

**ARTICLE**

# The unstudied reference neighborhood: Towards a critical theory of empirical neighborhood studies

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**Abstract**

Ethnographic and quantitative studies of urban neighborhoods have played an essential role in contrasting deeply held stereotypes, highlighting systemic injustices, and shaping federal urban policy. However, the majority of these studies focus on a small slice of the most marginalized urban neighborhoods, leaving much unknown about the vast majority of communities and how to address persisting inequality. This piece examines these empirical and theoretical shortcomings and proposes integrating critical theory into empirical studies of neighborhoods. This new theoretical approach has implications not only for how scholars conduct their research but also for how this research is applied in public policy. Suggestions for future studies and policy are discussed.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Tracing back to the late 19th century, neighborhood studies have played a pivotal role in shaping national policies and the public's perceptions of the city (Madden, 2014; Sampson, 2012; Wacquant, 2002). In 1899, Du Bois' mixed-methods examination of Philadelphia's seventh ward brought attention to the positive and negative implications of racial segregation. Gans' (1965) examination of Boston's urban renewal problematized the government's approach to so-called urban slums. Wilson's (1987) sociohistorical account of inner-city marginalized communities became the catalyst for the deconcentration of federally subsidized housing units. Most recently, Desmond's (2016) ethnographic depiction of evictions and the lack of affordable housing in Milwaukee was publically recommended by Senator Sherrod Brown to be a policy guide for Secretary Benjamin S. Carson as incoming director of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These historical and contemporary academic examinations of urban communities have provided vivid portraits of life in urban America, challenging common stereotypes, highlighting systemic injustices, and shaping federal urban policy (Rios, 2011; Young, 2008). However, with few exceptions, neighborhood studies only examine a small slice of urban neighborhoods (Haymes, 1995; Irby, 2015; Rios, 2015). This leaves much unknown about the vast majority of communities and curtails the effectiveness of interventions attempting to reduce neighborhood inequality.

In this article, I provide an overview of both qualitative and quantitative studies of neighborhoods, highlighting their strengths and exposing gaps in the literature. I then propose how critical theory can be incorporated into the empirical study of neighborhoods to address shortcomings in the research. I conclude by discussing how this alternative theoretical approach can alter how social policies aimed at reducing inequality are constructed and implemented.

## 2 | AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD STUDIES LITERATURE

From the inauguration of sociology as a field, qualitative expositions of urban neighborhoods have played a vital role in the discipline's understandings of social interactions (e.g., Simmel, 1903), social structure (e.g., Park & Burgess, 1967, 1925), and social inequality (e.g., Du Bois, 1996). This tradition has continued throughout the last century, with scholars investigating Jewish and Gentile "ghettos" (Wirth, 1928), Italian "slums" (Gans, 1965; Suttles, 1968), Puerto Rican communities (Bourgois, 1995; Small, 2004), and majority Black neighborhoods (Anderson, 1990; Duck, 2015; Duneier, 1999; Freeman, 2006; Goffman, 2014; Pattillo, 2007; Taylor, 2002; Venkatesh, 2008; Wacquant, 2004; Wilson, 1987). These ethnographies have highlighted the experiences of urban dwellers as they interact with their neighbors (Anderson, 1990; Freeman, 2006; Pattillo, 2007; Taylor, 2002; Wacquant, 2004), engage with the political system (Gans, 1965; Small, 2004), participate in the underground economy (Bourgois, 1995; Duck, 2015; Duneier, 1999; Venkatesh, 2008), experience the effects of incarceration and violence (Fader, 2013; Goffman, 2014; Miller, 2008; Rios, 2011), and struggle for housing (Desmond, 2016).

These monographs are some of the most widely read sociological works and have long played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of and policy interventions for marginalized communities (Rios, 2011; Wacquant, 2002; Young, 2008). However, after the exodus of the White middle class from the urban core, ethnographic and media portrayals became one of the only ways White Americans were exposed to the joys and struggles of urban life (Anderson, 2012; Young, 2008). Instead of providing rigorous analyses, these ethnographies were often targeted at an uninformed audience and merely described what was virtually common sense for those living in urban neighborhoods (e.g., Duneier, 1992; Duneier, 1999; Goffman, 2014; Newman, 1999; Venkatesh, 2008). Moreover, these ethnographers depicted urban, marginalized communities as exotic and dangerous, aggrandizing their own bravery as researchers, which in turn perpetuated the notion that these communities require salvation or civilization and implicitly differentiated these neighborhoods from an unspecified "normal" neighborhood (Hoang, 2015; Rios, 2011; Small, 2015). As previous scholars have noted, the exotification of marginalized neighborhoods has compounding effects on these communities and how their residents view themselves and are viewed by others (Hoang, 2015; Rios, 2011; Small, 2015). Central to this exotification is the implicit comparison to unspecified normal neighborhoods.

Unlike quantitative research which requires variation in the dependent variable, ethnographic methodology entails in-depth examinations of one or sometimes a few cases (Small, 2009). Yet to draw theoretical conclusions, ethnographers pull on previous empirical research to situate their particular case. In neighborhood studies, scholars often compare their particular case to a presumed "normal" White middle-class neighborhood. However, exemplifying studies of racial inequality more generally (Daniels & Schulz, 2006), White middle-class neighborhoods are rarely studied in the literature (Haymes, 1995; Irby, 2015; Rios, 2015; Wacquant, 2002). The lack of empirical observations in White middle-class communities has resulted in scholars basing their comparisons and theoretical conclusions on their own personal assumptions instead of verifiable data (Young, 2008). Venkatesh (2006), for example, contrasts urban communities like the one he is studying to an unspecified suburban community.

*Even in a depleted ghetto, there will be collective actors in place who attend to neighborhood affairs [...] their time and energy are taken up by matters that do not always make it onto the radar of the wider world. They may be working in the immediate present to make sure that children can walk safely on the sidewalk or through the park to enter their organization. [...] Unlike their suburban counterparts who are more likely to have decent city services and far fewer shady types roaming about, they do not have the time to luxuriate and plan for the future. (p. 385)*

To be sure, structural conditions in some suburban neighborhoods stand in stark contrast to those in many marginalized urban communities. Yet Venkatesh provides no empirical evidence—from his own observations or the empirical research of others—that collective actors in suburban communities spend less time on secondary tasks or have superior city services. This lack of specificity constrains Venkatesh's ability to identify the exact differences between the two areas. More importantly, it presumes the reader has a shared knowledge and familiarity with suburban neighborhoods that deem explaining them unnecessary. This assumption reifies the normality and superiority of White middle-class space.

Similarly, Goffman (2014) writes, "In ghettoized communities there has long been distrust between men and women, and also between people living respectably and those living on the edge" (p. 104). By identifying these issues of mistrust as specific to ghettoized communities, Goffman implies that these same issues of mistrust do not exist in the unspecified White middle-class reference neighborhood. However, Goffman does not provide empirical evidence that this is the case. Utilizing an unspecified comparison community allows her to ignore research demonstrating changing levels of trust in all communities (e.g., Wellman, 1979) and the fact that all neighborhoods have law-abiding citizens as well as residents who have engaged in criminal behavior, including but not limited to illicit drug use, domestic violence, and white collar crimes. Highlighting perceived differences without systematic evidence serves to differentiate the "ghetto" as other and not "normal."

Likewise, Anderson (1999) also implicitly differentiates behavior he observes in one inner-city neighborhood to an unspoken reference community.

*This reality of inner-city life is absorbed largely on the streets. [...] [W]ithout much adult supervision, children from street-oriented families gravitate to the streets, where they must be ready to "hang," to socialize competitively with peers. These children have a great deal of latitude and are allowed to rip and run up and down the streets. They often come home from school, put their books down, and go right back out the door. On school nights many eight- and nine-year-olds remain out until nine or ten o'clock (teenagers may come home whenever they want to). (p. 70)*

Anderson goes on to further problematize this behavior, insinuating that the lack of supervision leads to deviant and criminal behavior. In doing so, Anderson implicitly juxtaposes these children with peer groups in other communities. However, he fails to acknowledge that his image of communal free play among neighborhood children is comparable to idealized 1950s Middle America communities. Instead, he problematizes this behavior by suggesting that the unsupervised children are forsaking their studies, family time, and sleep to gain "street knowledge," which he theorizes is responsible for the criminal behavior in the neighborhood.

These three examples, Venkatesh, Goffman, and Anderson, are emblematic of the majority of urban ethnographies in their tendency to explicitly and implicitly compare observations in one marginalized neighborhood to a presumed "normal" community. The reoccurring references to presumed normal neighborhoods reinforces the notion that impoverished and marginalized communities are distinct and exist in stark juxtaposition to all other communities. In directing the public's gaze to these communities alone, the scholarship identifies these communities as the problem that needs fixing.

Building off these influential qualitative studies, quantitative scholars have scoped outward and identified the broader relationships between residential neighborhoods and residents' well-being. Specifically, scholars have sought to demonstrate that disadvantaged neighborhoods have detrimental effects on residents' educational attainment (Brattbakk & Wessel, 2013; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Casciano & Massey, 2012; Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007; Turley, 2003; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011), employment opportunities (Chetty, Hendren, & Katz, 2016; Howell, 2018; Massey, Albright, Casciano, Derickson, & Kinsey, 2013; Sharkey, 2013), civic engagement (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Sampson, 2012), and physical and mental health (Elliott et al., 2006; LeClere, Rogers, & Peters, 1997; Martens et al., 2014; Nkansah-Amankra, 2010; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011). To this end, scholars compare residents who live in marginalized neighborhoods to those who do not.

However, much like their qualitative counterparts, quantitative scholars only pull on empirical evidence from disadvantaged communities when providing theoretical rationales for their observed correlations. This reinforces the notion that disadvantaged neighborhoods are the other while White middle-class neighborhoods are the norm. For example, in Wodtke et al.'s (2011) widely cited *American Sociological Review* article, the authors exclusively discuss marginalized communities when theorizing the reasons why a correlation between neighborhood characteristics and educational attainment exists. They state the following:

*Social isolation theories argue that residents of poor neighborhoods are isolated from social networks and institutions that provide access to job information and important links to mainstream culture. As a result, adults in such neighborhoods fail to provide role models that encourage success in school for local children (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Wilson, 1987, Wilson, 1996). [...] Neighborhood poverty is linked to a breakdown of mutual trust among resident adults, which hampers their ability to monitor and control youth behavior (Sampson 2001). Lacking collective supervision, children in disadvantaged neighborhoods may be more likely to engage in deviant behaviors that disrupt progression through school (Browning, Buntington, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Browning, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). [...] The cumulative risk of victimization necessarily increases with one's duration of residence in high-crime neighborhoods, and harmful biological processes resulting from stress require sustained exposure. (pp. 715–716)*

In each of these sentences, the authors contrast disadvantaged neighborhoods to an unspecified mainstream culture. However, none of their citations are empirical examinations of “mainstream” communities. Thus, like their qualitative counterparts, Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert rely on assumptions about the role models, mutual trust, and level of risk in White middle-class neighborhoods to assert marginalized communities are both unique and inferior.

Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert are not alone in their use of White middle-class neighborhoods as their implicit reference category. In fact, of the 197 articles published on neighborhood effects from 1990 to 2015 in the premier urban sociology journals, no articles theoretically discussed “mainstream” or privileged communities.<sup>1</sup> The articles vary in the theoretical mechanisms, and the language they use to distinguish marginalized and dominant communities, but they all assume any observed effects were due to what was lacking or different in marginalized neighborhoods instead of considering that the observed correlations could be due to abnormalities in the unstudied and unspecified reference communities—White middle-class neighborhoods.

In short, both qualitative and quantitative studies focus on the social norms, networks, expectations, and institutional resources observed in disadvantaged neighborhoods. They explicitly and implicitly compare these observations to mainstream communities without providing empirical evidence of the social norms, networks, expectations, and institutional resources in their unspecified reference neighborhoods. This gap in the literature is an avenue for future research, yet it is also more than that. It speaks to a theoretical and methodological oversight that has biased urban sociology's conclusions. By not empirically investigating “mainstream,” “average,” White middle-class neighborhoods, scholars have limited their ability to illuminate how systemic structures perpetuate inequality. In fact, they make much of the processes that maintain neighborhood inequity invisible by not illuminating how these mechanisms work in non-disadvantaged spaces (Daniels & Schulz, 2006). I propose the application of critical theory to empirical neighborhood studies can begin to address these theoretical shortcomings.

### 3 | INCORPORATING CRITICAL THEORY IN EMPIRICAL NEIGHBORHOOD STUDIES

To build the case for the application of critical theory in empirical neighborhood studies, I begin with an overview of critical theory and discuss how critical theory has been incorporated into US urban studies, applied in empirical studies of racial inequality, and how it could be applied to empirical research on neighborhoods.

### 3.1 | An overview of critical theory

Critical theory traces its roots to a loose alliance of 1920s German scholars, often referred to as the Frankfurt School, who were attempting to explain why capitalism remained dominant despite Marx's prediction of its demise (Agger, 1991; Brenner, 2009). Like Marx, these scholars argued that capitalism centralized the production of wealth at the expense of the proletariat, perpetuating inequality. However, unlike Marx, they argued that as capitalism evolved, it increased worker's false consciousness instead of inspiring a unified revolt (Agger, 1991). Critical theorists saw Marx's underestimation of workers' false consciousness as an example of the shortcomings of positivism. In fact, they argued that positivism within the social sciences was increasing false consciousness and enabling the capitalist agenda (Peet, 1977). They proposed an alternative approach based on four key precepts.

First, critical theory is *theory*. The critical theorists wanted their work to be unapologetically abstract. Second, critical theory is *reflexive*, continually analyzing the context and propositions of the theory itself. Third, critical theory is *critical*, illuminating how the interests of the capitalists are diametrically opposed to the proletariat. Finally, critical theory is *liberating*, believing in and pointing to the possibility of liberation and change (Brenner, 2009). Although theoretically distinctive, these four tenets are also broad, allowing scholars to apply them to a wide range of disciplines and topics, including urban studies.

### 3.2 | The application of critical theory in urban studies

The social and political unrest of the 1960s illuminated contradictions embedded in capitalism and served as a catalyst for urban social scientists to incorporate critical theory in their studies (Peet, 1977). This shift was most pronounced in radical geography with the work of Harvey (1972), who argued scholars should move away from studying the conditions of "ghettos" and instead critique the analytic constructs of the city itself. Specifically, Harvey argued scholars should examine how city constructs serve the capitalists class and perpetuate inequality (Peet, 1977). Implementing his suggestions, several scholars have discussed the false dichotomy between city and "nature." These scholars contend treating city and nature as antithetical to one another has escalated divides between suburban and urban space exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequality (Angelo, 2017; Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015; Holifield, 2009; Lawhon, Ernstson, & Silver, 2014; Loughran, 2016; Loughran, 2018; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018).

A similar argument was made a decade later in urban sociology, when Saunders (1986) posited that the city was not an ecologically definable phenomena but a social creation whose production had important implications on residents and global capitalism. Applying this larger critique regarding the construction of cities to neighborhoods, Madden (2014) argued that like nation states, neighborhoods have been promoted as an inevitable, even natural, boundary, delineating clearly defined areas with shared culture. However, Madden noted that the very creation of neighborhoods is a continuous political process that has ongoing implications for structural inequities. Irby (2015) expanded upon this notion, asserting that unlike gender scholars, who critique patriarchy, and race scholars, who interrogate White privilege, urban sociologists take neighborhoods and their corresponding inequalities for granted instead of deconstructing their very existence.

These critiques and the application of critical theory in urban studies more generally have prompted new important questions and broadened how scholars conceptualize the promises and perils of urban life, yet these theoretical discussions have not altered how empirical neighborhood studies are conducted or discussed. This is not surprising. Critical theory is explicitly skeptical of positivism and its corresponding empirical research methods (Brenner, 2009; Carbadó & Roithmayr, 2014). Thus, critical urban scholars tend to produce rigorous theoretical pieces—not empirical studies. At the same time, empirical methodologies—especially demography—are products of a White patriarchal profession, and thus, their operationalization of variables and interpretations of results tend to reflect and reinforce unequal social structures (Loughran, 2015; Peet, 1977; Zuberi, 2003; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Fortunately, this does not mean the incorporation of critical theory into empirical neighborhoods studies is impossible.

Despite resistance, other empirical fields such as race scholarship have successfully applied the principles of critical theory in their empirical studies. I now turn to a discussion of how race scholarship has incorporated critical theory into empirical studies to illuminate what neighborhood studies might learn from their example.

### 3.3 | Applying critical theory in empirical fields

Much like critical theory more broadly, initially critical race theory was very skeptical of empirical research, arguing that positivistic research use of racial categories in their statistical models reified racial hierarchies (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; García, Gee, & Jones, 2016). Additionally, they asserted that sociology's and anthropology's focus on individual-level analysis as well as the disproportionate focus on marginalized racial groups curtailed scholars' ability to illuminate the structural conditions perpetuating inequality. That is, using individuals as the primary unit of analysis perpetuated the false conception that racism was the product of individual prejudices instead of structural conditions. Furthermore, the attention on people of color as the "problem" meant White communities were largely left off the hook for their role in perpetrating racial inequality (Daniels & Schulz, 2006). Thus, while critical race theorists developed rigorous theoretical explanations of the inseparable connection between White privilege and the oppression of people of color (García et al., 2016), they remained skeptical of empirical research and its ability to contribute to analyses of structural inequality.

Critical race scholars began creatively reshaping empirical methodologies by shifting away from studying racism as an individual phenomenon measured by stated beliefs to examining how implicit racial biases reinforce structural inequality (e.g., Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Howell & Emerson, 2018; Howell & Korver-Glenn, 2018; Korver-Glenn, 2018; Krysan, Couper, Farley, & Forman, 2009; Krysan, Farley, & Couper, 2008; Pager, 2003; Royster, 2003). Likewise, scholars problematized the presumption of Whiteness as the norm (McKee, 1993; Seamster, 2015; Turner, 1978; Winant, 2007). Researchers pointed out that Whiteness was the default reference category in quantitative studies and rarely investigated in qualitative studies (since scholars assumed it did not need explaining) (Daniels & Schulz, 2006; Rios, 2015). They began to study White culture and norms, which challenged the privileged position of Whiteness. These studies highlight the pervasive and structural nature of racial inequality and illuminate how "fixing" the predicament of people of color requires disturbing the implicit and explicit privileges of Whiteness (Obasogie, 2013).

Incorporating critical race theory into sociological empirical studies is still a work in progress, but lessons can be learned from the work that has been done. First, empirical critical studies have demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the social construction of research methodologies by explicitly stating the implicit reference group and conducting empirical studies investigating the processes that perpetuate that group's place in the racial hierarchy (Daniels & Schulz, 2006; Obasogie, 2013; Rios, 2015; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Zuberi, 2003). In doing so, the presumed normality of the reference racial group—Whites—is questioned and their privileged status problematized. Second, though related to the first, empirical critical race studies have highlighted the inseparable connection between advantage and disadvantage. In other words, Whiteness is not neutral. Racialized systems of oppression are maintained through acts of domination (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Daniels & Schulz, 2006; Feagin, 2010; Feagin, 2013; Hughey, 2010). Thus, understanding oppression requires examining domination. Utilizing the example of critical race theory, I propose how critical theory can be applied in empirical studies of neighborhoods.

### 3.4 | Cultivating critical theory in empirical neighborhood scholarship

Applying critical theory to the study of neighborhoods requires reflexive assessment of the historical construction of our methodology and theoretical propositions. Contemporary research on neighborhoods still relies heavily on the theoretical propositions set out by the Chicago School in the 1920s (Loughran, 2015); specifically, Park and Burgess' (1925) presumption that neighborhoods are clearly defined, monolithic communities that are hierarchical by nature

(Irby, 2015; Madden, 2014). In their estimation, neighborhoods and their stark inequalities did not have lasting influences on residents' well-being or life chances. Instead, migrants first settled into the least desirable neighborhoods associated with their own cultural affinity group and quickly moved into more desirable neighborhoods as they assimilated into city life and became upwardly economically mobile.

Despite a lack of empirical evidence supporting their claims, Park and Burgess' theories became and remained the predominant theoretical explanation of neighborhood diversity and inequality for much of the 20th century. This was the case despite the empirical evidence supporting Du Bois' (1899) theoretical assertions regarding how race was a strong determinant of residential location—even for affluent residents—and how residential neighborhoods had lasting effects on residents' outcomes (Loughran, 2015). Contemporary research has repeatedly affirmed Du Bois' notion that racialized processes shape access to residential neighborhoods (Gotham, 2002; Jackson, 1985; Massey & Denton, 1993; Pattillo, 2007) and these communities have profound impacts on residents' well-being (Chetty et al., 2016; Howell, 2018; Martens et al., 2014; Massey et al., 2013; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013; Wodtke et al., 2011). Yet as a whole, the field still conceptualizes Du Bois' assertions as helping contextualize the Black experience and not as a theoretical framework in its own right that provides insights into all US neighborhoods (Loughran, 2015). Because of this, scholars still default to the Chicago School's assumption that neighborhoods exist on a hierarchy from "good" to "bad."

In fact, Chetty et al.'s (2016) recent study, which received widespread attention in the news media, is even entitled, "The Effects of Exposure to *Better* Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment" [italics added]. Their description of White middle-class neighborhoods as "better" without accompanying caveats reflects the ongoing perception that neighborhoods are inherently hierarchical. Likewise, in Sampson's (2012) monumental book, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, he states

*One morning a few years ago I stepped outside my home only to notice a fresh swath of painted graffiti [...] My first reaction was anger and, I admit, an almost instantaneous fear that my wife and I had bought in the "wrong" neighborhood, one about to decline. But realizing that I lived in a stable, well-off neighborhood despite its dense urban character and proximity to a park and public transit line, I relaxed. I talked with authorities about the defacement as did others and the graffiti was cleaned up. (p. 450)*

Although Sampson uses this personal anecdote to illuminate an important point regarding the emotional ramifications of disorder, his language reflects the prevalent and underlying assumption in the literature that certain communities are universally more desirable while others are poor locations which should be avoided. These are just two examples, but they represent the predominant theoretical assertion across the field that neighborhood hierarchy is inevitable and even natural. This assumption appears in scholars' discourse as well as their theoretical and methodological decisions.

Critical reflexivity will require continuously examining how this presumed hierarchy is influencing researchers' choices throughout the research process. Whether studying impoverished Black communities in Chicago, gayborhoods in Berlin, or gated communities in Johannesburg, scholars should ask themselves which neighborhoods are their assumed comparisons. Reference neighborhoods will shift from study to study depending on the questions being asked; nevertheless, scholars need to be transparent about these comparisons and ensure their comparisons are between empirical studies and not colloquial assumptions. Deliberating, articulating, and empirically examining our reference neighborhoods will nuance our assumptions about which neighborhoods are "better" or "worse." Likewise, quantitative studies should incorporate research on privileged and marginalized communities to theoretically distinguish which specific neighborhood conditions shape particular outcomes.

In addition to this methodological and theoretical reflexivity, incorporating critical theory into empirical studies of neighborhoods requires recognizing the inseparable connection between privileged and marginalized areas. Scholarship repeatedly illuminates how historical and contemporary policies and preferences create neighborhood inequalities (e.g., Gotham, 2002; Jackson, 1985; Massey & Denton, 1993; Pattillo, 2007), but when studying neighborhood effects, scholars focus on what is lacking in marginalized communities. Solely focusing on the problems

of impoverished communities inadvertently gives the impression that these difficulties can be addressed without changing advantaged communities or the social structures that deem some neighborhoods advantaged and others disadvantaged. Cultivating critical theory within empirical neighborhood studies will entail examining the inextricably linked fate of affluent and poor communities and illuminating the social structures that perpetuate neighborhood inequality.

## 4 | MOVING OUT OF THE IVORY TOWER AND INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

As I have outlined above, applying critical theory in empirical studies of neighborhoods could address the theoretical and methodological shortcomings in the literature, yet the importance of cultivating critical theory among empirical neighborhood scholars reaches beyond the academy. Empirical urban research plays a critical role in the framing of social problems and how policy makers and the wider public attempt to address these issues (Madden, 2014; Rios, 2011; Sampson, 2012; Wacquant, 2002; Young, 2008). This is not to say every single empirical study has direct implications on policy or local interventions in neighborhoods, but their collective discussion has shaped and continues to shape how nonprofit and governmental organizations conceptualize “the problem,” which in turn shapes their corresponding interventions (Rios, 2011; Young, 2008).

Defining the problem is one of the most influential and persistent effects academic work has on real-world implications. As mentioned in the introduction, Wilson's (1987) description of the detrimental effects of concentrated poverty reframed not only the academic discussion but also how policy makers conceptualized the role of urban communities in perpetuating generational poverty. Framing the problem as a concentration of poverty served as a catalyst for the deconcentration of public housing and the housing voucher program. More recently, Desmond's (2016) Pulitzer Prize-winning examination of evictions highlighted evictions as a national housing crisis. Defining evictions as a critical problem in cities inspired senators and the public to consider new interventions aimed at decreasing evictions and their detrimental effects.

In short, what empirical research identifies as a social problem has far-reaching implications in the real world. Thus, altering how researchers conceptualize urban inequalities could have ripple effects on policy and nonprofit organizations. To illustrate the possible implications of this shift in perspective, I outline how a critical perspective would alter the problem of unequal neighborhood resources and how this might transform proposed interventions.

### 4.1 | A critical perspective on neighborhood resources and its possible implications

As widely noted in the literature, neighborhoods vary in their level of institutional resources, and this inequality perpetuates the transmission of socioeconomic status across generations (Chetty et al., 2016; Freeman, 2006; Kimbro, Denney, & Panchang, 2012; Massey, Condran, & Denton, 1987; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013; Wilson, 1987). This research has implicitly and explicitly assumed that the amount of resources in “mainstream” communities is normal and failed to examine the role these communities play in perpetuating the observed inequalities. As a consequence, these scholars have framed neighborhood inequality as the *lack* of resources in marginalized neighborhoods (e.g., Chetty et al., 2016; Massey et al., 2013; Wilson, 1987; Wodtke et al., 2011). In turn, policy interventions have primarily been focused on enhancing resources in specific marginalized communities or moving residents out of impoverished neighborhoods.

For instance, local communities, development corporations, and advocacy organizations have primarily attempted to address the perceived problem of marginalized neighborhoods lacking resources by applying for grants through HUD or nonprofit corporations (e.g., Local Initiatives Support Corporation [LISC]) to improve the infrastructure, schools, and commerce in their own neighborhoods. These targeted grants make important advances in their local communities; however, this approach does not address the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate the



observed neighborhood inequalities. Likewise, programs like Moving to Opportunity and Section 8 vouchers attempt to relocate individual residents in marginalized communities to neighborhoods with more resources. However, as research has shown, this does not address the underlying mechanisms that lead residents to locate in these neighborhoods or the implications on residents left behind in neighborhoods of increasing poverty and disinvestment (Massey et al., 2013; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013).

Reframed from a critical perspective, the problem of neighborhood inequality has less to do with what is *lacking* in marginalized neighborhoods and more to do with the distribution of city, state, and federal funds. When neighborhood hierarchies are no longer taken as a given, the infrastructural and educational inequalities across communities becomes deeply problematic. Additionally, it becomes clear that addressing this inequality will require disturbing current channels of funding and redistributing these funds more equitably. This then opens new creative possibilities for policy change. For example, federal money that is currently used to target individual neighborhoods could be awarded to city and state governments who choose to restructure their tax systems in ways that would promote long-lasting equity across communities.

This hypothetical example is just that. I do not posit it as the solution for all neighborhood inequalities, but I am arguing that critical theory, when applied to empirical problems, not only transforms academic investigations but can also fundamentally shift how the public conceptualizes urban inequities and how they decide to address them. Theory and policy are inseparably linked (Storper & Manville, 2006), and urban sociologists need to recognize how our theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches have shaped not only our studies but also our very cities. It is time to problematize our assumptions, incorporate studies of middle-class White neighborhoods, and by doing so cultivate just and livable cities for all.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> In order to ensure I was not missing studies that do focus on privileged communities, I identified all articles published in *American Sociology Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Urban Studies*, *Cities*, *International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning*, *City: Analysis of Urban Trends*, *Culture Theory, Policy, Action, City and Community*, *Urban Affairs Review*, and *Journal of Urban Affairs* which mention the word “neighborhood” in their abstract ( $n = 1,158$ ). I then identified the 197 pieces that examine how neighborhoods affect residents and coded their theoretical explanations.

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