As such, researchers are only beginning to fully identify, understand, and empirically verify the social-interactional mechanisms that link structural characteristics to crime in

neighborhoods. In an attempt to address this shortcoming, in part, in the remainder of the chapter we discuss some promising theoretical developments for social disorganization theory.

Promising Theoretical Developments

For decades following the early Chicago School studies, research testing social disorganization theory, by and large, emphasized the critical role of two theoretical constructs: social ties and informal social control, as discussed earlier. In more recent years, however, scholars have begun to introduce additional theoretical concepts that borrow from – but go well beyond – social ties and informal social control. These include collective efficacy, social capital, and social networks. For the remainder of this chapter, we discuss these promising new theoretical directions in social disorganization theory.

Collective efficacy

As noted earlier, Sampson and Groves (1989) incited renewed interest in social disorganization theory and its ability to explain variations in community crime rates. Recall their argument emphasized the formation and utility of social ties in terms of providing effective social action (i.e., informal social control) to fight crime. In recent years, scholars have begun to suggest that perhaps dense social networks of strong ties might not be sufficient, in and of themselves, to fulfill social control functions (Browning *et al.*, 2004; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Pattillo, 1998; Sampson, 2006, Sampson *et al.*, 1997, Venkatesh, 2000, 2006). According to some, what appears to be missing is the key factor of purposive action, that is, just how ties are activated and resources mobilized to enhance informal social control (Sampson et al., 1997).

Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls (1997) address this deficiency in their formulation of the concept of collective efficacy, which they define as, "the linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good" (921). As is evident from the definition, collective efficacy integrates cohesion and mutual trust among residents with a culturally-derived neighborhood dynamic (i.e., shared expectations for control). The concept advances previous theorizing by taking into account mechanisms of social action that may be facilitated by, but do not necessarily require, an interconnected network of strong ties (Sampson, 2006: 152). Since "efficacy" refers to the ability to achieve a desired effect or outcome, in the context of the theory, collective efficacy is best conceptualized as a task-specific concept that captures the perceived ability of a neighborhood to solve crime problems.

Importantly, there are two components of collective efficacy. The first component is the willingness of residents to intervene for the common good of the neighborhood. Such willingness, according to Sampson and colleagues (1997), is a necessary precursor for establishing informal social control, or the degree to which actual

behaviors are undertaken by residents as a means to address and prevent crime. To measure this component of collective efficacy, or the willingness to intervene, in a survey (The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, or PHDCN Survey), Sampson and colleagues asked 8,782 residents of 343 neighborhoods in Chicago the likelihood that their neighbors would intervene in the following (hypothetical) scenarios: (1) if children were skipping school and hanging out on a street corner; (2) if children were spray-painting graffiti on a local building; (3) if children were showing disrespect to an adult; (4) if a fight broke out in the front of their house; and (5) if the fire station closest to their home was threatened with budget cuts. Respondents answered using a five-item Likert-type scale. The assumption is that those neighborhoods that score high on the collective willingness to intervene scale are more likely to actually intervene when faced with these and similar situations, thereby reducing the likelihood for crime in those communities.

The second component of collective efficacy is the combination of cohesion and mutual trust. The importance of common values and similar goals among residents dates back to the earliest social disorganization research (Park & Burgess, 1925; Shaw & McKay, 1942). When residents are mostly self-interested and care little about the community at large, it is inherently difficult for the neighborhood to procure resources and to activate social ties to prevent crime. However, when there is cohesion and mutual trust among residents, there is a greater likelihood that residents will acknowledge problems in the community, will achieve consensus on how to address them, and will solve the problems in a more collective fashion. In this sense, cohesion and mutual trust are precursors to problem solving. Sampson and colleagues measure this component of collective efficacy by asking respondents in their survey the extent to which they agree with the following statements: (1) people around here are willing to help their neighbors; (2) this is a close-knit neighborhood; (3) people in this neighborhood can be trusted; (4) people in this neighborhood generally don't get along with each other; and (5) people in this neighborhood do not share the same values. Not surprisingly, measures of social cohesion and shared expectations for control were highly correlated across neighborhoods in Chicago. The two components were combined to create a summary measure of collective efficacy.

Sampson and colleagues (1997) contribute to social disorganization theory in two fundamental ways; first, they empirically demonstrate that collective efficacy has a significant negative effect on violent crime, in line with what social disorganization theory would predict, and second, they show that associations of concentrated disadvantage and residential instability with violent crime are largely mediated by collective efficacy. The second contribution is arguably the most significant as it implies that neighborhood characteristics are relevant to crime insofar as they produce (or fail to produce) collective efficacy.

In the years since Sampson and colleagues (1997) introduced the concept, studies examining collective efficacy in Chicago and beyond have proliferated. In general, findings from this literature echo what Sampson and colleagues documented – communities with greater levels of collective efficacy have lower rates of crime and

violence, controlling for other factors, and that collective efficacy mediates the effects of ecological characteristics on crime and violence (Browning 2009; Browning, Feinberg, & Dietz, 2004; Mazerolle, Wickes, & Mc Broom, 2010; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Moreover, given an emphasis on purposive action, the prevailing assumption has become that the explanatory power of collective efficacy is not limited to just certain types of crime or violence. For example, Browning (2002) examines the impact of collective efficacy on partner violence. Using Sampson *et al.*'s survey data, as well as other data sources, he demonstrates that collective efficacy has a crime-reducing impact on partner violence, independent of individual and relationship characteristics that heighten domestic violence risk. Another study by Dekeseredy, Alvi, & Tomaszewski (2003), which examines women's victimization in Ontario public housing, also documents support for collective efficacy's impact. In essence, it is becoming clearer that collective efficacy likely impacts a range of crimes and delinquent behaviors, as well as other related outcomes such as social disorder (see, e.g., Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999).

In recent years, collective efficacy scholars have turned their attention to the role of peers and the extent to which parental supervision of teenage peer groups may matter for crime. Maimon & Browning (2010) once again utilize PHDCN survey data to identify whether collective efficacy modifies the effect that unstructured peer socialization has on violent behavior. Their multilevel models, involving 842 Chicago residents in 78 neighborhoods, confirm that collective efficacy has a negative (independent) influence on violence. More importantly, they find that an "individual's unstructured socializing with peers is less likely to result in violence within high collective efficacy neighborhoods" (466). Their results provide evidence that collective efficacy can attenuate the deleterious effects of other social pressures on crime.

Of course in assessing collective efficacy's usefulness for social disorganization theory, and impact in the field more generally, one should consider the concept's predictive validity in relation to other correlates of crime – a task that Pratt & Cullen (2005) undertake in their meta-analysis of macro-level crime predictors. Pratt and Cullen identify over 200 studies from 1960 to 1999 that have examined the ecological correlates of crime, and perform a meta-analysis to determine which predictors have strong and stable effects on crime rates. Their findings reveal that relative to the other predictors, collective efficacy ranks fourth (out of 23) in weighted effect size. Sampson (2006) argues this finding supports the notion that collective efficacy is a robust predictor of crime rates, and is fundamental to social disorganization theory.

In his presidential address at the 2012 annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Robert J. Sampson suggested that collective efficacy, in effect, helps neighborhoods mitigate several problems – most notably, crime and violence. Findings from the small but growing literature indicate he might be right. Yet there remain only a limited number of studies that have empirically assessed just how collective efficacy affects crime and related outcomes (for a more detailed discussion on this point, see Pratt & Cullen, 2005). For this reason, researchers must continue to explore how collective efficacy impacts crime at varying points of time and in

varying social contexts. This will entail applying sophisticated and innovative methodological approaches. Currently, we know very little about, for example, the longitudinal or reciprocal relationship between collective efficacy and crime.

Social capital

One source in which scholars have recognized immense potential for understanding variation in community crime rates is the impact of local organizations. Social disorganization theory presumes that local organizations conducive to pro-social interaction such as churches, youth groups, charities, civic associations, and political groups, can enhance neighborhood informal social control. This is because civic and social organizations facilitate the sharing of common values and goals among residents, thereby increasing the collective ability to disseminate information, mobilize resources, and utilize social networks towards combating crime (Peterson, Krivo, & Harris, 2000; Triplett, Gainey, & Sun, 2003; Wilson, 1987).

Recently, criminologists have adopted the concept of social capital, defined as "the investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin, 1999:30), in order to argue that civically engaged communities yield crime-control benefits. Scholars posit that the investment in communal social relations (i.e., civic engagement) is reflected by residents' participation in civic and social organizations. Prosocial interaction that originates within organizational settings extends to other settings in the greater community, ultimately providing the expected return: the emergence or enhancement of informal social control. In this sense, social capital refers to the potential for effective social action, as it does not directly encapsulate purposive action.

In criminology, social capital's operationalization most frequently reflects Lin's (1999) higher-order conceptualization, specifically, with respect to the investment in communal social relations. Previous studies have measured social capital using at least one of the following types of indicators: (1) a simple count of the number of civic and social organizations in the neighborhood; (2) residents' participation in these types of organizations; and (3) the level of trust among residents. The simple count reflects investment in terms of the availability and opportunity for residents to participate in pro-social organizational settings. Residents' organizational participation signifies the actual investment made in these organizations. Finally, residents' trust levels reveal the emotional investment that underlies interpersonal relationships. Studies typically combine these indicators into a summary measure of social capital or alternatively use one of them as a single-measure construct (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2005; Lee, 2008; Peterson, Krivo, & Harris, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Rosenfeld, Messner, & Baumer, 2001).

The seminal work of Putnam (1995, 2000) is arguably considered the standard research on social capital to date. For Putnam, social capital is conceived as a multidimensional concept reflected by two general forms: trust and social participation. The concept primarily features indices of political participation, civic participation, religious participation, workplace connections, informal social ties,

philanthropy, altruism, and volunteering. According to Putnam (1995), levels of social capital in the United States have declined significantly since the 1960s. Putnam's evidence in support of this claim includes declining participation rates in bowling leagues, church attendance, The Boy Scouts, labor unions, and parent–teacher associations. Putnam maintains this decline is problematic to the extent that "successful outcomes are more likely in civically engaged communities" (Putnam 1995: 65). In support of this contention, state-level analyses of archival and survey data reveal both trust and social participation to be negatively associated with crime (Putnam, 2000). Thus, consistent with social disorganization theory, civically active communities have a greater ability to solve and prevent crime, all else equal.

Recent research has built on Putnam by incorporating diverse measures of social capital into analyses. Beyerlein & Hipp (2005), for example, investigate the religious component of civic engagement on crime in US counties. Acknowledging differences in social networks among religious traditions, their models specify the number of congregations per 100,000 for several denominations of Christianity, including mainline Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, and Catholicism. Beyerlein and Hipp find that greater numbers of congregations per capita – regardless of the denomination – are associated with lower crime rates across counties. In another study, Lee (2008) develops a civic engagement index that not only includes the number of religious congregations, but also the number of civic associations, sport leagues, and hobby and special interest groups in his analysis of rural US counties. Lee (2008) finds that areas with higher levels of civic engagement have lower crime rates. And in a third study, Peterson, Krivo, & Harris (2000) examine whether the presence of recreation centers and libraries impact crime rates in neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio. Peterson and colleagues discover that while libraries have little impact on crime, the presence of recreation centers appears to mitigate violent crime in the most disadvantaged Columbus neighborhoods.

Two key challenges for researchers have been assessing the reciprocal influence that crime has on social capital and determining social capital's spatial effects. One study by Rosenfeld, Messner, & Baumer (2001) examines the reciprocal nature of the social capital–crime relationship. Rosenfeld and colleagues perform a series of structural equation models (SEM), which reveal that their latent variable of social capital (which includes a dimension for both organizational participation and trust) is negatively associated with homicide rates across a sample of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties. This protective effect is unaffected by standard correlates of crime as well as the reciprocal influence that homicide has on social capital. Hipp, Petersilia, & Turner (2010) address the spatial effects of social capital in their investigation of how the availability of social capital (oriented) organizations affects the likelihood of recidivism for California parolees. Examining the number of such organizations within two miles of the parolee's current address, Hipp and colleagues find that a one standard deviation increase in the availability of social capital oriented organizations decreases the likelihood of recidivating by more than 40%. Although the analysis estimates an individual-level outcome (recidivism of individual parolees), it is not unreasonable to suggest that this protective effect applies at the community level as well.

As previously alluded, social capital can be theorized along several dimensions as well as using a variety of methodological approaches. Yet, there is a pressing need to identify the general effect that social capital has on crime rates across aggregate units of analysis. Pratt & Cullen (2005) begin to address this need by providing a (quasi) quantitative synthesis of studies associated with social capital. They focus explicitly on the impact of noneconomic institutions, which capture those studies that examine the level of religious and political participation within communities – two indicators frequently applied in the operationalization of social capital. They find that the strength of noneconomic institutions ranks first (out of 23) in weighted effect size and, in line with predictions, such institutions are negatively associated with crime. Although their measure is only a proxy for social capital, the strength of the effect size suggests that social capital is potentially a robust predictor of lower crime rates, and therefore crucial to understanding the establishment of social control.

The studies building upon Putnam's seminal work are generally supportive of an inverse relationship between social capital and crime. However, we suggest it would be premature to conclude that social capital is a robust predictor of lower crime rates, mainly because current studies differ so drastically with respect to units of analysis, research settings, time-periods, and estimated outcomes. Moreover, there is a developing concern regarding the extent to which social capital is theoretically distinct from collective efficacy and social networks (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). Scholars have identified mutual trust as a dimension of both social capital and collective efficacy. Similarly, mutual trust may condition the relationship between social networks and crime. In summary, although social capital presents the opportunity to better understand the emergence of social control in communities, more research must be done before it is fully incorporated into social disorganization theory.

Social ties and neighborhood networks

From the earliest formulations of social disorganization theory, the concept of social ties has occupied a central place in the theory. An enduring assumption is that socially disorganized neighborhoods lack the social ties that activate mechanisms of informal social control (Kornhauser, 1978; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Park & Burgess, 1925; Sampson, 2006; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942). So when crime problems emerge, the theory reasons, residents are unable to effectively respond via the dissemination of information, the implementation of guardianship behavior, the mobilization of resources, and the coordination of civic events. According to the theory, the formation and maintenance of informal social control thus requires the neighborhood to have an abundant supply of strong ties that connect residents to one another. Accordingly, criminologists have long examined how the presence of social ties as well as their utility and content are related to neighborhood crime rates.

Despite substantial work in this area, the measurement of social ties is generally limited to two types of indicators: (1) the quantity of social ties, and (2) the content

of those ties. Such information is typically ascertained via survey questions which instruct respondents to provide information about their social exchanges and interactions with fellow neighbors. The first indicator reflects an assumption that there is a high correspondence between an abundance of social ties and the activation of informal social control mechanisms. In contrast, the second indicator suggests that the type of social ties among residents (e.g., family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers) will differentially impact the ability to prevent crime. According to the theory, those social ties that represent emotional investment and reflect frequent interaction are deemed to be "strong," while those ties that exhibit less familiarity and interaction are considered to be "weak." Accordingly, the strength of neighborhood ties is considered fundamental to the informal control of crime.

Despite the theory's predictions, the collective body of research suggests that the evidence in support of social ties' impact is mixed with respect to crime reduction. Some studies identify social ties as a catalyst for effective social action to fight crime (e.g., Sampson & Groves, 1989) while others demonstrate that social ties may actually facilitate crime (e.g., Pattillo, 1998). In regards to the former, the seminal article by Sampson and Groves, discussed earlier, lends considerable support to the notion that an interconnected network of strong ties characterizes lower-crime neighborhoods. Recall they used data from a large national survey of Great Britain. The survey included a question instructing respondents to indicate how many of their friends reside in their local community, from which Sampson and Groves constructed a community measure of local friendship networks defined as "the mean level of local friendships" (784). Their network measure captures the abundance of social ties characterized by frequent interaction and emotional investment. Also recall that Sampson and Groves show that the mediating dimension of local friendship networks has an independent effect on crime and delinquency outcomes, net of (exogenous) neighborhood characteristics. This finding suggests that neighborhood networks do appear to activate and maintain mechanisms of informal social control.

The promise of social ties for social disorganization theory is less apparent in Bellair's (1997) study, which explicitly assesses how the frequency of interaction among neighborhood residents influences crime. Using survey data from residents of 60 urban neighborhoods (spanning three states), Bellair finds that social interaction, here defined as the percentage of community residents who get together once a year or more, reduces community rates of burglary, motor vehicle theft, and robbery. He also finds that social interaction largely mediates the effect of neighborhood characteristics on community crime, in support of social disorganization theory. Yet Bellair's findings ultimately raise questions regarding the value of social ties for the theory. Although social interaction is significantly associated with community crime rates in the direction the theory predicts, the fact that even infrequent interaction can reduce community crime rates challenges the theory's assumption that strong and dense ties are what matter most; Bellair's "once a year or more" definition reflects a level of interaction that is arguably less than what the perspective theorizes.

Other studies produce conflicting evidence regarding the impact of social ties. For example, using survey data from the city of Seattle, Warner & Rountree (1997)

document mixed support for social ties' crime reducing impact. Their measure of social ties, or what they refer to as "local ties," reflects the extent to which respondents had done each of the following: (1) borrowed tools or food from neighbors; (2) had lunch or dinner with neighbors; and (3) had helped neighbors with problems. While Warner and Rountree find that local ties are associated with lower rates of assault in Seattle neighborhoods, they contrastingly find that these ties are associated with higher rates of burglary. As a result, Warner and Rountree question the assumption that social ties automatically translate into greater levels of informal social control, as the theory predicts.

Even more troubling are findings from studies which suggest that social ties may, in fact, serve as a source of social capital for offenders, thereby increasing the likelihood of offending. Browning, Feinberg, & Dietz (2004) arrive at this conclusion in their study of the impact of collective efficacy and social ties on violent crime rates in Chicago neighborhoods. Using Sampson's PHDCN survey data, they discover that while collective efficacy is associated with diminished rates of violence, social ties and exchange between residents appears to diminish neighborhood social control. Browning and colleagues also conclude that the "regulatory effects of collective efficacy on violence are substantially reduced in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of network interaction and reciprocated exchange" (503).

Questionable findings regarding social ties' impact are not limited to quantitative analyses. A study by Pattillo (1998) qualitatively documents the complex relationships among social ties, informal social control, and crime. Through participant observation and face-to-face interviews in a middle-class black neighborhood in Chicago, she finds that residents are highly connected to one another and that these strong ties are characterized by emotional investment and frequent interaction. As a result, and in support of social disorganization theory, the neighborhood is able to keep crime to a relatively acceptable level through the supervision of youth, the identification of strangers, and the mobilization of community organizations. However, the value of these ties comes with a trade-off; Pattillo also finds that the social ties frequently connect law abiding residents and criminals, thereby making it more challenging for the neighborhood to eradicate criminal activity. This occurs because residents are reluctant to publicly shame or legally sanction those with whom they are closely tied (even in the face of illegal behavior). Once again these findings, which reveal that social ties can simultaneously enhance and undermine informal social control, question the relevance of this concept for social disorganization theory.

Although the evidence in support of social ties is mixed, we do not mean to suggest that criminology should abandon studying the impact of neighborhood networks on crime. Instead, the present challenge is to pinpoint the specific characteristics of networks that precipitate and mitigate crime. Doing this will require scholars to recognize, as Sampson (2006: 164) points out, that "not all networks are created equal." In the context of social disorganization theory, this means acknowledging that while neighborhood networks may be capable of facilitating effective social action, they are likely not sufficient, in and of themselves, to fulfill social

control functions. Sampson (2006) lists three reasons why neighborhood networks should not be equated with effective social control: (1) weak ties can be equally important in the activation of informal social control (see also Granovetter, 1973); (2) strong ties can undermine social control efforts; and, (3) social ties may connect law-abiding citizens with criminals and vice versa. In extending and refining the concepts of social ties and neighborhood networks for social disorganization theory, researchers must account for these "social facts."

Conclusion

Social disorganization theory has long occupied an important place in criminological thought and continues to do so well into the 21st century. But as with all theories, in order to survive it must be continuously subjected to testing and then reevaluated in light of the empirical evidence. Despite the theory's predictive power, in this chapter, we have suggested there is room for improvement, particularly when it comes to specifying the social interactional mechanisms that link structural characteristics of communities, such as poverty and residential instability, to heightened crime rates in socially disorganized communities. We have also suggested that such improvement may occur by attending to more recent theoretical concepts that borrow from, but go beyond, social ties and informal social control. These include collective efficacy, social capital, and social networks. In this chapter, we have defined these concepts, explicated their usefulness for social disorganization theory, and reviewed the empirical literature on their effectiveness. We believe these concepts hold significant promise.

We conclude with one final suggestion regarding the fundamental challenge involved in linking structural characteristics to crime in socially disorganized communities. This final suggestion is related to the role that neighborhood culture/subculture likely occupies for social disorganization theory. Although often downplayed (and even ignored) by scholars today, neighborhood subculture was of key interest to Shaw and McKay and other early social disorganization theorists. A central question for these scholars centered on how neighborhood subcultures became entrenched and affected rates of delinquency. They posed the question: Under what economic and social conditions does crime develop as a social tradition and become embodied in a system of criminal values?

Shaw and McKay found evidence regarding the impact of neighborhood subculture on crime and delinquency. Of particular interest is their finding that areas of low economic status were characterized by diversity in norms and standards of behavior, rather than uniformity (recall that solidarity, or an internal consensus on norms and values, is critical for social organization). Shaw and McKay found that in poor communities, youth were exposed to a wide variety of contradictory (and sometimes unlawful) standards rather than to a relatively consistent and conventional pattern of norms. It was also determined that in these communities, children were exposed to adult criminals, from whom they could learn (illegal) behavior.

In essence then, alongside social ties and informal social control, neighborhood subculture constituted a critical component of social disorganization theory, and helped to account for why crime rates were higher in disorganized neighborhoods. Decades following Shaw and McKay, researchers continued to examine how neighborhood subculture impacted crime and delinquency, as well as how it was itself impacted by neighborhood conditions (e.g., Miller, 1958; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Kornhauser, 1978). Unfortunately, for reasons that have been explicated elsewhere (see Sampson & Bean, 2006), neighborhood subculture increasingly became irrelevant to the theory. Discussions regarding neighborhood subculture's impact became obsolete and empirical examinations of the theory did not include measures reflecting local subculture.

Most recently, however, cultural explanations have been resurrected in neighborhood research, which we argue is a positive development. Scholars are both theorizing culture's potential impact on community crime rates (Anderson, 1999; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson & Bean, 2006) as well as empirically examining just how culture and crime are associated in both organized and disorganized communities (Berg *et al.*, 2012; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Stewart & Simons, 2006; Warner, 2003). Research on cultural effects is relatively new, so there is much to be worked out with respect to the precise role that subculture occupies in social disorganization theory. But scholars are beginning to sort out the issues and progress in occurring. Although we are unable to review the important findings from this nascent but growing literature, what we can say here is that it is becoming abundantly clear that, in the words of Kubrin & Weitzer (2003: 380), "cultural factors deserve greater attention" and can no longer be ignored. As Shaw and McKay and other early theorists believed, we cannot understand variations in crime rates across communities without also understanding the role that neighborhood subcultures occupy in the calculus. Along with greater attention to the concepts of collective efficacy, social capital, and social networks, future work must continue to specify subculture's critical role.

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