Intersectional Analysis of Communities of Identity and Communities Place and Connectedness

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Contents

Introduction

The current "war against woke", and attacks on stigmatised groups such as migrants, trans people and people of colour, suggests we might be living in societies where connectedness, and therefore empathy and connection, between people who are different is fracturing or breaking down. The riots across the UK in the summer 2024, following a knife attack on a children's group in the town of Southport, Merseyside, which saw groups attack hotels used to house asylum seekers awaiting a decision, were a shocking visible symbol of societal divisions. In trying to understand this, politicians and commentators have fallen back on the decades-old trope of "white working class communities" that have been ignored and feel alienated from the multicultural communities in which they now live (Amin, 2002).

It is empirically shown that connection between different groups, even in a passive way of co-residence in a neighbourhood, can increase empathy and understanding between groups (Bailey, et.al. 2013; Laurence and Goebel, 2025)). To unpack what might work to enhance local connectedness , in this position paper we explore the intersections between what have been referred to as "communities of interest" or social identities (e.g. ethnicity; disability; faith and belief; sexual and gender identity) and "communities of place", or place identities. While these are often seen in opposition, and policy often considers them in silos, in this position paper we advocate an intersectional approach, recognising that everyone must live somewhere, and these identities will be interlinked in complex ways, informed by underlying social processes . First, we begin by considering what is meant by the over-used word 'community'.

What is community?

> *'Community' is one of those words – like 'culture', 'myth', 'ritual', 'symbol' – bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which, when imported into the discourse of social science, however, causes immense difficulty'*
>
> *(Cohen, 1985: 11)*

Social scientists from the classic work of Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies and Simmel, to the pioneering work of Jane Jacobs in the 1960s up to Putnam in the 21st century, have all grappled with community in various forms to either herald its ongoing importance or bemoan its decline. At its most basic, following Gusfield (1975), a sense of community can be seen as both emotional (sense of place) and relational (sense of belonging). Thus, a sense of community may require 'meaningful social interactions and entanglements creating a sense of belonging among individuals.' (Niskavaara, et al, 2024: 2).

In his pathbreaking book, The Symbolic Construction of Community (1985), the sociologist Anthony Cohen stated that at the heart of community is the idea of relationality – connections between people – but also boundary – differences from other people. In other words, a community is seen as meaningful through its distinctiveness and boundary with other communities. The nature of that boundary may vary. It could be a geographical boundary, but also non-spatial boundaries such as an ethnic or religious boundary (like the global Islamic Ummah), or other aspect of identity such as sexuality (e.g. the LGBTQ+ community).

Therefore, far from being hard and fast, clear-cut entities, 'communities' are social constructions defined through symbolic boundaries (Cohen, 1985). Precisely, because these boundaries are largely symbolic, rather than fixed legal entities, they are open to a broad range of interpretations

by different people. Thus, 'community' may exist only in the minds of its members – in other words, people perceive a distinction between themselves and other 'communities'. For example, a global religious community may seem clear cut when defined in relation to other religions or non-believers but may be riven with internal disagreements and intersectional differences – a point to which we return below. Here, we can think of the insightful analysis of Benedict Anderson on the 'Imagined Community'. Part of the enduring attraction of community is this nebulous quality and the fact that it can mean so many different things.

It cannot be simply assumed that communities are spatially bounded. As Thrift (2008: 98) points out, the fabric of space is open-ended rather than enclosed. Thus, community can also be virtual or hybrid 'space' in which individuals share similar interests and values, without necessarily sharing the same location or indeed ever actually meeting each other. This raises questions about the role of place and extent to which a shared geographical location matters for community formations.

Place-identity and community

Although, as noted above, community does not need to be spatially bounded, and can exist virtually, much of the research on community occurs at the local level within specific geographical locations including rural villages and urban neighbourhoods. Much of that work explores community through the lens of place-identity following the classic work of scholars such as Tajfel and Hummon (Tajfel, 1978; Hummon, 1986: Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Nevertheless, 'a shared location of residence in a neighbourhood does not necessarily mean shared values and activities among the residents' (Niskavaara, et al, 2024 p.2). Thus, in order for a sense of place identity to emerge it requires a self-awareness of one's membership to a place related group, as well as the emotional and evaluative appreciation of this membership (Tajfel, 1978).

'Place' typically means a specific geographical location – but that is not to suggest that place is a static, given, one dimensional entity in which things happen – place is not self-evident. Place can be both concrete and ambiguous. Place is socially constructed by people and institutions, by layers of interaction over time (Ryan et al, 2021). Place can mean different things to different people at the same time (Main and Sandoval, 2015) and imbibed with multiple meanings (Hummon, 1993; Grey and O'Toole, 2018). These meanings are denoted by symbols and the stories that people tell about those places (Cohen, 1985; Niskavaara, et al, 2024). Of course, that is not to suggest that people can simply define places as they wish. As Doreen Massey (1995) reminds us, local places are also situated within wider geo-political and economic contexts. Thus, the extent to which people can claim a sense of belonging to a particular locality may be contingent upon particular legal rights and institutional regulations – such as immigration restrictions (Main and Sandoval, 2015; Schneider, 2024).

Much sociological research on communities is interested in how a sense of place identity, belonging and relatedness within places varies across the socio-economic gradients, or understood in a more complex way as differing between classes. Within a British context, and employing an Bourdieusian understanding of class as a reflection of socio-economic and socio-cultural positions, Savage (2010) suggests that more affluent, middle-class people have an elective belonging to place. Where they choose to live reflects their broader identity, and who they want to project into the world. Social connectedness for these people is attained through formal groups, such as the Parent-Teacher Association, or Parish/Community Council (Bagnall et.al. 2003). This contrasts with the "being-in-place" of working-class communities described by Allen (2008) of rooted links in local communities.

The connectedness of such working-class communities has become increasingly problematised

over the last decade with the concern about "left-behind places" within political discourse (Pike et.al. 2024). Such places, and communities, are evocatively described as "places that don't matter" who took their revenge in the Brexit referendum in the UK, the recent (2025) success of Reform in elections in the UK, and the elections of Donald Trump as president of the USA (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The term 'left-behind places' has been described as 'a resonant label and spatial imaginary' (Pike et.al. 2024: 1168) but also one that 'has tended to homogenize the kinds of places in question, obscuring their differing combinations of dimensions, predicaments, and potentials' (ibid.: 1173). One such predicament identified is the reduction, or even collapse, of social infrastructure in these communities that produced and supported connectedness (Klinenberg, 2019), due to decades of under-investment and austerity. Conversely, a potential opportunity is the new modes of social infrastructure that can be developed in these so-called 'left-behind' places (Gregory 2018, Tomaney et.al. 2024).

Bringing together these themes of community and place-identity, we can understand both as social constructions, with meaning created through the relationality of the people within these communities. However, the links between place-identity, communities-of-place, and communities-of-identity, are complex, with wider socio-economic forces, such as employment patterns, housing markets, immigration policies and spatial planning decisions, all leading to particular people being co-located in particular places. Layering on top of this, administrative boundaries can be used as a tool of governing to bound people whom the state thinks are linked, while keeping out others whom the state wishes to define as different. This can be a politically neutral, or ambiguous process, such as in Great Britain, where administrative boundaries attempt to reflect historical imaginaries of a "community" - a parish or a town council, for example - or to reflect the development of specific neighbourhoods at specific period of time, such as a large social housing estate. Of course, administrative boundaries have often been used oppressively, to divide and keep people within certain places (the most extreme examples being in Northern Ireland during the Troubles – see below).

Intersectionality

Originally coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality emphasises the ways in which different aspects of identity intersect to create disparities of power, social inequality and discrimination (see also Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Hill Collins, 2017). To provide one example of how identities might intersect to layer discrimination, a woman who is disabled may experience discrimination in society for their gender and as a product of ableism in society. When we bring in place, we can also bring in the intersections of the stigma and discrimination relating to where someone lives (a less advantaged neighbourhood), the tenure of their home (social housing), and even the adaptations to make their home accessible (ramps, or grab rails) (McKee et.al. 2025). In this case, the individual may be discriminated against, or excluded from wider social connections because of any of these things, or all of them combining together. In different situations, different parts of someone's identity can intersect to produce a particular experience of social inequality and discriminations. In the UK, the framework of the Equality Act 2010 frames much of our discussion of intersectionality on the "protected characteristics" (sex and gender; race and ethnicity; disability; age; faith and belief; sexual identity; gender identity; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership) that are outlined in the legislation (EHRC, 2017).

Applying intersectionality to understand community, Niskavaara, et al, (2024) try to enhance and broaden Tönnies' understanding of community (i.e. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft). As they note, although community has been the topic of extensive research over decades, there has been less attention to the intersectional characteristics of local communities and how that is reproduced through different narratives. Thus, it is argued that: 'Intersectionality theory

provides a critical lens for understanding the ways in which social identities and power relations interconnect to shape individual experiences of community' (Niskavaara, et al, 2024: 2).

Bringing in place identities, we use intersectionality to understand the relationship between place and identity as dynamically intertwined, with place and identities as mutually constructive of each other (Grey and O'Toole, 2018). As noted above, places are not neutral backdrops on which things happen, they are ambiguous, complex, dynamic, with multiple meanings, shaped over time (Ryan et al, 2021). Amongst the growing body of research using an intersectional lens, there is increasing recognition of the significance of place, space and location in constructing identities, social categories and oppressive structures in society (see for example, Lundström 2010; Castán Broto and Alves 2018; Vietinghoff 2021; Blidon 2018, Baylina Ferré and Rodó-de-Zárate 2016; Niskavaara, et al, 2024; McKee, et al, 2025).

Research across a range of geographical locations in Spain found evidence that time in place is highly significant and 'newcomers differ from local residents in their kind of attachment to a place' (Belanche, et al (2021: 246). Thus, age matters and they found that older, long term residents were more likely to profess a sense of belonging to their local places. There is also evidence that gender matters as women develop more affective links and value the place they live more than men and, as a result, women tend to report higher levels of place identity (Belanche, et al 2021). Another relevant factor appears to be housing tenure: 'Home ownership has also been found to increase place identity' (Belanche, et al (2021: 246). Therefore, paying attention to the specific demographic characteristics of residents is important when exploring their varied levels of attachments to local places and the sense of community they experience.

Patterns of the intersection of place and identities in the UK

To understand, in greater depth, the intersections of identity and place, we have to understand how some people come to be spatially concentrated within particular neighbourhoods. Places are neither socially homogeneous, nor equally socially diverse. Our understanding of the identity of places is often shaped by our understanding of who lives there; conversely, people may choose to live in a place because of who is already there. To understand the links between this spatial distribution and community connectedness it is important to analyse the social processes that produce these intersections of place and identity. The social processes can be simply demarcated as "push-factors", or broader social structures (e.g. class, ethnicity etc.), or "pull-factors" reflecting the agency of individuals wishing to be in a particular community.

Push-factors are predominantly economic and strongly linked to housing markets and housing and planning policies – the price and tenure of housing determines where many people can live. This is, in-turn, linked to wider social determinants, such as discrimination, will impact someone's earnings. Within the UK, urban planning plays a major part in this due to the construction of large areas of socially-rented housing in the period after 1945. Changes to housing policy from the 1970s onwards meant this housing had to be allocated to those in greatest need, concentrating socio-economic deprivation in areas of towns and cities. For many decades, this economic sorting was also paralleled by discriminatory practices in social housing allocations, especially racism, with white people prioritised for social housing (Henderson & Karn, 1987). While regeneration programmes have sought to reduce concentrations of deprivation through replacing mono-tenure neighbourhoods with mixed communities, it should be noted that this has focused on reducing socially-rented housing, not diversifying areas of concentrated owner-occupation.

Pull-factors are predominantly social, but there can be some economic factors. The primary pull-factor is homophily – that people like to live near people that are similar to themselves, or dislike living near people who are different (Clark 1991). Even if a minority of a group show a slight preference to live near to one-another, and not near another group, then spatial sorting will lead to a stark divide between communities. These choices can also be economically driven – co-location in a neighbourhood can create markets for services for a minority community, such as cafes or shops (Cheshire, 2007). Homophily can be used to stigmatise minority groups, as an explanation for why they do not mix and exclude themselves from society (Imrie and Raco, 2003). A more appropriate way to understand it is in phenomena such as "white flight", when a white majority population leave a neighbourhood when ethnic minorities move in because they are racist, seen dramatically in US cities like Detroit (Galster, 2021). Homophily can also be a way for stigmatised and excluded groups to protect themselves from harassment and discrimination.

Such social processes, pushing and pulling people to live in particular neighbourhoods, mean that we need to understand places, and place identity as changing, and so the complex intersections of identities will change over time. To do this, we need to consider the role of a neighbourhood within the wider urban or regional economy. For example, a neighbourhood could be one that people temporarily transit through in their life course to move onto a different (possibly better quality) home and neighbourhood elsewhere; or a neighbourhood could be isolated from wider social processes, becoming somewhere where people are "stuck" with limited connectedness beyond the neighbourhood (Robson et.al. 2008; Green and White, 2007).

Contemporary spatial patterns in the UK

The discrimination that people in different identity communities face varies, therefore the processes that lead groups to be concentrated in specific spatial communities also vary.. In this section, we shall consider some of the main protected characteristics – disability and age; ethnicity; and sex and gender identity – and how they have become intersected with place identities using examples from the Community Catapult areas.

Disability and ageing: historic ableist discrimination that prevented disabled people from working has led to disabled people being concentrated in social housing. In the most deprived decile of neighbourhoods in England, as measured by censuses, 26% of people were disabled, compared to 17.6% of the population across England; and in Wales 28.2% of people in the most deprived decile of neighbourhoods were disabled compared to 21% nationwide. Comparable data for Scotland and Northern Ireland is not readily available. These neighbourhoods are predominantly social housing – as noted, this housing is allocated to those in greatest housing need in the UK, so socio-economic disadvantage becomes concentrated in these places.

In the UK, for disabled people who cannot find suitable employment, or cannot work, the social security system provides their income, with housing paid for through Housing Benefit, or the housing portion of Universal Credit. This limited income means that social housing is the primary tenure such households can afford. Further, policies to provide adaptations to housing for people with physical impairments are complex to navigate, and the funding available is limited (Anderson et.al. 2020). A disabled person's low income can also become disabling leading to further health problems, such as anxiety and depression (Whickam et.al. 2020).

Disability needs also to be understood alongside ageing – most people will become disabled in some way as they age. This means many people age-in-place, living in a home, and neighbourhood, that suited them when they were younger, but could become isolating or require expensive adaptations as a person ages. With ageing populations across the globe, this could become a growing issue for connectedness.

Community catapult – Alloa, ageing, disability and stigma

Alloa, the largest town in our community catapult area of Clackmannanshire, is an example of the social processes and intersecting identities of place, disability and ageing. Alloa is a major industrial town, with a large glass factory and plants and warehousing associated with the Scotch whisky industry. However, it has experienced mass deindustrialisation, with the closure of the coal mines in the late twentieth century. This heritage has left the town with major areas of socially-rented housing, some of which are in the most socio-economically deprived ten percent of neighbourhoods in Scotland. Within these neighbourhoods, many residents experience ageing-in-place with associated disabilities, intersecting with their complex identities of being from the "scheme" (a Scottish stigmatising dialect term to refer to a neighbourhood of social housing). These neighbourhoods are home to around 3,300 people, according to the 2022 census. This data also reveals the concentration of disabled people in deprived neighbourhoods. Across all of Scotland, 24.1 percent of people are impaired in their daily lives to some extent; in these neighbourhoods in Alloa, 32.7 percent of people are. In the neighbourhoods in Alloa in the least socio-economically deprived ten percent of neighbourhoods in Scotland, 15.57 percent of residents are disabled. We can also note that, to an extent, how this is driven by people ageing in place; across Scotland, 23.87 percent of the population are aged over-65. In least deprived areas of Alloa, 17.39 percent of the population are aged over-65, compared to 19.01 percent in the most deprived areas, a similar proportion to the 19.08 percent of people aged over 65 in Clackmannanshire as a whole.

Patterns of development in Alloa have produced these spatial patterns – the deprived neighbourhoods are predominantly council housing built between 1919 and 1979. One of the least deprived neighbourhoods is next to an area of social housing, but is modern, detached family housing built by a major private housing developer. Only 9.36 percent of the population of this neighbourhood is currently over-65. While the historic spatial patterns persist, Clackmannanshire Council has worked with partners to develop supported accommodation for older people in Alloa town centre to try and change the built environment and improve connectedness for older residents.

Ethnicity: the spatial concentration of people of colour within the UK is complex, and reflects historic patterns linked to the history of colonisation and decolonisation. Discussions are often tainted by racism (Amin, 2002). The predominant spatial concentrations of minoritised ethnic groups were created through migration patterns in the period after 1945, when people from colonies, and former colonies, were invited to the UK to fill gaps in the labour market. This produced concentrations of people from Caribbean countries in London and the Midlands, and from India and Pakistan in the north of England and parts of the Midlands. Within the cities where these people settled, racism in housing provision led them to commonly live in poor quality, private-rented housing and entering low-cost owner-occupation (Hilliard 2025).

The 2021 census in England and Wales showed that a number of local authorities now have a

minority of their population describing themselves as White, English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British: Birmingham, Luton, Leicester, Manchester and the majority of London boroughs. Other ethnicities are concentrated in some cities; for example a quarter of the population of Bradford identify as Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh – Pakistani; 34% of the population of Leicester identify as Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh – Indian; and 34% of the population of the London borough of Tower Hamlets identify as Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh – Bangladeshi. It should be recognised that some of these trends are a product of the artificial boundaries of local authorities, and that whereas some urban areas, like Leicester are under-bounded by their local authority, others such as Bradford cover a very large metropolitan area. Thus, a third of the population of Leicester local authority are White, English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British, but in all the surrounding local authorities the majority of the population identify this way. In Bradford 56.7% of the population identify as White, English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British, but this varies from 5% in the inner city to 91% in the outer suburbs.

The spatial trends within London are particularly interesting and reflect specific economic transformations there. In the decades immediately after early immigration from former colonies, these people tended to be resident in inner suburbs of nineteenth century terraced housing, that had been sub-divided and leased privately, most famously Notting Hill. Gentrification over the past 20 years has seen a suburbanisation of this ethnic minority population, which is often experiencing poverty, to outer suburbs that were predominantly white and middle class. Again, the sub-division and letting of homes privately, has supported this trend.

While we can focus on the choices and behaviours of minoritised ethnic groups, it is important to recognise that white people moving out of inner-city and inner-suburban areas, to outer suburbs, and racism in the allocation of council housing, was been a key driver in the concentration of specific ethnic groups in some neighbourhoods (Henderson & Karn, 1987). As noted, the concentration of minoritised groups in specific neighbourhoods is often tainted by racialised discourse, suggesting such communities are isolating themselves, hence, reducing community connectedness (Amin, 2002). Such arguments ignore that the majority white population are also doing this; that minoritised communities are often moving away from racism and harassment; and finally, that there is evidence that such co-location improves inclusion and connectedness for such communities into wider society by providing much-needed local support (Musterd and Ostendorf, 2009;).

This narrative suggests a homogenous experience across ethnic minorities in the UK. Across minoritised ethnic groups there is substantial difference, with some groups such as East Asians and Indians having very high levels of home-ownership and being among the wealthiest and highest-income households in the country (ONS, 2020). Further, it also suggests minoritised ethnic groups in themselves are homogeneous, whereas increasingly these groups are mixed and super-diverse (Markkanen, et.al. 2013).

Faith and belief: it should also be recognised that the patterns of co-location among minoritised ethnic groups also often map onto faith communities, however this is in a context where the UK is becoming an increasingly secular country. One part of the UK that has particularly complex intersections of faith and spatial communities is Northern Ireland. Its complex, colonial history; the oppression of the Roman Catholic minority community; and continued sectarian divisions mean that Northern Irish identities are unique. These spatial divisions within Northern Ireland have persisted during the peace process that has been ongoing since 1998.

Community Catapult – Darnall, an ethnically diverse neighbourhood in the north of England

In many respects, Darnall exemplifies the processes of colocation of people of colour in towns and cities in the UK, and particularly the north of England and midlands. However, one difference is housing type – while in cities and towns like Bradford, Leicester, Blackburn and Bury, these communities are concentrated in terraced housing built in the nineteenth century, which became available when the white working-class moved to newly built suburbs in the 1930s and postwar period, Darnall is a mix of semi-detached properties (47% of households), mainly built in the 1930s, and terraced housing (32.8%). Across housing types though, the housing is low cost, with 85.1% of houses in Band A of Council Tax, and an average selling price in 2023 of £121,153 compared to the English average of £335,659. This means there is a relatively high proportion of owner-occupied housing (49%) in the neighbourhood when average annual household incomes before housing costs are almost £10,000 lower than the English average at £22,350. The intersection with ethnicity and faith becomes clear when we look at that data: 59.4% of the population of Darnall is non-white; 41% Asian, compared to 9% of England's population. Further, 34.2% of the population of Darnall was born outside the UK (compared to 17.4% in England). This ethnic diversity is reflected in religion, with 48.3% of people in Darnall identifying as Muslim, compared to 6.7% of England's population. (Sheffield City Council, 2024)

Sexual and gender minorities: when we consider this group (we shall use the shorthand LGBTQ+ people), there are specific historic trends linked to legal discrimination, patterns related to continued discrimination, and in some contemporary instances comparative advantage. It should be noted that data on trans people is often not collected, therefore in this section we use the terms LGBTQ+, LGB or non-heterosexual to describe what data we are discussing, not to specifically exclude any particular group.

The law in the UK discriminated against LGBTQ+ people until very recently, impacting socio-economic outcomes, and there is ongoing and increasing discrimination against trans people (Faye, 2021; Duffy, 2025). In terms of spatial sorting, sexist laws and rules regarding women obtaining mortgages without a male signatory, historically prevented single women from owning their own home, particularly impacting lesbians and bisexual women. In the 1990s, HIV/AIDS stigma prevented gay men from getting the life assurance needed to obtain a mortgage, again limiting routes in home-ownership (Matthews et.al. 2024). That marriage rights were not equalised for same-gender couples until 2014/2015/2020 across the UK, also meant long-term relationships were not legally sanctioned, which did prevent some couples from accessing a joint mortgage, reducing what they could borrow. Further, the legacy of this stigma is that LGB people are more likely to be single than heterosexuals. The impact of this discrimination is most notable in the UK in the historic concentrations of lesbians in Hebden Bridge, and LGBTQ+ people often being first-wave gentrifiers (Smith & Holt, 2005). As first-wave gentifiers, LGBTQ+ people can often find themselves priced-out of the affordable neighbourhoods they moved to by subsequent waves of gentrification (Doan & Higgins, 2011). Recent analysis of data across Great Britain suggests this has produced a complex pattern of disadvantage and advantage

for LGB people. For example, gay men are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to own homes worth more than £250,000, and are also more likely to rent their homes privately, suggesting quite a bifurcated distribution of housing wealth among this group (Matthews et.al. 2024).

The other driver of spatial-sorting for LGBTQ+ people is homophily and the desire to access communities and services. The small proportion of the population that identify as not-heterosexual and/or not-cisgender (usually around 3-5% of the population) means this group needs to be in large population centres to be around other LGBTQ+ people. Historically, this also provided a market to sustain LGBTQ+ specific services such as bookshops, bars and clubs, as well as providing the population base to sustain activist movements. In the UK this has led to particular concentrations of LGBTQ+ people in places such as London and the Southeast, Manchester, Brighton and Hove as well as other major urban centres.

Community Catapult – Brixton, the gaybourhood?

Brixton is a diverse neighbourhood within the London Borough of Lambeth, to the south of the river Thames, with a rich and complex history of diversity across many communities. However, over the past 40-years it has become a prominent "gaybourhood" within London. At the 2021 census, 9.58% of the population of Brixton identified as lesbian, gay or other, with the majority of these being lesbian or gay, with a smaller population of bisexuals and other sexual identities. Looking at the four Medium Super Output Areas that make-up Brixton, we see the complex intersections we are discussing at work. In the areas with a greater proportion of socially-rented housing, Brixton Central (44.2% of households) and Brixton Hill West (36.6% of households) there is a higher proportion of people of colour (64.6% and 47.5% respectively) and LGBTQ+ people are 8.93% and 8.67% of the populations respectively. In comparison, Acre Lane and Brixton Hill East have far lower numbers of socially rented homes, with private renting being the largest tenure (44.6% and 38.8% respectively). The population is these neighbourhoods is also less ethnically diverse (30.4% and 34.9% people of colour respectively) and there is a higher proportion of non-heterosexuals (10.18% and 10.52% respectively). This reflects the patterns described above – non-heterosexuals are co-locating in a "gaybourhood", although with many excluded from home-ownership due to gentrification, with a spatial demarcation of a more ethnically diverse population in social housing.

Sorting processes and intersectionality

As described, processes of spatial sorting of different groups are predominantly driven by housing markets and are closely linked to the incomes of households, but also public policy in the allocation of non-market housing and social housing. This means the links between identity, discrimination or exclusion based on that identity, and eventual outcomes in terms of where someone lives, and their place-identity are complex and intersectional. We can see this in our community catapult areas. A young, white gay male professional in London may find themselves renting a room in a house share in Brixton as they are priced-out of the wider London housing

market; an older Indian, Muslim low-income family may find themselves owning a home in Darnall because they were prevented from accessing social housing in Sheffield due to past racism.

Of interest to us here, however, is more how these intersectional identities are linked to the connectedness between people and communities, and whether the complexities of intersectional identities may create barriers to connectedness.

Intersectionality, Connectedness and Boundaries of Community

In terms of intersectionality, of course identity is not simply about place – place alone does not define identity. 'Identity can be built on place' alongside a 'mosaic' of sources and resources through which identity is constructed and maintained (Grey and O'Toole, 2018). In other words, the way that place impacts on identity is context specific and in order to understand how that plays out, it is important for researchers to go to that place and to collaborate with local residents to understand how notions of community are constructed and experienced. There is increasing interest among social scientists, for example, in using mobile methods, such as walking interviews to understand how people navigate place and how this shapes their sense of belonging and identifications with those particular places (Sun and Zhu, 2024). Such an approach is insightful in exploring how people tell stories about themselves and their relationships to and within geographical locations (Ryan et al, 2021; Ryan et al, 2026).

In exploring how a local sense of community is constructed and experienced intersectionally, Niskavaara, et al, 2024 apply a narrative approach: 'As narratives are central meaning-making systems for individuals and human social networks, such as families, neighbourhoods and urban communities, it is reasonable to suggest that one's identity as a community member appears in the nexus of place, social interaction, and narratives.' (p.4). A key example here is oral history narratives and how the meaning of local places, identity and a sense of community are related through stories told by older, long-term residents (Ryan, et al, 2025).

However, 'stories can maintain internalized, exclusive and even detrimental social structures, such as racism' that 'can lead to the formation of imaginaries and assumptions that make some iterations of communality more desirable than others and eventually lead to segregation and exclusion' (Niskavaara, et al, 2024 p.4). This brings us back to Cohen's symbolic construction of community and the key role of boundaries to define processing of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, going back to Massey's (1995) important observation about wider contextual structures, we can also observe how political discourse and polices, such as anti-migration approaches, can shape local racist narratives to target and exclude migrants as witnessed in the summer riots across locations in Britain in 2024.

In their research in Finland, Niskavaara, et al, 2024 noted an interesting contradiction at the heart of how community is perceived by residents in local towns. Older residents felt that community was stronger in the past than now – overlain with deep feeling of nostalgia for a golden past. This echoes the research in Spain, where age emerged as an important variable. However, at the same time, the Finnish research found that older residents were critical of new, migrant communities precisely because they appeared to be tight-knit and hence not integrating with the wider society. Hence, the value of a community can be judged differently depending on the intersectional composition of that group. As previously discussed with regard to ethnic clustering, some closely knit communities can be seen as positive, whilst others can be viewed as ghettoised and suspicious.

Thus, rather than simply infer that community exists within a specific geographical area, it is necessary to consider the relationality among its members. In this regard, using social network analysis (SNA) can be helpful in revealing the actual extent of social interactions going on among residents (Wellman, 1979). SNA can reveal the meaning of relationships, the extent of trust and the level of exchange of resources and support among members of particular networks (Ryan, 2011; 2016). Moreover, in looking beyond spatial boundaries, including virtual communities, a networks lens is especially useful in following the connections between people rather than focusing on one geographical location (Ryan, 2023).

In exploring the relationality and connections between people, especially in constructions of community, we need to consider processes of inclusion but also exclusion. Who is considered to be part of the community and who does not belong? In answering this question, we need to go beyond simplistic associations between geographic location and community. Not everyone who shares the same location will necessarily belong to the same community. This brings us back to Cohen's notion of symbolic boundaries. We need to understand what 'community' actually means to people and how it is experienced by them as a form of inclusion, identification and belonging, or otherwise. In other words: 'We seek an understanding of it by trying to capture some sense of their experience and of the meanings they attach to community' (Cohen, 1985: 38). For example, if an established geographical location, such as an urban neighbourhood or rural village is viewed as a community by its long term residents, to what extent can new-comers be accepted as members, especially if they look and behave differently? (Schneider, 2024).

Of course, as noted above, places are dynamic over time. New waves of residents including migrants and refugees, whilst encountering hostility from long term residents, can also shape their local neighbourhoods (Main and Sandoval, 2015). As a result, new symbols of community can be created such as particular kinds of shops or restaurants which can go on, over time, to shape the character of these areas. This process of migrant agency in new neighbourhoods, constructing new spaces and symbols of community is apparent in Patricia Ehrkamp's (2005) work on the emergence of Turkish neighbourhoods in Germany. Moreover, illustrating the dynamic interplay of place and identity to forge new community boundaries and symbols, the work of Main and Sandoval (2015) in California reveals how migrants from different Latin American countries can come together to carve out new expressions of shared Latino culture within a local neighbourhood.

Applying an intersectional lens allows us to explore the complex and dynamic interactions between people and places and the implications for how community is asserted, experienced and understood.

Intersectionality, diversity and community connectedness

To understand community connectedness and intersectionality a useful sociological concept is social capital. Robert Putnam (2007: 137) offered what he called 'a lean and mean' definition of social capital as 'social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness'. Following the earlier work of Coleman (1990), Putnam (2000) focuses on social capital at the local level of society, e.g. local associations, communities and neighbourhoods. From this basis, Putnam develops on the notion of 'constrict theory' arguing that increased diversity appears to reduce levels of trust and community participation: 'The more ethnically diverse the people we live around, the less we trust them' (2007: 147). He suggests that diversity leads people to withdraw from collective life 'to huddle unhappily in front of the television' (2007: 151).

This suggests a distinction between social capital based on bonding 'ties to people who are like me in some important way', and bridging 'ties to people who are unlike me in some important way' (Putnam, 2007: 143). This tendency to define 'like' and 'unlike' along ethnic lines, in particular, raises questions about the "pull-factors" that we have discussed and that people like to live near similar people – homophily. The extent to which homophilous, co-ethnic ties are necessarily a source of bonding capital, while ties to non-co-ethnics are a source of bridging capital cannot be assumed. Such narrow dichotomous constructions limit our understanding of what is actually going on within social and community networks (Geys and Murdoch, 2010; Patulny, 2015; Ryan, Erel and D'Angelo, 2015; Keskiner et al, 2021).

Adopting an intersectional lens (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Phoenix and Bauer, 2012) allows diverse aspects of identity, beyond ethnic homophily, to come to the fore, including religion, sexuality, class, gender, among others. Bourdieu's (1986) more critical conceptualization of social capital provides a particularly useful analytical tool to do this. He distinguishes three forms of capital that individuals may possess: economic, cultural and social. While economic capital refers to material assets and income, cultural capital refers to the symbolic assets that a person possesses, which may be embodied in accent and behaviour and can also be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. Social capital, on the other hand, derives from the size and type of social networks one can access and draw upon (Bourdieu, 1986).

Importantly, rather than simply focusing on local formations, such as neighbourhoods, Bourdieu offers a more sociological analysis by situating social capital within wider structural relationships of power and inequality. As Goulbourne et al (2010: 28) observe that Bourdieu conveys an understanding of social capital that considers 'factors of social class, dominance and conflict'. Hence, Bourdieu's analysis is useful to understand power dynamics and how networks may also operate as exclusionary mechanisms. For example, in his essay on forms of capital (1986), Bourdieu clearly outlines how networks can be used by elite groups to maintain their privilege. While such 'closed networks' (Coleman, 1988) may be high in trust and reciprocity, they are also very difficult for newcomers to penetrate (Bourdieu, 1986; Ryan et al, 2008; Erel and Ryan, 2019; Keskiner et al, 2022).

Within this understanding a further focus for analysing social capital is to divide it into "bonding capital" and "bridging capital". This stems from the research by Granovetter (1974) on labour markets in Boston, US. His research showed that people who had lots of "weak" ties of social capital to a diverse group of people did better in the labour market than people who had a small amount of "strong" ties to a small, un-diverse group of people. The former is "bridging" capital – weak ties to a diverse range of people that give people access to a wide range of resources (particularly knowledge).

While Granovetter's conceptual framework is useful for understanding different types of social connections, it is necessary to consider some further clarifications. As argued at length by Ryan (2011; 2016; 2023) not all weak ties are equally useful, thus we need to differentiate between horizontal and vertical weak ties. Referring to all such contacts simply as 'weak ties' confuses the different resources that these may be able to generate and transmit (Ryan, 2011). Horizontal ties connect to people of a similar social position, while vertical ties connect to people in higher social positions who have more resources at their disposal (Ryan, 2016).

Furthermore, as noted earlier in relation to Putnam's bonding and bridging, ethnic categories tend to be imposed on the strong tie/ weak tie distinction such that strong ties are defined as co-ethnics and weak ties are defined as those beyond the 'ethnic group' (e.g. Lancee and Hartung, 2012). There is a risk here of a reductive approach, such that the complexity and dynamism of networks become simplified into binary categories. Once again it is necessary to turn to the intersectional lens to explore how complex and multi-faceted aspects of identity may influence the formation of ties and the flow of resources (Ryan, 2023).

In terms of the intersection between communities-of-place and communities-of-identity, and social cohesion, social capital understood in this way has been used to suggest that the co-location of particular groups in particular places might have strong bonding ties, but not the bridging ties that might help them "get on" through connectedness and participation. It has long been recognised in the literature that such a formulation, often used in policy, elides four underlying issues. Firstly, it is often a classed (and as explored above, thus in the UK also a racialised) issue – it is working class communities, or communities of people of colour, who are seen to be in deficit, lacking bridging social capital. Secondly, this points to a key policy question – who is it who should be including whom in what communities? Thirdly, bonding capital might be immensely useful to people in their particular situation, for example a working class young person might get useful knowledge about how to access housing, social security and appropriate work opportunities within their networks in a less-advantaged neighbourhood, which more advantaged young people would not have. Finally, causation is poorly explored empirically, and is complex to unpack. For example, do advantaged people have weak ties, or do weak ties make people more advantaged? If there are negative, or positive, effects to the social capital and social connections you have, are these linked to where you live? (so-called area, or neighbourhood effects)(Matthews & Bessemer, 2015).

Spatial agglomeration of people can also be a route to greater political power through this . Most representative democracies use spatial communities as the basis for political representation. Within these spatial communities, the interests of minority groups can be subsumed or actively silenced or ignored. Creating a majority group within a geographical political subdivision can provide minority groups with access to participation in political processes. Such representation can also be less formal – just providing a greater number of voices within a spatial community to request services or policy changes. For example, a study of Tallahassee in Florida, found that the concentration of people of colour in particular neighbourhoods meant they could confound a pattern that white-majority neighbourhoods usually get a better and more rapid response to service requests to local authorities (Xu and Tang, 2020). Of course, the obverse can also be true, and an evidence synthesis by Hastings and Matthews (2013) showed how middle-class and more affluent communities can use their connectedness and co-location to ensure that public services are delivered at a higher-level and designed for their benefit.

Despite these critical insights into social capital as a concept, as many have noted (Barbalet, 2000; Evergeti and Zontini, 2006), social capital has been popular among policy-makers for decades in large part because it is regarded as something of a panacea to social problems. In Britain, for example, government policy often assumes that social capital derived from strong communities can alleviate the need for centrally funded services thus absolving the state of responsibility (Leonard, 2004). This trend was redoubled during the 14 years of austerity-driven cuts to public expenditure, particularly focused at local government in the UK from 2010. This was explicit in the "Big Society" programme in England after 2010, but also implicit across the UK in a trend towards co-production of solutions to local problems with citizens, which can be used cynically to justify the withdrawal of state support.

Conclusion

The position paper opened by highlighting that the issues we have considered are at a point of particular political polarisation. As people seemingly come to live more atomised lives, retreating to communities in online worlds, the communities we live in, and with, seem to be drifting apart. With this we are losing the connectedness and empathy to live together and with it wider socio-economic benefits. Data on spatial polarisation, as presented here, does suggest this to the case, and that the economic forces of late-capitalism and neo-liberal housing markets are accelerating these changes. A general decline in the proportion of people reporting that they volunteer

regularly suggests falling generalised reciprocity (see, for example: Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2025), which is the glue that often maintains connectedness between people (Matthews and Bessmer, 2015). Nonetheless, during the Covid Pandemic there was a noticable spike in voluteering (Baker, 2022), suggesting that people's tendency toward volunteering may fluctuate over time and in response to specific societal contexts. Moves to online connectedness, and the much-reported fracturing of communities produced by algorithms, is an even more rapid change we are struggling to grapple with. Within this context, we would suggest that much more profound, and we would argue important, empirical questions remain:

1. Does interaction across difference lead to connectedness and how does intersectionality help us understand this?

2. Are connections between different groups and communities increasing or decreasing?

3. What can public authorities, community organisations, and wider social infrastructure do to meaningfully implement the public equality duty to "promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics"?

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