

# Connected Communities

## Youth and Community: Connections and Disconnections

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## Executive Summary

This literature scoping project engaged with a series of issues concerning the 'connectedness' of young people with their communities and community agencies. We consulted research which has explored the life-worlds of young people in materially poor communities, developing our review via a critical re-interpretation of discourses of 'community' and of 'social capital'. We advocated the adoption and development of research methodologies which enhance the ability to investigate these issues further, exploring the nature and consequences of neo-liberal social and political changes at community level whilst contributing to problem-solving and social justice.

The evidence provided ample testimony of the complex and 'ambiguously connected' lives of young people in poor communities. In feeding our findings back to a series of community meetings, we compared the themes from the literature with issues raised by community members – including young people. Respondents were chiefly concerned, by the impact of social change upon their lives and communities; by the ways in which growing inequalities and blocked opportunities impacted upon the experiences of young people and, above all, by a sense that dis-connection and social fragmentation were resulting from political decisions resulting in the loss of community resources and a diminishing 'commitment to welfare'.

## Researchers and Project Partners

CUPP (Community-University Partnership Programme); The Crew Club (Brighton); East Brighton Community Crime Prevention Forum; North Laine Community Association.

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# Youth and Community: Connections and Disconnections

## The 'Urban Alchemy' of Community

'Community' holds diverse, contradictory meanings and political agendas (Berger, 1977; Firey, 1945; Rose, 1999; Hill Collins, 2010; Blond, 2009). It permits a confusing – but ultimately unsatisfying trickery of 'urban alchemy' mixing but failing to blend disconnected elements harmoniously (Katz, 2010: 27). This, 'alchemy', is reflected in the way that, in Rose's words, community is both, 'the object and target for the exercise of political power, whilst remaining, somehow, external to politics and a counterweight to it' (1999: 168). 'Community... evokes everything we lack to be secure, confident and trusting... Paradise lost or paradise still to be found ...this is definitely not a paradise which we ...know from our own experience' (Bauman, 2001: 3).

The historical origins of the concept offer insights; community, as Bauman has noted, speaks to nostalgia – paradise lost – as ties of place and localism (community as destiny) fragmented under motors of change, production and mobility. Questions of community, as Abrams (1977) pointed out, are related to questions about cohesion and connection in society (Flint and Robinson, 2008). Hill Collins noted its particular, almost magical, utility - despite its epistemological framing as an apolitical, natural concept – lies in sustaining social relationships across differences in power and status, securing consent, making social inequalities palatable, and linking individuals to social institutions. Hence, 'the interpretive meanings of community do the heavy lifting of shoring up multiple systems of social inequality' (Hill Collins, 2010: 11). The alchemy of community stands in close relation to the fabricated magic of 'social capital' discussed later.

## Community as policy

Many issues of cohesion and solidarity lying behind concepts of community found their way into policy discourses. By focusing on a few iconic instances it is possible to see how concepts, together with their tensions and contradictions, have worked their way into social policy, major shifts in orientation and, most importantly, the consequences which have followed.

## The Origins of Community Development Policy

'Community' was pushed to the forefront of social and urban policy in the post war period: integration of commonwealth immigrants, the consequences of slum clearance and re-housing and, towards the end of the 1960s, the 'rediscovery' of poverty. The issue presented itself at that time to policy makers as the question: why are some communities and groups not taking advantage of opportunities and resources offered by social planning and the welfare state?

Problems of trying to answer this question were graphically illustrated by the Community Development Projects (1969-79). These initiatives selected deprived communities and dispatched community workers to mobilise the population to become more proactive and entrepreneurial. Many of the CDP teams moved rapidly leftwards politically; community

mobilisation often resulted in confrontations with official agencies, while many CDP workers argued that the problems facing deprived communities were located, not in characteristics of those communities, but in wider dynamics of de-industrialisation and general economic decline (Mayo, 1981). By the end of the 1970s the CDPs had been closed down (Loney, 1983).

### **The 1981 Riots & Scarman**

Issues of community came into sharp focus with the 1981 riots. Lord Scarman (1981), made two recommendations directly concerning community policy. Firstly, that poor (black) communities be brought into local consultation processes regarding policing, secondly, that such communities were resourceful and resilient but needed significant additional resources and investment in jobs and education.

Scarman may have been the last time emphasis was unambiguously placed upon the state to respond to the needs of communities. Increasingly the discourse turned in the direction of self-help but also questioned the capacity of communities to activate networks of mutual support. The Barclay Report (1982) saw successful social work involving the activation of community networks, a proposal criticised from the standpoint of the long term weakening of such networks, echoing Willmott and Young's (1960) earlier research.

### **The Bradford Riots 2001**

By the Bradford riots of 2001 the ball was firmly in the community's court. The problems were perceived by policy makers as a lack of 'community cohesion', (now conceptualised as a deficiency of 'social capital': Putnam, 1999) and how it could be enhanced, such that local communities would become successful at attracting business (Flint and Robinson, 2008). The role of the state, now influenced by neoliberal doctrines (Fletcher, 2008), was restricted to assisting development of cohesion rather than directly investing in employment and resources as Scarman advocated. When *New Labour* came to power, however, firmly embracing many aspects of the neoliberal agenda its approach to community renewal was epitomised in the *New Deal For Communities* programme. Many of the ambitions of the New Deal centered upon children and young people – seemingly the 'Achilles Heel' of community in late modernity (Measor and Squires, 2000).

### **Young People: Connections and disconnections in the Literature**

No specific body of work focuses upon children and young people and community issues, a consequence we argue of the development of sub-cultural and deviancy studies (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) more concerned with young people's escape from the confinement of community and their rejection of dominant values.

Consequently, the literature mined for this report did not have young people's experiences of community as its focus, instead it explored: the significance and mechanics of transition to adulthood or to the world of employment (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Craine, 1997; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; MacDonald, 2006, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2011; Roberts, 2011; Webster *et al* 2004); or the role of peer groups and impact of gang involvement (Deuchar and Holigan, 2010; Moloney *et al*, 2011; Pitts 2008; Ralphs, Medina and Aldridge, 2009; Young and Hallsworth 2010) and how young people experience crime, disorder, community safety and criminalisation in socio-economically distressed neighbourhoods (Deakin 2006; Deuchar 2010; Goldsmith 2006,

2008; 2011; Green *et al* 2000; Nayak 2003; MacDonald, 2006, 2007, 2011; Matthews *et al* 1999; McAuley, 2007; Measor and Squires 2000; Sadler 2008; Stephen and Squires 2003; Squires and Stephen 2005; Turner *et al* 2006; Yates 2006a, 2006b).

## Lived experiences of Young People

The research tells complex stories about how young people are connected to and disconnected from community; stories challenging dominant discourses that young people erode community and pose a threat to it.

Young people operate forms of agency, resilience and psycho-social attachment which underpin important connections to their close friends, family and extended peer groups. Young people consider themselves to be well connected to their communities (MacDonald *et al.*, 2005; Yates 2006a; McAuley 2007; Shah *et al.*, 2010; Goldsmith 2011). Family and friends are, on the basis of the evidence surveyed, the conduit through which mutual aid is given and organised. Connection to neighbourhood networks is vital for young people. A safe place to stay, food, money, clothes, formal and informal employment opportunities, and childcare are available to the 'connected' (Roker, Player and Coleman, 1999; Goldsmith, 2011). For young people living in socially and economically distressed neighbourhoods such connections are 'the only way to survive' (McAuley 2007: 11).

Connections are neither assured nor stable but formed or reinforced, for example, through advantageous or sexual liaisons (Measor, 2006) making 'links' (Gunter and Watt, 2009), public declarations using the language of 'family' to create kith and kin affiliations to other, more connected, young people (Goldsmith, 2011). Use of public space is core to many young people's experience (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007; Goldsmith, 2008; Brent 2009; Gunter and Watt, 2009) and is, perhaps the dominant site outside the home, where peer connections are sustained. Engagement in 'risky' behaviour can strengthen friendship bonds (Yates, 2006a; Green *et al* 2000; Brent, 2009) and involvement in 'social', as opposed to 'anti-social' (Lea, 1999) crime and disorder is one way young people participate in neighbourhood life. But potentially harmful consequences can accompany the imperative to be connected, including brushes with the law (Goldsmith, 2011).

## Aspects of Disconnection

Some young people negotiate forms and patterns of connection within their community, research shows they are often disconnected from public agencies, employment structures and other institutions such as school – the communities of governance (Stephen and Squires 2003; Squires and Stephen 2005; Yates 2006a, 2006b; McAuley, 2007; Gunter and Watt, 2009; Goldsmith, 2008; 2011). This is not always, despite popular perception, a consequence of a lack of individual effort, additional barriers that lock people out of the labour market (Craine, 1997; Fletcher, 2008). Recent figures show that 898,000 young people between 16 and 24 years old were unemployed between February and April 2011, 19.3% of this population (Rhodes 2011).

The complex lives and strategies of young people are often unacknowledged, or misinterpreted by social welfare and criminal justice professionals. Labeling an area 'crime prone' by official agencies can lead to young people experiencing persistent discrimination and negative stereotyping (McAra and McVie, 2005; Sadler 2008; Ralphs *et al* 2009; Goldsmith, 2008; 2011).

### **From 'Street Life' to a life 'On Road'**

Research suggests that 'street life' can be transformed for some young people into a hyper-masculine street culture - 'on road' - where crime is seen as a form of work (Gunter and Watt 2009; Young and Hallsworth 2010). Whilst the culture created can be highly problematic and disruptive, it is also an attempt to create alternative connections to 'community' when few viable alternatives exist. This can produce cultures which echo the 'nasty, brutish and short' character of neo-liberalism (Squires, 2012), exercising attitudes and behaviour which clash violently with formal values of mainstream 'civilised' society - including the values held by many other people (young and old) in their own neighbourhoods. They are, nonetheless, products of that very same culture.

### **Community feedback themes: process**

A core theme of the analysis is communities – especially relatively deprived ones and particularly the young people *within* them – are more often talked about, than talked to. Accordingly, the 'added-value' dimension of this project involved 'research feedback events' where we shared with community members, young people and 'community practitioners' key themes arising from academic evidence and sought their reactions and responses. The approach was consistent with our commitment to a method that sought to give voice to those for whom so much of community governance (Rose, 1999) is designed whilst incorporating principles from alternative participatory research traditions.

Our approach contrasts with conventional 'community consultation' or 'social capital building' (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000) because such methods are about citizens becoming beneficiaries of political institutions which can counter ideals of participation. Our argument, in this report, is that many contemporary conceptions of 'community governance' function in precisely these ways, with researchers, in Fine's terms (Fine, B., 2010; 2010a) 'behaving badly' by aiding and abetting governance and compliance processes.

### **Community Narratives and social capital**

The themes and issues emerging from feedback events led back to discussions of community cohesion and 'connectedness'. They raised a number of important issues reflecting community's expectations and aspirations, problems faced and tribulations endured, they run to the heart of community identity, consciousness and experience. These community 'narratives' are imperfectly and inappropriately expressed in the language of social capital (Morrow, 2001). The discourse of social capital, rooted in neo-liberalism, is deployed to legitimate the marketisation of community relations, advocate trust, consent, and entrepreneurialism of the self, disseminating an economic ethics of self-improvement to galvanize the poorest to help themselves (Fine, 2010; 2010a).

### **Rejecting 'dark capital' : silence, stigma and discrimination**

These problems are nowhere so apparent as in the phenomenon of 'negative' or 'dark' social capital (Fisher and Gruescu, 2011: 17), a personalized 'negative equity' attached to the poor and marginal, and young people in deprived communities. Attributions of dark capital seem mostly entail blaming the victim, 'negative capital' is regarded entirely as a failing of individuals; contexts and environments which people inhabit, circumstances they experience or the discrimination and stigma they face are not considered. By contrast community narratives offer dynamic personal and political vocabularies for consciousness and experience

allowing individuals and groups to articulate a sense of self, voice their mistrust and mobilize resistance.

Evidence emerged in feedback events, of political resistance, active and lively informal support networks, a profound sense of disappointment with local political processes, criticisms of the stigma and discrimination experienced and challenges to the discourses of 'broken society' and 'social capital deficit' within which much contemporary community governance is steeped.

### **Feedback themes emerging**

Three major themes arose from feedback events: [1] the impact of social and economic change on communities; [2] growing inequality and broken promises; [3] the experiences of young people. They represent an overtly political critique of dominant official discourses on community deprivation; indicate complex interplays of informal connections and official disconnections and the ways people cope in adverse circumstances.

The first theme, reflecting the impact of recent social changes focused upon the collapse of youth labour markets and barriers to employment facing young men with limited education and skills. At issue was the implication in official or mainstream political discourse that responsibility for this new precariousness lay primarily with young people themselves.

The third theme: the experiences of young people, was preoccupied with disadvantage and blocked opportunities. Many respondents shared a profound sense young people's issues were overlooked. In the eyes of some respondents, government efforts to address these issues had profound negative consequences for youth and youth opportunities. Neighbourhood and 'community safety' policies exacerbated problems for young people. Young people might seem a test case for the shift from welfare to punitive regimes (Wacquant, 2009); they are not merely *disconnected* from safety nets of public policy, but are increasingly the objects of local crime and disorder governance (Squires and Goldsmith, 2010).

The second theme, inequality and 'broken promises', provides a master narrative here, conveying a sense of injustice and also a sense of resentment. This resentment and sense of injustice is 'dark social capital': it is the community announcing its scepticism: speaking for itself, vocalizing resistance, shattering consensus, breaking with dominant and 'sanctified' forms of community governance, articulating different values or refusing a dialogue whose terms are rejected and, perhaps, shifting the terms of debate to an explicitly political critique, not of 'broken society', but of 'broken promises'. The idea that social and economic problems of deprived communities not only lie outside those very communities but in deliberate political choices, (Wacquant, 2009) is perhaps more than even the beguiling alchemy of 'community' could withstand.

### **Suggestions for further research**

We advocate the development of research drawing upon and combining insights of 'participatory action research', subaltern perspectives and longitudinal ethnographies. The aim is to assess the impact of social change, disinvestment and state disconnection and withdrawal in our more deprived communities at the cutting edge of neo-liberalism's hollowed out new 'social contract'. Research from the bottom up gains a purchase upon informal connections sustaining real communities in a cold climate while exploring coping mechanisms resorted to by the new dispossessed. It is our argument that, not only is such activity 'off the books' as far as the state is concerned, it is

increasingly slipping out of the books of the academy. The prevalence of the 'social capital industry' in recent years implies that *critical* research on this 'alchemy of contemporary governance' is long overdue and with it the need for a critical evaluation of the machinations of new community governance and the 'big society'.

## Conclusions

This scoping project sought to engage with critical issues concerning the 'connectedness' of young people with their communities and with formal and informal agencies and institutions within and servicing those communities. We pursued our review of academic and research literature via critical re-interpretation of discourses of 'community' and concepts of 'social capital' being deployed to further problematise poor communities. We consulted research findings which explored the life-worlds of poor communities and interrogated the connections that individuals in distressed and impoverished environments established amongst themselves and with the extended state. We advocated the adoption and development of research methodologies which enhance investigation of these issues, exploring the nature and consequences of neo-liberalism whilst contributing to problem-solving and social justice.

The research evidence in the literature provided ample testimony to the complex and ambiguously connected lives of young people in poor communities and, in feeding our findings back to community meetings, we compared these themes and issues with the issues voiced by community members. Community respondents were concerned, chiefly, by the impact of social change upon lives and communities; by the ways growing inequalities and blocked opportunities impacted upon young people and, above all, by a sense that dis-connection and social fragmentation were resulting from political and economic decisions resulting in the loss of community resources and a diminishing public 'commitment to welfare'.



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## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

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