

# **Children and Their Neighborhoods: A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding the Construct Neighborhood**

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Defining and measuring neighborhood presents a significant challenge to social science researchers because the construct has a variety of meanings. In fact, Aber and Nieto (2000) note that, “Despite nearly a hundred years of scholarly interest in neighborhoods, the question of what precisely constitutes a neighborhood remains unresolved and largely unexamined” (p. 188). Additionally, while children are the target population of theory and research on neighborhood environments, their perceptions and experiences have occupied a peripheral place in these endeavors. With few exceptions (e.g., Bryant, 1985; Burton and Price-Spratlen, 1999; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Sutton, 1992) researchers have presumed knowledge of children’s neighborhood experiences on the foundation of structural information about the neighborhoods where they reside. In fact, Seidman, Hirokazu, Roberts, Teran, Allen, Friedman, & Aber (1998) point out that “There has been surprisingly little work examining how objective structural aspects of neighborhoods relate to youths’ perceptions and experiences of neighborhoods” (p. 260). This discrepancy has compounded the problem of obtaining a clearer view on how neighborhoods affect the developmental outcomes of children.

While the ultimate goal of neighborhood effects research is to comprehend how developmental outcomes are or are not associated with neighborhood environments, this comprehension will elude us until we have secured accurate means for measuring that environment. However, both of these goals, securing accurate measures of neighborhood and making clear associations between behavioral outcomes and neighborhood environments, requires preliminary exploration of how our understanding of neighborhood environments can be informed by examining census data in conjunction with children’s narratives. This dissertation employs a mixed methods approach to initiate this preliminary exploration. The research offers the opportunity to move beyond defining neighborhood via “social address” by comparing children’s writings about the built and social environment of their neighborhoods to the statistical indices provided in 2000 U.S. census tract data that coincide with the neighborhoods where those same children reside. In addition, because the children are queried about the negative as well

as the positive aspects of their neighborhoods, this research may illuminate some of the strengths of neighborhood environments that are obscured by the deficit models that are frequently employed in neighborhood effects research.

Traditional theoretical frameworks that explain how neighborhoods affect individual outcomes, such as Social Disorganization Theory (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999), employ census data as a proxy measure for neighborhood environments. While these measures provide information about the structural aspects of neighborhoods they obscure the social processes and other mechanisms at work within neighborhoods. Other models, such as Pluralistic Neighborhood theory (Aber & Nieto, 2000), posit that the inclusion of residents' voices and an exploration of neighborhood strengths are key for obtaining a clearer understanding about the ways in which people are influenced by the locales where they reside. The two theories, taken side by side, suggest that both census data and residents' voices are important ingredients for understanding neighborhoods. However, it is not clear how these two modes, one quantitative and the other qualitative, are or are not reflected in one another. Hence, the questions that guide this exploratory/descriptive study in which a qualitative construction of neighborhood, based on children's perceptions, is compared with a quantitative construction of neighborhood based on 2000 census data.

The first set of questions rest on Pluralistic Neighborhood Theory.

*How do children think about and experience their neighborhoods?*

- a) *How do children define the term neighborhood?*
- b) *How do children describe and use the built and natural environment of their neighborhoods?*
- c) *How do children describe and interact with the resources (human and institutional) within their neighborhoods?*
- d) *Do children, who reside in the same neighborhood, present narratives and perceptions that converge in a way that is consistent within that neighborhood.*

The second question is directly related to Social Disorganization Theory.

*How do statistical indices obtained from census tract data and framed within Social Disorganization Theory describe the neighborhood environments of the children in this sample?*

The third question results from hypotheses that can be derived from each theory. *What associations and discrepancies are there between the narratives provided by children and statistical indices of their neighborhood environments?* Social Disorganization Theory would suggest that narratives of children who reside in socially disorganized neighborhoods will represent a lack of references to positive neighborhood and neighboring experiences. While on the other hand, as neighborhood social disorganization decreases, the narratives will increase in references to positive neighborhood and neighboring experiences. Pluralistic Neighborhood Theory would suggest that the children's narratives will represent negative as well as positive

neighborhood and neighboring experiences that do not necessarily coincide with levels of social disorganization as determined by census tract data.

The goal of this dissertation requires an epistemological stance that supports the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The pragmatist paradigm (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) provides that foundation. This paradigm represents an effort to create a space for research that emphasizes a both/and approach to design and analysis as opposed to an either/or approach in which the researcher must be firmly planted in either quantitative methodologies or qualitative methodologies. One can expect research informed by this paradigm to involve: 1) quantitative and qualitative methods, 2) deductive and inductive reasoning, and 3) subjective and objective points of view (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

The quantitative data were obtained from the 2000 Census data that coincide with the residential location of the children in the sample ( $n = 59$  fourth and fifth grade children). Each child's address was geo-coded so as to ascertain the census tracts ( $n = 30$ ) represented in the sample. The variables chosen from the census data are based on those typified in neighborhood effects studies that are framed by Social Disorganization Theory. A descriptive quantitative analysis was completed on the census data via the statistical software package SPSS. This analysis includes a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) as a means for confirming or disconfirming the similarity between the components of the construct *neighborhood* found in the census tracts where the children reside and the components typified in Social Disorganization Theory.

The qualitative data were collected from fourth and fifth grade children. The analysis occurred at the various levels available in the data: the entire sample of children, the children in each census tract, and the children in each block group. While there is a diversity of racial and ethnic groups represented in the sample, the numbers within these categories are quite small to be sufficient for separate analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed using the software package, Atlas-ti. This package does not "do" or "think through" the analysis for the researcher. Instead, it provides a system that allows the researcher to manage the qualitative data analysis. The constant comparative method of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed because it allows for "the exploration and discovery of subjective experiences and knowledge."

The mixed methods analysis involved the exploration of the data for associations and discrepancies (non-statistical) between the qualitative results and the statistical indices provided by the census data. This analysis delineated the census tracts into high ( $n = 6$ ), moderate ( $n = 14$ ), and low ( $n = 10$ ) levels of social disorganization. These levels were devised from the sum of the three factor scores estimated by the PCA. Each factor score was weighted equally because Social Disorganization Theory does not provide specifications for how these components should be otherwise weighted. The break points for the levels of social disorganization were based on data provided by a histogram of the summed factor scores. The levels of social disorganization were compared with the results of the qualitative analysis for associations and discrepancies between levels of social disorganization within a tract based on census variables and levels of social disorganization depicted in the children's neighborhood experiences within that same tract.

The PCA suggests similarities between the components of the construct neighborhood found in the census data for the tracts where the children reside and the components typified in Social Disorganization Theory. However, the qualitative results demonstrate that there are discrepancies between the experiences of neighborhood child residents and the structural descriptions of those neighborhoods as framed in census tract data. When viewed through the lens of childhood, the construct neighborhood is defined via nine dimensions that reflect both the strengths and weaknesses of neighborhood social processes and neighborhood resources. This construction of neighborhood is inconsistent with the singularly deficit based definition of neighborhood suggested by Social Disorganization Theory.

The inconsistency found between the census data and the lived experiences of children has implications for neighborhood based social work practice. First, the voices of children are key ingredients in assessment of neighborhood environments. Second, neighborhoods hold hidden assets in the lives of children. These assets can be capitalized on in social work interventions with children, families, and neighborhoods. Finally, these results demonstrate that children are keen observers of their neighborhoods and can play important roles in the creation of neighborhood based change efforts.

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