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Neighborhood Features Moderate the Etiology of Children's Social Information Processing

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ABSTRACT:

The neighborhood is a key context in which children learn to navigate social situations. While much of this learning leads to adaptive outcomes, some children develop aggressive response styles. Researchers in this area have emphasized the need to consider the potential contributions of multiple neighborhood features (e.g., social processes and structural characteristics), but have largely overlooked the ways in which children's individual-level characteristics might moderate neighborhood effects. As a consequence, little progress has been made in identifying the specific mechanisms through which neighborhood influences children's perception of social situations. We examined 847 6-11 year old twin pairs oversampled for disadvantage from the Twin Study of Behavioral and Emotional Development in Children (TBED-C), and a yoked sample of 1,880 randomly-sampled neighbors who reported on neighborhood social cohesion, informal social control, and extent of problems in their neighborhood. We evaluated these neighborhood informant reports as etiologic moderators of children's hostile attributions and expectations for aggressive behavior (i.e., positive outcomes, peer approval, and retaliation). We found no evidence of etiologic moderation of children's expectations of aggressive behavior. However, we found that extent of neighborhood problems moderated nonshared environmental influences on children's hostile attributions such that as neighborhood problems decreased, the amount of variance accounted for by nonshared environmental factors increased. These results suggest that twins who resided in more advantaged neighborhoods differed more in their hostile attributions. Our next steps will be to test various definitions of neighborhood, and to test more traditional conceptualizations of neighborhood disadvantage as assessed using Census data.

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