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Advancing Neighborhood Research Through Innovations in Method and Theory

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Where you grow up shapes your development across the life course. This is the message that has been touted by psychologists, sociologists, economists, and public health scholars. Decades of research have identified the key ingredients that underlie these associations, from concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage and resources to community violence and social ties. Though compelling, several methodological and theoretical simplifications limit the advancement of neighborhood research in developmental science. In their scoping *Monograph*, Witherspoon, White, and colleagues infuse cultural developmental research from psychology with activity-space research from sociology and geography to propose a *Cultural-Developmental Activity Space Framework*. Their innovative and truly interdisciplinary approach is precisely the fresh perspective that will lead to a more nuanced understanding of how, when, and for whom neighborhood environments shape development. In this commentary, I will highlight how this approach can be used to clarify individual differences in the settings of development, as well as the mechanisms of place-based disparities in health and wellbeing across the life course.

A simple yet critical observation by the authors of this *Monograph* is that most research focuses on one microsystem or setting for development. Scientists evaluate the influence of the family microsystem (e.g., parenting behaviors, family socioeconomic resources), exposures within the neighborhood microsystem (e.g., community violence), or the impact of the school microsystem (e.g., teacher expectations, school resources) on developmental outcomes. Ecological Developmental Neuroscience (Hyde et al., 2020) has similarly highlighted the proliferation of research that attempts to link a single adversity in a single ecological context to measures of brain development. Hyde et al. (2020) argue that more attention must be paid to the broader neighborhood ecology as a potent driver of experiences that occur within the family and school microsystems. Even still, attending to the neighborhood context in addition to the family or school environment may not capture the totality of a developing individual's microsystems or the interactions among those settings – termed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as the mesosystem. Witherspoon, White, and colleagues rightly suggest that methodological limitations in how we measure developmental contexts contribute to this knowledge gap. Moreover, scholars situated in cultural developmental frameworks (e.g.,

Garcia-Coll et al., 1996) would argue that researchers must empirically evaluate whether the composition of a mesosystem and, thus, the salience of the different microsystems for the developing individual, vary by indicators of social stratification and cultural orientation.

An activity space approach enables both more precise measurement of mesosystems across development, and an assessment of whether mesosystem structure (i.e., proximal versus distal for the developing person) and function (i.e., utility for the developing person) vary by cultural orientation, racial-ethnic identity, and social position. As defined by Witherspoon, White, and colleagues, an activity space is a collection of locations where routine activities are frequented by an individual. Measured using GPS-enabled devices and confirmatory time diaries, the construction of an activity space enables researchers to study the impact of experiences and exposures within the entire mesosystem on developmental processes and outcomes. Activity space methods also overcome a longstanding limitation of traditional neighborhood effects research: Operationalizing neighborhoods using administratively defined boundaries (e.g., U.S. Census tracts) assumes that exposures largely occur within these static spaces. For example, an oft examined research question explores the associations between the number or rate of violent crimes that occur within an individual's "neighborhood" (e.g., Census tract, block group) and health and wellbeing. By restricting the exposure space to an individual's residential Census tract, this traditional approach fails to capture (1) violent crimes that occur just outside of the individual's Census tract, but still within what the individual considers their neighborhood, and (2) whether an individual actually frequents and is exposed to experiences within all parts of their Census tract. Indeed, some work shows that distance measures (e.g., distance between a violent crime incident and one's home or school address) rather than crime rates aggregated to administrative boundaries, are much stronger predictors of youth delinquency (Gard et al., 2022). In addition, the measurement of activity spaces can prompt explorations of how social identity (e.g., racial-ethnic identity) shapes the structure and function of an individual's mesosystem. For example, minoritized adolescents exploring their racial-ethnic identity may spend relatively more time in spaces populated by individuals who share their racial-ethnic backgrounds as a mechanism of exploration, compared to youth who are just at the beginnings of developing their racial-ethnic identity (White et al., 2021; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

One important question raised by this work is whether there are implications of discordances in youth activity spaces and the neighborhoods in which they live. Previous research suggests that the size of an adolescent's activity space is related to wellbeing, and that youth who reside in socioeconomically-disadvantaged neighborhoods often travel farther outside of their neighborhoods for resources (e.g., schools, social services) (Browning et al., 2021). Moreover, for youth who prefer to spend time with peers outside of their neighborhoods, the well-documented (e.g., Gard et al., 2022) association between greater neighborhood collective efficacy (i.e., shared values, mutual trust, and a willingness to intervene on behalf of the community) and lower adolescent delinquency may be weaker (Tompsett et al., 2016). These findings imply that some youth may not reap the same benefits from their immediate neighborhood environments, due to the same structural failures (e.g., food deserts, resource-limited schools) that force youth to travel longer and farther to meet basic needs and thrive. Yet, a unified cultural-development activity space framework as proposed by Witherspoon, White and colleagues could evaluate the extent to which this describes all youth or reflects the

3 Gard

experiences of youth with specific social identities. Place-based disparities have long been acknowledged as mechanisms of systemic inequality in health and education (Williams & Collins, 2001); activity space research has the potential to reveal new explanations for these processes.

Another important question stimulated by this *Monograph* is whether and how discrepant youth neighborhood-activity spaces impact the social fabric of a community as a whole. That is, if youth and other residents routinely leave the neighborhood for school, employment, and other resources, what impact might this have on social ties among neighbors, collective efficacy, and place attachment? Social features of the neighborhood context, including social relationships between neighbors, shared values and mutual trust, attachment to place, and willingness to intervene, are linked to lower mortality and fewer physical and mental health challenges, for both adolescents and adults (Arcaya et al., 2016; McDonnell & Sianko, 2021; Park et al., 2022). Although the focus of the authors of this *Monograph* is adolescent development, whether and how all members of a community interact and share perspectives has direct implications for the health and wellbeing of all residents. Interventions designed to increase neighborhood collective efficacy build social capital, empowerment, and civic participation through communal activities such as education, skills training, discussion groups, and relationship-building (Butel & Braun, 2019; Christens, 2010). In qualitative interviews with caregivers, teens, and leaders in Washington DC, we recently found that all community members, regardless of their social roles in the neighborhood, conceptualized shared physical spaces as conduits to social interaction (Fuchs et al., 2022). Therefore, in neighborhoods with marked nonshared activity spaces, community members may not reap the health benefits of social integration. An activity space approach that examines the overlap of residents' activity spaces could lead to a clearer understanding of how shared and nonshared spaces shape the social fabric of a community and, ultimately, developmental outcomes.

The *Cultural-Developmental Activity Space Framework* proposed by Witherspoon, White, and colleagues offers researchers methodological tools and theoretical perspectives to better understand how ecological contexts shape development. As highlighted in the *Monograph*, mixed methods approaches will be crucial to this endeavor. Qualitative designs that include members of the community under study are likely to reveal more reliable observations (Ambady et al., 2001) and promote strengths-based perspectives by empowering community members in the scientific research process (Collins et al., 2018). It is through the measurement of activity spaces, promotion of community-based participatory research, and attention to the sociocultural context that researchers can clarify how, when, and for whom neighborhood environments shape development.

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5 Gard

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