Neighborhood factors related to the likelihood of successful informal social control efforts

Barbara D. Warner *

Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30302-4018, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Purpose: To expand conceptualizations of informal social control in social disorganization and collective efficacy theories to include responses to informal social control, and to examine neighborhood level predictors of responses to informal social control.
Methods: The study uses surveys of approximately 2300 residents across 66 neighborhoods, supplemented with census data at the block group level.
Results: Neighborhood mobility decreased the odds of positive responses to informal social control, measured as both "giving in" and "talking it out" when you have a disagreement with your neighbor. Disadvantage was found to decrease only the odds of "giving in." Neighborhood level measures of social cohesion and faith in the police were also found to increase the odds of responding positively to informal social control efforts. In contrast, social ties were not found to significantly affect the likelihood of positive responses to informal social control.
Conclusions: The findings from this study broaden support of collective efficacy theory and concepts related to efficacious neighborhoods. While previous studies have raised questions about the measurement of informal social control, the findings in this paper offer support to earlier studies by providing a different approach to the conceptualization and measurement of informal social control.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

A neighborhood's capacity and shared expectation to engage in informal social control has been found to be an important variable in explaining variations among neighborhood crime rates (see e.g., Bellair & Browning, 2010; Elliott et al., 1996; Mazerolle, Wickes, & McBroom, 2010; Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson, 1997, 2012; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Informal social control refers to the behaviors engaged in by residents to control inappropriate public behaviors, and thereby prevent conditions that are conducive to importing crime, and has been a key theoretical component of contemporary social disorganization theories, including collective efficacy theory. Over the last two-and-a-half decades, a large body of research has developed that not only addresses the effects of informal social control, but also its causes. These studies have identified several neighborhood structural characteristics, such as disadvantage and residential mobility, that constrict social processes (such as the development of social ties, social cohesion and trust, and attitudes favorable to the police) related to the likelihood of residents engaging in informal social control (e.g., Sampson et al., 1997; Silver &

Miller, 2004; Warner, 2007). As important as this research has been in recent criminology, it has generally examined only half of a transaction. As Gibbs (1981, p.54) has pointed out, behavior directed at social control is best viewed in terms of attempts. Defining social control as an attempt to manipulate others' behavior "permits the distinction between successful and unsuccessful social control." Are attempts at informal social control always successful? Are they more successful in some neighborhoods than in other neighborhoods?

Reactions to informal social control within neighborhoods are important because it is the successful wedding of social control efforts with positive responses to those efforts that perhaps best identifies a community's capacity for effective socialization and crime prevention. That is, neighborhood variables that are related to expectations for informal social control are implicitly assumed to also be related to responses to informal social control. Expectations for, or the perceived likelihood of, informal social control is not theoretically argued to directly affect crime rates. Rather it is implicitly argued to either co-exist with, or affect, the actual likelihood of controlling inappropriate behaviors, which left unattended, provide a fertile environment for the importation of criminal behaviors. That is, expectations for informal social control, the key translation of informal social control in collective efficacy models, are argued to be part of a culture that includes "shared expectations of conduct in a social setting" (Sampson, 2013, p. 20). Thus, where expectations of informal social control are high, residents would

* Department of Criminal Justice, P.O. Box 4018, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia 30302-4018. Tel.: +1 404 413 1016.
E-mail address: warner@gsu.edu.

not only be likely to take action, but they would also be likely to respond appropriately to attempts at informal social control. Nonetheless, this aspect of informal social control has rarely been examined.

Examining responses to informal social control is also meaningful from a measurement perspective. Sampson (2013, p.19) notes that questions remain over how collective efficacy is best measured. Several questions have been raised about recent studies of collective efficacy. First, questions have been raised with regard to measuring the *likelihood* of informal social control rather than *actual* incidents of informal social control behavior (e.g., Wickes, Hipp, Sargeant, & Mazerolle, 2012). A second area of concern has surrounded the measurement of informal social control through residents' perceptions of how likely *neighbors* would be to intervene rather than the likelihood of residents themselves intervening (e.g., Gau, 2014). Measuring the response to informal social control efforts is an important and meaningful way to expand the measurement of the informal social control component of collective efficacy. The extent to which informal social control efforts are likely to be met with positive responses is an additional indicator of the community's capacity to enforce shared norms.

This study, therefore, envisions informal social control as transactional in nature and examines the likelihood of success for one form of informal social control—direct intervention. The study examines the extent to which neighborhood characteristics identified by contemporary social disorganization perspectives affect respondents' likelihood that attempts by neighbors to provide informal social control would be successful. One of the most frequent contexts in which informal social control is used is that of interpersonal disputes (Lee, 2000). Neighborhood disputes, therefore, offer a broad basis for examining the effectiveness of informal social control for neighborhood behaviors. The current research examined respondents' reported likelihood of a successful response to neighbor's wishes concerning a disputed behavior. Neighborhood variables derived from contemporary social disorganization literature are examined in relationship to respondents' likely responses to informal social control efforts. The study was based on data from 66 neighborhoods in two cities in a Southern state.

Background

Informal social control has frequently been defined in terms of behaviors used by community residents themselves to monitor and regulate undesirable public behavior (Kornhauser, 1978; Greenberg, Rohe, & Williams, 1982). Within sociology, informal social control has always been viewed as a central and potent aspect for regulating behavior. For example, Ross (1901/1929) pointed out the fundamental importance of citizens constraining one another. "The first service of sentiments like sympathy and the sense of justice is to enable a man to control himself. Their next service is to stir him to control others" (p. 63). Further he points out that the reaction of others to inappropriate behavior can be very powerful in instigating self-shame, an essential element in effective punishment and socialization.

Rarely can one regard his deed as fair when others find it foul. Or count himself a hero when the world deems him a wretch. The first hold of a man's fellow is, therefore, their power to set him against himself, and to stretch him on the rack of whatever ideas of excellence he may possess. The coarse, vital man may ignore the social stigma. The cultivated man may take refuge from the scorn of his neighbors in the opinion of other times and circles; but for the mass of men, the blame and the praise of their community are the very lords of life (Ross, 1901/1929, p. 90).

Further, informal social control has been argued to be both more pervasive and more powerful in controlling crime than formal social control (Paternoster, Saltzman, Waldo, & Chiricos, 1983; Tittle, 1980). As Banton (1964, p.2) noted, social control is maintained by the rewards and punishments which are built into every relationship, and which are evident in the conferring and withholding of esteem, the sanctions of gossip, and the institutional, economic, and moral pressures that

underlie behavioural patterns. Law and law-enforcement agencies, important though they are, appear puny compared with the extensiveness and intricacy of these other modes of regulating behavior.

The importance of informal social control in relation to both socializing residents and deterring criminal and delinquent behavior has recently been highlighted by contemporary versions of social disorganization theory. Social disorganization theory argues that neighborhood structural conditions, particularly disadvantage and residential mobility, weaken neighborhood social networks, social interactions, and/or social cohesion, as well as attitudes toward the police, which in turn lessen the capacity or expectation for the neighborhood to regulate neighborhood behavior. This literature, however, has examined neighborhood regulatory capacity only in relation to the likelihood of, or expectations for, residents *providing* social control with little acknowledgement of the transactional nature of social control. For a neighborhood to successfully regulate behavior, residents must view attempts at informal social control as legitimate and must respond appropriately to informal social control measures. Informal social control that is met with disregard or hostility is unlikely to provide effective regulation, no matter how many times it is provided.

What then leads to *successful* intervention? While it is likely that the same neighborhood factors that enhance the likelihood of intervening are likely to enhance positive responses to intervening, this has rarely been examined. Current social disorganization based theories examining neighborhood characteristics related to informal social control have simply assumed that informal social control is met with an equal likelihood of success across all neighborhood contexts. Variability in responses to informal social control efforts has not been incorporated into current studies of informal social control.

Variables central to social disorganization theory

Contemporary social disorganization theories have argued that neighborhood disadvantage, residential mobility, social ties, social cohesion and trust, and faith in the police are key variables affecting the likelihood of informal social control. Specifically, the theory suggests that high levels of disadvantage and residential mobility indirectly affect informal social control by undermining the community's ability to develop social ties, create neighborhood cohesion and trust, and develop effective relationships with external agents of social control such as the police. Consequently, the lack of these important social processes is argued to undermine residents' willingness to provide, or develop expectations for, informal social control within the neighborhood.

In the research reported here, these variables, central to social disorganization theory, are examined in relation to the "success" of efforts at informal social control. Disadvantage, in terms of both poverty and race/ethnicity, often constrains the choices people have regarding where, and among whom, they can live. This may be important in terms of the success of informal social control as it is likely to affect the perception of shared norms, and the level of social cohesion and trust within the neighborhood. That is, residents in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods may perceive others in their neighborhoods as different from them and unlikely to share their same values or to find them trustworthy (even though they may not have different values) (Warner, 2003). In turn this perception of a lack of shared values and lack of trust may make residents less amenable to control efforts by others whom they view as different or whom they don't trust. Similarly, residential mobility suggests short term relationships among residents, which limit the number of social ties within the neighborhood, thereby allowing residents of these neighborhoods to be less susceptible to the public opinion of their neighbors.

Central to social disorganization theory, therefore are the mediating variables of social cohesion and trust and social ties. Social cohesion and trust are in large part argued to be based on a sense of shared values. Because effective social control requires that groups have established norms or values towards which behavior is being oriented,