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Socioeconomic disadvantage and violence Recent research on culture and neighborhood control as explanatory mechanisms

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Abstract

This article reviews recent theoretical and empirical developments that further our understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and violence. Previously hampered by lack of appropriate data and model specification, there has been significant revitalization of research testing cultural and social disorganization theories. Recent studies have examined the role of attitudes in violence, the social–structural sources of those attitudes, and community-level social control processes.

Keywords: Violence; Attitudes; Subculture; Social disorganization

1. Socioeconomic status (SES) and violence

Arrest, victimization, and self-report data in the U.S. consistently indicate that violence is not randomly distributed across social demographic categories or groups in the social structure. In addition to the overrepresentation of males and younger persons, those involved in violence are more likely to be non-White and from lower SES backgrounds (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). Much of the racial differences in rates of violence, however, are due to racial differences in SES. In terms of offender characteristics, data show that those arrested for violent crimes are less likely to be high school graduates and more likely to be

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unemployed compared to persons in the general population. Victimization studies find that persons at the lowest income levels experience the highest rates of violent victimization. Nationally representative studies of youth find that those who report involvement in the most serious forms of violence (e.g., involving injury or the use of a weapon) are more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds. Moreover, studies of family violence find that lower SES parents (in terms of education and income) are more likely to use physical means of punishing their children as well as engage in violence towards their spouses (Gelles, 1990; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Although significant progress has been made, the reasons for the disproportionate concentration of violence (and other types of crime) among persons of lower social standing are not fully understood. In this paper, I first review the social interactionist perspective, a general explanatory framework for understanding instrumental motivations for aggression and violence. I then review theoretical and empirical developments in criminological research that bear on the link between economic disadvantage and violence, focusing on the interrelated role of attitudes and neighborhood structure as explanatory mechanisms. Both areas of research are rooted in long-standing theories that have been recently revitalized and subject to systematic development and testing.

2. Aggression and violence: motivations and situational processes

Prior to reviewing research accounting for SES differences in violence, it is useful to provide a fundamental understanding of the nature and underlying motivations for much violent behavior. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) offer a parsimonious, "social interactionist" explanation for violence that is rooted in impression management and social influence theories. The theory views violence as "coercive actions" involving the intent of inflicting harm or forcing compliance, such as threats, punishments, and the use of bodily force. According to Tedeschi and Felson, violent actions have three general, interrelated goals: (1) to compel or deter others' behavior, (2) to assert and protect situated identities, and (3) to address grievances. Their theory was developed, in large part, out of research showing that many violent encounters involve perceived rule violations, resistance to requests for behavioral compliance, and "character contests" over situated identities (Felson, 1984; Luckenbill, 1977, 1980). The use of violence is seen as involving a decision-making process, which is affected by an individual's procedural values regarding the use of coercion, as well as weighing the risks or costs associated with violence relative to the expected gains.

The advantage of social interactionist theory is that it accounts for a range of violent behaviors as instrumentally motivated. The same theory can be applied in understanding the motivations for the use of physical aggression in a variety of circumstances — for example, parents' attempting to punish their child's perceived misbehavior, young men fighting to appear tough in front of onlookers, spousal violence over relationship or financial matters, gang warfare over "turf," an armed robber seeking money, or perpetrators of sexual assault overcoming resistance. Thus, special theories are not needed to explain predatory violent crimes (e.g., robbery or rape), dispute-related violence (e.g., fights that may result in

homicide), or noncriminal physical aggression (e.g., parents' spanking to punish children). Below, the implications of social interactionist theory for understanding the relationships between economic disadvantage and violence are discussed.

3. Cultural perspectives: the role of attitudes

One of most important implications of the social interactionist perspective for understanding the high rate of violence among low SES persons is that the motivations underlying the use of coercion may be stronger among actors of low SES. Tedeschi and Felson suggest there may be social demographic variation in both procedural values and in how grievances and attacks on a person's identity are expressed. They assert that among the members of some social groups, "coercion may be the preferred method for handling disputes, and violence may be the preferred method of coercion" (1994, p. 187). Thus, persons who place greater emphasis on certain values or attitudes (e.g., towards courage, toughness, or retribution), when provoked, may act in ways that can escalate encounters, increasing the likelihood that violence will be used. Moreover, since violent encounters are social events involving two or more participants, procedural values and attitudes may not only affect aggressive behavior directly, but may also affect the likelihood of being a target. Their theory is consistent with Black (1983) who argued that violence among low status persons is often a form of informal "self-help" in the perceived absence of help from formal authorities in resolving disputes.

The idea that there are class differences in values, attitudes, and norms related to the use of violence is rooted in the classic "subculture of violence" theory, which attributes social differences in violence to attitudes towards courage, toughness, and retribution (Cohen, 1955; Curtis, 1975; Miller, 1958; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Unfortunately, the concept of *subculture* implies consensus within a group, and differences between groups that are not absolute. The overstatement of group differences implied by the language of subcultures may have discouraged research into the theory on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, there could still be statistical differences across social groups in attitudes related to use of violence. Thus, instead of using the language of subcultures, Markowitz and Felson (1998) suggest that it is perhaps more reasonable to say that attitudinal differences may play a role in demographic differences in violence (what they term the "attitude mediation thesis"). There has been a recent revitalization of interest in cultural explanations for violence, involving a good deal of theoretical elaboration and quantitative testing (Anderson, 1999; Bernard, 1990; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Heimer, 1997; Kennedy & Forde, 1996; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989; Markowitz, 2001; Markowitz & Felson, 1998).

Important elaborations on cultural explanations link social structural position with cognitive differences that facilitate violence. These elaborations include Luckenbill and Doyle's (1989) approach to grievance expression. They argue that younger persons, men, racial minorities, and persons of lower SES are more likely to be "disputatious." That is, members of these groups are more likely to perceive those who produce negative outcomes for them as blameworthy. They are also more likely to express a grievance to the blameworthy party, demand reparation, and, if the demand is not satisfied, employ physical

violence to settle the dispute. Similarly, Bernard (1990) emphasizes grievance expression in his subcultural approach to violence among the "underclass." He argues that aversive social conditions in the underclass (e.g., pollution, noise, crowding, discrimination) produce arousal, which leads to expanded rules for assigning blame and for retaliation, leading to a higher frequency of violence.

Another influential cultural approach is Anderson's (1999) notion of a "code of the streets," derived from his ethnography of an inner-city neighborhood. The code emphasizes maintaining the respect of others, being tough, and exacting retribution through physical violence if necessary. It emerges as an adaptation to adverse economic conditions and as a means of acquiring status and self-worth in ghetto areas. Anderson argues that much violence among disadvantaged inner-city residents revolves around the desire to acquire status — either through being perceived as "tough" or through the display of certain material possessions (e.g., jewelry, designer athletic clothing, expensive cars). Since many inner-city youth are unable to participate in the conventional labor force as a means of obtaining such material goods, they may turn to the use of violence (robbery) as an alternate means. According to Anderson, for many, the campaign for respect and self-worth is seen as a "zero-sum" game in which gains are made at the expense of others.

Despite the continued development of cultural theories of violence, until recently, there have actually been very few attempts to systematically test them. Early quantitative research on demographic differences in values and violence (e.g., Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Erlanger, 1974a,b) suffered from various methodological limitations, mostly related to measurement and model specification (see Markowitz & Felson, 1998; Messner, 1988; Tedeschi & Felson 1994). These studies either failed to consider specific attitudes or values related to violence or did not examine the causal links between SES, attitudes, and violence. However, recent studies use improved measures of violence-related attitudes, measurement-modeling techniques, and consider the causal structure of cultural theories more closely, examining whether attitudes mediate demographic differences in violence. These studies have found that attitudes explain significant portions of age, gender, and SES effects. For example, Heimer (1997) found that a considerable part of the relationship between SES and self-reported violent behavior among adolescents was mediated by approval of the use of violence. Also, Markowitz and Felson (1998), using a representative sample of the general population and a sample of criminal offenders, find that persons of lower SES are more likely to hold attitudes favorable towards showing courage in fights or arguments and believe more strongly in retribution. These attitudes, in turn, predicted the frequency of self-reported violence. Using a set of hypothetical vignettes, they also find that persons of lower SES are more disputatious — they are more likely to express grievances, and are more willing to use physical force to settle disputes, supporting Luckenbill and Doyle's (1989) theory.

The challenge for research in this area is to provide a more detailed explanation of the processes by which attitudes towards the use of force in disputes are acquired. In the original formulation of subculture of violence theory, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) suggested that attitudes toward violence are learned through exposure to violence, a proposition supported by some current research. Heimer and Matsueda (1994), in a study of youths, found that parents' use of physical punishment and exposure to delinquent peers affects attitudes

towards violence, which, in turn, affect violent behavior. Similarly, Markowitz (2001), in examining the role of attitudes in family violence, showed that witnessing violence among one's parents and experiencing physical punishment while growing up are related to approval of physical aggression towards spouses and children. Approval of violence was then related to the frequency of violence.

Research attempting to "contextualize" the relationship between attitudes and violence showed that the attitudes of a young man's schoolmates as well as his own attitudes predicted violent behavior (Felson, Liska, South, & McNully, 1994). That analysis suggests that adolescent boys may feel compelled to fight when their peers expect it, even when they would rather not. This is consistent with social interactionist and cultural theories, in that fighting is a function of impression management, as well as the internalization of attitudes conducive to violence. The study also found that attitudes toward violence predicted nonviolent forms of criminal behavior as well as violence, suggesting that it might be better to think of subcultures of crime and delinquency rather than subcultures of violence.

4. Social disorganization: the role of weakened communities

Traditional subcultural arguments are rooted in classic economic strain and social disorganization theories. Social disorganization theory provides insight into the relationship between low SES and violence, and like subcultural theories, it has undergone significant revitalization. Originally, developing out of the work of the "Chicago school" of sociology (Shaw & McKay, 1942), the theory focuses on the ecological (especially neighborhood) distribution of crime and delinquency, hypothesizing that it is due to variation in the capacity of neighborhoods to constrain its residents from violating norms. This capacity is considered a function of *neighborhood cohesion*, reflected by the size, density, and breadth of network ties, and levels of organizational participation among residents (Bursik, 2000; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Recent conceptualizations focus on a direct form of informal control, or *collective efficacy* — the ability to effectively intervene in neighborhood problems and to supervise residents to maintain public order (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). As these complementary mechanisms weaken, neighborhoods are assumed to lose their ability to control violent crime. The strength of neighborhood cohesion and collective efficacy in turn are thought to reflect a broad range of macroconditions, including urban isolation, de-industrialization, population turnover, ethnic/racial heterogeneity, family disruption, and low SES; as they increase, the strength of cohesion and informal control are predicted to decrease (Bursik, 1986, 1988; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

For many years, one of the major problems in testing social disorganization theory has been a lack of research on the role of neighborhood cohesion in mediating the effects of population turnover, ethnic heterogeneity, and low SES on crime rates. To a large extent, this work had not appeared because of the difficulty and expense of doing it. Information on neighborhood cohesion is not available from public records, such as the U.S. Census. It requires large-scale surveys that include enough respondents from a sufficient number of

neighborhoods. Many existing surveys include a large number of respondents from a few neighborhoods or a small number of people from a large number of neighborhoods. In their landmark study, Sampson and Groves (1989) reached a reasonable compromise by using the British Crime Survey containing about 11,000 respondents from 238 electoral wards, developing a feasible strategy for addressing a crucial question. From the survey items, they composed three indexes of neighborhood cohesion (local friendship networks, organizational participation, and supervision of youth). They reported that these dimensions of cohesion mediated part of the ethnic heterogeneity, population turnover, and SES effects on violent crime rates. More recent studies have followed using samples of U.S. neighborhoods. Bellair (1997), in a study of 60 urban neighborhoods, found that infrequent interaction with neighbors mediated much of the effects of ecological characteristics, including low SES, on crime. Also, in a study of 343 Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson et al. (1997) show how neighborhood cohesion and collective efficacy among neighbors mediate a substantial portion of the effects of "concentrated disadvantage" (a factor including income, unemployment, family disruption, percent nonwhite, and proportion of youth) and residential stability on violent crime. However, Warner and Rountree (1997), using data on 100 neighborhoods in Seattle, found that "neighboring activities" are negatively related to official rates of assault, but did not mediate the effects of structural characteristics. In their study, much of the demographic effects — including low SES — still remained significant.

Some studies suggest the effect of cohesion on violent crime is not straightforward, but may depend on neighborhood demographic context. For example, Rountree and Warner (1999) demonstrate that the negative effect of women's social ties on violence is diminished in neighborhoods with higher percentages of female-headed households. They speculate that this may be due to the limited capacity of single-parent households, and of females in particular, to exert control over young males. Also, Warner and Rountree (1997) find that social ties reduce crime in predominately white, but not in predominately minority or racially mixed neighborhoods.

Patillo's (1998) ethnographic study of a black lower middle-class Chicago neighborhood provides insight into the conditional nature of the effects of social ties. She reports that these types of neighborhoods, despite dense social networks, have limited effectiveness in reducing crime because the highly overlapping nature of networks allows for gang members and other law-breakers to coexist within larger, normative (law-abiding) networks. In these communities, those who engage in crime/violence are part of overlapping social networks as family members and friends, often contributing to the community in positive ways, for example, by providing social and financial support. As a result, there is a tolerance for a certain amount of criminal activity because many of those involved are seen as not *all* bad (Patillo, 1998). Moreover, the fear of reprisal may inhibit residents' community involvement, intervention in gang/drug activity, and cooperation with police (Anderson, 1999).

Recognizing that mechanisms, such as neighborhood cohesion, are only part of the reason why areas with higher levels of racial heterogeneity, poverty, family disruption, and residential instability have more crime, some researchers have suggested that there may be utility in linking social disorganization theory with other approaches (Bellair, 2000; Markowitz, Bellair, Liska, & Liu, 2001; Veysey & Messner, 1999). Linking neighborhood

structure with cultural explanations offers a more complete explanation. As a form of adaptation to adverse economic conditions, there may simply be greater tolerance of crime and violence in neighborhoods marked by high levels of poverty (Anderson, 1999; Markowitz & Felson, 1998; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Also, while there may be agreement among low SES neighborhood residents on certain *values* — such as the desire, in principle, to live without violence and crime, in practice, socialization of children prohibiting non-normative behavior may be weakened, ambiguous, or somewhat less effective compared to other neighborhoods. Low SES neighborhoods with higher proportions of young, unmarried, and less-educated parents (themselves products of similar backgrounds) may have a lowered capacity to effectively socialize children to adhere to conventional norms and to restrain their impulses (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Thus, there is likely to be *normative heterogeneity* across communities, which facilitates crime. Differences in effective socialization, as a function of neighborhood structure, is a key feature of the social disorganization perspective (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993), yet remains relatively unexamined. Future research, borrowing insights from learning, labeling, and developmental theories, might, for example, examine parents' responses to the aggressive/criminal behavior of children and others, identifying differences across neighborhoods in how such behavior is punished, rewarded, ignored, or perhaps neutralized in ways that increase the likelihood of subsequent behavior (see Heimer & Matsueda, 1994).

Recent social disorganization research has also begun to examine reciprocal relationships between violence and the conditions, such as social cohesion, that may inhibit it. There are several studies that directly examine the reciprocal relationship between crime and the capacity for informal social control at the neighborhood-level. One is Bellair's (2000) examination of 100 Seattle neighborhoods. He found that informal surveillance negatively affected robbery and stranger assault and that these crimes negatively affect informal surveillance. Moreover, the relationship between violent crime and informal surveillance was mediated by the perceived risk of victimization. However, that study used cross-sectional data and relied on an instrumental-variable technique to estimate the feedback loop, which often requires making difficult assumptions about the direct and indirect effects of exogenous variables. A second study is Sampson and Raudenbush's (1999), using a sample of 195 Chicago neighborhoods. They estimated reciprocal effects models of the relationship between "collective efficacy" (a factor consisting of both neighborhood cohesion and informal control items) and serious violent crime (robbery and homicide). To identify such models, they used lagged measures of each crime in the crime equations, and measures of neighborhood social ties (number of friends and relatives) and attachment in the collective efficacy equations. Their findings show significant negative reciprocal effects between collective efficacy and both types of crime. These investigations suggest that unless these feedback effects are controlled in nonrecursive models, estimates of the effects of cohesion on violent crime will be biased. Another study, aggregating individual responses from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 British Crime Surveys to the neighborhood level, suggests an escalated feedback loop in which crime and "disorder" (e.g., trash, litter, graffiti, unsupervised teens) leads to fear, which weakens neighborhood cohesion, facilitating more crime and disorder (Markowitz et al., 2001).

5. Conclusion

Two enduring and complementary approaches to the relationship between economic disadvantage and violence — cultural and social disorganziation theories, have been significantly revitalized. Fig. 1 depicts processes examined by recent research. Support for cultural theories has been provided by survey and ethnographic research. Recent survey-based studies, using sophisticated structural equation modeling techniques, more closely examine the causal structure of cultural theories, and show that a significant part of the relationship between economic disadvantage and violence is accounted for by attitudes towards violence, such as a greater emphasis on courage, retribution, the willingness to escalate negative events into disputes, and to use physical force to settle disputes. Ethnographic studies provide a detailed understanding of how attitudes that facilitate violence arise as a form of adaptation to difficult economic circumstances.

A common thread throughout this research is that economic deficits lead to a sensitivity, or concern with one's status, especially among peers and neighbors. These deficits are remedied by placing emphasis on obtaining material goods (e.g., money, clothing) and nonmaterial resources (e.g., respect, deference). In the absence of conventional economic opportunities, attitudes that facilitate violence become accentuated as a means of obtaining these goals. Witnessing and engaging in violence serves to reinforce attitudes that justify its use, leading to an "oppositional culture" that promotes certain behaviors and forms of self-presentation which inhibit successful participation in conventional educational and labor market opportunities, ultimately perpetuating economic disadvantage (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

Concurrently, there has been a revitalization of social disorganization theory and research that attempts to explain SES differences in rates of violence across neighborhoods in terms of differences in communities' capacities to exert informal control over the behavior of its residents. While research into this long-standing theory had been hampered by the unavailability of neighborhood-level data, several studies have emerged using data from U.S. and British neighborhoods offering qualified support for the theory. These studies have shown that the relationship between low SES and violence is due, in part, to neighborhood cohesion

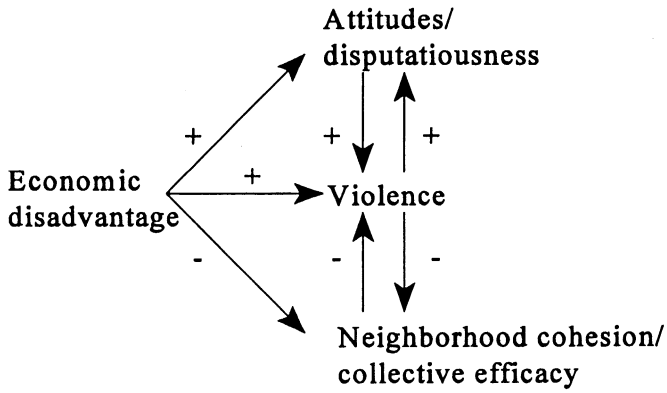

Fig. 1. Cultural and social disorganization model of the relationship between economic disadvantage and violence.

and collective efficacy (see Fig. 1). However, the violence-reducing effects of neighborhood cohesion and efficacy may be attenuated in neighborhoods characterized by highly overlapping normative and nonnormative social networks, in those where crime is entrenched, and where families are less intact. Finally, other research suggests an escalating feedback loop whereby violence reduces social cohesion/efficacy by increasing fear among neighborhood residents, thus, leading to further violence.

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