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An Examination of Social Disorganization and Pluralistic Neighborhood Theories with Rural Mothers and Their Adolescents

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Abstract

Neighborhoods matter for youth; yet, most literature focuses on neighborhood deficits rather than strengths. To understand how best to capture neighborhoods, this study used census- and perception-based measures of neighborhood characteristics as suggested by social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theories, respectively, to determine the association between structural characteristics and perceptions of positive and negative neighborhood characteristics. The ethnically diverse (59% White and 34% African American) sample (N = 1414) consisted of early adolescents (53% female) and their mothers. We found that participants perceived distinct positive and negative neighborhood characteristics. For adolescents and mothers, neighborhood structural characteristics were positively associated with risk perceptions (e.g., physical and social disorder) but differently associated with positive neighborhood characteristics. In addition, participants perceived their neighborhoods differently (e.g., adolescents perceived less informal social control but more cohesion than their mothers). We discuss the importance of the neighborhood context, particularly positive neighborhood characteristics, for rural families.

Keywords

Rural neighborhoods; positive and negative perceptions; structural disadvantage; early adolescents

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Both research and theory suggest that neighborhoods are a distal context that has consequences for youth development (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). The neighborhood literature has burgeoned over the past two decades, with studies most often focusing on urban youth and relying on deficit models, such as social disorganization theory, that emphasize how neighborhood disadvantage, characterized by census-based characteristics, may lead to adolescents' maladaptive behavior through weakened social ties and community norms. Few studies are guided by strengths-based models, such as pluralistic neighborhood theory, that focus on how individuals experience living in a neighborhood and that also allow for the possibility that neighborhood disadvantage may not inevitably lead to weakening of the social fabric. Instead, individuals may perceive positive neighborhood attributes that exist even in the face of neighborhood disadvantage. Application of both theories could enhance understanding of neighborhood contexts.

The present study examines rural neighborhoods from the dual perspectives of social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theories by examining both census and perception-based measures of neighborhood characteristics and by comparing relationships among these characteristics for both youth and their mothers. Specifically, from the standpoint of social disorganization theory, we examine whether census measures of neighborhood disadvantage are positively related to adolescent and mother's perceptions of neighborhood risk and negatively related to their perceptions of neighborhood informal social control and neighborhood social cohesion and trust, or, from the standpoint of pluralistic neighborhood theory, whether the measures of disadvantage are unrelated to the measures of informal social control and social cohesion. Also, following from pluralistic neighborhood theory's emphasis on lived experience, we examine the extent to which adolescents and their mothers view their neighborhoods differently from each other. Our overall purpose is to determine whether tenets of pluralistic neighborhood theory are supported because of the potential implications for how neighborhood context should be conceptualized and measured in research examining how the neighborhood context shapes adolescent development. We also add to the literature on neighborhood context by examining rural neighborhoods.

Social Disorganization Theory

Deficit models of neighborhood life pervade the literature. The most prominent theory, social disorganization, asserts that neighborhood structural factors thwart the likelihood that individuals will develop strong community ties and common norms (Shaw & McKay, 1942, Osgood & Chambers, 2000, Sampson, 2001). Neighborhood social disorganization is operationalized using a multi-trait approach provided by census-level data using such indicators as residential instability, poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and single parent households. Girded in examining the association between delinquency and community/neighborhood characteristics, social disorganization theorists assumed that distressed neighborhoods had more problems due to the lack of shared values and beliefs. The premise of this sociological theory is that the socioeconomic conditions of the neighborhood (i.e., poverty) will influence individual experiences in the neighborhood by eroding the social fabric. Specifically, the claim is that in neighborhoods characterized as "disorganized," residents' attempts at social cohesion and trust will not be realized due to a lack of consensus

about community norms and values. The primary focus of the theory is on the structural patterns of the neighborhood (i.e., census-level characteristics), rather than the individuals' perceptions or descriptions of the neighborhood.

Wilson (1987) expanded this focus on macrosystem level (i.e., census) factors to explain the accumulation of disadvantage that results in neighborhoods devoid of social resources and entrenched with social isolation. Wilson (1987) highlighted the importance of place with *concentrated effects* to describe the additional disadvantage poor people face beyond individual differences and family systems. Although Wilson's work almost exclusively focuses on urban, inner-city neighborhoods, the theory that individuals living in such places experience greater social capital and resource constraints (i.e., less strengths) due to limited employment opportunities, increased poverty, and social isolation (Wilson, 1987; 1993) may be equally applied to rural areas (Osgood & Chambers, 2000). Such deficit orientations allow for limited variability in social processes at the neighborhood level (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) and suggest that socially disorganized neighborhoods will inevitably have low levels of cohesion. The implication is that neighborhood deficits are inversely related to neighborhood strengths (Cantillon, 2006).

Following the premise that macrosystem indicators influence individuals' neighborhood experiences, one would expect to see associations between census-level neighborhood characteristics and individuals' neighborhood perceptions (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Therefore, census-based indicators of neighborhood disadvantage would be positively associated with individuals' neighborhood risk perceptions and negatively associated with perceptions of neighborhood cohesion and other positive social processes. Parents' and adolescents' reports of neighborhood characteristics are differentially associated with census-derived structural characteristics (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Plunkett, Abarca-Mortensen, Behnke, & Sands, 2007), suggesting the importance of individuals' perceptions of and experiences in the neighborhood (Aber & Nieto, 2000). In urban samples, census characteristics (e.g., poverty and education level) were associated with mothers' and adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood risk (i.e., socioeconomic conditions such as unemployment and welfare receipt) (Plunkett et al., 2007) but not with adolescents' perceptions of positive characteristics (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996). With a rural sample of African American families, Brody et al. (2001) found that both youths' appraisals of neighborhood risk (i.e., community deviance) and strengths (i.e., collective socialization) were significantly associated with community disadvantage (i.e., census-based characteristics), such that disadvantage was positively related to perceptions of risk and negatively related to perceptions of strength. For caregivers, there was no association between community disadvantage and collective socialization (i.e., positive neighborhood characteristic), highlighting the possibility that neighborhood deficits may be unrelated to neighborhood strengths.

Pluralistic Neighborhood Theory

Despite potential neighborhood risks, neighborhoods may have strengths that are protective despite sub-optimal characteristics. Pluralistic neighborhood theory (Aber and Nieto, 2000) argues that "structurally disadvantaged" neighborhoods have inherent strengths to sustain

and cultivate positive youth development, suggesting that positive and negative neighborhood characteristics may be distinct entities. Neighborhood strengths may be thought of as social resources (i.e., *cohesion and trust* or *informal social control*, the monitoring of youth behavior) that create opportunities for residents. Further, the assertion that neighborhood strengths may exist along side neighborhood deficits allows for the possibility that positive and negative neighborhood characteristics may be unrelated. In support of this possibility, Seidman et al. (1998) used cluster analysis to show that urban adolescents' perceptions of neighborhood risk (i.e., poverty-related hassles) did not co-occur with perceptions of neighborhood strengths (i.e., cohesion). This suggests that despite socioeconomic deprivation and other neighborhood risks in neighborhoods, positive social processes may thrive.

In addition to suggesting that positive and negative neighborhood characteristics are orthogonal constructs, pluralistic neighborhood theory asserts that individuals' perceptions of their neighborhoods are as important as objective appraisals of the neighborhood, and that these perceptions may vary by individual, suggesting that adolescents and adults may view their neighborhoods differently. Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff (1999) showed (for adults) that there was significant clustering of individual perceptions between neighborhoods in addition to heterogeneity of perceptions within neighborhoods. This finding suggests that characterizing neighborhoods only by structural characteristics based on census data may be limiting the exploration of heterogeneity within socially disorganized neighborhoods. Further, due to the degree of heterogeneity in perceptions within neighborhoods, it is plausible to assume that residents of different ages (adults and youth) may view the same neighborhood differently. From a developmental perspective, adolescents' perceptions of their neighborhoods should differ from parents' perceptions because, as they gain more autonomy with age, youth have the ability to transverse more of their neighborhoods and form their own neighborhood experience (Brody et al., 2001; Burton, Price-Spratlen, & Spencer, 1997). As a result, adolescents' and their parents' reports of neighborhood characteristics are likely to be dissimilar (Allison et al., 1999; Burton et al., 1997; Furstenberg et al., 1999; O'Neill, Park, & McDowell, 2001).

Studies most often have focused on perceptions of neighborhood risk (Meyers & Miller, 2004) with several studies reporting weak to moderate correlations between parents' and adolescents' subjective accounts of neighborhood risks (Brody et al., 2001; O'Neill et al., 2001). In these studies, adolescents' viewed their neighborhoods more favorably than parents. Only one known study examined the association between adult and youth reports of positive neighborhood characteristics. Brody et al. (2001) showed, with a rural sample, that mother's and adolescent's reports of collective socialization (i.e., informal social control) were weakly and significantly correlated. It might be plausible to assume that mother's and adolescent's perceptions of neighborhood positive characteristics are less correlated than their perceptions of risk because of the objective reality of risk versus the social nature of positive characteristics. Perceptions of positive characteristics are dependent on social interactions; for adolescents and mothers these interactions may occur with different people. Understanding how adolescents experience and perceive their neighborhoods is essential to understanding how neighborhoods may shape adolescent development.

Hypotheses

Using social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theory as guiding frameworks, we use multiple reports of neighborhood characteristics to address two overarching goals. The first goal is to examine census and perception-based measures of neighborhood characteristics to determine how structural census-based characteristics are related to adolescents' and mothers' perceptions of positive and negative neighborhood attributes. A second goal is to determine the extent to which mothers' and adolescents' appraisals of neighborhood characteristics differ. In order to attain these goals, we first confirm that our measures of perceived neighborhood risks and strengths are appropriate for this rural population.

Based on our review of the literature and expectation that neighborhood characteristics identified in urban samples are applicable to rural residents, we hypothesize that rural adolescents and their mothers will perceive both positive (i.e., informal social control and cohesion and trust) and negative (i.e., risk) neighborhood characteristics. Because of the differing perspectives of social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theory as to whether positive and negative neighborhood characteristics are negatively related or unrelated, we do not hypothesize about the direction or magnitude of the association between these perceptions. Following social disorganization theory, we hypothesize that census-based characteristics (i.e., disadvantage) will be positively related to neighborhood risk for both mothers and adolescents but negatively related to informal social control and cohesion and trust due to the inverse relation between neighborhood deficits and strengths. We further hypothesize that adolescents will report more favorable perceptions of their neighborhoods than their mothers. In addition, we hypothesize that the strength of the association between mother and adolescent neighborhood perceptions will be stronger for risk than for measures of collective socialization (i.e., informal social control and cohesion and trust).

Method

Study Overview

The data for this study were drawn from the first wave of data from the longitudinal, school-based Context of Adolescent Substance Use Study (Ennett et al., 2006), which included adolescents from public schools in three predominantly rural counties in North Carolina. The study counties are eligible for targeted federal funds for health services due to their rural location and low population density and are classified as nonmetropolitan areas with access to an interstate highway (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb, & Randolph, 1999). The largest cities in the three counties have populations that range from approximately 8,700 to 10,900 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The study design included multiple contextual components. First, the adolescent sample included youth from 12 schools in 3 public school systems. The schools were classified as middle schools with 6th – 8th graders ($n = 8$), comprehensive K – 8 ($n = 2$), and alternative ($n = 2$). Adolescents completed surveys at school. Second, the parent sample consisted of a simple random sample of parents of the adolescents surveyed in school. Parents completed

telephone interviews. Last, adolescent and parent addresses were geocoded to link survey information with U.S. Census based characteristics at the census tract ($n = 53$) and block group ($n = 142$) levels.

The institutional review board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved protocols for each sample and approved the written waiver of parental consent. A letter that was mailed and sent home with the child notified parents about the study. Parents could refuse their child's participation by returning a postage-paid signed form or by calling a toll-free number. Adolescents provided written assent for participation at school during the time of data collection by trained data collectors. Parents provided verbal consent for their participation in the telephone interview.

Adolescent Sample and Data Collection

At the initial wave of data collection (i.e., Spring 2002), all adolescents in the 6th – 8th grades were eligible for the study except those in self-contained classrooms for Exceptional Children and those with insufficient English language reading skills to complete the questionnaire. Approximately 88% of eligible students ($n = 5,220$) completed the questionnaires. Trained data collectors administered the surveys at least two times at each school. Adolescents completed the self-administered questionnaire in classrooms or larger group settings (e.g., cafeteria) in approximately one hour. The questionnaires were coded with confidential identifiers but not names. Students put their questionnaires in envelopes before returning them to the data collectors. Teachers stayed in classrooms, at their desks, to help maintain order but did not answer questions about the study.

For the current investigation, only youth whose parent participated ($n = 1,663$) were eligible for the study. Of these families, 2% whose fathers responded to questionnaire items or whose parent's gender was missing were excluded as well as an additional 13% who did not complete at least two-thirds of the scales used for the study. These exclusion criteria resulted in a sample of 1,414 youth and their parent. The sample was 53% female ($n = 755$) and almost equivalently split by grade with 35% in 6th grade, 34% in 7th grade, and 31% in 8th grade. Youths' racial self-identification was 59% White, 34% African American, and 7% Other (e.g., Latino, Multiracial, Asian or Pacific Islander). On average, youth were 13.02 ($SD = .96$) years old and lived in two-parent homes (93%).

Parent Sample and Data Collection

The parent sample was a simple random sample of parents (or primary caregivers) of adolescents who completed the Wave 1 survey. At Wave 1, 81% of eligible parents ($N=1,663$) completed the telephone interview. Trained data collectors administered the telephone interviews, which lasted approximately 25 minutes. By design, in the majority of cases (98%), the mother or mother surrogate was the parent interviewed. Fathers and unidentified caregivers were excluded from the analyses. Therefore, in subsequent details the parent will be referred to as mother.

Mothers ranged in age from 24 years old to 75 years old; the mean age was 40.47 ($SD = 6.95$) years old. Similar to their youths, 61% of mothers identified as White, 35% of mothers

identified as African American, and 4% were identified as Other. The majority of the mothers (56%) graduated from high school, earned a GED, or had some college; 33% of mothers graduated from community college, college, or professional school; and 11% of mothers had less than a high school education. Sixty six percent of mothers lived in houses; 26% lived in mobile homes; and only 2% lived in public housing. On average, mothers lived in their current neighborhood for 9.81 ($SD = 9.03$) years.

Geocoding

Both adolescents and mothers provided their addresses. All addresses were sent to a commercial geocoding firm to be matched with the 2000 decennial census U.S. census tracts and block groups. The geocoded addresses were linked with U.S. Census data, for both adolescents (99.7%) and mothers (100%) to characterize the neighborhoods at the block group and census tract levels. On average, for the 53 census tracts, there were 27 residents (range = 1 – 93). At the block group level, there were 142 block groups with a mean of 10 residents (range = 1 – 39). For subsequent analyses, we defined neighborhoods using mothers' address reports. We present analyses using the U.S. Census block group level because their smaller size may more approximate neighborhoods and there is more homogeneity in perceptions based on block group rather than census tract.

Measures

Demographics—All measures were based on adolescents' and mothers' self reports. For adolescents, age was measured using date of birth; gender was coded so that female was the reference group. Race/ethnicity (i.e., White, African American, or Other) was based on the adolescent's self-identification and dummy coded to include White as the reference group. Family structure was coded as two parents in the home (reference group) versus some other composition.

For mothers, age was measured based on year of birth. Race/ethnicity was based on the mother's self-identification and also coded to include White as the reference group. Education was coded as less than high school education (reference group) versus high school graduate and some college or college graduate. Length of residence in the neighborhood was based on the number of years the mother reported living in the neighborhood. Mothers also reported on their type of home (e.g., public housing, mobile home, or house).

Neighborhood disadvantage—Five variables derived from the 2000 U.S. Census were used to measure neighborhood disadvantage at the block group level: percentage of residents unemployed, without a high school diploma, below the poverty level, without a car, and living in female-headed households. Each of these indicators has been used in prior studies (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Seidman et al., 1998). *Unemployment* is the percentage (6%; i.e., average across block groups) of adults (16 years and older) who are unemployed. *Educational attainment* is the percentage (24%) of individuals at least 25 years old who have not received a high school diploma or GED. *Poverty level* is the percentage (14%) of individuals who are living below the poverty-level. *No car* is the percentage (7%) of inhabitants who lived in the neighborhood and did not have a car. *Female-headed*

households is the percentage (14%) of female-headed households. Each of the structural indicators was standardized and a mean score, neighborhood disadvantage, was computed. Standardized scores (i.e., z-scores) ranged from – 1.30 to 2.88.

Adolescents and mothers reported on negative (i.e., risk) and positive (i.e., informal social control and cohesion and trust) neighborhood characteristics. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and ranges of study variables.

Neighborhood risk—Perceptions of neighborhood risk was assessed using items developed for the study for adolescents and adapted from Ross and Jang (2000) for mothers. Adolescents ($\alpha = .83$) responded to three statements about neighborhood risk, such as “people are afraid to come to my neighborhood.” Mothers ($\alpha = .75$) responded to four statements such as “there is a lot of crime in your neighborhood.” Adolescents (5-point) and mothers (4-point) responded to a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores indicate greater perceived risk.

Neighborhood informal social—Items developed for adolescents and an adapted version of *The Collective Efficacy Scale* (Sampson et al., 1997) were used to assess perceptions of neighborhood informal social control to tap the degree to which adults would intervene in adolescent misbehavior. Adolescents responded to three statements ($\alpha = .63$) such as, “Adults would be willing to break up a fight going on there” on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores indicate greater perceived informal social control. Mothers responded to six statements ($\alpha = .91$) about the likelihood of intervention from neighbors if adolescents were participating in behaviors such as damaging property, showing disrespect, or hanging out and smoking. Responses ranged from very unlikely (1) to very likely (4). Higher scores indicate greater perceived informal social control.

Neighborhood cohesion and trust—Perceptions of neighborhood cohesion and trust were measured using items developed for the study for adolescents and adapted from *The Collective Efficacy Scale* (Sampson et al., 1997) for mothers. Adolescents ($\alpha = .72$) and mothers ($\alpha = .64$) responded to three statements about the degree of perceived neighborliness and mutual trust in their neighborhood with items such as “most of the people there know each other,” for adolescents and “people in your neighborhood can be trusted,” for mothers. Adolescents responded to a 5-point scale, and mothers responded to a 4-point scale; each ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores indicate greater perceived cohesion and trust.

Results

Plan of Analysis

The analysis plan follows the strategies necessary to address our research goals. As preliminary analyses, we used confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework to determine if our neighborhood measures adequately captured rural adolescents and their mothers' perceptions of negative and positive neighborhood characteristics. After confirming the appropriateness of these constructs, we

calculated the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), ratios of between group variability to the total variability, for neighborhood risk, informal social control, and cohesion and trust for both reporters. This analysis allowed us to determine the degree of homogeneity in perceptions across reporters within Census block groups. To address goal one, as suggested by Bryk and Raudenbush (1992) and Aber (1994), HLM was used to model the nested structure of the data and examine the degree to which neighborhood disadvantage (i.e., structural characteristics) explained variation in adolescents' and mothers' neighborhood perceptions of neighborhood characteristics after adjusting for demographic characteristics. To address goal two, we used paired sample t-tests to examine mean differences in neighborhood perceptions across reporters as well as Pearson correlations and hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to determine the degree of association between adolescents' and mothers' perceptions of neighborhood characteristics.

Preliminary Analyses

Rural Residents' Perceptions of Positive and Negative Neighborhood

Characteristics—Within a CFA framework, separate models for adolescents and their mothers were tested and based on the sample covariance matrix estimate using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation (Contact author for covariance matrices and parameter estimates). EQS® Version 6.1 was used to model and estimate all parameters. The hypothesized CFA model for neighborhood perceptions (see Figure 1) was composed of three latent factors corresponding to neighborhood risk, informal social control, and cohesion and trust. For adolescents, there were nine manifest variables, which included three items for each latent construct. For mothers, there were 13 manifest variables, which included 4 items for neighborhood risk, 3 items for cohesion and trust, and 6 items for informal social control. We assessed the overall model fit using several goodness-of-fit indices (Hoyle, 1995).

Goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesized three factor adolescent and mother models showed that models were acceptable fits to the data. For youth, $\chi^2(24, N=1290) = 270.36, p < .001$, the NNFI = .85, CFI = .90, and RMSEA = .08. For mothers, $\chi^2(62, N = 1290) = 478.56, p < .001$, the NNFI = .84, CFI = .87, and RMSEA = .07. Positive neighborhood characteristics were positively correlated. Informal social control was positively correlated with cohesion and trust for adolescents ($r = .39, p < .01$) and their mothers ($r = .50, p < .001$). Neighborhood risk was negatively correlated with cohesion and trust for adolescents ($r = -.13, p < .05$) and mothers ($r = -.66, p < .001$) and informal social control for mothers ($r = -.39, p < .001$). However, neighborhood risk was positively correlated with informal social control for adolescents ($r = .14, p < .05$).

Homogeneity of Neighborhood Perceptions—To determine the degree of variability between Census block groups (level 2), we used one-way random effects ANOVA to decompose the variance components using PROC Mixed in SAS® v.9.1. For adolescents, the ICCs were .003 for informal social control, .05 for cohesion and trust, and .11 for risk. Mothers' ICCs were .06 for informal social control, .12 for cohesion and trust, and .17 for risk. These estimates suggest that a non-negligible proportion of observed variability is due

to the clustering of individuals within Census block groups and that this clustering is greater for mothers than adolescents.

Linking Neighborhood Structural Characteristics with Neighborhood

Perceptions—We used mixed modeling with a random intercept to test the links between structural neighborhood characteristics and residents' perceptions. For adolescents and mothers, Level 1 predictors included demographic characteristics. Reference groups were equivalent across analyses. Continuous variables were grand mean centered.

Adolescents' perceptions: After adjusting for all covariates, African American ($b = .56, p < .001$), Other race/ethnicity ($b = .59, p < .001$), and older ($b = .078, p < .01$) youth perceived more risk than their counterparts (see Table 2). Youths whose mothers had some college ($b = -.24, p < .05$) or graduated from college perceived fewer risks ($b = -.38, p < .01$). Turning to our Level 2 indicator, neighborhood disadvantage ($b = .19, p < .001$) was positively related to adolescents' perceptions of risk, suggesting that living in a more disadvantaged neighborhood is associated with a greater likelihood of perceived risk.

For the positive neighborhood characteristics, after adjusting for other variables, there were no associations between demographic characteristics and informal social control. Other-race/ethnicity youth ($b = -.21, p < .05$) perceived less cohesiveness than their White counterparts. Turning to the Level 2 predictor, neighborhood disadvantage was unrelated to adolescents' perceptions of informal social control ($b = -.07, ns$), but negatively related to adolescents' perceptions of cohesion and trust ($b = -.15, p < .001$), suggesting that structural characteristics might impede experiences leading to neighborliness and mutual trust.

Mothers' perceptions: After adjusting for all covariates, the pattern of findings for mothers' perceptions of neighborhood risk is similar (See Table 2). African American mothers ($b = .14, p < .001$) who have lived in the neighborhood longer ($b = .004, p < .05$) perceived more risk than their counterparts. Mothers who graduated from college perceived fewer risks ($b = -.13, p < .05$). Turning to our Level 2 indicator, neighborhood disadvantage ($b = .18, p < .001$) was positively related to mothers' perceptions of risk, suggesting that living in a more disadvantaged neighborhood is associated with a greater likelihood of perceived risk.

For positive neighborhood characteristics, unlike their adolescents, demographic differences emerged for mothers after adjusting for other variables. African American mothers ($b = -.15, p < .05$) perceived less informal social control than their counterparts. Older mothers ($b = .01, p < .05$) who had attended college ($b = .17, p < .05$) perceived more informal social control by adults than their counterparts. Results were similar for mothers' perceptions of cohesion and trust. Turning to the Level 2 predictor, neighborhood disadvantage was negatively related to mothers' perceptions of informal social control ($b = -.12, p < .001$) and cohesion and trust ($b = -.13, p < .001$), suggesting that structural characteristics might impede attempts at collective socialization.

Correspondence between Adolescent and Mother Perceptions—We addressed the correspondence between adolescent and mother perceptions by first comparing adolescents' and their mothers' perceived mean levels of neighborhood characteristics. To compare the means of perceived neighborhood characteristics across reporters, we recoded the range of possible values (i.e., 1 - 4) for adolescents to be comparable to mothers. Paired sample *t*-tests indicated that adolescents perceived significantly more neighborhood risk than their mothers, $t_{(1413)} = 9.51, p < .001$, significantly less informal social control, $t_{(1413)} = -20.05, p < .001$, and significantly more cohesion and trust among neighbors, $t_{(1413)} = 7.64, p < .001$.

Next, we examined the degree of association between adolescents' and their mothers' reports of neighborhood characteristics. Pearson correlations showed that there was a positive association between adolescents' and mothers' perceptions of neighborhood risk ($r = .29, p < .001$) and cohesion and trust ($r = .18, p < .001$). However, adolescents and mothers did not perceive informal social control within the neighborhoods similarly ($r = .03, ns$).

A more rigorous test of the degree of association between adolescents' and mothers' neighborhood perceptions was to adjust for the clustering of individuals in block groups and other demographic variables. Therefore, we tested a model in SAS® v.9.1 (PROC Mixed) within the HLM framework (Level 1: gender (i.e., male), race/ethnicity (i.e., African American or Other), age, and other reporter's perception; Level 2: Census based block group disadvantage). Similar to the previous findings, mothers' perceptions of neighborhood risk ($b = .43, p < .001$) were significantly associated with adolescents' perceptions of risk after adjusting for gender ($b = .10, ns$), African American ($b = .56, p < .001$), Other race/ethnicity ($b = .62, p < .001$), and age ($b = .10, p < .001$), as well as neighborhood disadvantage ($b = .15, p < .01$). The pattern of findings was similar for cohesion and trust ($b = .19, p < .001$) after adjusting for the demographic variables as well as neighborhood disadvantage ($b = -.13, p < .001$). There was no association between mothers' and adolescents' perceptions of informal social control after adjusting for demographic characteristics (i.e., all non-significant associations) and neighborhood disadvantage ($b = -.06, ns$). These patterns of findings are identical to the findings when mothers' perceptions are the dependent variable.

Discussion

To date, most studies of neighborhoods and youth have focused on urban youth and deficits rather than strengths. The primary aim of the present study was to use tenets of social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theories to understand how the neighborhood context should be conceptualized in order to better capture how the neighborhood context affects adolescent development. We did this by focusing on two goals. First, we examined census and perception-based measures to determine the linkages among rural adolescents' and mothers' positive and negative neighborhood perceptions and neighborhood structural characteristics. Second, we compared adolescents' and mothers' perceptions of neighborhood characteristics. Our results suggest that conceptualizations of neighborhood risk, informal social control, and cohesion and trust utilized to describe urban neighborhoods also apply to rural neighborhoods. We also find that individuals' perceptions (pluralistic

neighborhood theory) are more important than, objective neighborhood structural factors (social disorganization theory) based on associations between census-based neighborhood disadvantage and neighborhood perceptions. In addition, we find that adolescents and their mothers may view their neighborhoods differently.

Positive and Negative Neighborhood Perceptions

Rural youth and their mothers perceived both positive and negative neighborhood characteristics. This finding supports assertions of both deficit and strengths-based models of neighborhoods. Deficit models assert that negative (i.e., risk) neighborhood characteristics are inversely related to positive characteristics (i.e., informal social control and cohesion and trust), but strengths-based models suggest that positive characteristics are inherent in neighborhoods and not necessarily related to negative characteristics. We found that both adolescents and their mothers perceive positive neighborhood characteristics despite neighborhood problems, suggesting that deficits in the neighborhood do not completely erode the potential for social strengths in neighborhoods.

We also found a significant clustering of neighborhood perceptions within block groups similar to that of Furstenberg et al. (1999) for mothers' reports of social cohesion and social control. These significant ICCs underscore that neighbors have similar experiences, to some degree. Yet, there was still more variation within block group than between neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are not monolithic; they are internally heterogeneous (Sampson, 2001). Pluralistic neighborhood theory (Aber & Nieto, 2000) suggests that individual perceptions vary within neighborhoods due to alternate experiences. This assertion appears to be especially true for youth; their ICCs were consistently smaller than those of their mothers, suggesting that youth have more varied experiences than their adult counterparts. This finding may be a result of the different psychological worlds that individuals live in (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). The myriad of neighborhood experiences youth have may be a result of their interaction with peers.

Census-based Neighborhood Characteristics and Perceptions

Combining reports of different sources of information about neighborhood characteristics, we found that structural characteristics of the neighborhood (i.e., operationalized as neighborhood disadvantage) accounted for a significant proportion of variability in perceptions, even after adjusting for demographic variables. Similar to Brody et al. (2001), we found that neighborhood disadvantage significantly predicted perceptions of risk for both mothers and adolescents, suggesting that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood increases the perception of risk and accounts for significant variability in more tangible constructs (i.e., risk). This finding supports social disorganization theory and suggests that structural characteristics can influence individual perceptions of neighborhood characteristics in rural areas.

For positive characteristics, our findings were mixed and provide support for both deficit and strengths-based theories. Social disorganization theory asserts that structural neighborhood characteristics would be negatively associated with positive neighborhood characteristics, because disadvantage thwarts the opportunity for the creation of social

capital, community norms, values, and mutual trust. Strengths-based models suggest that neighborhood disadvantage does not preclude the existence of positive neighborhood characteristics and that individuals perceive their neighborhoods differently. For youth, neighborhood disadvantage was negatively related to feelings of cohesiveness but unrelated to informal social control, suggesting that individual perceptions account for a substantial amount of variability in relational constructs.

For mothers, neighborhood disadvantage was negatively related to both feelings of neighborhood cohesiveness and adult intervention in adolescent maladaptive behavior, unlike Brody et al. (2001) who found that community disadvantage was unrelated to collective socialization. The overall findings for mothers follow the tenets of social disorganization theory—structural disadvantage hampers social capital, stifles attempts at community building, and inhibits linkages between adults and institutions (Elder & Conger, 2000; Osgood & Chambers, 2000).

Although social disorganization theory posits that neighborhood disadvantage may undermine positive social processes, this inference does not appear to be generalizable to youth. We hypothesize that this difference may be a result of the salience of peers for adolescents. An inference from deficit-based neighborhood theories is that youth who associate with neighborhood friends will have poorer outcomes because the peer group becomes an important reference group for teens (Barber & Olsen, 1997). This assumption is grounded in contagion theory and the idea that neighborhood friends in disadvantaged neighborhoods may have negative effects due to the perpetuation of deviant behavior and non-normative peer networks (Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion, & McCord, 2005). Yet, youth who hang out with neighborhood peers become more independent and form a social identity outside of their family (Quane & Rankin, 2006). Our post-hoc analyses showed that spending more time with neighborhood friends was unrelated to perceptions of neighborhood risk after adjusting for all other covariates, whereas youth who spent more time with neighborhood friends endorsed higher levels of informal social control and cohesion and trust. This finding supports the literature that asserts that having neighborhood-based friends can have pro-social consequences (Quane & Rankin, 2006) and that youth's feelings of positive neighborhood characteristics may be associated with their peer groups, instead of objective, structural characteristics, which may be important for adults' perceptions of neighborliness.

Correspondence between Mother and Adolescent's Perceptions

Since youth and adults may have different perceptual lenses, it is not surprising that we found important differences in perceptions for mothers and adolescents. Qualitative researchers speculate that adult appraisals of neighborhoods do not capture youth's experiences (Burton et al., 1996) because of the different areas of the neighborhood youth and adults spend their time (Brody et al., 2001), resulting in dissimilar reports of neighborhood characteristics. We found that adolescents perceived their neighborhoods both more unfavorably and favorably than their parents. Adolescents perceived more neighborhood risk than their parents, although the mean level of risk was still characterized as "low risk." Youth also perceived significantly less informal social control than their

mothers. It was expected that youth would report more informal social control than their parents due to their more positive view of the neighborhood (Burton et al., 1997). An alternative hypothesis would be that youth would report less informal social control than their parents because they are not aware of what adults are doing in the neighborhood. At the same time, adolescents perceived more favorable, positive relationship experiences. They perceived more cohesion and trust (i.e., neighborliness) than their mothers. We speculate that youth used other peers as their reference group rather than adult neighbors, with whom they may be less familiar. Perhaps both the informal social control and cohesion and trust findings are due to the peers being a more salient reference group than adults.

Limitations and Implications for Future Work

Although our study extends the literature base for rural adolescents' development within the neighborhood context by incorporating a comprehensive view of neighborhoods, there are limitations. A primary limitation is the use of only cross-sectional data. Longitudinal data would allow systematic explorations of the direction of effects, how adolescents' perceptions of their neighborhoods change as they age, and how these changes in their perceptions are related to their well-being. We conjecture that, as adolescents age, they continue to become more autonomous and travel more geographical space, which, in turn, might affect their conceptualization of neighborhoods as well as their exposure to "different people" in "different places." This experience of difference may alter their place identity, and, in turn, enhance or thwart their well-being. In addition, we can validate the notion that one way structural characteristics may relate to youth development is through perceptions of neighborhood risks and strengths. With longitudinal data, empirical tests of these hypotheses may be tested.

A second limitation of the present study is the use of different measures of perceived neighborhood characteristics. Although we assume that the underlying neighborhood constructs (i.e., neighborhood risk, cohesion and trust, and informal social control) are tapped for both mothers and adolescents, the inferences regarding differences in mean levels of mother and adolescent's perceptions should be interpreted with caution since they may reflect differences in the items forming the measures. Future studies should continue to examine the correspondence between adolescent and mother's perceptions of neighborhood characteristics using similarly anchored scales.

Despite these caveats, this study offers an initial step to understanding how to better conceptualize and measure the neighborhood context and how it may shape adolescent development. We found that rural mothers' perceptions of their neighborhood risks and strengths were related to an objective measure of neighborhood disadvantage. This relationship was also evident for adolescents' perceptions of cohesion and trust but not informal social control. These findings highlight important tenets of both social disorganization and pluralistic neighborhood theories by showing the inverse relationship between structural characteristics and perceived neighborhood social attributes as well as the lack of relationship for adolescents. This lack of relationship for adolescents points to the importance of individual experiences in the neighborhood. Using the reports of rural adolescents and their mothers, we explored how their phenomenological understanding of

their neighborhood and these perceptions were separate from or colored by structural characteristics. Given these findings, prevention and intervention scientists may seek to capitalize on perceived neighborhood strengths in disadvantaged neighborhoods to offer additional protection despite potential risks.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dawn Witherspoon is currently a Carolina Consortium on Human Development (CCHD) post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Developmental Science (CDS) at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. She received her B.A. from North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in both English and Psychology. Witherspoon received a M.A. from NCCU in Psychology. She received another M.A. and Ph.D. in Community Psychology (developmental concentration and quantitative methods minor) from New York University (NYU). Her research interests focus on the ways in which families and youth are influenced by the contexts in which they are embedded. Specifically, she assesses how contextual factors, such as neighborhoods, affect adolescent's academic, psycho-social, and behavioral well-being. While the bulk of her research focuses on the neighborhood context and its relation to other proximal contexts for adolescents, Dawn explores and identifies positive characteristics in multiple contexts that are related to adolescent well-being. To frame her research, she employs a strengths-based approach. The theoretical foundations that she relies on come from Community and Developmental Psychology as well as Sociology. These theories include Ecological Systems theory, Social Capital theory, Social Disorganization theory, and Pluralistic Neighborhood theory. Each of these theories addresses how individuals interact with their environments and highlight the co-action of environments and individuals.

Dawn's educational training and research has been funded by multiple entities. Her dissertation was funded by a National Research Service Award (NRSA) from the National Institute on General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), the American Psychological Association (APA) Dissertation Support Award, and the Educational Advancement Foundation (EAF) of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Throughout her graduate training at NYU, she received research and quantitative fellowships such as the NYU MacCracken Fellowship, APA Minority Fellowship, National Science Foundation (NSF) Minority Supplement Fellowship, NYU Quantitative Training Program in Mental Health Statistics Research Fellowship, and the University of California at Los Angeles Structural Equation Methods Advanced Training Fellowship with Peter Bentler, Ph.D. Additionally, she received funding and training opportunities from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) to focus on policy relevant research through the Grants-in-Aid Program and the Dalmas A. Taylor Minority Summer Policy Fellowship.

Over the course of her graduate and post-doctoral training, Witherspoon has had the opportunity to work on four longitudinal projects (i.e., Adolescent Pathways Project; Early Adolescent Cohort/Project RAP of the Center for Research on Culture, Development, and Education; Context and Linkages Study; and Three City Study) that examine how context shapes adolescent development. These projects have allowed her to investigate her research questions with racially and socio-economically diverse samples from multiple geographies, to gather information from multiple informants, to use various forms of data, and to apply both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. These interdisciplinary experiences have sharpened her skills in developmental inquiry and have adequately prepared her to be an independent researcher.

Witherspoon has disseminated her work by presenting at various conferences and publishing her work, in collaboration, with others in *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* and the *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science*. She currently has manuscripts under review for publication at other developmental and community psychology related journals.

Witherspoon has professional affiliations with the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA), Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), and SPSSI. She has served as a reviewer for the biennial conference of SRCD on the *Family Relationships Panel* as well as 2009 biennial conference of SCRA.

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Blinded Response to Reviewers Comments

Thank you for reviewing our manuscript, internally. We have made the requested revisions to the title you suggested and reviewed the manuscript for any additional errors. We look forward to seeing the published manuscript.

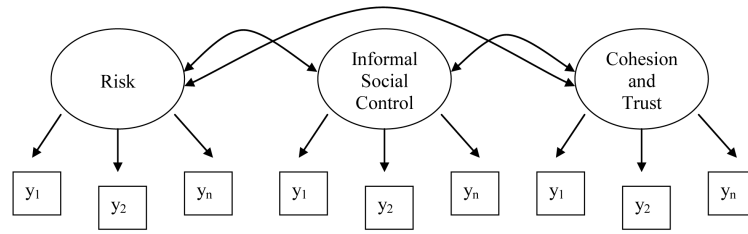


Figure 1.
Hypothesized Three-Factor Model of Neighborhood Perceptions

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Neighborhood Characteristics

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range
Risk, youth	1414	0.87 (1.18)	0 - 4
Risk, mother	1414	1.43 (0.58)	1 - 4
Informal Social Control, youth	1414	2.67 (1.10)	0 - 4
Informal Social Control, mother	1414	3.53 (0.70)	1 - 4
Cohesion and Trust, youth	1414	3.34 (0.85)	0 - 4
Cohesion and Trust, mother	1414	3.29 (0.69)	1 - 4

Table 2
 Hierarchical Linear Model Unstandardized Coefficients for Models Testing Level 1 and Level 2 Effects

	Youth Report			Mother Report		
	Risk	Informal Social Ctrl	Cohesion and Trust	Risk	Informal Social Ctrl	Cohesion and Trust
Level 1 Variables						
Intercept	0.82(.10)***	2.77(.10)***	3.29(.08)***	1.47(.05)***	3.44(.06)***	3.23(.06)***
Child gender	.10(.06)	.04(.06)	.08(.04)			
Child age	.08(.03)**	.01(.03)	-.02(.02)			
C-African American	.56(.07)***	-.04(.07)	.03(.06)			
C-Other	.59(.11)***	-.11(.12)	-.21(.09)*			
Family Structure	.23(.12)*	.13(.12)	-.01(.09)			
Mother age				-.004(.002)	.01(.003)**	.01(.003)***
M-African American				.14(.04)***	-.15(.04)***	-.32(.04)***
M-Other				-.01(.08)	-.11(.10)	-.20(.09)*
Mother residence length				.004(.002)*	-.001(.002)	.001(.002)
Mother some college	-.23(.10)*	-.12(.10)	.01(.07)	-.07(.05)	.17(.06)**	.19(.06)***
Mother college graduate	-.38(.11)***	-.13(.11)	.06(.08)	-.13(.05)**	.12(.07)	.19(.06)**
Level 2 Variable						
Neighborhood Disadvantage	.19(.04)***	-.07(.04)	-.15(.03)***	.18(.02)***	-.12(.03)***	-.13(.03)***

Note: C = child, M = mother;

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$