



Collective efficacy: How is it conceptualized, how is it measured, and does it really matter for understanding perceived neighborhood crime and disorder?



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ABSTRACT

Building on the insights of the self-efficacy literature, this study highlights that collective efficacy is a collective perception that comes from a process. This study emphasizes that 1) there is *updating*, as there are feedback effects from success or failure by the group to the perception of collective efficacy, and 2) this updating raises the importance of accounting for members' degree of *uncertainty* regarding neighborhood collective efficacy. Using a sample of 113 block groups in three rural North Carolina counties, this study finds evidence of updating as neighborhoods perceiving more crime or disorder reported less collective efficacy at the next time point. Furthermore, collective efficacy was only associated with lower perceived disorder at the next time point when it occurred in highly cohesive neighborhoods. Finally, neighborhoods with more perceived disorder and uncertainty regarding collective efficacy at one time point had lower levels of collective efficacy at the next time point, illustrating the importance of uncertainty along with updating.

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A growing body of literature has employed the concept of collective efficacy to explain various neighborhood processes (for reviews of this literature, see Hipp & Wo, 2015; Sampson, 2006). A not uncommon consequence for any construct to which social scientists turn with such vigor is that this wholesale adoption of a concept runs the risk of creating conceptual confusion. That is, there is a risk that all things good *are* collective efficacy, just as the concept of social capital sometimes simply indicates all things good in a neighborhood or community. To utilize the important insights provided by the concept of collective efficacy it is useful to consider carefully what this construct really implies, and how it should be measured. These considerations are analogous to Portes' (1998) discussion regarding social capital, as we need to distinguish between what *is* collective efficacy, what are the *determinants* of it, and what are the *consequences* of it. Conflating these creates conceptual murkiness and stunts theoretical development.

One key insight that I will develop here is the notion of *updating* for how members of a group view the group's collective efficacy regarding some task. This insight comes from a close reading of the general notion of self efficacy, and makes clear that whereas collective efficacy is a general perception of the group members, it is malleable and develops from a *process*. Although Sampson (2006) has noted that collective efficacy is

produced through social interactions, important unique insights emerge from my focus on the feedback from prior success, or lack of it, when engaging in collective behavior. An implication is that the possibility that crime or disorder in the neighborhood might impact residents' perception of collective efficacy is not some arcane statistical possibility, but in fact is a likely important part of the process through which residents develop their level of collective efficacy.

A second unique contribution from the present study is that this updating implies that the degree of *uncertainty* members of the group have regarding this collective efficacy has important implications. As I will elaborate later, this uncertainty is distinct from a neighborhood with an average level of collective efficacy. This uncertainty will typically occur in a low crime or disorder neighborhood, as residents will have little actual evidence to know whether their neighbors will engage in informal social control when confronted with neighborhood problems. Furthermore, I will point out that this uncertainty implies that a single event of disorder or crime can have a strong impact on subsequent perceptions of collective efficacy, depending on the response that is observed in that instance.

This study therefore considers: 1) whether levels of perceived crime or disorder cause residents to update their sense of collective efficacy over time; 2) whether crime or disorder events provide information to residents that reduces their level of uncertainty about collective efficacy over time; 3) whether crime or disorder events in neighborhoods with much uncertainty regarding the level of collective efficacy result in

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reduced collective efficacy over time; and 4) whether higher levels of collective efficacy within a context of high cohesion might reduce the level of crime or disorder over time.

Background

Defining self-efficacy and collective efficacy

To begin, we need to unpack the key terms of Bandura's (1977) concept of *self-efficacy* and *collective efficacy*. Self-efficacy focuses explicitly on the efficacy expressed by an individual, and is defined as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995: 2). Thus, self-efficacy is a sense of what *can* be accomplished in a situation that does not include any out of the ordinary circumstances. Furthermore, self-efficacy is a task-specific construct—a person has self-efficacy regarding a particular task—rather than some general trait characterizing a person. The insights of the broad literature studying self-efficacy are of use to scholars in the collective efficacy tradition, given the substantial overlap in the constructs, and I will touch on these.

Collective efficacy extends the idea of self-efficacy to a collectivity. As discussed by Wickes, Hipp, Sargeant, & Homel (2013), there are dual intellectual lineages for the concept of collective efficacy from both psychology (Bandura, 1986, 2000; Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson, & Zazanis, 1995) and sociology (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Building on the theoretical framework of self-efficacy, Bandura noted that "perceived *collective* efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results" (Bandura, 1982: 143, emphasis added), and hypothesized that collective efficacy was a property of any sized group, ranging from small collectivities to nation-states. Sampson et al. (1997) theorized the importance of collective efficacy for neighborhoods as "the capacity for achieving an intended effect" (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999: 612).

Informal social control

Although collective efficacy is a broad concept referring to the collective sense of being able to accomplish some collective task, much recent social science literature utilizing this concept uses neighborhoods as the collectivity of interest and the specific task of reducing crime through the provision of informal social control. As noted by Sampson et al. (1997: 918), "Social control refers generally to the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles—to realize collective, as opposed to forced, goals." Importantly, this is a *behavioral* measure. Measuring informal social control is quite difficult, as such sanctioning behavior can only occur *if there is delinquent behavior* (Sampson, 2006). This emphasizes the need to somehow account for the limited opportunities in some neighborhoods, by, for instance, measuring the proportion of observed instances of delinquent behavior in which a resident actually engaged in sanctioning behavior. One such approach would measure the *potential for informal social control* in a neighborhood by offering residents a series of vignettes and asking them their own likelihood for engaging in such behavior (Warner, 2007). Similarly, studies have asked residents the degree to which they feel responsible for the neighborhood (Steenbeek & Hipp, 2011; Taylor, Gottfredson, & Brower, 1984). An advantage of such an approach is that to the extent residents answer such questions honestly and accurately, the answers of all residents in the neighborhood could be combined as a measure of the likelihood of residents responding to delinquent behavior by engaging in sanctioning behavior. Of course, the validity of this measure crucially relies on the extent to which residents actually answer such questions honestly and accurately. Social desirability bias might lead some to claim that they would engage in such activity when in fact they would not if confronted with such a scenario. The studies that ask about informal social control *behavior* typically have limited

information about what the activity was. For example, one study asked residents whether they help watch over one another's house, but what respondents mean by "watching over" can vary (Bellair, 2000). Another study asked residents whether they had "been active to improve the livability and safety of the neighborhood", which is also vague about the actual activity (Steenbeek & Hipp, 2011).

Nonetheless, studies often use neither the behavioral action of providing informal social control nor the *potential* for informal social control in a neighborhood, but instead frequently ask a series of vignettes in which, rather than asking the respondent what they might do in such an instance, ask respondents to report on what they believe their *neighbors* might do in such an instance. That is, the initial question stub of "how likely is it that you would intervene if..." is replaced with "how likely is it that your neighbors would intervene if..." (Odgers et al., 2009; Reisig & Cancino, 2004; Sampson et al., 1997; Taylor, 1996; Wickes et al., 2013). Combining the responses of residents in a neighborhood (or any other collectivity) on these measures captures the extent to which residents expect others to engage in such behavior. Indeed, Sampson and colleagues in later work referred to this measure when summed over all residents of the neighborhood as the *shared expectations* of informal social control (Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). I argue that given the definition of collective efficacy provided above—a collectivity's sense of efficacy regarding a particular task—these measures indeed *are* collective efficacy regarding the ability of residents to provide informal social control.

Note that although I claim these expectations of informal social control *are* collective efficacy, a common strategy in the neighborhoods and crime literature combines them with a measure of cohesion/trust to create a measure termed "collective efficacy" (Browning, Feinberg, & Dietz, 2004; Mazerolle, Wickes, & McBroom, 2010; Sampson et al., 1997). However, scholars are increasingly questioning this approach given that measures of trust and cohesion in neighborhoods are very general constructs and not task-specific—which is a crucial component of collective efficacy.¹ The psychology branch of collective efficacy research typically does not combine a general measure of cohesion as a *component* of the task-specific construct of collective efficacy, but instead considers that cohesion may enable collective efficacy (Zaccaro et al., 1995). Recent neighborhood studies also have shown empirically that collective efficacy and cohesion/trust appear to be distinct constructs using data from Chicago (Rhineberger-Dunn & Carlson, 2009) and Brisbane, Australia (Wickes et al., 2013), and another study conceptualized them as distinct constructs (Foster-Fishman, Collins, & Pierce, 2013).

The process of efficacy: updating

An important insight that comes from Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is the notion of *updating* that constantly occurs regarding one's sense of efficacy. Updating refers to the process of reassessing one's sense of efficacy based on new information that has been obtained in some fashion (Bandura, 1997). This idea, and its implications, has not been sufficiently appreciated in the collective efficacy literature. For self-efficacy, scholars have demonstrated the importance of updating with experiments (Bandura, 1982: 124–126), and it is posited that individuals will reassess their self-efficacy based on their own experiences, as well as vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, or the physiological state in which they experience the event (Bandura, 1982: 126–7). Thus, there are four posited mechanisms through which self-efficacy can be changed: 1) enactive mastery experiences (indicators of capability); 2) vicarious experiences (observing the attainments of others); 3) verbal persuasion that one has capabilities; and 4) physiological and affective states through which one assesses their capabilities (Bandura, 1997: 79).

This notion of updating in the self-efficacy literature translates exactly to the concept of collective efficacy. Nonetheless, scholars have not fully accounted for this, despite its important implications. Fig. 1

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