Disadvantage, disorder and diversity

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Professor Sampson is our foremost contemporary researcher of urban disorder and crime and this recent lecture (Sampson 2009) provides an elegant summary of his current thinking. It also represents a new attempt to empirically explain how the interplay between structure and perception drive action and hence future structure. In this country, similar thinking has been attempted – most notably at Cambridge by Tony Bottoms and Per-Olof Wikström. However, for Sampson, as ever, he locates his thinking firmly within the Chicago tradition and clearly wants to be seen to be carrying that mantle forward – an ambition that few would aspire to but which he of all people fulfils.

Sampson’s thesis, briefly stated, is that disadvantage at the neighbourhood level is long lasting; that this longevity can not be explained by the structural variables of disadvantage since their persistence is to be explained; that it is perception of disorder that is fundamental to disadvantage and its persistence; such perceptions are contextually shaped into collective social meaning that drive a neighbourhood’s future and that race and diversity is the key to such perceptions of disorder.

This thesis actually involves two different but connected lines of argument: one about disadvantage and the other about disorder. Since the stages in each of these arguments are to some extent implicit it is worth spelling them out.

The first argument starts with the assumption that disadvantages of various kinds exist and a claim that they are hierarchically structured. The argument then claims that many disadvantages are inter-correlated and so clustered. Furthermore, this clustering exists in space – i.e. that neighbourhoods have different rates of disadvantage. The next step in the argument is that neighbourhood rates of disadvantage are persistent over time. Whilst this claim is not always true (some areas do significantly change their relative disadvantage rate) it is often correct. Sampson is right that persistence is often more striking than change. Indeed, he starts his lecture by pointing out the similarity of some
of Mayhew’s description of Victorian London with the present day. This line of argument and its associated empirical evidence leaves a series of questions about what causes disadvantages and their inter-correlation and why they both cluster by place and can be persistent over time.

The second line of argument starts from the premise that social order is a necessary precondition for the social interactions that constitute social life. This is because interaction is based on trust in the orderliness of social exchange and so a certain degree of predictability as to the outcome. Disorder threatens the trust needed for interaction. For human society to be possible, the necessary degree of trust and so order must be constructed and maintained. That is why one of the key functions of political organization is to guarantee order through the making and enforcement of rules and the proclamation and re-enforcement of dominant norms. But organized political response can not alone enforce order but at best re-enforce informal mechanisms of social order. To achieve that informal social order we routinely have to manage and control the risk of disorder. We do so by creating a map of order and disorder in social space – for example, there are places, or times, or people that we perceive as threatening disorder and by avoiding them we protect the orderliness of our lives. Of course, this tactic only works if our perceptions are reasonably accurate and the danger of disorder is not so overwhelming that it can not be avoided. However, our perceptual map of order/disorder does not have to be totally accurate, just accurate enough for us to make risk decisions that are functional in maintaining our social lives. If we get it badly wrong (wandering into a high risk environment unaware) then we risk injury or if we perceptually over-emphasize disorder we risk undermining our social life (old people who worry so much about crime that they never go out). It’s a tricky balance and very difficult to calibrate on the basis of individual experience. Fortunately we don’t have to do so because mechanisms exist so that we can share experience and vicariously learn.

Both these arguments are well known and hardly novel. Sampson’s thesis involves them both but what is novel is the way Sampson explains the interactions between them and the implications for the persistence of disadvantage at the neighbourhood level.

Furthermore, he points out that the link between disadvantage, disorder and diversity are central to some contemporary politics whether that emerges in Putnam’s concerns about the effects of diversity on social capital and therefore solidarity and disorder, or Wilson and Kelling’s concern that unchallenged incivilities drives crime and a breakdown of public governance. In the UK it has led to a concern that declining social capital may lay behind a lack of public political engagement and a retreat into atomized private realms, or whether rule breaking can be halted by zero tolerance of deviance, or whether by tackling anti-social behaviour we can re-invigorate public morality and reduce crime? Sampson’s thesis then could not be more topical.
Let us examine the broad evidence for his thesis.

First, although our maps of disadvantage can change, Sampson is right that persistence is more striking than change. Second, we know that disadvantage at neighbourhood level involves the inter-correlation of the various forms of disadvantage but we also know that such correlations are less than total. So, for example, all high offender rate residential areas are relatively poor but not all relatively poor neighbourhoods have high offender rates. That is why the old favourite to explain the persistence of neighbourhood disadvantage, a Marxist theory of social class, explained too much – it is over-deterministic and so can not account for the empirical variability in the disadvantage inter-correlations nor the variability in the relationship between disadvantage and disorder and crucially whether these change or persist. Third, since disadvantage is either an attribute of individuals or families then its concentration and co-location in neighbourhoods must have something to do with how and why individuals and families come together spatially and temporarily.

So far the evidence has been structural in form. However, the fact of relative neighbourhood disadvantage is publicly well understood. The result is that, fourth, neighbourhoods have reputations as to their relative disadvantage. Furthermore, neighbourhoods also have reputations as to their relative disorder. These two perceptual aspects of reputation are not necessarily co-terminus – the difference being graphically expressed in the Victorian distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Fifth, such reputational differences are not just individual perceptions but are both well-known and shared in a city and re-enforced by a variety of public judgements (estate agents’ blurbs, press reports, school league tables etc) and reflected in local culture and media. Sixth, such reputations can be long lasting because cultural beliefs and folk memories change more slowly that can structural reality. In Sheffield, where I once did crime research, the story of a television being dropped from a multi-storey block of flats and killing someone was told as if it had just happened years after the actual event.

So far the broad evidence supports Sampson’s thesis and is well known. It is the next steps in Sampson’s argument where the evidence becomes more controversial but also his thesis more original.

Because social order is a necessary pre-condition for us to engage in a public life, perceptions of social disorder are always going to be central to our beliefs about the social world in which we live. Beliefs about disorder can warn us that our normal modes of public interaction may be threatened so we can retreat back to spaces where we know we are safe. We will claim that our beliefs are based on actual signs of disorder but experience of all neighbourhoods of a city is quite rare and most of our beliefs about the geography of disorder are second-hand. However, most sociologists have assumed that the shared but second-hand perceptions of disorder across a city are fairly closely related to reality even if not completely accurate. For example, whilst beliefs about
neighbourhood crime rates may all be out of scale they are often in the correct rank order. Similarly a superficial analysis of British Crime Survey data shows that perceptions of anti-social disorder are closely correlated with crime rates at the neighbourhood level.

More recently doubts have begun to emerge about how perceptions of disorder are linked to actual disorder. Although crime in England and Wales (as measured by both the British Crime Survey and police recorded crime) has gone down very significantly over the last decade, nevertheless almost two thirds of the public believe that crime has been going up. Of course, that particular disparity could be explained by perceptions of national politics and media reporting and indeed the disparity is less (but still present) if measured at the local level. However, more detailed analysis of the British Crime Survey data shows that perceptions of anti-social disorder have not followed the downward trajectory of crime itself. That fact has been used to claim support for the ‘broken windows’ thesis (although as Sampson points out a strangely emasculated version of that thesis), to argue that ‘signal’ crimes are the key to perception and that the public’s political expectations of crime control can therefore only be fulfilled by tackling the anti-social behaviour that drives perceptions of disorder. As Sampson notes, key elements of contemporary crime control policies have grown out of the lack of direct connection between perceptions and actual disorder.

It is at this point that Sampson is able to draw upon the very extensive research data set that he, and others, have collected in Chicago. That research has uniquely collected data not just on perceptions of disorder but also standardized measures of disorder at neighbourhood level. The British Crime Survey has collected perceptions of disorder and interviewer assessments of signs of disorder but the latter is not so rigorously standardized and, because it is a national survey, only available at a pseudo neighbourhood level. What Sampson shows is that the perceptions and reality of disorder are disjuncted at the neighbourhood level and that the disjunction reflects the extent of ethnic heterogeneity in general but the number of black residents in particular. Sampson then argues that the persistence of neighbourhood disadvantage is the outcome of shared and public perceptions of differential disorder which reflect not actual disorder but ethnic mix and discriminate against and isolate some neighbourhoods from the mainstream. However, such neighbourhood discrimination is not based on conscious discrimination against ethnically mixed or black neighbourhoods but rather is the result of unconscious but shared cultural beliefs about disorder and danger which have particularly assigned such risk to ethnically mixed and especially black groups.

Given this explanation Sampson surprisingly is not ultimately pessimistic. If the driver of disadvantage is unconscious cultural perception then cultural change could alter the situation and Sampson sees signs of that in new generations moving into neighbourhoods because they positively value local
diversity. Not embourgeoisement in the hope of a capital gain but the cultural celebration and valuing of bohemian diversity. In countries where diversity has increased this is a comforting analysis.

It is an attractive and in the end hopeful thesis. More to the point the mechanism of neighbourhood discrimination and perceptions of disorder are backed up by empirical evidence and analysis. I am in no position to argue with the link between ethnic diversity and especially blackness and perceptions of disorder in Chicago’s neighbourhoods – Sampson produces his evidence. It also seems to me quite plausible that the same linkages would be found in other US cities given the cultural heritage of racial and especially black discrimination.

However, that still leaves some difficult questions. First, would the same explanation apply in other countries – and especially that last step in the argument? Second, is the key mechanism perception and culture which has created the structure of disadvantage? These are difficult because if the answer to the first question is ‘no’ then the Sampson thesis needs to explain why particular attributes act so powerfully as signifiers of disorder and if the answer to the second question is ‘no’, or a more complex interplay between culture and structure, then his optimism is punctured. These are awkward and the latter especially churlish in the context of the optimism in future race relations in the USA we all want to share following the election of President Obama.

As regards the first question, clearly ethnic diversity or blackness can not be the mechanism driving perceptions of disorder in a city without such diversity. Sampson himself quotes Mayhew’s descriptions of Victorian London to demonstrate the persistence of neighbourhood disadvantage but Victorian London was not so ethnically diverse as today – although it is true that some ethnic groups were clustered in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. However, the same pattern of neighbourhood discrimination and continuing disadvantage was found in the past in British cities where at the time there was little ethnic diversity and where such neighbourhoods were often socially homogeneous and often socially solidary. Nevertheless, some such neighbourhoods were usually perceived within the city as both disadvantaged and often disordered – in other words the rest of the Sampson thesis applied as the explanation of persistence. In such cases the clues that identified neighbourhoods as disadvantaged were different – the undeserving poor were probably as feared and easily identified by Victorians as Chicago’s black ghetto residents today. Unfortunately we don’t have the evidence to know whether the Victorian undeserving poor also saw themselves as dangerous. In other words, as Sampson says, this cultural process is context dependent and so its form will vary.

That leaves some questions: is it possible to have a society in which advantage is not unequally distributed (disadvantage)? If not is it possible to have a society in which such disadvantage is not used (even if indirectly) as the basis for sorting individuals and families between areas of a city? If that happens will
that mean that such collected disadvantage will be used as the basis for judging areal risk rates? And if that happens will that impede changing neighbourhood rates of disadvantage?

A modern society without disadvantage is unknown and remains a utopian ideal. Most modern societies do cluster disadvantage at neighbourhood level. Unconscious judgments and choices about sameness play their part but the key thing about residential areas is that the housing market acts as a mechanism of allocation. For so long as disadvantage includes wealth then the housing market will produce clustering of disadvantage. In situations where there is not a price-driven housing market (as was the case in the UK in the middle of the last century when public housing made up a large proportion of housing in most cities) then the use of other forms of social power will effect the same result. For example, people will use influence, connections and knowledge to ensure they are allocated to areas with good, rather than bad reputations. In trying to influence where they live, people are simply exercising one of the most important risk management decisions based on the shared perceptions in a city as to the reputations of different areas. The original reason for an area gaining a poor reputation may be trivial (one well reported incidence or new, better housing coming on to the market) but can then be the basis for such decisions. Once made the decisions will then have a multiplier effect: those with least power (the most disadvantaged) will end up in the neighbourhoods with the worst reputations. However, the concentration of disadvantage might also increase the actual extent of disorder because the range of disadvantage will likely include many of the risk factors of criminality and victimization. The result can be a solidary neighbourhood but one based on a deviant sub-culture. Even if this is not the case and residents want to control disorder, their disadvantage will reduce their ability to command state agencies to help maintain order – in Sampson’s language such neighbourhoods have lower levels of ‘collective efficacy’. In other words, allocation between neighbourhoods may be based on perceptions that are not accurate but the consequence can be to create or re-enforce the very conditions that were originally assumed. Once that has happened then persistence will be the norm unless something breaks the cycle. Such change is difficult and programmes for neighbourhood renewal have to change both the fabric of a neighbourhood and its reputation which is very difficult if the link between allocation and disadvantage persists. No amount of improving the housing stock or glossy promotion will work if an area’s reputation keeps it at the bottom of the market. When the Chicago school explained the persistence of high crime areas over time, even though different waves of new immigrants passed through them, they did so in these terms.

This analysis could be more depressing than Sampson’s final optimism: as long there is a hierarchy of disadvantage and a housing market that reflects that fact then some neighbourhoods will have poor reputations and then suffer
the consequences in terms of their rates of disadvantage and disorder. The only way out is to break the link between disadvantage and housing allocation. We once tried to do so in the UK by making the allocation of public housing serve broader social policy. When the public housing stock was large this worked to some degree, although the knowledgeable still tried to play the allocation rules to their advantage. However, as the size of the public housing stock declined so the concentration of disadvantage increased. The alternative is to have a public culture which does not encourage area social segregation in the housing market. However, a pre-condition for such a culture would be both the perception and actuality of generally low rates of disorder and a limited range of social disadvantage. Japan approximates this housing ideal and also historically had a low crime rate and a very homogeneous society. For those countries with higher crime rates and more heterogeneity the problem is more difficult. Sampson’s hope of a cultural shift to valuing diversity could work but only if what is found attractive is not the availability of illicit goods and services. Essentially incomers with a culture of valuing diversity actually have to change an area and reduce its rate of disorder (even if that rate is exaggerated) and crime. If such a culture became more common place then the housing market would reflect the value of diversity in its allocations and future developments.

However, the need to guard against the threat to our social life of disorder will remain. As long as the risk of disorder is so skewed in its distribution then we will seek to use that knowledge for risk management strategies to avoid danger. If crime and disorder is not geographically skewed then there is no advantage in neighbourhood choice from a risk management point of view. But as long as crime and disorder remain skewed in any dimension then we will use that to attempt to mitigate risk. Ask about any choice (of school, work place, university) and one element will be risk mitigation. To some extent it will be to manage the risks of disorder but, sadly, it will also be to avoid contact with the disadvantaged since that attribute is also believed to carry a danger of contagion, whether by lack of ambition, social contacts or knowledge. This is not to be pessimistic. The difference between degrees of civilization is not whether these social processes are in play but the extent of the differences that they are allowed to generate. Lower rates and less variation in rates of disorder or disadvantage are civilized goals for any society and Professor Sampson continues that great Chicago tradition of trying to understand how to achieve them.

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**Bibliography**
