

**COMMUNITIES AS SYSTEMS:
IS A COMMUNITY MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS?**

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While there is a growing interest by social scientists in understanding the role that neighborhood and community influences play in the lives of children, adolescents and families, the research thus far has not been very successful at capturing these neighborhood effects or providing much insight into the processes that might account for them. Duncan and Raudenbush (this volume) attribute much of this problem to deficiencies related to method, measures and analytic techniques. While they do an excellent job overviewing a number of these difficulties and suggesting some possible solutions, we believe the problem is more fundamental and resides earlier in the research process.

From our perspective, the problem results from a deficiency of current theory and conceptualizations of neighborhood and community. To the degree that our conceptualizations of neighborhood and community are deficient, so are the measures and methods that follow. Consequently, in this chapter we will focus our attention primarily on what we believe to be some fundamental issues regarding how community and neighborhood are defined and operationalized and present a preliminary systemic framework, for conceptualizing and organizing how communities might affect the development and well-being of children and adolescents.

The primary contribution of our framework to the field lies in the conceptualization of communities as systems comprised of interrelated parts. We also argue that the most theoretically meaningful and methodologically promising effects exist at higher order levels and are products of the transactional relationships existing between elements in the system. This

framework calls attention to several factors not typically addressed in neighborhood effect studies or related theory and answers in the affirmative, the question posed in the title of this chapter, *Is the community more than the sum of its parts?*

Defining terms.

Before we begin our explication of this framework, we would like to consider how neighborhood and community have traditionally been defined and operationalized and offer some suggestions about how these terms might be distinguished from one another. A review of the literature on neighborhood and community effects (including the community psychology literature and the recent anthology, *Neighborhood Poverty Vol I.*) indicates that the terms neighborhood and community are typically used interchangeably. This is evident from the general session titles of this conference as well. While it appears that historically the terms neighborhood and community have often been used to describe the same concept, we believe that such usage can be confusing--both conceptually and practically.

In this paper we consider neighborhood to refer to a physical place defined by socially shared boundaries which includes a population of people who usually share similar life chances, socio-economic status and physical proximity. Community, on the other hand, refers to social relationships that individuals have based on group consensus, shared norms and values, common goals, and feelings of identification, belonging and trust. These conceptualizations are consistent with dictionary definitions, the root origins of each word, and previous conceptualizations from the community psychology (Heller, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and developmental psychology literatures (Bronfenbrenner, Moen, & Garbarino, 1984). Moreover, this conceptualization recognizes that socio-technological changes have created the possibility for

people to become part of communities which are outside of their immediate physical environs.

The key element that differentiates neighborhoods from communities is that while a neighborhood can be the physical location where a community occurs, community is not necessarily tied to a physical place or locality, but rather is a more relational and psychological construct that goes beyond physical boundaries (Heller, 1989). That is, a community refers to a psychological place where an individual feels a sense of connection, identity, trust, mattering and relationship. The critical question for conceptualization, theory and research, however, is which entity (neighborhood or community) is more important when it comes to understanding the development and well-being of youth? It is our view that for both conceptual and methodological reasons, community is the more useful concept.

Neighborhood would seem to be an easier concept than community to measure since it is grounded in place and researchers can at least make an attempt to estimate its boundaries. In contrast, community is a psycho-social construct that to some degree resides in people's heads and derives its significance from the relationships people form and the meanings that are associated with them. But even though neighborhoods are physical entities, defining meaningful spatial boundaries is not a straightforward task. Such spacial boundaries and definitions of neighborhood are likely to vary from individual to individual and are probably also related to one's social class, developmental status and race or ethnicity. For example, for very young children the most important physical and social environments are likely to be the home and family and the functional neighborhood is fairly small in size. For the adolescent, the physical boundaries of the neighborhood expand further and might include the school, the local YMCA, the community youth center and blocks where close friends live. For many adolescents the

neighborhood has become somewhat obsolete as a meaningful physical location. Contemporary urban and suburban teens may spend time in many different neighborhoods. They may work a fast food restaurant across town, attend a magnet or consolidated school miles from where they live, and hang out at a church-sponsored youth group located several neighborhoods away. A family's financial status is also likely to influence the size of their neighborhood. For example, wealthier families are more likely to have the means to participate in settings located in neighborhoods far from their home. They can afford to send their child to private schools or to cultural and recreational activities located elsewhere and shop in malls that are many miles from their home. For these families, the composite of these settings constitutes their actual neighborhood.

The problem of looking at community effects by using spatial definitions of neighborhood was alluded to by Duncan and Raudenbush (this volume). They noted that defining neighborhood by even fairly limited geographic areas using measures derived from zip codes, census tracts, or block groups, has not been very productive. The failure of such spacial definitions of neighborhood should not really surprise us. There is no reason to believe that how the US Postal Service or Census Bureau defines neighborhood is in any way consistent with how people actually do. All this suggests that in order to develop a functional and meaningful measure of neighborhood, we must first go inside people's heads and gain an understanding of how they define, perceive and organize the physical settings in which they participate. In other words, before we can derive meaningful measures of an individual's neighborhood, we must first understand how they define their community.

Towards a new framework for conceptualizing community effects.

The framework we present should be considered preliminary and speculative. We offer it as a small attempt to reframe an important, but not well conceptualized area of study. Its value depends not only on whether it can provide some guidance to future conceptualization for research on the effects of communities on children and adolescents, but also on whether it has practical utility to practitioners in the field.

Three principles guide this framework. First, the communities that children and their families belong to socially and psychologically are more important influences than the actual physical place or neighborhood where they reside. We recognize that there is an overlap between the two concepts and that physical place does impact individuals and their families. But, as we noted earlier, to meaningfully define the spatial boundaries of neighborhood, one must first have an understanding of how individuals define and perceive them--in other words, we must know about their community.

Second, we think it will be more fruitful and instructive to focus on the mechanisms or processes by which communities affect human development rather than spatial features, structural characteristics or demographic markers. In the early stages of an area of study it can be useful to identify structural characteristics and demographic factors since they are easy to locate and measure and because they can often provide useful initial insights. But sometimes,-- as seems to be the case with many of the current approaches to the study of neighborhood effects-- these demographic and structural factors are such imprecise measures or so distal that the effects of interest are barely perceptible. Even more importantly, these marker variables usually tell us little about the actual processes or mechanisms that account for the developmental, behavioral or health-related outcomes of interest. Focusing on underlying mechanisms is crucial for theoretical

reasons as well, since very little is currently known about the mechanisms that explain the ways by which neighborhoods and communities can influence the well-being and development of its children and youth. And perhaps even more importantly, efforts to furnish practitioners and policy makers with tangible strategies for using communities to support adolescent development must focus on underlying processes.

The final and key principle of our framework is that communities are complex systems. As complex systems they are comprised of smaller interacting subsystems that are organized in unique ways. This final assumption might seem obvious, but an examination of the literature indicates that such a concept is rarely incorporated into either theoretical models or research strategies. Most social science research on community effects on human development has tended to examine either demographic factors or processes in isolation, or at best, in small clusters. As Duncan and Raudenbush (this volume) have noted, looking only at social addresses or isolated processes makes it appear that there are few or no community effects or that they are inconsequential. Conceptualizing communities as complex systems, rather than the sum of isolated parts, calls attention to several important processes that occur at different levels within the community and which have typically been overlooked.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the presentation of an organizing framework for thinking about some of the ways that communities can affect children and adolescents. In contrast to other approaches to the study of community, we argue that communities are complex systems that are far more than and different from the sum of their parts and that an accurate assessment and understanding of community effects on human development must take this into account. Our framework proposes that communities influence children and youth on at least

three levels: First order, second order, and third order community effects. A heuristic diagram of this framework is presented in figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

First Order community effects.

First order community effects are the direct aggregate influences of the universe of community settings and institutions in which adolescents participate. In the child development literature these individual settings are referred to as microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) while other social scholars have referred to them as social mediators (Connell, Aber & Walker, 1995). Some examples of significant community settings for children and youth include families, schools, peer groups, recreational youth programs, health care facilities, religious institutions, and child care settings. From a developmental perspective what is most important about these settings is not the settings themselves, but the *processes* occurring within them that promote or undermine youth development and well-being. Examples of some of these processes include parental socialization, positive (or negative) peer influence, modeling by older youth and adults, and the development of self-efficacy and self-confidence. When taken together, in the aggregate, they constitute first order community effects. From a statistical standpoint, first order community effects are an additive function of all the significant community settings in which the individual participates and which influence their development and well being.

Both the quantity and quality of these settings vary from place to place as a function of a range of economic, political and social factors. For example, poorer families are less likely to

have access to a wide range of settings and the setting that they do participate in are more likely to be of inferior quality. It is also worth noting that as children grow older, the number of significant settings in which they participate typically expands. This is usually viewed as a positive developmental sign and an important force in promoting development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, very young children may only participate in (and be influenced by) a few settings like the immediate family and child care, while adolescents typically participate in and are directly influenced by a much broader range of settings including peer group, school, workplace, family, non-formal educational and recreational programs and religious settings

Suffice to say that first level community effects are the aggregation of those primary influences that occur within the individual settings that comprise one's community. Within these settings important and influential processes occur and any effort to understand human development or behavior or to strengthen a community must take them into account..

Second order community effects.

Even if it were possible to know about the influence of every single community setting on adolescent development (i.e., if we could overcome what Duncan and Raudenbush (this volume) refer to as omitted variable bias), we would still not have a complete picture of community effects. This is because community effects are greater than the sum of the effects from individual settings. Community effects also consist of effects of the second order which are determined by relationships and linkages between settings in a community, or in the words of Bronfenbrenner (1979), "A set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant" (p. 209). These linkages include the social networks that children and their families are a part of and which often serve as "the social glue" that bridge different

settings. We view second order community effects as including many of the mesosystem effects described by Bronfenbrenner in his Ecological Systems theory (1979, 1992), however, we believe there are additional, critical elements as well.

Building on Bronfenbrenner's conception of mesosystem we propose several ways that second-order community effects--the linkages and relationships between community settings--may serve to enhance the development and well-being of children and adolescents who participate in them. We do not view this list as exhaustive or definitive, but rather as an initial effort to suggest some possible interconnections and relationships characteristic of healthy, vital communities that could affect youth.

Cross-setting consistency. To the degree that community settings in which children and youth participate share common goals and values, the potential positive effects in each setting are reinforced and enhanced. Particular settings may have different immediate purposes, but when common values and general goals are consistent across settings, young people are likely to be exposed to the same normative messages, be held to similar standards of behavior, and be exposed to adults and others who consistently model behavior that embody these norms and expectations. Such cross-setting consistency also helps to legitimize and consequently strengthen the effect of a particular practice or value. Conversely, where such cross-setting consistency occurs, but where the values and behavior being modeled and encouraged are deviant or delinquent, the effects are still likely to be reinforced, but in a direction consistent with the deviant behavior and values.

Cross-setting presence of adults and older youth. The developmental potential of individual settings are likely to be further enhanced if there are individuals, especially adults and

older, mature youth, who are present in more than one setting where the young person participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and who uphold and model positive community standards and values. Not only will this contribute to greater consistency across settings in norms, values and expectations (as mentioned previously), but it will increase the likelihood that positive relationships will develop between the young person and the adult or older youth, further enhancing the settings' potential to positively contribute to the young person's development.

Quality of communication and exchange across settings. The quality of individual settings can be enhanced by high levels of cross-setting communication, especially when adults in one setting are knowledgeable about the people, activities, norms, and expectations present in other settings in which children participate. In the words of Bronfenbrenner, *"The developmental potential of participation in multiple settings will vary directly with the ease and extent of two-way communication between those settings"* (1979, p. 216). For example, there is substantial evidence that children do better in school when parents and teachers communicate with one another about the child's needs (Epstein, 1990; Stevenson, D.L., & Baker, D.P. (1987). Similarly, parents of adolescents who are acquainted with and communicate regularly with the parents of their children's friends are better able to establish common rules and expectations as well as more effectively monitor the peer groups' whereabouts and activities (Small & Eastman, 1991). In addition, being knowledgeable about what occurs in other settings can help youth and their parents better prepare for the child's transition into new settings and inform parents about the appropriateness of specific settings for the child.

Availability of structurally different, appropriate and supportive settings.

Bronfenbrenner proposes that *"development is enhanced as a direct function of the number of*

structurally different settings in which the developing person participates in a variety of joint activities and primary dyads with others, particularly when these others are more mature and experienced (1979, p. 212). This suggests that healthy communities not only provide appropriate, high quality settings, but that they possess a variety of settings each offering a range of different activities, opportunities and experiences and that they involve cross-age participants. The need for structurally different and challenging settings and exposure to a variety of non-familial adults may be especially important for adolescents who need increasingly challenging experiences, opportunities where they can explore new roles and identities, and who could benefit from the development of relationships with non-parental adults with whom they can confide. Communities that do not provide positive challenges and opportunities risk having youth who rely primarily on peer culture for a sense of identity and engage in deviant behaviors as a way to create personal challenges and test out emerging abilities.

Complementarity and fit of community settings. This refers to how well available community settings complement one another. In contrast to the other second order community effects discussed thus far, this concept is not primarily concerned with linkages between settings but the fit of existing settings. Well functioning, supportive communities are characterized by complementarity in the settings and institutions available to children and their families. This suggests that there is an ideal balance in the types of settings and institutions that exist within an individual's community. Although the fit between settings partly depends on the quality and quantity of existing settings within an individual's community, the concept of complementarity assumes that not all communities must have the same number and types of settings. The ideal

balance and mix of settings most likely depends on the characteristics and needs of the people living there. For example, in communities where there is a high degree of seasonal summer employment, it is probably very important to have day long recreational activities and child care available for children and youth during the summer months.

Another way to look at the concept of setting complementarity and fit is to consider the developmental needs of a particular child and the ways that these needs are being met. If a child's needs are not being met in one setting, like the family, then whether or not the child thrives or suffers, will depend on whether these needs are being met in other available settings. Research on resilient children suggests that such children are better able to locate and draw out what they need from other settings and people when they are not receiving what they need in the settings where those needs are typically met. Their resiliency is not only a result of their personal characteristics, but also depends on the availability of settings and people that can provide the support, structure or opportunities that they need.

Physical and social accessibility. Finally, the ability of community members to both physically and socially navigate between settings and institutions has important implications for young people. The degree of accessibility in a community will determine how often youth can take advantage of the benefits of various settings and also affects the quality of linkages between settings.

Barriers to accessibility can be both physical and social. Physical barriers include a lack of convenient transportation, environments in which people feel unsafe, and programs or settings that are not available at convenient times or places. They might also include barriers that result from natural or man-made geographical features that inhibit movement from one setting to

another. Social barriers might include such factors as language, social class or cultural differences between a program's providers and those it serves as well as social or cultural boundaries. For example, an individual may perceive a particular setting as being located in an area "owned" by a rival gang or ethnic group and refuse to utilize facilities, programs, or businesses that are located within that territory.

The concept of second order community effects has rarely been discussed or examined in the research literature. However, recent approaches to community building on behalf of youth have emphasized the need for building cross-setting, community collaborations. The reasons and benefits for such cross-setting approaches, while rarely stated, would seem to be in part, related to the perceived value of creating stronger inter-setting linkages and improving the level of complementarity between them.

We suggest that the theoretical concept of social capital might best be conceptualized as the aggregation of second order effects that exist within a community. This would appear consistent with Putnam's definition of social capital as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits" (1993, p. 36) as well as Coleman's claim that "social capital is lodged not in individuals but in the structure of social organization" (1990, p. 302).

Third order community effects.

The core tenet of our conceptual framework posits that among the most important influences that communities exert upon youth are those of a higher order, what we refer to as third order community effects. We hypothesize that when second order effects or the level of

social capital in a community reaches a critical mass, then the potential of a community system to operate at a new higher level of complexity may emerge

Third order community effects which are the product of interactions of various elements in a community system. They are a manifestation of processes taking place at higher order levels of community organization. Third order effects are not simply the aggregation of settings, processes, or inter-setting relationships that occur at lower levels of social structure or organization, but rather are effects that are unique to the system as a whole. Higher order effects cannot be explained by reducing them to their smaller, constituent parts, because they are more than the sum of their parts. Higher order effects include and incorporate lower level effects, but also possess properties that are unique to the higher level system of which they are a part. The relationship between the parts and the whole is characterized by emergence (Colarelli, 1998). The concept of emergence is based on the idea that higher levels of a system are more complex and encompassing than are lower levels in that they include the capacities, processes and settings at lower levels but then add their own unique, system level capacities. The combination of parts produces a whole that is greater than and different from the sum of the parts (Holland, 1995).

Higher level systems properties can also influence and determine the meaning and function of a lower order part of the system. The whole, in other words, is not only more than the sum of its parts, but it can, in some cases, influence the function of its parts. Another way to think about third order community effects is that they are located in the collective rather than in the individual parts and that they derive both their meaning and their influence as properties of the whole.

At first glance third order community effects may sound nebulous, difficult to identify

and elusive to measure. However, we believe that much of the most recent and productive research on community influences has actually been focused on third order effects, even though they have not been identified as such. Other participants of this symposium have also begun to argue that collective properties of communities are important to identify as processes which influence youth development (Sampson, this volume). Drawing on this emerging literature we will discuss several examples.

Social Cohesion. Social cohesion is a term used by community psychologists to refer to a sense of emotional closeness among community members as a result of shared real world lived experiences, common life changes, and similar personal histories (Heller, 1989). Emotional cohesion is likely to be characterized by a sense of trust and solidarity among individuals and a feeling that others in a community can be counted on to look out for one another and the good of the community. What makes social cohesion a third order, community level property rather than a second order effect or dimension of social capital is that the emotional closeness that is experienced is not just to a few key people or institutions, but is more generalized emotional connection to a critical mass of others in the community.

Community Identity and Membership. Closely related is the concept of community identity and membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When it emerges in a community, citizens feel a sense of belonging, ownership and community spirit. They also feel that they are a part of an entity that is larger than oneself. One's personal identity becomes defined in part by the community in which they are a member. Community identity and membership is neither an individual characteristic or a dyadic one, but emerges out of a collective sense of being part of something larger than oneself.

Superordinate values, goals and norms. When members of a community feel an emotional connection to one another and some form of shared identity and group membership, they are likely to recognize that part of what unites them with others are common norms, values and goals. They share a collective sense about what is expected, valued and desirable. Unlike the mesosystem linkages between two or more settings, the norms, values and goals that are shared are not just common to a small group of individuals or settings but are perceived as being shared by most people in the community. Part of their justification and importance comes from the fact that they are viewed as agreed upon and accepted by members of the community. They are seen as values or norms that are at the core of what the community represents and what it desires for its members.

Collective Efficacy. Finally, we view the concept of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997) as another example of a third order community effect. Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls define collective efficacy as **A**the linkage of mutual trust and the willingness to intervene for the common good.**@**Or as Sampson (this volume) states in his recent paper in this volume, **A**collective efficacy is meant to signify an emphasis on shared beliefs in a neighborhood's conjoint capability for action, coupled with an active sense of engagement on the parts of residents**@**(p. 11). It seems clear from this definition that collective efficacy is a system level property that is located in the collective and directed to regulating and benefitting the community as a system.

Because third order effects are properties of the community system they are likely to be highly interdependent and interrelated. It seems reasonable to posit that some third order community effects are dependent not only on the existence of lower order effects, but on the prior

emergence of other third order effects. For example, collective efficacy appears to be a fairly advanced higher order community system property since it is contingent on other third order community effects. Before collective efficacy within a community can occur, there must first be a sense of shared values and goals around which the community will unite, a belief in and commitment to a common good, a sense of cohesion and mutual trust among citizens so that they are willing to work together, and finally, the human and material resources to draw on to bring about community action.

To implicate a third-order community effect, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the observed effect is a function of forces lying outside the direct effects of the universe of community settings (first order effects) and the linkages between such settings (second order effects). Consequently, the influence of the community on families and the individuals who reside within it cannot be validly measured solely by assessing and aggregating the contributions of each of its constituent subsystems. Third order community effects are probably interactive and multiplicative rather than additive. The effects derive from the coexistence and joint impact of particular subsystems, the nature of the linkages between them, and unique properties that characterize the system as a whole.

Implications for policy and practice.

Like most systems, it seems reasonable to assume that community systems are hierarchically organized and that lower level effects precede higher level ones. Before a second order effect like mesosystem linkages can be formed, you must first have individual community settings to be linked. And before you can have a third order effect like collective efficacy or community identity, you must have both a critical mass of quality settings in a community and a

sufficient number of inter-setting linkages.

There are important practical and policy implications for such a hierarchical sequencing of levels of community effects. It means that, because third order effects build upon and incorporate second order effects, it is probably unrealistic to try to promote third order effects like collective efficacy, social cohesion, or community spirit before creating sufficient second order linkages. Similarly, it makes little sense to put energy into creating second order linkages if there are not first a sufficient number of quality, primary community settings. What this implies for practice and policy is that we need to begin by creating and enhancing settings, then work at optimizing their fit and creating meaningful linkages between them. Finally, not until these first two levels of community effects have been achieved, can we expect conditions to be present where third order system effects can emerge or be promoted. In other words, it is folly to think that we can promote community efficacy, cohesion or identity if fundamental settings do not exist or where important setting linkages have not yet been established.

Given our inability to simply infuse communities with constructs like cohesion, efficacy, or social capital or to make people feel more connected to their community, we argue that interventions should focus on first and second-order level effects. We hypothesize that the interactions between various community subsystems such as families, schools, churches, and businesses contribute to a higher-order community effects. The extent to which youth belong to a community with strong, healthy, and positive frequent interactions among subsystems leads to the promotion of sense of community, social cohesion, and collective efficacy which enhance the environmental context within which youth develop in.

Programmers and policy makers should endeavor to identify interventions which

strengthen the bonds and links between subsystem settings to create second order effects. Improving the quality of communication across settings, encouraging adults to participate in a range of different settings in which children spend time, working towards common community values, goals and norms across settings, and inculcating a sense of trust among community members should be emphasized as potential points for intervention. Based on our model, we would hypothesize that community collaborations which enhance second-order effects will contribute to the emergence of desirable third-order effects.

Conclusion.

We believe that the communities in which children and adolescents live can have important influences on their well-being and development. Unfortunately, current efforts to understand community influences have thus far not been very successful at either finding community effects or identifying underlying mechanisms. In our view the primary reason for this lack of success is conceptual: Researchers have failed to conceptualize communities as the complex systems that they are and have instead looked for community effects where it is most convenient. Although a conceptualization of communities as multilevel, complex systems will not be easy to operationalize or study, we believe it provides a more accurate and honest description of the complexity inherent in community effects and will result in more useful theoretical and practical insights than current conceptualizations have thus far provided.

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Figure 1. Heuristic Diagram of First, Second and Third Order Community Effects



