

## Cultural Disorganization and Crime

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In 1978, Ruth Kornhauser published *Social Sources of Delinquency*, a controversial account of the state of criminological theory at the time. In *Social Sources*, Kornhauser minces no words critiquing dominant criminological theories of the era. Her most scathing critique is reserved for cultural deviance theories, which emphasized the role of culture in the production of crime and delinquency. Cultural deviance refers to “conduct which reflects socialization to subcultural values and derivative norms that conflict with law” (Kornhauser 1978: 21). Cultural deviance occupies a central role in culture conflict (e.g., Sellin 1938) and cultural transmission (e.g., Sutherland 1956) theories, both popular at the time *Social Sources* was published. A statement in the final paragraph of Kornhauser’s book is telling: “So abused have been the concepts of culture and subculture in explanation of delinquency that if these terms were struck from the lexicon of criminologists, the study of delinquency would benefit from their absence” (p. 253). Much of *Social Sources* is dedicated to explaining why she takes this extreme position.

For decades following the publication of *Social Sources*, research in the communities and crime tradition tended to downplay—if not downright ignore—the role of culture, focusing almost exclusively on structural conditions of communities conducive to crime, such as poverty and residential mobility. Yet this wholesale repudiation was not what Kornhauser intended. In fact, in *Social Sources*, she constructs an explanation of crime and delinquency that incorporates a meaningful definition of culture, albeit one at odds with what is espoused in cultural deviance theories.

The goal of this chapter is to present Kornhauser’s viewpoint on the role of culture in the explanation of crime and delinquency and to describe how her thinking on culture has inspired important avenues of insight that are evident in

theory and research today, especially in the area of communities and crime. To fully appreciate her view, it is first necessary to understand how, in her words, “so abused have been the concepts of culture and subculture” in the study of crime and delinquency. To that end, in this chapter, I first discuss Kornhauser’s critique of what she considers social scientists’ “loose usage” (p. 9) of culture more broadly. The loose usage of culture, she argues, is reflected in improper definitions of human nature and the social order, as well as “extreme cultural relativism” (p. 14). Second, I review Kornhauser’s critique of cultural deviance theories, including culture conflict and cultural transmission theories, as embodying these broader criticisms. I explain the rationale behind her designation of cultural deviance theory as “deadpan sociology” (p. 160). Third, I present Kornhauser’s version of a “meaningful definition of culture” (p. 210), which she claims is a necessary starting point to determine the influence of culture on behavior. Fourth, I discuss Kornhauser’s preferred explanation, that of cultural disorganization and crime, which largely develops from a control model of social disorganization theory. Finally, in light of increasing calls for the reintroduction of culture into contemporary community-level crime research, I briefly review recent advances in this area that build on Kornhauser’s insights. A caveat is warranted before beginning the discussion. Kornhauser’s critiques are not without skepticism and controversy. My goal in this chapter is to present her arguments rather than critique them. To that end, I stick close to the text in *Social Sources*, frequently citing Kornhauser’s words directly—whether or not I agree with all of the claims that she makes.

### **The Mistreatment of Culture**

While Kornhauser’s critique in *Social Sources* centers on cultural deviance theories, such as culture conflict and cultural transmission, her arguments go well-beyond these perspectives to encompass criticisms associated with scholars’ (mis)treatment of culture more broadly. In this respect, Kornhauser may be understood as arguing against a pervasive mid-century “intellectual orthodoxy” (Selznick 1992: 122) on issues of human nature and cultural relativism (see also Hirschi 1996: 249). Generally speaking, Kornhauser denounced what she described as social scientists’ “loose usage” of culture (p. 9), warning readers of the “hazards of indiscriminate use of the global conception of culture” (p. 10). She identified two concerns in particular: first, scholars’ adherence to a perspective of extreme cultural relativism and the associated assumption that culture is robust, ubiquitous, constant, and powerful; and second, scholars’ failure to distinguish between culture and social structure in causal explanations of behavior.

Kornhauser challenged the perspective of cultural relativism, which was fundamental to subcultural theories of the time. Cultural relativism is the view that all beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual or a group within her/their own social context. Cultural relativists argue that all cultures are worthy in their own right and are of equal value. “Right” and “wrong” are thus

culture-specific; what is considered moral in one society (or among members of one group) may be considered immoral in another, and since no universal standard of morality exists, one does not have the right to judge another society's (or group's) customs. The possibility of absent, weak, or inadequate subcultures is ruled out in this viewpoint. In characterizing the position of those who advocate this view of culture, Kornhauser explains, "cultures flourish everywhere, no matter how barren the soil. More precisely, there are no conditions of culture: every problem of meaning and action calls forth its solution in culture or subculture, and cultures, once formed, are equally potent in gaining and keeping the commitment of their constituencies. For culture is seen not as a variable but as a constant, as absolute creation of human adaptability" (pp. 4-5). In this "culture is everything" (pp. 9-10) viewpoint, Kornhauser notes there is scarcely an aggregate of individuals—no matter how tenuous, intermittent, or even nonexistent their collective identity—that has not been endowed with a subculture, so long as its "members" exhibit some similarity in outlook or behavior (p. 4).

This insistence on the ubiquity and power of culture is especially prominent in explanations of crime and delinquency, according to Kornhauser. Drug use, poverty, illegitimacy, alienation of youth, and violence, she claims, are all attributed to some appropriate subculture: "Delinquency theories provide an impressive list of subcultures that play a vital role in explanations of delinquency—ethnic and racial cultures; lower-class or slum culture; male culture; youth culture; varieties of delinquent subculture such as a parent delinquent subculture; drug, conflict and criminal subcultures" (p. 4). She challenges this ubiquity when she argues, ". . . social analysts are so enchanted with culture as an explanatory concept that the people they study are sometimes compelled to bear witness to cultures they neither have nor want" (p. 4). For Kornhauser, culture can only define *ideals*; it cannot compel behavior. In essence then, scholars need to conceive of culture as variable, rather than constant, as well as fragile and precarious, rather than deterministic.

A second criticism centers on Kornhauser's perceived failure among scholars to distinguish between culture and social structure in causal explanations of behavior.<sup>1</sup> She claims scholars have not paid sufficient attention to decomposing the social into the cultural and the structural, and asserts the prevailing view treats social structure as embedded in culture. Yet "many cultural responses, particularly in the cognitive domain, are adaptations to situational exigencies rather than embodiments of cultural values" (p. 6). In other words, structure constrains behavior: ". . . when behavior is not guided by values or the norms derived from them, but is imposed by structural or situational constraints, removal of those constraints would more easily lead to a change in behavior" (p. 10). As such, inequality before the law stems not from conflict in different sets of societal norms (i.e., conflicting values, as culture conflict theory would suggest) but from the unequal resources differentially distributed to positions in a social structure. Her conclusion, then, is that both social structure and culture are manifested in

social action but that social structure and culture must be separated from each other.

In sum, Kornhauser challenges the fundamental definition and treatment of culture that she claims was pervasive of the era. Sustained by an allegiance to cultural relativism, she argues, scholars of the day adopted the view that cultures or subcultures are ubiquitous; differ only in their content; that each is equally viable, equally the object of deep commitment, and equally capable of producing perfectly socialized persons; and that culture is neither conceptually distinct from other social phenomena nor variable in its strength. Opposing this definition and treatment, Kornhauser insists the starting point for any discussion of culture's impact on behavior is the notion that culture is variable in strength and that social structure and situation are distinct from but objectively related to culture, rather than subsumed under culture (p. 14). She identifies three scholars who, to her mind, properly attend to culture in their work: Yinger's (1960) work on contraculture and subculture; Suttles's (1968) work on slum social organization (or the social order of the slum); and Liebow's (1967) work on the subculture of Black street-corner men. In all three cases, she argues, the research reflects a "greater conceptual clarity in distinguishing among situation, social organization, and culture" and provides "a more useful conception of culture as variable in its autonomy, and hence in the completeness with which it is articulated with values" (p. 19).

### **"Deadpan Sociology": Cultural Deviance Models**

Kornhauser next sets her sights on critiquing then-popular cultural deviance theories that, she asserts, employ this faulty treatment of culture. Cultural deviance refers to "conduct which reflects socialization to subcultural values and derivative norms that conflict with law" (p. 21). Cultural deviance occupies a central role in culture conflict (e.g., Sellin 1938) and cultural transmission (e.g., Sutherland 1956) theories. Theories of culture conflict maintain there are no legal rules that represent values common to all members in society; rather, law is variable over time and between cultures. As such, instances of "norm violation" are really instances of culture conflict, or variation in subcultural values defining crime. Crime results when conformity to the norms of a relatively powerless group is labeled violative according to the norms of another, more powerful group. Theories of cultural transmission, on the other hand, assert that delinquency results from socialization to subcultural values that condone or permit law violation (rather than culture conflict in general). In her critique of cultural deviance theories, Kornhauser focused primarily on the work of Sellin (1938) and Sutherland (1956), yet she also critiqued the treatment of culture in other theorists' writings of the time, including Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Cohen (1955), Miller (1958), and Shaw and McKay (1942).

Kornhauser characterized the basic assumptions of cultural deviance theories as "without foundation" (p. 253).<sup>2</sup> She argues cultural deviance theorists

proceed from three (faulty) premises about human nature, which derive from the broader definitions and treatment of culture noted earlier. First, individuals have no discernible human nature, only a social nature. As such, they are wholly a product of their culture. This assumption, in Kornhauser's words, represents an "oversocialized view of human nature" (p. 34). She further argues, "To become the automaton conformist of cultural deviance theory, man must have a nature that is wholly passive, docile, tractable, and plastic in all other ways: he must be wantless, with muted drives of infinite mutability. How else could he turn out to be so good? He must learn to be willful, greedy, and cruel" (pp. 35-36). For Kornhauser, in this view, the word "culture" becomes vaguely and meaninglessly synonymous with everything that is social (p. 186).

A second premise about human nature among cultural deviance theorists, Kornhauser argues, is that socialization into a given subculture is perfectly successful, even under conditions where the individual is exposed to many conflicting subcultures. Kornhauser also challenges this "over-socialized conception of man," where theorists are unable to conceive of delinquency, except as the result of invincible socialization to subcultural values endorsing it (p. 245).

Third, according to Kornhauser, cultural deviance theorists assume that cultural variability is unlimited; that is, there is unlimited variability in cultural and subcultural values within a given society, often described as the "multiple-moralities assumption" (Hirschi 1996: 251). Moreover, it is assumed that social differentiation, particularly in highly stratified modern societies, is the inevitable source of this value diversity. The problem here, Kornhauser maintains, is that under this assumption, all structurally differentiated units are considered subcultures, each on par with every other, all equally competitive with the societal culture, and all having equal potency in causing behavior (p. 5).

Kornhauser's criticisms extend beyond assumptions about human nature to include what she considers problematic assumptions about the social order. Cultural deviance theories, she suggests, embrace a coercive theory of social order—not surprising in light of the fact that these theories emphasize value conflict, view law as the codification of the cultural norms of powerful groups, and see court and prison as the only social controls available in modern society (p. 44). Fundamental to a coercive theory of social order is the idea that individuals refrain from violating laws for fear of punishment. Kornhauser argues cultural deviance theories deny that individuals ever violate norms out of considerations of reward and punishment. She argues, "On the contrary, in the little societies in which men have their being [i.e., subcultures], securely tucked away from the surrounding society, people never violate norms. There are no crimes against subcultures. In the larger society, the locus of warring subcultures, dissensus prevails; thus there is no basis for social order, and crime abounds. Its jails do not deter crime; they simply contain the prisoners who commit crimes as socialized members of subcultures" (p. 44). In essence, Kornhauser challenges the underlying assumption that only value consensus produces

social order, and that where there is no consensus, there is no basis for social order.

Kornhauser also takes issue with the relationship cultural deviance theorists propose between culture and behavior. In her opinion, among cultural deviance theorists, especially Sutherland, behavior is synonymous with values. That is, behavior is considered culturally or subculturally valued behavior. Hence, whenever we observe an individual acting, we shall infer that he is committed to a value that directly allows or prescribes his actions. Kornhauser argues this view assumes there are no other determinants of human behavior other than values, and that it results in circularity: "When everything is included under the rubric of culture, nothing is left with which to compare the causal importance of culture" (p. 9). Stated alternatively, delinquent values cause delinquency, but the only people who have delinquent values are delinquents, so delinquency causes itself (p. 194; see also Lemert 1964: 60). Kornhauser insists that culture consists of *ideal* norms or patterns of behavior, which should not be confused with actual behavior. In essence then, behavior does not automatically follow culture, which is only one of its determinants.

Yet another concern is her perception that, among cultural deviance theorists, subculture is often conceived of as anti-societal culture, or that which is in complete opposition to the broader societal culture. In this zero-sum approach, delinquent subcultures are characterized by "value reversal" (p. 242), such that if people value one thing, they must disvalue another. She illustrates her point by discussing the work of Cohen (1955), who characterized subcultural delinquency in terms of a solution to status frustration, or the problem of adjustment faced by urban working-class boys. Kornhauser suggests that, for Cohen, it is distinguished by "the explicit and wholesale repudiation of middle-class standards and the adoption of their very antithesis" (p. 129). Kornhauser is dubious: Is it possible to construct a totally insulated sub-society with a powerful subculture that totally reverses conventional values? (p. 152). She does not believe that it is:

The study of delinquency and crime is not a fertile field for uncovering antilegal orientations in the populace at large. The shock of troops of the revolution will not be found among delinquents and criminals, nor will the ideology of the revolution be constructed out of the experience of ordinary people with delinquency and crime. No *group* of people will construct a culture or a subculture that makes their own lives and group life impossible. Those actions enjoined in the core of the criminal law specify values that everywhere and always must regulate the sustained interaction of human beings with one another. That is why the search for subcultures that differ markedly in their orientation to crime is doomed to failure. (Kornhauser 1978: 218; emphasis in the original)

Recall one of Kornhauser's key criticisms of theorists' "loose usage" of culture centered on the relative lack of attention to social structure, something Kornhauser also identifies as problematic in cultural deviance theories. She claims that cultural deviance theory does not recognize any independent influence

of social structure apart from its expression in culture. As such, theorists are unable to ascertain how social structure can independently shape behavior (p. 23). Part of the problem for Kornhauser lies in the important, yet unrecognized, distinction between classes as aggregates (i.e., groups similarly located within social structure) and classes as collectivities (i.e., groups with a common subculture). If a number of individuals who occupy similar positions in a social structure exhibit similarity of behavior and orientation, these similarities alone, she maintains, are not evidence of the existence of a subculture. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and Undecideds, for example, are not adherents of Democratic, Republican, Independent, and Don't Know subcultures to whose precepts they are socialized (p. 230). Rather, social structure by itself is capable of accounting for similar orientations, without the apparatus of an intervening or independent corporate entity in which a subculture is vested. Returning to the example, the explanation of political preferences is typically traced to the different interests of individuals differentially located in the social structure (p. 230). Her point is that: "Since a subculture is a property of a collectivity, it must be demonstrated that the social units presumed to be carriers of a subculture are structurally united. There must be evidence of the existence of a corporate entity, with internal structures that link the individuals and groups within its boundaries. Cultural deviance models have never resolved this problem because they have never confronted it" (p. 230).<sup>3</sup>

In light of her collective criticisms, Kornhauser concludes her discussion by characterizing cultural deviance theory as "deadpan sociology" (p. 160): "Proponents of cultural deviance theory, under the banner of cultural and ethical relativism, are mainly responsible for establishing the tradition of deadpan sociology, in which the most outrageous and malevolent acts, as well as the most petty and tawdry, are alike solemnly portrayed as the consequence of perfect socialization to sacrosanct subcultural values" (p. 161). Kornhauser further argued this definition and treatment of culture is greeted with "incredulous amusement" outside of sociology, but within sociology, and especially criminology, it is "solemnly respected" (p. 161).

### A "Meaningful Definition of Culture": The Starting Point

Throughout *Social Sources*, Kornhauser asserts that cultural deviance theorists have not addressed the problems confronting the researcher who wishes to determine the influence of subculture on behavior. This is due, she believes, to the inability to provide a meaningful definition and treatment of culture. Kornhauser herself decides to undertake this task, offering her own version of a "meaningful definition of culture" (pp. 210-214) as a starting point for specifying culture's influence on crime and delinquency.

First, she emphasizes the importance of identifying the collectivity. Culture is a property of a group; if there is no group, there is no subculture. Yet the criteria for establishing that a number of people constitute a "group" rather than an

“aggregate” must be independent of the characteristics that are attributed to them by virtue of their presumed subculture, she argues. In the “culture” of sociologists, a group is defined as a number of people who are capable of concerted action for common ends. The members of a group are bound together in a distinctive set of social relationships. If the individuals who are candidates for inclusion in a group are incapable of concerting their actions, if they are not involved in social relationships with one another, they do not form a group and cannot have a subculture, according to Kornhauser. The researcher is thus directed to look elsewhere, in social structure or situation, for whatever similarities of behavior or perspective they may manifest. To illustrate her point, Kornhauser mockingly observes the only thing that unites poor Whites, poor Southern Blacks, poor ethnics, poor farmers, and poor slum dwellers is their indifference to each other. There are no lower-class institutions that cross those barriers. In this sense, the lower class does not exist as a collectivity and it does not have a subculture. Careful attention to properly identifying the collectivity is thus necessary.

Second, Kornhauser underscores the importance of a link to values. Shared values are the core of culture. They are not its only component, but cognitive and motivational orientations are not incorporated into culture unless they are valued or linked to values, she maintains. For example, apathy has been consistently more characteristic of disadvantaged than privileged strata. Yet apathy, she argues, is not a *valued* motivational orientation; if anything, it is a failure of motivation and its source lies in social structure and situation, not in subculture.

Third, Kornhauser highlights the issue of frequency. A culture is a property of a group, not merely of some or even many individuals within the group. Explanations that trace an attitude or behavior to subculture thus require high correlations between group membership and the attitude or behavior. In other words, if a cluster of traits characterizes only a small minority of a group, it cannot be part of their subculture. For that to happen, an orientation must be widely distributed throughout a subgroup.

A final component is related to what Kornhauser calls “publicity.” Culture is public. In this sense, not only do individuals believe in cultural values, but they also believe that others believe in them. Cultural values are thus embodied in a group’s institutions, where the efforts to transmit and enforce them are visible to all (i.e., public). As Kornhauser describes, “Cultural values are openly affirmed from platform and pulpit, from lectern and printing press, as well as among friends, relatives, and acquaintances” (p. 213). Culture, therefore, does not include every desire, wish, or motive that drives individuals. Rather, these wants must be considered to be desirable in the public forums of a group before they can be viewed as components of culture.

Having laid the foundation for a meaningful definition of culture, Kornhauser sets her sights on presenting to the reader her preferred explanation of crime and delinquency—that of cultural disorganization.

### “Cultural Disorganization” and Crime

As context for her cultural disorganization argument, Kornhauser reviews popular delinquency theories of the day, noting that these theories differ primarily according to whether they locate the causes of delinquency in social disorganization or in cultural deviance. Social disorganization theories, which of course Kornhauser prefers, are distinguished from cultural deviance theories by their willingness to make judgments that societies and groups vary in their degree of social disorganization, defined as the “relative lack of articulation of values within culture as well as between culture and social structure” (p. 21). A socially disorganized community is one “unable to realize its values” (p. 63). Social disorganization exists in the first instance when the structure and culture of a community are incapable of implementing and expressing the values of its *own* residents (p. 63).

Although not frequently acknowledged today, social disorganization theory has two variants: strain models and control models. Because of space limitations, I am unable to review Kornhauser’s assessment of the strain variant, but it is worth noting that she argues strongly against this approach, and in favor of control models in social disorganization theory. Control models assume that strain is relatively constant across persons, for wants can be gratified only at the cost of foregoing the gratification of other wants, so that all individuals have unfulfilled wants. Since non-normative means typically provide quicker and easier routes to such gratification, everyone has sufficient motivation to delinquency, she argues. Hence, in the control model variant, delinquency is an omnipresent vulnerability, the resort to which is a function not of frustrated wants (i.e., strain) but of the calculation of its costs to its benefits. Differential vulnerability to delinquency is thus determined by variation in the strength of social controls, the sum of which account for the net costs of delinquency (p. 24). Still, Kornhauser believes that what divides strain and control models is less important than the assumptions that unite them as social disorganization theories—a unity in direct opposition to cultural deviance theories.<sup>4</sup>

For social disorganization theorists, insofar as they remain within the confines of a control model, delinquency is explained without reference to socialization to an oppositional delinquent subculture. Rather, social disorganization produces weak institutional controls, which loosen the constraints on deviating from conventional values. In other words, normlessness, rather than prior socialization to a deviant subculture, precedes delinquency<sup>5</sup>; delinquency is the result of malfunctioning in the realization of shared values, and delinquents are not strongly committed to anti-legal norms; rather, they are weakly committed or indifferent to legal norms (p. 218).

Inherent in this view is an assumption regarding the consensus on certain basic values and norms among members in society, an assumption in direct opposition to cultural deviance theory. Kornhauser explains, “All members of the society are

said to have certain broadly similar basic values, and the source of delinquency is sought in community conditions that prevent their being attained" (p. 63). These broadly similar basic values, which find expression in law, are cultural universals rooted in the needs of persons and the requirements of collectivities. She explains mockingly, "Most members of the human race, elites and nonelites alike, prefer not to be maimed or have their heads blown off or suffer the loss of property" (p. 188). In short then, there is consensus, not dissensus, among the constituent subgroups of American society in their evaluations of delinquency and crime, despite the fact that rates of delinquency among these subgroups may vary substantially (p. 242).<sup>6</sup>

Given these assumptions, the cause of crime and delinquency is not variation in the *content* of values defining what is morally valid, but variation in the strength of commitment to values of unopposed moral validity. Social disorganization theory's objective, then, is to uncover the social sources of that variation, which Kornhauser suggests lie in malfunctioning social structures, malintegrated cultures, or faulty links between the two—but not subculture: "It is not an ethnic or racial culture, a class culture, or a slum culture that harbors delinquent values; it is a community that cannot supply a structure through which common values can be realized and common problems solved" (p. 63). In this sense, social disorganization theory assumes not only that people frequently violate the norms of their own groups but also that they frequently violate norms whose moral validity they do not deny and against which they do not seek to construct a set of oppositional values (p. 30).<sup>7</sup> Kornhauser does not deny that some deviance follows from commitment to alternative values (either individually or subculturally elaborated) but maintains that most involves the breach of consensual values. In sum then, social disorganization theory assumes that the definition of delinquency is uniform for all constituent subgroups of the society, and that delinquency is infraction of law, caused not by commitment to different norms, but by indifference to, or weakness of, shared norms (p. 30).

The arguments advanced by social disorganization theory reflect several important assumptions about human nature, the social order, and the role of culture in the production of crime and delinquency. Regarding assumptions about human nature, in direct contrast to cultural deviance theory, it is suggested that man has a human nature, socialization can never be perfect, and cultural variability has some limits. Kornhauser adopts a view of human nature in which man is active, moved to gratify strong wants, and receptive to efforts to socialize him primarily as they relate to the gratification of wants (p. 39). Socialization is always more or less effective, yet never perfect, she maintains, first because man is an active participant in socialization, which allows for some resistance to it, and second because social disorganization is present to some degree in all societies, which cannot therefore provide the conditions of perfect socialization (p. 39).

Concerning the social order, social disorganization theory, at least the control model variant, relies heavily on the exchange explanation of social order and

the importance of shared norms in accounting for social order. Underlying this is a belief in universal human needs (e.g., security), which serves as the basis for assuming a common core of value agreement (e.g., consensus) among members of a society, as noted earlier. This is because, within an entity sufficiently knit to be called a society (or a group in it), there are minimum rules required for its mere existence. For example, Kornhauser argues no human group could come into existence, let alone survive, that tolerated uncontrolled theft, assault, or murder. These minimal requirements will result in the institutionalization of some similar cultural values between all societies, as well as in all subgroups within them.<sup>8</sup> These pan-human “rules of the game”—rules about the safety of the person and his possessions, rules without which sustained social interaction cannot occur—are everywhere and always embodied in law, Kornhauser argues (p. 40). Yet such agreement, she notes, neither generates nor guarantees orderly social relationships, nor does it preclude conflicts of value or of interest. She asserts, “These rules make group life possible; they do not make it just, happy, rewarding, equitable, or stable” (p. 41).

Finally, concerning the role of culture in the production of crime and delinquency, Kornhauser identifies “value orientations to crime” (p. 218), which are inconsistent with the assumptions of cultural deviance theories and consistent with the tenets of social disorganization theory. First is the idea of ambivalence, not acceptance. Kornhauser notes individuals may be ambivalent in their orientation to delinquency. Whether overt or covert, whether antecedent or consequent to delinquency, ambivalence suggests that delinquents acknowledge the moral validity and moral superiority of lawful rather than unlawful conduct, and remain sufficiently committed to conventional morality to prevent their construction of an oppositional delinquent subculture characterized by value reversal (p. 219). And as noted earlier, youth are able to violate the laws in which they believe by constructing justifications of deviance based on extension of principles embodied in the legal code. Here Kornhauser references Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization, or the rationalizations that blunt the effect of internal and external controls (i.e., guilt and shame), thereby freeing youth to engage in delinquency.

A second value orientation to crime is the idea of a hierarchy of values, not wholesale repudiation. Kornhauser argues delinquents accord highest priority to conventional values defining crime but assign a lower rank to certain illegal acts, rather than totally condemning them (p. 221). Stated alternatively, delinquents unequivocally evaluate conventional goals and lawful conduct as morally superior to unconventional goals achieved through illegal acts. However, though conventional morality ranks highest to them, they are less disapproving of some delinquent acts than nondelinquents, presumably because their commitment to conventional morality is weakened by their unsatisfactory adaptations to conventional others and institutions and/or by their belief in the inevitability of crime, particularly if they live in disorganized neighborhoods (p. 221). Still, Kornhauser

claims their lessened disapproval of some crimes does not generalize to a lessened disapproval of all crime, nor does it extend so far as to indicate positive approval of illegal acts, as cultural deviance theory suggests.

A third value orientation suggested by Kornhauser is the idea of amorality, not value reversal. Delinquents may be indifferent to the moral consequences of their actions, guided solely by cognitive orientations that assert the universal primacy of self-interest, yet in no case is there evidence, she argues, that delinquent acts are positively approved or preferred. Hence, amorality, not value reversal, is the end product of weakened commitment to conformity (p. 243).

Given a meaningful definition of culture and using control models as a foundation, Kornhauser turns to a more detailed description of the ways in which social disorganization leads to ineffective controls, extracting the control model and explicating it. While space limitations preclude a thorough account, I outline some of her most important points, underscoring the role of culture in the explanation of crime and delinquency.<sup>9</sup>

Recall that, for Kornhauser, social disorganization refers to the ineffective articulation of values within and between culture and social structure (p. 246). More concretely, the term “social disorganization” designates a culture that does not effectively embody the values of a people and a social structure that does not effectively make the achievement of their values possible (p. 246). The effectiveness of social structures may be gauged by the outcome of cooperative efforts to achieve goals. Culture varies in response to the variable capacity of social structure and situation to generate and sustain it (p. 248).

This basic argument is laid out in greater detail. Kornhauser traces a causal chain beginning with the ecological causes of community disorganization (i.e., low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility), themselves a byproduct of economic segregation, which lead to structural and cultural characteristics of neighborhoods that represent the social causes of social disorganization. Structurally, the social causes include inadequate institutional resources, the isolation of institutions and weak intermediate relations, a lack of communitywide relations, and institutional instability. Culturally, the causes include a diversity of subcultures (which reduces unconditional commitment to any system of values, whether subcultural, communal, or societal), obsolescence of subcultures (obsolescent subcultures break down as traditional values fail to provide adaptive solutions to the problems faced by residents), instability and restricted scope of community culture, and irrelevance of societal culture characterized by universalism and imbalance (societal values that cannot be realized become attenuated because of their irrelevance).

These social causes have both structural and cultural consequences. Structural consequences include the institutional inability to provide routes to valued goals and institutional discontinuities in socialization and control. Cultural consequences are evidenced in the general attenuation of cultural values. It is at this point that readers are introduced to the concept of “cultural disorganization” or “cultural

attenuation” (p. 77); attenuation means to lessen the amount, force, magnitude, or value of and to weaken, in this case, communal and societal cultural values. Kornhauser explains cultural disorganization or attenuation occurs when societal values cannot be realized and, hence, are abandoned: “They are not rejected . . . but they are disused” (p. 77). Kornhauser suggests the preceding social causes lead to the attenuation of subcultural values, the attenuation of communal cultural values, and the attenuation of societal cultural values.

There are still further consequences both in social structure and culture. Structurally, the consequences involve weak social bonds and the inability of isolated institutions to discover and enforce common standards and goals. Culturally, Kornhauser identifies three consequences: first, the inability of attenuated communal and societal values to serve as a basis for common community opinion (i.e., the loss of direct external control by community); second, the inability of attenuated subcultural values to be enforced by families (i.e., the loss of direct external control by family); and third, the inability of attenuated values of all types to serve as basis for adequate socialization (i.e., the paucity of internalized values and lack of direct internal controls). Stated more succinctly, a consequence of social disorganization is weak controls, which is assumed to be the necessary precursor of crime and delinquency. At the heart of this process is cultural attenuation: “An attenuated communal value system cannot serve as a basis for effective community control. The community cannot organize itself to combat delinquency unless united by common values. A fragile, badly divided community opinion cannot evoke shame in the child. The community ceases to be an agency of social control” (p. 78).<sup>10,11</sup>

After outlining the ways in which theorists have preached and practiced what amounts to, in Kornhauser’s words, the “mistreatment of culture,” after illustrating this as problematic in cultural deviance theory, after providing a “meaningful definition of culture” as a starting point for theorizing crime and delinquency, and after outlining a preferred theory of cultural disorganization that builds upon this “meaningful definition,” Kornhauser offers one last piece of advice to future scholars when she writes in the book’s closing paragraph: “Strain models are disconfirmed. Cultural deviance models are without foundation in fact. To the more definitive formulation of control models, to the more adequate linking of macrosocial and microsocial control theories, and to their more rigorous testing, the study of delinquency might profitability turn” (p. 253). For Kornhauser, a central component of this approach is the idea of cultural disorganization and attenuation.

### Kornhauser’s Legacy

Recall that, at the outset of the chapter, I noted that research in the communities and crime tradition following the publication of *Social Sources* tended to downplay, and in many cases completely ignore, the role of culture, reflecting perhaps the significant impact Kornhauser’s work had on the field. Yet Kornhauser

did not intend to convey the position that culture is irrelevant in explaining crime and delinquency, only that cultural deviance theories' treatment of culture was problematic. Regardless, in the final three decades of the twentieth century, one is hard pressed to find neighborhood crime studies that incorporate, let alone even mention, the role of culture—something that has not gone unnoticed by contemporary scholars (Berg, Stewart, Brunson, and Simons 2012: 412; Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1191; Sampson and Wilson 1995: 53; Small and Newman 2001: 23; Warner 2003: 73).

Fortunately, more recently, there have been increasing calls for the reintroduction of culture into contemporary community-level crime studies. These calls are found in theoretical statements (e.g., Anderson 1999; Bruce, Roscigno, and McCall 1998; Bursik 1988; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003a; Sampson 2002; Sampson and Bean 2005; Small and Newman 2001) as well as empirical neighborhood-crime studies, where culture is directly incorporated into the analyses (e.g., Berg et al. 2012; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003b; Matsueda, Drakulich, and Kubrin 2005; Sampson and Bartusch 1998; Stewart and Simons 2006; Warner 2003; Warner and Rountree 2000; Warner and Burchfield 2011). While space limitations preclude a thorough discussion of this literature, in the remainder of the chapter, I discuss two ways in which Kornhauser's arguments have shaped current theory and research on the role of culture in neighborhood crime studies.

First, scholars have reproduced and continue to call for a definition and treatment of culture consistent with Kornhauser's, particularly regarding fundamental underlying assumptions of human behavior and the social order as well as concerning the concepts of cultural disorganization and cultural attenuation. For example, in addressing criticisms against social disorganization theory, Sampson (2002) recasts the concept of social organization based on an appraisal of what community is theorized to supply in modern society, raising the question, "organized for what?" (p. 96). In answering this question, he references Kornhauser's argument that we must first recognize that social organization is goal oriented and consensual: "It confuses matters to think about social disorganization in the abstract, absent any content. For criminologists, content is grounded in the common goal of living in an area free of the threat of crime. Here, social organization refers to the collective and concrete efforts of neighborhood actors toward meeting this goal" (p. 98). Regarding societal consensus of key values he further suggests, "We should stand firm on the issue of common values with respect to safety. Criminologists have mistaken what Ruth Kornhauser (1978: 122) calls a 'jaundiced' view of indigenous crime and gangs for tacit acceptance—thus opening the door to misguided subcultural and differential association theories. To be sure, I believe that the existential reality of living in dangerous environments may reduce one's emotional distance from the criminal 'other'—but that does not imply normative acceptance in the deeper cultural sense" (p. 100). Sampson applauds scholars such as Anderson (1999) who maintain

that, while a tradition of crime and delinquency may be a powerful force in some communities, it is only a part of the community's system of values, and that even neighborhoods with the highest crime and delinquency rates are overwhelmingly conventional.

Similar arguments are advanced in recent scholarship on legal cynicism. Legal cynicism refers to a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill-equipped to ensure public safety (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1191; Sampson and Bartusch 1998).<sup>12</sup> It is suggested that legal cynicism, as a cultural frame, can help explain the high (and persisting) levels of violence in some neighborhoods. Importantly, scholars insist that legal cynicism is not reflective of an oppositional culture. In making their point, they distinguish between "culture in values" and "cultural frames" orientations, the former positing a cause and effect relationship between values and behavior (akin to cultural deviance theories) and the latter positing a constraint and context-dependent relationship between cultural frames and behavior (akin to what Kornhauser advocated) (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1194-1195; see also Sampson and Bean 2005: 24).<sup>13</sup> Characterizing legal cynicism as a cultural frame, scholars emphasize that, while individuals may believe in the substance of the law, antagonism toward and mistrust of legal agents may propel some individuals toward violence simply because they feel they cannot rely upon the police to help them resolve grievances. Under such conditions, violence serves as an additional form of problem-solving behavior in one's cultural repertoire (see also Kubrin and Weitzer 2003b). In short, then, and consistent with Kornhauser's notion of cultural disorganization, legal cynicism serves to constrain choices for resolving grievances and protecting oneself because individuals are more likely to presume that the law is unavailable or unresponsive to their needs.

A great example of a study that embraces these assumptions and explicitly examines the role of attenuated culture, as theorized by Kornhauser, is Warner (2003). Warner (2003) explicates the role of cultural disorganization in the contemporary social disorganization model, integrating aspects of both the systemic model and a cultural attenuation model. She empirically examines this model using structural equation modeling on survey data from residents in 66 neighborhoods in a Southern state. Throughout the study, Warner (2003) reinforces Kornhauser's key points regarding the definition and treatment of culture. For example, she argues that a culture is strong when similar values are not only widely shared by community members, but are also visibly present in everyday life and regularly articulated in social relationships, such as when parents or neighbors tell children it is important to stay in school or to not engage in sexually promiscuous behavior.<sup>14</sup> The diminished physical embodiment of these values, namely values such as waiting to be married to have children, staying in school, being honest in all transactions, maintaining a marriage in the face of adversity, and so on, Warner maintains, weakens the perception of widespread conventional

values. When culture is attenuated, as Kornhauser argued, it cannot provide the basis for effective community social control (p. 76).

Warner links cultural attenuation to structural conditions of communities, noting that while conventional values are pervasive across communities, community structural conditions, particularly those associated with concentrated disadvantage, are likely to decrease the extent to which residents perceive neighbors to hold conventional values—due both to limited social ties through which conventional values can be articulated and verbally reinforced as well as diminished opportunities for those values to be lived out and reinforced through their physical presence within the community. Warner suggests neighborhood culture is attenuated to the extent that residents do not perceive their neighbors to hold conventional values. Attenuated culture inhibits informal social control, which then leads to crime (pp. 79-80).

Warner's (2003) findings support these arguments. She shows that concentrated disadvantage and the level of social ties in a community affect "cultural strength," which in turn affects informal social control. Although crime is not measured in the model, Warner's findings demonstrate that informal social control is more likely to occur when culture is strong, in line with Kornhauser. She calls for further theoretical expansion of social disorganization models to include cultural disorganization, a task that she takes up in more recent work (see, e.g., Warner and Burchfield 2011).

A second way in which Kornhauser's arguments have shaped current theory and research on the role of culture in neighborhood crime studies is an explicit recognition of the linkage between structure and culture in generating crime, since "taking an exclusive structural or subcultural approach limits the ability of researchers to consider the complex, and often interacting, economic and social contexts from which violence emerges" (Bruce et al. 1998: 30). An approach that combines aspects of both structural and cultural social disorganization suggests that certain neighborhood conditions make it difficult for communities to provide informal social control because of attenuated culture.

In the current historical context, linking structure and culture to crime and delinquency is most often seen in studies of violence in inner-city, minority neighborhoods. William Julius Wilson's work on the "new urban poverty" (Small and Newman 2001: 24) provides the theoretical backdrop to much of this work. Wilson (1987) argues that, since the 1970s, structural changes in the economy, in particular the shift from manufacturing to service industries and the departure of low-skilled jobs from the urban centers, increased joblessness among African Americans in central city ghettos. Compounding this was the flight of middle-class Blacks who were able to take advantage of affirmative action and fair housing laws to relocate to higher-income urban neighborhoods and the suburbs. As working families departed and the nonworking families stayed behind, inner-city neighborhoods became mired in concentrated poverty. The result, Wilson argues, was a new "underclass" of single-parent families, welfare

dependency, joblessness, and other social pathologies including crime (see also Small and Newman 2001: 24).

Sampson and Wilson (1995) extend this argument to help explain high crime rates in inner-city, minority communities. Their basic thesis is that macro-social patterns of residential inequality give rise to the social isolation and ecological concentration of the “truly disadvantaged,” which in turn leads to structural barriers and cultural adaptations that undermine social organization and hence the control of crime (p. 38). In particular, Sampson and Wilson (1995) describe how structural changes in inner-city neighborhoods, such as those just noted, have led to poor minority neighborhoods being socially isolated from middle-class resources. They define social isolation as the “lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society” (p. 51). Although most residents in these neighborhoods accept the moral validity of middle-class values, they may be less able to live out those values due to the constraints imposed by pervasive poverty. Notably, social isolation is distinguished from other cultural arguments by virtue of its focus on adaptations to structural constraints and opportunities, rather than internalization of norms. To the extent that fewer residents in impoverished neighborhoods act out conventional values, the less these values are reinforced through observance of others’ behaviors, and the weaker they become, resulting in cultural disorganization—or the attenuation of societal cultural values (p. 49). Sampson and Wilson’s argument underscores the importance of social as well as cultural disorganization—the latter viewed as an adaptation to the former: “. . . if cultural influences exist, they vary systematically with structural features of the urban environment” (p. 41) (see also Bruce et al. 1998: 41; Sampson and Bean 2005: 22-23).

A strong link between structure and culture is also emphasized in recent work on legal cynicism. The cultural frame of legal cynicism originates, it is argued, as an adaptation to neighborhood structural conditions. In socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, individuals come to understand that the dominant societal institutions (of which the police and the justice system are emblematic) will offer them little in the way of security, either economic or personal. Self-reliance emerges as an essential adaptation to this alienation from mainstream society, especially under conditions of racial segregation, intense poverty, and limited opportunity structures (Kirk and Papachristos 2011). Sampson and Bartusch (1998) show that neighborhood variation in legal cynicism is, in fact, a product of neighborhood disadvantage.

Ethnographic studies generally support the notion that “structurally disorganized communities are conducive to the emergence of cultural value systems and attitudes that seem to legitimate, or at least provide a basis of tolerance for, crime and deviance” (Sampson and Wilson 1995: 50). Most often cited is the work of Anderson (1999), who suggests that macro-structural patterns of racial inequality, disadvantage, and limited economic opportunities foster a street culture that is conducive to violence, in large part because these conditions create a sense of

hopelessness and cynicism about societal rules and their application, thereby resulting in a “street code” that undermines mainstream conventional norms. But additional support is found in other work, such as Kubrin and Weitzer (2003b), whose study lends support to a more integrated structural-cultural perspective on violent crime in urban neighborhoods. Using data to examine the structural correlates and ecological distribution of homicide in St. Louis, Missouri, and narrative accounts of homicide incidents, they find that a certain type of homicide—what they call “cultural retaliatory homicide”—is more common in some neighborhoods than others due to the combined effects of economic disadvantage and problematic policing and of neighborhood cultural responses to these structural conditions. Problems confronting residents of these communities, they find, are often resolved informally, without calling the police, and neighborhood cultural codes support this type of problem solving, even when the “solution” involves a retaliatory killing (p. 157).

Although I have revealed just the tip of the iceberg in this discussion, it should be apparent that Kornhauser’s thinking and writing on culture and cultural disorganization has inspired important avenues of theoretical insight that exist today. As scholars continue to call for the reintroduction of culture in community-level crime studies, I expect that Kornhauser’s ideas and arguments in *Social Sources* will remain persuasive and influential.

### Notes

1. According to Kornhauser, social structure refers to the stabilization of cooperative efforts to achieve goals, by means of the differentiation of a social unit according to positions characterized by a distinct set of activities, resources, and links to other positions and collectivities. The elements of social structure are social positions (or the roles based on them) and closely related positions that cluster around some function to form collective units (p. 7).
2. Hirschi (1996) claims: “On one point, the record is clear. Kornhauser did not like the assumptions of cultural deviance theories. She considered them contrary to logic and evidence. And she said so” (pp. 254–55).
3. In particular, Kornhauser asserts that Sutherland’s cultural transmission theory does not account for the causal importance of social structure. She argues that, in Sutherland’s work, a social structure is never a structure of unequal resources; it is never a structure of communications; it is never a structure of relationships with patterned links between the units. Rather, it is a structure of values. In other words, social structure is culture (p. 202). Kornhauser contrasts this with Marx’s idea of the “working class,” which she argues is an aggregate of individuals who share similar positions *in a social structure*. Kornhauser claims that, while members of the working class may share similar orientations, the nature of that similarity lie not in subculture but in social structure. Hence, individuals who occupy similar positions (e.g., the lower class) may behave in similar ways without sharing a subculture. An important distinction then is made between classes as aggregates and classes as collectivities. For Kornhauser, only the latter are culture-bearing units (p. 209).
4. Either of the two variants of social disorganization theory, strain models or control models, may be linked to pure cultural deviance models to form “mixed models” of delinquent subculture. Like social disorganization theories, mixed models maintain

that most delinquents are selected for delinquency on the basis of experienced strain or weak controls. Like cultural deviance theories, they maintain that delinquency will not ensue for most youths, no matter how severely strained or inadequately controlled, without the endorsement of a delinquent subculture (26). As such, a mixed model explanation locates a degree of social disorganization in the larger community or society but finds order and coherence in the structure and culture of the delinquent subgroup. According to Kornhauser, Shaw and McKay were responsible for the first effort to combine social disorganization and cultural deviance theories in a model of delinquent subculture (p. 21). She describes in great detail (pp. 62–69) how they vacillated between developing a pure control model and incorporating elements of a cultural deviance model into their theory—something noted by other scholars (Bursik 1988; Warner 2003)—eventually joining the two to form the first mixed model of delinquent subculture. Naturally, Kornhauser rejected the mixed-model approach, asserting that it is “untenable” (p. 69).

5. Hirschi (1969: 198) similarly argued “normlessness, and not a system of norms, is at the root of nonnormative behavior.”
6. In contrast with cultural deviance theory, which posits that value diversity occurs in modern societies that are highly stratified, Kornhauser insists that the processes at work in modern society, in fact, undermine subcultures rather than encourage their development (p. 42). The potential of unprecedented differentiation for producing and sustaining subcultures is more than counteracted, Kornhauser argues, by the equally unprecedented centralization of economic and political institutions. Incorporation into nationwide labor and consumer markets and national electorate destroys the social insulation required for the sustenance of subcultures with truly distinctive values. Rather, it provides the structural base for a single, common culture.
7. Kornhauser argued that delinquents themselves acknowledge the moral validity of the very laws they violate (p. 31). See also Hirschi (1969).
8. Kornhauser also defines values of health, life, economic sufficiency, education, and family stability, among others, as reflecting universal human needs, which are common to all members of society (p. 63).
9. Kornhauser’s theoretical model is discussed on pages 69–82 and illustrated in Table 1 on page 73.
10. Warner (2003: 75) nicely summarizes Kornhauser’s argument, identifying the critical role that cultural disorganization occupies: “In sum, advancing a cultural attenuation or cultural disorganization approach, Kornhauser (1978) argues that the cultural source of community-level crime rates is not in competing value systems that motivate residents toward criminal offending, but rather in the variable strength of conventional values and their consequential ability to provide informal social control. She argues that the strength of the normative culture varies across communities, and that weakened or attenuated culture cannot provide effective social control. This approach to culture places the role of values more centrally within a social control model, emphasizing the role of a weakened normative or conventional culture on informal social control.”
11. Kornhauser does not completely deny the relevance of delinquent companions vis-à-vis cultural deviance theory. Indeed, although Kornhauser insists that youth preselected for delinquency on the basis of weak controls become delinquent *with* our *without* the influence of delinquent companions, she also suggests that companionship in delinquency explains additional variance in delinquency, primarily due to collective behavior and primary group processes that reinforce preexisting tendencies and generate additional enthusiasm by reducing fear and possibly shame (p. 71).

12. Kubrin and Weitzer (2003b: 175) similarly describe a “policing vacuum,” where residents of extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods tend to believe that police services are inadequate.
13. For an excellent discussion on differences between “culture as values” and “culture in action” perspectives, see Sampson and Bean (2005: 23–29).
14. Notably, with respect to legal cynicism, Kirk and Papachristos (2011: 1192) similarly suggest that perceptions of the law are augmented and solidified through communication and social interaction among neighborhood residents.

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