

The Salience of Neighborhood

Some Lessons from Sociology

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Introduction

It has been argued that in recent years innovation in the social and health sciences has been driven by new data, tools, and methods and less by theoretical advances.^{1,2} The thesis of this commentary is that new scholarship in health and environment research requires a synthesis of existing theories and conceptualizations of “place” or neighborhood environments from across several social and health science disciplines. More rigorous conceptual models will allow researchers to take advantage of recent innovations in spatial data and GIS-related technologies and thereby facilitate our understanding of the processes by which neighborhood “gets into people.”

One of the weakest theoretical areas of current practice in health and environment research is the conceptualization of place.³⁻⁵ For the most part studies of the relationship between environment and health outcomes has been based on several conventional and naïve assumptions of place: places are often administratively bounded, static, and exist as isolated islands removed from meaningful nested⁶ and non-nested contexts.^{4,5} Social environment is most commonly and uncritically defined as a “neighborhood,” which in turn has conventionally been operationalized as a census unit, typically a census tract, and where proximity to environment resources and/or risks is often measured as a binary condition (i.e., presence or absence). Implicit in many current empirical models is the assumption that relevant exposures to risks and/or resources can be represented by one bounded space containing a specific location—typically a residence—and where exposure is 24/7/365 (and without the collection of length of residence information, lifetime exposure). Indeed some areal units such as the census tract have become almost sacred and widely regarded as “standardized, quasi-neighborhood units”⁷ even though their use (i.e., their conceptualization as a neighborhood) may be a serious obstacle to the solutions of contemporary problems.

Herbert Gans⁸ has referred to sociologists being engaged in “sociological amnesia” (i.e., lack of acknowl-

edgement of the work of previous generations of scholars). In this commentary, I want to use Gans’s observation to explore some of what we already know about spatial behavior and the relationships between people and places based on selected readings from early twentieth century urban sociology. While I will focus on but a handful of sociological studies, it is important to recognize that urban planners, geographers, and others have also spent much of the latter half of 20th Century describing how people use and are attached to “neighborhoods”; not surprisingly these works find considerable heterogeneity in spatial behavior whether the focus is on commuting, job seeking, social networking, or the use of facilities/resources.⁹

The Past

Sociologists have long been interested in the salience of geographically bounded neighborhoods on the wellbeing of groups, families, and individuals. Roderick McKenzie was among the first of the Chicago School to study “local life” in the city with a series of five articles on the neighborhoods of Columbus, Ohio, that appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1921 and 1922 (republished in 1923 by the University of Chicago).¹⁰ While it would be easy to believe that criticisms of neighborhood boundaries and definitions emerged recently, McKenzie wrote “probably no other term is used so loosely or with such changing content as the term neighborhood, and very few concepts are more difficult to define.” He further went on to note that “the concept of neighborhood has come down to us from a distant past and therefore has connotations which scarcely fit the facts when applied to a patch of life in a modern large city.”

Several studies during mid-century focused on use of urban space, specifically the locations of employment and facilities—that is, anchor institutions and resources—as well as the locations of social networks in relation to the home. Just a few studies are highlighted here. In 1950, Foley¹¹ collected data on facility use from over 400 families in part of St. Louis in a project designed to explicitly study the dependence on local facilities. This early study included the collection of data on the locations of employment, food outlets, clothing outlets, household equipment, schools, churches, medical care, and recreation related activities. Each facility was clas-

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sified by location as either falling within, adjacent to, or away from the district; where district was a 5-square-mile residential area (one much larger than the median size of today's census tracts). The descriptive findings are quite staggering: while 41% of the facilities used were within the district, 12% were in adjacent areas, and 47% were further afield. An alternative grouping by distance bands revealed that 47% of facility uses were within one mile of the home residence, 20% between 1 and 3 miles from home, and 33% over 3 miles. Inevitably certain facilities were more likely to be located and used in the local areas surrounding a home residence. At least half of all reports for four facility uses were within the district: food shopping (69%), church attendance (77%), school attendance (68%), and movie attendance (58%). Among the other groupings, 35% of miscellaneous indoor activities (i.e., association meetings, sports) were within the district, and the percentages were even lower for health care (29%), employment (17%), outdoor recreation (10%), and shopping for clothing/household equipment (5%). Foley concluded that "many lines of functional interdependency extend out from any designated residential district."¹¹

Later Ross,¹² in a study of a Boston neighborhood, reported that "food shopping and church attendance are modally local, but all other facility usages were found to be predominantly non-local" and that "non-local . . . usage was fairly widespread throughout the metropolitan area." In a study of local intimacy in East Lansing, Michigan, the majority (62%) of "best" friends identified by their respondents lived outside of an area considered by the respondent to be their neighborhood.¹³ To the authors "the city, then, is a place where a person finds it possible to develop a sense of intimacy both city-wide and locality-based."¹³ As Barbara McClenahan noted 60 years ago:

Any city dweller can test for himself the meaning of his place of local residence. If he will list his major activities and then spot their focal centers on a map he will quickly discover that his associations and his associates are rarely to be found in the immediate vicinity of his home. Nor will he ordinarily find the home of his best friend in his neighborhood.¹⁴

Jane Jacobs made the observation that there were three levels of neighborhood: the block, the community/district, and the city as a whole.¹⁵ While not quite the same as Bronfenbrenner's¹⁶ typology of multiple, overlapping, individual, and environmental contexts, Jacobs's observation is important. She recognized that individuals and families organize their lives and their use of the city along multiple dimensions or domains, where domains would include but not be limited to education, health care, food, clothing, social services, recreation, social support networks, and work. Individuals and families based on both necessity and strategy use differ-

ent parts of a city for different reasons. Their actions require the traversing of multiple spatial and temporal scales and reveal a range of connections or engagements with many places. While some families would appear to draw on local resources, to the degree that they exist, other families are spatially polygamous (attributed to John Odland, Professor of Geography, Indiana University, made during an invited seminar to the Department of Geography at UCLA in the early 1990s) loyal to no single place and enjoying in some cases intimate relations with multiple places.

The Present and the Future

Today sociologists study many different facets of human behavior in the city (and increasingly in more diverse contexts). These sociological studies include, but are not limited to, intimate relationships, neighborhood ties, social support networks, facility use, participation in local organizations, community identification, racial/ethnic integration/segregation, marriage markets, and the spatial mismatch between residence and work. The spatial patterning of human behavior varies across these substantive topics but the overall conclusion would be that cities (environments) are complex, that residential location is but one place where we spend our time, and that census tracts do not capture the majority of activities and/or locations relevant to an individual's or a family's routine. Every day, people jump spatial scales, crossing administrative lines without knowing, to take advantage of nonlocal resources.

Researchers in sociology, health, and environment could profit from a closer reading of other fields, too. The discipline of geography has a long-established literature on both the spatial patterns or spatial dimensions of daily life including constraints on human behavior/activities¹⁷ and in humanistic geography, specifically phenomenological approaches, to the study of meanings associated with place.¹⁸ The advent of tracking technologies—such as GPS, wireless, location-based monitors, and remote sensor devices—and the ability to link individual movement across space and time has led to the reemergence of time geography as an important area of inquiry.¹⁹ Studies of individual spatial behavior have integrated qualitative²⁰ and quantitative²¹ data within a GIS framework, although the potential of these new data-collection methods has yet to be realized especially with regard to converting the collected data into measures of exposure, nor have they been integrated with research designs that collect data on attachment to place.

Summary

My intent has been to show that long before we adopted multilevel modeling software from their initial applications in the neatly nested world of education

(pupils within classrooms within schools), sociological studies had revealed the complexity of cities, how people used cities to meet their daily needs, and thus raised questions about the salience of local neighborhoods. Given the abundant evidence that people jump spatial scales and move across multiple, non-nested hierarchies in their daily activities, the time is ripe for the integration of theoretical and conceptual models of neighborhood from across the social sciences. With revised conceptual models we will be better able to take advantage of the new spatial data on people and places and emerging GIS-related technologies of the 21st century.

No financial disclosures were reported by the author of this paper.

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