

INDIVIDUAL NEIGHBORHOOD ATTACHMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY†

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ABSTRACT: *Macro-structural research in the social disorganization tradition assumes neighborhood structure dictates individual behavior. The current research explores the opposite perspective to determine whether individual attachment to the neighborhood influences perceptions of neighborhood safety. Using the Chicago Metropolitan Area Survey, the results show that loners, persons wishing to move, and renters perceive their neighborhoods as being less safe than attached residents. Implications for future research are offered.*

INTRODUCTION

In our own life the intimacy of the neighborhood has been broken up by the growth of an intricate mesh of wider contacts which leaves us strangers to people who live in the same house (Cooley, 1962, p. 26).

A venerable body of research demonstrates that neighborhoods, the physical and social environment immediately proximal to one's home, have meaningful effects on residents. On the other hand, a diverse literature does stress the importance of individual volition in determining whether neighborhoods are indeed salient. As the above quotation suggests, it may be that neighborhoods have no impact whatsoever on individual behavior. Given these contradictory claims, the current study investigates whether individual-level characteristics influence perceptions of neighborhood safety.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

According to social disorganization theory, neighborhoods characterized by high residential mobility, tremendous ethnic heterogeneity, and high poverty levels will exhibit higher crime and delinquency rates. Shaw and McKay (1942) discovered that socially disorganized areas contain higher proportions of families on public assistance, less expensive rents, fewer residents owning homes, high infant mortality, and large immigrant populations. They also noted that delinquency rates in disorganized neighborhoods were static even though their racial and ethnic composition was quite dynamic. Crime-ridden neighborhoods were "bad" whether they were populated by Western Europeans, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Latin-Americans, or African-Americans. Shaw and McKay interpreted these findings in ecological terms. They felt communities themselves were the key factor. Bad places, not bad people, caused social problems. This social disorganization approach has received widespread empirical support over the years (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; DeFronzo, 1996, 1997; Gillis & Hagan, 1982; Heitgerd & Bursik, 1987; Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Rountree & Land, 1996; Rountree, Wilcox, & Land, 1994; Sampson, 1988; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Warner & Pierce, 1993; Warner & Rountree, 1997).

While social disorganization researchers concluded neighborhoods mattered, other researchers realized these effects are incredibly important for some persons, but not for others (Austin & Baba 1990; Gottfredson, McNeil, & Gottfredson, 1991; Haggerty, 1982; Taylor, 1995; Taylor, Shumaker, & Gottfredson, 1985; Wellman & Wortley 1990; Wittberg 1984). Fried (1982, p. 109) wrote "there appears to be a very large discrepancy for many people between the subjective importance they attach to a sense of neighborhood and community and their evaluations of local areas as settings that fulfill such a sense of neighborhood and community."

Oliver's (1984) study of social movement activism uncovered a paradox in community life. Individuals with the greatest sense of collective identity and positive regard for their neighbors often assumed somebody else would bear the responsibilities of social activism. The most "neighborly" people were free-riders. The persons who were willing to assume visible roles often were residents who had less respect and liking for their neighbors. These people were more likely to believe that if they wanted something done, they would have to do it themselves. Along these lines, Granovetter (1973) theorized that peripheral secondary relationships or weak ties were more important than proximal primary relationships or strong ties (of which neighbors certainly apply). Bellair (1997) also questioned whether frequent, friendly, neighborly

interactions were responsible for effective community social control. In effect, these researchers either assumed or found neighborhoods do not “matter.”

THE CURRENT STUDY

Research in the social disorganization tradition is grounded in a structural position. It assumes the neighborhood structure coerces individual actors. People living in impoverished, racially diverse, transitory neighborhoods have higher probabilities of becoming involved in crime, lapsing into unemployment, discontinuing their education, and becoming immersed in urban decay. Conversely, some researchers question the coercive power of neighborhoods over individuals. They acknowledge the tremendous individual-level variation within neighborhoods and operate on the assumption that only some individuals in a neighborhood are affected by its structure.

The purpose of the current study is to examine how individual neighborhood attachment influences perceptions of neighborhood safety. It assumes individuals who are not attached to their neighborhood will have less favorable views of the locale. More specifically, it is hypothesized that unattached persons (e.g., loners, persons wanting to move, renters, and people with few local friends) will be more likely than attached individuals to view their neighborhood as an unsafe place where crime is a problem.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study came from the Chicago Metropolitan Area Survey (CMAS). The CMAS was conducted as part of the “Citizen Participation and Community Crime Prevention” project at the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University. A modified random-digit dialing telephone survey yielded a sample of 1,803 respondents. For a complete discussion of methodological issues regarding original data collection and question wording, see Lavrakas and Skogan (1979). This data set is ideal for the current research purposes because it contains individual-level data, measures of neighborhood attachment, and perceptions of neighborhood safety.

The two dependent variables represent factor scales constructed through varimax rotation. The first scale measures whether respondents perceive crime to be a neighborhood problem. It is derived from survey questions which inquire about the occurrence of arson, assault, burglary, robbery, and vandalism. The second scale measures whether respondents feel criminal victimization (assault, burglary, and robbery) is a likely event in their neighborhoods.

Eleven independent variables are used to estimate neighborhood safety. The four hypothesized measures include self-identification as a loner or sociable person, a desire to move out of the neighborhood, rental or ownership status, and how many neighbors the respondent could ask for a favor. The demographic variables are race, sex, age, education, and household income. In addition, the model includes measures of recent criminal victimization (assault or robbery in the past two years) and fear of crime (afraid to walk in the neighborhood at night) to determine whether they mediate the hypothesized effect of the attachment variables (Baumer, 1985; Covington & Taylor, 1991; Rountree & Land, 1996; Skogan, 1987; Stafford & Galle, 1984). Ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression is employed because of the continuous-level measurement of the factor scales.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the correlation matrix. The correlations between the attachment variables are weak and multicollinearity is not a problem. Among the attachment measures, males are more likely to be loners and income is moderately related to wanting to move and home ownership. The largest relationship exists between recent victimization and the likelihood of victimization scale.

TABLE 1
Zero-Order Correlation Matrix (n = 1,803)

	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆	X ₇	X ₈	X ₉	X ₁₀	X ₁₁	Y ₁	Y ₂
X ₁ Race	-.06	-.19	.07	.19	-.02	-.11	.00	-.14	-.02	.17	-.02	.17
X ₂ Age		-.06	.08	.03	.02	.14	-.08	.17	.00	.07	.00	.07
X ₃ Sex			-.02	-.13	-.30	.04	-.04	.06	.01	.30	.01	-.30
X ₄ Education				.06	.04	.00	-.01	-.01	-.01	.16	-.01	.16
X ₅ Income					.05	-.12	.07	-.25	.01	.12	.01	.12
X ₆ Loner						-.08	.06	-.09	.03	.03	.03	.03
X ₇ Mover							-.09	.26	.07	-.16	.07	-.16
X ₈ Friends								-.05	.01	.05	.01	.05
X ₉ Ownership									.03	-.13	.03	-.13
X ₁₀ Recent Victim										-.08	.07	.66
X ₁₁ Fear of Crime											-.08	.24
Y ₁ Neighborhood Crime												.00
Y ₂ Likelihood Victimization												

Coding: Race (0 = White, 1 = Black); Age (in years); Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female); Education (0 = No Secondary, 1 = Secondary, 2 = College Undergraduate, 3 = College Post-Graduate); Income (0 = Less than \$6,000, 1 = \$6,001 to \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001 to \$15,000, 3 = \$15,001 to \$20,000, 4 = \$20,001 to \$30,000, 5 = \$30,001 to \$50,000, 6 = \$50,001+); Loner (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Mover (0 = Wants to Move, 1 = Remain); Friends (continuous); Ownership (0 = Rent, 1 = Own); Recent Victim (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Fear of Crime (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

Table 2 presents the results of the regression solution. Loners, persons wishing to move, and renters regard their neighborhoods as less safe than attached residents. Neighborhood friendship fails to reach statistical significance. Among the control variables, respondents who are more educated, younger, non-white, and fearful of crime see their neighborhoods as unsafe. Gender, income, and recent victimization experience are not predictive of perceptions of neighborhood safety.

TABLE 2
OLS Regression Coefficients

Independent Variables	Neighborhood Crime Problem			Likelihood of Victimization		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Education	.013*	.006	.054	.008	.006	.034
Age	-.004*	.001	-.064	-.003*	.001	-.046
Race	.183*	.055	.078	.249*	.055	.108
Sex	-.017	.047	-.008	.082	.048	.041
Income	.002	.010	.004	.017	.010	.041
Loner	.094*	.044	.050	.084*	.044	.044
Mover	.044*	.014	.075	.024	.014	.040
Neighborhood Friends	.002	.001	.036	-.002	.001	-.027
Own/Rent	.261*	.045	.144	.098*	.045	.054
Recent Victim	.019	.058	.007	.412*	.058	.161
Fear of Crime	-.187*	.022	-.205	-.135*	.022	-.149
Constant	3.497*			2.529*		
R^2	.102			.091		
Adjusted R^2	.097			.084		
<i>N</i>	1,803			1,803		

* denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

Three of the four hypothesized measures of neighborhood attachment (loners, persons wishing to move, and renters) are predictive of perceptions of the likelihood of criminal victimization scale. The number of neighborhood friends has no effect on respondents' perceptions of neighborhood safety. For the control measures, younger respondents, non-whites, females, respondents with higher incomes, previously victimized respondents, and persons who are unafraid of crime think personal victimization is likely in their neighborhood. Only education is not significantly related to perceptions of the likelihood of criminal victimization in one's neighborhood.

DISCUSSION

The data support three of the four hypotheses. Self-estranged individuals generally perceive their neighborhoods as less safe compared to

respondents who are more attached to the local community. These effects persist after controlling for socio-demographic measures, fear of crime, and recent victimization experience. Unexpectedly, social statuses are inconsistently related to perceptions of neighborhood safety. These findings contradict other studies which show that lower status persons view their neighborhoods as less safe (Austin & Yoko, 1990; Walker, 1994; Smith & Torstensson, 1997).

The main contribution of the current research lies in the introduction of attachment variables which help explain individual perceptions of the quality of neighborhood life. Persons who tend not to socialize with neighbors, want to move out of the area, and renters rate their neighborhoods as unsafe. This perception is not mediated by fear of crime or criminal victimization. Thus, the importance of neighborhood phenomena to individuals is as salient as those individuals' sociological characteristics.

These findings suggest three avenues for future research. First, individual locus of control might influence whether one feels the need to attach themselves socially and perceptually in a positive way to their neighborhood. Persons with an internal locus may be more likely than individuals with an external locus to nullify their social environment and simply stay secluded inside their homes. At least one study (Houts & Kassab, 1997) shows locus of control impacts fear of crime.

A second concern focuses upon variables which influence the beliefs of self-estranged individuals. Unattached people have worse perceptions of neighborhood safety in the current analysis. Perhaps television influences this perception. Prior research shows television news consumption affects fear of crime among white females and middle-aged persons (Chiricos et al., 1997). The vicarious presentation of criminal events in the media might sway perceptions of neighborhood safety for people who elect to shelter themselves inside their homes.

Third, racial prejudice (Skogan, 1995; St. John & Heald-Moore, 1996) and area racial composition (Chiricos et al., 1997) impact individual-level fear of crime. These variables also might determine whether people are willing to interact with neighbors of different race and ethnicity. The addition of such measures might help explain why the attachment variables presented here are robust predictors of perceptions of safety.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to a macro-sociological perspective, neighborhoods are not monolithic structures which universally steer individuals down certain behavioral paths. Instead, people decide whether they will allow

their neighborhood structure, be it a safe or a dangerous place, to manipulate them. Though traditional demographic measures were helpful in determining neighborhood effects, the current results indicate a need to look within those generally ascribed statuses to gain a fuller understanding of neighborhood attachment and quality of life issues.

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