



Caring about the community, counteracting disorder: 311 reports of public issues as expressions of territoriality



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ABSTRACT

Many cities now receive and digitally archive requests for government services through constituent relationship management (CRM) systems (e.g., 311 hotlines). Some reports seek to counteract deterioration or disorder in urban neighborhoods (e.g., potholes), suggesting that they might be motivated by territoriality. We examined this question through a survey of CRM users in Boston, MA, which was combined with their patterns of reporting, as derived from the CRM database ($N = 660$). The survey included measures of three territorial motives and social and personal relationships with the neighborhood. We test a three-layer model in which neighborhood relationships predict territorial motives, and both predict reporting patterns. The findings suggest that the greatest motive for such reports is to benefit the community. Other results regarding the role of social cohesion and local social networks are also discussed. Overall, the study provides a substantive interpretation for CRM reports that was previously absent.

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1. Introduction

Physical disorder has long been seen as an important indicator of the well-being of a city neighborhood (see Booth, 1903; Jacobs, 1961; Mayhew, 1862; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Taylor, 2001; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Deterioration and other incivilities, like graffiti, accumulating garbage, or the iconic “broken window,” reflect a space that is poorly maintained and managed, and can be symptomatic of a deeper vulnerability in the community’s ability to regulate its public spaces. Most research on disorder has focused on its role as a signal of other neighborhood characteristics, and the effect that it can have on residents and passers-by (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008; O’Brien & Wilson, 2011; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Pitner, Yu, & Brown, 2012; Skogan, 1992; Wilson & Kelling, 1982), but less is known about the behaviors that are responsible for the maintenance of the public spaces, what one might call *custodianship*. Research has yet to specify where and how often individuals act as custodians, what their motives are for doing so, and how these patterns and dynamics vary across individuals.

A major methodological challenge for the study of custodianship is that its constituent behaviors are difficult to measure. Actions

that serve to maintain the public space are sufficiently rare that no protocol of systematic observation has been developed for them, and survey measures on the topic are likely to be subject to both recall error and reporter bias (e.g., Bator, Bryan, & Schultz, 2011). A new technology, increasing in popularity in Western Europe and the United States, offers a potential solution to this challenge. Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) systems, colloquially known as 311 lines, provide residents with a set of convenient channels for requesting city services, often including not only a telephone hotline but also web-based applications. Such systems receive hundreds of requests per day, each one a discrete moment in which an individual has chosen to take action on some issue. Many of these refer to instances of deterioration or neglect in the public space, like street light outages, potholes, or graffiti, in which case the call itself is an instance of custodial behavior. The CRM database is an archive of these reports, and though its original intent was to assist city officials in the management of service delivery, it has the potential to be a valuable resource for research on neighborhood maintenance.

With this premise in mind, O’Brien (2013) forwarded a methodology that uses the CRM database to measure individual differences in the frequency and geographic range of custodianship. Analyzed in isolation, though, it is unclear how these measures relate to established behavioral and attitudinal constructs, information that would be necessary for them to contribute to current research. Traditionally, maintenance and personalization of the

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public space have been treated as an expression of territoriality, or those attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions that arise from ownership of objects or space (Taylor, 1988). This has been supported empirically by studies that have found that houses whose residents are more territorial are better maintained and are more likely to have decorations at holidays (Brown & Werner, 1985; Harris & Brown, 1996), and neighborhoods whose residents exhibit greater territoriality are cleaner, have lower levels of crime, and are, overall, more orderly (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2004; Pitner et al., 2012). The current study evaluates this proposed relationship between territoriality and custodial requests for service by using a novel multi-method approach that augments the CRM database of Boston, MA with surveys completed by its users. The combination of these two data sources allows us to examine the territorial motivations that underlie these requests, and how both emerge from relationships with the neighborhood. Towards this end, the following sections summarize the existing literature on territoriality as a behavioral construct, and discuss the sorts of measures that would be necessary to examine whether and how a particular behavior is in fact an expression of territoriality.

1.1. Territoriality and urban neighborhoods

Human territoriality has been a popular area for scientific study since the mid-20th century, originally growing out of a deep body of work in biology that focused primarily on how animals claim territories and defend them from intrusion by others (e.g., Ardrey, 1966). It was noted, though, that territorial behaviors in humans were not limited to aggression and defense, leading researchers to expand the definition more generally to all behaviors, cognitions, and attitudes that arise from a sense of ownership over an object or space, and serve to define interpersonal roles surrounding it (Altman, 1970; Brown, 1987; Edney, 1974; Sundstrom & Altman, 1974; Taylor, 1988). Thus, psychological ownership, or “the feeling of possessiveness and of being psychologically tied to an object” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001: 299), is the primary basis for territoriality, driving those behaviors that establish, communicate, and maintain one's relationship to an object or space relative to others (Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005). This might include the overt establishment of borders (i.e., mine vs. yours), but also more subtle acts that indirectly signal ownership, for instance, by personalizing an item in recognizable ways. It also includes mechanisms that reduce conflict and facilitate collective functioning where space and items are shared.

Territoriality is on display in urban neighborhoods at two different levels (Brown & Altman, 1981). First, as in any residential setting, individuals and families are responsible for their homes, conducting regular maintenance, and attending to any desired landscaping or other lawn and house decoration. This might be referred to as the primary territory. Second, owing to high population density, urbanites share considerable public space—some of which might even technically be private, like front steps—which requires its own physical and social maintenance, referred to as the secondary territory. This has been of major interest to urban researchers as it provides an insight into the overall function of communities, and how residents collectively manage their space. If this maintenance fails for any reason, the neighborhood could eventually fall into a disorderly state, characterized by both physical deterioration and social misconduct.

Despite the popularity of the subject, very few studies have examined the discrete behaviors that are responsible for the maintenance of the public space, how they vary across individuals, and how in turn this variation influences the overall maintenance of the neighborhood. Instead, most work has focused on evidence of territoriality in the physical and social scenery of the

neighborhood. Because territoriality is equated with behaviors that maintain and personalize the space, it is possible to estimate its strength in a neighborhood through artifacts like the level of physical disorder (Harris & Brown, 1996), lawn or holiday decorations (Brown & Werner, 1985; Werner, Peterson-Lewis, & Brown, 1989), or elements that announce property boundaries, like fences or “NO TRESPASSING” signs (Caughy, O'Campo, & Patterson, 2001). In this way, territoriality is measured indirectly through the consequences of its operation.

One reason for this approach might be a methodological challenge. Territorial behaviors themselves are rare, and therefore difficult to observe in a systematic fashion, especially if the focus is the public space. The recording of a single such event would require the coincidence of an issue in the public space and an individual who decides to take responsibility for said issue. Given multiple hours of observation, a researcher may observe this coincidence a few times at most, making comparisons across neighborhoods difficult, and comparisons across individuals virtually impossible. There have been a few exceptions to this rule, though each with their weaknesses. During a door-to-door survey Edney (1972) found that individuals with more signs and fences on their lawn answered the doorbell more quickly. The correlation was interpreted as evidence for a coordinated suite of territorial behaviors. Others have examined the likelihood that individuals will intervene in a public disturbance, either informally or formally, but typically through self-reports and not through measures of actual actions (Heckler, Ho, & Urquhart-Ross, 1974; Wells, Schafer, Varano, & Bynum, 2006).

The CRM system offers a potential window into a specific form of territorial behavior known as custodianship, or those acts that seek to maintain the space by either preventing or counteracting deterioration. When people work to counteract or prevent physical disorder they are proactively asserting ownership over the space and its conditions. Because there are various ways and contexts in which territoriality might manifest itself, it would be most appropriate to say that custodianship comprises a subset of these behaviors, and, likewise, only entails a subset of the cognitions and motives associated with them. Custodianship might be observed as direct action, like sweeping a sidewalk, but is also readily visible in those CRM reports that instigate city services to address an instance of deterioration or denigration, like a street light outage or graffiti. The CRM database contains a digital record for each such record, providing an extended time-course that is sufficient to measure individual differences in reporting, overcoming the overall rarity of such actions. O'Brien (2013) demonstrated the methodological potential of the CRM database, referring to such reports as custodianship, a particular expression of territoriality oriented around maintenance. This characterization seems fitting given the content and functional impact of the reports, but, as with any administrative data set, the data are novel and have no external validity relative to established measures and constructs. Thus, there is a need to explore which, if any, territorial motives they in fact reflect, and, in turn, if and how they are driven by relationships with the surrounding neighborhood.

1.2. Assessing the role of territoriality in CRM reports

The CRM system is just one of many large, digital data sets that have emerged in recent years, each capturing some aspect of human behavior or society in unprecedented detail. Many have argued that these “big data” will lead to a computational social science that promises to transform existing models and theories (Lazer et al., 2009). For this to occur, however, two questions must be answered for any such data set: 1) What in fact do the data measure?; and 2) How do these measurements connect to the

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