



The social disorganization of intimate partner violence

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ABSTRACT

Recently, scholars have begun to recognize new theoretical connections between geography and intimate partner violence (IPV). One such theory is social disorganization theory (SDT). According to SDT, crime in communities can primarily be explained as a consequence of economic disadvantage, insufficient informal social control, lack of collective efficacy, and family breakdown. SDT is typically used in the context of property crime and public violence. This article reviews this evolving literature, proposing a unique and comprehensive concept map offering insights into how neighbourhood dynamics influence IPV.

Key Words Social disorganization theory; intimate partner violence; collective efficacy; social control; violence; neighbourhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global health problem. Broadly speaking, IPV includes:

any type of physical or sexual assault, physical threat, threats with weapons, deprivation of liberty, psychological and emotional abuse, and stalking perpetrated against legally married or common-law partners, girlfriends, or female dating partners, whether the relationships are intact or estranged. (Johnson & Dawson, 2011, p. 4)

This definition is conceptually broad enough to encompass the different ways IPV manifests itself and recognizes that the majority of serious cases involving bodily harm involve women as the victims (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018).

The rate of police-reported IPV in Canada in 2015 was 309 incidents per 100,000 residents, accounting for one quarter of all violent crimes reported to police that year (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). Even more troubling is that police-reported IPV is severely under-representative, with only three in ten cases coming to the attention of police, indicating that in one year about 1% of Canadian women experienced IPV (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). Clearly, IPV is still a cause for concern warranting serious attention from researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.

The World Health Organization (2010) developed an *ecological* framework to help explain interpersonal violence.

This framework classifies risk factors associated with violence into four levels of risk factors: individual (e.g., personal histories and biological factors), relationship (e.g., families and peers), community (e.g., neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces), and societal level (e.g., economic issues, social policies, and cultural norms). Neighbourhoods, found within the community level, are of particular concern with respect to IPV. Given the conceptual nature of this article, the terms neighbourhood and community are used interchangeably, and are defined as a distinct district forming a community within a city.

A number of studies have found that the geographic distribution of IPV is not uniform and that IPV clusters within specific neighbourhoods (Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2003; Browning, 2002; Burke, O'campo, & Peak, 2006; DeKeseredy, Alvi, & Tomaszewski, 2003; Frye, 2007; Gracia & Herrero, 2007; Gracia, López-Quílez, Marco, Lladosa, & Lila, 2014; Jackson, 2016; Kiss et al., 2012; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; St. Jean, 2007). This clustering of IPV suggests an opportunity to concentrate interventions to proactively address the causes and deal with the consequences of IPV. Understanding how this concentration operates is the first step towards targeting interventions.

Social disorganization theory (SDT) explains the spatial distribution of crime (Shaw and McKay, 1942, 1969). This paper explores how this theory can provide a framework for understanding the geographic concentration of IPV and how neighbourhoods influence IPV. Through a review connecting the SDT literature to IPV, a new concept map is presented to offer insights into how neighbourhood dynamics influence IPV.

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STRENGTHS

SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION THEORY AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Social disorganization theory suggests the concentration of neighbourhood crime is a result of the clustering of socio-economic challenges, which leads to a breakdown in social control and the cultural transmission of deviant values (Browning, 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997, 1998; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999, 2001; Shaw & McKay, 1942, 1969). The theory's focus on neighbourhood socioeconomic circumstances, social control, and values suggests a number of concepts worth integrating to better understand the spatial distribution of IPV. The cluster of economic stresses in neighbourhoods is predicted to increase levels of IPV above and beyond what would be expected based on family challenges alone. This increase is explained by an increase in negative neighbourhood attitudes towards women, which foster conditions that encourage violence in intimate relationships.

A number of academics consider SDT as a mechanism to explain neighbourhood IPV (Benson et al., 2003; Browning, 2002; Copp, Kuhl, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2015; DeKeseredy et al., 2003; Frye, 2007; Frye et al., 2008; Gracia & Herrero, 2007; Gracia et al., 2014; Jackson, 2016; Kiss et al., 2012; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; St. Jean, 2007; Uthman, Moradi, & Lawoko, 2009). At the most basic level of the theory, the cluster of economic disadvantages in neighbourhoods is associated with higher rates of IPV (Benson et al., 2003; Gracia et al., 2014). However, there is some debate as to whether clustering results in higher rates within neighbourhoods or whether economic strain simply places people likely to commit IPV in close proximity, thus creating higher rates (Kiss et al., 2012). In other words, does the neighbourhood where a woman lives impact her likelihood of experience IPV?

Collective efficacy is associated with neighbourhood IPV (Browning, 2002; DeKeseredy et al., 2003; Gracia & Herrero, 2007; Jackson, 2016). Collective efficacy is the trust that develops amongst neighbours which allows them to intervene to help improve and protect their neighbourhood (Sampson et al., 1997, 1998). Reductions in collective efficacy, arising from the challenges associated with economic disadvantages, reduce the likelihood that neighbours will intervene to prevent IPV as it occurs. Increases in collective efficacy increase the chances that women will disclose when IPV occurs in their own relationships (Browning, 2002). Disorder is negatively connected to neighbourhood collective efficacy; that is, as levels of disorder rise, collective efficacy falls within a community (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). This suggests that collective efficacy could be connected to IPV though disorder may play some sort of a mediating role in this relationship.

St. Jean (2007), however, calls into question the relationship between disorder, collective efficacy, and IPV. He argues that interventions are unlikely in domestic violence disputes and that collective efficacy is therefore unlikely to reduce IPV. St. Jean does find a connection between collective efficacy and incidents of IPV, but he suggests "the presence of disruptive family members is the key variable in the relationship between low collective efficacy and high incidence of battery" (St. Jean, 2007, p. 209). He notes that, in some areas with low collective efficacy, there are no incidents of IPV, while in other areas with low collective efficacy, there are many incidents.

The key difference, according to St. Jean (2007) is the presence of disruptive family members.

Separate studies by Frye et al. (2008) and Copp et al. (2015) create further concern about the importance of collective efficacy as it relates to IPV. Both studies argue that individual factors are much more important than neighbourhood context as a cause of IPV. In addition, DeKeseredy et al. (2003) find that informal social control is not sufficient to reduce IPV. However, recent work by Jackson (2016) suggests a more complex relationship, whereby a women's socioeconomic status predicts whether she will benefit from neighbourhood collective efficacy.

Overall attitudes towards women within a community also warrant consideration with respect to IPV. Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969) introduce cultural transmission theory as an important component of social disorganization theory. Originally conceived as a mechanism by which older teenagers introduced younger youth to socially deviant values, cultural transmission theory applied to IPV would suggest a similar clustering is occurring with respect to attitudes towards women, creating conditions that encourage IPV within the home and the community.

Cultural transmission theory in its original form focuses on youths transmitting values to other youths. The clustering of attitudes towards women may work in a similar way. Individuals in neighbourhoods that carry negative attitudes towards women may directly share these attitudes with their neighbours. When attempting to understand why women do not leave situations of IPV, one of the factors identified is the "patriarchal and sexist structure of society along with women's economic dependency" (Barnett, 2000, p. 343). This suggests that negative attitudes towards women in neighbourhoods can exacerbate problems of IPV, particularly in areas where women face economic challenges.

Individuals with negative attitudes towards women may also perpetuate these attitudes through inaction when faced with IPV. If an individual is aware of an incident of IPV but does not act by confronting the accuser or providing support to the victim, this can perpetuate the perception that IPV is not a problem. Many victims of IPV internalize beliefs related to IPV that make it difficult to leave the abusive relationships. Some women believe that the abuse is a normal part of a relationship, whereas others excuse the abuser's behaviour (Barnett, 2001). These problems can be compounded by depression and low self-esteem felt by the victims (Barnett, 2001). Neighbours who are aware of IPV could act as supporters to help women address the abuse but, through inaction, may reinforce the perception that IPV is a normal part of a relationship.

Additional research suggests a causal link between neighbourhood attitudes towards women and IPV. A qualitative study of 37 urban and 24 rural women's experiences of IPV in neighbourhoods revealed seven key contributing factors: "(1) deterioration contributors, (2) negative social attributes, (3) violence attitudes and behaviors, (4) stabilization contributors, (5) neighborhood monitoring, (6) communication networks and (7) community enrichment resources" (Burke et al., 2006, p. 190). The third factor, violence attitudes and behaviors, includes macho attitudes about control, ignorance about IPV, and gossip, amongst its sub-components (Burke et al., 2006). These qualitative findings directly suggest neighbourhood attitudes are an important contributor to overall levels of neighbourhood violence.

Uthman et al. (2009) found a direct measure of the clustering of neighbourhood attitudes towards IPV in a study conducted in sub-Saharan Africa. Their research found that both individual factors and community dynamics influence attitudes towards IPV. Unexpectedly, in their findings, they also discovered women were more likely than men to justify IPV as acceptable behaviour. It is, therefore, possible that neighbourhood attitudes towards IPV work on two levels. First, they may make it less likely for bystanders to intervene in circumstances of IPV. Second, they may make it more likely for women involved in IPV to accept their situation and not seek to leave the relationship.

Concept Map: Social Disorganization Theory and Intimate Partner Violence

The concept map presented in Figure 1 carefully integrates the various elements of SDT reviewed above to help explain the spatial distribution of IPV. A concept map uses cross-links to show how different theoretical elements fit with one another to create an overall theoretical framework. The cross-links use single words and short phrases to explain how the sub-components of a theory fit together (Novak & Cañas, 2008).

The concept map is uniquely divided into three sections which connect different elements of SDT to Concentrated Neighbourhood IPV. The clustering of IPV within neighbourhoods documented by numerous previous studies (Benson et al., 2003; Browning, 2002; Burke et al., 2006, 2006; Frye, 2007; Gracia & Herrero, 2007; Gracia et al., 2014; Kiss et al., 2012; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; St. Jean, 2007) can explain this concentration by connecting key elements of SDT to IPV.

The right-hand side of the concept map introduces the importance of the cultural transmission of values, originally used to explain how deviant values were passed along from older teenagers to younger youth (Shaw & McKay, 1942, 1969). In the context of IPV, the focus shifts from deviant values amongst youth to attitudes towards IPV, which connect directly to overall attitudes towards women in society.

In the concept map, a similar cycle to that found with youth is hypothesized to occur with respect to attitudes towards women. In this model, *Negative Individual Attitudes Towards Women* (specific boxes in the concept map are capitalized and italicized in the text to assist in finding them in the figure) create an environment, which leads to the clustering of *Negative Neighbourhood Attitudes Towards Women*. Individual attitudes contribute directly to individual incidents of *Intimate Partner Violence* (Flood & Pease, 2009). In addition, community attitudes that condone *Intimate Partner Violence* and support traditional gender stereotypes create an environment encouraging individual incidents of IPV (Flood & Pease, 2009). These factors thus work to create an environment where IPV clusters accumulate to create *Concentrated Neighbourhood Intimate Partner Violence*. Simultaneously, the presence of IPV in a home directly causes *Family Breakdown* thus increasing the number of *Single-Parent Families* within the neighbourhood.

The presence of *Single-Parent Families* moves to the middle of the proposed concept map. The presence of *Single-Parent Families* in a neighbourhood contributes to a *Low Family Income* for that family and, when concentrated, it creates a *Clustered Economic Disadvantage* (Benson et al., 2003). Facing a *Low Family Income* also reduces the mobility of families, making it

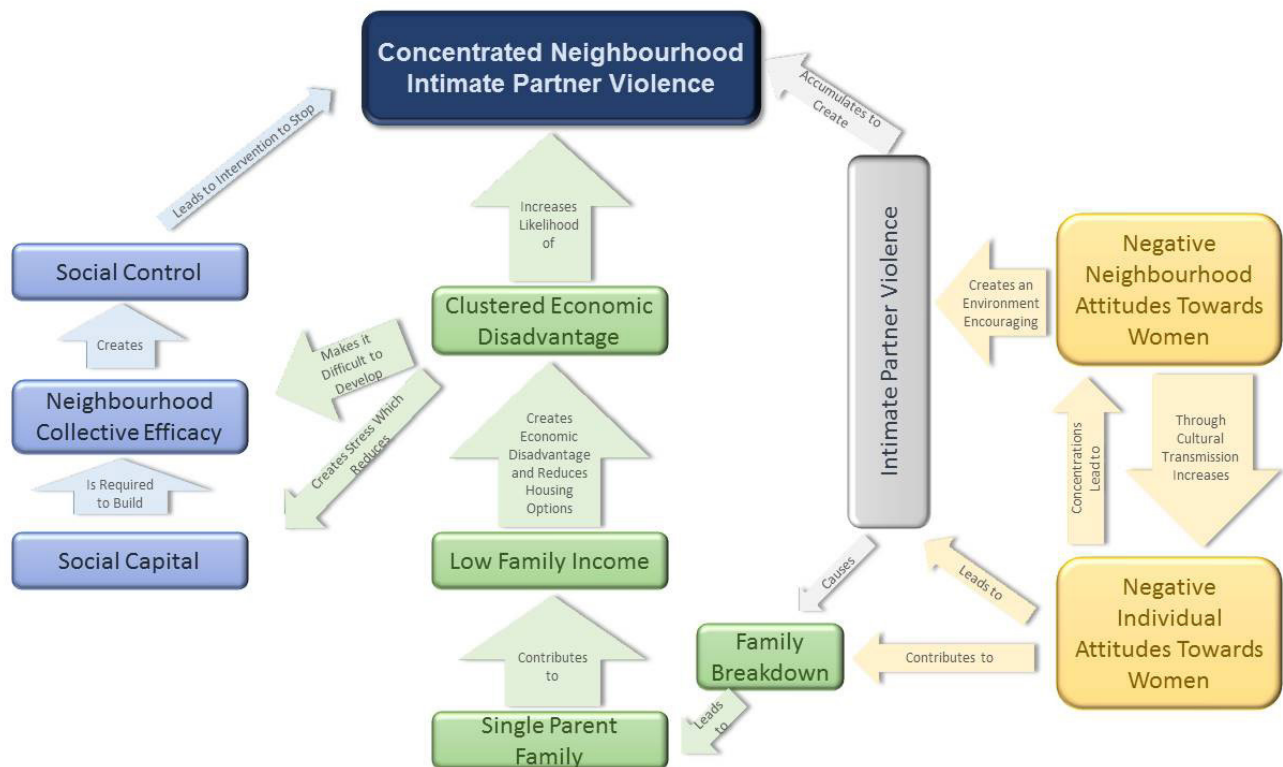


FIGURE 1 Social Disorganization Theory and Intimate Partner Violence.

less likely they will be able to leave a neighbourhood they find undesirable in some way. Collectively, this *Clustered Economic Disadvantage*, as predicted by SDT, leads to a concentration of IPV in the neighbourhood. This hypothesized relationship is consistent with existing research. Pinchevsky and Wright (2012) review a number of articles examining the connection between concentrated economic disadvantage and IPV, confirming that most studies find a positive relationship.

Concentrated economic disadvantage has also been connected to *Social Capital* and *Neighbourhood Collective Efficacy*. The *Clustered Economic Disadvantage* creates stresses in a community that erode *Social Capital* and in turn make it more difficult to develop a sense of *Neighbourhood Collective Efficacy* (Sampson et al., 1997). These connections to *Social Capital* and *Neighbourhood Collective Efficacy* move to the left side of the proposed concept map.

The left-hand side of the concept map begins with the concept of *Social Capital*. Putnam (1995) defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). The connections between people facilitated through social capital are a necessary pre-condition for the development of collective efficacy within a community.

Neighbourhood Collective Efficacy, in turn, creates conditions where informal *Social Control* is exerted by residents in a neighbourhood. “Social control refers generally to the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles—to realize collective, as opposed to forced, goals” (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 918). In a community with a high level of collective efficacy, this informal social control should manifest itself through bystander interventions to reduce and address incidents of IPV. It also creates an environment where women are more likely to disclose IPV (Browning, 2002). The presence of *Neighbourhood Collective Efficacy*, therefore, can impact rates of neighbourhood IPV independent of economic circumstances. However, economic circumstances of a neighbourhood can erode levels of *Collective Efficacy*, thus inhibiting the potential impact of collective efficacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Social disorganization theory has made many important contributions to explaining the spatial distribution of crime and violence over the last 75 years. However, only recently have scholars begun to connect SDT and IPV. Many opportunities, therefore, still exist to elaborate on how SDT and IPV relate. The concept map presented here is meant as a starting point for additional analysis. However, existing research provides strong evidence that SDT can make a valuable contribution to explaining the concentration of neighbourhood IPV. The initial findings relating neighbourhood values and IPV are particularly promising, as they suggest potential opportunities to prevent and reduce IPV.

In particular, Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969) demonstrate how neighbourhood values are shaped amongst teenagers and young adults through the cultural transmission of values. The concept map presented here builds on this framework, demonstrating how negative attitudes towards women can be culturally transmitted and thus contribute to IPV. Indeed, the existing evidence supports the connection between the

clustering of negative and problematic attitudes towards women and IPV in some neighbourhoods (Burke et al., 2006). If this relationship is indeed accurate, it suggests a promising avenue for interventions. Campaigns to change attitudes towards women and IPV in specific neighbourhoods could have a positive impact on rates of IPV. This idea, however, is built on suppositions and extrapolation, and the effectiveness of this approach will require additional testing.

Two priorities for testing seem paramount. First, this idea builds upon research showing that personal attitudes of individuals towards IPV can affect the likelihood that someone will intervene (Frye, 2007). In other words, individuals who view IPV as a serious problem are more likely to intervene than those who do not see it as an issue. If neighbourhood attitudes are changed, it is therefore assumed that more individuals will intervene to address IPV, a supposition that should be tested empirically. Secondly, the notion that improving neighbourhood attitudes towards women will lead to more interventions builds upon research showing that, in cases of sexual assault, men are more likely to intervene as bystanders if they believe other men are likely to intervene (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Studies should explore the impact of creating cultural norms in neighbourhoods related to intervention when IPV is discovered by bystanders. Longitudinal survey research on attitudes towards women combined with police-reported crime data could directly address these research questions, possibly alongside an intervention to change attitudes towards women and IPV. Ultimately, the hope is to create neighbourhoods where addressing IPV is everyone’s responsibility.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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