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POLICY ESSAY

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MAKING ORDER OF DISORDER: A CALL  
FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY\*

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Over the past several years, social science has not been kind to broken windows theory. Various critiques have led some scholars to conclude that the “theoretical arc of the broken windows or incivilities thesis has at the least flattened out and may be in decline” (Taylor, 2006:1625). Criticisms surface on several dimensions. Among the most scathing, Harcourt (2001) takes issue with the concept of “disorder,” claiming it is socially constructed, variable, and biased against lower class culture. He also challenges the notion that disorder and crime are related. In his reanalysis of Skogan’s (1990) data, Harcourt documents no support for a disorder-crime relationship, finding “no statistically significant relationships between disorder and purse snatching, physical assault, burglary, or rape when other explanatory variables are held constant” (p. 78).

Other studies grant that although disorder and crime may be related, the nature and strength of the relationship are questionable. Sampson and Raudenbush (2001:4) find it is the structural characteristics of neighborhoods, as well as neighborhood cohesion and informal social control (i.e., collective efficacy)—not levels of disorder—that most affect crime. And other studies similarly document that disorder takes a back seat to more powerfully predictive aspects of neighborhood fabric such as status and stability (Taylor, 2008; see also Taylor, 2001).

Social science also has not been kind to the most common policy response based on the broken windows perspective: order maintenance policing.<sup>1</sup> Although many public officials and analysts have credited this form of policing with drastically reducing crime and improving the quality of life in New York City and in other major cities in the United States, some scholars question how much, if any, of the decline in crime can be attributed to order maintenance policing (Bowling, 1999; Conklin, 2003; Harcourt, 2001; Kamen, 2000). Bowling (1999), for example, argues that

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1. Order maintenance policing is also referred to as problem-oriented policing, problem-solving policing, quality-of-life policing, zero tolerance policing, broken windows policing, and community policing.

homicide rates in New York City had begun to decline before any radical changes in policing policy were instituted and maintains that the “‘New York story’ has been over-simplified and over-sold” (p. 531). Another study finds that New York City’s crime drop was equal to or below that of several other large cities, which employed a variety of policing strategies (Joanes, 2000; see also Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Finally, one study concluded the following with respect to the broken windows thesis and the effectiveness of order maintenance policing: “Taken together, the evidence from New York City and from the five-city social experiment provides no support for a simple first-order disorder-crime relationship as hypothesized by Wilson and Kelling [1982], nor for the proposition that broken windows policing is the optimal use of scarce law enforcement resources” (Harcourt and Ludwig, 2006:271).

The current study by Gau and Pratt (2008, this issue), which raises several conceptual and methodological problems with the broken windows thesis, only adds to the onslaught. Their major finding—that citizens do not distinguish between disorder and crime—undermines a key assumption of the theory, namely that disorder and crime are different phenomena and that the former precedes the latter. However, as they note in their study, disorder cannot cause crime if disorder *is* crime. Their findings, along with others, underscore the need for scholars to reevaluate the main theoretical arguments that comprise the broken windows thesis. I argue that the most important step in this process is to reevaluate the central concept of disorder itself.

## WHAT IS DISORDER?

The concept of disorder is absolutely fundamental to broken windows theory. Disorder, it is claimed, can set off a chain of events that lead to greater crime rates in neighborhoods. Given its centrality, one might expect the concept to be clearly defined and systematically empirically measured across studies, but this has not been the case. Below I detail the challenges, both conceptual and methodological, with theorizing and measuring disorder. I later argue that much more work is needed in these areas to sort out the various issues before relevant public policies such as order maintenance policing are implemented.

## DEFINING DISORDER

Since the inception of the theory, disorder has been somewhat of a “slippery concept” (Skogan, 1990:4) causing many to question, what is disorder? And how does one know disorder when one sees it? Although more recent work has paid special attention to defining the concept systematically and to assessing its properties empirically (see especially Ross

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and Mirowsky, 1999), this work has not resulted in the adoption of a common understanding of disorder. Variability in how disorder is understood and conceptualized across studies is the rule rather than the exception.

For example, some studies make a distinction between physical and social disorder (Skogan, 1986, 1990; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Taylor and Hale, 1986; Taylor and Shumaker, 1990), whereas others claim this distinction is unimportant and unnecessary (Xu, Fielder, and Flaming, 2005:163) or does not bear out in the data (Ross and Mirowsky, 1999:416). Also unclear is whether disorder and crime represent substantively distinct concepts (as the theory argues) or whether they are simply at opposite ends of the same continuum. Research findings, including those from Gau and Pratt's study, seem to suggest the latter perspective is correct. Ross and Mirowsky (1999:414) note that "Major crimes are rare and often unseen, but they form the extreme end of the disorder continuum," and Sampson and Raudenbush (1999:608) agree: "A reasonable hypothesis is that public disorder and predatory crimes are manifestations of the same explanatory process, albeit at different ends of a 'seriousness' continuum." Still others posit alternative relationships; Lewis and Salem (1986) claim perceived increases in crime are among the clearest indicators of social disorder in an area. How, then, should researchers conceptually distinguish, if at all, between disorder and crime?

Also illustrative of the variability in how disorder is defined is the fact that researchers have not arrived at a common vocabulary. Despite using almost identical measures across studies, some researchers purport to examine disorder (Perkins and Taylor, 1996; Skogan, 1990, Xu et al., 2005), others incivility (Covington and Taylor, 1991; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992; Lewis and Maxfield, 1980; Perkins et al., 1993; Rohe and Burby, 1988; Taylor and Covington, 1993), and still others neighborhood problems (Gates and Rohe, 1987; Lee, 1981; Rohe and Stegman, 1994; Taylor and Hale, 1986). Are there substantive differences between these concepts? How is disorder similar to and different from incivility and neighborhood problems? Are these terms interchangeable? Relatively little attention has been given to differentiating between these concepts; yet, for the most part, they are used interchangeably in the literature.

Perhaps more troubling is the considerable overlap of the concept of disorder with related concepts from other neighborhood theories such as social disorganization. Disorder has significant theoretical overlap with the concepts of collective efficacy, informal social control, and crime. As Ross and Mirowsky (1999:413) note, "communities with high levels of disorder are characterized by deviance, noise, vandalism, drug use, trouble with neighbors, and other incivilities associated with a general breakdown of social control." The authors find this characterization to be true in their study when they note, "Some informal social control items appear to be

good indicators of neighborhood order” (p. 425). Of concern then is how disorder differs from the related concepts of informal social control and collective efficacy.

However, even more serious problems may abound with the concept of disorder. Several researchers contend that defining disorder is inherently subjective and problematically so. Who (or what) is orderly and who (or what) is disorderly depends on who is doing the defining, which gives disorder a contextually dependent nature (Taylor, 2008). Although it is widely recognized that Wilson and Kelling (1982) acknowledged as much in their original statement of the theory, many scholars eager to implement related policies have overlooked this point, which leads some to caution: “[T]he meaning of order and disorder may not be as stable or as fixed as the order maintenance approach suggests” (Harcourt, 2001:18). The social construction of disorder and the dichotomizing of the orderly versus disorderly can have serious consequences.

This latter point is reinforced by the main finding of Gau and Pratt’s study: Unlike as theorized, citizens do not seem to differentiate between disorder and crime; rather, the two blend together in their eyes. Their finding and the above discussion should serve to remind us that “disorder” and “crime” are essentially labels, labels used in studies by criminologists and dictated by police agencies in their practices (i.e., order maintenance). These labels, however, may not have the same relevance for individuals in communities, as Gau and Pratt ultimately discover.

The lesson here is that labels can be reified and take on a life of their own. As scholars, we are trained to recognize this occurrence but often need to be reminded of the dangerous consequences of reification. The concept of disorder and the findings from Gau and Pratt and other researchers provide one case in point: Definitions of disorder used by researchers and officials studying and practicing broken windows policing are not necessarily consistent with residents’ perceptions in their own communities. Another case in point is illustrative. In her book *Neither Angels nor Demons*, Kathleen Ferraro (2006) explores the connections between victimization and offending from the perspective of women charged with crimes against their intimate partners. A key finding from her analysis is that despite serious and repeated victimization from their significant others, all women in her study rejected the label of “battered woman,” even when it was in their best interest to adopt such a label (e.g., in court or during sentencing hearings). These women did not embrace the term “battered woman” but rejected it, claiming the label was inappropriate. Ferraro’s findings illustrate the difficulty of forcing experience and perception into narrow legal or scholarly categories. I argue that the same point applies to the concept of disorder with broken windows theory and order maintenance policing.

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The above discussion speaks to the necessity of recognizing and accounting for the subjective meanings imbued on concepts such as “disorder” by criminologists, residents of communities, and the police officers that patrol disorder and disorderly conduct in those very communities. In the case of broken windows theory, one might argue, in fact, that we should prioritize community residents’ perceptions of disorder because residents are the direct targets of police efforts. Unfortunately, relatively little consideration has been given to the inherent subjectivity of disorder, and even less attention has been directed toward understanding residents’ subjective meanings of disorder in their communities. This inattention not only has created conceptual confusion in the literature but also has resulted in problems regarding the proper operationalization and measurement of disorder. The challenges in measuring disorder are described below.

## MEASURING DISORDER

As noted, most studies testing the broken windows thesis have relied on objective indicators of disorder, which fail to capture the social meaning ascribed to disorder by community residents that may trigger the broken windows process. This reliance is somewhat ironic given that individuals’ perceptions of their communities—not necessarily objective reality—are central to the theory. As Gau and Pratt note, although several theories and policies specify the importance of how residents perceive the conditions in their communities, this importance is perhaps “most integral to the theory and practice of ‘broken windows’ policing.” So residents’ perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and so on should drive broken windows theory development and related policy initiatives. Yet, this change has not happened.

How strongly related are objective and perceptual measures of neighborhood disorder? Perkins and Taylor (1996) documented correlations that ranged from a low of 0.20 between independent observations of young men hanging out on the streets and respondents’ reports of physical disorder to a high of 0.76 between observations of residential physical disorder and respondents’ reports of physical disorder. These correlations suggest that objective and perceptual measures of disorder are not always highly correlated.

Perhaps more importantly, what behaviors do the police typically treat as disorderly and how strongly related are they to residents’ perceptions of disorder in their community? Thacher (2004) provides four examples of how police departments and order maintenance practitioners across the country typically define disorder: (1) obstructing or lying down in the subway, (2) public urination, (3) panhandling, and (4) youth or student parties. Thacher acknowledges, “Whether any of these specific cases or

categories of actions justify police attention may remain controversial” (p. 396), which highlights the context-specific definition of disorder and underscores the importance of considering residents’ perceptions in the calculus. Do these definitions of disorder comport with residents’ perceptions in most or even many communities? How might race, ethnicity, class, and gender of residents factor into the equation? Because relatively little research to date has investigated residents’ perceptions, we cannot fully answer these questions.

More recent work, however, is beginning to address this deficiency, acknowledging that perceptions of disorder are far from uniform and in line with police expectations (as Gau and Pratt document here). For example, Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) raise questions regarding the grounds on which individuals form perceptions of disorder and seek to determine what makes disorder a problem for residents. Along these lines, they ask: “Is ‘seeing’ disorder only a matter of the objective level of cues in the environment? Or is disorder filtered through a reasoning based on stigmatized groups and disreputable areas?” (p. 319). In their study, they find support for the latter: As the concentration of minority groups and poverty increases, residents of all races perceive heightened disorder, controlling for an extensive array of personal characteristics and independently observed neighborhood conditions. Their findings lead them to conclude that “seeing disorder appears to be imbued with social meanings” (p. 319). Their findings also should lead researchers to reject a common assumption: “The issue is clear, people recognize disorder when they see it, and uniformly want something done about it” (Xu et al., 2005:156). Variability and subjectivity, not uniformity and objectivity, characterize perceptions of disorder.

Variability and subjectivity in what constitutes “disorder,” and how it is responded to, is not just a matter of proper measurement. Real-world consequences occur. Policing disorder can cause divisive social impacts within communities. A fine line exists between aggressive policing of disorderly conduct and harassment, particularly among certain populations. For this reason, absent a community-outreach component, broken windows policing carries the ever-present danger of morphing into outright harassment of individuals who do not comport with the mainstream conceptualization of “order.” This potential danger is why researchers should more carefully attend to defining disorder and to incorporating residents’ perceptions into their assessments. Along these lines Thacher (2004:397–398) notes, “Any viable attempt to defend order maintenance activity needs to draw careful and complex distinctions among kinds of public behavior. . . . The effort to describe and analyze such cases would begin with ethnographic accounts of how police carry out their peacekeeping function in practice, focusing on the kinds of situations police might potentially treat

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as disorderly and the steps they take when they do intervene.” This reason is also why public officials must be more sensitive to these issues before fully embracing an order maintenance approach to combating crime.

## CONCLUSION

Findings by Gau and Pratt and other researchers have led to one important conclusion with respect to broken windows theory and policing: the urgent need for clarity in the conceptualization and operationalization of disorder. Both are absolutely essential for theory testing as well as for the implementation of policy initiatives based on the broken windows perspective. Unfortunately, order maintenance policing has been, and will continue to be, implemented on a large scale before satisfactorily working out these issues.

By no means am I suggesting that we should completely eliminate order maintenance policing. Although broken windows theory and policing have become inextricably linked, Thacher (2004) cautions us not to limit our assessment of this form of policing to tests of the broken windows thesis. He claims current critiques place “less emphasis than they once had on direct analysis of the merits of order maintenance as a use of police resources and authority” (p. 94) apart from broken windows. He also maintains that after the appearance of Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) statement, “scholarly attention largely turned to questions about the effect of order maintenance on crime, rather than the intrinsic merits of public order as a goal of policing” (p. 387). Thacher argues that at least some kinds of order maintenance policing are intrinsically valuable, regardless of the impact they have on serious crime, because they address important instances of accumulative harms and offenses.

A larger question for broken windows theory and policing, however, remains: Even if public order *is* a desirable goal, we should ask whether the police are the right institution to enforce it. Should the task of order maintenance remain with the police or, instead, largely include the efforts of community institutions and groups? As it stands, mandated police crackdowns on disorder constitute a top-down approach to fighting crime. A perhaps more palatable bottom-up approach would be to enlist the efforts of neighborhood residents by, for example, informally mobilizing neighborhood cleanups or creating neighborhood watches.

Successful examples of such efforts have occurred across the country: Residents in Des Moines, Iowa, work with local code-enforcement agencies and the police to close, demolish, or renovate drug houses; the Brighton Neighborhood Improvement Program in Brooklyn, New York, operates a jeep patrol, foot patrol, and drug busters program, all of which give police information about drug trafficking in the area; in Long Beach,

California, the Neighborhood Cleanup Program provides paint and tools to organized volunteer groups, which schedule cleanup projects designed to reduce blight throughout the community; a Safe City Initiative in St. Paul, Minnesota, encourages residents and agencies to cooperate in identifying assets that communities should use to address public safety concerns. These “neighborhood safety audits” help community groups develop action strategies and a database of local public safety concerns. Many more examples exist (for a list of dozens of successful community-based programs, consult the National Crime Prevention Council’s, *350 Tested Strategies to Prevent Crime* [1995]). Community crime prevention, whatever the form, engages residents, addresses problems, mobilizes neighborhood resources, galvanizes local agencies to act, and revives community spirit. In sum, then, both approaches to combating disorder—police crackdowns and community crime prevention—may ultimately lower crime in neighborhoods. But each approach is likely to evoke a very different response by residents. Where do we want to concentrate our efforts?

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