

# Community Social Organization: A Conceptual Linchpin in Examining Families in the Context of Communities\*

Jay A. Mancini

Gary L. Bowen

James A. Martin\*\*

**Abstract:** The concept of social organization provides an important framework for understanding families in the context of communities and focuses our attention on norms, networks, and associated processes that typify community life. We discuss the significance of community for understanding family outcomes, discuss challenges in defining community context, define social organization and feature several of its associated components and their linkages, and assess research designs that inform the study of social organization. We conclude by suggesting implications for theory (elaborating social organization community processes), research (incorporating designs and measures that reflect collective processes), and practice (maximizing effects generated by informal and formal networks in communities).

**Key Words:** communities, community capacity, families, social organization.

Community context factors, including transactions with other families and institutions, are significant elements in understanding and strengthening families. The work of family science scholars increasingly recognizes that families are surrounded by community forces that influence both their everyday life experiences and their individual and collective life trajectories. Teachman and Crowder (2002) evidence a central aim of exploiting rather than simply trying to control contextual noise in family functioning models. Sprey (2000) notes that layered approaches to human sociability provide a level of understanding otherwise unattained, and Scanzoni (2001) calls for a “reconnection”—linking households and communities via small household social support networks at the neighborhood level.

Family life practitioners are finding increasing leverage in strengthening families through community-centered interventions. These interventions range from the community-building efforts of Family

Service America to strengthen families (Sviridoff & Ryan, 1997) to the promotion of community capacity in the U.S. Air Force as a strategy for preventing family violence (Bowen, Martin, & Nelson, 2002). Family program professionals increasingly are working with community members as allies in support of families and are mobilizing families to exert greater control over their own lives (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001; Doherty & Carroll, 2002). Turner (1998) contends that practitioners are rediscovering the “Holy Grail” of community, and Sampson (2002) uses the term *elixir* when describing the promise some see in community-oriented interventions.

Community context should have a more prominent place in thinking about families. However, greater elaboration is needed in the conceptualization and measurement of community-level processes as independent variables in family research. Such advances enhance the study of families and

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\*\*Jay A. Mancini is a Professor in the Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061 (mancini@vt.edu). Gary L. Bowen is a Kenan Distinguished Professor of Social Work at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. James A. Martin is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Bryn Mawr College.

communities and inform the development of community-level interventions that strengthen families.

We aim to contribute to family science theory, research, and practice by advancing social organization as a conceptual linchpin in examining families in the context of communities. We first set the conceptual boundaries for our discussion of community by defining locally oriented geographic areas as a primary reference point. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of social organization, the central focus of the paper. Three central components of community social organization are proposed: formal and informal social networks, social capital, and community capacity. Subsequently, three community assessment strategies found in the research literature are reviewed, including a contextual effects perspective that reflects social organization as a unifying concept in the study of families and communities. Finally, the implications of a social organizational framework for theory development, future research, and evolving community practice are discussed.

## The Contextual Boundaries of the Community Concept

Defining the appropriate context is a critical challenge both for conducting research on communities (Teachman & Crowder, 2002) and for implementing prevention and intervention programs within communities (Mancini, Nelson, Bowen, & Martin, *in press*). Coulton (1995) discusses phenomenological (based on consensus among people), interactional (contact patterns), statistical (census-like information), and political (districts, wards, and towns) aspects of community boundaries. Chaskin et al. (2001) note that shared social interests and characteristics (e.g., language, customs, class, or ethnicity) can be used to define community. Articulating the parameters of community gives clarity to what can easily become a diffusive and elusive context. For researchers, this articulation aids in formulating the research question and the associated required methods; for program professionals, this articulation makes apparent the range of prevention portals and opportunities.

Communities can be conceptualized from at least two broad perspectives—community with a lowercase *c* and Community with a capital *C* (cf., Arum, 2000). Family processes and outcomes can be

examined in the context of local community structure and processes—proximate spatial settings that include a physical infrastructure, a demographic and social profile, institutional resources, and networks of social support and social control (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997). The nature of the family-community interface also can be examined in the context of larger, nonlocal, institutional contexts that include federal and state policies (Arum, 2000). These “organizational fields” may influence families directly or indirectly by shaping the opportunity structure and the normative environment in local communities.

Our perspective centers on the lowercase-*c* paradigm, placing emphasis on locally anchored geographic conceptualizations of community, such as urban neighborhoods, suburban subdivisions, or single communities in rural areas, an approach that is consistent with the work of Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) and Sampson (2001). Processes most often occur at the local level, even though they are influenced by nonlocal forces. In addition, when community conceptualization is tied to geography, a rich composite of descriptive information emerges, including natural boundaries, a recognized history, and demographic patterns, as well as the industries and organizations located in the community (Chaskin et al., 2001).

Though we have chosen a local geographic lens for our discussion of social organization, we recognize that social networks extend far beyond these local boundaries. When any one of us actually plots the people in our lives with whom we share innermost thoughts, to whom we confess, or consider our closest friends, we note that many are outside of our local residential geography. Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) remark that these local areas are nested in larger and more complex community settings, suggesting that a focus on locally anchored geographic conceptualizations of community must also account for these surrounding settings. However, a concern with the quality of community life and strong neighborhoods makes pivotal the relationships, processes, and norms in our most immediate surroundings of families.

Close ties within local residential areas either have changed or are not as significant as we would like to believe. Sampson (2002) rejects the idea that close personal ties are even necessary for a productive community and suggests that shared norms are more important. Granovetter's (1973) description of the

“strength of weak ties” and Wuthnow’s (2002) discussion of “loose connections” draw attention to less intense forms of interaction that nevertheless are important and functional. Within a residential setting is a range of networks, relationships, and community processes; some are distant, whereas others are intense. Consequently, both loose ties and close alliances contribute to community life. An informed analysis of community accounts for all these influences, so that both immediate influences from close associations and general influences from shared beliefs are included.

A focus on social organization provides a conceptual umbrella for such an accounting. There are processes at a collective level that bear significantly on how families experience life within their immediate surroundings. These network connections are both positive and negative, potentially contributing to or taking away from family resilience. Under certain conditions being involved intensely in networks can exacerbate stress, called the “pressure cooker” effect (Hobfoll & London, 1986). Social relationships exercise powerful and direct influences on individual, relationship, and family well-being; further, these social relationships mediate other community influences. Social organization accounts for a range of influences on family life, including both specific collections of people whom we know well and collections of others with whom we share norms rather than relationships.

## Social Organization

### *Definition and Function*

*Social organization* “describes the collection of values, norms, processes, and behavior patterns within a community that organize, facilitate, and constrain the interactions among community members” (Mancini, Martin, & Bowen, 2003, p. 319). Social organization is the process by which communities achieve their desired results for individuals and families, including the ability of individuals and families to demonstrate resiliency in the face of adversity and positive challenge. Social organization includes networks of people, the exchanges and reciprocity that transpire in relationships, accepted standards and norms of social support, and social controls that regulate behavior and interaction.

Like other definitions of social organization in the literature, our definition includes a focus on

social networks, social controls, and the positive outcomes for individuals and families that can accrue from social organization. For example, Sampson (1992) cites local friendship networks and rate of local participation in formal and voluntary organizations as key parts of social organization. In a similar vein, Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) suggest that social organization features include how individuals and families in the community interrelate, cooperate, and provide mutual support.

In his work, Sampson (1991) also links the concept of social organization to the community’s ability to implement “effective social controls” (p. 48), which Janowitz (1991) defines as “the capacity of a society to regulate itself according to desired principles and values” (p. 73). Social control is both centripetal (reining in or centering actions) and centrifugal (pushing outward and expanding actions toward growth and change). Social control can accrue from effective socialization, from scrutiny, from supervision that may result in penalties, and from rewarding social relationships and network experiences (Kornhauser, 1978). There is a link between social organization and the results that individuals and families are able to achieve, outcomes that are linked to what Sampson (1991) defines as the “ability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents” (p. 48).

Social organization is often viewed as suppressing community problems such as crime, delinquency, or child maltreatment (Freisthler, 2004). For example, social organization historically was connected with a social disorganization theory of delinquency (Kornhauser, 1978), and social organization and social disorganization were viewed as opposite ends of a continuum that reflected a community’s ability to control problems (Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003). However, social organization also can be seen as that which builds community assets, a by-product of which might be problem reduction.

Looking at capacity enhancement in addition to risk reduction represents an important shift. In this capacity-enhancement approach, the focus is on community processes that primarily maximize opportunities, whether for individuals, for families, or for the community as a whole. Exploring new dimensions of social organization is recognized as necessary for understanding community processes and their effects (Sampson, 2002), as is evidenced by Small’s (2002) suggestion to include culture and suggestions by Cantillon et al. (2003) to incorporate

sense of community into social organization thinking. We support the emancipation of social organization thinking from social disorganization and from research on delinquency and community disadvantage, and contend social organization has a fundamental role in explaining broader family phenomena.

Families are pivotal in fully understanding social organization because families are the most basic and essential social grouping in a community, with a unique role in socialization. Janowitz (1991) contends that family cohesion is a core element for understanding the dynamics of community involvement. In effect, families often provide the energy for community processes. In turn, aspects of a community influence family processes. Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) note that qualities of the social environment are proximate determinants in how children develop. These qualities are essentially social processes reflecting interaction and transaction among and between people in a community, including families. These processes are assumed to shape behavior, both desirable and undesirable. Sampson (1992) adds that community structure is important because it facilitates or prevents creation of social capital among children and families. He suggests that parent-child relations are permeable to multiple ecological influences, and he concludes that the amount of social capital available to families depends in large part on the stability of local communities and the closure of social networks connecting adults and children.

### Key Elements

A recent review by Sampson et al. (2002) is an important contribution to understanding social organization processes, particularly through research on neighborhood effects. Sampson et al. (2002) organized neighborhood-level process variables into four categories: (a) social ties and interaction, (b) norms and collective efficacy, (c) institutional resources, and (d) routine activities. At the individual level, process-oriented variables include prosocial activities, social ties with neighbors, daily hassles, and social activities.

These authors point out inconsistency in how processes are operationalized or theoretically situated, so although there is improvement in this area of study, the need to improve conceptualization and research remains. A central theoretical challenge is differentiating social organization structure from

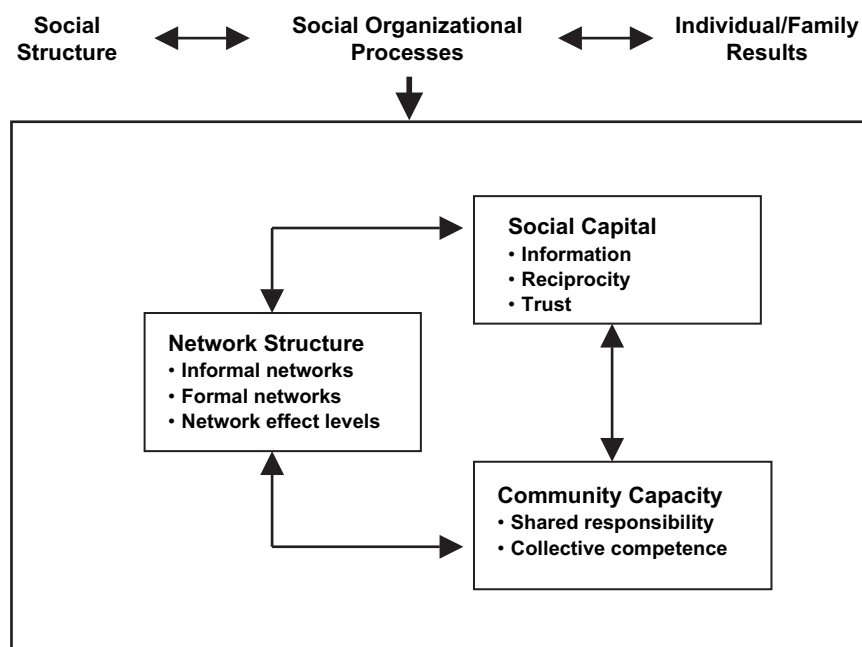
social organization process. Generally, *structure* refers to interconnecting parts, a framework, organization, configuration, and composition; *process* refers to a course of action, functions, operations, and methods of working.

Building upon Sampson et al. (2002), Chaskin et al. (2001), and our recent work to identify social organizational processes at the community level (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Mancini et al., 2003, in press), three concepts associated with a social organizational perspective have particular value for opening up the “black box” between the social structure and the results experienced by individuals and families: (a) formal and informal social networks, (b) social capital, and (c) community capacity (see Figure 1). These social organizational processes are dynamically and reciprocally interrelated and combine in additive and interactive ways to influence individual and family outcomes.

*Networks.* Community networks are significant for promoting the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of individuals and families. Informal networks of relationships with work colleagues, friends, neighbors, and other voluntary relationships, which are characterized by mutual exchanges and reciprocal responsibility, and formal networks associated with agencies and organizations, in which there is an element of obligation, are central components of social organization. Networks may be considered primary community structures through which much of community life is enacted. Interaction occurs within networks, whether between friends and neighbors or between community members and service providers.

“Social care” is an important network function, indicating that networks are essential for providing support. In this sense, the concept of *social* is a key element, suggesting that the products accruing from networks are intertwined with interaction and transaction. In many respects, informal and formal networks are interrelated, with the potential for each strengthening the other. Supporting informal networks can be a primary function of formal networks, and formal networks can more effectively reach their objectives by mobilizing and engaging the informal community.

The concept of *effect levels* describes the interaction within and between informal and formal networks (Small & Supple, 2001), which contributes to building community capacity through the generation of social capital. First-level effects occur within



**Figure 1.** Social Organizational Processes, Social Structure, and Individual/Family Results.

a homogenous network (e.g., a particular neighborhood), second-level effects occur between similar networks (such as between multiple community organizations that focus on similar issues), and third-level effects occur between dissimilar networks (e.g., in partnerships between neighborhoods and community agencies).

The prevention of intimate partner violence serves as an example of these effect levels (Mancini et al., in press): If members in a single organization, such as a community agency, are focusing their energies on informing the public about violence prevention, bonding occurs within that unit, which builds toward capacity; if several community agencies are collaborating and pooling resources to address the issue, capacity is further strengthened and effects are likely more widespread; if dissimilar networks are coalescing around an issue, such as community agencies and informal collections of neighborhood residents, a process of bridging occurs that further increases capacity because there are multiple points of influence (see Putnam, 2000, for discussion of bonding and bridging). These network configurations provide individuals and families with leverage to achieve desired results through the generation of social capital and the production of community capacity.

*Social capital.* Despite the numerous conceptual debates in the literature, social capital is a key

component of community social organization. Social capital is the aggregate of resources (information, opportunities, and instrumental support) that arise from reciprocal social networks and relationships and that result from participation in formal and informal settings (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Social capital engenders reciprocity and trust. It is evidenced in the actions of civic and social advocacy groups, local faith communities, and various community-based membership groups. According to Sampson (1992), “social capital is created when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action” (p. 77). Social capital is an important component of social organization because it increases the odds of individuals and families achieving results that might not be attained otherwise (Coleman, 1988).

*Community capacity.* From a measurement perspective, social capital is difficult to capture; however, heuristically, it is an attractive concept that bridges what occurs in and results from networks, which in turn becomes the action component of social organization—community capacity. Reflecting a capacity-enhancement approach, Bowen, Martin, et al. (2000) define community capacity as the degree to which people in the community demonstrate a sense of shared responsibility for the general welfare of the community and its individual

members, and demonstrate collective competence by taking advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members. Elements of community capacity identified by Chaskin et al. (2001) include human capital, organizational resources, and social capital; moreover, these elements are used to solve community problems or maintain community well-being. In discussing his concept of *collective efficacy*, which parallels community capacity but includes a closer link to social control, Sampson (2003) defines efficacy as community members' shared beliefs that result in action to meet a community goal. These approaches have similar foci and share common assumptions: (a) concern is expressed both for the community in general and for particular parts of the community; (b) capacity is evident in degrees, rather than simply being present or absent; (c) action is taken beyond the expression of positive sentiments; (d) action seizes opportunities rather than being reactive; and (e) action occurs in terms of normative everyday life situations in addition to situations of threat.

We emphasize the term *demonstrate* in our conceptualization because community capacity is anchored in taking action that produces observable results, rather than merely being a sentiment about supporting the community. Community capacity as an aspect of social organization focuses on a set of process elements that leads to an explanation of how change occurs in communities and how communities are mobilized. Although the concept of community capacity has conceptual linkages to the concept of collective efficacy (Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson, & Zazanis, 1995), this definition of community capacity gives relatively more attention to the active investment of community members in the welfare of the community and its residents (shared responsibility) and reflects a more generalized collective orientation. Community capacity is dynamic and multidimensional.

### *Consequences of Effective Social Organization*

Effective social organization leads to achieving *community results*—broad-based shared outcomes desired by community members, such as health and well-being, safety, sense of community, and family resilience (Bowen, Martin, et al., 2000). Results that are identified and valued by individuals and families

in a community provide direction for targeted application of resources to resolve issues and address concerns, as well as to achieve positive community goals. By incorporating results into the discussion of social organization, the approach becomes more action oriented, rather than merely representing a way to describe community activities. From a community action and program development perspective, managing results—rather than managing the disparate activities of individuals, families, agencies, and organizations—enables prevention and intervention efforts to be more intentional and, ultimately, evaluable (Mancini, Huebner, McCollum, & Marek, 2005; Orthner & Bowen, 2004).

## **Measurement of Social Organization and community Contexts**

Theories of social organization generally, and community capacity models in particular, continue to be refined and elaborated to reflect complexities in communities. Part of this refinement toward greater validation involves overcoming particular design and measurement challenges so that the multiple levels of social organization can be effectively identified and understood.

Three measurement strategies have been used by quantitative researchers in their attempts to capture social organizational processes in locally anchored geographic areas. The first strategy relies on individual reports and perceptions of community characteristics; the second strategy attempts to account for community effects with aggregate social structural measures of the community's social, demographic, and institutional infrastructure; and the third strategy attempts to assess directly macrolevel processes and mechanisms at the community level. Only the latter strategy is fully compatible with the present focus on social organization and its role in influencing individual and family outcomes.

### *A Contextual Approach*

The most common approach in studies that attempt to capture social organizational processes is to rely on the individuals as the unit of analysis—a microlevel approach. These investigations often are framed by an ecological perspective, which addresses the

microsystems in which individuals and families are embedded (e.g., neighborhood) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Individual reports or perceptions about these environments are used as independent variables to examine variation in individual and family outcomes and often are analyzed in the context of other influences at the individual level, such as background characteristics, attitudes, and experiences.

The family studies literature includes many examples in which researchers capture community-level influences through the eyes of respondents (e.g., Bowen, Bowen, & Cook, 2000; Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; Roosa et al., 2005). In such cases, respondents report on their own situation (e.g., self-reported personal friendship networks in the neighborhood), the situation of significant others (e.g., parents' views of children's friendship networks in the neighborhood), or more general perceptions of the situation (e.g., the nature of relationships among residents in the neighborhood).

Although these studies may make an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the families and the communities in which they are embedded, they do not contribute to our understanding of how communities influence individual and family outcomes independently of respondents' perceptions. As noted by Blau (1960), "The individual's orientation undoubtedly influences his behavior; the question is whether the prevalence of social values in a community also exerts social constraints upon patterns of conduct that are independent of the influences exerted by the internalized orientations" (p. 179).

### *A Compositional Approach*

Researchers also capture complex community-level processes by using variables that assess various dimensions of the community's social and demographic infrastructure—a proxy variable approach that is strong on predictive validity but weak on explanatory potential. Reflecting in many cases what Sampson (2002) labels the "poverty paradigm" (p. 216), community-level markers (e.g., neighborhood poverty rate or joblessness) are used as estimates of potential social organizational processes. These "omnibus variables," in the words of Burton and Jarrett (2000, p. 1119), typically are captured at the zip code, census tract, or block-group level and are entered into analyses as a summary index (e.g., Baumer & South, 2001).

Multilevel analysis typically is used to account for clustering effects, which allows sources of error to be disaggregated into two components: individual (level one) and cluster (level two). In some cases (e.g., Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001), community-level markers (e.g., poverty at the Census Bureau tract level) are assessed but are analyzed at the individual level rather than at the group level, an analysis that fails to account for the clustering of individuals and families. The nature of the sample design (e.g., too few individuals or families in many of the neighborhood clusters) also may place constraints on the ability of investigators to conduct multilevel analysis (Pinderhughes et al.).

Although the use of such structural variables may uncover contextual noise, their influence on dependent outcomes often is indirect. In this approach, social organizational processes are left unexamined and researchers attach meaning to contextual effects largely by conjecture rather than by examination (Bowen & Pittman, 1995). Investigators are left searching for the process mechanisms linking community structure with outcomes. Nonetheless, these covariance models may serve as preludes to contextual effects models that attempt to specify the social organizational processes that are captured by such social structural variables and that are related to variation in the dependent variable (Firebaugh, 1979).

### *A Contextual Effects Approach*

As described by Blalock (1984), "the essential feature of all contextual effects models is an allowance for macro processes that are presumed to have an impact on the individual actor over and above the effects of any individual-level variables that may be operating" (Blalock, p. 354). Consequently, a hierarchical data structure is used to order variables, including those that describe individuals and those that capture the properties and social organizational features of groups in which they are located (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Such a contextual effects approach reflects our emphasis on capturing the influence of dynamic community social organizational processes on individual and family outcomes. For example, community norms about handling conflicts within and between families would be analyzed both within the context of individual characteristics and for their impact on the ability of family members to resolve successfully their differences.

Bowen and Pittman (1995) identify three central characteristics of contextual effects models. First, the dependent variable in these models reflects individual-level outcomes. Second, independent variables reflect both individual-level variables and group-level variables. These group-level variables may be aggregates of data collected at the individual level (e.g., average attributes) or may be information that is not dependent on individual reports—what Blalock (1984) refers to conceptually as “global variables.”

Finally, at least one of the group-level variables reflects a hypothesized group or situational process that is more or less external to the individual. It is this third characteristic of contextual effects models that most clearly distinguishes them from the proxy variable approach discussed above. These macroprocesses can be hypothesized to exert direct and independent effects on individual outcomes, beyond the contribution of individual-level effects. In addition, the indirect and interactive contribution of these influences can be examined in conjunction with variables measured at the individual level.

An increasing number of studies appearing in the family science literature attempt to capture social organizational processes at a community level and satisfy the three characteristics associated with a contextual effects perspective (e.g., Browning, 2002; Wickrama & Bryant, 2003). For example, using social disorganization and social control perspectives as theoretical anchors, Wickrama and Bryant (2003) examined the joint effects of community- and family-level processes on adolescent depression. Their model included two blocks of variables at the community level: structural community adversity (concentration of poverty and ethnic heterogeneity) and community social resources (social integration and collective socialization). Aggregate, higher order measures of social integration and collective socialization were captured across census tract areas by averaging survey responses from parent sample members.

Using adolescent depressive symptoms as the dependent variable, Wickrama and Bryant (2003) examined the direct effects of community-level factors, the indirect effects of community-level factors via family-level factors (called cross-level mediation), and the interactive effects of community-level and family-level effects (called cross-level moderation). The data were examined in the context of statistical

controls and using multilevel regression models (individual, family, and community characteristics). The results support the importance of accounting for community effects in research examining the relationship between family-level factors and adolescent outcomes. Equally important, the study represents the increasing sophistication of research that examines the influence of community context on individual and family outcomes, and it serves as a model for other researchers interested in assessing the effects of social organizational processes on families and individuals.

## Summary

In their review of effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) conclude that it is important to distinguish between neighborhood structure and neighborhood social organization. We draw a similar conclusion in our attempt to distinguish community processes from community structure, both conceptually and from a measurement perspective, and by offering community social organization as a conceptual linchpin for examining families in the context of communities.

Social organization concepts such as community capacity provide a roadmap-like breadth and a lens-like depth for examining families in context and will allow family scientists to incorporate dynamic measures of community contexts into their models. The approach illuminates how people and families are positioned in communities; how they interrelate informally with one another and how they relate with formal networks; what results from these networks, in terms of social capital; and ultimately, how community capacity is built to effect change. More sophisticated methodologies are now available to capture multilevel processes so that these complex family and community relationships can be examined (see Teachman & Crowder, 2002). There are a host of implications for family theory, research, and practice that will orient family science professionals toward greater elaboration and more refined measurement of community social organizational processes, both in examining variations in individual and family outcomes and in designing practice strategies to influence these outcomes.



## Implications for Theory

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In many respects, this discussion has centered on theory, though the linkages between elements of social organization have not been adequately conceptualized or researched with sufficient breadth or depth. Social organization has not been classified in this paper as theory because inadequate attention has been paid to its underlying assumptions about communities, concepts associated with it have not been rigorously examined or shown to have mutual exclusivity, and additional structural and process elements remain unexplored.

Within the context of these limitations, additional avenues for thinking about social organization are suggested, especially as they pertain to families. A social organization framework provides a conceptual umbrella useful for delineating, distinguishing, and modeling numerous community processes. It is not suggested that virtually everything about a community is a part of social organization, but we do suggest that social organization covers a great number of community processes that have a bearing on family life. For example, families are embedded in networks of other families that subsequently influence them, children interact with other children and are influenced by their family system, community social control has some bearing on family lifestyles and decisions, and formal network agencies and organizations provide support to and in some cases may overfunction with respect to families and miss the opportunity to promote the development of informal network ties.

Our present discussion of social organization represents an attempt to contribute to a theory of social organization that aids description, prediction, and explanation of community processes. There are several steps that seem worthwhile in further elaboration and testing. For instance, there has been no attempt to partition either formal or informal network structures into subunits. In addition, the model now suggests equivalence between friends, neighbors, work associates, and other sources of informal support, though it is clear that these categories of relationships function differently. It has also been assumed that these relationship types are mutually exclusive, whereas it is likely that, for example, a particular friend is also a neighbor or also a work associate. Moreover, whereas a neighbor or a work associate is designated as such by location, a friend is not similarly bounded.

Nor have we explored the overlap between formal and informal networks. For example, within formal network structures, informal networks may develop based on something more than obligation, which is why work associates are considered informal networks. Additionally, many informal networks have elements of obligation, rather than emanate solely from choice, such as family relationships. Empirical analysis of network effect levels also is warranted especially because it is assumed that action from dissimilar networks (third-level effects) can more effectively meet desired community results. Although at first glance this assumption may seem reasonable, it fails to account for varying competencies found within formal and informal networks. There should also be an intentional focus on how families explicitly influence both formal and informal networks in their communities, either by the decisions they intentionally make about community participation or by how they view their place in their surrounding community.

Two elements of community capacity have been identified, shared responsibility and collective competence. However, additional elements that may explain variation in individual and family outcomes have not been considered. Moreover, it is assumed that both these elements are necessary, whereas it may well be that only collective competence is required for positive outcomes for individuals and families, no matter how it is developed. The relationship between shared responsibility and collective competence has not been sufficiently explored. For example, of the two, which is absolutely necessary to promote the changes that individuals and families desire? What occurs when shared responsibility is high but collective competence is low? Moreover, processes that override the community capacity that resides within any one community need to be specified (see our earlier discussion about Community with a capital C). At the least, additional research should focus on evaluating the underlying assumptions of this theory of change, the logic of the linkages between components of the model, and how well social organization is captured generally.

## Implications for Research

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Many of the studies that have examined the impact of community- and neighborhood-level effects on individuals and families were not designed to

capture respondents within higher levels of aggregation. Consequently, researchers are left to using compositional variables as proxies for examining social organizational processes. More intentionality is needed in sample design and data collection for studies examining families in the context of communities. This recommendation is consistent with Browning's (2002) call for "larger scale prospective data sets" (p. 849).

Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) discuss the value of research sampling designs to estimate neighborhood effects that maximize heterogeneity in the neighborhoods sampled and to ensure an adequate number of respondents within neighborhood clusters that allow for multilevel data analysis. In addition, more longitudinal designs are needed to enable a greater focus on the dynamic relationship between communities and families over time (e.g., Crowder & Teachman, 2004). For instance, in what ways does the interface between families and communities shift across time, and what are the consequences of this dynamic and reciprocal interface for successful family functioning (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2000)?

Importantly, studies are needed to test for non-linear community effects, especially bottom-level and top-level threshold effects (Roosa et al., 2005). For example, once social organizational effects like community capacity reach a certain upper level, increases may have relatively little additional value in promoting positive results for individuals and families (Bowen, Martin, et al., 2000). On the other hand, consistent with an epidemic theory of community effects (Crane, 1991), once such effects fall below a certain lower level, positive results for individuals and families may drop precipitously.

More research is needed to examine the nature of the family-community interface in the context of larger, nonlocal, institutional contexts—what Arum (2000) described as a neoinstitutionalist perspective and what we described earlier as community with a capital C. For example, Kaslow (2001) calls for research that examines families within the context of broader socioeconomic and political macrolevel forces.

Ethnographic research also has an important place in understanding social organization (e.g., Bould, 2003; Brodsky, 1996). Bott's (1971) qualitative study of 20 London families, conducted in the early 1950s, continues to inform the work of researchers interested in how elements of social structure and normative influences frame and

inform the division of household labor, the nature of leisure pursuits, and the provision of social support in marriage.

Qualitative research is needed to examine the nuances of aggregate effects. For example, in examining how communities frame and inform the meaning that families attribute to stressor events, Reiss and Oliveri (2003) make an important distinction between "family-level concepts," which reflect the extent to which individuals within the same family share common assumptions about family life, and "community-level concepts," which capture the extent to which families residing within the same community share common assumptions. More research is needed about the mechanisms through which some families in a community come to construct similar meanings and attributions that operate as collective forces in their lives, whereas other families in the same community do not.

## Implications for professional Practice

A primary professional practice question is, what are the leverage points in communities that affect family resilience? Social organization provides a number of signposts for professionals involved in prevention, intervention, and program development activities. The primary elements of social organization, which are social networks, social capital, and community capacity, represent malleable aspects of individual and family life. Although we share Sampson's (2002) concern about the concept of community being perceived as the "modern elixir" for what ails society, it does appear that community-level interventions have merit in the panoply of efforts to strengthen family life (Wandersman & Florin, 2003). The traditional focus on individuals and on individual-level changes in attitudes and behavior must expand to include a broad focus on the norms and social context in which the behavior occurs. Targeting social norms directly enhances the reciprocity between norms and individual behavior. Levine (1998) makes a persuasive case that focusing solely on the individual is no longer sufficient for prevention planning. He argues that prevention efforts designed from an ecological perspective can change norms and can result in a more positive social climate.

An impressive body of basic research identifies some of the social organizational processes that may be targeted for intervention planning (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson et al., 2002). An equally impressive body of practice research identifies intervention strategies that may be effective in producing positive change (Chaskin et al., 2001). For example, we recently applied our community capacity model, which includes a primary focus on the operation of formal and informal social support networks in communities, to the prevention of intimate partner violence (Mancini et al., in press). This application elaborates how these networks can be energized both separately and in tandem to support families living in stressful or destructive conditions.

Social organization theorists and community practitioners challenge interventions that focus almost exclusively on changes within formal agencies and systems while giving much less attention to the potential of informal networks. McKnight (1995) suggests that focusing on formal agencies may weaken the capacity of informal networks and associations, even though we know that people often prefer the informal network for support. There is untapped potential capacity in individuals' informal networks, associations, and communities. However, formal networks and institutions should not be ignored. These institutions are an important piece of any community fabric, though at the present it seems that research has not adequately captured institutional factors (Sampson et al., 2002). A social organization approach considers both formal and informal networks as pivotal for understanding the support networks of families in communities.

A social organization capacity-building approach to support individuals and families was recently implemented with Air Force Family Support Centers (Bowen, Orthner, Martin, & Mancini, 2001). This initiative was designed to energize informal and formal networks in a collaborative way to support families. Among the key principles identified for effective agency practice were (a) creating opportunities for community partnerships by modeling collaborative behavior and by building bridges within and between community stakeholder groups (including families and their individual members); (b) activating interest in community building by engaging community stakeholders in small group discussions and community forums about individual and family health and well-being, and by

encouraging the development of a community culture based on the principles of shared responsibility and collective competence; (c) removing barriers to community participation by families by identifying challenges to meaningful involvement and by engaging community stakeholders in finding creative solutions to overcoming these barriers; and (d) enabling connections among individuals and families by sharing ideas, information, and strategies for strengthening formal and informal networks. Each of these four key principles is grounded in social networks, social capital, and community capacity, which are primary elements of social organization.

## Conclusion

Implications for theory, research, and practice reinforce the argument that the concept of social organization provides an important framework for understanding families in the context of communities. The elements of this argument include discussion of the significance of community for understanding families, the challenges in defining community context, a definition of social organization and its associated components and their linkages, and a review and assessment of research designs used to study social organization. These elements provide both knowledge and encouragement for the further understanding of families in the context of their communities. At a minimum, additional "grist for the mill" is provided as family science scholars and family life practitioners continue to grapple with the community social organization concept.

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