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Perceptions as the crucial link? The mediating role of neighborhood perceptions in the relationship between the neighborhood context and neighborhood cohesion

Joran Laméris^a, John R. Hipp^b, Jochem Tolsma^{a,*}

^a Department of Sociology, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^b Department of Criminology, Law and Society, The University of California, Irvine, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of neighborhood racial in-group size, economic deprivation and the prevalence of crime on neighborhood cohesion among U.S. whites. We explore to what extent residents' perceptions of their neighborhood mediate these macro-micro relationships. We use a recent individual-level data set, the American Social Fabric Study (2012/2013), enriched with contextual-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) and employ multi-level structural equation models. We show that the racial in-group size is positively related to neighborhood cohesion and that neighborhood cohesion is lower in communities with a high crime rate. Individuals' perceptions of the racial in-group size partly mediate the relationship between the objective racial in-group size and neighborhood cohesion. Residents' perceptions of unsafety from crime also appear to be a mediating factor, not only for the objective crime rate but also for the objective racial in-group size. This is in line with our idea that racial stereotypes link racial minorities to crime whereby neighborhoods with a large non-white population are perceived to be more unsafe. Residents of the same neighborhood differ in how they perceive the degree of economic decay of the neighborhood and this causes them to evaluate neighborhood cohesion differently, however perceptions of neighborhood economic decay do not explain the link between the objective neighborhood context and neighborhood cohesion.

1. Introduction

Ongoing immigration to Western countries triggered a heated political and academic debate about the possible threats of racial diversity for the well-being of society. In a widely cited article, Putnam (2007) claimed that diversity in U.S. communities erodes social cohesion both between and within ethnic/racial groups. This paper spurred other research investigating the diversity-cohesion relationship in the United States as well as in Europe (e.g. Stolle et al., 2008; Letki, 2008; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2010; Savelkoul et al., 2014). Meta-analyses of the multitude of studies investigating the diversity-cohesion relation pointed out that if a negative effect of racial diversity is found at all, it is more common in the United States than in Europe and it is more consistent for aspects of social cohesion that are spatially bound to the neighborhood, such as trust in neighbors and favorable neighborhood evaluations, than for other social cohesion indicators (Schaeffer, 2014; Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014). A recent direct replication of Putnam's study on his original dataset shed further doubt on the claimed generic negative consequences of diversity. Even in the United States, diversity appears to be unrelated to social cohesion. The size of the racial in-group, on the other hand, is – at least for whites – positively

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: j.lameris@ru.nl (J. Laméris), john.hipp@uci.edu (J.R. Hipp), j.tolsma@ru.nl (J. Tolsma).

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associated with some indicators of cohesion, such as trust in neighbors (Abascal and Baldassarri, 2015).

Ethnic/racial group sizes are not the only neighborhood characteristics that are being linked to social cohesion. Previous research demonstrated that residents of socioeconomically disadvantaged and crime prone neighborhoods are less likely to display high levels of cohesion than residents of affluent and safe neighborhoods (e.g. Letki, 2008; Laurence and Heath, 2008; Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000). Some authors even show that economic deprivation is much more consistently related to lower levels of social cohesion than the ethnic/racial make-up of the neighborhood (e.g. Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2010). As economic deprivation and crime tend to be highly correlated with ethnic/racial minority density in U.S. neighborhoods (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Sampson et al., 1997), it is important to assess their influence on social cohesion simultaneously. We use a recent individual-level data set, the American Social Fabric Study (Butts et al., 2014), enriched with contextual-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) to investigate how the neighborhood racial, economic and crime composition affect neighborhood cohesion within U.S. neighborhoods.

We define social cohesion in this study as “the degree of interconnectedness between individuals that is both a result and cause of public and civic life.” (Van der Meer and Tolsma, 2014:460). A distinction can be made between a structural and a cognitive dimension of social cohesion. The latter refers to a set of attitudes and norms that facilitates people's predisposition toward cooperation, participation and a willingness to help, whereas the former refers to the actual behavioral manifestations of these attitudes and norms (Chan et al., 2006). We focus on the cognitive dimension of social cohesion. More specifically, we examine the degree of cohesion that is inherently bound to a specific geographical radius, namely the neighborhood.

Besides uncovering neighborhood effects, we aim to explain them. In this contribution, we focus on individuals' perceptions of the neighborhood as an explanatory mechanism. The neighborhood environment is, besides an invariable physical reality, a social construction (Wong et al., 2012) that is at least as important in explaining the influence of the neighborhood composition on individuals' attitudes and beliefs. This is not to say that the residential context can only be consequential if individuals are aware of it (cf. Wickes et al., 2013; Pickett et al., 2012). People may, for example, have less neighborly contact and subsequently less social cohesion in racially diverse neighborhoods (Vroome et al., 2013; Gundelach and Freitag, 2014), even though they are not consciously aware of the fact that they live in a diverse environment. However, people's perceptions of different aspects of the neighborhood environment may serve as one of several links between the objective neighborhood environment and people's attitudes toward the neighborhood community (Ajzen, 2012; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2011; Fishbein, 1963).

We will therefore explore to what extent the impact of the objective neighborhood characteristics (racial in-group size, economic decay and crime) on neighborhood cohesion can be explained by how residents perceive their neighborhood. Previous research has already shown that perceptions of ethnic/racial minority density (e.g. Schaeffer, 2014; Hooghe and Vroome, 2015; Hipp and Wickes, 2016), perceived social disorder (Mirowsky and Ross, 1989; Skogan, 1990) – which is closely related to perceived economic decay – and perceived unsafety from crime (Ross and Jang, 2000) are negatively related to social cohesion for whites. We assess the extent to which these perceptions of the racial, economic and crime composition of the neighborhood can, besides having a direct relation with cohesion, also explain the effects of the objective neighborhood characteristics on cohesion. Newman et al. (2015) showed that the perceived number of immigrants in the neighborhood mediates the impact of the objective number of immigrants on the extent to which people consider immigration a big problem in their community. Other studies have further shown that perceptions of ethnic/racial group sizes are more predictive of individuals' attitudes towards the ethnic/racial group being estimated than the objective ethnic/racial group size (e.g. Strabac, 2011; Semyonov et al., 2008; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Semyonov et al., 2004). We build on these works by examining the broader concept of neighborhood cohesion and by additionally studying perceptions of the economic and crime composition of the neighborhood and the degree to which these perceptions mediate the impact of the objective neighborhood composition on neighborhood cohesion.

This study is not only a replication of other studies investigating the role of the racial composition of the neighborhood in shaping social cohesion. Although such a replication using recent U.S. data is valuable in itself, we aim to bring the field forward, firstly, by investigating the relative importance of the racial in-group size, economic deprivation and the prevalence of crime for neighborhood cohesion and, secondly, by examining the extent to which subjective perceptions of the neighborhood composition explain why the objective neighborhood context affects cohesion. So far, neighborhood perceptions are neglected as a possible explanation for the relationship between the objective neighborhood context and cohesion. To get a better understanding of how individuals' perceptions of the neighborhood mediate contextual neighborhood effects, we employ state-of-the-art multi-level structural equation models (MSE-models, Preacher et al., 2010, 2011).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Direct effects of the neighborhood context

Researchers have long focused on explaining how the social and structural composition of neighborhoods affect pro-social attitudes (e.g. trust) and behavior (e.g. volunteering) of individuals (cf. Sharkey and Faber, 2014). The focus has mainly been on the extent to which the racial and economic composition of the neighborhood influence neighborhood cohesion. In the related literature studying social disorder, the prevalence of crime in the environment also takes a prominent position as an explanatory factor. In line

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