



Everybody's doin' it (right?): Neighborhood norms and sexual activity in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

A neighborhood's normative climate is linked to, but conceptually distinct from, its structural characteristics such as poverty and racial/ethnic composition. Given the deleterious consequences of early sexual activity for adolescent health and well-being, it is important to assess normative influences on youth behaviors such as sexual debut, number of sex partners, and involvement in casual sexual experiences. The current study moves beyond prior research by constructing a measure of normative climate that more fully captures neighborhood norms, and analyzing the influence of normative climate on behavior in a longitudinal framework. Using recently geo-coded data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), we analyze the effect of normative climate on adolescents' sexual behaviors. Results indicate that variation in neighborhood normative climates increases adolescents' odds of sexual debut and casual sex, and is associated with their number of sex partners, even after accounting for neighborhood structural disadvantage and demographic risk factors.

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1. Introduction

Neighborhoods are important contexts in which adolescent risk behaviors unfold. Prior studies find that sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, substance use, delinquency, and violence vary significantly across neighborhoods (Billy et al., 1994; Shaw and McKay, 1942; South and Baumer, 2000). Neighborhoods are particularly important during adolescence, given youths' limited geographic mobility during this stage of development. Further, individuals and their micro-level relationships (e.g., family, friends, peer networks) exist within a larger macro-level context (Berkman et al., 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and these relationships and contexts interact over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 108). Investigations of "neighborhood effects" have examined mechanisms through which various structural characteristics influence a range of behaviors and health outcomes. One mechanism through which communities affect behavior is the emergence, maintenance, and transmission of social norms that influence preferences for and meanings of particular behaviors, such as the appropriate age of sexual debut or the acceptable number of sex partners. Such norms define the boundaries of permissible behaviors (by encouraging or failing to discourage them), and provide justifications and rationalizations for behaviors that help establish them as favorable (see Akers, 2006 [1994]) or at least taken-for-granted.

The notion of a normative climate highlights that there are aggregate norms that exist independent of and apart from individually held attitudes (Mollborn, 2010, p. 304). As defined by Butler (2005, p. 428), "Normative climate can be conceptualized as the attitudes shared by members of a social group." These aggregate views and perspectives may affect individuals' own value systems and calculations of what counts as acceptable behavior, and in turn figure into decision

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making. The neighborhood normative climate may be particularly salient in adolescence, given that youths are strongly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of similarly-aged others within their social environments (Giordano, 2003; Hartup, 1996; Warr, 2002).

The current study focuses on the effect of neighborhood normative climate¹ on the sexual behavior of adolescents, utilizing geo-coded data from two waves of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS). We operationalize neighborhood as the census tract, and measure the sexual normative climate by assessing the attitudes of the larger number of neighborhood youths that individuals are exposed to and influenced by—either directly or indirectly—encapsulating close friends, the “wider circle of friends” (Giordano, 1995), and even unknown others. Thus, this study builds on and extends findings from prior studies that have measured norms via adolescents’ perceptions of close friends’ attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Baumer and South, 2001; Browning et al., 2008; Manning et al., 2005; South and Baumer, 2000) and those that have used structural characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., proportion Black or neighborhood poverty) as proxies for sexually permissive environments (e.g., Billy et al., 1994). We focus on adolescents who were not yet sexually active at their baseline interview to assess whether the neighborhood normative climate influences adolescents’ sexual debut, and then focus on all adolescents who were sexually active by Wave II to examine the effect of normative climate on their reported number of sexual partners and likelihood of having sex outside of a dating relationship (casual sex). This study is responsive to scholars such as Eder and Nenga (2003; see also, Harding, 2008) who have called for research to explore adolescent socialization occurring outside the family and school setting.

2. Background

By the time teenagers reach age 18 or 19, most have had sexual intercourse. In 2008, 60% of female and 65% of male never-married 18–19 year olds had experienced sexual intercourse (Abma et al., 2010). Researchers have recognized variation in adolescent sexual experiences, including early onset of sex, frequency of sexual activity, and the relationships context of sexual behavior (Kusunoki and Upchurch, forthcoming; Manlove et al., 2007; Manning et al., 2005). Adhering to a risk framework, much research on adolescent sexual behavior has focused on multiple partnering and inconsistent condom and contraceptive use, both of which place adolescents at increased risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Browning et al., 2005; Roche and Leventhal, 2009). Past research suggests that early onset of sexual activity has negative consequences for adolescents’ well-being, including STI risk, mental health, and academic outcomes (Frisco, 2008; Kaestle and Halpern, 2007; Meier, 2007). Additional research finds that casual sex during adolescence is associated with inconsistent condom and contraceptive use, delinquency, and poor educational outcomes (Manlove et al., 2003; Manning et al., 2005; Seffrin et al., 2009). The implications of adolescent sexual experiences are also potentially long-term, such that teens with casual partners and/or numerous partners experience earlier union formation in early adulthood (Meier and Allen, 2009; Raley et al., 2007).

2.1. Neighborhood influence on adolescents’ social environment

Neighborhood context is an important correlate of adolescent sexual behavior, given the link between neighborhood characteristics (particularly physical/social disorganization and structural disadvantage) and various problem behaviors and health-related outcomes (for a review, see Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Youths have limited geographic mobility and, accordingly, neighborhoods are part of an expanding circle of contexts (including families, friends, peer networks, and schools) to which individuals are exposed during adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Giordano, 1995; Manning et al., 2005). Therefore, we consider the social environment(s) in which adolescents’ behaviors occur. Social structure is both contextual and relational (Entwisle et al., 2007); thus individuals’ social interactions are embedded in larger social and cultural contexts. It is important to consider the placement of micro-level relationships within larger macro-level context (see, Berkman et al., 2000), the interactive nature of these contexts, and how individual-level characteristics emerge as a joint function of person-environment interactions over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 108). Individuals and their families, for instance, are not randomly distributed into neighborhoods, and differences across neighborhoods in the prevalence and rates of certain risk behaviors are often found to persist even after individual- and family-level risk factors are considered.

Various mechanisms have been proposed to understand contextual influence on individual behavior. Models prominent in the social disorganization literature explore the role of social networks in linking neighborhood characteristics and adolescent risk behaviors (e.g., Baumer and South, 2001; Browning et al., 2004a; South and Baumer, 2000; South et al., 2003). These models highlight the power of peers—youths’ proximal friends and their more distal age-mates—in the transmission of norms throughout networks and communities.

In his examination of the impact of structural conditions on inner city residents, Wilson (1987, 1996) observed that social isolation and neighborhood disorganization create a context within which certain norms, attitudes, and behaviors can develop and crystallize (see also Baumer and South, 2001), and a subculture can emerge that contrasts with the values of order and organization shared by the majority of residents (see also, Anderson, 1999). Structural characteristics of neighborhoods

¹ It would be more accurate to refer to this as “neighborhood adolescent normative climate”, because we measure the attitudes of adolescent respondents and their neighborhood peers/age-mates. However, this terminology is fairly cumbersome; therefore, for parsimony, we use the terms “neighborhood normative climate” or “normative climate”, with the implied reference being individuals in the neighborhood who are of similar ages.

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