

MIT Open Access Articles

Taking Place and Space Seriously: Reflections on "Disparity and Diversity in the Contemporary City"

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

Citation: Davis, Diane E. "Taking place and space seriously: reflections on 'Disparity and Diversity in the Contemporary City'." *British Journal of Sociology* 60.1 (2009): 39-47.

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2008.01213.x>

Publisher: Blackwell Publishers

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/51859>

Version: Original manuscript: author's manuscript prior to formal peer review

Terms of Use: Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.



Taking Place and Space Seriously: Reflections on “Disparity and Diversity in the Contemporary City”

Diane Davis
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

December 2008

Rob Sampson’s “Disparity and Diversity in the Contemporary City” establishes two very critical points for sociologists generally, and for scholars of the city in particular. First and foremost, it highlights the importance of individual perception, a form of cognitive processing, as a key determinant in social outcomes. While not entirely new, this claim is in need of serious re-consideration and further discussion in sociology today. Second and most innovatively, if not importantly, Sampson introduces a concern with perception into studies of the city and applies it to the phenomenon of segregation, both income and race-based. By so doing, he extends the role of perception and cognition beyond the domain of subjective urban experience, a subarea of study already well-developed in the work of the urban sociologist Claude Fischer. Sampson argues provocatively that perceptions of social disorder are central to the reproduction of neighborhood composition and urban socio-spatial form. Above and beyond his fascinating findings about the race-linked interpretive biases that drive individuals to perceive greater social disorder in certain neighborhoods than actual empirical evidence would dictate, Sampson’s research will bring the discipline of urban sociology more in line with recent innovations in brain and cognitive science that are changing the way many established fields are coming to understand individual thought and behavior.

To be sure, the discipline of sociology has flirted with psychology (and thus individual thought and behavior) almost since its inception -- although Durkheim, as one of the field’s founders, was actually motivated by the desire to differentiate sociology from the discipline of psychology. For decades, sociologists have incorporated the concepts, ideas, and methods of experimentally-based psychological work into their study of the key dilemmas of social order, ranging from the proclivities toward destruction and evil (who can forget Stanley Milgram’s experiments with torture) to the dynamics of trust, cooperation, and responsibility (Prisoner’s Dilemma anyone?) to individual responses to crowding (ah yes, the rats). When I attended graduate school three decades ago, the subfield of social psychology was in fact one of the most popular specializations offered, and many of my graduate student peers were examining the notion of relative deprivation and other socio-psychological theories to account for the social movement behavior that I was studying through the lens of state structures and class conflicts. But it has been a while since concern with individual’s cognitive processes has been central to the discipline as a whole, let alone used to argue something novel in the subfield of urban sociology, as does Rob Sampson. It is long overdue.

Some of the initial turning away from social psychological approaches may have owed to the growing dissatisfaction with quasi-experimental methodologies. With comparative-historical and political sociology increasing in popularity over the 1980s and 1990s, at least in the United States, scholars began questioning the assumptions and value of controlled experiments and whether they could produce material of value for theorizing the “large structures and big processes” driving social life and social change. Along with this shift, sociology moved away from its predominant focus on individuals and their values or normative orientations and began to embrace more structural and institutional explanations for change. This not only meant that in studies of large-scale phenomena like revolution, state formation, industrialization, and urbanization, Neil Smelser’s writings were steadily upstaged by those emanating from Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol. It also meant that the perceptions and the proclivities of individuals were soon identified as less critical in producing social outcomes than were political and economic institutions or collective action repertoires; and even when rational actor models were introduced into studies of these large structures and processes, as in writings of Mancur Olsen on the free-rider problem, the collective dynamics of interaction were as important as individual perceptions in producing outcomes.

When the limits of more structural approaches and macro-sociological paradigms became clear in the 1990s, they generated a renewed appreciation for the field of cultural sociology. This was a subject that held considerable potential to generate greater concern with individual agency, the role of norms and values, and thus cognitive processes. But even then, social psychology still did not experience much of a revival. Culture and its value-laden normative infrastructures were still as likely to be methodologically conceived as socially produced through history, institutions, and political or social interactions as through the perceptions and cognitive processes of individual actors.¹

In the last several years, however, social science has changed dramatically. Cognition and controlled experimentation are back at the forefront of innovation, owing to recent discoveries by brain and cognitive scientists like Steven Pinker, who have introduced new cognition-based theories and laboratory methodologies for the study of human behavior, and whose findings call into question many of the assumptions about individual motivations and the origins of social order. Likewise, there is renewed interest in the value of controlled experimentation, a methodology that has taken the fields of economics and political science by storm recently, resulting in a large body of writings on social behavior and how individuals changes their preferences and actions in the face of incentives, opportunities, and constraints. The elective affinity between brain scientists, economists, and rational choice-based political scientists owes in large part to the shared assumptions of methodological individualism – or better said, the view that individuals (and either their thoughts or actions) are the foundational elements upon which larger theories of social, political, or economic order are constructed.

¹ My intent here is to draw a broad and sweeping “interpretation” of dominant trends in sociology. I fully acknowledge that social psychological approaches and sociological studies of individual attitudes, perceptions, and norms did not disappear altogether over the last several decades. But their popularity has waned until recently, making Sampson’s approach to “bringing cognition back in” all the more important.

Rob Sampson's research on the role of perception in structuring neighborhood composition rides the crest of this wave of new research, placing individual cognition at the heart of urban change, but developed in a way consistent with the social ecology tradition so dominant among American urbanists. That is, Sampson contextualizes perception in a geographically-defined (and racialized) spatial context. As such, this research should be lauded for its potential to spark new excitement and a similar set of questions about the value of social cognition and experimental methodology in the field of urban sociology.

Along with Manuel Castells, who is among the forefront of urban sociologists seeking to incorporate brain and cognitive science into the study of how individuals form networks and develop communication skills, and parallel to a handful of others who now embrace theories of social cognition in the study of economic institutions, moral order, and network relations, Rob Sampson is leading a revival of sorts to bring questions of perception into debate, and conceiving of perception not simply as a proxy for cultural and racial stereotypes as much as a set of cognitive processes that "operate beneath the radar screen of our conscious reasoning" (p. 12). As such, Sampson is interested in explaining the impact of these cognitive processes on aggregate structural patterns of racial composition, segregation, concentration of poverty, and the longer-term social production of space in the city.

As an urban sociologist I applaud Sampson not just for the commitment to understanding the interplay of structure and individual agency in the determination of city form, but more importantly, for rescuing subjectivity and interpretation from the dustbin of post-modernism, where it was frequently employed to undermine social scientific efforts to establish causality rather than sustain larger propositions about identifiable principles of social change. His success in framing the study of individual perceptions of disorder in the context of a rigorous quantitative analysis built on empirical measurement of real and perceived disorder (and their impacts on patterns of neighborhood change) serves as a model of conceptual rigor. This research also shows that it is possible to conduct serious methodological work on cognition and perception without electrodes and brain probes. Neighborhoods can serve as "labs" for observing perceptive behavior, thank you, and the insights that such procedures generate are still not yet fully known.

As an American-born urban sociologist who has lived most of her adult life in this country's largest cities (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and now Boston), I respect the unflinching determination and sensitivity with which Sampson has identified and made sense of the issue of racial inequality that so clearly defines the urban experience in this country. Indeed, my own experiential knowledge of the deep wound of racism on the American psyche, coupled with the stark reality of racism in everyday American life, have made it almost impossible to read this article with a critical eye. At every turn, and with every set of findings about perceived disorder and why it was greater than objectively reported disorder when racial composition of the neighborhood was factored into the analysis, I could only find myself nodding in resignation if not agreement.

But if I did not offer anything but accolades it would be boring, so perhaps it is the predictability and unsurprising nature of the findings that will serve as my point of departure. When asking myself why was it seemed so easy to accept the coherence, findings, and conclusions of this article, I could only turn to the methodology and framing and search for under-explored or missing elements that might inspire other questions or that, at minimum, while not challenging the argument, would help elaborate or embellish it. First is the issue of the conceptual framing of the research.

It is hard to shake the sensation that Sampson's preoccupation with the concept of disorder -- which permeates the introductory sections of the paper and becomes the main dependent variable of the research design (operationalized in terms of "scales of disorder") -- is itself a social construct selected for study because of its grounding in a particular body of theory, rather than because it is a phenomenon around which citizens structure their everyday life in significant ways. This is not to say that disorder is unimportant, or absent as a social phenomenon. But it is to ask questions about why a focus on disorder matters.

Disorder as a concept is most identified with neo-functionalist theory, which has been central in much of the urban sociological writing associated with the Chicago School, especially for those who followed the human ecology tradition and posit that change comes through strain and disorder that disrupts equilibrium. In this framing of the problem, disorder is assumed to be a negative phenomenon. As I read through this essay, it occurred to me that the study of perceptions could have been framed around the concept of order rather than disorder, which is an equally significant concept in the field of sociology also tracing to Durkheim and other theorists who defined sociology as the search to identify the institutions and practices that establish and sustain social order, thereby making society possible. So why not? Alternatively, why wasn't this essay conceptually framed around perceptions of race directly? Why was the explanatory road to racial segregation and concentration of poverty routed almost completely through the study of disorder, whether real or perceived, especially given the fact that racialized assumptions loom large in Sampson's quantitative results and qualitative interpretation?

Of course, disorder is a powerful idea that can and should capture our scholarly attention. But it would be helpful to have more empirical justification as to why we should return to it now, especially given the fact that the idea of urban disorder was a major subject of urban sociologists for years before it was jettisoned by Charles Tilly in "The Chaos of the Living City" as the justification underlying bourgeois fears of an active working class. Even Sampson himself argues that in certain contexts (e.g. graffiti along the Seine in Paris), disorder is not necessarily seen as problematic; and he goes so far as to query why the laissez faire attitude towards disorder is not the case here, where he notes it is "taken-for-granted" as signifying something negative (p. 8). Yet by sidestepping this question of why it is taken for granted, and turning his attention to the underlying the perceptions of disorder, he begs the question of why disorder as a subject should be relevant for American urban scholars. While his findings do suggest that measures of disorder still resonates among survey respondents, who are able to identify cues that Sampson's coders then classify as evidence of disorder, it is not evident whether survey respondents are

asked to weigh in on the definition or meaning of disorder. Nor does we know for whom disorder (or its cues) are interpreted as negative, and in what ways? Will such formulations hold true for residents in all cities? Stated differently, do all the measures of disorder (physical and social ranging from graffiti to public drinking) have the same negative connotations in all places and spaces, either individually or together as a single measurable construct?

To be fair, Sampson does offer a partial response to such queries when he invokes the “broken windows” strategy as some sort of justification for linking disorder to crime, suggesting that for police, disorder is an important and meaningful measure of a place’s negative potential and attributes, at least as described in terms of risk for crime.² But is the same view held by city residents? Does disorder – real or perceived -- say something about the value and desirability of places they choose to live? Even if disorder is always negative, can anything be done about it? The latter questions get directly at a foundational assumption of this research, which is the claim that perceptions of disorder sustain the racialized inequality of space over time. Yet to make that conceptual leap one would not only have to accept that citizens of all races are free to move from places where disorder is perceived as high to those where it is not; one also has to assume that leaving (perceptively) disordered areas is a desirable option for all, no matter their race or ethnicity.

This is where we start wading into murkier waters, and where greater attention to material conditions that constrain or embellish neighborhood ambience and the semiotics of daily life and/or the meaning of disorder might have deepened our knowledge. One particular area for further examination is the built environment, primarily the housing stock and housing types that predominate in certain neighborhood areas. The age and nature of housing, whether it is public or private, may produce a sense of place and social identity that itself has an impact on perceptions of disorder, whether positively or negatively, and independent of the demographic attributes of its users. Certain housing styles, moreover, may invite certain forms of physical or social behavior (graffiti, public gathering, their absence, etc.). Of course, to the extent that there is some correlation between racial and income composition or poverty concentration and housing stock, and to the extent that physical infrastructure of the built environment can carry forward historical associations that persist in time, even when certain residents depart, it would be difficult to know whether the perceptions of disorder for a given environment owe to the racialized or income characteristics of prior or current residents as opposed to the overall ambience of the area produced by the form of the physical built environment, in which certain racial or income populations may in fact predominate. But these queries may be worth pursuing. For example, could the presence of public housing projects in a neighborhood give more visual cues of perceived disorder than would single family

² In my own work on disorder and policing, I have found that often these strategies serve as a policy “sleight of hand” that justify active involvement of police to curtail sociability (a clear positive attribute of place) and, more significantly, that justify large-scale gentrification processes that displace low-income people from certain areas of the city. See “The Giuliani Factor: Zero Tolerance Policing and the Transformation of the Public Sphere in Downtown Mexico City.” Forthcoming in Gareth A. Jones (ed.), *Public Space and Public Sphere in Mexico City*, Routledge.

homes, assuming one could hold constant income and race of the inhabitants; and if so, could it be the distribution of these and other housing types within and between neighborhoods or census tracts -- as opposed to the visual cues of "skin color" identified by Sampson -- that motivate observers to perceive entire neighborhoods as more disordered?

As a sociologist teaching in an urban planning department, I have become more cognizant of the importance of built environmental cues and the aesthetic assumptions used for valuing subjective comfort and meanings of space and place. I have learned that sometimes visual cues of disorder are significant to local residents because they keep gentrifiers out – or so this was the case in a study of Boston's dilapidated downtown Chinatown by my MIT colleague Tunney Lee, who found that residents did not want new storefronts, modernized buildings, or renovated facades because it signaled an openness to yuppies who in turn would drive up property values and displace current residents. In this case, disorder was a very positive thing. I have also learned that visual cues like density, green space, quality of light, balance of single versus multi-family houses, the mere presence of towering mega-family housing projects, and urban land uses that signal poverty or difference (ranging from car repairing on the streets to loud music) are both visually legible and socially meaningful as signs of either social distance or identity or both. But any serious assessment of whether these cues signal disorder or ordered familiarity, and whether one or the other of these states is valued and why, must be generated through ethnographic methods or some other form of on-the-ground data collection that links the semiotic cues of a place to the varieties of meaning attributed to these cues by residents. Sampson himself is very well attuned to the power and importance of visual cues in this research; but he identifies only a small and predictable range of social and physical signifiers and assumes a relatively negative meaning to all of them. This may be the case because the classifications of these visual cues and their asserted meaning seem to be drawn from criminologists and police more than residents, urbanists, anthropologists, or architects who are trained or experienced enough to subtly understand the meanings of space, place, and the built environment.

Let me conclude by concurring wholeheartedly with the larger picture painted in this research, and by agreeing that the data presented here support the claim that perceptions of place are mediated by socio-economic and the racial or ethnic characteristics associated with those places. With this solid foundation of research, urban sociology is well poised to consider a wider array of mediating and contextual variables to tease out causalities. I have already noted the built environmental factors that might help deconstruct or delineate these causalities, but I would also like to end by underscoring the value of history as well, and the importance of time and the peculiarities of place in sustaining perceptions of space.

On page 15 Sampson makes the absolutely critical point that national context matters in understanding perceptions of disorder, but then goes on to imply that perhaps the main differences are between the United States and elsewhere. I would call on him to scale this insight down to the city, if not the level of neighborhoods. As a former resident of Chicago, it strikes me that these powerful research findings say as much about Chicago's

social and spatial history as they do about the perceptions of urban residents in the US, let alone elsewhere. Until recently, Chicago was the most racially segregated city in the nation. This owed not just to its history of post-WWII migration, but also to the city's machine politics, its spatial form, its housing and land use policy, redlining, employment patterns, the proliferation of living spaces like Cabrini Green, and a massive inflow of Mexican migrants in recent years, among other things. Although many other American cities have one or more of these characteristics (think Detroit or St. Louis), few have this complex array of determinants, let alone the dubious honor of consistently being among the nation's most segregated cities.

To be sure, the million dollar question raised by Rob Sampson's research is whether it is perceptions of disorder that explain this distressing state of affairs, as evidenced by the durability of segregation over time. He has given a powerful answer and compelling evidence to sustain it. But one cannot help but think that the nature and patterns of segregation painted in this research may owe so much to the city's unique history as they do to individual perceptions of disorder, generally understood. Given this history, would we expect the importance attributed to social cognition in determining enduring segregation in Chicago also hold for a city like Phoenix, or Los Angeles? We can leave it to Rob Sampson to extend his research agenda to include a variety of urban locales, and to conduct similar assessments on a variety of American cities, North and South, sunbelt or rustbelt. By ascertaining similarities and differences across cities in the relationships between perceived and observed disorder and their impacts on segregation, we can only deepen our knowledge about race, perception, and urban form. We may in the process also learn more about the universality of semiotic cues about order and disorder. Finally, we may discover the conditions under which individual perceptions of disorder are more aligned to built environmental cues and interventions than to racial demographics, and with this knowledge argue for new urban policies that derail the reproduction of segregation over time. If so, urban sociologists could even make a case for reviving the quasi-experimental method, structuring built environmental interventions in a variety of communities across cities or the nation, and assessing their relative impact on individual perceptions and segregation over time. There is so much more to do, and with Rob Sampson at the helm of any such initiative, the research path is well established and the intellectual leadership is eminently clear.