Neighborhood disorder and generalized trust: A multilevel mediation examination of social mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Prior research suggests that neighborhood context has an important role in shaping individuals' generalized trust, which is an important ingredient in establishing social capital and collective efficacy. Because most of the empirical research focuses on the direct effects of neighborhood conditions such as disadvantage and disorder, there is a rather limited understanding of how social mechanisms affect individual levels of trust. As a result, it remains unclear whether several theoretically relevant social processes mediate the effect of neighborhood disorder.
Methods: Using data from the Project of Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods—Community Survey (PHDCN-CS), multilevel mediation modeling is used to investigate whether social mechanisms, specifically fear and negative police efficacy, mediate the relationship between neighborhood disorder and individual-level generalized trust.
Results: Our results show that neighborhood disorder reduces generalized trust and that fear and negative perceptions of police efficacy mediate the effects of neighborhood disorder.
Conclusions: Social mechanisms, specifically fear and negative police efficacy, are salient processes in the neighborhood disorder and generalized trust relationship. Theoretical and policy implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

At the heart of healthy, safe, and sustainable neighborhoods, is the ingredient of generalized trust. The importance of trust in society can be traced back to Durkheim (1984 [1893], 1897) who argued that societies achieve solidarity through mutual cooperation and trust. In his seminal work *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984 [1893]) believed that trust was important for societies to create a division of labor based on equal rights and duties for its members. Furthermore, he argued that while trust is the foundation of solidarity and mutual cooperation, distrust among individuals is likely to result in anomic settings that deteriorate the solidarity established in society. To date, scholars of urban life have commonly agreed on the fundamental role of trust in producing social ties and relationships that are beneficial to communities (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Kornhauser, 1978; Putnam, 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Generalized trust, defined as the belief in the integrity of other people, is an important element in the ability of individuals to depend on others for assistance (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, generalized trust is a salient component in the

formation of social capital and collective efficacy (Putnam, 1995; Sampson et al., 1997),[1] which have been shown to provide a "protective factor" from the adverse structural characteristics of urbanism and social disorganization (see Sampson, 2012, p. 175).[2]

Early research on neighborhood effects contended that the changing physical and social environment of cities affected the quality of life and weakened the trust-based social connections of residents (Park, 1925; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Drawing on these ideas, contemporary research on neighborhood effects have directly emphasized the roles that adverse structural characteristics play in reducing levels of generalized trust and trust-formed social ties (e.g., social capital and collective efficacy) (Massey & Denton, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Presently, much of the available literature has suggested that dimensions of neighborhood stratification negatively affect individuals' trust in others due to conditions associated with disadvantage and disorganization (Massey & Denton, 1993; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Wilson, 1987). Indeed, influential work by Massey and Denton (1993) illustrates how neighborhood disorder can influence the lack of trust in others as part of a larger psychological and cultural response to stressful living conditions: "In the face of persistent neighborhood disorder, residents come to distrust their neighbors and to look upon them as threats rather than as sources of support or assistance…By provoking withdrawal, disorder

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weakens informal processes of social control that operate to maintain a neighborhood's stability" (p. 138).

While previous efforts have generally established a direct relationship between adverse neighborhood contexts and reduced trust, limited attention has been directed toward the intervening mechanisms that may link this relationship. This gap in the literature is surprising given that scholars of neighborhood effects advocate that individuals react to neighborhoods differently and these reactions "constitute social mechanisms and practices that in turn shape perceptions, personal relationships, and behaviors …within… neighborhood borders…" (Sampson, 2012, p. 357). Consistent with this assertion, strands of theories based on neighborhood effects suggest there are social and psychological factors more apt to occur in adverse areas, which in turn may affect the levels of trust among individuals.

Building on these theoretical notions and previous efforts, and specifically drawing from the disorder framework, we argue that neighborhood disorder may weaken individuals' trust indirectly by way of two pathways. First, individuals residing in neighborhoods characterized by high disorder may become more fearful of their environment, thereby reducing their level of trust with other citizens. Secondly, residents of these adverse environments view the police to be less responsive, ultimately believing that the police are unwilling to assist with their problems, thereby undermining trust in others.

Understanding the intervening mechanisms that explain the relationship between neighborhood disorder and trust is important for several reasons. First, trust has been identified as an antecedent to various positive benefits for both individuals and communities, including economic mobility, social capital, and collective efficacy (Bourdieu, 1980; Putnam, 2000; Sampson et al., 1997). Thus, identifying the predictors that may weaken individuals' trust can have important implications for understanding prosocial relationships that provide safe and sustainable communities (Kornhauser, 1978; Putnam, 2000; Sampson et al., 1997). Second, because limited empirical attention has been given to the possible mechanisms between adverse neighborhood contexts and trust, we know very little about how individual-level processes may decrease trust. As a result, identifying the processes that may reduce trust has important implications for understanding the ecological foundations of generalized trust (Putnam, 2000; Wilson, 1987). Third, the percentage of individuals who trust others have varied over time, but ultimately fallen from approximately 46% to 32% (General Social Survey, 1972–2012). Consequently, to the extent that fear and negative police efficacy mediate the relationship between neighborhood disorder and trust, our results may provide additional implications for understanding the factors partially responsible in reducing trust among individuals.

Drawing on theoretical models of neighborhood effects as well as prior work in this area, the present study assesses two hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that neighborhood disorder will be significantly and negatively related to individual-level trust, net of individual- and neighborhood-level controls. Second, we hypothesize that the significant relationships between neighborhood disorder on trust will be mediated by individual-level mechanisms, such as fear and negative perceptions of police efficacy, that are more apt to occur in such depleted environments. We evaluate these predictions using multilevel data from the Project of Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods—Community Survey (PHDCN—CS).

2. Theoretical foundation

The increasing concentration of disadvantage within urban neighborhoods has generated multiple theoretical frameworks regarding the consequences of residing in adverse living conditions, which include, but not limited to violence, adolescent development, educational outcomes, and concentrated poverty (Anderson, 1999; Elliott et al., 1996; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Sampson, 2012; Wilson, 1987). Moreover, theoretical models of neighborhood effects suggest the substantial variation in individuals' levels of generalized trust is due to types of

neighborhood contexts where individuals live. In fact, there is convincing evidence linking the consequences of residing in disadvantage environments to reduced levels of generalized trust. In his discussion of environments characterized by extreme disadvantage, Wilson (1987) argued that urban areas have suffered economic hardships due to the deindustrialization, changes within labor forces, elevated levels of prolonged unemployment, family disruption, and the relocation of middle- and upper-class families to suburban locales. He further contends that residents of these urban areas have become socially isolated from "individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (1987, p. 60). In other works, Massey and Denton (1993) illustrated that disadvantage areas created by isolation not only signify a breakdown in social order and security, but also promote mistrust and withdrawal from community life (1993, p. 138). As stated by Massey and Denton (1993, p. 172): "In this social world [disadvantage contexts], ghetto dwellers acquired a tough, cynical attitude toward life, a deep suspicion of the motives of others, and a marked lack of trust in the goodwill or benevolent intentions of people and institutions."

Several studies inspired by the disadvantage framework have documented the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and reduced individual-level trust (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Putnam, 1995; Ross et al., 2001). In addition, neighborhoods characterized by residential instability and racial/ethnic heterogeneity, which are mainly found in disadvantage environments, have been shown to negatively affect trust (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Lancee & Dronkers, 2008; Marschall & Stolle, 2004; Putnam, 2007).

2.1. Neighborhood disorder and trust

While studies have generally linked neighborhood disadvantage to reduce generalized trust, other scholars contend that neighborhood disorder predicts individuals' levels of trust above and beyond neighborhood disadvantage (see Ross et al., 2001; Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2002). The importance of neighborhood disorder can be traced to Wilson and Kelling's (1982) influential thesis on "broken windows" which highlights how disadvantaged inner-city locales influence physical and social disorder (Jacobs, 1961; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). In their observations, Wilson and Kelling found that neighborhoods suffering from signs of physical (e.g., graffiti, abandoned buildings, litter) and/or social deterioration (e.g., drunks, prostitutes, rowdy teenagers) increased residents' fear and withdrawal from public spaces, resulting in a breakdown of informal social control as trusting relationships diminished. Similarly, Massey and Denton (1993) contend that withdrawal from social life further exacerbates disorder; which in turn, reduces the social connections needed to operate a stable and safe environment.

Ross et al.'s (2001) "structural amplification theory of mistrust" also illustrates how neighborhood disorder reduces individuals' willingness to trust others. According Ross and colleagues, neighborhood disorder, common in disadvantaged contexts, negatively influences levels of trust by increasing residents' perceptions of powerlessness. The effect of powerlessness, in turn, amplifies the negative effects of neighborhood disorder on trust.

As stated by Ross et al. (2001, p. 571): "… these signs [disorder] indicate that the people who live around them are not concerned with public order…not respectful of each other's property, that the local agents of social control are either unable or unwilling to cope with local problems, and that those in power have abandoned them, all which undermine trust."

Consistent with arguments within the disorder framework, research illustrates that neighborhood disorder decreases individuals' generalized trust. Indeed, using their structural amplification of mistrust theory, Ross et al. (2001) found that residents who live in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of disorder are more mistrusting. In addition, among residents who felt powerless in avoiding harm and threat, the effect of neighborhood disorder on mistrust was amplified. In a related study, Ross et al. (2002) found that neighborhood disorder