Revealing the Cues Within Community Places: Stories of Identity, History, and Possibility

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Place-based approaches to community change have become increasingly popular strategies for addressing significant social problems. With their intentional focus on 'place,' most efforts have sought to gain greater understanding into how neighborhood contexts affect people. However, while both aggregate characteristics and social dynamics of neighborhoods have been subject to scrutiny in the literature, less attention has been paid to understanding how the environmental characteristics of neighborhoods and communities as places have meaning for residents. The present study used an innovative methodology called Photovoice to obtain a greater understanding of the meanings residents ascribe to the salient characteristics of their neighborhoods and communities. As part of a place-based initiative, 29 adult and youth residents in seven distressed urban neighborhoods photographed and dialogued about the meaningful physical attributes of their community. According to participants, place characteristics provided cues about their personal histories as members of the community; communicated messages about the value and character of the community and its residents; defined social norms and behavior within the community; and provided markers that could remind residents of who they are and inspire a sense of possibility for who they could become. Implications for practice are discussed.

KEY WORDS: place; identity; comprehensive community initiatives; neighborhood conditions; photovoice.

Within the last 15 years, many major foundations and other funding sources have funded comprehensive community change efforts focused on particular places (e.g., specific urban neighborhoods) that have targeted a range of social issues including educational success, youth and family well-being, community health, employment, and poverty. While they vary greatly in their scope and targeted outcomes, these place-based initiatives all recognize geographically bounded areas such as neighborhoods as targets of intervention and seek to transform such places into contexts with greater capacity to support youth and families (Gibson, Kingsley, & McNeely, 1997).

Overall, this focus on place stems from the belief that the qualities of places—and neighborhoods in particular—matter in determining the health and well-being of children and families (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Advocates of such efforts propose that this focus on context has several benefits over traditional programming efforts aimed at promoting change at the level of individuals alone (Aspen Institute, 1999). First, the focus on a specific, geographically defined place assists in revealing the interconnected and multi-level nature of social issues operating within that area (Gibson et al., 1997). This, in turn, facilitates a more comprehensive and holistic approach to change, thereby enhancing the potential for integrating services and strategies to address the multiple needs of residents and increasing the opportunity for synergistic effects among change activities to emerge (Smock, 1997). In addition, ecological theories remind us that by intervening at a level

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(neighborhood) above the level in which we ultimately aim to impact (individuals), change strategies are more likely to succeed (e.g., Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Finally, as distressed communities are often marked by a lack of inherent institutional resources and supports, place-based initiatives can be a strategic means of infusing resources where they are needed most (Aspen Institute, 1999).

The focus on a relatively small, bounded geographic area often found in place-based initiatives (Stone, 1994) also facilitates mobilization of community residents and local resources (Smock, 1997). An operating principle of such initiatives is that citizen participation (i.e., including residents as architects of and participants in the change processes occurring in their own neighborhoods) is essential to creating sustainable change (e.g. Traynor, 1995). This stems from the belief that building the inherent capacity of a community to address future problems is at least as important as any specific programmatic activity or immediate outcome that emerges from such a process (Aspen Institute, 1999). In addition, because outside "experts" are unlikely to have sufficient familiarity with the neighborhoods in question to fully understand the pressing needs of the community, the context of those needs, or the vast array of neighborhood resources and assets that could be applied towards those needs (Smock, 1997), resident insight is considered as important as expert analysis (Halpern, 1995).

Thus, place-based initiatives view distressed neighborhoods—and the contexts created by and surrounding these neighborhoods—as primary foci for community change. For this reason, the pursuit of place-based change efforts requires gaining a deep understanding of neighborhoods and communities as *contexts,* including an awareness of the effects such places have on the people who reside within them.

To date, community-based research has lent significant insights into the implications of community contexts for residents. For example, research on neighborhood effects has examined the relationships between broad, aggregate, characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., SES, homeownership, crime rates) and an array of outcomes for youth and adults in areas such as delinquency, educational achievement, and employment, focusing on answering whether and when neighborhood contexts are significant predictors of individual health and well-being (e.g., Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2003; Sampson,

Morenoff, & Gannon Rowley, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Other research, often conducted with a focus toward building capacity for community change, has made significant progress in the area of identifying and describing various social dynamics of neighborhoods such as sense of community and collective efficacy and the impacts these qualities have on both residents as individuals and on the problem-solving ability of the neighborhood as a whole (e.g., Ainsworth, 2002; Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Browning & Cagney, 2002; Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003; Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Cohen, Farley, & Mason, 2003; Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Parker et al., 2001; Rankin & Quane, 2002; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

What has received less attention, particularly in the field of place-based change efforts, is what places such as neighborhoods really mean to people and how various physical conditions in the environment impact residents of a community. While the physical scars borne by many distressed communities are readily apparent to researcher and casual observer alike, we have less of an understanding of the personal and social implications these conditions have for residents. Further, it is reasonable to suspect that an understanding of the meaning and implications behind the environmental conditions of a community could yield important insights for place-based change initiatives. As place theorists have argued, a true understanding of place must encompass both its physical form and its social construction—that is, the meanings and purposes persons attach to the place and its features (Canter, 1977, 1997; Proshansky, Ittelson, & Rivlin, 1976; Suttles, 1972). Furthermore, if, as theorists in both environmental and ecological psychology posit, person and place are intertwined such that places serve to define behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), then to be optimally effective, change efforts should incorporate an understanding of how places are experienced by community members, what behaviors are supported in the context of those places, and how these might impact the implementation and success of programmatic strategies. As such, place-based efforts to transform neighborhoods would do well to gain a greater understanding of what community conditions mean to insiders including how such conditions affect how they think about, feel about, and behave toward their community. These implications

point toward the value of a more explicit exploration of the meanings of place in residents' lives.

This paper presents findings from one such exploration into the meaning and implications behind neighborhoods and communities as places, guided by the research question: *what meaning and significance do residents ascribe to the physical conditions of their neighborhood and community?* This question was examined within the context of a broader formative evaluation of a place-based initiative called Yes we can! (YWC!), funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which is seeking to improve the economic and educational outcomes of youth and families living within distressed neighborhoods in the small city of Battle Creek, Michigan (population ~53,000). The authors were members of the team hired to evaluate YWC!

METHOD

Method Overview

As YWC!'s designers sought to lay the groundwork for partnering with residents in order to transform distressed neighborhoods into places of choice, they recognized the need to first understand what life is like for residents living in these neighborhoods. As such, a key objective of our initial formative evaluation efforts was to gain a better understanding of residents' lived experiences and what meaning and implications those experiences had for them. In order to collect this information, we utilized Photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a qualitative participatory research methodology that puts cameras in the hands of participants to document the realities of their daily lives and then, through their photographs and opportunities for personal reflection and group dialogue with other participants, express what they think is important for the community to know and understand about their experiences (Harrison, 2002; McIntyre, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997). To date, Photovoice projects have been conducted with a variety of populations (e.g., rural Chinese women, low-income and homeless African-American women, Bosnian refugee youth) to empower participants to explore and communicate important messages about their lives and communities (e.g., Bender, Harbour, Thorp, & Morris, 2001; Berman, Ford-Bilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001; Gallo, 2002; LeClerc, Wells, Craig, & Wilson, 2002).

Photovoice was seen as a particularly appropriate method given the objectives and context of this evaluation effort for several reasons. First, Photovoice is designed to specifically tap into daily realities and the core meanings and significances of these realities as defined by research participants themselves (Wang & Burris, 1997). Because Photovoice methodology is designed so that participants identify and present the issues and aspects of their lives that they most want to share, it allows them to both define the phenomenon of interest and then share why they chose to focus on that particular aspect of their life and the meaning it has for them. Hence, by adopting the Photovoice methodology for this project, we were able to sidestep the limitations that preconceived notions of resident needs and assets might impose on our investigation (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Further, the photographic component of Photovoice provides additional information not available in traditional qualitative approaches such as interviews and focus groups. Photographs aid the researcher by providing a window into the subject of participants' reflections. The process of discussing the content of photographic imagery allows participants to both share and guide researchers through an external view of the participants' internal realities (Collier, 1979). In addition, several scholars have noted the value of photographs for facilitating reflection, sharing, and dialogue (Aschermann, Dannenberg, & Schultz, 1998; Heisley & Levy, 1991; McIntyre, 2003; Smith & Woodward, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Specifically, photographs, when combined with interviews or focus groups provide additional stimulus to the participant(s), aiding recall (Aschermann et al., 1998) and potentially calling forth "associations, definitions, or ideas that otherwise go unnoticed" (Harper, 1988, p. 65), thus yielding richer information (Collier, 1979). As noted by Clark-Ibáñez "...photographs act as a medium of communication between the researcher and participant...Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions and simultaneously, participants can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives" (2004, p. 1512).

Last, as a participatory research methodology, Photovoice is designed to not only elicit valuable data on the lived experience of participants but also to increase participants' knowledge and awareness of their own lives (McIntyre, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Due to the resident-driven emphasis of the initiative within which this evaluation effort was embedded,

community awareness and understanding of the conditions affecting residents' lives was viewed as an essential component to supporting resident empowerment (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2006). In light of this larger aim, facilitating such awareness was viewed as an appropriate and desirable potential impact (for discussion of the impacts of participation in this Photovoice effort, see Foster-Fishman et al., 2006).

Our Photovoice project was guided by two questions that were initially designed to inform programming and our formative evaluation efforts: (1) What do residents see as good about their life? What would they like to change? and (2) What is the significance and meaning behind these positive and negative experiences? Out of this Photovoice effort, a significant proportion of photos and reflections focused on the physical conditions of residents' neighborhoods and community and the meanings and implications of these conditions. This paper reports on this subset of data.

Study Context

Seven distressed neighborhoods[3] within the city of Battle Creek were initially invited to partner with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation on the YWC! effort. These neighborhoods were identified and invited to partner in the YWC! effort, in part, as a result of the poor educational and economic conditions that exist within them.[4] For example, in 2000 over half of children attending elementary schools within the seven neighborhoods scored below acceptable ranges on standardized tests. In addition, whereas approximately 18% of individuals over the age of 25 do not have their high school diploma within Battle Creek, this number jumps to as much as 42% of individuals living in census tracts that overlay several of the participating neighborhoods. Economically, 11% of all families in Battle Creek live below the poverty line. However, several of the seven neighborhoods overlay census tracts in which 30–43% of people are living at or below the poverty line. Further, approximately three quarters of the children attending elementary school in the seven neighborhoods qualify for free or reduced lunch programs. These economic conditions

are all the more evidenced by deteriorating housing stock, with as much as 14% of housing stock standing vacant in some of the neighborhoods.

The racial makeup of the seven neighborhoods was also somewhat more diverse than what is typically found in other Battle Creek neighborhoods. Across the seven neighborhoods, approximately 66% of the residents were Caucasian, 26% African-American, and 7% Hispanic. This is in contrast to an overall population of 19% African-America and 5% Hispanic within the city. However, racial distributions vary greatly across the seven participating neighborhoods. For example, in some of these neighborhoods as much as 57% of the population is African-American and in others up to 11% of the population is Hispanic. The population for each of the seven neighborhoods ranged from 1930 to 4500 people with an average population of 3393.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from the seven neighborhoods selected for involvement in YWC!. Community organizers and Photovoice project team members recruited 42 participants (averaging three adults and three youth from each neighborhood) through the use of community newsletters describing the Photovoice project and the distribution of flyers in the targeted neighborhoods and at neighborhood events. Because Photovoice is an unfamiliar process that requires a substantial investment of time and effort on the part of participants, residents were first invited to attend an orientation and training designed to acquaint them with the process and give them the information needed to determine their interest in participating in the project. Of the 42 individuals who attended this orientation session, 31 elected to continue as project participants. Two youth dropped out after the first session due to conflicts with other summer activities, leaving a total of 11 youth and 18 adult participants. Participants were initially recruited with the goal of creating a sample that included substantial representation from the demographic diversity present in the seven neighborhoods on the aspects of race/ethnicity, age, and gender. The sample of 29 accomplished this goal. Overall, 52% were African-American, 31% were Caucasian, and 17% were Hispanic. Sixty-nine percent were female. Participant ages ranged from 13 to 65 years old.

Participants were reimbursed $50 for attending the training and an additional $25 per week in

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[3] The term neighborhood here refers to an elementary school catchment area (ESCA).

[4] Unless otherwise specified, all demographic information was obtained through public education records and Census data collected in 2000.

consideration of their time and effort invested in the project.

Procedures

Participant training was conducted over the course of two evening sessions and provided orientation to the goals, process, and ethics of Photovoice and instruction by a professional photographer in basic photography techniques. The core elements and content of this training were developed based upon techniques and suggestions discussed elsewhere by Wang and colleagues (e.g., Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Upon successful completion of training, participants were provided with a basic auto focus 35-mm camera and film. Participants were asked to carry their cameras with them for 5 weeks and to shoot one roll of film each week, using three framing questions to provide an overall focus for the subject of their photos: (1) "What is your life like?" (2) "What is good about your life?" and (3) "What needs to change?" Each week, project staff collected the film for processing and returned the developed photographs to participants. For each set of developed photographs, participants were asked to select three images that they felt were particularly meaningful, communicated an important message or story pertaining to the three framing questions, or both. Participants were asked to complete written reflections about each of these three photographs by responding to the following: "I want to share this photo because...""; "What's the real story this photo tells?"; and "How does this story relate to your life and/or the lives of people in your neighborhood?"

Participants then brought their chosen photos and reflections to weekly group reflection meetings. Reflection groups were comprised of up to seven Photovoice participants from a given neighborhood and were facilitated by members of the research team. The purpose of these meetings was to provide participants with the opportunity to share their photos and reactions with others in their neighborhood and to generate deeper reflection and dialogue amongst participants. During these weekly sessions, participants first individually presented each of the photographs they selected that week for reflection and shared the meaning and significance the images held for them. After each photographer had the opportunity to present each of his/her three photos, the group selected, from amongst all the photographs presented that week, the images that they wanted to discuss further as a group. This occurred through a group voting process in which each participant assigned tokens to the photographs he/she felt portrayed a particularly significant message. The five photos that received the most votes from the group were selected for group discussion.

Participants then engaged in dialogue with one another and the facilitator about the meaning behind each of the chosen photographs. The role of the facilitator was to develop a full understanding of the meaning and significance behind the photos by encouraging active participation from all group members in the individual reflection and group dialogue processes. For photographs identified as depicting strengths (e.g., things about their lives that were good), facilitation included combinations of probes around how those strengths came to be, in what ways they impacted people, and what relevance, if any, these held in promoting positive change. For photographs identified as depicting things in need of change, facilitation included combinations of probes around the meaning behind the photograph, why the depicted problem or issue existed, how it impacted people, and how it could be changed. Reflection meetings were audio taped and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

Because the results presented here represent a subset of data collected from our Photovoice project, we first describe the within-case analysis process used with the data set as a whole and then explain the specific cross-case analysis that produced the results presented here.

Data

Photovoice data consisted of photographs, written reflections, transcripts of verbal reflections from individual photographers, and transcripts of group discussions. As a first step, the research team[5] made

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[5] The research team who conducted the analysis for this study consisted of five Caucasian women whose ages ranged from mid-20 to mid-40s. Two of the five members were Ph.D.s and three were doctoral graduate students at the university. Four of the five members had received their research training in the field of community psychology and one had a research background in agricultural education. Three of the members were familiar with the seven neighborhoods represented in this paper as a result their direct involvement in the ongoing evaluation of YWC! Two members had been the principal designers and implementers of the Photovoice project and had served as facilitators for the group reflection sessions.

the decision to focus analysis on only those photographs that were selected for group discussion ($n = 141$). This decision was made both from pragmatic considerations in order to reduce the full dataset to a manageable size as well as from the recognition that these photos: (1) embodied issues that were considered to be of significance by each group; (2) had sparked in-depth discussion and reflection around those issues; and (3) contained the richest array of reflection and discussion data representing multiple participants' thoughts and feelings. For each photo in this subset, a case summary was created, which included the photograph, the written reflection, the personal reflection, and the group reflection for that photograph.

Within-Case Analysis

Given that we were primarily interested in residents' lived experience and the meanings they assigned to objects and events in their everyday lives, a phenomenological approach to analysis was selected. Phenomenological approaches to data analysis seek to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied, giving primacy to the subjective experience of participants and interpretation of meaning resulting from those experiences (Rieman, 1998). Consistent with the analysis procedures described by Denzin (1989), Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), and Rieman (1998), our analysis of the data followed several iterative phases.

First, a within-case analysis was performed on all cases to identify the significant statements and formulated meanings present in the data (Rieman, 1998). In order to accomplish this, a framework of key interpretation questions (i.e., What do residents value? What are residents' interpretations for why it is valued? What facilitators or barriers exist to obtaining or securing what they value? How it is a barrier or facilitator? What, if anything, does this mean for creating positive social change in the community?) was developed to guide what information we sought from the data. This initial organizing framework was developed after three coders each reviewed a sample of two or three transcripts and worked collaboratively to determine a framework for organizing the data. This process underwent several iterations in order to refine the framework into set of key interpretation questions that reflected the different ways that residents talked about their lives and the meanings they ascribed to them. Coders then applied this framework by seeking out significant statements (Rieman, 1998) present in each case summary that spoke to one or more of the interpretation questions. An analysis table was prepared for each case, listing these statements in a single column using either verbatim text or summaries of text excerpts as first-order themes. In a second column, second-order themes were then assigned to represent the formulated meanings (Rieman, 1998) participants assigned to, or that we interpreted as being implied by, these significant statements.

Consistency checks were used throughout the process to ensure that coders were utilizing the framework in a similar and consistent way. These checks entailed two coders periodically coding the same case summary and then coming together to discuss their selected statements and second-order assignments of formulated meaning. If dissimilarities existed, coders would discuss areas of divergence and alert the rest of the research team if further clarifications or modifications for applying the interpretive framework were deemed necessary. Throughout the coding process, frequent meetings and peer debriefing among members of the research team allowed the team to examine themes for areas of convergence, refine our process, and discuss what insights and findings were emerging from the data that could inform the work of the community initiative (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Cross-Case Synthesis

Given the intentionally broad focus of the Photovoice project, the tabled summaries of significant statements and formulated meanings generated during the first, within-case phase of analysis represented a wide range of issues, assets, and insights. Across these, however, the physical characteristics of neighborhoods and the broader community was a common subject of participants' case summaries. This subset of case summaries was the focus for analysis in the present study ($N = 64$). Significant statements and formulated meanings identified for each case summary in this data subset were examined through multiple meetings among the authors that occurred over the course of several months. Through a process Patton (2001) refers to as the creative synthesis stage, common themes were identified in the significant statements and formulated meanings across cases and then integrated into an organizing framework that we felt captured and communicated the underlying meanings and significance residents ascribed to the

physical conditions of their neighborhood and community (see Appendix A for an example of this analytic progression).

RESULTS

Through the photos taken by participants and their reflections on these images, we learned that the conditions and characteristics of where they live carry multiple meanings for residents. Specifically, we learned that characteristics of residents' proximal neighborhood and larger community convey cues to residents about who they are, how they are viewed by others, what behaviors are socially accepted, and who they might become. The following is the story of those meanings as shared by participants and the implications they have for the community as a whole and the lives of the people who live there.

Cues About Personal History and Connection to a Community

One of the ways in which participants described neighborhood and community physical characteristics as having meaning was by serving as markers of residents' own personal histories. Participants frequently chose to photograph well-loved parks, walking trails, and public spaces, commenting not only on the current value and usage of these places for gathering and recreation, but also how these places served as reminders of their own personal histories with and connections to the community.

For example, several participants chose to photograph an area park that featured restored historic bridges from the community's past. In sharing the meaning behind the photographs, participants described the significance of the park in terms of the role it has played in the history of their own as well as their families' residence in the community. One participant described the significance of a small area of the park near the river in the following way (see Fig. 1):

> I went swimming here as a child and [have now] for many years. I've been fishing here and my grandmother and other relatives were baptized in the river. The bridges bring some of the history back to the present for more generations to enjoy. It's a nice park … someplace where you can go and learn to appreciate nature. I imagine that even if the bridge wasn't there you would take your kids there anyway. *It's not so much the things that are there, it's like the family and the friends that you spent time with there.*

Fig. 1. Photograph of historic bridge.

> *These are the things that take you back again; they remind you of that time. It's not so much the objects at the park. It's the park, and it's the memories that the objects bring back.* [italics added]

Through stories such as these, participants conveyed enduring relationships to their community that had evolved over time through the accumulation of place-based memories. Landmarks and community spaces that participants associated with their own histories in the community served as concrete reminders of their ties to the community. At their root, these stories suggested that some community landmarks were meaningful to the members of the community today because they held an important place in their past.

Cues Conveying Community Identity and Value

In addition to providing markers of residents' personal connection to the community, participants described physical features as capable of communicating messages about the value and worth of the community itself. They frequently chose to photograph monuments, memorials, and signs that depicted the community's identity and history. Their reflections about the meaning and significance behind these objects suggested that such landmarks are important because they communicate to residents, as well as to outsiders, that this community has value. This sentiment was articulated by a youth who

photographed the "Welcome to Battle Creek" sign displayed in the downtown area:

> I mean, when you come to places and they done took the time [to build] not just no little sign that say, 'Welcome to Battle Creek'. They done took the time to build a monument that say, 'Welcome to Battle Creek.' You know, you might feel a little better about comin' to this place. I mean, that's how I feel about the situation. You thinkin,' okay well there gotta be somethin' here, [something] that's good in Battle Creek 'cause they done took the time to build 'Welcome to Battle Creek.' *So, you know, there's gotta be some good here...*[italics added]

Similarly, markers of community history were commonly photographed and reflected upon as significant not only because they captured the story of the community's past, but also because such history—and the act of remembrance—was viewed as reflecting upon the community as it is today. For example, several participants chose to photograph monuments and landmarks that symbolized their community's role in the Underground Railroad. One participant described her interpretation of the meaning and significance behind a photo of one such monument in the following way:

> I think that part of it is that a lot of the history [of the Underground Railroad] was from the Battle Creek area, and they want people to know that, you know, *there were good people here in this area back then, and maybe there is still some good in the area.* [italics added]

Another participant commented on the pride symbolized by tributes to the community's history:

> Well, the places that give you more of the history...to me it makes me feel like this place is important to them. But then you go into some place that doesn't say anything, to me it makes me feel like these people don't care who came in and settled this or when it was founded. [italics added]

Similarly, another participant reflected on the ability of such tributes to restore some of what was lost to the community by reconnecting residents with a proud community heritage:

> Okay, so if you know that sense of belonging and pride was there, what have we done, you know, to have caused us to lose that sense of pride in community? *And if you know a little bit of history, then I think that you can regain that sense of pride.* [italics added]

Thus, positive physical characteristics of the community were credited with the ability to communicate messages of identity, pride, and value to and about the community. According to participants, physical landmarks contain symbolic meaning for residents and convey messages regarding the importance of the community as a whole.

Participants also described the importance of positive *neighborhood*-level physical features for communicating a sense of identity and worth to residents. Just as the sign for the city of Battle Creek was valuable to participants for the statement it made about the community as a whole, tangible demonstrations of neighborhood-level identity were likewise reflected upon as having value and significance for communicating positive messages to and about residents of that neighborhood. For example, one participant proudly shared a photo of a large sign marking the entrance to her neighborhood and described its importance in the following way:

> Well, it brings the community together so [residents] *actually know that they are part of something.* Our people actually know we're ['Creekview' neighborhood] and not just some other block in the city. It just sort of makes the community here look a little bit better. *It's there to show you that you belong,* and these people are all part of this, and without these people it's not ['Creekview'] Neighborhood. [italics added]

Interpretations such as these suggest that when located in residents' proximal neighborhoods, such signs serve not only to communicate messages about the neighborhood as a distinctive place, but also suggest feelings of belonging and positive identification to residents of that place.

However, participants also shared numerous examples of local physical conditions that held *negative* meaning for them. In photographing aspects of their community that needed to change, participants shared images of their local neighborhoods that depicted areas overrun with garbage, dilapidated houses, and buildings covered in graffiti. All of these images were accompanied by a unifying message: the conditions of where you live reflect on who you are.

Participants shared that the significance of how a neighborhood looks is far deeper than merely an issue of aesthetics. Rather, the physical characteristics of a neighborhood were described as projecting a message to the larger community about the people who live there. The awareness that neighborhoods and, correspondingly, the people who live in them are judged by the broader community based upon their physical appearance was particularly salient in commentaries put forward by youth about the

conditions in their neighborhoods. For example, one young female participant shared a photograph of a boarded up apartment building near where she lived:

> My mom and dad grew up here and I've been born and raised here. Everybody thinks I'm gonna live here, [but] that's not true; I'm gonna work my hardest to not live out here…because I don't like it out here. Because the whole neighborhood…*everybody thinks that just because you live up there you're a welfare brat,* and it's not true. [My family] works so hard. I notice people who get to know me, [they are] like, 'Oh you live where? Ooooh okay. We don't like people from over there. That's the bad side of town.' [italics added]

Another youth photographed a neglected ditch located in front of his apartment building that was filled with garbage. Three weeks later, he brought in a second photograph of the same ditch that had been cleaned up. When asked what these photographs meant to him, he responded:

> [It's important] because [the trash] reflected me. I mean, it might not have truly reflected me, but somebody, when you looked at it…they thought, 'Look at that guy's trashy front thing. He's throwing that stuff away. He's got two dumpsters, and he's throwing it right in the front. *He's lazy…and they're lazy, and look what they've done.* [italics added]

Yet another youth, in reflecting upon a photo of streetscape located close to his home, expressed his views on the characterization of his neighborhood as being a "bad neighborhood":

> …when you go up the street and you see all the houses, sometimes you start thinking it's a bad neighborhood, but it's just the neighborhood's low-income and it just can't afford a lot of nice things, but that doesn't necessarily make 'em bad. Just 'cause you don't make a lot of money, and just because your house, *because you can't afford to make your house like the best doesn't mean you're a bad person.* I mean, it's just the way the neighborhood looks, you know?

Narratives such as these illuminated the sense of frustration and shame that residents can experience from being associated with negative physical conditions in their neighborhoods, whether through direct feedback from peers or others in the community or through the perceived attitudes of a generalized other. Some residents noted that because these negative conditions confronted them on a daily basis, the negative messages became all the more invasive. This was illustrated by the reflections of one participant in remarking on the significance of

Fig. 2. Building covered in graffiti.

a graffiti-covered building in her neighborhood (see Fig. 2):

> This building is part of my daily life. When I walk out my front door and I look to the right, that's the first thing I see. When I come into the neighborhood, it's right there at the stop sign. And if I go for a walk around the block, it's there. If I sit on my porch, work in my yard, or even leave my driveway to go to the store, I have to look at this eyesore.

Thus, while positive physical conditions could invoke a sense of pride and belonging for residents, negative conditions were seen as reflecting their negativity upon the people who lived there, consequently becoming a pervasive part of community life for residents who live in close proximity to such conditions.

Cues that Define Social Norms and Behavior

In addition to having implications for personal and community identity, physical conditions were also described as having consequences for people's behavior toward a community. Namely, residents told us that evidence of neglect invites further neglect, while evidence that people care about the neighborhood inspires and motivates additional acts of caring.

Beyond their implications for how residents are judged by the broader community, in some cases

negative physical conditions were described as even more insidious because of their ability to set norms that open the door for even greater ills to befall a neighborhood. For example, one participant, in describing the significance behind an image taken of an abandoned house in her neighborhood, commented on its potential to invite other negative elements into the neighborhood:

> Well like I said, it just makes the neighborhood look bad, makes us look bad, like we don't care. And so, it's like I said, to me it's a very high risk. [This house] says drugs is coming in there and homeless people and whatever, which will cause a lot more problems later down the road - [problems] for our safety and the kids' safety in the neighborhood.

Another participant had a similar interpretation, commenting on the role such houses play in the downward spiral of neighborhoods in transition:

> ...one apple can spoil the whole bunch...the neighborhood is already on a, you know, a little downfall and then by him not, him just lettin' his house go it just ain't doing nothing but adding to the worse. The neighborhood look more worse than to what it is.

Yet another participant, in discussing an abandoned and unkempt building and surrounding yard area, had the following to say:

> People come down here and think, 'Okay this is...dumpy, and we can dump things over here; we can dump things over there.'

Examples such as these illustrate how neighborhood conditions provide community members and others with visual cues from which both the character and the social norms of the neighborhood are inferred. However, other stories suggested that the messages residents read from their physical environments have significant intrapsychic effects as well. For example, the participant who photographed the graffiti-covered building in her neighborhood also shared the impact that building had on her own, as well as her neighbors,' motivation and ability to improve this negative condition:

> It drains my energy to look at the mess. It just makes us look like we're a shabby little neighborhood, and *nobody has the energy to do anything* because when you come into the neighborhood you've got all this negative energy. [italics added]

Residents' explanations of the significance of these conditions were consistent with broken windows theory explanations of neighborhood decline, wherein minor issues (e.g., broken windows) that

go unattended convey apathy and social disorder that invites—or, at a minimum, communicates lack of resistance to—further delinquent behavior (Skogan, 1990). Importantly, participants clarified that not only do such conditions invite further vandalism, but their presence is also personally felt in ways that deteriorate residents' drive and self-efficacy to improve their situation.

However, participants also shared evidence that the relationship between environmental cues and resident behavior can work in a positive direction and indeed is consciously leveraged by some residents to generate energy for improvement in their neighborhoods. Participants frequently photographed well-kept houses and beautiful lawns and gardens—often their own. The stories told about these images revealed that not only were participants proud of their accomplishments, but they also felt efforts to improve their own homes might foster a desire for change in others. For example, one participant shared a photograph of her landscaping efforts, saying:

> I'm trying to improve my house and my yard and my neighborhood any way I can with what little I have to work with. Maybe it'll trickle down—somebody else will say, 'Okay, their house looks nice, I want my yard to look nice. I want my house to look nice,' and you get a little bit of competition going on there. [italics added]

Another participant made the following remark regarding his efforts to beautify his own yard:

> ...I'm just hoping to be a good example for other people in the neighborhood. It gives everyone something nice to look at and *gives the neighbors motivation to improve their yards*. [italics added]

Through these accounts, participants suggested that, in their understanding, efforts to improve and beautify their own property were not merely executed for personal benefit but also served the social function of setting positive examples and encouraging norms of caring for the neighborhood among other residents. Participants described the mechanism through which such positive social norms exerted influence as closely associated with the same principles of pride and shame expressed in their reflections of positive and negative neighborhood conditions. For example, one participant presented his group with a photograph of a well-manicured lawn in his neighborhood, saying (see Fig. 3):

> [This photo is] a challenge for the rest of the neighborhood, 'cause [neighbors] can put up their yard

Fig. 3. Photograph of well-kept lawn.

and have it lookin' like this one in a few years. It's about people's attitudes. I mean, *if everybody else's yard looks nice and yours is the only one that looks like crap, then obviously you're gonna want to fix yours up too that way. So they don't think you are dirty or lazy*. [italics added]

In sum, participants saw within the features and physical conditions of their proximal neighborhood messages suggestive of the character and value of both the place itself and, by association, the people who live there. These messages were described in powerful terms, with clear consequences for residents' personal and collective identities as members of the community, their attitudes toward and connections to place, and their subsequent behavior within that community.

Cues of Possibility and Markers of Progress

As described earlier, community environments provided cues that suggested to residents who they were, how they were viewed by others and what was considered to be socially acceptable/desirable behavior in their physical context. Participants also described community conditions as holding additional meaning for residents by informing and inspiring their actions with evidence of the possibilities for what could be. The idea of creating a community context that inspires and informs the possibility of change emerged through participants' discussions surrounding the importance of having a community that was rich in its knowledge of its own history.

For example, as mentioned, several participants chose to photograph a monument commemorating the community's historic role as a stop along the Underground Railroad. In considering the significance of one of these photographs, one participant commented:

> You look at that picture and you think no matter how hard or rough the times are right now, somebody else has always had it rougher, and *it has come a long ways. So if it's progressed from that to now— there's still room for growth to get better.* [italics added]

To participants, this and other local monuments served, not only as cues that inspire a sense of identity and value as discussed, but also as markers of community achievement, reminding community members of the progress the community has attained throughout its history and, by extension, suggesting the community's inherent potential for further progress. Thus, participants' numerous photographs of and reflections on historical markers in the community point to the important role these can serve in providing inspiration and hope for the possibility of future change by bringing past pride and accomplishment into current community consciousness.

Conditions that promote knowledge about the history of a community can also serve to remind its members of the lessons they have learned along their journey and of where they do *not* want to return. For example, in response to the group's discussion regarding why visible reminders of history are important, one youth remarked:

> It shows where we been. And then you think about where we been and it shows you who we don't wanna be again. It shows you where you been and where you don't wanna go back to.

The importance of environmental cues that remind residents of the lessons of the past was echoed in the comments of yet another participant in giving her explanation of the meaning and significance behind the various historical buildings and monuments:

> ...If you know your background, you'll always know what you got to look forward to. Without knowing your background, you don't know where you came from; you can't achieve nothing. We'll constantly achieve, but you'll probably fall back into something that you could've avoided if you knew about it.

In summary, the truth behind the old adage "seeing is believing" is reflected in participants' reflections regarding the importance of having

communities rich with evidence of pride, belonging, and possibility, supported by both visible examples of achievement today as well as a history of past accomplishments. Knowledge of examples of what is possible and attainable is believed to inspire residents and to motivate efforts toward community improvements. Importantly, residents described drawing upon a variety of sources for such inspiration. Examples of places people could look to for hope, ideas, and a sense of self and collective efficacy ranged from individual residents setting an example of home and yard maintenance for others to follow to drawing upon historical knowledge of what was once achieved in order to remember the lessons of the past as well as to imagine what can again be accomplished.

DISCUSSION

The data presented here provide a glimpse into the meanings that residents construct from cues in their surrounding environments, as perceived by a diverse group of youth and adult residents living in seven distressed neighborhoods. These findings offer several important contributions for both augmenting our conceptual understanding of the impact of community conditions and environments on residents and suggesting tools for the practice of community change in place-based initiatives.

Community Conditions and Positive Place Identity

Our findings provide empirical support for the premise that community conditions are important, in part, for the symbolic meanings they carry for residents. The presence of physical markers, such as a monument or neighborhood name placard, symbolically affirm a resident's membership to that community by communicating to residents that they are part of something distinctive, important, and valuable. The symbolic meanings carried by physical conditions can thus serve as an important conduit in the development of a positive place identity in neighborhood residents. Place identity is defined as an aspect of self-identity in which a person uses objects and spaces to help him/her define who they are in society (Durrheim & Dixon, 2001; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1995), and in which places function as meaningful reference points in the development of personal identity (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995). Positive place identities are

enhanced when a place is perceived as favorably distinctive from its broader environmental context (Proshansky et al., 1995) and when individuals develop a strong sense of membership and belonging to a place (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). This sense of belonging to a place can deepen as individuals interact with a place over time (Rowles, 1983) and find their own personal histories entwined with memories of the place.

As the data presented here illustrates, such elements of positive distinctiveness and feelings of belonging are symbolized in the physical attributes of a community or neighborhood, suggesting an important link between the physical characteristics of communities and the development of place identity. Although community psychologists have yet to widely incorporate the place identity construct as developed in the environmental psychology literature, related concepts are gaining attention, particularly in relation to sense of community. Three recent studies examining the dimensions and measurement of sense of community (Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002a, 2002b) found that "conscious identification" (defined as the degree to which an individual attaches personal identity meaning from belonging to the community) both emerged as a factor apart from existing conceptualized dimensions of psychological sense of community and appeared among all the dimensions as the strongest predictor of global sense of community.

In conjunction with of the findings of Obst and colleagues, the present study suggests a need to further develop our understanding of the relationship between physical features of a community, residents' experiences and interpretations of these conditions, and the development of place identity and sense of community. Since a strong sense of community has been implicated as an important factor in the overall health of a community (e.g., Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002) as well as a necessary condition for the success of place-based community change initiatives (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990), such investigations could yield important new understandings for strengthening communities and building community capacity for social change.

Neighborhood Conditions and Self-Identity

In addition to having an influence on residents' sense of belonging to a given community, results suggest that physical environments can have even

more fundamental implications for the self-identity of those who live there. For example, many of the images and messages described by the residents in our study emphasized how the physical characteristics of one's neighborhood become a source of evidence used by residents *and* outsiders to form judgments about a neighborhood or community and its inhabitants. Physical characteristics were described as capable of communicating very powerful identity-related messages about residents such as "they are dirty," "they are lazy," and "they don't care"; or inversely, "there are good people here" and "you belong." These findings support Dixon and Durrheim's (2000) conclusion that one's sense of self is often in direct relationship with the physical environment such that "questions of 'who we are' are often intimately related to questions of 'where we are'" (p. 27). In short, conditions can either inspire residents with a sense of pride and belonging or, inversely, they can invoke feelings of shame.

For scholars and practitioners interested in understanding and explaining the effect of neighborhood conditions, these insights suggest previously neglected mechanisms that may contribute to how and why community conditions affect residents of impoverished neighborhoods. While significant attention has been paid to studying the relationships of both physical neighborhood conditions and collective neighborhood demographics to individual and neighborhood outcomes (e.g., Sampson et al., 2002), the impact of neighborhood environments on the self-identities of residents is essentially absent in these analyses. Such studies have largely focused on the influence of factors such as institutional resources, social norms, relationships, and networks to explain differences between individuals from impoverished neighborhoods on an array of achievement and health indices (e.g., Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002). However, it is reasonable to suspect that negative characterizations of people and places imposed by outsiders and incorporated into one's self identity (Cohen, 1985; Suttles, 1972) may have significant implications for the personal sense of worth, self-efficacy, and overall mental health of residents. These effects may be particularly strong for youth, for whom concerns regarding how one is perceived in the eyes of others have an especially powerful influence on the development of a positive self-concept and their general mental well-being (Harter, 1999).

Neighborhood Conditions and Community Engagement

Our findings also suggest important implications for the relationship between residents' place-related self-identities and their behavior and motivation to engage in community change efforts. The willingness of residents to identify with and adopt a feeling of ownership over their neighborhood is an important facilitator to the kind of resident mobilization required of place-based change efforts (Traynor, 2002). However, as described earlier, findings from this study suggest that the kind of negative environmental conditions that are frequently associated with neighborhoods chosen for place-based change efforts are perceived to reflect badly upon those who live there and can consequently threaten residents' sense of self.

It has been argued that one cognitive mechanism for managing this threat is to disassociate oneself and identify with such environments only in terms of who one is not, defining a negative place identity to contrast oneself from the setting (Proshansky et al., 1995). For example, Proshansky et al. (1995) assert that when physical settings such as home, school, or neighborhood threaten, detract, or interfere with a positive conception of self, the resultant effect will not only preclude the development of positive place identification but may actually produce place aversion.

It is certainly problematic that place-based change efforts, which seek to transform distressed neighborhoods through strategies of resident engagement, are frequently working within environments that may be the least likely to evoke the kind of identification and ownership necessary for engagement. As our findings illustrate, neighborhood conditions that threaten residents' self identity can promote disassociation from the neighborhood and, in turn, reduce motivation and energy for working to improve neighborhood life. Such disassociation may have an additional aggregate effect if, as suggested by participants, collective disengagement generates further physical evidence and subsequent norms of neglect. This is worth noting in light of the work of Sampson et al. (1997) in examining the mitigating role of collective efficacy on crime in physically and socially disordered neighborhoods and suggests the need to examine the relationship between place identity and the collective efficacy of neighborhood residents.

Implications for Practice

Findings from the present study can be further refined into important implications for the practice of community change in place-based initiatives. First, our findings suggest that place-based initiatives would do well to attend to issues of place identity in structuring their interventions, as neighborhoods whose residents possess a poor or diffuse sense of place identity are likely to experience particular challenges in coming together for collective planning and problem solving. That is, before residents can work together as a neighborhood, they must at the very least be willing and able to recognize themselves as a neighborhood, and identify strongly enough with the neighborhood to commit their time and energy toward improving it.

As discussed earlier, one promising mechanism for fostering a positive place identity is promoting a sense of positive distinctiveness within a neighborhood or community in order to promote residents' awareness of themselves as members of a neighborhood. Positive distinctiveness can be supported first by identifying—or encouraging neighborhoods to create—geographically distinct boundaries and markers that distinguish it from the broader community. In addition, change agents can learn from residents what features they find favorably distinctive about their neighborhood and/or community and what aspects of the community's heritage are conducive to a positive sense of place. This knowledge can then be leveraged to promote a sense of collective identity. Moreover, change agents can work to further support a sense of belonging and membership to a community by identifying aspects of the community to which residents feel personal ties or attach a sense of history. Through identifying and leveraging these aspects of the person–environment relationship between residents and their community, change efforts can work to embed messages within their programming that communicate to residents that "This place is distinctive and valuable," and that "This is your community and you belong here."

The second implication for practice concerns the relationship between neighborhood conditions that invoke a sense of pride and resident engagement. The challenge of facilitating the kind of sustained involvement of residents necessary to carry out the work of the initiative has been well documented in place-based initiatives (Traynor, 1995). However, the neighborhoods identified by community change initiatives to address social and economic issues typically show significant physical distress and carry with them negative reputations, which may reflect poorly on residents, threaten residents' self-identities, and obstruct positive place identity in that context. In light of this, practitioners may benefit from recognizing that apathy and disengagement on the part of residents is, in some ways, an adaptive strategy. Such disengagement not only protects residents from the sense of shame resulting from negative judgments of the neighborhood but it also allows them to direct their energies at upward mobility to a better neighborhood. Through this lens, change agents can work to foster residents' willingness to invest time and energy in improvement efforts by helping residents generate sources and feelings of pride and address sources of shame in their neighborhoods.

In this manner, initial investments in, for example, neighborhood cleanup and beautification efforts can support positive place identity cognitions among residents by replacing negative images with new and more positive cues about their neighborhoods. Likewise, eliciting from residents other sources and expressions of pride and identifying ways to make these visible and prominent in the neighborhood could serve to promote the sense that this is a neighborhood worth being a part of and, consequently, worth the effort to improve.

Finally, the present study highlights the importance of community conditions for creating possibility-rich environments. Impoverished neighborhoods may not only be lacking in resources and tools for creating opportunity as identified in many institutional theories of neighborhood effects (Mayer & Jencks, 1989), but they may be additionally anemic in their ability to promote a psychological sense of possibility in residents. Without visible examples of achievement in their environment that people can relate to, residents may lack the sense of efficacy needed for achievement irrespective of the availability of external resources. This suggests that building a sense of collective efficacy necessary for place-based change efforts involves, in part, creating a psychological sense of possibility in residents.

The notion of change being inspired from existing examples of achievement is not new to the field of community development and community organizing. Change efforts often recognize the importance of incorporating "small wins" or "quick wins" into the change process in order to build capacity and bolster participants' sense of possibility,

efficacy, and commitment to the change effort (Sytniak, 1996; Weick, 1984). However, discussions of the importance of small wins and achievements in the context of place-based initiatives are often primarily concerned with those achievements that occur as a direct response to the initiative. While targeting and communicating initiative-sponsored accomplishments within the community is certainly valuable, it is important that this lens does not prevent practitioners from searching out, identifying, and supporting residents in showcasing a broad spectrum of community achievement—both past and present—as a lever for building the collective efficacy of disenfranchised neighborhoods. Sources of inspiration captured by participants in this study included images of the personal achievements by others like themselves and reminders of past events and historical achievements that have relevance for the present and future. This indicates the need to think broadly when considering how to inspire hope and a sense of possibility for change in residents. It may be that readiness for social change comes, not from any one source of inspiration, but from a cumulative effect of multiple sources, each adding to residents' belief in the possibility of change.

Limitations

Findings from the present study do need to be considered in light of some limitations. To begin with, it can certainly be assumed that individuals who are willing to commit up to seven hours a week for five consecutive weeks exploring their community, taking photos, writing personal reflections, and participating in weekly group reflection meetings may differ in certain respects from the average resident. One specific threat to generalizability related to this that emerged in this study is the possible selection bias that occurred in the Photovoice participant sample. Eleven of the individuals who initially participated in the orientation and training session elected not to participate in this Photovoice project. Several critical factors such as a heightened interest in community, a desire to learn photography, and/or a certain level of time availability may have distinguished the 29 individuals who did participate from other residents in their neighborhoods. It may also be that participants who chose not to participate differed from the 29 in their level of skill or comfort with certain aspects of the Photovoice project such as taking photographs, writing, or speaking in groups. While we do not think this potential selection bias has limitations

to the validity of the experiences and perceptions of those who did participate, it is unclear if such individuals experience and are subsequently impacted by the conditions of their neighborhood in a way that is unique from the experience of the average resident. Furthermore, due to our small sample size, our ability to make the assertion that the experiences reported by our sample are representative of the dominant experience of residents in these neighborhoods is also limited. However, our confidence in the legitimacy of the findings in this context is bolstered by three factors. The first is the fact that our sample is characteristic of the diversity existing within the neighborhoods on the attributes of age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Second, findings were not inconsistent with, and in some instances lent further support for, existing theories and literature. Last, our selection for analysis of cases that had been chosen for group discussion allowed us to analyze participant perspectives in the context of a larger dialogue in which participants themselves validated each others' perceptions.

Therefore, while the extent to which our findings will generalize to other communities remains undetermined, our hope is that through comparisons of similar inquiries in different communities and increased attention to the meanings that residents ascribe to the cues and conditions in their communities, our base of knowledge about the fundamental relationships that exist between people and places will continue to evolve.

Conclusion

The latest generation of place-based community change efforts (e.g., Gibson et al., 1997; Hyman, 2002) require new frameworks for understanding and defining community problems and assets and new tools for engaging residents in the difficult work at hand. Findings from this study provide strong support for the assertion that environmental characteristics carry with them cues and accompanying meanings that are germane to the work of these efforts. The meanings ascribed to neighborhood and community conditions can have substantive implications for residents' sense of self, their sense of belonging, and their willingness to invest in neighborhood change efforts. By gaining an understanding about what place really means for people, funders and designers of change initiatives can leverage this knowledge to design initiatives that tap into residents' motivation and promote positive experiences with place.

Appendix: Illustration of analysis progression

First-order significant statements	Second-order meaning	Themes	Organizing framework
Picture is important because it shows what good yards look like	Beautiful yards are important because they inspire positive change in others	Evidence of caring inspires further caring	Cues that define norms and social behavior
Good yards make the neighborhood look better	Beautiful yards reflect positively on the neighborhood		
When people fix up their yards, it challenges the rest of the neighborhood to do better	Residents use visible improvements to their own homes as a way to inspire change in their neighbors		
People should show off their yards to encourage others to make theirs look good			
"I'm trying to improve my house and my yard any way with what little I have to work with so maybe it will trickle down . . .someone else will want theirs to look that way so you can get a little bit of competition going there"			
When people see trash laying around they might dump more trash and make it look worse	People are more likely to throw trash in places that already have trash laying around	Evidence of neglect invites further neglect	
It makes the neighborhood look bad and sets a bad example for the neighborhood	Badly maintained property communicates lack of caring in the neighborhood		
Neglected houses communicate that the neighborhood doesn't care which causes more problems (i.e. leads to drug dealers and homeless people coming in there)			

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