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Context, network, and adolescent perceived risk

Yue Yuan ^{a, *}, Weihua An ^b^a Department of Justice Studies, San Jose State University, USA^b Indiana University Bloomington, USA

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has identified a list of individual attributes, along with neighborhood, school, and network characteristics, as potential factors affecting perceived risk. However, prior research has rarely investigated the simultaneous effects of these factors on perceived risk. This study uses the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth), supplemented with the 1990 census data, to examine the associations of neighborhood, school, and network characteristics and perceived risk among adolescents. To account for the overlaps between school districts and neighborhoods, we use cross-classified multilevel modeling (CCMM). Our analyses lead to two main findings. First, perceived risk appears to be context-specific. Perceived risk at school is mostly affected by school characteristics but not by neighborhood characteristics. Perceived risk in neighborhood is mostly affected by neighborhood characteristics but not by school characteristics. Second, network characteristics matter for both types of perceived risk and more so for perceived risk at school than in neighborhood. We find that, while having more friends is associated with a lower level of perceived risk, having more friends with delinquent and violent behaviors is associated with a higher level of perceived risk among adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Research has discussed the multidimensional characteristic of an individual's perceptions of crime (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987; Gabriel and Greve, 2003; Wilcox Rountree and Land, 1996b). Ferraro and LaGrange (1987), for example, pointed out that fear of crime refers to an individual's negative emotional and physiological reactions to potential danger and criminal victimization, while perceived risk refers to cognitive judgment and assessment of the likelihood of criminal victimization. Fear of crime and perceived risk represent two important dimensions of one's reactions to crime (Ferraro, 1995; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987; Wilcox Rountree and Land, 1996b). Wilcox Rountree and Land (1996b) demonstrated that although fear of crime and perceived risk shared some predictors, results from their multi-level models suggested that these two concepts are conceptually distinct at the same time. We focus on individuals' cognitive assessment of the safety, that is, perceived risk of surroundings in this study.

High levels of perceived risk can impact adolescents' academic performance and mental health; thus, it is important to understand how various factors influence perceived risk (Milam et al., 2010; Nijs et al., 2014). Prior research (Ferraro, 1995; Melde and Esbensen, 2009; Perumean-Chaney and Sutton, 2013; Wilcox Rountree and Land, 1996b) often focuses on individual-level, school-level, and neighborhood-level characteristics to understand adolescents' perceptions of personal

* Corresponding author. MacQuarrie Hall 524, San Jose State University, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192, USA.

E-mail address: wilson.yuan@sjsu.edu (Y. Yuan).

safety. However, several research questions are unanswered. First, prior research on adolescents' perceived risk often assumed a singular context and ignored the fact that adolescents are often nested in multiple settings, such as school and neighborhood. Multiple social settings may have differential impacts on an individual's cognitive assessment of the environment. As Jackson (2004, p. 949) explained, different social contexts could yield different social interactions and interpretations of the context-specific situation; Jackson suggested that "perceived risk and fear of crime should be located within the actor's definition of the situation, their subjective experience or interpretation placed in its social context." (see also Warr, 1990) Students who go to the same schools may come from different neighborhoods, and schools are not necessarily nested within neighborhoods. Thus, the extent to which variation in adolescents' perceived risk or subjective interpretation of the risk of the environment is affected by individuals, schools, or neighborhoods is presently unknown.

Second, the relationship between adolescents' socializing with peers and perceived risk is understudied. To be more specific, the paradoxical relationship between adolescents' social networks and perceived risk has not been fully investigated. On the one hand, adolescents with dense social networks may be more likely to report high levels of perceived risk due to the fast and widespread transmission of crime-related information within friendship networks (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). On the other hand, adolescents' cognitive assessment or interpretation of the risk of an environment can be alleviated when they have an increasing number of social ties, due to the fact that social ties often provide social support and access to resources that be mobilized to cope with threatening situations (Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Warr, 2002). Some studies (Melde, 2009; Tillyer et al., 2011) used adolescents' perceptions of friends' delinquent behaviors to understand perceived risk, but the results provide mixed (and sometimes contradicting) evidence on the effects of friendship networks. We argue that these prior studies may have inadequately measured peer delinquency by using adolescents' perceptions of peer delinquency.

To better understand the variations in perceived risk among adolescents, this study draws on ecological systems theory, investigating the independent and interdependent impacts of neighborhood, school, and social networks on adolescents' context-specific perceived risk. The current study makes several important contributions. First, perceived risk often focuses on either school or neighborhood characteristics to reveal the contextual effects. In contrast, the current study uses cross-classified multilevel logistic models to investigate how school-level and neighborhood-level characteristics simultaneously influence adolescents' perceived risk. Second, to advance the understandings of the relationship between adolescents' socializing with peers and perceived risk, we include measures that capture different aspects of adolescents' social networks. Therefore, the current study extends previous research by linking network characteristics and self-perceived risk. Specifically, we use panel data to determine whether prior social network characteristics are associated with subsequent perceived risk, thereby showing the temporal association between social network properties and adolescents' perceived risk. Third, we test hypotheses regarding the influence of social networks on context-specific outcomes, providing additional information regarding whether school, neighborhood, and network characteristics universally affect perceived risk of different types of contexts.

2. Existing research on the fear of crime

Fear of crime emerged as an important research subject in the 1960s (Biderman, 1967; Ennis, 1967; Reiss and Black, 1967) due to its omnipresence as well as its relationship to individuals' various aspects of quality of life. After five decades of research, fear of crime researchers have developed several theoretical perspectives to understanding sources of the fear of crime and perceived risk. Prior research regarding explanations of fear and perceived risk is reviewed in the following paragraphs.

First, the victimization perspective assumes that individuals' direct and indirect victimization experiences influence fear of crime. Direct victimization refers to victims of certain crimes such as crimes against persons and properties, while indirect victimization refers to exposure to crime-related information such as witnessing of a violent incident or obtaining violence-related information from friends, relatives, and mass media (Hale, 1996). Researchers suggested that both direct and indirect victimization should be included in the study of the fear (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Garofalo, 1979; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Tyler, 1980). For example, studies showed that the direct victimization approach is limited in explaining the fear of crime and perceived risk because the proportion of direct victimization was often low in empirical research (Garofalo, 1979). At the same time, the extent to which how indirect victimization (e.g., obtaining fear-inspiring information from media, relatives, and friends) influences an individual's fear and perceived risk is understudied (Tyler, 1980, 1984). For example, Tyler (1984) found that there is no direct link between mass media and one's perceived risk, while other studies (Lejeune and Alex, 1973; Tyler, 1980) suggested that the effects of one's social networks may have more significant impacts on perceived risk compared to mass media.

Second, the vulnerability perspective has been used to explain certain variation of the fear of crime (Killias, 1990; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Unlike the victimization perspective, the vulnerability approach provides alternative explanations of why women, minority groups, and the elderly often experience high levels of fear even though the actual victimization rates were low for women and the elderly (Hindelang et al., 1978; Warr, 1985). More specifically, physical vulnerability refers to body size and strengths, while social vulnerability indicates an individual's race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The vulnerability perspective assumes that individuals with high levels of social and physical vulnerability are prone to fear because they lack the capabilities of resist criminal victimizations, and they lack resources to cope with threatening and violent situations (Killias, 1990). Empirical studies (Franklin et al., 2008; Hindelang et al., 1978; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Zhang et al., 2009) have shown that vulnerability-related characteristics including race, gender, and socioeconomic status are important factors in understanding the fear of crime.

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