

Psychological Sense of Community as a Framework to Explore Adolescence and Neighbourhoods

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Adolescence is considered a time of change, and, to some extent, upheaval. Psychological Sense of Community has been utilised as a framework for understanding adolescents' experiences in their neighbourhoods. The present study explored the experiences of 10 adolescents from two urban schools in eastern Australia, a specialist setting for students with a mild intellectual disability, and a mainstream school. Using a modified version of Photovoice, participants were actively engaged in taking photographs about their day-to-day lives in their neighbourhoods. The photographs were supplemented by individual semi-structured interviews and small group discussions. The role of neighbourhood, including factors the participants considered important in their neighbourhoods, as well as other aspects of their lives were discussed with similarities found between the two groups. Both groups of participants were involved in community activities although participants with a disability required more family support in accessing activities. The dynamic nature of neighbourhoods and broader concepts of communities, including the role of technology, were also explored during the research project.

Adolescence is defined as the period between the onset of puberty and early adulthood. During this time, individuals are faced with a myriad of rapid and complex changes – physical, cognitive, social and emotional – which may lead to a range of experiences with some unprecedented challenges. An increased discrepancy between sexual and psychosocial maturity has arisen due to earlier pubertal changes and social and economic factors resulting in increased dependency on parents during early adulthood (Kleinert, 2007; Patton & Viner, 2007). Although adolescence has traditionally been characterised as a period within one's life cycle when storm and stress is more likely to occur than at any other life stage (Arnett, 1999), an exploration of contemporary thoughts on adolescence within western culture suggests that this is not always the case.

Recent research has recognised the importance of protective factors and has begun to explore the promotion of resilience in adolescents (e.g., Resnick, 2005; Vassallo, Smart, Sanson, & Dussuyer, 2004). Australian researchers have clearly defined the critical

roles that families, schools and communities play in supporting adolescents in negotiating the challenges that arise during this life stage (Fuller, McGraw, & Goodyear, 2002). This contrasts with previous research which tended to focus on the individualistic, and often negative, aspects of adolescent development, such as risk taking behaviours and antisocial behaviours (Maggs, Frome, Eccles, & Barber, 1997; Moore & Parsons, 2000).

Adolescents are not, however, a homogeneous group, although much previous research has only considered the experiences of those adolescents attending mainstream schools. Historically, people with intellectual disabilities have tended to be excluded from decision making, community involvement and research projects, despite integration having been advocated for some time (Wituk, Pearson, Bomhoff, Hinde, & Meissen, 2006). The experiences of adolescents with intellectual disabilities have only recently been explored (Bramston, Bruggerman, & Pretty, 2002; Pretty, Rapley, & Bramston, 2002). This research considered how community connectedness is related to the perception of quality of life in

adolescents with an intellectual disability, particularly through the use of community facilities and feelings of belonging, and how this relates to subjective quality of life. They found similarities in the perceptions and use of community facilities by both adolescents with and without an intellectual disability.

Research undertaken by Bramston et al. (2002) explored the association between quality of life and community belonging measures and found a correlation between both measures, suggesting that having activities, friends and support was associated with higher life satisfaction for adolescents with an intellectual disability. Self-reported quality of life domains of belonging and empowerment were found to be significantly lower for adolescents with an intellectual disability, when compared to their non-disabled peers: "Despite attending the same schools and living in the same neighbourhoods, those with an intellectual disability felt significantly less belonging and less control over their choices than their matched counterparts" (Bramston et al., 2002, p. 394).

Increasingly, questions have arisen in relation to the contemporary meaning of "community" and the possibilities of alternative definitions to physical locale or place-based communities, such as neighbourhoods or towns. It has also been observed that an individual may belong to more than one community. Traditional concepts of community may no longer apply as technological advances create new opportunities for social engagement and interaction. Accordingly, the role of relational communities (such as communities of interest and virtual communities) has been considered by some researchers (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined the elements that make up Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) as membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection, defining it as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that

members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). They described strong communities as those that "offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honour members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members (p. 14).

PSOC, as the "fundamental human phenomenon of collective experience" (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008, p. 62), has been considered in relation to its relevance to adolescents (Chipeur & Pretty, 1999; O'Grady, 2000). The components of PSOC go some way in explaining the role of neighbourhood as one aspect of community in supporting adolescents. Neighbourhoods have also been recognised as an instrumental factor in child and adolescent development as they influence behaviour, attitudes and values and provide a range of risks and opportunities (Boardman & Saint Onge, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealander, 1993; Mead, 1984).

PSOC has provided researchers with a framework to understanding adolescent behaviour and needs in a range of settings. Whitlock (2007) found that adolescent connectedness to community was influenced by factors such as quality of adolescent-adult exchange, availability of outlets for creative engagement; well advertised opportunities for meaningful input; safety and perceived welcome in public spaces. Pretty (2002) argued that perceptions of one's community and experiences within it, particularly PSOC and community attachment, can be important factors in the development of an adolescent's community-minded self. She claimed that an adolescent's experiences in the neighbourhood provide information as to his or her identity as a community member.

Issues of inclusion and exclusion apply when one identifies with a particular

community. Puddifoot (2003) named elements such as identification, distinctiveness and orientation that may form a model of community identity. Gustafson (2001) described “place” as having many meanings to individuals, meanings which can be broadly classified under three poles: the individual and inter-related themes of environment (physical environment and distinctive features); self (often expressed as experiences and memories) and others (through the perceived characteristics, traits and behaviours of inhabitants).

This paper describes a research project which explored the perceptions of 10 adolescents from two urban schools in eastern Australia: a specialist school for students with a mild intellectual disability, and a mainstream school in relation to their experiences within their neighbourhoods, their meaningful connections to others and their wellbeing. This was considered of particular relevance as notions of community and traditional supports for adolescents may be changing at a time when adolescence as a life stage is becoming longer and more complex. The PSOC framework was used to explore these ideas with an emphasis on the role that neighbourhoods may or may not play in the development of a young person’s identity.

Methodology

The use of a modified version of Photovoice, an ethnographic research method, aimed to engage the participants as well as add to the knowledge base as a methodology which respectfully aims to develop a greater understanding of adolescents through the course of their daily lives (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Photovoice is an approach which has been used extensively in international research projects, especially with marginalised and disempowered groups who traditionally tend to be excluded from research projects due to accessibility and language barriers, is Photovoice (Booth & Booth 2003; Streng et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2000; Wang & Pies, 2004). A qualitative research method

closely related to the naturalistic approaches used in ethnographic research, Photovoice draws on theoretical underpinnings from Freire’s Critical Consciousness, Feminist Theory and documentary photography. It uses photographs generated by the research participants as the primary data source (Wang et al., 2000). The photographs are then supplemented by narrative and interview data. A modified version of Photovoice was used in the present study as a research tool as the subsequent policy steps of Wang et al. were not included.

Participants

Participants were 10 adolescents (4 males and 6 females) in an urban locality in eastern Australia. Five participants attended Year 10 in a mainstream government secondary college and were aged 15 or 16 years. These participants resided in close proximity of their school, usually walking or catching public transport to school. The other five participants attended a government specialist school for students with a diagnosis of mild intellectual disability. Whilst the participants from the specialist school had a primary diagnosis of a mild intellectual disability, they were relatively high functioning within the school and community settings. These participants travelled from a number of suburbs to attend the school by train, tram and/or bus. They did not have any physical disabilities. These participants were aged 18 or 19 years.

Demographic data was gathered in relation to the length of time the participants had been members of their neighbourhood. Two participants (both from the specialist school) had resided at their current residence since birth. The other three participants from the specialist school reported residing in their current residence since preschool or for one participant “a few years”. One of the participants from the mainstream school reported having resided at her current residence for over 13 years and another lived in the same house for eight years after having moved from a neighbouring street. The other three participants from the mainstream school reported having moved within the last two years, with one participant

reporting several moves since his parents' marriage break up.

Procedure

The stages undertaken in Photovoice are important in setting the scene for the process as well as utilising the opportunities it provides to discover meaning. The induction workshop provided an opportunity for the researcher to meet with the participants, explain the purpose of the project, establish ground rules about the use of the camera and begin initial data collection through discussions which took place. Participants then collected the disposable cameras to capture their day to day lives. The cameras were returned and the photographs developed by the researcher. Individual interviews took place with each participant using the photographs to explore what is important in their lives.

A constructivist, grounded theory approach was used in the development of the research project and data analysis. Interviews were transcribed and an initial thematic data analysis was undertaken by the researcher to develop common themes arising from the discussions and to consider what issues may require further elucidation. Small discussion groups were then held to explore issues within a small group setting. Further transcription and thematic data analysis then took place to identify common themes between the two groups of participants as well as within groups. Copyright release forms were signed by the participants and their parents authorising the release of photographs for the purposes of academic publications.

Results and Discussion

Long and Perkins (2007) described PSOC as a multilevel construct with both place and social elements, which are inextricably bound. They also suggested that PSOC is closely related to social capital and other factors, including place attachment and community satisfaction. The participants in the present study were asked to explore the way they spend their time in their neighbourhood. In keeping with Long and Perkins' argument,

the participants from both groups relayed social experiences with neighbours as well as the role of the neighbourhood as a place from which they gain access to the broader community and activities outside of the neighbourhood.

Mead (1984) referred to the neighbourhood as a place for children to learn to become members of their society through exploration and adaptation. The role of various adults in the neighbourhood was considered crucial in this regard. The importance of the neighbourhood in the lives of the participants was explored in the present study. It was found that the participants from both groups of participants identified relationships with neighbours. This often involved ambivalence as neighbours were identified as providing support, but also surveillance of their life. As outlined by Mead, the neighbourhood increasingly served as a gateway from home to the external world where the participants accessed communities of interest and ventured to meet friends or visit family.

Regardless of which school the participants attended, those who had resided at their current home for most of their lives tended to know more neighbours than those who had recently moved. This supports research undertaken by Chipeur et al. (1999) which found that adolescents who had lived at their current address for 10 or more years reported more support in their neighbourhoods than those who had lived there for less than 10 years. This suggests that these participants' needs were more likely to be met in their neighbourhood if they knew more neighbours. However, some of the participants in the present study who had resided in their neighbourhood for a long time reported not talking to some of their neighbours or not knowing those neighbours who were new to the neighbourhood.

Conversely, another participant detailed regular activities undertaken in her street with neighbours such as an annual street barbecue. She reported that she knew people in every couple of houses. Another participant, who had recently moved, stated that although he had not

yet met his neighbours his family kept in regular contact with people from his previous neighbourhood, suggesting that important bonds have been formed through relationships in neighbourhoods which are considered valuable and worthy of maintaining despite distance. Some participants reported only knowing the neighbour immediately next door, whilst others named up to five neighbours they knew. A participant from the specialist school reported that one of his neighbours drives him to the railway station each school day. Accordingly, the PSOC framework held true for some participants, whose needs were met through the support of neighbours and who maintained relationships formed within the neighbourhood. For other participants, the PSOC framework was less useful in explaining their experiences.

Participants reported knowing friends from their current and previous schools and sporting as well as from activity groups out of school. One participant reported having friends in his street, although not spending as much time with them as he had in previous years. Participants, therefore, reported having to use technology, such as the internet (MSN or email) and telephone, to keep in contact with their friends from school and other areas. In this way, the local neighbourhood no longer met the participants' needs as their interests and contacts broadened to communities of interest rather than geographical communities. This supports research undertaken by Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith (2002) which explored the place of identification within PSOC. They compared geographic communities with communities of interest (science fiction fandom) and found that participants reported higher levels of global PSOC with fandom than with their geographic communities.

Participants reported feeling more belonging, ties, shared values, and influence with fandom than with their local communities (Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002), suggesting that interest rather than locality is more significant. It would appear from the present

study that the ability to travel outside of their neighbourhood combined with technological advances, such as the internet, may be enhancing accessibility of communities of interest for adolescents. Many of the participants reported being close to shopping and youth activity centres, but also reported having to travel out of their neighbourhood to participate in certain activities, such as karate, school and to visit friends.

Previous research (O'Grady, 2000) explored what adolescents liked and disliked about their neighbourhoods and found that interactions with people were important, as was access to amenities such as shops, transport and things to do. Participants in the current study identified similar factors they did and did not like about their neighbourhoods. Both groups of participants were able to clearly identify those things that were aesthetically pleasing as well as their relationships with neighbours.

Location close to shops, activity centres, the beach and friends was considered important by participants. Participants reported that they did not like graffiti, drag racing and noise in their neighbourhoods.

Safety

Safety has consistently been associated with the experiences of adolescents within neighbourhoods and communities and has been explored in relation to its association with PSOC particularly for adolescents. It was identified by Chipeur and Pretty (1999) as a significant factor in the Neighbourhood Youth Inventory and feelings of unsafety were explored by Zani, Cicognani, and Albanesi (2001). Similarly, O'Grady (2000) found that safety was the main recurring theme in her research with Year 10 participants who identified a range of safety concerns, including parental concerns about allowing their children to spend time in the neighbourhood, street lighting being inadequate, differences in attitudes towards safety between males and females, and changes over time in relation to community safety.

In the present study, various aspects of safety, including personal and community safety

within the neighbourhood were raised during the discussions. Sometimes the neighbourhood was perceived as a safe place for activities, such as playing in the park. John, a participant from the specialist school, in describing the park shown in Photograph 1, revealed that "... It's pretty safe there... I have to tell mum when I get back. .. Um she worries that I might fall over, stuff like that."



Photograph 1. Photograph by John². The park.

Violence and noise tended to be the main criteria by which participants determined whether their neighbourhood was safe or not. Christopher, from the specialist school, described his neighbourhood as safe:

Yeah it's [neighbourhood] very safe really. Umm it's good that it's safe I don't really see any bad people there in the court but sometimes down at the milk bar behind our house you can hear a lot of burnouts and that. No seriously where I live is quite safe there's no stabbings or nothing nothing's bad it's just safe

Safety concerns were raised during discussions about the neighbourhood with participants, particularly those from the mainstream school, who may have had greater awareness of risks than participants from the specialist school. Issues of safety included both personal safety in relation to the participants' health as well as community safety:

Lots of kidnappings around my area and school. I take [dog] with

me for safety and medical help if I need it. One time he went and got help for me because of my illness. (Aleisha, mainstream school.)

I've been a bit concerned about the neighbourhood. There have been some stabbings. I'm scared about my little brother he's three and has autism... Just a couple of days ago a guy tried to take my bike. He made a grab for it... I told my mum about it. My mum said you couldn't do much about it... I'd never had anything like that happen before. (Ben, mainstream school)

And I've got my work and I've got a misty one [photo] of my work because that was one of my safe places but there's been big brawls outside of my work so that's not a safe place anymore. (Lisa, mainstream school)

Perceptions of safety appeared to be significant for some of the participants who tended to rely on anecdotal evidence in relation to gangs or appeared to associate graffiti with gangs.

[Do you feel safe walking in your area?] No not really because the place that we live is just a 10 minute walk from a known gang area... [How do you know?] There are tags there and from friends that got beaten up around there. (Crystal, mainstream school).

For Lisa, the presence of a Safety House Zone, Photograph 2, offered a sense of safety and she associated this with friendliness within her neighbourhood:

There's a primary school just around the corner from us and we're in a safety zone and we've got all the safety houses and stuff. It's really good. Everyone is really friendly.



Photograph 2. Photograph by Lisa. Safety House zone.

Neighbourhoods as Places to Develop Relationships

As suggested by Long and Perkins (2007), PSOC involves the binding of social connections with place. For many participants, their neighbourhoods represented relationships with others and discussions often included examples of ways the participant or their family members interacted with others. In this way it appeared that the participants had developed a sense of belonging and history with their neighbours, both important elements of PSOC. This was particularly evident during the group discussion at the specialist school.

*Yes they mum and dad talking to some woman I forgot her name.
Yes she's an older woman.*

The neighbour next door if she's going away she asked us to um collect her mail and if we don't go away ... Oh mail we take the mail for them... And the one next door if they go away and they've got pets sometimes we feed it.

The neighbour on that side they buy us things like chocolates at Christmas ... and they've got a garden light and they've got hot peppers. Yeah and they're so nice. My old next door neighbour came to my 18th.

As noted by Chipeur et al. (1999), these interactions often included tangible support or friendly gestures. Similarly, Wood (1974) found that neighbourhood for adolescents involved more than residence but a deeper connection between the people and the place.

For some of the participants, particularly those from the specialist school, PSOC was not necessarily evident as they identified that whilst they may see people they had attended school with, they would not necessarily be included in their friendship groups. "Some of them my old high school friends live down there but I see them sometimes. They wouldn't hang with me (laughter) I don't see them that much" (John, from specialist school). This suggested that John did not view himself as belonging to his neighbourhood in the same way as adolescents without disabilities, providing support for Bramston et al.'s (2002) assertion that living in and feeling part of the community are not the same.

Shared Public Spaces in Neighbourhoods

McMillan and Chavis (1986) described strong communities as those that offered positive ways for community members to interact and honour each other. Research has found that public spaces, such as shopping centres, can be problematic for adolescents as they can be the subject of, and subject to, the gaze of others. In this way adolescents may not always feel included in the neighbourhood, but rather judged and monitored within it. Adolescents' unsupervised presence in public space represents adolescents as in-between, not children or adults. This has led to media and adult representations of adolescents as disruptive and threats to the safety of themselves and others (Panelli, Nairn, Atwool, & McCormack, 2002). Regardless of this research, it was agreed by participants in the current study that the local shopping centre provided a safe place for young people to gather:

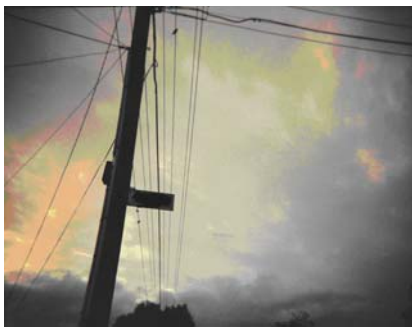
There's never been a fight down there. The Plaza's probably one of the safest places... There are people around if something happens they'll

see you. In the streets if it's dark no-one will see you. (Aleisha, mainstream school)

We get no trouble at all just sitting around and talking... Although one time I was drinking a bottle of "V" and they're [security guards] like you're not allowed to drink that here and I'm like what do you mean and they're like no alcoholic substances on the premises and I'm like no this is a "V" it invigorates you. (laughter) Yeah they're like sorry man so I was being blasted for nothing I'd done wrong it was one of those maybe you should have checked before you... (Martin, mainstream school)

Lisa described her neighbourhood (as symbolised by her court sign in Photograph 3) as a special place for her:

It's kinda got all of the clouds and everything... it's always very foggy in the morning and stuff. I love it, it's mystical. I'll look out my bedroom in the morning and I'll just see all these clouds and it's so pretty. I love it. So I pictured the court sign and the clouds... I wake up and see the fog. I walk to school. I used to go to [name of school] and um I'd walk to school in the morning and it would feel like I was walking in the clouds. It was so nice.



Photograph 3. Photograph by Lisa. My court sign.

Lisa, in reflecting upon her photograph again during the small group discussion, described how circumstances had changed for her since taking the photograph:

And um I've got pictures of my area but they were like misty because I said that was my mystical place. I don't know I don't feel like that anymore that's changed. [Ok so what's different? Why was that important at the time?] I don't know. I just it was my safe little place...

It appeared that for Lisa, despite the relative short time span between taking the photograph and discussing it during the small group, her feelings about the neighbourhood had changed and she struggled to explain how it had been more important to her previously. This suggests that feelings and experiences do not remain static, but change over time. This may be particularly the case for adolescents given the rapid developmental changes they are undertaking. It could be that day to day experiences impact on the way they feel about the neighbourhood, resulting in different feelings and attitudes at different times.

Neighbourhood as a Place for Activities

Maton (1990) found that meaningful instrumental activity was positively related to life satisfaction, independent of social support from friends and parents. Bramston et al. (2002) found that adolescents with an intellectual disability accessed community facilities less than those without a disability. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore the types of activities undertaken and the level of participants for both groups of adolescents.

Whilst an initial analysis of data in relation to activities undertaken by both groups suggested that the participants from the specialist school tended to be involved in passive and indoor activities, further discussions and data analysis suggested that there was a wide variety of activities that participants from both school settings engaged in. These included:

- Sporting activities – watching Australian

Football League football, watching family members play sport, informal and formal sports participation;

- Spending time with family and friends, including parties, shopping and going to restaurants;
- Playing computer games and talking on MSN;
- Music – playing guitar and drums, listening to music.

Although some of the participants from the specialist school participated in disability-specific programs such as soccer and the circus, they also participated actively in many mainstream activities, such as going to the Australian Football League football, bowling, movies and the gym. Bramston et al. (2002) identified that adolescents with a disability tended to participate in community activities less frequently than their peers without a disability. The current research did identify differences between the two groups in relation to some opportunities for participation. This was particularly evident for one of the female participants from the specialist school who stated:

I want to [play sports] but I don't know what team and my mum and dad goes oh what are you going to do that for? They always say stuff like that. I hate that. My brother says you're good at it you should play.

Similarly, John, from the specialist school, acknowledged the difficulties he encountered as he became older and the demands on him increased: “[I’ve played] cricket for 10 years now. One year to go, I’m not good enough to be in the seniors.” Participants from the mainstream school reported performing (singing and dancing) and writing (songs and a book) – activities not shared by participants from the specialist school. Martin, from the mainstream school, was a member of a local community group which organised music

events.

There was a greater reliance on the support of family for participants with a disability, with many activities (such as bike riding, going to the library and attending the gym) undertaken with family members. This finding confirmed previous research which found that parents played a crucial role in enabling the participation of adolescents with a disability in school and community extracurricular and recreational activities (Kleinert et al., 2007).

Participants from the specialist school also included their work experience and TAFE activities when discussing ways they spend their time. It appeared that they tended to participate in more organised and structured activities than participants from the mainstream school. John, from the specialist school, did identify playing football by himself in a local park and Jayne, from the specialist school, reported that she sometimes goes shopping independently by herself or with friends. Participants from the mainstream school appeared to be more independent in their activities although spending time with family members was included. One of those participants reported that her ill-health had reduced her ability to participate actively in sports and had also impacted on her interest in socialising with friends. These experiences confirm the desire for autonomy and potential barriers (such as illness) which affect adolescents from both groups as they strive to negotiate the developmental trajectory between childhood and adulthood (Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999).

For participants such as Clare, from the specialist school, football was supported at a local level with her brother’s involvement (Photograph 4). Clare’s family regularly watched him play with friends and extended family members. The politics of the game and loyalty for her brother was reported by Clare who expressed considerable frustration at her brother not being chosen to play:

... but now the coach said that he doesn't really get a game anymore. I don't know why but yeah. I'm

starting to get angry... Because he shouldn't you know whenever he comes he goes on the bench and it's not fair to him. Everyone else gets a game and I think my brother should tell the coach what's happening and that and sometimes I have like tea there and yeah...

Photograph 4: Photograph by Clare. Brother playing football.



The support provided by a local sporting club to which the family belonged was acknowledged by Lisa, from the mainstream school, who reported family involvement with the football club as her brother had played, her father had coached and she had been the club photographer. She described the support provided by the club following a family tragedy:

Yeah we're still close with everyone we've sort of had the football club organise a fundraiser for our family so we're very close with them but yeah dad just doesn't he's been coaching for the last four years and he's decided not to coach this year. And [brother]'s messed up his knee quite a lot.

Discussions about belonging to football teams suggested that this involvement allowed participants to experience PSOC as their participation involved membership of the team,

provided fulfilment of needs and a shared emotional connection with others. At times they were able to influence their family or friends with their opinions about the team's performance or predictions about future progress. There were usually symbols such as scarves and jumpers which acknowledged their membership. Their membership of the team may also have involved an identity with the team but also with others who shared the membership.

Having a space away from home was also identified by John as useful when his grass at home is too wet to play football (Photograph 5). Whilst he identified the park as a place to play, it also provided interaction with others (which he did not always welcome).

... [Yeah and is there anybody else that sort of hangs around the park or is that ...] Ahh little kids but they get in the way they get in my way... They get in the way when they try to play on the playground. [O.k. so they're a bit annoying?] They're all right. Just one kid that tries to put me off when I kick the ball... He goes are you going to miss it this time? [Laughter]

Photograph 5: Photograph by John: The park at the junction.



The park provided a thoroughfare in her neighbourhood for Crystal, from the mainstream school. She identified her friend's house as being close to the park. The pathway through the

Photographs 6 and 7: Photographs by Crystal. Park I walk through to get home.



park led to her school as well as the broader community.

Growing Up and Away from the Neighbourhood

Adolescence, as a key developmental stage, has proven to be a challenge for researchers in identifying the relevance of PSOC to adolescents (Pretty, 2002). Exploration of the activities within the neighbourhood often led to a discussion about changes that occurred during adolescence and the loss of childhood and associated activities, some of which had occurred within the neighbourhood with friends. For some participants, they had played as children within their neighbourhood – riding bicycles or spending time with friends. As their interests changed and they no longer rode bikes they tended to report spending less time with friends in their neighbourhood. This resulted not only in spending less time within the neighbourhood but a different way of viewing themselves as they began to identify with people outside of their neighbourhood.

Yeah when I was younger a lot more time. I used to go on bikes yeah you know kick a footy yeah and maybe play a little bit of basketball because my body you know our bodies have changed so much like you just talk and that ... Yeah because when I was younger I used to ride bikes a fair bit (Christopher, specialist school).

... but I don't know I'm not around my area much when I go to see friends. It's not like my little area anymore (Lisa, mainstream school).

Conclusion

PSOC was explored as a framework to understand the role of neighbourhoods in the lives of adolescents. It was shown in the present study that PSOC as a model, whilst relevant at times, did not capture the essence of those things considered important and meaningful to the participants. The elements that make up PSOC – membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connections – were reported to have varying levels of importance in the lives of the participants. The sense of membership and belonging was found to be important in relation to a number of communities, such as family, sporting groups, school and neighbourhood. It appeared that the adolescents' sense of wellbeing was related to interactions and relationships within multiple communities rather than one community only, providing support for research undertaken by Evans and Prilleltensky (2007) and Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith (2002). Shared emotional connections were significant for all participants and often appeared within the context of family relationships.

The participants did not appear to have influence within their communities. Importantly, they did not seem to seek to have influence either, preferring to have fun and connections with others rather than responsibilities that they

may have considered to be more adult like. School was cited by some participants as a place where they could have some limited influence through participation in community projects and junior school council. For most participants, however, school was referred to as a place for socialising and fun, aspects not well captured by PSOC.

All participants identified features of the neighbourhood that held significance for them, but acknowledged that, at their life stage, their participation within the neighbourhood was less active and played a less important role than when they were younger. Instead, the neighbourhood for the participants served as a gateway to the external world, providing access to communities of interest. It was also identified by some participants as a place of surveillance as neighbours monitored their behaviours. Some participants did acknowledge the potential support they provided and received from neighbours. This was related to the number of neighbours they knew and how long they had lived in their neighbourhood, supporting previous research (Chipeur et al., 1999; Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994).

There were similarities between the two groups of participants in relation to their level of participation within the community; however, those with an intellectual disability required considerable support from family members to access community activities. Many activities were also undertaken with the support of the school in the form of work experience rather than developed independently within the neighbourhood or community for those with an intellectual disability.

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