Disorder, order and control signals

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Robert Sampson has placed us all in his debt by his immensely stimulating British Journal of Sociology lecture. Emulating the spirit of confession apparent in his third footnote (Sampson 2009: 27) I candidly admit that, while in theory recognizing the distinction between actual disorder and perceived disorder, in my own writings I have not always adequately differentiated between these two things. It is a mistake that, following Sampson’s detailed and convincing exposition, I shall not make again.

In responding to this lecture, I propose to focus on two main points, both of which are recognized by Sampson, though neither is greatly emphasized. These topics are first, the need for a fully holistic social-scientific analysis when dealing with issues of disorder; and second, the potential importance of so-called ‘control signals’ in the development of order in communities. To develop these points, I will consider first some recent British research, and then some rather older – but still highly relevant – research from Chicago.

As part of their research in connection with the National Reassurance Policing Project, Martin Innes and colleagues (2004) conducted detailed qualitative interviews in 16 residential areas across England, asking representative respondents in each area to identify what they perceived to be the key potential threats to neighbourhood safety in their area. Some early results from six areas are shown in Figure I (later results are similar). For each area (here designated ‘A’ to ‘F’), respondents’ perceived threats to neighbourhood safety are listed in descending order of importance; thus, for example, in Area F ‘drugs’ were perceived as the principal threat, followed by ‘youths hanging around’ and ‘public drinking’.

What is especially striking about the information in this figure is that, although there is – as one would expect – some variation across areas, nevertheless the most commonly-perceived ‘top threats’ are all disorderly events occurring in public space. Thus, it would seem, these kinds of incidents often send a powerful signal to residents that ‘my area is out of control’. (I shall return to the ‘signal’ metaphor later). Indeed, according to the data in Figure I,
such incidents often send a more powerful signal of threat than does residential burglary, traditionally regarded by the police service as a ‘real crime’, and therefore as a more important priority than matters such as graffiti or ‘young people hanging around’. One of Innes’s respondents commented on precisely this paradox:

Yes, it is daft, it is almost daft, but graffiti is the thing that sort of bothers me more, because it is in my face every day. I mean obviously rape and murder are more horrendous crimes, but it is graffiti that I see. (Innes 2004: 348)

Such findings and comments remind us that, despite the communications revolution, ‘virtual networks’, and the like – all of which are very real, and sociologically important – nevertheless human beings remain embodied creatures whose bodies can be in only one place at a time. In consequence, we all have a common interest in the usability and non-threatening character of the public spaces that we necessarily frequent. As Robert Sampson rightly emphasizes, therefore, place continues, and will continue, to matter.

But now consider some results from the Keele University study of the small town of Macclesfield (population c.50,000), referred to a couple of times in Sampson’s lecture. Congruently with the later findings of Innes and colleagues...
(Innes et al. 2004), one particular form of disorder, namely ‘the unsupervised gathering of groups of male and female teenagers in public places’ was found to be, in Macclesfield, ‘perhaps the principal source of adult concern about youth’ (Girling, Loader and Sparks 2000: 81). However, and in strong agreement with one of Robert Sampson’s main messages, it was also:

Evident from our research that residents interpret the presence and behaviour of these teenagers in contrasting ways and invest it with varying degrees of significance; and these interpretations cannot simply be read off from actual levels of disorderly or criminal activity. (2000: 82, emphasis in original)

Indeed, Girling, Loader and Sparks went on to provide evidence that, in one particular location, there were some radically different adult responses to the behaviour of the same group of young people (2000: 85–9).

Such evidence naturally raises the question why differential perceptions exist, a question of great importance within Sampson’s text. Sampson emphasizes the evidence that in making such judgements, individuals are affected by the community context in which they live, and that view is supported by Girling et al’s more qualitative research evidence. These authors also indicate, however, the complexity of the background factors that can differentially shape responses to ‘disorderly youth’. At one polar extreme, there are middle-class professionals with

a high degree of geographical mobility and a corresponding cosmopolitanism of outlook, both things that enable them to distance themselves, materially and emotionally, from the stresses and troubles that afflict the neighbourhood in which they live. (Girling, Loader and Sparks 2000: 171)

At the other extreme, there are those for whom the ‘problem of youth’ acquires a heightened material and metaphorical force by being embedded in a web of local ties and affiliations (2000: 171).

Such ties and affiliations to localities are often intimately connected not only to personal histories, but also to the historical development of the area and its meaning to residents, as well as issues (such as the current economic context and the housing market) that might affect the ability to move. Once one realizes the importance, for perceptions of disorder, of this deep contextual background, it becomes easy to see how oversimplified the celebrated ‘broken windows hypothesis’ (Wilson and Kelling 1982) really is, and how right Ralph Taylor was to conclude, after his pathbreaking analysis of that hypothesis, that a more holistic analysis is essential:

Theorizing on incivilities needs to reconnect more firmly with works in the areas of urban sociology, urban political economy, collective community crime prevention and organizational participation. Changes in neighborhood fabric, neighborhood crime rates and residents’ safety concerns are
each tangled topics with a range of causes. To gain a clearer picture of these processes, it is necessary to break away from [incivilities] per se, and broaden the lines of inquiry. (Taylor 2001: 20).

I turn now to a slightly different – though related – topic, that of ‘control signals’. At one point in his lecture, Robert Sampson speaks of social processes by which ‘social perceptions reinforce later disorder and potentially poverty, absent an exogenous intervention’ (emphasis added; Sampson 2009: 18). The italicized phrase, which is not further discussed, raises the important possibility that planned interventions in communities could alter what otherwise look like inevitable trajectories.

Twenty five years ago, Richard Taub, Garth Taylor and Jan Dunham (1984: 20, 172) produced evidence that two Chicago neighbourhoods with high crime rates not only received positive ‘satisfaction with safety’ scores in a residents’ survey, but also had rapidly appreciating residential property values. In the light of this unexpected finding, the obvious next question is: under what conditions can high crime co-exist with perceived neighbourhood safety and a buoyant housing market? A possible answer to this question was provided by the Chicago research, where it was reported that, in both the areas combining high crime with ‘satisfaction with safety’ (namely, Lincoln Park and Hyde Park/Kenwood), ‘there [were] highly visible signs of extra community resources being used to deal with the crime problem’ (Taub, Taylor and Dunham 1984: 172), and also that ‘institutional activity’ by corporate actors ‘has been of considerable consequence’ (1984: 102). The authors’ suggestion was therefore that, in these areas, actions by powerful institutions had helped to create a general sense of neighbourhood safety, despite continuing high crime. Although the researchers were uncertain about what other factors might also have been relevant, they further noted that, for example, Lincoln Park – a gentrifying area – ‘has the park and lakefront location, . . . De Paul University, convenience to downtown places of work, and the feeling that the area is an exciting place to be’ (1984: 172). Thus, they went on to suggest, people make a generalized, gestalt judgment about a given area, taking into account a range of positive and negative factors, of which crime (and, by implication, disorder) is just one; hence, ‘one can perceive high crime in the community and be fearful of it, but still discount it because of other compensatory aspects of the neighborhood’ (1984: 189). Moreover, a possible positive contribution to such gestalt assessments can come from planned interventions that provide ‘highly visible signs of extra community resources’ (see above).

The language used here by Taub, Taylor and Dunham, that of ‘visible signs’, is particularly interesting in the light of the later development, by Innes and Fielding (2002), of the concept of ‘control signals’ – one of a trinity of linked concepts, the others being ‘signal crimes’ and ‘signal disorders’. Rooted in the
theory of symbolic interactionism, the central insight behind this conceptualization is that certain acts communicate (‘send signals’) to the general public, in a way that may promote or hinder the general sense of order in a neighbourhood. As Robert Sampson notes in his lecture, in some social contexts graffiti can send the message of urban decline, in others that the district is ‘edgy’ (and it should be noted in passing that we do not yet know enough about such messages and their interpretation). On the same logic, relevant authorities can sometimes send successful ‘control signals’, that is, a set of indications that the situation is under control. An example of exactly this occurred, in the Taub et al research, in the area of Chicago (Hyde Park/Kenwood) that includes the University of Chicago. As well as investing heavily in the urban infrastructure (including obtaining substantial Federal urban renewal funds), university managers caused to be introduced certain initiatives that directly addressed ‘safety in public space’ issues – such as a private security force (with direct links to the Chicago Police Department), 24-hour ‘safety buses’ and emergency telephones (Taub, Taylor and Dunham 1984: 99–102). The whole package of measures taken in the area seemed to send a strong ‘control signal’; for while crimes such as burglary remained high (1984: 21–2), as previously noted the area was nevertheless perceived by the residents as safe, with property rapidly appreciating.

It is not accidental, however, that in this example the University of Chicago is a corporate actor. It is very much harder for an individual resident to send successful control signals; indeed, as Taub et al. effectively point out, for an individual household in a declining area instrumental rationality dictates a fast exit from the area, unless one can somehow persuade enough other households to join in collective action to stay and see through significant area-based improvements. The difficulty of such courses of action, and the relative rarity of corporate actions aimed at altering area trajectories, no doubt help to account for the long-term continuities of outcome that Robert Sampson sets out in his lecture. But we should certainly not lose sight of the potentially beneficial outcomes that can sometimes occur following what Sampson calls an ‘exogenous intervention’. Indeed, there is even some tentative evidence that such strong ‘control signal’ interventions by public authorities, or other corporate bodies, can enhance the likelihood that individuals in a community will themselves exercise more effective informal social control in the public spaces of an area (‘collective efficacy’) (see discussion in Bottoms and Wilson 2007).

Finally, residential areas can seem to their residents to acquire over time either a positive or a negative momentum, a perception that – as Sampson notes – can easily become self-fulfilling. Thus, in a small-scale research study of four sub-areas in Sheffield, Andrew Wilson and I found that residents’ perceptions as to whether, in the last two years, their local neighbourhood had become a better or a worse place to live were particularly closely associated with their current perceptions of the safety of the neighbourhood (Bottoms
and Wilson 2007: 79–80). When discussing self-fulfilling prophecies, Sampson refers particularly to situations in areas of perceived decline where ‘residents acting on their perceptions of disorder undertake actions that have the effect of increasing that very disorder’ (Sampson 2009: 19), but more positive momentum is also possible. Hence, Andrew Wilson and I (2007: esp. 81–3) drew attention to one sub-area (‘Inner B’) which used to be very crime-prone, and which still suffered from a higher rate of recorded serious violence, and of drugs offences, than any of the other three neighbourhoods that we studied. Nevertheless, following recent major exogenous initiatives by official bodies, many residents in Inner B considered that there had been a very significant improvement in the area’s quality of life, to the extent that they now rated it joint top in the sub-area rankings of Neighbourhood Safety.¹

Such findings both reinforce Robert Sampson’s message as to the crucial importance of perceptions, and also point to the potential promise, in certain circumstances, of appropriate exogenous interventions.

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**Note**

¹. The exogenous initiatives in this neighbourhood arose from its inclusion in the UK Government’s ‘New Deal for Communities’ (NDC) initiative, which aims to reduce the gap between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country through community-led partnerships in 39 areas across England. A recent research report describes the Sheffield NDC (an area broader than Inner B) as being among a cluster of localities where ‘residents were very positive in their view that the area had improved and that the local NDC had contributed to this improvement’ (Beatty et al. 2008: 72).

**Bibliography**


