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Networks and neighbourhoods

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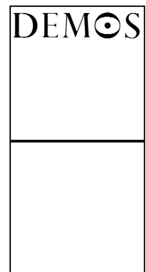


12. Networks and neighbourhoods

the implications of connectivity for thinking about crime in the modern city

Robert J Sampson

The idyllic notion of local communities as 'urban villages' characterised by dense networks of personal ties is a seductive image, and one that pervades theoretical perspectives on neighbourhood crime. The idea seems to be that tight-knit neighbourhoods are safe because of their rich supply of social networks. Yet such ideal typical neighbourhoods appear to bear little resemblance to contemporary cities where weak ties prevail over strong ties and social interaction among residents is characterised more by instrumentality than altruism. Moreover, the dark side of 'community' is often neglected – social networks can and often are put to use for illegal or violent purposes. In short, a deceptive conflation of networks and neighbourhoods characterises the current scene.

The urban village model of cities is further compromised by the assumption that networks of personal ties map neatly on to the geographically defined boundaries of neighbourhoods, such that neighbourhoods can be analysed as independent social entities. In fact, social networks in the modern city frequently traverse traditional ecological boundaries, many of which are permeable and vaguely defined. Living in close proximity to high-crime neighbourhoods may increase the risk of crime no matter what the density of social networks in an adjacent neighbourhood. It follows that neighbour-

hoods themselves need to be conceptualised as nodes in a larger network of spatial relations.

In this essay I explore these issues by considering new ways of thinking about the relevance of neighbourhoods and networks that nonetheless build on important work of the past. Tradition needs to be transcended, not discarded. Neighbourhoods, after all, show remarkable continuities in patterns of criminal activity. For at least a hundred years criminological research in the ecological tradition has confirmed the concentration of interpersonal violence in certain neighbourhoods, especially those characterised by poverty, the racial segregation of minority groups, and the concentration of single-parent families. The challenge, then, is to incorporate new urban realities into our understanding of crime – and ultimately our policy responses.

From social disorganisation to networks

The intellectual history of situating social networks in local neighbourhoods is a venerable one. In the classic work of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology in the early twentieth century it was thought that density, low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and residential instability led to the rupture of local social ties, which in turn accounted for high rates of crime and disorder. Later in the century, the concept of social disorganisation came to be defined as the inability of a community to realise the common values of its residents and maintain effective social order. This theoretical definition was formulated in systemic terms – the allegedly disorganised community was viewed as suffering from a disrupted or weakened system of friendship, kinship and acquaintanceship networks, and thus ultimately of processes of socialisation.

More recently, the intellectual tradition of community-level research has been revitalised by the increasingly popular idea of 'social capital'. Although there are conflicting definitions, social capital is typically conceptualised as being embodied in the social ties among persons. In an influential version, Robert Putnam defines social capital as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate

coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.[1] The connection of social disorganisation and social capital theory can be articulated as follows: neighbourhoods bereft of social capital (read social networks) are less able to realise common values and maintain the social controls that foster safety.

Despite the popular appeal of social capital, there are good reasons to question the translation of strong social ties into low crime rates. First, in some neighbourhood contexts strong ties may impede efforts to establish social control. William Julius Wilson, for example, has argued that residents of very poor neighbourhoods tend to be tightly interconnected through network ties but without necessarily producing collective resources such as social control. He reasons that ties in the inner city are excessively personalistic and parochial in nature – socially isolated from public resources.[2]

Second, networks connect do-gooders just as they connect drug dealers. In her study of a black middle-class community in Chicago, Pattillo-McCoy specifically addresses the limits of tight-knit social bonds in facilitating social control.[3] She argues that although dense local ties do promote social cohesion, at the same time they foster the growth of networks that impede efforts to rid the neighbourhood of organised drug- and gang-related crime. In this way, dense social ties have both positive and negative repercussions, reminding us that in a consideration of networks it is important to ask *what* is being connected – networks are not inherently egalitarian or prosocial in nature.

Third, shared expectations for social control and strategic connections that yield action can be fostered in the absence of thick ties among neighbours. As Granovetter argued in his seminal essay, 'weak ties'– less intimate connections between people based on more infrequent social interaction – may be critical for establishing social resources, such as job referrals, because they integrate the community by way of bringing together otherwise disconnected subgroups.[4] Consistent with this view, there is evidence that weak ties among neighbours, as manifested in middle-range rather than either non-existent or intensive social interaction, are predictive of lower crime rates.

Collective efficacy

Research on dense social ties reveals a paradox of sorts for thinking about crime. Many city-dwellers have only limited interaction with their neighbours and yet appear to generate community-specific social capital. Moreover, urban areas where strong ties are tightly restricted geographically may actually produce a climate that discourages collective responses to local problems. To address these urban realities, in recent work I and my colleagues have proposed a focus on mechanisms of social control that may be facilitated by, but do not necessarily require, strong ties or associations.[5] Rejecting the outmoded assumption that neighbourhoods are characterised by dense, intimate, emotional bonds, I define neighbourhoods in ecological terms and highlight variations in the working trust and shared willingness of residents to intervene in achieving social control. The concept of neighbourhood 'collective efficacy' captures the importance of this link between trust and cohesion on the one hand and shared expectations for control on the other. Just as self-efficacy is situated rather than general (one has self-efficacy relative to a particular task), a neighbourhood's efficacy exists relative to specific tasks such as maintaining public order.

Viewed through this theoretical lens, collective efficacy is a task-specific construct that draws attention to shared expectations and mutual engagement by residents in local social control. To measure the social control aspect of collective efficacy, we have asked residents about the likelihood that their neighbours could be counted on to take action under various scenarios (for example, children skipping school and hanging out on a street corner, or the fire station closest to home being threatened with budget cuts). The cohesion and working trust dimension has been measured by items that capture the extent of local trust, willingness to help neighbours, a close-knit fabric, lack of conflict and shared values. Published results show that after controlling for a range of individual and neighbourhood characteristics, including poverty and the density of friendship ties, *collective efficacy is associated with lower rates of violence*. Neighbourhoods high in collective efficacy predict significantly lower rates of violence even

where earlier experience of violence may have depressed collective efficacy because of fear.

Moving away from a focus on private ties, use of the term 'collective efficacy' is meant to signify an emphasis on shared beliefs in a neighbourhood's capability for action to achieve an intended effect, coupled with an active sense of engagement on the part of residents. Some density of social networks is essential, to be sure, especially networks rooted in social trust. But the key theoretical point is that *networks have to be activated to be ultimately meaningful.* Collective efficacy therefore helps to elevate the 'agentic' aspect of social life over a perspective centred on the accumulation of stocks of social resources (or what some call 'social capital'). This is consistent with a redefinition of social capital in terms of expectations for action within a collectivity.

Distinguishing between the resource potential represented by personal ties, on the one hand, and the shared expectations for action among neighbours represented by collective efficacy, on the other, helps clarify the dense networks paradox: *social networks foster the conditions under which collective efficacy may flourish, but they are not sufficient for the exercise of control.* So the theoretical framework proposed here recognises the transformed landscape of modern urban life, holding that while community efficacy may depend on working trust and social interaction, it does not require that my neighbour or the local police officer be my friend.

Exclusive and non-exclusive social networks

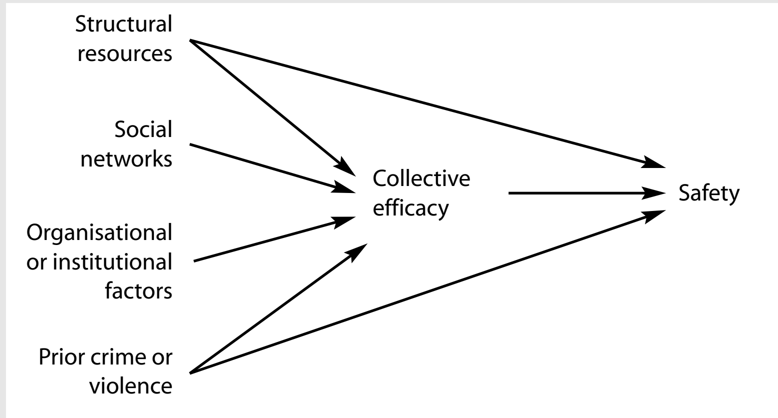
As noted above, recent writing on social capital tends to gloss over its potential downside – namely that social capital can be drawn upon for negative as well as positive goals. After all, resources can be put to many uses, and therefore some constraints on goals are theoretically necessary. For example, we would not consider racial exclusion, as practised in many a 'defended' neighbourhood, to be a desirable result of networking. Many neighbourhood associations in American cities have been so exploited by whites to keep blacks from moving to white working-class areas. Although often resisted by social scientists,

I therefore believe there is a need to invoke a normative or goal-directed dimension when evaluating social networks and collective efficacy.

To judge whether neighbourhood structures serve collective needs I apply the 'non-exclusivity requirement' of a social good – does its consumption by one member of a community diminish the sum available to the community as a whole? For example, I would argue that safety, clean environments, quality education for children, active maintenance of intergenerational ties, the reciprocal exchange of information and services among families, and the shared willingness to intervene on behalf of the neighbourhood all produce a social good that yields positive 'externalities' potentially of benefit to all residents – especially children. As with other resources that produce positive externalities, I believe that collective efficacy is widely desired but much harder to achieve, owing in large part to structural constraints. Ultimately, then, I view the role of social networks in the production of collective efficacy not as a simple panacea but as dependent on specific normative and structural contexts.

The natural question that follows is: what are the kinds of contexts that promote collective efficacy and non-exclusive social networks? Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, I would argue that the infrastructure and cohesion of organisations help sustain capacity for social action in a way that transcends traditional personal ties. In other words, organisations are at least in principle able to foster collective efficacy, often through strategic networking of their own. Whether garbage removal, choosing the site of a fire station, school improvements, or police responses, a continuous stream of challenges faces modern communities, challenges that no longer can be met (if they ever were) by relying solely on individuals. Action depends on connections among organisations, connections that are not necessarily dense or reflective of the structure of personal ties in a neighbourhood. Our research supports this position, showing that the density of local organisations and voluntary associations predicts higher levels of collective efficacy, controlling for poverty and the social composition of the population.[6]

Figure 1 Neighbourhood inequality, social processes and safety



Inequality in other resources nonetheless still matters for explaining the production of collective efficacy. Concentrated disadvantage and lack of home ownership, for example, predict lower levels of later collective efficacy, and the associations of disadvantage and housing instability with violence are significantly reduced when collective efficacy is controlled. These patterns are consistent with the inference that neighbourhood constraints influence violence in part through the mediating role of neighbourhood efficacy. Our work suggests that social resources and social networks create the capacity for collective efficacy, but it is the act of exercising control under conditions of trust that is the most proximate to explaining crime (see Figure 1).

Spatial networks

Networks need not be conceptualised only in personal terms. I would argue that neighbourhoods are themselves nodes in a larger network of spatial relations. Contrary to the common assumption in criminology of analytic independence, my contention is that

neighbourhoods are interdependent and characterised by a functional relationship between what happens at one point in space and what happens elsewhere.

Consider first the inexact correspondence between the neighbourhood boundaries imposed by census geography and the ecological properties that shape social interaction. One of the biggest criticisms of neighbourhood-level research to date concerns the artificiality of boundaries; for example, two families living across the street from one another may be arbitrarily assigned to live in different 'neighbourhoods' even though they share social ties. From the standpoint of systemic theory, it is thus important to account for social and institutional ties that link residents across neighbourhoods. The idea of spatial dependence challenges the urban village model, which implicitly assumes that neighbourhoods represent intact social systems, functioning as islands unto themselves.

Second, spatial dependence is implicated by the fact that offenders are disproportionately involved in acts of violence near their homes. From a routine activities perspective, it follows that a neighbourhood's risk of violence is heightened by geographical proximity to places where known offenders live or to places characterised by risk factors such as concentrated poverty or low collective efficacy.

A third motivation for studying spatial dependence relates to the notion that interpersonal crimes such as homicide are based on social interaction and thus subject to processes of diffusion – where knock-on effects may be felt far from the initial point of impact. Acts of violence may themselves instigate a sequence of events that leads to further violence in a spatially channelled way. A key insight, for example, is that many homicides are retaliatory in nature, such that a homicide in one neighbourhood may provide the spark that eventually leads to a retaliatory killing in a nearby neighbourhood. In addition, most homicides occur among persons known to one another, usually involving networks of association that follow a geographical logic.

There are good reasons, then, to believe that the characteristics of surrounding neighbourhoods are crucial to understanding violence

in any given neighbourhood. Our findings support this notion by establishing the salience of spatial proximity and the inequality of neighbourhood resources that are played out in citywide dynamics. The mechanisms of racial segregation reinforce spatial inequality, explaining why it is, for example, that despite similar income profiles black middle-class neighbourhoods are at greater risk of violence than white middle-class neighbourhoods. In short, violence is conditioned by the characteristics of spatially proximate neighbourhoods, which in turn are conditioned by adjoining neighbourhoods in a spatially linked process that ultimately characterises the entire metropolitan system. Policies that focus solely on the internal characteristics of neighbourhoods, as is typical, are simply insufficient.

Conclusion

We live in a network society, or so we are widely told. But not all networks are created equal, and many lie dormant. The mistake has been to equate the existence of networks with mechanisms of effective social action. As Arthur Stinchcombe put it in a useful analogy, just as road systems have their causal impact through the flow of traffic, so systems of links among people and organisations (and in our case, neighbourhoods) have their causal impact through what flows through them.[7] The problem then becomes obvious – through neighbourhood networks flows the full spectrum of life's realities, whether despair, criminal knowledge, friendship or social control.

In this essay I have considered one small slice of the problem. My basic position is that collective action for problem-solving is a crucial causal mechanism that is differentially activated under specific kinds of contextual conditions. The density of social networks is only one and probably not the most important characteristic of neighbourhoods that contributes to effective social action. I have also argued that neighbourhoods themselves are part of a spatial network encompassing the entire city. To use an overworked term, not only are individuals embedded, so too are neighbourhoods.

Nothing in the logic of my approach is limited to the United States, or any country for that matter. Our current research is seeking to examine the role of spatial inequality and neighbourhood efficacy in several cities around the world. To date we have explored a neighbourhood-level, cross-national comparison of Chicago and Stockholm. Although Chicago and Stockholm vary dramatically in their social structure and levels of violence, this does not necessarily imply a difference in the processes or mechanisms that link communities and crime. Indeed, our analyses suggest that rates of violence are predicted by collective efficacy in Stockholm as in Chicago. Furthermore, collective efficacy is promoted by housing stability and undermined by concentrated disadvantage – again similarly in both cities and in accord with our general theory. The data are thus consistent with a general approach to social policy that emphasises ameliorating neighbourhood inequality in social resources and enhancing social conditions that foster the collective efficacy of residents and organisations.

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Notes

1 R Putnam, 'The prosperous community: social capital and community life', *American Prospect*, Spring (1993).
2 WJ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
3 ME Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: privilege and peril among the black middle class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
4 MS Granovetter, 'The strength of weak ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973).
5 RJ Sampson, SW Raudenbush and F Earls, 'Neighborhoods and violent crime: a multilevel study of collective efficacy', *Science* 277 (1997).
6 J Morenoff, RJ Sampson, SW Raudenbush, 'Neighborhood inequality, collective efficacy, and the spatial dynamics of urban violence', *Criminology* 39 (2001).
7 A Stinchcombe, 'An outsider's view of network analyses of power' in R Perrucci and H Potter, *Networks of Power* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1989).