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Neighborhood: The "Outside" Space for Girls in Urban India

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Neighborhood - the "*Outside*" Space for Girls in Urban India

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"I don't know anyone" "I don't talk to anyone, they are all boys in the neighborhood"

Neighborhood is a physical and social space for identity expression, the closest public space outside of one's home and amongst non-family members. This study explores the perspective of girls on the neighborhood as a social institution that plays a role in formation of identity. The study also aims to explore the concept of neighborhood as a public space that can affect agency performance in adolescent girls.

Introduction to role of neighborhoods

The position of neighborhoods within the social systems hierarchy varies within the ecological perspective on social systems. A neighborhood is capable of being a *mesosystem* i.e., second level ecological environment, wherein the adolescent girls actively participate and create the social conditions defining it. At the same time, a neighborhood can be an *exosystem* i.e., third level ecological environment, further removed from mesosystem, and might not be a place for active participation by individuals, but nonetheless exerts an important influence on social conditions/norms (Bronfrenbenners, 1979). This classification would ultimately emerge from an individual's perception regarding the neighborhood.

A neighborhood comprises both social and physical space for an individual. The socio demographic status of individuals, as well as prevalent norms, is likely to influence the access and utilization by individuals of this space. Therefore, neighborhood and its importance as a social system would be a useful variable in assessing the interaction between individuals and public space.

According to Ellen and Turner (1997), there are "six mechanisms by which neighborhood *characteristics* influence child outcomes: socialization by adults, local social networks, peer influences, quality of local services, exposure to crime and violence, and physical distance and isolation from, in particular, economic opportunities" (P. 1918 Curtis, Dooley, & Phipps, 2004). The neighborhood characteristics listed by Ellen and Turner could therefore potentially affect the outcome of girls' identity. For instance, a *typical neighborhood* could serve as a means of gender socialization that determines the norms of girls' behavior in public spaces (identity development) or in setting achievement goals (agency formation).

Neighborhood as a Study Variable

The focus on neighborhood studies in Indian settings has been in reference to predicting demographic, public health, and environmental outcomes (Das, 2007). A few studies have used urban neighborhoods in bigger cities within India to predict psychological wellbeing (Suchday, Kapur, Ewart et al., 2007). Among the few studies of urban spaces is Sharma's (2003) study of a modernizing small town in North India. In this study, Sharma explores the gender, class, and community outlines that function as parameters of social spaces in a small town. These parameters transcend the physical space of a neighborhood to a social space (Sharma, 2003). According to Sharma, social distance is a manifestation of perceived social differences and is a natural outcome of this phenomenon. He identifies a consciousness of social space that is linked to consciousness of social status in the city residents' self-imposed segregation. On the other hand, in a study of another modernizing town in South of India, Arefi and Meyers (2003) found in

their 37 interviews a commonality of interests and concerns regarding the neighborhood or urban space amongst the participants. These participants came from diverse socio economic backgrounds but reported similar characteristics, similar in saliency, about their urban space. Baviskar's study on physical space in Delhi highlights the tussle between elitist concerns with environment and the slum population's struggle with adequate housing and sanitation facilities.

These studies underline the complexity of urban spaces and their representation and scope for creating a social space. However, there have been limited studies on the impact of emerging urban spaces and their effect on younger age groups within the Indian population, such as adolescent girls. Conversely, the studies conducted with the neighborhood variable outside of India highlight the important role of neighborhood as a variable in outcomes for children and adolescents. For instance, comparisons of neighborhoods in reference to siblings and children from different families living in the same neighborhood are able to separate the variance of neighborhoods in explaining the outcomes for children (Duncan, Boisjoly, & Mullan-Harris, 2001). Neighborhoods also have the potential to moderate the influence of other social systems, such as school and family. For instance, studies have reported the influence of neighborhood peer groups as distinct from siblings and school peer groups/friends. In the Indian context, urban spaces of neighborhoods are not usually transitory spaces and so the neighborhoods might have even more pertinent relationships with children's outcomes as compared to other societies.

Identities and Neighborhoods

This study applies the *"identities"* conceptual framework, which is an interdisciplinary, theoretical approach to understanding female identity (Singh, 2005). This framework draws primarily on the individual's assessment of her position in reference to a social system; it examines the components of self, agency, identity, and expressed identity in each narrative; it also examines, through these components, the relevance and importance of a social system to an individual. The framework is informed by poststructuralist critique of feminism (Francis, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Parpart, 1993), cultural anthropology (Holland et al., 1998 ; Williams, Labonte, & O'Brien, 2003), and a socio-psychological understanding of individual's performance with social context (Frable, 1997; Unger, 2001). The key terms in the framework are -

Self comprises the sum of all experiences, values, actions, skills, and habits that a individual acquires throughout her life and which are accessible in the present (Weinreich, 2003).

Agency is the use of self by the individual in the accomplishment of objectives desired in the present and aspired for in the future (Kabeer, 1999).

Identity is an outcome of the process of reflection, review, and interpretation of self and agency to form a link between the past and the aspired future (Weinreich, 2003).

Expressed identity is the individual's overt articulation of salient elements of self, agency, and identity.

The *identities of women* framework also examines the significance of *visible environments* and *abstract environments* and proposes that it is within these two distinct environments that women function. The visible environment consists of the social institutions that an individual is formally a part of, for instance, the family and the school.

The abstract environment is derived from the accepted and salient norms and values of the society that guide the overt and underlying processes with the social systems, such as age-based hierarchy in traditional family systems and economic worth of formal education and the schooling process.

The *identities of women* framework proposes that the interaction between these environments and the individual is a complex and unique process. It manifests itself in different outcomes for individuals, even when they are living in similar environments. Therefore, an interpretation of an individual's ability and needs, which is based on an understanding of social environments alone, is misleading. As an alternative, the *identities of women* framework proposes that the *expressed identity* of an individual is the link between social environments and the individual. An individual is a part of the multiple realities of the abstract and visible environments, and the individual's expressed identity encompasses these realities. For instance, in this study, a neighborhood is the immediate physical (concrete) and social (abstract) space (environment) that has the potential to contribute to negative and positive components of identity in adolescent girls.

Description of Lucknow as an Urban Neighborhood

Oke, Khatter, Pant, & Saraswati (1999) highlight the key features of Urban India, in which there are increasing numbers of people, buildings, slums, and vehicles. Lucknow, the capital city of the Northern State of Uttar Pradesh, is a developing urban area spread over 2528 square kilometers. The city is on the precipice of increased immigration from rural areas, poor infrastructure, and a rapidly rising crime rate on all fronts, including robberies, homicides, rapes, and abductions. The district has a population of over 4 million (2000 census). About 33.3% of the population lives in the

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rural areas, while 62.7% of the population lives in the urban areas. The density of population is 1081 per square kilometer. The primary languages spoken in the district are Hindi and Urdu. There are 7.80 primary schools per ten thousand residents in the urban areas of the Lucknow district. The enrollment in secondary school averages up to 1.07 per ten thousand residents (National Institute of Communicable Diseases Retrieved from http://nicd.org/Dst_Lucknow.asp).

Lucknow has developed into a trade and small scale-manufacturing center. It continues to be a multicultural and multi-religious city and its population comprises two main religious groups of Hindu (70%) and Muslim (22%), plus a number of other cultural and religious minorities. The city also continues to be a seat of old *Nawabi* culture, known locally for courtesy, culture, and cuisine. The urban area spreads along the sides of the Gomti River. It contains an assortment of spaces, including old world *gallis (bylanes)* and *mohallas (colonies)*, (NOTE: you may need to define these terms) crowded slums and temporary shanties of migrant workers, high rise buildings, and low, spread-out colonies, sprawling residences of upper economic status and semi urban peripheries of constructed land.

Sample

Participants in the study were girls enrolled in 7th to 10th grade from 5 schools selected from a district of a Northern State in India. The sample had representation from different types of schools - public and private schools, coeducational and girls' only schools, and schools with English versus Regional (Hindi) language as medium of instruction. These categories also help in identifying the impact of differences in

socioeconomic environments of the participants. The original study included 13 focus group discussions and 40 participants.

Data Collection Method

Structured Focus Group discussions were used to collect data. Structured focus groups are standardized methods of collecting qualitative data across disciplines. They are useful tools in examining values and attitudes of participants. Focus group discussion was an appropriate method for this exploratory study. This method allows for access to in-depth knowledge pertaining to the "meaning, contexts, and processes" of concepts. A focus group guide was used, and the discussion was conducted in both the local language, Hindi, as well as English.

The focus group discussions were conducted in a local research center. Most of the participants were included in more than one focus group. An interview guide was provided to the participants ahead of time. There were two moderators. One was a graduate from the MSW degree program of the Lucknow University, the second was the author, and there was one observer for each focus group. The focus group proceedings were recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word files for analysis. The participants were given travel costs and book store gift certificates to acknowledge their participation in the study.

Data Analysis Methods

Atlas Ti, a qualitative data analysis program was used for the study. This is a useful tool for analyzing, sorting, and cross referencing a large amount of qualitative data. It also facilitates the use of cross sectional indexing or use of formal coding methods in textual data. *Literal and interpretive* analysis was done for the study (Mason,

1996). The literal analysis is a basic content analysis of the text generated in the focus group discussion. Additional interpretive analysis was undertaken to identify themes in the data.

Findings

The following are the key themes that emerge from the data:

1. **Neighborhood is not a self-identified context for the study participants**

In response to a question to rank the important social systems including: school, family, extended family, neighbors, and friends, a majority of the participants did not mention neighborhood. Repeatedly, the moderators introduced the concept of neighborhoods across the focus groups. However, after prompting follow up questions, the respondents reasserted the lack of identification with "neighborhoods" as a context for self.

Quote

"Moderator – In the discussion here we have been talking about school and home. but there are many other institutions also<u>- home, family neighborhood, friends….so all these things…¹</u>.if you consider them as institutions…..school , friends , neighbors……..how would you rank these according to their importance in your life?
Fiza –first of all parents because they are the ones who give us the basics of our life, who taught us basics of our life and now also if we say anything to them, they are ready to solve our problems. Then the school because in my school I think the teachers are same like our parents because they are always ready to help us, they never refuse anything and never get angry with us. If we have any query we can always solve with them of our personal problem or anything about school, they are always ready. Then my friends because as they are of my age I can share everything with them….and neighbors …..I don't talk to them, only to my cousins" - FGD 12
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2. ***"Outside the house"* was an alternate conceptualization of *neighborhood***

The participants seemed not to relate to the word neighborhood or the word "*pados*" in Hindi. They also do not mention the other words *mohalla* or *gali*. However, the word

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[1] All underline text is translated from hindi

baahar, meaning outside, seems to denote the same space right outside the house in many instances. Thus *outside* (the house) appeared to have more meaning for the participants. This concept should be examined in more detail as a self-identified context that has relevance for the study sample.

3. ***"Presence of "boys" in the neighborhood was a deterrent to girls having access to "outside"***

By limiting access to outside, it appears that the parents are able to successfully produce a socially gendered identity and restrict personal agency of girls (in interacting with boys). It is interesting that most of these girls were in coeducational schooling. However, a couple of girls did express dissatisfaction with the state of things and the restrictions on their mobility.

Quote

Moderator - ok let's ask the next question. Which is that thing at home which if changed…you will be very happy. Like earlier Gita was saying …one of you was saying that if you had more freedom. So which aspect of your real life …if you change it, you will be happier.
Bindu - my mother says that you have grown up, don't go to play outside and go with your sister. My sister doesn't agree to go out easily. And I love to roam here and there. My mother goes to office and she says that ask before you ride a cycle, ask before you do anything. So this should not be there. I should be allowed to do some things my self (translated)
FGD 12

While for most girls, it appeared to be a non-issue.

Quote

"Moderator –you have any friends in the neighborhood?'
Jia –no
Moderator –no
Jia – all are boys.
Moderator – so you don't play with the boys?
Jia – no maam. They are all old" FGD 6

Quote

" Moderator –…lets talk about other aspects of your life……socially, personally… what type of changes have come?
Manu – when we were small it was very easy to go out of the house, we could go out with anybody but now that we have grown up, it is not so secure to venture out. If we have to go out somewhere, mummy says that don't go outside alone, it looks bad…restrictions in personal life.(translated from Hindi)(translated)
Moderator – What kind of restrictions?
Manu –where I live it's a hostel colony, most of the house have hostels…boys' hostel. So that is why my mother says not to go out alone and my auntie stays there…nearby then I am not allowed to go there alone" from FGD10

The imposition of a social norm of limited mobility, and access to "*outside*", probably

conditions girls to accept the limitations on their mobility later in life.

Quote

Moderator –what about in the evening, do you go outside to play?
Garima –no I study a lot

The open spaces that seem to substitute for neighborhood are terraces and balconies

> *Hema – "my terrace because it is open and I can see everything all around" - FGD 13*

> *Anu –"the balcony of my house because there are many flowers and I like flowers" – FGD 12*

4. **Age as a factor in access to "*outside* the house"**

In addition to gender-based restrictions, there is an element of age-based restrictions. One

of the quotes identifies increased restrictions on access to outside for older girls. The

source of these restriction directives stems from (in a couple of instances) the grandfather

and (in most others) the mother. The adults appear to reinforce the perception of

"…dangerous, contaminated, disordered space of the outside" p. 467 (Dickey, 2000). It is

difficult to classify this as an *adultist* practice (Thomas, 2005) given the very real

perceived threat of violence against girls in the urban areas.

Quote

Moderator –What about your going out of the house, meaning, you know, how much
freedom you have? Do you go outside and play? Outside the?
   Eva – yes!.
   Moderator – so that hasn't changed?
   Eva – no , … when I was kid …, when my grandfather has died, … for that I time
have come…came outside and play. Till that time.…when my grandfathers not dead, …
we used to… only one hour, when he sit outside, then.…then only we go and play
otherwise we cant." FGD 9

5. ***Class-based distancing* of households from others in the neighborhood**

It is possible to perceive the social distancing of households from the neighborhood as a

method of maintaining class-based distinctions. The majority of interaction from the

household level seems to be limited to extended relatives and parents' friends, not from

the neighborhood.

Quote
Moderator –there are so many things, in a home there is your actual home and there are
people in the house, then there's the neighborhood and what you do……..how would you
describe all of that?
Diya - Neighborhood I can't…because I, I am not very friendly with our…with my
neighbors. I am just friendly with my studies, my uncle.   FGD 3

Moderator:: what else? Does anyone has a different answer?

Jenny: involvement also….like colony, neighbors…little bit importance like….

FGD 11

Given the range of neighborhoods and their socio demographic composition, this can be a

factor in girls' limited access to neighborhood space. Other studies have reported the

phenomenon of social distancing in urban Indian households – upper class from lower

class, household from domestic employee (Dickey, 2000). While there are illustrations of neighbors visiting, it is not frequent or significant in the participants' lives.

Quote

Eva - kite has fallen in our house and my neighbor has come to pick up,

6. **For the girls in the study, school premises *outside* the classroom substitutes as a space for being out of home**

The school "terrace", "balcony", and "garden" appear to be the non-gendered social and physical spaces that are accessible as part of the home.

Quote1

> *"Moderator –In your school <u>what is your favorite place?</u>*
> *Heera –playground*
> *Moderator - <u>why do you like it?</u>*
> *Heera – there we can play the game of our choice" From FGD 13*

Quote2
> *Bipasha – "…playground. It's a auditorium type and I like it because it has a very large space"*

Quote3

> *Meeta –"I like computer lab most in my school because that is the only place which has AC in the school. I like sitting there because it is too cool and…as Bipasha said that our school is very congested type." From FGD 13*

Quote4

> *Hema – "there is a big corridor in my school and behind that there is a big garden and fountain and all those things. In the corridor there is a very large bench. In interval also, before school and after school I can sit there with my friends. I have very less friends, I can sit with them and I can share each and every thing with them…… <u>I always remember that place"</u> From FGD 13*

Quote5
> *Manya – "I like my library and compute lab because they have many good magazines and books in the library." From FGD 13*

Quote6

> *Gita – "And the place that is the….. in front a balcony is there in front of the chemistry lab where no one comes. That side they are not allowed and usually there is a fan open. So I and my friend usually go there and that is the only place where we share each and every thought of ours whether it is related to anything. And she is in another section so we just go there only to talk whatever we have to whether it is studies, related to teachers and whether it is any secret also because no one comes there and we can easily talk there, <u>there is no fear that someone will come and scold us."</u> From FGD 12*

Quote7

> Anu – "the place I can't tell because our school is very congested" *From FGD 12*

Quote8

> **Jiya** <u>–" library...there are rules and we can learn in peace…..our studies"</u> *– FGD 12*

7. **Foucault's panoptic space in girls' assessment of their interaction with the outside.**

   It affects their dressing style, talking style, and other forms of social interaction with the *outside*.

In response to a question that asked the study participants to compare themselves to a girl from Bombay/ Mumbai and Mangalore (These are cosmopolitan cities in Urban India and perceived by most people in India as places where girls having fewer restrictions on expressions of identity and exercising of agency). The *outside* became a reference point in the participant's comparisons.

> **Hema** – *"…we dress according to the environment. The environment is not good here, it is not good there also but people don't have so much of time to see each other. Mostly they wear what they want. And in the way of talking-I think they are much more frank than we are, with anybody."*

With the realization that girls are living in a "bad environment" even in those cities, they are also perceived as managing to dress and talk in a "frank" manner.

> ***Manya*** *– "same views as Hema because their dressing sense is not according to the weather they have. I've see in televisions and all that. And they are too frank with anyone they talk. And we are sometimes in a dilemma that how to talk to such and such person but they talk in their own way with whosoever they meet."*

Undue social interest of other people in the way the girls dress and the way they talk and possibly, whom they talk to, seems to define the *panoptic space* for these girls.

> *"Meeta- the clothes which we wear , we are most concerned that how do people see it but there life is so busy that no one cares for others so no one addresses that what all she is wearing or what all I am wearing. They are mostly concerned with them that whatever they feel is right so it is right."*

One of the participants summarizes the expression of agency as they feel it is right so it is right; this appeared to be a less frequently exercised form of free will for the study participants.

The limited responses from the participants made it difficult to identify the scope for additional factors that affect the relationship of girls with their neighborhood in the study sample. While the participants mention the use of internet at school and, in one case, at home, it does not seem to have a high prevalence. It does not therefore appear to serve as an alternate space for social interaction for the study participants. The underlying dimension of these discussions is the concept and perception of safety and particularly safety for girls, which might also explain their limited social interaction with neighborhoods.

Scope for use of ethnographic methods

The findings reported above underline the complex interaction between public space and girl's identity and agency. This exploratory study creates groundwork for ethnographic research that would identify the sub-texts and recurring patterns in the interaction between adolescent girls and their neighborhoods. Ethnographic studies are a primary method, which is used to identify relevant contexts within a culture (or in reference to a population) and discover patterns within these contexts (Fife, 2005). The distinction and superiority of ethnography over qualitative research also stems from what can be termed as researcher motivation. One of the assumptions in this kind of research undertaking is that the researcher knows the different manifestations of a phenomenon in a culture and is familiar with the different theories that explain them. It falls upon the researcher to determine macro and micro salient features of the study, informed by archival information and researcher's prerogative. This transforms the research into a "post – fact" meaningful statement of likely factors that play a role in the nature of a phenomenon. This is unlike other research methods, where the hypothesis is drawn from a universal interpretation of the cause and description of the phenomenon. Furthermore, I believe that the application of cross discipline methods in examining this relationship between neighborhood and adolescent girls' identity contains both practical and theoretical merit. The information generated by using interdisciplinary methods might be able to isolate interactions between primary variables and do a better job of explaining the causes for a phenomenon and bringing about a change in it (Widstrand, 1976, p. 139)

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