

Expanding the traditional model of neighborhood Social Organization

Results from an experimental pre-test

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Introduction

The organization of a community is seen to be a critical determinant of the outcomes it experiences. Neighborhoods with high levels of social organization are believed to be better equipped to protect themselves against various forms of crime and disorder. Conversely, neighborhoods low in social organization are understood to more easily fall victim to various threats to community safety.

Because social organization can play a very prominent role in determining the well-being of communities, it is crucial to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that contribute to its creation. The research presented here attempts to accomplish this goal by expanding the traditional model to include a consideration of neighborhood-level *perceptions* and the importance of *willingness* in the social organization process.

Traditional Social Organization theory

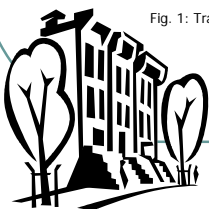
Social Organization theory refers to the ability of a community to realize its shared goals, specifically its ability to protect itself from crime. Within this theory, objective neighborhood attributes—namely, its ethnic heterogeneity, socioeconomic status, and residential mobility—determine the degree of neighborhood-level organization achieved by the community.

While these attributes determine the level of organization, participation in the various tenets of social organization—participation in local volunteer organizations, creation of informal friendship networks, and exercising control over local juveniles—subsequently determine the outcomes the community achieves. Thus, neighborhood characteristics matter in determining community outcomes, but they primarily work by affecting the level of organization that may be achieved.

A basic model of the traditional social organization theory is represented in fig. 1.



Fig. 1: Traditional Social Organization Model



Perception-based model of Social Organization

The model I present diverges from the traditional model in the following ways (see fig. 2):

- 1) I assert that the actual degree of organization achieved is the product of community-members' *willingness* to engage with their fellow residents—not a direct response to the objective neighborhood conditions.
- 2) This willingness is largely determined by the way the community is *perceived* by residents, which is dependent on the subjective value placed on any of a number of community attributes.

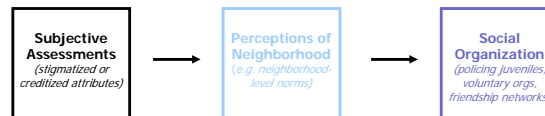


Fig. 2: Perception-based model of Social Organization (simplified version)

Methods

Using an experimental survey I attempted to gain insight into the following research questions:

- 1) Do value judgments supplied by others influence residents' perceptions of the community?
- 2) Are residents' willingness to engage in social organization influenced by perceptions of neighborhood quality?

This experiment utilized a 3 (objective condition) x 3 (subjective label) between-subjects experimental design. Respondents were shown a picture of one neighborhood (varying from low to high objective quality) accompanied by text signifying a "bad" or "good" subjective popular assessment (or no text at all in the control condition).

Following exposure to the stimuli, respondents completed a survey indicating how they perceive the neighborhood, its residents, and their likelihood of participating in various types of social organizational activities *if they were residents of that neighborhood*.

Results

- Objective stimuli accompanied with a "bad" subjective assessment consistently received more negative evaluations for safety, class status of residents, degree of existing neighborhood problems, degree of existing neighborhood organization and overall desirability.
- Subjective assessments levied against one aspect of the community were powerful enough to influence respondents' perceptions of other neighborhood attributes.

- Respondents' overall *perceptions* of the neighborhood (which is a response to both the objective *and* subjective stimuli) accounted for more of the variance in neighborhood-level evaluations than did the objective condition of the community alone.
- Perceptions of existing organization was the variable most highly correlated with decisions to engage in neighborhood social organization.

Conclusions

Traditional social organization theory is correct: neighborhood characteristics matter. However, it is only one factor in the equation: perception matters as well.

The objective conditions highlighted in social organization theory may indeed impose limits to the resources available to residents as the community attempts to organize itself. However, a wide variety of neighborhood attributes are seen, understood, and reacted to by residents, thus influencing the subjective value that they place on the community, and subsequently their willingness or desire to become involved in the requisite components of social organization.

Understanding how these perceptions are formed, and oftentimes why they persist even as objective conditions change, is an important step towards understanding differential organization among communities, and ultimately addressing the differential outcomes that they experience.

Sources and further reading

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For more information

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