“Either they don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the hood:” A Social Disorganization Theory Approach to Boyz n the Hood

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ABSTRACT
This research uses a social science approach to film criticism to determine if the Social Disorganization Theory (Shaw and McKay 1942) is evident in the 1991 film Boyz n the Hood. The method used by this researcher was to apply the three Sampson and Groves (1989) measures of a socially disorganized community to the depiction of the African American community in Boyz n the Hood. The purpose of this research is to examine depictions of African Americans in a film based on predominantly African American neighborhoods to discover possible cyclical implications of such depictions. This research found that, according to the three Sampson measures, Boyz n the Hood depicted lower-middle class African American communities in Los Angeles as socially organized. The strong local friendship ties, as depicted in the film, should have mediated against delinquency. However, as defined by Shaw and McKay, the community was actually disorganized since its residents could not realize their common values nor could the community control delinquency. The implication is that local friendship ties do not always mediate against street-corner peer groups. Instead, the particular dynamics of the friendship ties may be more of a measure of their ability to counter delinquent behavior.

Growing up, this researcher loved movies. However, this researcher could not watch anything he wanted. His mother did not allow him to watch any films that contained a high amount of violence, use of profanity, or sex scenes. Of course, the majority of the movies that this researcher wanted to watch contained all the characteristics that were forbidden by his mother. Although as a child this researcher was not allowed to watch films such as Boyz n the Hood, many of this researcher’s peers watched them and loved them. As an adult, this researcher wanted to apply what he has learned in his classes to the forbidden films of this researcher’s youth. Is it possible that some films based on the African American experience contain content that validates the environmental conditions that lead to the aforementioned overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system? This study begins to answer the question by critiquing one film. The present research aims to examine one of the most successful African American films of the past few
decades, John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood*, (1991), for evidence of Shaw and McKay’s (1942) Social Disorganization theory.

Social Disorganization theory was originated in 1942 at the Chicago School by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003). After going into a neighborhood where there was an ample amount of juvenile delinquency, these two researchers formulated a theory to explain why these juveniles were committing delinquent acts. The theory defines “social disorganization” as “the inability of the community structure to realize common values residents and maintain effective social control” (Gainey et al. 2004 pg. 1). Shaw and McKay identified four factors affecting the organization of a community: economic status, residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity and family disruption (1989). In 1989, Sampson and Groves provided three ways to measure the level of social organization: the ability for the community to control teenage peer groups, the presence of local friendship networks, and the amount of participation in formal or salutary organizations (Sampson and Groves, 1989).

After constructing a list of characteristics based on Sampson and Groves’ (1989) three measurements of social disorganization, this researcher applied them to *Boyz n the Hood* to see if the film depicted the neighborhood as socially disorganized. The results showed that the neighborhood was not effective at controlling teenage peer groups, strong local friendship networks between the boys in the neighborhood was present, and that there was low participation in community organizations. Although there were strong local friendship ties, they were ineffective at controlling juvenile delinquency. According to Sampson and Groves’ three measurements, the community depicted in the film should not have been disorganized because of the strong local friendship ties. However, the community met the Shaw and McKay definition of social disorganization because the residents were unable to realize their common values and maintain effective control over delinquent behavior.

The implication is that Sampson’s perception of the interaction between the three measures may have been simplistic. According to Sampson and Groves (1989), the three boys’ friendship tie should have mediated against delinquent behavior. Instead, one of the boys continued to engage in delinquent behavior and was eventually killed. The implication, as Gainey et. al. (2004) had concluded, is that the interrelationship between the measures is complex. As shown in the film, the dynamics of the friendship tie may be more of a key to mediating against delinquent behavior than the mere existence of the friendship ties.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Under their Social Disorganization theory, Shaw and McKay argued that juvenile delinquency in urban areas was based on four structural factors affecting community social organization: economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption (Sampson et al. 1989). Economic status concerns several factors, including family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community (Sampson, 1989). Ethnic heterogeneity refers to the presence of different racial groups (Costa, 2003). Residential mobility refers to a frequent change of residency (Crowley 2003). Family disruption is refers to single parent households, the more single parent households in a community the less adult supervision and control of youths (Gainey et al. 2004).

Shaw and McKay saw a relationship between social disorganization in urban neighborhoods and each of the four structural factors. They explained that communities in low income neighborhoods lack adequate money and resources to advance their community when it comes to education and other organizations (Sampson 1989). Racial and ethnic heterogeneity seems to promote the lack of communication and interaction among residence by weakening the social control of local youth (Gainey et al. 2004). The third factor, residential mobility, is an obstacle for the development of extensive friendship bonds and local associational ties (Sampson, 1989). Lastly, family disruption (i.e., Single parent households) decreases the ability of adults to supervise and control youth peer groups. Single parent households decreases the ability to supervise teenage peer groups because there is one less person in the house to serve as a protective eye, as well as provide increase supervision and guardianship of the youth in their neighborhood (Sampson and Grove 1989).

One of Shaw and McKay’s main indicators of a socially organized community is the ability for the residents to control their juveniles (Sampson 1989). There are three types of social control: informal, formal, and parochial. Informal control tends to be community based, formal control is usually based on institutions outside of the community, and parochial control comes from interpersonal networks and local community groups (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). Social Disorganization theory focuses on formal controls (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003).

Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) argue that there are two ways in which formal control is central to the social disorganization theory: first, formal control directly influences crime and disorder because authorities are more effective at maintaining order and enforcing legal codes, and second, formal control influences residents’ informal control practices because the residents and
police work together to identify and solve problems in the neighborhood through community policing. According to Kawachi et al. (1999), formal social control includes supervision of leisure-time youth activities, interventions in street corner gatherings, and challenging youth who appear to be unsupervised by adults.

Although Shaw and McKay (1942) prescribed four indicators that effect the social organization in a community, they failed to provide a way to measure social organization. Sampson and Groves (1989) created three measures of the level of social organization: (1) The ability of a community to supervise and control teenage peer groups (e.g., gangs), (2) the presence of local friendship networks, and (3) the rate of participation in formal and salutary organizations in the local community. After testing these three measures by surveying 10,905 subjects in Great Britain and using data from British Crime Reports for 238 neighborhoods in England in Wales, Sampson and Groves concluded that these three measures were accurate (Sampson and Groves 1989). Communities that tend to have street corner peer groups usually have higher adult crime rates (Sampson and Groves 1989). Local friendship networks allow residents living in a community to better recognize strangers and to become more likely to engage in “guardianship behavior” against victimization (Sampson and Groves 1989). Lastly, when youth are involved in formal community organizations, they have less time to be congregating with street corner peer groups and committing delinquent acts (Sampson and Groves 1989). In Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social Disorganization Theory, Sampson and Groves (1989) cites Ruth Kornhauser (1978), who suggests that institutional instability (when organizations similar to the YMCA lose funding and have to cut programs) and the isolation of institutions (when youth refuse to be involved in community organizations) contribute to social disorganization.

Sampson and Groves’ (1989) evaluation of organization in a community was dependent upon particular questions for each measurement. To measure the social control and the supervision of teen peer groups, each respondent was asked (on a scale of 1-4) how common it was for youth to congregate in the neighborhood and annoy others while doing so. Juvenile delinquency is seen as a group phenomenon. Therefore, the researchers also asked questions regarding crime such as vandalism, which is considered a common youth crime (Sampson and Groves, 1989). After collecting and analyzing the data, Sampson and Groves found that disorderly teenage peer groups in the neighborhood were a common problem. In the selected communities street corner peer groups ranged from zero up to seventy-five percent; however, lower-class communities were less effective at controlling or supervising youth compared to upper-class communities (Sampson and Grove 1989).
As a measurement for Sampson and Groves’ (1989) second measure of local friendship networks in the community, the researchers asked respondents how many friends they had in their local community. Local community was defined as the area within a 15-minute walk of the respondent’s home. According to the data, researchers found about four percent of local friendships networks within the 238 selected communities.

Regarding Sampson and Groves’ (1989) third measure of participation in community organizations, respondents were asked about participation in formal organizations during their leisure time. To receive an accurate measurement of their involvement at the meetings of committees and clubs, the researchers listed attendance as a category. The data showed a lack of organizational participation, ranging from zero to a little over one-third of the residents throughout the selected communities (Sampson and Groves 1989).

In 2004, Gainey et al. concluded that Sampson and Groves’ (1989) study was a modest measure of social organization. According to Gainey et al. (2003), there were three issues regarding Sampson and Groves (1989) study. First, the research was limited to two studies that were conducted in England and Wales using data collected by British Crime Survey (BCS). Second, another study shows local friendship networks as having little effect on neighborhood assaults because friends are less likely to cause harm to one another, while having a significant effect on burglary, which is typically by a stranger to a victim. Lastly, Sampson and Groves’ (1989) model needs further exploration and explaining between the following relationships: (1) local social ties and organizational participation, (2) residential mobility and supervision of youth, and (3) the relationship between family disruption and organizational participation.

To test the validity of Sampson and Groves’ (1989) study, Gainey et al. (2004) conducted their own survey. Gainey et al. (2004) study was conducted in the United States, gathering data from 4 neighborhoods in seven different cities and states. Although these researchers used Sampson and Groves’ (1989) measurements of a socially organized neighborhood, they did not use the same questions.

According to Gainey et al. (2004) the measures are not as simplistic as Sampson and Grove (1989) made them appear. They suggest that there is more of a complex relationship among some of the concepts in the model than was originally mentioned (Gainey et al. 2004). While measuring unsupervised teenage peer groups, Gainey et al. (2004) had difficulties using secondary data. However, to measure the control of teenage peer groups, Gainey et al. (2004) asked respondents on a three point scale (including
the categories of No, Some, and Too Big), if disruption around schools (fights, hanging out, etc.) or truancy is a problem in their neighborhood. The Sampson and Groves question related to local friendship networks and asked about friendship ties. In contrast, Gainey saw that neighborhood ties were more important and asked about whether neighbors spent time together and helped each other (Gainey et al. 2004). Lastly, Sampson and Groves’ measure of participation in formal organizations asked about participation in any organization, and did not specify whether the organization was community based. In contrast, Gainey et al. (2004) asked respondents about the frequency (in the last 6-12 months) of their attendance at meetings held for the purpose of battling drug and crime problems. That is, Gainey focused on participation in organizations that had a direct affect on controlling crime in the community. Gainey et al. (2004) chose these particular questions because they felt that they could get a more accurate measurement on Sampson and Groves’ (1989) three measures as they relate to crime and delinquency.

Gainey et al. (2004) concluded that Sampson and Groves’ model was partially supported from the analysis of American data. Crimes such as robbery and burglary typically involve strangers as victims. As such strong local friendship ties and high rate of participation in formal organizations have little effect on robbery and burglary crime rates. In contrast, the crimes of assault and rape typically involve a victim known to the assailant. As such strong social ties and high rate of participation tend to reduce assault and rape crime rates (Gainey et al. 2004). Gainey et al. (2004) concluded that Sampson and Groves’ (1989) theoretical framework did not account for the complex, interrelationship between some of the measures.

METHOD

This researcher chose Boyz n the Hood (1991) because of the director/producer’s attempt to accurately portray life in a lower-middle class African American neighborhood in South Los Angeles. According to Massood (1986), it was the first film to “map the hood on land and put it into the mainstream media” (Dyson 1992). In addition to Boyz N the Hood, John Singleton directed and produced Poetic Justice (1993), Higher Learning (1995), Shaft (2000), and Baby Boy (2005) (Internet Movie Database, 2011). During an interview, Singleton mentioned that Boyz n the Hood was his first movie and it was semi-autobiographical. Singleton says that filmmaking saved him from delinquency because he was able to express himself through media opposed to committing crime; however, he mentions that people are scared to have a viewpoint. Siskel and Ebert said that Singleton’s movies have altered their lives or made them think in different ways (Siskel and Ebert 2010). Those
comments make Singleton proud that he is making a difference as a film maker (Singleton 2010).

*Boyz n the Hood* follows the lives of three young African American teens growing up together in a low-middle class neighborhood in Los Angeles where there are many social problems. Ricky and Doughboy are half-brothers raised in a single parent household by their mother, while Tre, their friend, is also being raised in a single parent household with his father, Furious. Ricky is an “All-American” athlete looks forward to earning a full-ride scholarship to the University of Southern California. Doughboy’s friends are violent and they abuse alcohol and commit crimes. Tre is the only one in the group that has a male role model—and he’s the only one to leave the hood to pursue a higher education at Morehouse College.

To analyze *Boyz n the Hood*, this research uses Sampson and Groves’ (1989) three measures of social organization. This researcher watched *Boyz n the Hood* to determine the frequency of the following measures of social disorganization:

1. **The ability of the community to supervise and control teenage peer groups (gangs).** Sampson and Groves (1989) asked respondents how frequently they saw youth hanging out on the corner making a nuisance. This researcher counted the number of scenes that depicted youth engaging in street corner peer groups.

2. **Local friendship networks.** Sampson and Groves (1989) asked respondents how many of their friends lived in their local community, defined as living within a fifteen minute walking distance from their residence. This researcher counted the number of scenes that showed youth who were congregating with friends that lived in the same community.

3. **Participation in formal and salutary organizations in the local community.** Sampson and Groves (1989) asked respondents about their rate of participation in formal organizations during their leisure time. This researcher counted the number of scenes showing youth involved in social and leisure activities with formal organizations. The researcher looked for churches, friendship networks, community centers and organizations, and neighborhood watches, to see if there is evidence of a formal community organizations.

**Social Disorganization in “Boyz n the Hood”**
There is a high amount of juvenile delinquency in the film, such as shootings, killings, stealing, fighting and street corner peer groups. The x-axiss of Figure 1 shows the characteristic of a social disorganized neighborhood; while the y-axis shows the number of times the characteristic is observed in *Boyz n the*
Throughout the film, this researcher observed (six) street corner peer groups, which led to the youth committing delinquent acts, such as shooting, stealing, gambling, etc.

**Figure 1.** The inability of the community to supervise and control teenage peer groups (gangs)

According to Sampson and Groves’ (1989), the youth who grew up together in the hood were a local friendship network because there were 12 scenes that showed youth who were congregating with friends that lived in the same community. In *Boyz n the Hood*, Ricky and Doughboy lived across the street from Tre and they were together almost every day, which, according to Sampson and Groves (1989), would be a local friendship network.

Participation in formal and salutary organizations in the local community was depicted in the film. This researcher observed one scene in *Boyz n the Hood* that depicts male characters’ involvement in clubs, committees, or any other voluntary organizations. Ricky, who played for his high school football team, was the only youth in the neighborhood involved in a formal organization.

**DISCUSSION**

According to the three Sampson measures, the community depicted in *Boyz n the Hood* should had been socially organized since the strong local friendship ties, under Sampson’s theory, should have mediated against street corner peer groups delinquency. However, the lack of structure in the community depicted in *Boyz n the Hood* indicates that the community was unable to realize the common values of its residents and maintain social control (Shaw and
Doughboy, who was aspiring to attend college, dies during a gunfight. Throughout the film, youth gangs commit violent and criminal acts. According to Shaw and McKay’s definition, the community depicted in the film was socially disorganized.

Sampson and Groves’ first measurement of social disorganization, the inability for the community to supervise and control teenage peer groups (gangs), is apparent within the film. Out of all the youth in the film there are only three individuals (Tre, Brandi and Ricky) who strive to pursue a higher education. The residents in the neighborhood in the film *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) were unable to supervise its teenage peer groups. Many youth were in the film were living in a single parent household, Tre was raised by his father, while Doughboy and Ricky who were brothers were raised by their mother (Dyson 1992). Since there were a majority of single parent households in the film there was one less set of protective eyes to control the youth. This film depicts teenage peer groups as unsupervised, which may lead to delinquent acts, such as burglaries, fights, killings, shootings, and gambling. Furious is the only parent who monitors Tre’s activities, and he challenges youth who seem to be looking for trouble. On the other hand, there is no intervention in street corner gatherings or the monitoring leisure-time of youth activities. This lack of monitoring and intervention leads to the arrest of Doughboy for stealing.

Sampson and Groves’ second measurement of social disorganization, presence of local friendship networks, was strong in the film. The bond of friendship between Tre, Ricky, and Doughboy depicts a strong friendship tie. According to Sampson and Groves’ (1989), this friendship tie should have served as a deterrent to juvenile delinquency. However, it was ineffective at deterring juvenile delinquency, which led to many criminal acts. For example, although there was a strong local friendship tie in the community in *Boyz n the Hood*, they were unable to recognize outsiders who were a potential threat and causing trouble in their community. A red car occupied by troubled youth was constantly entering the neighborhood of Ricky, Doughboy, and Tre serving as a threat to their neighborhood. The individuals in this particular car almost ran over an infant and, in another instance, held members of the neighborhood at gun point. The strong friendship ties should have provided a means for the community to engage in “guardianship” behavior to protect the community from strangers. In the film, it did not.

Sampson and Groves’ third measurement of social disorganization, participation in formal and salutary organizations in the local community, is virtually missing from the film. The only person involved in an organization is Ricky, a football player for Crenshaw High School. None of the other
youths were depicted as involved in any community organizations. Therefore, the lack of participation in community organizations is evidence of social disorganization.

Though the three measures show that the community in Boyz n the Hood should have been socially organized, the measures failed to explain why the friendship tie between the three boys did not mediate against delinquency. Doughboy was torn between the street-corner gang and his friendship tie with Tre and Ricky. According to the ideas contained in Sampson’s work, Doughboy’s friendship tie should have prevented him from committing crimes. In addition to the red car being observed in the community in many instances, it led to the killing of the star football player at Crenshaw High School, Ricky. After the death of Ricky, his brother Doughboy decided to take matters into his control, and he murdered all the individuals who were involved in his brother’s death. The implications of the failure of the friendship tie to prevail over social disorder is that, as Gainey et al. (2004) concluded, there is more of a complex relationship among the three measures than was originally believed. Specifically, the implication is that local friendship ties do not always mediate against street-corner peer groups and outside intruders. Instead, the particular dynamics of the friendship ties may be more of a measure of its ability to counter delinquent behavior.

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this research is limited to the film Boyz n the Hood and does not reflect any of the other films directed or produced by John Singleton or any other films of this genre. This research does not consist of surveys or interviews of people to determine the effects of this film on the audience.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Since Boyz n the Hood was the first film to “map the hood on land and put it into the mainstream media” (Massood 1986), this researcher would like to review other films to see if the representation of African American youth depicted as living in socially disorganized neighborhoods is continuing or changing. This researcher would also like to survey law enforcement officers to see how they view Boyz n the Hood in regards to its impact on community policing. Future research can also be conducted regarding the dynamics of friendship ties and its ability to mediate against street-corner peer groups.
CONCLUSION

In the film *Boyz n the Hood*, John Singleton depicted African Americans living in a lower class neighborhood in Los Angeles as socially disorganized. Applying Sampson’s three measures, this researcher found that the neighborhood was not effective at controlling teenage peer groups, there was a strong local friendship network between the boys in the neighborhood, and there was low participation in community organizations. Although there was a strong presence of local friendship networks, they were ineffective at deterring youth from committing delinquent acts. Therefore, people in the neighborhood were unable to realize the values of its residents and control delinquent behavior, which, according to Shaw and McKay (1942), are the markings of a socially disorganized community.

More importantly, the film depicted a complex interrelationship between friendship ties and street-corner peer groups where the boys’ friendship did not prevent one of the boys from delinquent behavior. As other researchers such as Gainey et al. (2004) have noted, Sampson’s three measures may have been simplistic and the relationship between the three measures needs more study. In particular, the film implies that the dynamics of friendship ties may have more of a mediating affect than the mere existence of the friendship.
REFERENCES


