Analytic approaches to disorder

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There is no greater honour for a scholar than to have one’s work taken seriously and engaged critically at an intellectual level. Indeed, what is better than a vigorous debate about ideas one cares about, especially ones that have generated controversy over the course of decades? In the present case, I am lucky enough to have not one but seven esteemed scholars engage with my work, and for that I am deeply grateful to the BJS and each interlocutor in turn for their intellectual commitment and contribution to this special issue. In this response, I address my critics and attempt to integrate some of their common concerns into an agenda for the future.

Contested social science?

I begin with Professor Gilroy, who served as the formal respondent at my lecture in London. This distinguished choice of discussant by the BJS Board was provocative – brilliant even and probably unexpected to those familiar with our respective styles of work. To wit: upon seeing the advertisement for the lecture last summer, a senior colleague in the USA emailed me to say: ‘A discussion between you and Paul Gilroy at the LSE – what an exciting “clash of academic cultures” scenario.’ Professor Gilroy did not disappoint. His comments were erudite and provocative, and while I would not say we clashed, he did raise a number of critical questions. The reader thus might be surprised to find that I agree with several of Gilroy’s basic points, but unsurprised that ultimately I find his goals to be fundamentally different from mine. Our aspirations as social scientists do not neatly align and so my task here, I think, is to sort out what that means for an understanding of disorder in the contemporary city.

At an important level we agree. Disorder is a concept that is not ‘natural’ in its meaning and must be interrogated critically. Race, racism, concentrated poverty, and socio-historical context play a crucial role in this interrogation, as does the neglected concept of culture. How we go about studying them is
another matter. Gilroy is suspicious of my approach and country from the starting gate: quantitative methods are said to ‘stifle and undermine other strategies of inquiry and academic reflection’ (Gilroy 2009: 33). Yet it is not clear how, exactly, and Gilroy does not say. My coming from the USA was a disadvantage apparently, given its alleged intellectual power and hegemonic, globalizing tendencies. His verdict on the USA is probably correct, I am not happy to say, but how it bears on the validity of my argument is logically a separate point, of course. Moreover, the contested state of social science according to Gilroy does not seem accurate to me. Rational choice theory in sociology is in fact quite marginalized even in the USA and qualitative methods are now commonplace. While his assertion that quantitative methods are ‘mechanistically’ applied is quite often true, this is not inherent to the method or indeed any method. I have read many an ethnography that was ‘mindlessly’ applied without theoretical reflection. Badly applied methods are bad period and it makes no difference their qualitative or quantitative moorings (Sampson 2009a). As one of my favourite qualitative sociologists has reflected, this debate is retro and uninspiring (Becker 1996).

On substance Gilroy has strong beliefs about the causal role of institutionalized racism unique to the USA in producing the phenomenon I study. More than that, he asserts that in recent years the USA has exported ‘racial technologies’ as the best way to manage racialized politics and to govern the problems of racial hierarchy. He does not define these technologies so I defer comment on this point. On the prior point I do not posit that racial hierarchy in the USA is natural or a ‘birth defect’, and so in a fundamental sense Gilroy and I agree. As the careful reader will see, I ground my thinking about the role of racial inequality in scholars such as Loury (2002) and Massey and Denton (1993). Condoleezza Rice they are not. Now, it is true that the specific mechanisms I study empirically are not about racism per se. The reason is that my data and theory are not able to adjudicate the ultimate ‘cause’ Gilroy believes is the culprit so I do not make any strong claims in this regard. That is, I can believe and for the most part do believe as does Gilroy up to a point but I disagree that a simplistic framing of racism is able to capture the complexities of contemporary racial hierarchies, especially when the unit of analysis is individual or neighbourhood-level variations. Implicit bias is a mechanism that is every bit as pernicious when it comes to social reproduction at these empirical levels, and to dismiss its claims for not paying more attention to a prior cause seems to me analytically shortsighted.

There are several other themes that Gilroy picks up on, including the uniqueness of Chicago as a city, continuity and change, and the nature of what we mean by disorder. That London has much to offer us as an example of diversity is obvious from my engagement with the classical work of Booth and Mayhew in the late 1800s and with contemporary data from Chelsea and Stockwell. It is impressive how stable most areas are in the sense of relative
social ranking, one of the motivations for my analysis in the first place. Gilroy observes how the area he has long lived in, Finsbury Park, has changed over the years with the arrival of distinctly different immigrant groups, from the Irish to the Pakistanis to Moroccans. But this is a fairly general pattern and can be seen in many Chicago neighbourhoods as well, with new immigrant groups succeeding older ones. The question I raised was whether the relative ranking of a community changes. Gilroy does not present evidence one way or the other of Finsbury Park’s relative status over time.

I would not claim that Chicago reflects a ‘universal’ pattern but I gladly confess to being interested in general patterns that take on different manifestations depending on historical context. In my paper I make this point explicit, noting that the Irish and Italians were the ‘disreputable poor’ if not the ‘underclass’ in the early twentieth century. So while I certainly agree that there is change and that historical context is crucial, I am still impressed with relative continuity in the reputations and social status that areas maintain. Moreover, I do not think that Chicago is as unique as Gilroy and others imagine (Dear 2002). In a recent paper I present data on the stability and change in economic profiles for all neighbourhoods in the United States (Sampson 2009b). Even in an era of gentrification, the stability of concentrated poverty and racial hierarchies is remarkable. This pattern points to one of the advantages of confronting assumptions with empirical data – sometimes our beliefs and common assumptions are incorrect.

Gilroy’s mention of ‘Clapton is God’ brings back fond memories of the 1960s and reveals just how contextual the concept of disorder is. I agree with much he says in this section of the paper and remind the reader of the subtitle of my paper: ‘Social (Dis)order Revisited’. I did not invent ‘broken windows’ theory nor did I propose that graffiti is inherently disorderly. Nor did I argue that disorder and order are absolute states as Gilroy implies. I argued that disorder as I defined it was orderly and patterned by a racialized inequality inscribed in space. (Having been accused of being a social constructionist by some critics and an essentialist by Gilroy is something of an unusual position to be in!) I think what I would say is that the very point of my paper was to investigate the grounds upon which people perceive disorder. It is true that to study a phenomenon one must first define it, and to do so I bent over backwards, in my opinion, to give ‘broken windows’ theory its due. As a powerful and influential theory of policing and urban change, it deserves no less. That I might personally disagree that graffiti is disorderly is a separate matter. Analytically, nothing Gilroy says undermines my argument.

If there is one disappointment it is that Gilroy did not engage the specifics of my investigation. Silence greets many of the assertions I could test and so I did not learn how I might be wrong or improve my work. I did learn that for Gilroy I did not go far enough in my study of racism as an ultimate cause but
again, that is because I could not fairly make the case one way or another. He might take that as evading the obvious cause, but I see it as respecting the limits of my study. I applaud Gilroy’s call to tackle the larger institutional factors and look forward to learning from his future research should he choose to go in this direction.

In short, it seems clear that Gilroy and I are on different missions. That is okay, a division of intellectual labour is probably a good thing – a ‘clash of academic cultures’ even. Gilroy does not practice social science as I understand the enterprise but I do not mean this in a derogatory manner. The humanities are every bit as important intellectually and I wholly agree that integrating literature, philosophy, politics and sociology is exciting. And certainly ‘science’ should not be a weapon to stifle other inquiry. But Gilroy’s latent critique of ‘positivism’ is, I think, outdated. Aren’t we all realists now? My agenda is to figure out how the world works and if that takes quantitative methods so be it. Ditto qualitative. Professor Gilroy seems already to know how the world works, in which case neither method seems necessary. I wish him well, but I for one cannot tell how he would know when he is wrong.

Other responders

I turn now to my other distinguished respondents. If having Paul Gilroy was not provocative enough, consider my reaction when told that Professors Sophie Body-Gendrot, Anthony Bottoms, Diane Davis, Richard Sennett, Per-Olof Wikström, and Paul Wiles would weigh in as well. What an added treat. The only drawback was that we could not have a group discussion. Also, because of the inevitable space crunch of the journal I cannot respond in detail to each critic. I attempt instead to extract substantive themes that connect across essays.

One of these themes continues the larger question posed by Professor Gilroy: What about other cities and countries? There seems to be a general wariness of Chicago being generalizable in its lessons. In one way or another this concern was raised by all respondents – Davis wonders about other US cities like Phoenix and LA; Bottoms, Wikström and Wiles about Britain and other European countries; Sennett refers to travels in non-Western cities; and Body-Gendrot writes about the Parisian scene. My answer is, let’s find out. As I outlined in skeletal form in my response to Gilroy, I believe that fairly general mechanisms are at work but that they will take specific form in different places. As Body-Gendrot observes, for example, Paris has ‘ghettoes’ where immigrant groups with few resources are clustered spatially and from which the wider society distances itself. That they are in the suburbs is a distinctly European phenomenon – until recently that is. Many US cities are moving in this inside-out direction, with the city centre areas becoming more desirable.
and many poor being forced into the suburbs. The near south suburbs of Chicago are largely black and taking in refugees from the housing projects that Chicago discarded, whereas former slums on the near south side with lakefront proximity are ripe to welcome the new black middle class. American cities are thus becoming more ‘European’ in their pattern of concentrated poverty, but this does not override the dominant stability in the city overall or mean that inequality is going away any time soon.

The organizing principle that Wikström asked about is that disvalued groups in any society tend to be spatially separated and stigmatized. Wiles refers to this as a ‘hierarchy of disadvantage’ and elsewhere I have called this ‘hierarchy maintenance’. Groups and places may change but such status hierarchies are rather tenacious. (In fact this durability should perhaps temper some of my optimism for the future, a point to which I return below). Whether Turks or Algerians in Stockholm or the Surinamese or Moroccans in Amsterdam, I believe similar social processes may be at work in the allocation of disadvantaged groups differing in social rank to stratified areas. Showing how these processes work is the task of sociologists. In my BJS paper I set forth a strategy for doing so, arguing that perceptions of disorder in communities where disvalued or discriminated groups are clustered will be higher, regardless of the amount of observed disorder, and that this process is part of a self-fulfilling or self-reinforcing mechanism that reproduces inequality. This thesis is not tied to any specific group although it clearly follows that the more salient the stigmatization (e.g., African Americans in the USA) the stronger the effect and the stronger the self-reinforcing feedback loop.

Once again, then, viewing the data I do not see Chicago or the USA as uniquely as perhaps others do. I realize that the historical hegemony of the Chicago School is an annoyance to many, but as I have pointed out elsewhere, we need to recognize what the Chicago School was and was not (Sampson 2008a). If the Chicago School of urban sociology between the two World Wars can be said to be a school, it was more in consensus forms of empirical activity (which were in fact quite diverse) rather than a lock-step set of theoretical commitments. Chicago ultimately was about the importance of context and process, not a specific urban form such as concentric zones – which happens to be wrong. My allegiance is to an idea, not a specific form.

A related point raised by several commentators’ concerns trends in diversity, including a bit of surprise about my ‘optimistic’ forecast. There is some divergence of opinion here, though, as Wiles seems to think I am too optimistic, Wikström that I am (too?) bold, and yet Sennett was optimistic decades ago and Body-Gendrot seems even more so than any of us. Only the future will reveal, but I would stress here the underlying logic. My reasoning was largely structural, in that as immigration and heterogeneity continue to increase the racial and other categories that many societal divisions are based upon will inexorably begin to dissolve. For example, between 1990 and 2000 in the USA,
a mere ten-year period, the foreign-born population increased by more than 50 percent, to 31 million people. This is a stunning change. Racial segregation is also decreasing and we just elected as President a bi-racial man with a black father and white mother. It is thus not an accident that I concluded my paper with the citation to what I consider the major work of the late Peter Blau (1977), who made a similar argument about the effects of heterogeneity. As noted in my lecture, this structuralist logic appears to be consistent with the thesis laid out in Gilroy (2000) on the crisis in racialogy.

I would readily admit, however, that my diversity thesis goes against the grain of classical disorganization theory (as Wikström points out) and that my thinking on this topic has evolved. I also think that diversity, at least in the USA, is taking on a different cast at the structural level than it did in the heyday of the 1920s and 1930s (Sampson 2008b). Although beyond the scope of this response, I would hypothesize that the effects of immigration are deeply cultural as well as economic, and contingent on the sending country’s context. ‘Voluntary’ immigration motivated by economic opportunity (e.g., Mexican immigration flows to the USA) is less likely to yield discrimination than immigration based on war or strife (e.g., asylum seekers). Thus the concentration of first generation immigrants and increasing diversity based on economically motivated immigration is likely to be more integrative and lead over time to less crime, I predict, than a recurring pattern of refugee-based migration of those who did not select to move but rather were forced. Dislocations involving the second generation must be taken into account too, as in the so called ‘segmented assimilation’ thesis. There are a number of further hypotheses that demand our attention but the larger point is that the effects of contemporary diversity are only beginning to be understood. I can only hope my optimism is borne out.

Gentrification is a related process that may help shed light on diversity’s role in the future of the city. Body-Gendrot observes the ironic demand for disorder reduction among the professional classes who invade diverse, transitional neighbourhoods in the process of gentrification. Gilroy also spoke of conflicts over gentrification in London and Wiles notes the challenge of diversity in changing communities. My photos and observations of Chelsea suggest a similar tension, whereby ‘upmarket’ professionals invade edgy areas and value diversity but perhaps are not so pleased when signifiers of disorder remain. Will the woman shopping at Ralph Lauren from my paper (Sampson 2009: Figure VIII) countenance the disorder around the corner? Will the professionals move out once they have children or the disorder remains in place? Will their perceptions of disorder or ‘decay’ (see Sennett 2009: 58) change? Resolving the paradox of ‘diversity meets disorder’ is central to understanding the long term viability of cities that currently are attracting bohemian culture and the creative class to marginal areas.

The study of gentrification by definition involves community change. In his discussion of ‘control signals’ Bottoms refers to my observation that many
communities remain stable in their poverty or disorder trajectories absent exogenous interventions. How do trajectories of otherwise similar places diverge? In Chicago, poor black communities on the near south side witnessed major interventions, including the dismantling of segregated high-rise public housing and considerable investment by the city and local institutions such as the University of Chicago (Bottoms’ corporate actor) in both the physical infrastructure and educational system (e.g., charter schools). It is notable that communities undergoing these large ‘interventions’ (and for the most part, only these communities) saw significant unexpected declines in concentrated poverty as predicted from 1990 levels (Sampson 2009b: 275). Stability is not inevitable then – reversal of fortune is possible but in the case of Chicago at least, and I suspect other cities, structural levers are needed to spur change in deeply distressed minority communities.

Perhaps the biggest and most gratifying theme that emerges among respondents, Gilroy included, is the ratification they put forward on the importance of studying perceptions. As Sennett argues, the ‘projective’ element of disorder is what dominates, not the deductive. Put differently, we are processing something else than what we see directly. Although we might disagree on the exact mechanisms, there seems to be consensus that for too long sociologists and criminologists have neglected advances in cognitive science and social psychology that might help to integrate macro/historical concerns with individual actions. Davis and Wikström in particular highlight the change in focus once one recognizes the powerful role that perceptions play in social life. Davis further notes the misleading idea that to be concerned with ‘large structures and big processes’ means eliding individual cognition. The human mind is back.

I would argue that the role of culture in perceptions is perhaps the key to future work in this area. Commentators have given me a rich menu of ideas that I intend to pursue. For example, Wikström raises the need for situational action theory and Sennett talks about the concept of a ‘common yardstick’ of inequality. Consistent with these scholars, I wish to re-emphasize that a concern with the micro-macro link and perceptions does not necessarily entail a rational choice position as is often assumed. I hope that my paper demonstrates the viability of a quantitative approach to perceptions that takes social meaning and culture seriously. An area that needs work, pointed out by Wiles, is connecting reputation and what he calls ‘public judgment’ to institutional practices (e.g., real estate agents, press reports, school report cards).

An interesting question was nonetheless raised about why my perceptual framework focused on disorder in the first place, virtually a ‘preoccupation’ of mine according to Davis. She asks, is disorder something that citizens actually pay attention to in their daily lives? Why privilege disorder? Why not race per se? Gilroy made much the same point. I focused on disorder in
part because of the importance of ‘broken windows’ theory in urban policy, which Davis allows. I did so also on conceptual grounds, drawing on a long line of theory pointing to the salience of visual cues in public spaces that turn on threats or perceived threats. Going back to Booth, whether we like it or not, disorder as defined in broken windows theory seems to have been widely noticed. The present respondents present us with additional data of relevance that serve to further vindicate my approach. For example, Wiles notes the power of ‘risk mitigation’ in governing daily actions, with disorder a major cue. Bottoms refers to English data from Macclesfield and the Innes study showing that in terms of commonly perceived threats, disorderly events in public spaces are what stand out. Ethnographic accounts match almost exactly the sorts of cues and signifiers I studied (see Bottoms’ Figure I (Bottoms 2009) and also the Kefalas study cited in my lecture (Kefalas 2003)). Body-Gendrot notes as well the salience of similar disorderly events in Paris, especially those that trigger police responses. Her observation simultaneously exposes another gap in my study – perceptions of the police are a key ingredient in reinforcing reactions to disorder. Overall, then, a focus on disorder is sustained even as I can agree with Sennett, Davis, and Gilroy on its constructed, projective nature.

The built environment is one of those areas that urban sociologists pay lip service to but rarely study carefully. I am no exception really, and I recognize the limitations of my work in this area. So far I have attended mainly to land use but as Davis, Sennett, and Body-Gendrot argue, much more needs to be done. Haussmann’s Paris serves as a fine example of how urban planning influenced the ‘forces of order’ (Body-Gendrot 2009: 66) and Davis articulates, correctly I think, the importance of ‘micro’ building environments for shaping public perceptions. In this regard I think one area ripe for future research is the sprouting of new housing developments on the outskirts of US cities, especially gated communities. Against the trend of diversity and urban revival has been the tendency of many in the USA to move further away from the city and seal themselves off from contact with what we normally think of as urban society and by implication, ‘difference’. Opportunities for intergroup contact and exposure to disorder are carefully controlled, a manifestation of what Sennett originally argued. What are the effects of contemporary gated developments on perceptions of disorder and decay? What are the implications for intergroup relations and the social reproduction of inequality? It seems that urban design badly needs to reunite with sociological theory (Davis 2009). Because housing markets act as a mechanism of allocation (Wiles 2009), they also need to be better integrated into sociological and criminological theory.

Two final comments are in order. First, note that I considered ‘perception’ in a broad sense and not just the lexical version of Wikström (2009: 62). One definition of perception (Merriam-Webster) is ‘intuitive cognition:
appreciation’. Because the existence of an object does not compel that people see it the same way, I think his emphasis on ‘assessment’ is perhaps too narrow in the sense of my argument because part of what I am saying is that people have different sensitivities or awareness of disorder in the first place. Some may literally not see (notice) litter walking to work – not because it was unobservable but because it was not salient to them. Or if a person believes some behaviours to be immoral or ‘bad’ (say, tattoos or immodest dress) and thus a problem in society, he or she will ‘see’ them more. In this sense the meaning influences the perception such that ‘believing is seeing’ even though all along there is some independent number of tattoos out there, or scantily clad people. It follows that I can be a realist and still claim that perceptions are socially mediated. Perhaps more important, I stick to my claim that culture can and should be studied from a systematic, inter-subjective vantage point.

Second, as noted in my original paper (Sampson 2009c), we measured and accounted for time of day in all analyses of disorder. Not surprisingly, physical disorder was highly stable over time. Even if some social disorder emerged at night the results would be overturned only if it occurred in a large number of areas where other social disorder was not present during the day. I would add, moreover, that positing the effects of ‘invisible’ disorder that occurs out of sight or in the middle of the night when no one in the neighbourhood is there to see it in essence defeats the logic of the broken windows theory: If one cannot see the disorder, then how is it to have an effect?

Conclusion

I wish to thank my discussants, one and all, for their engagement with my work. Although we might not fully agree there is quite a bit of common ground. Where questions were raised I see an opportunity to improve my thinking and conduct further research. In particular, I believe the following themes were underdeveloped: comparative (cross-national) study of perceived disorder and inequality; the role of the built environment; diversity’s effects on crime and perceptions of disorder in different contexts; gentrification and structural ‘exogenous interventions’; perceptions of the police and other elites regarding disorder; and more generally, the role of culture over time, especially the institutional practices and meanings that sustain inequality. Finally, I can agree with Davis and Gilroy on the need to tackle race more directly.

Disagreement or challenge on fundamental principles tends to sharpen one’s thinking, so I have nothing but appreciation for an invigorating symposium. I hope others agree.

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Notes

1. If pressed I would label my approach as a form of ‘analytic sociology’, which focuses on action-based theorizing, micro–macro links and methods suitable to analysing social mechanisms and processes, especially the consequences (mostly unintended) of individual actions and perceptions for macro-level, emergent phenomena. I see analytic sociology as an extension of Merton’s middle-range approach, focusing as it did on social mechanisms (Sampson 2009a).

2. Of course there are several types of realism, including scientific, philosophical, critical and constructive (Gorski 2004). What I would emphasize, consistent with my paper, is the theorizing of unobserved mechanisms and a rejection of determinism. Naïve or logical positivism stands as a caricature.

3. I agree with Wikström that the same objective disorder could lead to more crime in some neighbourhoods, in which case people ‘correctly’ perceive it more severely. For example, a group of kids hanging out in one area might be perceived more disorderly than an identical group elsewhere if the former’s hanging was more likely to produce gangs and eventuate in crime. That is why I controlled for violence and other crime, but with no change in results.

Bibliography


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