

USING FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY TO UNDERSTAND FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND NEIGHBORHOOD IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Healthy neighborhoods come about via a confluence of factors, including but not limited to walkability, public spaces, feelings of safety, sense of community, and neighborhood reputation. While this research set out to understand why people choose their neighborhoods, a deeper pattern emerged related to feelings of safety, especially for women, and neighborhood reputation. This paper uses feminist geography as a critical lens to understand how power relations often exacerbate negative perceptions of safety and, as such, negative perceptions of a neighborhood's community health. Feminist geography as a lens has practical implications based on these findings for how urban planners and administrators design public spaces. Findings are based on a content analysis of interviews with 75 people throughout the U.S. Stories highlight how feelings of safety could affect neighborhood image and reputation.

Keywords: feminist geography; community health; qualitative methods; branding

Points for Practice:

- Women hesitate from fully participating in neighborhood life when their feelings of safety are threatened.
- Feminist geography can help understand why women disengage from unsafe neighborhood spaces and highlight ways to design better public spaces.
- Neighborhoods with unsafe brand images exclude women from critical social engagements.
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INTRODUCTION

“I’m a runner so not feeling like I’m going to get grabbed or assaulted when I’m running. It happens a lot in center city Philadelphia. A lot. Safety is for me, it’s the little things. Like in the wintertime being able to go out to your car and warm it up in the morning and don’t worry about it getting stolen. [My] sister is 27 and wanted to go for a walk and there was a nearby mugging. I like my heels for work, but I like to be able to move quickly. I keep all my shoes, like, in my car, and this way I have all my options available depending upon what I’m wearing.”

This story is from a woman living in the West Mt. Airy neighborhood in Philadelphia. She told me this story when I was asking about her neighborhood, and she mentioned feelings of safety. She was one of 75 people to whom I spoke while conducting research about neighborhood branding and image. Based upon a content analysis of interview data, people were concerned about feelings of safety related to neighborhood image (living in a so-called good neighborhood while avoiding those they perceived as bad).

Feelings of safety were part of a person’s place attachment and neighborhood image construction, and those feelings were often key to a consumptive decision, be it economic or social consumption (buy/rent a house, play in a public park, drive through a neighborhood, join a neighborhood association, etc.). What, then, if any is the relationship between feelings of safety and neighborhood image? There was a gender differential when it came to feelings of safety – women reporting being cognizant of their own safety, and men reported being wary of their own safety *and* that of women.

To better understand these findings, feminist geography scholarship is introduced as a possible modifier that urban planners, policy makers, and public

administrators can take into account when designing and promoting healthy neighborhoods. While it is not new that women often feel less safe in certain public spaces compared men (Koskela & Pain, 2000; Pain, 1997, 2001), what this paper adds is an understanding of how feminist thought plays into a person's creation of neighborhood image and reputation.

The focus here is broadly on individual health related to building strong neighborhoods, as fear of crime and diminished feelings of safety adversely affect a person's mental health and cause withdrawal from social situations (Chu et al, 2004). Within a neighborhood setting, people often feel safer if they trust their neighbors and interact with them, and even though this exact relationship is complex (Funk, Allan & Chappell, 2007), it is important to know if certain groups (women, people of color) withdraw from those social settings if they do not feel safe in public spaces such as neighborhoods (Koskela, 1997).

PLACE BRAND IMAGE AND NEIGHBORHOOD REPUTATION

This paper highlights how feelings of safety affect the perception of a neighborhood using lived experiences of men and women. As such, this first portion defines terms related to place brand identity and image. Place branding is becoming a key governance strategy in the wake of New Public Management-like movements that encourage running government like a business (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012), and given its relative nascence in the public administration literature, some questions remain (Zavattaro, 2018).

At its core, place branding applies principles of corporate branding, marketing, strategic communication, public relations, and emotional connection to places (Anholt, 2005). Place branding ideally is an active, co-creative process to distill and communicate features and values that

makes the place unique (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). A place, though, already has a brand whether you like it or not, or whether you want it to or not (Anholt, 2005). Within the public sector, there is pushback when it comes to adopting and adapting branding practices because the term is often associated with promoting and selling the place for economic gains (Anholt, 2005). A place brand ideally creates an emotional connection that serves as a cognitive shortcut for those choosing to visit or live in a place, and while the visual identity of a logo and/or slogan are important, those are artefacts rather than the core brand messaging and values (Anholt, 2010).

Within the public sector, schools, cities, neighborhoods, museums, hospitals and more have or are spending money to establish a brand identity (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). Branding as the verb is difficult within the public sector because there are often myriad stakeholders and decision makers involved who all seek differing outputs and outcomes (Klijn, Eshuis & Braun, 2012). Without this complex interaction, outcomes and buy-in are likely to suffer (Klijn et al, 2012).

Related are brand image and brand identity. Brand image is how users perceive the brand, while the identity is what an organization communicates (Anholt, 2010). Therefore, brand image is the crux of a brand's success because it will either encourage or discourage consumption (be that economic or social consumption). The focus of this paper is on neighborhood image, or how people perceive their neighborhood images through the lens of feelings of safety. Is it a "good" neighborhood or "bad" based on what you and others might perceive?

It might not seem like neighborhoods have a brand identity and image, but many throughout the United States actively seek a brand strategy (NeighborWorks America, 2015). NeighborWorks America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to shaping healthy communities, put together a

toolkit to help communities develop a brand identity from the bottom up (NeighborWorks America, 2015). But what is a neighborhood brand? Not surprising, there are few studies about the topic and even fewer direct definitions.

Wherry (2011, p. 4) argues a neighborhood brand is “apparent from what businesses sell, how their storefronts are designed, what kind of music emanates from open neighborhood windows and passing cars, and what kinds of themes are depicted on the neighborhood’s plentiful murals.” Deener (2007) substantiated this definition with a study of Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Los Angeles, finding that people wanted businesses that reflect community ideals along the street rather than falling prey to the latest “hipster” shops.

Public entities usually are the ones leading the charge for neighborhood branding and rebranding under the umbrella of classic economically driven neighborhood revitalization strategies, which Masuda and Bookman, (2018, p. 166). define as “the symbolic and material practices of state and/or private cultural producers who aim to enhance the appeal of local areas within the city in order to attract investment, promote consumption, reduce criminality, or to achieve social and cultural aims such as invoking civic pride.” The definition encompasses a broader view of neighborhood branding that sees success as both economic and social. Echoing Eshuis and Klijn (2012), Masuda and Bookman (2018) note neighborhood branding is more complex than city or nation branding because the focus is so hyper-local and people take pride in their neighborhoods sometimes more than their cities or states. This relationship can be inverse if a person feels no attachment to their neighborhood.

A neighborhood’s image is closely linked to its reputation – whether it is a “good” or “bad” neighborhood. In their study, Pais et al (2014) found that neighborhoods with an overall already positive reputation were able to

weather the economic housing bubble burst in 2010 better than those that had a neutral or negative reputation. Neighborhoods that are already more economically disadvantaged are likely to suffer further reputational attacks when compared to wealthier counterparts, thus reinforcing social justice concerns (Zelner, 2015).

Zelner (2015) explains neighborhood reputation and image usually come from three streams: collective memory, accomplishment of place, and interaction. Collective memory highlights how neighborhood identities are constantly socially constructed based on who is telling the story, where, and in what context (Zelner, 2015). Accomplishment of place contrasts the social construction aspect to instead focus on the physical features and landscape of the place, such as a highway that bisects communities or environmental features (Zelner, 2015). The final approach of interaction hones in on how social interactions shape neighborhood image (Zelner, 2015). Jacobs (1961) articulates this phenomenon with her explanation of how residents monitor neighborhood streets through collective action. The word reputation could be used to understand how people perceive a neighborhood because it has a softer tone than image, but the essence remains the same in that it is all about how someone views the place (Permentier & van Ham, 2007).

Neighborhood image and reputation matter, because “based on the reputation of (bad) neighbourhoods, institutions may develop strategies to deal with such neighbourhoods and their residents” (Permentier & van Ham, 2007, p. 205). As a response, people could chose to remain in their neighborhoods given a sense of loyalty, leave if they are able, or stay to build a sense of community and civic pride (Permentier & van Ham, 2007). In this is a recognition that places are more than areas for economic exchange; they are symbolic and constitutive so understanding the feelings matters (Firey, 1945).

Social Intersections of Branding

Place and neighborhood branding do not escape criticism. Especially when it comes to the public sector, place branding can change the governing ethos to see public administrators focusing more on a place's image rather than solving potential problems (Zavattaro, 2010). Giving a place a brand inherently commodifies it, creating something that can be consumed and used (Arvidsson, 2005) or culturally engineered (Holt, 2002). Neighborhoods seeking a strong brand identity are trying to up the neighborhood's use value – move here, shop here, play here, spend money here. An economic focus on a place brand could push away from a social focus and thus social capital aspects of neighborhood interactions.

Gender explorations are beginning to come into place branding research as a means to critique traditional views. A gendered lens is a critical theoretical perspective of place branding, showing how certain people are included or not in branding processes (Rankin, 2012). Certain language, policies, and practices related to political and organizational branding serve as signals for how women are appreciated (or not) in nation branding campaigns (Rankin, 2012). Rankin (2012) shows how different political parties in Canada write about and treat women based on their policy language. Similarly, Jezierska and Towns (2018) details how Brand Sweden also embraces gender equity in its language and imagery, making Brand Sweden “a utopian dreamscape for progressive liberals” (p. 59).

Sandberg and Ronnblom (2016) move from nation branding to the policy implementation level in Umea, Sweden. They use the concept of imaginaries to examine how planning professionals can include gender equity in purposeful design. Imaginaries move beyond traditional boundaries to think about possibilities while drawing on what is already known (Sandberg & Ronnblom, 2016). City officials imbued the planning process with gender equity

concerns by: focusing on safety in public spaces, offering symbolic statements related to equity, and merging spaces of equity and inequity to create more open spaces. A problem, though, is that branding could be a means to stage gender equity rather than fully implement it.

van den Berg (2011) calls this process genderfication, a play on gentrification. She uses Rotterdam as her case study, showing how the city's brand image is based on masculinity, using the city's working class ethos and proximity to the harbor and related industries. As work and education levels shifted, so did a branding campaign that focused on innovation and entrepreneurial ideals – yet still masculine. Yet also focusing on creativity hearkens to a more feminist ideal, and the campaign focuses on genderfication, the making accessible of all public spaces to women. Problematically, though, the marketing is driven toward certain kinds of women – “women in pink stilettos and with money in their pockets” (p. 13) – and still excludes economically disadvantaged women.

FEELINGS OF SAFETY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

There is not enough space to delve into the intricacies of feelings of safety; instead, this section provides an overview. Feelings of safety are often hard to define and measure, as they are so individualistic. Fear of crime and feelings of safety are related, and both can be used as tools of oppression to “other” certain communities (Hutta, 2009; Shirlow & Pain, 2003).

“Feelings” serves as a qualifier when describing safety, as there could be a disconnection between neighborhood crime rates and how safe people feel (Kim et al, 2002). What mitigates negative feelings of safety? A sense of community, especially in wealthier communities (Kim et al, 2002). Those living in predominantly minority

communities did not experience this same mitigating effect (Kim et al, 2002), so this highlights how a feminist geographical lens would help explain power differentials among and between neighborhoods.

People working in concert can make or break feelings of safety. Jacobs (1961) articulated this precisely with her study of Manhattan neighborhoods where shopkeepers and long-term residents looked out for each other and alerted others to potential dangers. Neighborhood social networks, either formal or informal, tend to heighten place attachment (Unger & Wandersman, 1985). The built environment, too, can create feelings of safety when there are opportunities for shared public spaces such as outdoor seating and constant activity (Bennetts et al, 2017).

Feelings of safety are related to neighborhood reputation and image. The broken windows theory illustrates this, in that neighborhoods are perceived as blighted and rundown (and thus unsafe) if there are broken windows, as broken windows might invite more criminal activities (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Austin et al (2002) confirmed at least parts of this broken windows theory, finding that housing quality positively affected a person's satisfaction with their local physical environment, which in turn influenced feelings of safety.

Feelings of safety also are linked with a sense of community, so when residents express or experience a strong sense of community and willingness to get involved with neighborhood activities, there is an increase in place attachment (Pitner, Yu & Brown, 2012). Vibrant, safe, and accessible public spaces also foster this sense of community (Francis et al, 2012), so when those spaces become unavailable to people because they do not feel safe or included, a sense of community and thus neighborhood image and attachment can decrease. Feelings of safety also increase a person's social cohesion within the neighborhood and willingness to try new experiences rather than always

staying close to home (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). It should be noted, though, that social cohesion only works to a point and could yield diminishing returns, as there needs to be a link between involvement and social cohesion rather than involvement for its own sake (Dassopoulos & Monnat, 2011).

Using Maslow, Greene and Burke (2007) argue that people can work toward selfless-actualization rather than self-actualization, as the former is about community efforts and place attachment. Selfless-actualization can manifest through activities such as community art, community dialogues, structures that encourage autonomy and independence with an eye toward community building, and ways to manage polarities (Greene & Burke, 2007).

A desire for diverse spaces might have eroded some of the social fabric key in creating a sense of community and feelings of safety in a neighborhood (Newman, 1972). Lack of civility and commonalities exposes people to potential crime and violence, akin to Jacobs (1961) arguing what happens when neighbors stop looking out for one another. Newman (1972) introduced Defensible Spaces, whereby people engage in something akin to neighborhood watch to protect their places and spaces. Defensible spaces can bring power back to local communities, especially those in poorer areas who want to feel empowered to stop crime. This, though, can have potentially negative effects (as George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin while on a so-called neighborhood watch because Martin was wearing a hoodie and looked suspicious to Zimmerman), but also could increase personal responsibility and have people “take back” their neighborhoods.

Defensible spaces have seen mixed results. Taylor, Gottfredson and Brower (1984) found that blocks functioned as small-scale social units, with majority white blocks having stronger social ties and reduced perceptions of fear when compared to minority-majority blocks. The more

connected someone feels to their block or neighborhood, the more likely they are to participate fully in civic life (Taylor et al, 1984). People, then, feel responsible for what happens in public spaces close to their homes. Mawby (1977), though, notes that results studying defensible space could be mixed because of theoretical deficiencies rather than practical applications of Newman's ideas. When incorporating a routine activities perspective into defensible space theory, a new approach emerges that highlights the importance of neighborhood features and image (brand). A neighborhood that is seen as more open with things to covet (nice houses, nice cars, for instance) could lend itself to more defensible design features such as high fences as walls to keep the others out (Reynald & Elffers, 2009).

Reynald and Elffers (2009) explain when an area has a negative image it is perceived as ripe for criminal activity (the bad neighborhood). The inverse also holds true about neighborhoods with positive brand images, which then serve as a symbolic deterrent (a wealthy area must have surveillance, for instance). How a neighborhood is perceived also affects how the people themselves are viewed – *they* become bad as well. “When the image of an area is negative, it increases fear and discourages inhabitants from spending time in their space and managing it as their own” (Reynald & Elffers, 2009, p. 30), so there is less sense of community and feelings of safety.

Gender and the Right to the City

Oftentimes professional urban planners might not take gendered elements into account when planning neighborhoods or public spaces, preventing women from having rights to the city and experiencing so-called everyday activities in safe spaces (Beebejuan, 2017). “Everyday life is connected to places where women and men live, work, consume, relate to others, forge identities, cope with or challenge routine, habit and established codes of conduct”

(Vaiou & Lykogianni, 2006). Neighborhoods are interesting places to study from a gendered perspective because they are both spaces for consumption and lifestyle (Vaiou & Lykogianni, 2006). Vaiou and Lykogianni (2006) found women in two Greek neighborhoods wanted a strong sense of community to feel safe, but also are caught in a tension with wanting activities and communities beyond neighborhood boundaries. As the economy collapsed in Greece, women continued to suffer by being left out of market exchanges, experiencing increased violence and sexism, and exhibiting more emotional labor and care work at home.

Vaiou (2014) articulates the internal-external separation many women feel between the home and public spaces. Violence at home and the threat of violence in public spaces must be dealt with from a planning perspective because each can reinforce structural inequalities (Sweet & Escalante, 2010). Planning practice needs to continue to improve to reduce gender imbalances, as the public, capitalist domain outside the home was often seen as the man's space versus women staying home to take care of domestic duties. Public spaces and items therein (such as public transportation) often were (and continue to be) designed with men in mind (Sweet & Escalante, 2010). A gendered community model would mitigate some of these structural planning issues in the city and neighborhood level (Sweet & Escalante, 2010).

When women are excluded from the public sphere and everyday life activities, then there is a risk healthy communities cannot form. Women might benefit more than men when it comes to building strong neighborhood social capital, as neighborhood safety allows women to engage in activities such as walking, political participation, and social networking (Kavanagh et al, 2006). A Catch-22 is that women often might make up neighborhood network central nodes, so bear the burden of creating and maintaining their

own social networks – the same networks that can help them feel safe where they live.

FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY: A BRIEF PRIMER

There are myriad books and academic journals devoted to the topic of feminist geography, itself a part of a critical geography movement (Sharp, 2009). I offer a brief overview of feminist geography showing how it can moderate feelings of safety as related to neighborhood image.

Feminist geography is both a theory and methodology used to understand the intersections of gendered experiences related to the built and natural environment. (In this paper, I rely on the theoretical side rather than using it as a methodology.) Feminist geography comes from the position that men and women are often situated differently in the world, and as such will experience places differently as well (McDowell, 1997). Feminist geography explores the power and structural inequalities within these spaces with an aim to change the status quo (McDowell, 1997). McDowell (1993) traces the history of the field's development, noting three main elements are often under investigation and interrogation: space, place, and nature. Most early scholarship, McDowell (1993) argues focused on women's supposed inferiority to men and how that manifested in spatial relations, usually relegating women to a home life and men to public life. Additional scholarship focuses on women's relationship to the built environment, noting cities were often designed and laid out with men's preferences in mind (McDowell, 1983).

Townsend (1991) outlines gendered differences within spatial constraints. For instance, there are gendered discrepancies found in divisions of labor, in the sexual contract, of space, of wellbeing, of society, by the state and others (Townsend, 1991). Gendering of space includes use

of transportation, personal space (and invasions thereof), and safety in public spaces and inside the home (Townsend, 1991). Geographically driven gender disparities manifest – and continue to manifest – on a global scale, so collecting data was and remains difficult regarding these disparities (Townsend, 1991). Parker (2017, p. 322) argues that “gendered and raced power relations are as often banal as blatant” and include features such as erasing women from public spaces, gentrification, and delegitimizing women’s and minorities’ opinions when it comes to urban geography. A feminist approach to geography attempts to unearth sometimes hidden power structures and offer ways to mitigate some of those damning effects (Parker, 2017).

Feminist geography is concerned with the so-called mundane aspects of women’s lives both inside and outside of the home (Dyck, 2005). There is recognition that what for some men might be mundane – walking alone at night to a car, walking down a dark alley – is sometimes an act of defiance for women (Pain, 2001). Community organizing activities also can fall into gendered lines, with women joining book clubs and men doing the neighborhood watch because women were relegated to the private sphere and men were told to protect the public sphere and, thus, their women and children at home (Martin, 2002). New urbanist tendencies toward walkability, community involvement, and community engagement also can exacerbate racist, gendered, and classist discrepancies when pitched seen as (or practiced as) as exclusionary (McLean, 2014).

Leaving out these everyday interactions women have (or choose not to have) in public spaces nearly erases women from political discourse (Dowler & Sharp, 2001). In geopolitical spaces, women’s bodies are often seen as needing protecting or regulating, and oftentimes men are creating those social constructions (Dowler & Sharp, 2001). Feminist geography and post-colonial theory can serve as emancipatory frameworks that can re-center women as key

players within public spaces rather than ancillary actors needing help and protection. For some women, being in public spaces is an act of vulnerability and contestation (Pain & Staeheli, 2014) so it becomes important to better understand how women feel in public and private settings.

Examining the local setting, such as a neighborhood, is critical for feminist geography because much of everyday life takes place within certain geographic confines (McDowell, 1999). Indeed, McDowell (1999) notes that even though a neighborhood might be small geographically and spatially, global forces still play a vital role in how people interact and engage with the neighborhood. Women feeling unsafe in certain public spaces is a global occurrence that manifests in many instances, including within a neighborhood setting. A feminist look at geographies and places unravels a complex social construction of living gender in place (McDowell, 1999).

METHODS: COLLECTING INTERVIEW DATA

Findings come from a content analysis (Berg, 2001) of interviews I did with 75 people across the United States asking about neighborhood image, identity, and branding. I used primarily purposive and snowball sampling to find participants. I spoke with residents in neighborhoods throughout the country of all sizes, asking questions about why those chose that particular area, how the neighborhood image affected their decision (if at all), and about their ideal neighborhood. I did not ask specific questions regarding safety, but it kept coming up in interviews as an important element of a thriving neighborhood – or what people perceived to be a vital part of a thriving neighborhood.

Interviews took place largely via telephone given the geographical dispersion. Telephone interviews allowed me to interview a larger sample of people in a low cost manner, but a potential limitation was missing non-verbal cues

(Novick, 2008). Interviews took place from January until July 2018 and usually lasted about one hour. Interviews followed an open-ended questioning pattern, and each was recorded per Institutional Review Board standards. Interviews typically lasted about one hour and included questions such as: Why did you pick your neighborhood? What image would you say people have of your neighborhood? What is your ideal neighborhood? What is a neighborhood?

Interestingly, I did not ask questions about feelings of safety. Many respondents mentioned it on their own, so I would ask follow up questions such as: What do you mean by safety? How do you tell others your neighborhood is safe? These were basic questions that led to interesting conversations. Asking additional probing questions when safety came up allowed me to better understand how people were using the term.

Analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach (Berg, 2001). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) “is a flexible data analysis method that can range from impressionistic interpretations to highly systematic analyses of text-based data” (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014, p. 342). Patterns emerged from the initial content analysis (Berg, 2001), then I dug further into those broad patterns. A broad initial read is done to assess the data and discern potential similarities to be explored further in detail (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Within Microsoft Word, I would place memos/notes by similarities (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). It was during that second round of nuanced data analysis (nearly 900 pages of interview data) that gendered elements related to feelings of safety became more apparent. Table 1 shows examples of quotes and how they were coded. For instance, the person who mentioned living in a neighborhood that allowed her to walk her dogs alone at night was coded as feelings of safety and neighborhood image because she

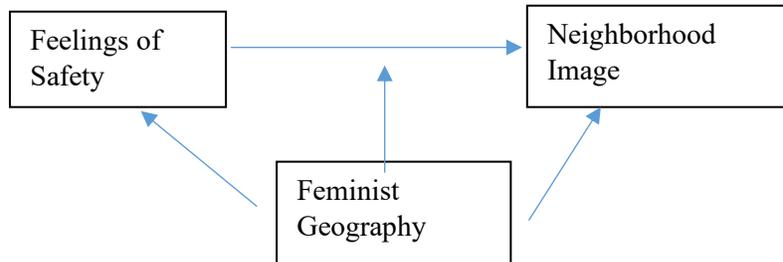
mentioned neighborhoods attributes that fostered the feelings of safety.

Table 1
Sample Quotes and Coding

<p>“The neighborhood is quiet enough and safe enough that we’ll just go for runs around it. Its typical run of the mill American suburb.”</p>	<p>Female identifying individual; personal feelings of safety</p>
<p>“It was a community that was a throwback to quieter times, to peaceful times. The times that I talked about where I could walk, where I could run around and not worry. My perception was safety. My perception was pride of ownership, pride of community – those sorts of very organic but very emotional comforting feelings.”</p>	<p>Male identifying individual; personal feelings of safety; neighborhood image</p>
<p>“People my community, even though some people are healthy and they will run, a majority of people are older, and they’re not active... I don’t feel exactly like I belong. I feel like an outsider.”</p>	<p>Female identifying individual; neighborhood image</p>
<p>“It’s the sense that you are part of it. I think it’s the sense that you feel very safe and secure in that place. You’re very comfortable. You’re proud.”</p>	<p>Male identifying individual; feelings of safety</p>
<p>“As an adult I’ve never been nervous walking around my neighborhood at night, but there are people who have... My coworkers won’t let me take the train after dark.”</p>	<p>Female identifying individual; feelings of safety; neighborhood image</p>
<p>“I know that I can walk around my neighborhood and maybe I’m a little naïve, but for the most part I feel comfortable in the evening walking my dogs at night.”</p>	<p>Female identifying individual; feelings of safety; neighborhood image</p>

From this coding, feelings of safety were closely linked with neighborhood image – if a neighborhood was branded as unsafe, people tended to avoid it. To better understand this relationship, I turned toward the feminist geography literature that explains what happens when women are not able to fully participate in civil society because they feel unsafe inside and outside of the home (McDowell, 1997; 1999). Figure 1 shows the relationship between feelings of safety, neighborhood image, and feminist geography. As pictured, feminist geography moderates the relationship, showing how there are different perspectives related to feelings of safety, which ultimately affects healthy communities.

Figure 1
Relationship between Feelings of Safety, Neighborhood Image, and Feminist Geography



FINDINGS:
**GENDERED LIVED EXPERIENCES IN THE
NEIGHBORHOOD**

Stories of the Mundane

Feminist geography allows us to look at everyday lives at local levels, recognizing the personal, relational

aspects between place and gender (Dowler & Sharp, 2001). Feminist geography brings to the forefront often-silenced voices by listening to the stories of the mundane, the everyday (Sharp, 2007). This section shares stories from women – and men – navigating the built environment as it relates to feelings of safety within the neighborhood. Findings respond to Sharp's (2007) call to highlight voices of marginalized figures via a feminist geography lens.

Quotes illuminate how women experience public spaces (Valentine, 2007; left box in Figure 1), which in turn affects neighborhood attachment (right box in Figure 1), community involvement, and where women choose to live. Neglecting these experiences can limit who participates in neighborhood activities and partnerships that are often vital to creating vibrant communities (Lasker & Weiss, 2003; bottom box in Figure 1). From an urban planning and policy perspective, feminist geography can shed light on lived experiences and how women and minority groups can be given equitable access to positions of power and safety within the neighborhood space.

The quotes detail how place is relational (Massey, 2004). It is not surprising that women report more fear than men when it comes to walking and being in public spaces (Tandogan & Ilhan, 2016). Women reported not walking alone at night in places such as empty streets, alleyways, subways, empty parks, poorly lit streets and others where their safety might be in danger (Tandogan & Ilhan, 2016). Women experience harassment from strangers when simply trying to live in public spaces (Macmillan et al, 2000). Urban planners and public administrators can think about how levels of lighting and a place's accessibility (whether it is a closed dead end where someone can feel trapped versus a place with easier exit) affect feelings of safety (Boomsma & Steg, 2014), and a feminist geography perspective can lend critical perspectives to this in practice. Men, of course, also experience challenges to their personal safety in public

spaces and also will avoid certain areas in which they feel unsafe (Gordon et al, 1980), so a feminist geography lens can unearth these lived experiences and the underlying power structures associated with the urban environment.

Some quotes show how women and men navigate the mundane, everyday activities such as fully (or not) participating in neighborhood life:

“Safe means I can walk and not feel that I’m going to be attacked, molested, robbed, accosted. I feel if I take the trash out and it’s after dark I don’t have to worry about hurrying back into the house. It doesn’t mean not be attentive. Safe means if I choose to leave the house unlocked it’s probably okay. It’s not a good idea, but it’s probably okay.”
– resident, Celebration, Florida (male identifying)

“Safety means that I can walk at night in the dark on the sidewalk and not feel like I am going to be attacked.” – resident, Thornton Park, Orlando, Florida (female identifying)

“How would I define safety? I guess I define safety as not feeling at risk during your day-to-day activities. Property not [being] at risk either so you exercise common sense. I think in a neighborhood like ours what makes it safe is people being out, people paying attention.” – resident, Millers Bay, Oshkosh, Wisconsin (male identifying)

“Ideally, like in an ideal world, I’m a woman so I think I have different opinions than my boyfriend for what safety means to me. Walking home alone at any time of day, day or night, winter or summer, and feeling like I’m going to leave this one-to-three-mile radius, and I’m going to get home safely. Sometimes I do feel that that’s not necessarily the

case.” – resident, Baltimore, Maryland (female identifying)

“I come from a city in which street sexual harassment is a problem. I have that in mind – I want to walk and not be sexually harassed.” – resident, Tucson, Arizona (female identifying)

“So we’ve had an increasing level of catastrophic times (such as Sept. 11, 2001), and I think that that changes peoples’ philosophies about life. So safety to me is a place where I don’t have these extraneous threats to my existence. I can sort of forget about it for a while, which is what home should be (an escape).” – Realtor, Orlando, Florida (male identifying)

“[The] perception of safety and the reality of safety are very real things. [Washington] D.C. has a decent amount of crime, and [I’m] cognizant of that especially for my wife... I think because I love cities and I think about safety, I feel comfortable being in most neighborhoods in most times, places, and frankly being an able-bodied man in his mid-30s certainly helps too in terms of the safety element. I think a lot of people, though, are less rational, which is totally fine in terms of what makes them feel or not feel safe.” – community organizer, Washington, D.C. (male identifying)

“Comfort and safety are related, but I think because of how we view different communities and depending on the racial makeup of the people you talk to, the answers will change I’m sure. White people when we think of brown communities we think of danger to ourselves from a broad cultural

perspective. Those two often get linked much more frequently than they should.” – resident, San Diego, California (male identifying)

The last quote shows again the relationship between feelings of safety and how a neighborhood can be labeled “good” or “bad” based on the demographics within. These class-, race- and gender-based differences manifest in relegating people to neighborhoods often labeled as ghettos (Morrill, 1954). Ghettos, of course harkening to Jewish containment areas in Europe during World War Two, are designated areas within the U.S. where 40 percent of residents live below the poverty rate, the term is usually shorthand for minority neighborhoods (Domonske, 2014). Once a neighborhood’s image turns negative, it is not easy to correct.

Much of this fear of crime relates to how women are perceived in society – as generally lesser than men and unable to defend themselves so in need of protection (Hilinski et al, 2011). This, too, affects men, making it almost hard to imagine men being victims of crime given they should be strong enough to defend themselves, as the narrative goes (Hilinski et al, 2011). Feelings of safety affect neighborhood and place attachment, with vulnerable populations (such as women and minorities) often seeking out similar people to form bonds within the neighborhood (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). As crime rises and feelings of safety are challenged, people will pull away from forming social bonds with the neighborhood (Baba & Austin, 1991).

Intersectionality and Neighborhood Living

This next story highlights the complex relationship shown in Figure 1. This is the story of a woman who identified as a Latina female living in the Baldwin Park neighborhood in Orlando. Baldwin Park (also my neighborhood for full disclosure) was a former US Naval

training facility, and the city purchased the land when the base closed. The neighborhood is near top schools and has an image of being home to wealthier, white residents. (I live in a one-bedroom apartment so there is a variety of housing options.) Baldwin Park is a testament to new urbanist planning philosophy, with stores and restaurants within walking or short driving distance. Some people call it the Baldwin Park Bubble because you do not necessarily have to leave to do everyday activities such as walking for exercise or grocery shopping. The bubble term, though, is exclusionary given you have to be granted access somehow to the bubble (though of course the neighborhood is open for anyone to visit).

The woman moved to Orlando to continue her doctoral research into social organizing and protest movements. She moved with her husband, a doctor of Pakistani descent. Her family picked a neighborhood that had a large Hispanic population, but it was not walkable and the schools were not necessarily the best. That neighborhood was closer to the tourist attractions, so she said there was a lot of vehicle and tourist pedestrian traffic. She explained she did not feel safe walking around because of the speeding cars. She did, however, like the international flavor of that neighborhood. The neighborhood was fine for the time, she said, but that all changed when she became pregnant, and that shifted her priorities for where to live. "It wasn't a place where I could go out and walk, like, once I had my baby. It was dangerous to walk in that area."

She and her husband then considered moving to Baldwin Park, though on an earlier visit she did not care for the neighborhood. "At that time we were turned off by its demographic. It didn't seem as diverse to me. It's a very white neighborhood. Now it's kind of like the fact that we have a growing family that kind of took precedent." They eventually moved to Baldwin Park, and when we spoke she was getting used to the neighborhood and trying to find

friends. “It’s a lot more family oriented. I can go out and there’s other mothers with babies. There’s a lot of people walking and exercising by the lake. I like that aspect of it. It feels more like a small town rather than this huge dispersed space where you don’t get any personalized feeling.”

While she likes this aspect, she is still wary of being a person of color in a predominantly white space. “I’m a little hesitant about living here, but so far it’s been okay. But the other day I was walking [by] really nice houses. I left [my] phone in the stroller and am thinking ‘God I hope no one calls the cops on me.’ As a person of color it’s like you worry about these thing, and I worry about that with my son. Because I had my son with me maybe I seemed a little less suspicious.” She said in Orlando people have told her to speak English when speaking Spanish.

“It reminds you that this is still very much the South, and I think that’s something that people forget about Orlando. Talking about identities, people don’t associate it with the South. It’s associated with the Mickey Mouse mentality and tourism, but people forget that racism is still very much alive, and there’s still very much this kind of Confederate mentality. I mean, we see Confederate flags here. I don’t think I could ever live here long term unless I did get a great job, then I’ll make sacrifices. Especially as a person of color and someone who is now responsible for someone else’s life I feel like I don’t know if I could live here because of that.”

I asked her where she grew up, and she explained she was from the Bronx, New York. She described a neighborhood where “grandmas were looking out the window yelling at you to come in.” This resembles what Jacobs (1961) described in American cities, where people look out for one another and notice anomalies on the street.

“It felt safe in that sense, in that kind of everyone knew each other and everyone knew each other’s kids and whatnot.” When she brought up safety, I asked her to explain that further. She said in her former Orlando neighborhood, feeling safe meant not getting hit by a car. In a broader context, though, she said:

“In general when I think of safety I think of it more as a right to live and not feel like my life is in danger because of my skin color or previous life experiences or current life experiences. It’s a tricky thing to negotiate for me especially in majority white and higher socioeconomic-status places. When I go in those spaces I’m kind of aware. It just feels different to me. It’s something I’ll immediately pick up on. [I] fear more now because I talk to my son and teach him that things might happen in certain spaces. To me that’s scary.”

As her story illustrates, she is keenly aware of how she fits in the public sphere in general and within her neighborhood confines. Her story highlights the intersectional nature of feminist geography (Valentine, 2007) while her quote about feeling no sense of place attachment shows the effects of this on neighborhood image. (The story highlights how feminist geography as a moderating lens explains this woman’s relationship between feelings of safety and neighborhood image, both in Baldwin Park and her former Orlando neighborhood.) The image of Baldwin Park is one that might not be friendly to those who look like they do not belong. Her perception of her feelings of safety might preclude her from joining neighborhood groups and organizations. The power differentials between herself as a woman of color in a predominantly white space is exactly the kind of relationship feminist geography can interrogate.

Healthy Communities and Gender

The final pattern relates to how women engage in outdoor physical activities such given their feelings of safety and neighborhood image. If a neighborhood has an image of being safe, women are usually more likely to participate in outdoor activities (Kavanagh et al, 2006). Neighborhood connectedness can spur health-related activities such as walking given the social ties created, and if people perceive their place as unsafe they could shy away from these community building activities (Kaczynski & Glover, 2012).

Men tend to dominate leisure space, and women often were relegated to at-home leisure activities until the advent of express policies and practices that encouraged women's participation in sports (Aitchison, 1999). Scraton and Watson (1998) find that even when women feel comfortable using public spaces for recreation, those choices are mitigated by time and feelings of safety. The city "is used 'carefully' by the women – both space and time determine women's use of the city" (Scraton & Watson, 1998, p. 133). Quotes from men and women illustrate these findings:

"With the safety factor, I can [ideally] go out for a run at 5 a.m. alone, and I'm not worried at all.... I have a Philadelphia police officer who lives on my block. I tell him all the time he's never allowed to leave." – resident, West Mt, Airy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (female identifying)

"The safety factor, especially as a female by myself you have to look around. You have to see what's behind you, even driving. Safety is being able to walk at night and not feel like you have to look behind you." – resident, Baldwin Park, Orlando (female identifying)

"As much as I feel comfortable walking around Uptown during the day by myself, after about 8 or

9 p.m. I am more cognizant and aware of my surroundings. It is close to a sketchy area so I don't feel safe enough [to] walk there by myself at night. There have been attacks at night on women by themselves. During the daytime I feel completely safe. That's for this neighborhood." – resident, Dallas, Texas (female identifying)

The person from Dallas said she felt safe in *her* neighborhood during the day, yet other neighborhoods around she said she would not walk in during any time – neighborhood image intersecting with feelings of safety through a feminist geography lens. Those neighborhoods have a negative brand image and are places she actively avoids. The quotes also amplify Scraton and Watson's (1998) findings that women do not want to use outdoor recreation spaces alone in the dark – or even walk alone at night regardless of recreational activities. Similarly to Scraton and Watson (1998), these findings are contextual, situational, and not meant to be generalizable (see also Pain, 1991). A feminist interrogation, though, can help urban planners think about how public spaces are constructed to encourage use from all.

As Valentine (1989, p. 385-386) explains, "every day most women in western societies negotiate public space alone. Many of their apparently 'taken for granted' choices of routes and destinations are in fact the product of 'coping strategies' women adopt to stay safe." This is because women perceive strangers, mostly men, as threats so will find ways to negotiate public spaces that will reduce their time alone and therefore vulnerable (Valentine, 1989). Women report, for example, crossing the street to a more well-lit area, avoiding alleys, even avoiding doorways when navigating spaces at night. Mechanisms of formal (police) and informal (store managers, outdoor seating, crowds) control also help women and minorities determine where

they feel welcome in public spaces (Valentine, 1989), and a feminist geography lens shines on these disparities that can be thought about and corrected when it comes to neighborhood spaces.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Healthy communities and neighborhoods stem from a confluence of factors, and in this instance feelings of safety were examined as related to neighborhood image. Neighborhood image, closely linked to reputation, is how people perceive the place – if they want to live there or not, visit there or not. Through these cognitive shortcuts, neighborhoods are labeled as “good” or “bad” given how people perceive them, and this perception often is related to feelings of safety and incivility in the neighborhood (Lewis & Maxfield, 1980). “The role of objective crime rates is mediated by perceptions of neighborhood incivility” (Lewis & Maxfield, 1980, p. 185). In other word, perception becomes reality.

A way to understand those perceptions is through a person’s lived experiences. The research set out to find out why people chose to live in certain neighborhoods, and during data analysis a strong pattern emerged regarding feelings of safety being an important factor in those considerations. Upon closer analysis, there was a non-surprising gendered element related to feelings of safety (Koskela, 1997; Valentine, 1989). To understand that relationship, I introduced feminist geography literature that is meant to reveal, challenge, and ideally change the status quo. Feminist geography as a lens of understand mitigates feelings of safety, neighborhood image, and the relationship between the two.

Practically, this matters because policymakers and planners can also employ a feminist geography lens when it comes to creating accessible public spaces. For example,

administrators can think about lighting levels (Boomsma & Steg, 2014), ease of access and egress, and possibilities for wider sidewalks that would allow outdoor seating and mingling. Maintaining clean, upkept public spaces that are within close proximity to similar spaces also can increase a person's feelings of safety related to the built environment (Wood et al, 2008). Similarly, if a neighborhood has a negative reputation, a ground-up approach could be taken to reshape that image while also altering any conditions that might be causing an increase in crime rates or incivility, such as broken windows (Gertner & Kotler, 2004).

Figure 1 shows how neighborhood image is an amalgamation of how people interpret various points of information and from what source (Stock, 2009). Word of mouth is a powerful influence when it comes to feelings of safety, in addition of course to visual clues from the physical environment (Nasar, Fisher & Grannis, 1993). When feminist geography mediates the relationship between feelings of safety and neighborhood image, it brings to light some of the structural inadequacies when it comes to women's feelings of safety in public spaces (Valentine, 1989). Again from a practical perspective, administrators can think about designing neighborhoods that imbue these positive feelings of safety through adequate facilities and spaces for social gathering that could create a positive neighborhood image.

If a person is generally satisfied with their neighborhood, they are likely to pass this message along to others, just as easily as they might tell someone to avoid an area in which they felt unsafe. As such, "it is important not only to understand how residents themselves assess their neighborhood, but also how they think that other city residents assess their neighborhood" (Permentier, Bolt & van Ham, 2011). A negative neighborhood reputation might cause people to move, assuming they are socially mobile with the economic resources to move (Permentier, van Ham

& Bolt, 2009). Feelings of safety can also exacerbate this desire to leave a neighborhood, so a feminist geography lens can illuminate the relationship between neighborhood reputation/image and feelings of safety. As a methodological tool, feminist geography can be a means to dig deeper into this relationship. Future research could take up this task with additional interviews in more rural neighborhoods or a comparative study with neighborhoods throughout the world.

The study has natural limitations given it was exploratory in nature and not meant to generalize to an entire population. Interviews were concluded when I reached a point of saturation, and I should be clear that not every person to whom I spoke brought up safety as a reason why they chose a neighborhood. The term came up enough during analysis that it warranted further investigation during a second round of coding. Feminist geography was used as a lens of understanding rather than a methodological tool in this paper, given that literature was a mechanism to tease out the relationship between feelings of safety and neighborhood image. By introducing feminist geography to an overall neighborhood health point of view shows we need to be keenly aware of the physical, social, and environmental factors that could keep people from living free, healthy lives in public spaces.

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