



Intimate partner violence in neighborhood context: The roles of structural disadvantage, subjective disorder, and emotional distress



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ABSTRACT

Most theoretical treatments of intimate partner violence (IPV) focus on individual-level processes. Some researchers have attempted to situate IPV within the larger neighborhood context, but few studies have sought to link structural- and individual-level factors. The current analyses fill a research gap by examining the role of anger and depression in the association between neighborhood disadvantage and IPV. Using data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) and the 2000 Census, this study focuses on structural indicators of disadvantage as well as subjective disorder, and highlights the complex associations between neighborhood conditions, emotional distress, and IPV. Findings indicate that anger and depressive symptoms partially explain the association between neighborhood disadvantage and IPV. Additionally, the associations between disadvantage, disorder, and IPV depend on respondent's level of anger. Results underscore the need to further consider the role of neighborhood factors (both objective and subjective) in relation to IPV, and also suggest the utility of introducing individual-level emotional measures to assess the circumstances under which neighborhoods matter most.

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1. Introduction

Recent data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) demonstrate that roughly 1 in 3 women (32.9%) and more than 1 in 4 men (28.2%) have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes, and nearly half of women (47%) and two-fifths of men (39%) experienced this violence when they were between the ages of 18 and 24 (Black et al., 2011). Moreover, relationship violence is associated with a range of negative physical and mental health outcomes (Basile and Smith, 2011; Breiding et al., 2005; Coker et al., 2002; Hill et al., 2010, 2009; Logan and Cole, 2007; Sutherland et al., 2002). Yet while we know much about certain risk factors and consequences, fewer studies have examined the processes that link structural and individual correlates underlying risk for intimate partner violence. Importantly, there is renewed effort to contextualize IPV, highlighting higher-order risk factors and associated processes. Recent prevention efforts note, especially, that researchers need to reframe the focus of IPV to address not just healthy relationships, but “healthy communities” as well—with the aim to “influence the structural and economic factors

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that contribute to IPV” (Parks et al., 2007:vi). As such, scholars have begun to focus on how neighborhood context influences intimate partner violence.

Despite efforts emphasizing the importance of neighborhoods for understanding IPV risk, scholars note that research needs to specify “exactly *how* the neighborhood environment affects experience and perpetration of intimate partner... violence” (Frye and O’Campo, 2011:189). Thus, it is an advancement that much recent scholarship has shown that neighborhoods matter for IPV, but we still need to uncover the possible ways that they matter. To date, most of the research on neighborhoods and IPV has focused on neighborhood structural characteristics, generally overlooking how residents subjectively experience their neighborhoods and whether these perceptions have consequences for IPV. Further, most of the work specifying potential mediating mechanisms has drawn on a social disorganization framework. Although the findings from this research have provided evidence of a general association between the neighborhood structure and IPV, social disorganization’s emphasis on the community’s level of informal social cohesion/control has a stronger intuitive connection to more public forms of violence, such as street and gang violence relative to acts that occur most often within the home. Additionally, recent research on IPV has shown a strong connection between this form of behavior and affective processes, suggesting the utility of examining the role of emotions as factors that link neighborhood context and variability in IPV risk. Using data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), we examine neighborhood variation in IPV perpetration to determine whether neighborhood disadvantage and subjective disorder influence IPV, and further, whether these associations are explained by individual-level indicators of emotional distress (anger and depressive symptoms). Proposed emotional mediators stem from Agnew’s (1999) strain theory. Additional analyses, situated in the theoretical framework of structural amplification, (Mirowsky and Ross, 2003; Ross et al., 2001) consider whether the associations between emotional distress and IPV are moderated by disadvantage and disorder.

2. Neighborhood context and intimate partner violence

Researchers have described IPV as something that occurs “behind closed doors” (Straus et al., 1980), thus alluding to its private nature. In contrast, scholarship on neighborhood or community effects has focused most often on ‘street’ violence, which typically occurs in public spaces. Yet as Browning (2002:849) notes, assumptions about the private nature of intimate relationships can obscure the fact that they, like other forms of personal interaction in public space, are embedded in broader communities. Much of the current scholarship linking neighborhood structure to IPV highlights economic disadvantage as an especially salient factor. In the mid-1990s, for example, scholars began examining the association between community economic factors and IPV, although with rather restricted samples. O’Campo et al. (1995) demonstrated an association between tract-level unemployment rates and increased odds of IPV among low-income women in Baltimore, and Miles-Doan (1998) showed that higher levels of disadvantage are associated with increased rates of IPV in a single county in Florida. Other studies using samples of one or two cities, counties, or states also found significant associations between indices of economic deprivation/disadvantage and IPV (DeJong et al., 2011; Diem and Pizarro, 2010; Frye and Wilt, 2001; Li et al., 2010; Woodredge and Thistlethwaite, 2003; Wu, 2009) or between poverty levels and IPV (Pearlman et al., 2003).

In addition to community-focused studies, researchers relying on important nationally representative studies have examined the link between neighborhood economic disadvantage and IPV. Cunradi et al. (2000) used the National Alcohol Survey (NAS) to demonstrate an increased likelihood of IPV for African Americans, and of female-perpetrated IPV for African American and White individuals living in higher-poverty neighborhoods. Finally, a number of studies relied on data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine the association between community disadvantage and IPV. These studies (Benson et al., 2003, 2004; DeMaris et al., 2003; Fox and Benson, 2006; Van Wyk et al., 2003) consistently report that higher levels of neighborhood disadvantage are associated with increased risk of IPV. An exception to the generally observed association was noted by Lauritsen and Schaum (2004); using the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), they found that higher poverty levels *decreased* IPV, but cautioned against drawing conclusions because this finding might be due to multicollinearity or spuriousness.

The above scholarship has been important in linking neighborhoods to IPV, but has yet to provide a compelling explanation of the processes via which neighborhoods influence partner violence. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on neighborhood structural characteristics, it has not thoroughly examined other neighborhood factors that may heighten IPV risk, particularly subjective considerations. Our objectives in this paper are to contribute further to scholarship in this area by considering variability in the subjective experience of neighborhood conditions (as well as more objective indicators of neighborhood disadvantage), and exploring the role of emotional processes as potential mediators of these neighborhood effects. We draw on Agnew’s (1999) revised General Strain Theory (GST) as a conceptual framework for this investigation. Additional models explore the potential for neighborhood conditions to moderate the effect of negative emotional processes as influences on the experience of IPV.

3. Theoretical mechanisms

Many studies linking neighborhoods to IPV have not been explicit about the theoretical underpinnings of these investigations. These exploratory studies recognize that neighborhood characteristics influence relationship dynamics (including violence) because neighborhoods are one of many “different levels of social life” (DeMaris et al., 2003) that are important,

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