

Preschool Children's Representations of Neighborhood Quality

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Objectives

1. To assess whether neighborhood quality is associated with child adjustment, over and above any impact of family climate and socio-economic status.

Research indicates the importance of neighborhood adversity to child socio-emotional functioning. For example, neighborhood violence (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998), crime (Luthar & Cushing, 1999), and poor quality (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999) have all been associated with adverse child outcomes. Thus, we began by testing the expectation that higher neighborhood quality would be associated with less child vulnerability to socio-emotional adjustment problems.

2. To assess whether neighborhood quality is associated with child neighborhood representations, over and above the impact of family climate and socio-economic status.

Although ecological theories attest to the importance of explicating processes by which neighborhoods impact children, little is known about how the neighborhood impacts children's functioning at the process level of interpretation and coping. Thus, we focused on children's representations of the neighborhood as an index of children's interpretations and expectations pertaining to the climate in their neighborhoods. Research pertaining to child representations has traditionally focused on children's representations of family relationships, which are purported to develop, in part, from experience with the quality of family relations (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). Theoretically, neighborhood representations should operate similarly to family-specific representations: Experience with neighborhood relations should result in representations that guide interpretations/expectations in similar situations. However, we are aware of no research that has specifically considered children's neighborhood representations. Therefore, as an initial foray into this area we considered children's representations specific to the interpersonal climate of the neighborhood. Specifically, we tested whether child representations of the interpersonal climate of the neighborhood – how harmonious a child expects neighbors to be toward each other – would be associated with parent-reported neighborhood quality. In addition, we attempted to highlight the specificity of the relationship between neighborhood quality and child representations of the neighborhood by testing this relationship over and above the impact of family climate and socio-economic status.

Researchers rarely question young children directly about their neighborhoods, likely due in part to the inability of young children to self-report and the inherent challenges in engaging children in interviewing paradigms. In family research, narrative techniques such as story-stem completion tasks are postulated to be especially appropriate for assessing young children's representations because children have a natural interest in storytelling (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990); hence, these procedures have the unique capacity to capture the meaning children make of a situation without requiring children to answer complicated questions (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005). Thus, in addition to the main objectives of this study, we also aimed to pilot story stems capable of examining whether children exhibit meaningful representations of the interpersonal climate in their neighborhoods.

3. To assess whether child representations of neighborhood harmony are associated with child adjustment.

More negative, hostile representations are thought to reflect child difficulties preserving security and thus engender child adjustment problems (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994; Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997). Therefore, guided by family process models (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990) we explored whether children's representations of neighbors as less harmonious and more hostile would be associated with greater child vulnerability to socio-emotional adjustment problems.

Method

Participants

- ▶ 32 boys and 29 girls (mean age 4.3) and their primary caregivers (94% mothers)
- ▶ 62% married, 21% single, 2% cohabitating, 3% divorced, 7% separated
- ▶ 67% White, 25% African-American, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian American, 1% Other
- ▶ Median family income \$29,000 - \$39,999
- ▶ Recruited through urban preschools in a mid-size, Eastern US city

Measures

Construct	Method	Description
<i>Covariates</i>		
Socio-Economic Status (SES)	Caregiver Self-Report	Mean of family income and caregiver education (standardized).
Overall Family Climate	Caregiver Self-Report	The Family Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict scales of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994) and the Family Sociability, Disengagement, Democratic Style, Laissez-Faire Style, and Enmeshment scales by Bloom (1985) and Bloom & Naar (1994) ($\alpha=.83$).
<i>Neighborhood Quality</i>		
Overall Neighborhood Quality	Caregiver Self-Report	Mean of the Quality, Retaliation, Assist/Intervene, Victimization, and Disorder Scales by Couffin, Korbin, & Su (1996) ($\alpha=.83$).
<i>Child Representations</i>		
Neighborhood Interpersonal Climate	Child Observation	Child appraisals of the extent of harmony and discord among neighbors in the face of two neighborhood dilemmas (see Procedures).
<i>Child Adjustment</i>		
Socio-Emotional Adjustment	Caregiver Self-Report	Sum of the Negative Social Skills, Positive Social Skills, Assertive Social Skills, Task Orientation, Shy-Anxious Problems, Frustration Tolerance, and Disposition subscales of the Parent-Child Rating Scale (McKim & Cowen, 1988; PMHP, 1999) ($\alpha=.70$). Square root transformation performed to correct for kurtosis.

Procedure

Primary Caregiver Interview. After providing consent for their child's and their own participation, primary caregivers were contacted by telephone and trained interviewers administered questionnaires to assess neighborhood environment, family climate, and demographics. At a separate administration through the preschool, caregivers completed the measure of child adjustment.

Child Story Stem Completion Activity. To assess children's internal representations, extensively-trained interviewers visited children at the preschools and administered a story stem completion task based on the established MacArthur Story Stem Battery (Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990). Story stems were designed to assess children's representations of the self and others in situations that are likely to pose a challenge to interpersonal relationships. Each standardized stem, plus warm-up and debriefing stems, were presented to children using various props and dolls (matched to the ethnicity and gender of the child). The experimenter then gave the props and dolls to the child and asked him/her to "Show me and tell me what happens next." When needed, children were prompted to address the main issue ("What's going to happen about the...?") or to clarify actions (e.g., "What's happening there?"). Psychometric support for this type of procedure is evidenced by its meaningful ties to children's social and emotional functioning (e.g., Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, & Klockow, 2002), and behavior problems (e.g., Oppenheim et al., 1997; Warren et al., 1996). For this study, we utilized the two Neighborhood Relations story stems:

(1) In the *Sick Neighbor* story, the child was told, "In this story, there are grown-ups in the neighborhood." A child (same sex as target child) and two adult (one male and one female) dolls were seated along the side of a felt mat. They looked on as an adult male doll walking very unsteadily said, "Whoa, I feel very dizzy," and then fell down; the interviewer explained that "he is knocked out cold." The child was told that "His money fell out of his pocket" and play money was thrown near the man. Then the child was asked to "Show me and tell me what happens next." The aim was to address the extent to which the onlookers helped the man and the negative escalation or positive resolution of the situation.

(2) The *Collision* story was set up with the same introduction and physical set-up as in the *Sick Neighbor* story. The interviewer then depicted two adult male dolls walking toward one another. The first man said, "I am walking home" and the second man said "I am walking to the store." Then the two men bumped into each other. The first doll exclaimed (in a raised, but not angry voice), "Hey! I got bumped!" and the second doll exclaimed in the same tone of voice, "Ouch! That hurt when I got bumped!" The child was then asked to "Show me and tell me what happens next." The aim was to address the extent to which the dilemma was depicted as hostile or benign, whether there was negative escalation or positive resolution, and the involvement of the onlookers.

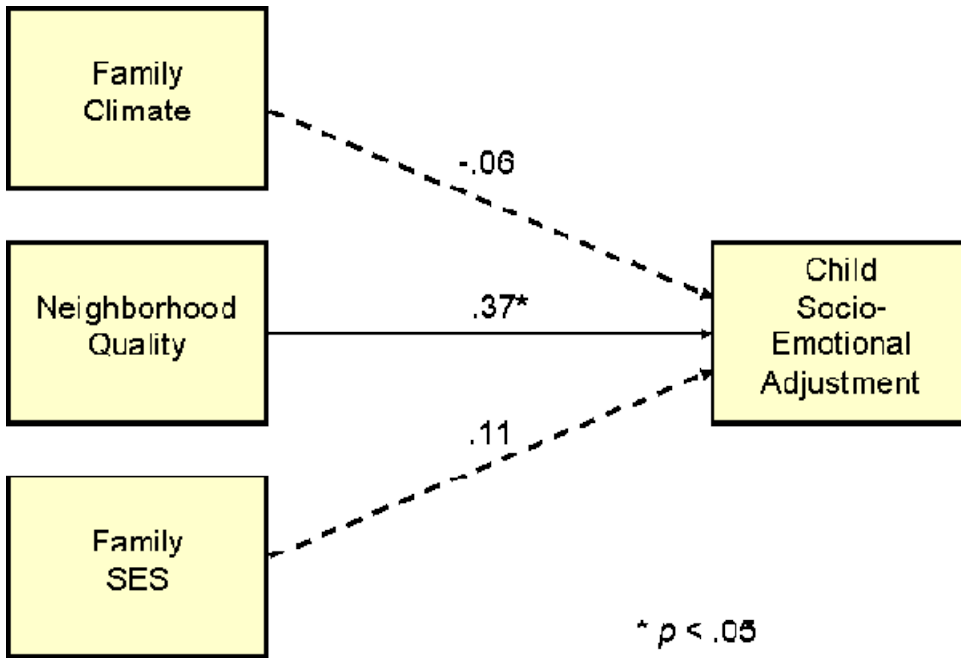
Coding: Children's videotaped responses were coded along a five-point, continuous scale of Interpersonal Harmony, within three domains: Adult-Adult Harmony, Adult-Child Harmony, and Child-Other Harmony. Interpersonal Harmony was designed to measure the degree to which children's stories depict interpersonal warmth, affection, and protection of others. Ratings ranged from 5 (Very Harmonious), in which a story included *multiple* instances of strong affection, to 1 (Not Harmonious), or stories that included no mention of affection, positive feelings toward another, or nor affiliative actions.

Inter-rater Reliability: Twenty-five percent of videotapes were independently coded by two raters. In the two stories, intraclass correlation coefficients were .97 and .91 for Adult Harmony, .94 and .97 for Adult-Child Harmony, and .95 and .95 for Child Harmony, respectively.

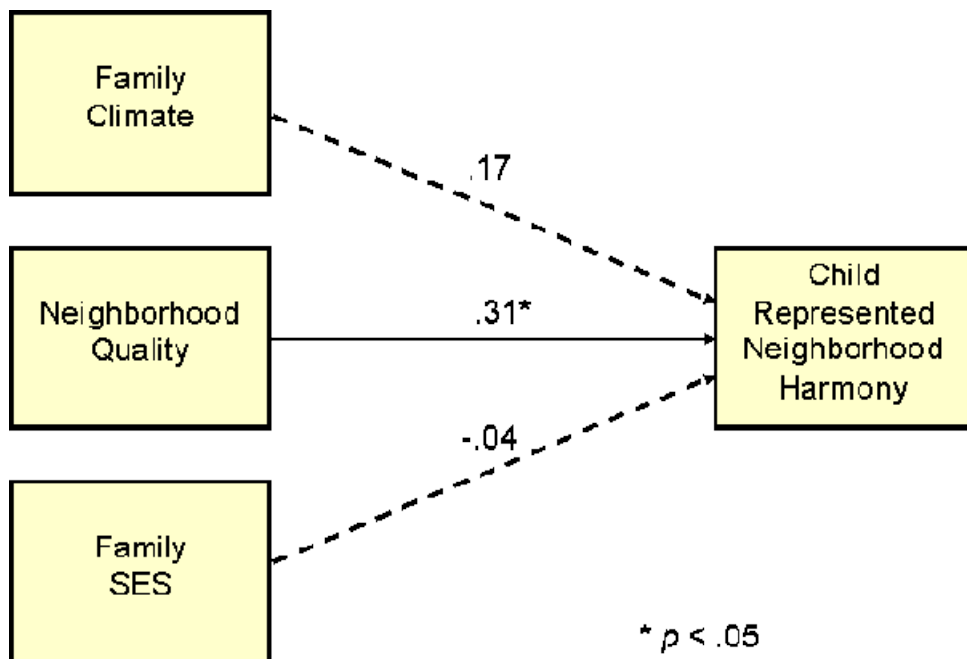
Data Reduction: Given significant intercorrelation, the three harmony codes were collapsed within story ($\alpha=.83$ in the *Sick Neighbor* and $.84$ in the *Bumping* story) and then collapsed across story to form one **Interpersonal Harmony** construct ($\alpha = .85$).

Results

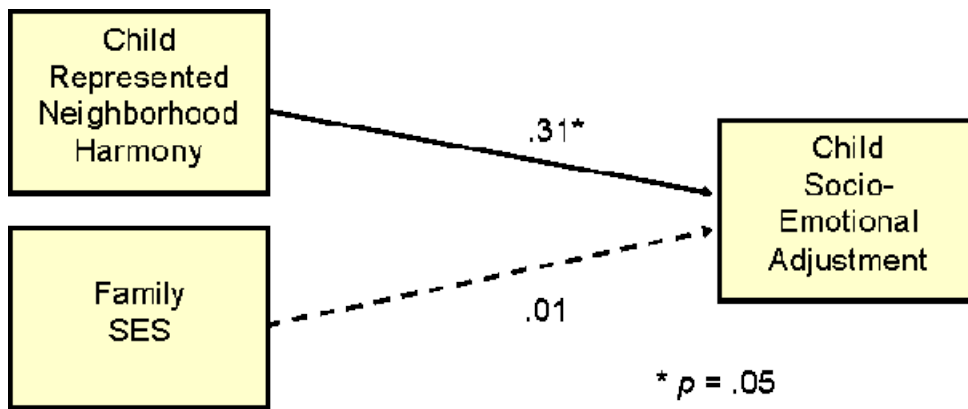
1. *Neighborhood quality is associated with child adjustment, over and above any impact of family climate and socio-economic status.*



2. *Neighborhood quality is associated with child neighborhood representations.*



3. *Child representations of neighborhood harmony are associated with child adjustment.*



Summary

In accordance with the call of risk and developmental psychopathology researchers for efforts to clarify processes underlying the impact of various risk factors on child adjustment (e.g. Cicchetti, 1993; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Sroufe & Rutter, 1984), this study was designed as an initial step toward considering processes by which neighborhood quality relates to child adjustment. Results, if replicated in a mediational model with longitudinal data, would suggest a pathway in which neighborhood poor quality impacts children at the level of interpretation and expectation by fostering representations of neighbors as being less interpersonally harmonious (kind and protective); these negative representations, in turn, can leave children more vulnerable to adjustment problems.

Within studies designed explicitly to consider the relative effects of family and community risk factors, research has often used rough markers of community level factors, such as SES, geographic location, or poverty (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Simons et al., 1996) that are often only weakly associated with child functioning (Coulton et al., 1996; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Moreover, neighborhood has often been operationally defined using census data or block groups, despite concerns about the degree to which such large units represent space that is meaningful to young children (Coulton et al.). Therefore, an important research direction includes more fully examining the roles of neighborhood quality and process at levels meaningful to young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Coulton et al.). Thus, there is unique utility in studies such as this that are specifically designed to (1) gather data at both the community and family levels that consists of (2) constructs relevant to the welfare of families with young children (Coulton et al.) via (3) measures of neighborhood quality that can capture the meaning of neighborhood to young children, and that consider (4) the additive contributions that family and community risk factors make to child adjustment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998).

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