Neighborhood and family context and psychosocial functioning among
African American adolescents

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Abstract

Research suggests that neighborhood context plays an important role in adjustment among
African American adolescents. The current study examines the interplay of neighborhood and
family contexts on African American adolescent functioning. Data were gathered from 56, at-
risk African American adolescents (mean age = 16; 40% female). Study A examines the link
between mothers’ parenting style and neighborhood socioeconomic status in predicting
adolescents’ academic achievement. Study B examines the link between the quality of the
mother-adolescent relationship and neighborhood ethnic composition in predicting behavioral
adjustment. Findings indicate that neighborhood environment moderates the relationship
between familial context and psychosocial adjustment. For adolescents living in more risky
environments, familial characteristics are particularly important in promoting positive academic
and behavioral outcomes.

Introduction

Scientific inquiry that has considered the neighborhoods within which youth are
socialized has enhanced our descriptions of African American adolescent adjustment (Gonzales,
Cauce, Friedman & Mason, 1996). The assumption that affluent and predominately European
American neighborhoods are associated with positive adolescent functioning predominates
conceptions about neighborhood influence. However, empirical evidence suggests a more
complex relationship between neighborhood affluence, ethnic composition, and adolescent
adjustment. Research indicates that neighborhood affluence is associated with better school
functioning among African American youth (Ensminger, Lamkin & Jacobson, 1996), whereas
predominately European American neighborhoods may be associated with poorer behavioral
functioning (Lamborn, Dornbush and Steinberg, 1996). Consideration of the multiple ecologies
that may influence development provides insight into the complex relationship between the
neighborhood and adolescent functioning. The current study examines the interplay between the family and neighborhood contexts in understanding African American adolescent adjustment. Two separate sets of analyses were run to examine the link between family and psychosocial functioning for adolescents living in communities that differ by socioeconomic status (SES) and those that differ by ethnic composition.

**Study A** explores the relationship between relevant familial characteristics and academic functioning in neighborhoods differing by SES.

**Study B** explores the association between relevant familial characteristics and behavioral functioning for adolescents living in neighborhoods that differ by ethnic composition.

**Method**

Data were collected from 56 African American adolescents (40% female). Adolescents were 16 years of age ($M = 15.84; SD = .78$) at Time 1 and 18 years of age ($M = 18.02; SD = 1.01$) at Time 2. Family income ranged from $2,500 to $70,000 with a median of $17,500. Participants were comprised of adolescents at risk for future academic and social difficulties by virtue of school problems.

**Study A Measures.** Schludermann and Schludermann’s (1988) version of the Children’s Report on Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965) was used to assess adolescents’ perceptions of their mothers’ psychological control. US census block-group data were used to ascertain neighborhood SES. Neighborhoods were classified as affluent or poor depending upon a composite score of the percentage of professionally employed residents and the percentage of residents below the poverty level. Adolescents’ grades were obtained directly from the school system.

**Study B Measures.** The quality of the mother-adolescent relationship was assessed using the Trust scale of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). US census block-group data were used to ascertain neighborhood
ethnic composition. Neighborhoods were classified as predominately African American or predominately European American based on the ethnic composition of their residents. The Problem Behavior Inventory (Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles & Canter, 1983) was utilized to gather adolescents’ reports of their level of engagement in delinquent behaviors. Adolescents’ reports of their perceived behavioral competence was measured using the Behavioral Conduct scale of the Adolescent Self-Perception Profile (Harter, 1988).

Results
Correlations are presented in Table 1, and means and standard deviations in Tables 2-3. Regression models tested the interaction between family and neighborhood variables in predicting adolescent adjustment. Adolescents’ age, gender, and family SES were included in all models.

• **Study A:** High psychological control by mothers at Time 1 predicted better grades at Time 2 for adolescents living in poor neighborhoods. High psychological control predicted lower grades for adolescents living in affluent neighborhoods (β = -.51, p < .01; see Figure 1).

• **Study B:** Less trusting mother-adolescent relationships were related to more problem behaviors for adolescents living in predominately European American neighborhoods (β = -.49, p < .05; see Figure 2). For adolescents living in predominately European American neighborhoods, less trusting mother-adolescent relationships were related to lower behavioral competence (β = .54, p < .01; see Figure 3). There was little relation between mother-adolescent relationship and adolescent behavioral adjustment for adolescents living in predominately African American neighborhoods.

Discussion
The results these analyses indicate that the relationship between family context and psychosocial adjustment is moderated by neighborhood context.
•**Study A:** For adolescents living in poor neighborhoods, their grades improved over time if their mothers were psychologically controlling. Given the relative economic depravity and potential risky nature of poorer communities, it may become particularly important for mothers to employ more controlling, authoritarian parenting styles. This type of parenting style appears to promote academic strivings. For adolescents living in affluent communities, psychological control by mothers seems to be detrimental to adolescents’ academic achievement. In the presence of economic stability, these adolescents benefit from less control from their mothers.

•**Study B:** For adolescents living in predominately European American neighborhoods, a poor mother-adolescent relationship was associated with poorer behavioral adjustment. These findings suggest that an ethnically dissimilar neighborhood represents a stressful environment for African American youth and it is in this environment that other resources become important in promoting competent functioning.

In sum, both studies indicate that familial resources are important for promoting positive adaptation for African American adolescents living in stressful environments. Poor communities seem to be risky with respect to academic attainment, whereas predominately European American communities seem to be risky with respect to behavioral functioning. Indeed, it seems that the dangers of living in a risky environment are greatest for those who are most vulnerable.

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References


Table 1. Correlations: neighborhood and family variables

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<td>-- - .24</td>
<td>-- - .07</td>
<td>-- - .59***</td>
<td>-- - .37**</td>
<td>-- - .01</td>
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<td>- .31*</td>
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<td>6. Behavioral competence</td>
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<td>7. Time 1 grades</td>
<td>-- .36*</td>
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<td>.36*</td>
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\(^*\)p < .05, \(^**\)p < .01, \(^***\)p < .001
\(^1\) Neighborhood SES is coded: 0 = poor; 1 = affluent
\(^2\) Neighborhood ethnic composition is coded: 0 = predominately European American; 1 = predominately African American

Table 2. Means and standard deviations by neighborhood SES

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Psychological Control</th>
<th>Poor Neighborhoods Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Affluent Neighborhoods Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>Time 1 Grades</td>
<td>1.26</td>
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<td>Time 2 Grades</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.49</td>
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\(^+\)p < .10
Table 3. Means and standard deviations by neighborhood ethnic composition

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Predominately African American Neighborhoods</th>
<th>Predominately European American Neighborhoods</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>Delinquency</td>
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<td>Behavioral Competence</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.62</td>
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Figure 1. Interaction between Time 1 mother psychological control and neighborhood SES in predicting Time 2 grades

High psychological control by mothers at Time 1 predicted better grades at Time 2 for adolescents living in poor neighborhoods. High psychological control by mothers at Time 1 predicted lower grades for adolescents living in affluent neighborhoods.
Low trust in the mother-adolescent relationship was associated with high delinquency primarily for adolescents living in predominately European American neighborhoods. There was little relation between mother-adolescent trust and delinquency for adolescents living in predominately African American neighborhoods.

Low trust in the mother-adolescent relationship was associated with low behavioral competence primarily for adolescents living in predominately European American neighborhoods. There was little relation between mother-adolescent trust and behavioral competence for adolescents living in predominately African American neighborhoods.