



Attributing activity space as risky and safe: The social dimension to the meaning of place for urban adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The social dimension of urban adolescents' interpretation of their activity space was investigated by examining reasons for attributing place as risky and safe, and analyzing these reasons by social network quality. Activity space and social network data were collected on 301 teens presenting for routine medical check-ups. SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys performed linguistic analyses on open-ended survey responses, applying concept derivation, concept inclusion, semantic networks, and co-occurrence rules. Results produced 13 categories of reasons for locations attributed as risky and safe. Categories were then transformed into dichotomous variables and analyzed with chi-square tests by social network quality. Results indicated two categories of reasons for locations attributed as risky: alcohol and drugs and Illegal activity, which were dependent upon social network quality. Two categories of reasons for locations attributed as safe, namely protective place and Neighborhood, were also dependent upon social network quality. These findings assert that adolescents' social networks influence their interpretations of risk and safety, highlighting a social dimension to the meaning of place.

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1. Introduction

The idea that risk exacerbating places are associated with negative health outcomes is especially salient for urban youth. Research has shown that urban youths are particularly vulnerable to early use and future dependency on illicit drugs and alcohol (Wright, 2004) and that young African Americans living in the inner city are at unique risk for substance abuse. For example, while African American adolescents use less marijuana compared to white and Hispanic teens, African Americans as a group engage in greater lifetime use of marijuana as compared to white and Hispanic counterparts. Further, there is evidence that as African Americans age, they suffer from substance abuse-related diseases at a greater rate as compared to other ethnic groups (CDCP, 2007). Given these risks, understanding the role of place, and specifically the unique meaning of activity space for urban youth is important when considering health policy and programming.

The role of urban places association with health outcomes has a long history. Classic sociological studies have linked large urban geographic units to negative outcomes, such as rates of suicide and chronic unemployment, providing an empirical link between behaviors and place (Durkheim, 1951; Wilson, 1987). Building on these sociological theories of alienation and isolation, Shaw and McKay (1942) posited that juvenile delinquency is in large

measure influenced by social disorganization in inner-city neighborhoods, where indicators such as abandoned or dilapidated housing and criminal activity signify a lack of social control stemming from poverty, isolation from 'mainstream society,' and residential instability. Relevant to the present study, a growing body of research has shown that perceptions of particular places are thought to influence health and health-related behaviors and are particularly suggestive of causal pathways linking place with health outcomes (Airey, 2003; Popay et al., 2003). More specifically, studies have established that individual perceptions of the characteristics of home neighborhoods have been found to be a robust predictor of behavior such as substance use and mental health outcomes (Ellaway et al., 2002; Kawachi and Berkman, 2003; Lambert et al., 2005; Latkin and Curry, 2003; Mason et al., 2009). However, very little is known about (a) how place is perceived within the context of individuals' routine activities, or activity spaces—not just home locations, (b) why particular places are attributed as risky and safe, and (c) if these place-based attributions are associated with social network quality (levels of risk for and protection against substance use). The purpose of the present study is to collect and categorize urban adolescents' reasons for attributing their activity spaces as risky and safe, and to test these categories' dependency on social network quality.

1.1. Activity space

An important construct that provides methodological guidance for addressing the socio-spatial dimension of adolescents' lives is

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activity space. Activity space has a long interdisciplinary history with disciplines such as geography, public health, sociology, transportation studies, time–space studies, social psychology, and human–environment interactions. It can be defined as all the locations that an individual has direct contact with as a result of his or her daily activities (Miller, 1991). More broadly, activity spaces are the manifestation of our spatial lives, serving as an index representing routine locations and all the accompanying psychological, social, and health-related experiences of these places (Golledge and Stimson, 1997; Sherman et al., 2005). Recent research with urban youth informs us that the type of locations in which youth spend their time are varied and geographically dispersed, and are not delimited by traditional geographical boundaries such as census tract, home neighborhood, block group, or political ward (Mason and Mennis, 2010; Mason et al., 2004). It is due to this unique spatial behavior of urban youth that traditional geographic boundaries are not effective in capturing teens' spatial signatures and associated health outcomes.

Recent research on adolescent activity space has demonstrated that neighborhood characteristics influence adolescents' perceptions of safety and risk and are associated with substance use and mental health outcomes (Mason and Korpela, 2009; Mason et al., 2009), underscoring the importance of this construct for understanding urban youth. These findings provide objective insight into adolescents' perceptions of safety and risk by examining observed risk and protective features that are most proximal to teens' activity space locations and the associated health outcomes. However, what is missing in this area of research is an understanding of why, or the reasoning for attributing activity spaces as safe or risky. Research that addresses this reasoning will provide insight into urban teens' psycho-social interpretation of space and has preventive implications for researchers seeking to deepen their understanding of the influence of place. That is, in order to provide a fuller contextual understanding of adolescents' activity space, social network analysis needs to be incorporated into these efforts to address the influence of the spatial dimension through the interaction with the social dimension.

1.2. Social networks

While the influence of social interactions on adolescent substance use and mental health is well established (e.g. Mayes and Suchman, 2006; Valente et al., 2005; Mason, 2009), there has been little recognition in the literature on the interplay between social networks and place. While research has demonstrated that adolescents develop social strategies through their social networks to regulate emotions (Berkman and Glass, 2000), a broader approach considers the role of place in producing environmental strategies to regulate emotions and promote identity development (Korpela et al., 2002). Selected locations represent critical environments for adolescent social development, such as identity formation, by selecting and shaping appropriate outer contexts or settings to moderate internal states and address developmental needs through processes of control, creativity, mastery, privacy, security, personal displays, and serenity (Clark and Uzzell, 2006; Korpela et al., 2002; Mason and Korpela, 2009). These healthful outcomes are linked to appropriate self and emotional regulation, which in turn serve as protective factors against mental health problems (Cole et al., 1994; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Kring and Werner, 2004) and against substance use (Hull and Slone, 2004; Sayette, 2004).

Place can be integrated into social network approaches adding a necessary and under-examined contextual grounding to network research. Place-based social network research assumes that adolescents' social networks are not static across peer

composition or across locations. That is, adolescents' social networks have different qualities (levels of risk) based upon the varied composition of a network and the level of risk at a particular location. The physical and social characteristics of adolescents' routine locations, whether measured by perceptions or independent measures, are known to interact with substance use and mental health (Fagg et al., 2008; Mason and Korpela, 2009). These findings support the theory that different settings are important at different developmental periods for adolescents (Cicchetti and Blender, 2004). Place-based social network quality then is dependent upon the alters who may or may not frequent a particular location of interest, constituting an interaction between network composition and place.

Recent place-based social network research has attempted to link the social and spatial dimensions of adolescents. Mason and colleagues analyzed whether the likelihood of urban adolescents' substance use involvement was dependent on place-based social networks (based upon activity space) and whether that is moderated by gender and age. Results show that for young female adolescents (13–16), substance use is strongly associated with their place-based social networks compared to older female adolescents (17–20) and compared to young and older male adolescents (Mason et al., 2010b). This research has established links between socio-spatial behaviors and health outcomes and provides further insight into the social ecology of urban adolescents.

1.3. Considering the meaning of place

Social science researchers interested in understanding the role of place on behavior have typically examined environmental influences by simply tallying geographic features hypothesized to influence outcomes within prescribed locations. For example, one may count the number of liquor stores within the census tract where an individual lives to investigate how the availability of alcohol influences alcohol abuse. Recent research asserts, however, that this approach fails to address the primacy of meaning of place for individuals (Frohlich et al., 2002; Cummins et al., 2007). These studies show that the meaning ascribed to various places is important, and is linked to and expressed through social practices and health behaviors. Specifically, the interpretation of meaning of places is the psycho-social mechanism by which geographic features exert influence on individuals (Mason et al., 2009).

By understanding the attributive meaning of places for individuals, researchers can collect more accurate social ecological data. For example, concepts such as a 'high-crime neighborhood' or 'safe neighborhood,' while ostensibly objectively measureable using crime and other large-scale data sources, may be experienced and interpreted completely differently by different individuals depending on their psychological, social, and behavioral background and practices. For example, recent research has confirmed that urban adolescents' interpret their home as safe regardless of objectively measured features considered "risky" such as crime, violence, drug sales, poverty, etc. (Mason et al., 2009). In this study Mason and colleagues used both the density of and the distance to risky features to examine adolescents' interpretation of their homes as safe or risky. This finding was then tested on the sample divided by substance users and non-users, with both groups reporting home as safe regardless of the objective risk, indicating that risky behaviors are not predictive of place interpretation. This finding is important and provides support for using activity space data to more accurately understand the socio-spatial lives of urban teens. Specifically, a more detailed understanding is needed to find out

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