Examining gendered pathways in the causal chain linking neighborhood navigational strategies and unstructured socializing to adolescent violent offending

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Research has demonstrated that adolescents with higher levels of street efficacy – the perceived ability to avoid violence and to stay safe in the neighborhood – are less likely to engage in violence themselves. But, empirical research has yet to examine sex differences in the relationship between street efficacy and violent offending. This study examines whether the causal chain linking street efficacy to adolescent violent offending is gendered.
Methods: Using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, a three-level logistic item response model nested 14,483 violent crime item responses within 1817 subjects representing 222 neighborhoods across metropolitan Chicago.
Results: An attenuated sex gap in violent offending was observed at higher levels of street efficacy. This was accounted for by: (1) reductions in the sex gap in unstructured socializing at higher levels of street efficacy, and (2) a concomitant effect of unstructured socializing on violent offending.
Conclusions: Street efficacy and unstructured socializing matter in the etiology of youthful offending, but the ways in which these constructs are relevant are nuanced. In particular, gender has a strong impact on the development and manifestation of street efficacy and unstructured socializing, which, in turn, are related to violent offending.

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Introduction

Scholars across the social sciences have lamented the epistemological divide between macro- and micro-criminology. In consecutive Presidential addresses to the American Sociology of Criminology, Rosenfeld (2011) and Messner (2012) discussed the failure of much sociological research to consider the role of individual agency in linking structural properties of social systems (i.e., more distal causes of crime) to the proximate causes of criminal offending. Concurrently, they urged micro-criminologists to continue to ponder the mechanisms through which aspects of the structural and cultural landscape shape individuals' developmental trajectories. Discussion on macro–micro integration is not new — scholars have long recognized that one avenue to advance criminology as a discipline is multi-level theorizing and analysis (see Bernard & Snipes, 1996; Rountree, Wilcox, Land, & Miethe, 1994; Wellford, 1989; Wikström, 2005). Much of this research has cited the inability of single-level theories to explain more than 20% of variation in criminal offending (see Elliott, 1985; Muftić, 2009; Wilson, 2012).

Linking persons and contexts is heady business, and theoretical and methodological challenges exist (Coleman, 1986; also see Zimmerman & Messner, 2012). But, there are recent efforts at multilevel theorizing

(see Wikström, 2010). Qualitative work has also made great strides in this area (see Harding, 2009). And, appropriately deemed the "person–context nexus," there is no shortage of empirical work that has utilized multilevel statistical analysis to examine individuals within their social contexts (for a review, see Baumer & Arnio, 2012).

To address the reality that persons and contexts are inextricably linked, Sharkey (2006) distinguished youths' "imposed" and "selected" environments (also see Bandura, 1997, p. 163). Imposed environments, unalterable to youths, represent enduring structural and cultural conditions of neighborhoods. Selected environments, on the other hand, are mutable: youths can choose friends, behaviors, and activity spaces within their imposed environments. Moreover, youths can purposefully observe and interpret their surroundings and subsequently develop strategies for navigating violent confrontations and staying safe in the contextual landscape. This psychological process, referred to as "street efficacy," captures a youth's ability to avoid fights, to do things, and to avoid gangs in the neighborhood. Through the concept of street efficacy, Sharkey (2006) injected human agency into the study of neighborhood effects, thereby filling a void in the gap between macro- and micro-criminology.

While studies have linked street efficacy (inversely) to adverse developmental outcomes, empirical research on street efficacy as a gendered process is sparse. In short, studies have yet to explore whether the relationship between street efficacy and offending varies across the sexes. But, qualitative work suggests that male and female youths

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employ different neighborhood navigational strategies (Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008) and differentially exercise these risk-avoidance strategies (Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, Kling, & Duncan, 2011). Based on such insights, this study examines empirically whether street efficacy has a greater impact on violent offending among males than among females. To explain variation in the relationship between street efficacy and violence across the sexes, I propose a mediated moderation model that links biological sex and street efficacy to violent offending through unstructured socializing.

The narrative begins with brief reviews of the literatures on street efficacy and unstructured socializing before focusing on the gendered pathways through which neighborhood navigational strategies and unstructured socializing impact violent behavior. The key hypotheses are subsequently examined using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), a dataset well-suited to examine how biological sex, street efficacy, and unstructured socializing contribute independently and interactively to violent offending.

Conceptual background

Street efficacy

Children and adolescents exert little to no control over where their families reside or over the socio-structural conditions of their neighborhoods. But, these "imposed" environments are not deterministic. Rather, youths have agency to change their "selected" environments – their peer associations, behaviors, and activity spaces – within these imposed settings (Sharkey, 2006; see also Corsaro & Eder, 1995). Moreover, it is these proximal selected environments that have immediate consequences for violence. Street efficacy is the social cognitive process through which youths internalize their imposed environments and choose selected environments that facilitate safety and discourage violence (Sharkey, 2006). Specifically, street efficacy assesses youths' perceived ability to go places safely, to avoid gangs, and to elude violent confrontations in the neighborhood. Ultimately, this views youths as active participants in shaping their environments, rather than as passive objects acted upon by the environment.

Using data from the PHDCN, Sharkey (2006) examined the sources and consequences of street efficacy. His results indicated that factors at multiple spheres of influence impacted the development of street efficacy. For example, demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity and age), personal attributes (impulsivity and verbal ability), prior exposures to violence (secondary exposure to violence, exposure to violent peers, and prior involvement with violence), family factors (parental supervision), and neighborhood characteristics (collective efficacy) impacted adolescents' perceived ability to engage social life while avoiding violence. Moreover, in supplemental analyses, Sharkey (2006) examined whether the sources of street efficacy were different for males and for females. The results indicated few significant differences across the sexes. Being exposed to violence in the home and subjected to direct, personal victimization reduced street efficacy among males but not females. Conversely, impulsivity reduced street efficacy among females but not males. But, because the majority of the coefficient estimates were statistically indistinguishable across the sexes, the results did not imply systematically different patterns of development of street efficacy for males and for females.

Pertaining to the consequences of street efficacy, Sharkey (2006) found that confidence about avoiding violence influenced violent behavior directly, as well as indirectly by deterring affiliation with delinquent peers. A number of additional studies have demonstrated that youths with higher levels of street efficacy are less likely to be aggressive (Kirk & Hardy, 2014), to be anxious/depressed (Dupéré, Leventhal, & Vitaro, 2012), to be victimized (Gibson, Fagan, & Antle, 2014), to engage in violent behavior (Sharkey, 2006), and to witness community violence (Sharkey & Sampson, 2010). In short, street

efficacy has been well-received as a theoretical and empirical contribution to the neighborhood effects literature (see Browning & Jackson, 2013).

Empirical research on heterogeneity in the effect of street efficacy, however, is sparse (cf. Gibson et al., 2014). This study adds to the literature on neighborhood navigational strategies by investigating sex differences in the relationship between street efficacy and violent offending. In the pages that follow, I discuss the role that sex differences in unstructured socializing play in explaining variation in the relationship between street efficacy and violence across the sexes.

Sex differences in unstructured socializing

Unstructured socializing represents time spent with peers in unstructured activities absent of capable guardianship (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Examples of unstructured socializing include participating in pickup games and "hanging out" (Agnew & Peterson, 1989), normative processes during adolescence (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). But, unstructured socializing is also a situational process that facilitates delinquency (Haynie & Osgood, 2005), property crime (Anderson & Hughes, 2009), substance use (Osgood et al., 1996), exposure to violence (Zimmerman, Messner, & Rees, 2013), and violence (Maimon & Browning, 2010).

This study is not focused on the criminogenic effects of unstructured socializing, per se, but rather on sex differences in unstructured socializing. In both quantitative and qualitative work, it is well-established that unstructured socializing tends to cluster among males. In the empirical literature, Videnović, Pešić, and Plut (2010) found that males are more likely to socialize in the community, while females are more likely to socialize in each other's homes. In addition, Osgood et al. (1996) found that males are more likely to drive around for fun, visit with friends, go to parties, and spend evenings outside of the home (see Larson & Richards, 1991).

In the qualitative literature, Bottcher (2001) discussed gendered elements of "making friends and having fun" as routine daily activities salient to sex differences in patterns of delinquency. Comparing male youthful offenders committed to the California Youth Authority (CYA) in the early 1990s to their sisters (some incarcerated, some not), Bottcher (2001) identified four gendered temporal–spatial components of youths' "daily paths." First, males tended to socialize in a wide area or "territory" (e.g., the community), while females were more likely to position themselves closer to home. Second, greater physical "movement" – spending more time with more people in a broader context – characterized male routine daily activities, as compared to females' activities. Third, males, compared to females, were more likely to spend time in "privacy," that is, in areas devoid of adult monitoring. Finally, males had greater "access to nighttime" than did females, staying out later with less strict curfews.

Bottcher's (2001) discussion of daily paths is echoed by Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2011) in their qualitative examination of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment. Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2011, p. 1166) found that males tend to spend time with other males in unstructured, unsupervised activities in the community, for example: "playing football or basketball at a local school, park, alley, inner courtyard, or vacant lot or loitering on street corners in front of bars and convenience stores." On the other hand, females tend to structure their time around the home in supervised activities: "inside the house or on the front stoop, talking and playing cards. Likewise, when girls visited friends or family in other neighborhoods, they usually spent their time inside or on their friends' stoops or porches… many more girls than boys emphasized that they spent most of their free time close to, if not inside, the home."

Qualitative research also suggests that gendered expectations for school and work shape how young males and females structure their free time. For example, females appear to be more adept at using "dominant" cultural capital to demonstrate intelligence (e.g., through