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The Significance of Neighbourhood

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The neighbourhood is prominent in contemporary urban policy and research, but why should this be so? And can we be clear as to what 'the neighbourhood' is in any case? In this introductory essay to the Special Issue of *Urban Studies*, we shall attempt to shed light on these questions. In answer to his own question "Does neighbourhood still matter in a globalised world?", Forrest declares that it does, "but its degree of importance depends on who you are and where you are" (Forrest, 2000, p. 30). The complexity of the neighbourhood and its varying relevance to inhabitants are, in a way, the key to this conundrum: governments and policy-makers are neither able to control global capitalism and its effects, nor at the other end of the scale to direct or manage the fortunes of individual neighbourhoods within their jurisdictions. Neighbourhood change is proving unpredictable and resulting in ever-wider gaps in fortune and prosperity between places within single regions and countries.

There is no single, generalisable interpretation of the neighbourhood. In a slight adaptation of Suttles' (1972) schema, we might say that the neighbourhood exists at three different scales, each with its own predominant purpose or function, as shown in Table 1. However, each scale can perform each of the functions so that the demarcations presented in Table 1 represent general tendencies rather than watertight distinctions. In particular, in different urban settings, neighbourhoods may be either unable to perform their intended function or, alternatively, may be able to perform additional functions; for example, in a high-quality, high-density inner-city location, the neighbourhood may provide both a place of belonging and a landscape of wider opportunity.

The smallest unit of neighbourhood, here referred to as the 'home area', is typically defined as an area of 5–10 minutes walk from one's home. Here, we would expect the psycho-social purposes of neighbourhood to be strongest. As shown elsewhere (Kearns *et al.*, 2000), the neighbourhood, in terms of the quality of environment and perceptions of co-residents, is an important element in the derivation of psycho-social benefits from the home. In terms of Brower's (1996) outline of the 'good neighbourhood', the home area can serve several functions, most notably those of relaxation and re-creation of self; making connections with others; fostering attachment and belonging; and demonstrating or reflecting one's own values.

Key considerations in the contemporary circumstance include the following: whether

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Table 1. Scales of neighbourhood

Scale	Predominant function	Mechanism(s)
Home area	Psycho-social benefits (for example, identity; belonging)	Familiarity Community
Locality	Residential activities Social status and position	Planning Service provision Housing market
Urban district or region	Landscape of social and economic opportunities	Employment connections Leisure interests Social networks

the 'connectedness' of the modern world (Mulgan, 1998) is achieved in the neighbourhood; the neighbourhood as an arena of predictability; and the neighbourhood as a source and purveyor of status. In terms of the first of these, connectedness, we can think of the neighbourhood as something that we might create rather than take as a given. The philosopher Edward Casey, in his book *The Fate of Place* (1997), utilises Heidegger's concept of 'nearness' to argue that places are about 'dwelling in nearness' to others—'nearness' entailing face-to-face contact and a reciprocal relationship; and that this 'nearness' brings about neighbourhood. Note that neighbourhood does not bring about 'nearness'—rather, it is the other way around. In other words, sharing space does not always bring about the proximity of residence that constitutes places. The reciprocity of 'nearness' can vary for different people from regular, low-level acquaintance to strong interpersonal intimacy and commitment; both can be important to people according to their needs. Yet at the same time, we all live in 'home areas'—the question is whether we consider them to be 'home' or to have particular qualities of 'dwelling in nearness'. Cross-nationally, our knowledge of levels of attachment to neighbourhood and of patterns of neighbouring behaviour is very patchy.

The analysis of neighbourhood as a multilayered phenomenon within an urban regional context is important and highly relevant to the interrelated issues of connectedness (and the concept of the nearness of place) and status. To go back to the notion of the multilayered neighbourhood illustrated in Table 1, Casey's notion of dwelling in nearness needs to be supplemented with the knowledge that people function in different social networks, at different scales, across different times and spaces, so that they may look for different things from their home area as a result. 'Nearness' can develop not only in the home area but in other places also, depending upon where we spend our time and how the opportunities for 'nearness' arise in time and space. This, in turn, is affected by the nature of our activities and by the physical and social composition of localities—i.e. it is culturally and regionally specific. Once the urban region (the third level of neighbourhood in Table 1) is viewed as a landscape of social and economic opportunities with which some people are better engaged than others (for example, by reasons of employment, leisure activities or family connections), then the individual's expectations of the home area can be better understood: not everyone wants or needs to drink in their local pub when more attractive venues are available and accessible to them elsewhere. For some people, their personal pattern of time-geography delimits their neighbourhood across the wider urban region.

On the other hand, the urban region can also be a source of closure as well as openness. Some neighbourhoods and localities (in addition to individuals and groups) can be seen to be subject to discrimination and social exclusion as places and communities (Madanipour *et al.*, 1998; Turok *et al.*, 1999). This applies especially to the second level of neighbourhood in Table 1, the locality or sub-district, such as a public housing estate. To appreciate why this might be so, we can develop Brower's (1996) three dimensions of the neighbourhood environment —ambience, engagement and choicefulness —but in each of these there are uncertainties about the perceived virtues of urban qualities such as density, diversity and vitality and a lack of appropriate research evidence to aid our understanding. In terms of ambience, it is clear that areas of poorly maintained, monofunctional environments contribute to stigmatised neighbourhoods, but it is not clear that the recent moves, such as in the UK, back towards higher-density, multifunctional neighbourhoods (Urban Task Force, 1999) will meet the needs of more than a limited number of life-style groupings within the population.

In terms of engagement, whilst it might be obvious that an area perceived as unfriendly or associated with hostile interactions will be unpopular, the current promotion of higher levels of associational activity (chiming with Third Way politics and concerns over declining social capital) may be a long way from many people's preference for no more than casual acquaintance with their neighbours: certainly, for many British people, the old maxim that 'Good fences make good neighbours' might still hold true today. But the relationship between residential stability or turnover and levels of social engagement within the neighbourhood is one where, at least in the British case, empirical evidence is lacking. Whilst there are understandable concerns about the effects of residential 'churning' in areas of weak or low demand for housing (Power and Mumford, 1999), the alternative vision of a stable suburb can offer the prospect of a moribund neighbourhood. Policies need to be based upon a better understanding of people's residential expectations and experiences.

Finally, neighbourhoods have important attributes of choicefulness. Whilst Brower was referring to the diversity of a neighbourhood in terms of lifestyles, the crucial aspects of choice which affect the fortunes of a neighbourhood are, first, that the residents feel that they have some choice of location—they opted into the neighbourhood and can opt to remain or depart, rather than simply ending up there; and, secondly, that the residents perceive that others might also choose to live in their neighbourhood. It is when a neighbourhood is perceived to be a place where one can become 'trapped' either in a bureacratic or market allocation system, that long-term reputational problems arise.

The discrimination of place referred to earlier can have two notable effects upon the behaviour and creation of neighbourhood by residents. First, as a response to discrimination and social exclusion, residents of deprived communities often engage in a high degree of mutually supportive behaviour. Analysts and advocates of this mutuality recognise that this is most often done in order to achieve subsistence and survival rather than to achieve a step up towards integration into mainstream society (Burns and Taylor, 1998). In terms of theories of social capital, the neighbourhood for poorer people has more often served as an arena for 'bonding' social capital that enables people to 'get by', rather than as a platform for 'bridging' social capital that enables people to 'get on' (Burns *et al.*, 2001). This can be self-limiting as well as sustaining, for, in the words of Putnam

> bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves (Putnam, 2000, p. 23).

The second way in which socio-spatial exclusion can affect the neighbourhoods of deprived residential groups is in terms of its impact upon the spatial behaviour of residents, especially young people. Here, there is a research need for the simultaneous analysis

of people's use of their home area and locality, compared with their movements into the wider urban region for similar or other purposes. Thus we could assess the significance of observers' and practitioners' reports that large groups of young people are extremely territorial in their behaviour, so that their action spaces or wider neighbourhoods have very limited horizons. We do not know whether the restricted neighbourhoods of many young people from deprived communities are due to the urban problem of fear of and anxiety concerning the unknown (Bannister and Fyfe, 2001), or due to a preference for the comforting benefits of one's familiar neighbourhood, or simply the result of a sense of 'knowing one's place'.

The familiarity that can be constitutive of the neighbourhood is apparent when we consider the neighbourhood in terms of encounter and narrative. If cities are 'landscapes of marginal encounter' (Gornick 1996), then neighbourhoods (especially the first and second levels in Table 1—the home area and the locality) ought to be arenas of predictable encounter (which for many people would also mean comfortable and secure encounters) where, to use Beauregard's (1997) terminology, people know the narrative rules of encounter and have the appropriate discursive strategies easily to negotiate public space: they feel 'at home'. Residents in their own neighbourhoods can read encounters correctly and can respond appropriately without having to resort to assertiveness and inventiveness since lower levels of discursive and social competence will suffice.

This notion of the neighbourhood as the familiar and predictable is well illustrated in contemporary fiction, the epitome being the US suburb: hence the humdrum music with a steady beat sounding over the opening credits to the hit film *American Beauty* as the main character played by Kevin Spacey guides us around 'his world; his neighbourhood' where everything appears to be in its place. The slightly threatening undercurrent to the musical score is prescient of the fact that he, Spacey, is about to step out of line in this ordered world and behave in unpredictable ways. The same themes are evident in the prize-winning, best-selling novel *A Crime in the Neighbourhood* (Berne, 1997) which describes a community's response to a child murder in its midst in the 1970s as seen through the eyes of a young girl living in an east-coast American city. The theme of familiarity as the foundation of neighbourhood is illustrated by the girl's mother who advocates more "little get togethers" because "As I always say, in a neighbourhood, everybody should know everybody" (Berne, 1997, p. 163). Another mother in the area expresses her shock and revulsion at the crime because for her it disrupts the essence of the neighbourhood, namely its predictability:

> This is a nice neighbourhood … Everyone I know around here has the same values. That's why we live here, because you know what to expect. Things like this just aren't supposed to happen here (Berne, 1997, p. 120).

In an increasingly competitive and uncertain world in which people seek to establish themselves either alongside or over and above others, the neighbourhood can play an important role in people's personal and social identity and social position, but with highly varying outcomes. Whilst Goffman (1963) was discussing the role of social information and visibility in the identification of those who are stigmatised ('the discreditable'), Packard (1959) identified the home as the emerging means of signifying status and culture. Today, it could be argued that neighbourhoods (as much if not more so than homes themselves) are competitive and inherently comparative entities which are visible and convey social information. One can either influence one's social position or have it determined for one, according to the type of neighbourhood one inhabits and creates. The neighbourhood is both a source of opportunity and constraint. On the one hand, some neighbourhoods suffer negative historical reputations that regeneration efforts cannot shift (Dean and Hastings, 2000). In these areas, a vicious circle of exclusion can arise as "bonding social capital, by creating strong

in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism" (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), exacerbating the situation further. On the other hand, for some aspiring groups with sufficient resources, the neighbourhood can become the focal point around which co-ordinated action to achieve a self-conscious class habitus through processes of gentrification is undertaken, so that 'distinction' can be maintained "in the struggles over status in social space" (Bridge, 2001, p. 207). The neighbourhood can then be the hero or villain of the piece.

Many of the themes outlined in this brief synopsis of an approach to understanding the urban neighbourhood are expounded further by contributors to this special issue. Galster's understanding of the neighbourhood is as a complex commodity consisting of a bundle of spatially based attributes incorporating content, locational and behavioural aspects. In a marketised situation, neighbourhoods compete with one another and have mutual interdependencies and impacts upon one another. However, selecting and residing in neighbourhoods are a risky business because market mechanisms cannot cope very easily with the unique characteristics of the complex neighbourhood.

Galster also highlights the fact that changes in neighbourhoods are externally induced and non-linear and, as we have already noted, disparities between neighbourhoods in many regions and cities have grown in recent years as these changes unfold (Lee *et al.*, 1995). The response of many European governments has been to institute a range of area-based initiatives to improve the fortunes of socially excluded neighbourhoods, although assessments conclude that mainstream programmes will in the end be more effective (Parkinson, 1998). Wallace explains how the British government's recent National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal has a greater chance of success than past initiatives—partly because it acknowledges the importance of mainstream services in deprived areas, but also because it focuses on economic revival, utilises more resources than ever before and has a longer time-horizon of up to 20 years. Meegan and Mitchell, analysing a European-funded initiative on Merseyside, illustrate how the spatial targeting of such initiatives is both technical and political at one and the same time. The definition of areas of intervention needs to accommodate the pre-existence of neighbourhoods founded upon place-oriented social processes, and this is an on-going rather than a one-off requirement. This case study illustrates the dilemmas of neighbourhood bounding discussed by Galster.

A central plank of the British government's strategy to renew deprived areas is to improve the way such places are governed through neighbourhood management structures and a variety of means of community empowerment (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Several papers in this Special Issue address issues of local governance within a neighbourhood context. Based on research into neighbourhoods in a number of European cities, Allen and Cars highlight the shortcoming that local governance structures have given insufficient thought to the demands of multiculturalism; rather than simply relying upon the political norms of the dominant cultural group, new, adaptive political institutions are required to support multicultural neighbourhood governance. Although there is some research which has identified the advantages that ethnic minority communities can have for neighbourhood regeneration and governance (Silburn *et al.*, 1999; Forrest and Kearns, 1999), it would be fair to say that both the functioning and governance of multicultural neighbourhoods have been largely ignored to date by the urban research and policy agendas. However, this will become a significant gap in our knowledge and thinking if trends in housing markets result, as they might, in reduced rates of ethnic segregation in our cities in the future (van Kempen and Sule Ozuekren, 1998).

Docherty, Goodlad and Paddison present the results of a study of civic culture in four neighbourhoods in Scottish cities. They show that differences in civic culture between similar neighbourhoods can be explained partly by the political opportunity structure

which reform of institutions and policies can produce, but also that people's trust in each other and in political actors and institutions, and their willingness to engage in co-operative action with each other are influenced by neighbourhood change and the confidence that this generates. This finding suggests that governance is indeed multilevel (Kearns and Paddison, 2000) and that attempts to modernise local government (Hambleton, 2000) and reinvigorate national politics in the UK will partly depend for their success upon whether people perceive their own neighbourhoods to have positive trajectories: extremely low electoral turnouts in deprived neighbourhoods are perhaps predominantly a reflection of disaffection with local circumstances and the pessimism this generates. In a system of multilevel governance, the neighbourhood forms the foundation upon which the other levels of governance must depend.

Continuing the governance theme, Purdue examines the operation of community leaders in neighbourhood regeneration partnerships in the UK. He describes how such leaders need to accumulate social capital of two kinds to be effective in their roles—namely, within-neighbourhood communal social capital and without-neighbourhood collaborative social capital. Comparing peripheral estates with inner-city neighbourhoods, Purdue shows that this dual requirement presents the community leader with different challenges in different neighbourhood contexts, affecting both their own performance and the possibilities for smooth leadership succession. Like Allen and Cars, Purdue also argues that institutions, in this case regeneration partnerships, need to adapt to changes in circumstances within neighbourhoods during the course of an initiative, in this case to changes in community organisations and conflicts that may arise between different circuits of social capital.

Two other papers in the Special Issue also deal with the relationships between neighbourhood and social capital. Forrest and Kearns attempt to elucidate the concepts of social cohesion and social capital as they might apply within the neighbourhood context, breaking down each concept into researchable domains. A major constraint upon our understanding, however, is the fact that urban research overwhelmingly focuses upon deprived neighbourhoods, with very few national or comparative findings to serve as a yardstick for the evaluation of empirical findings pertaining to social relations and resources within neighbourhoods. Another limitation they identify is a failure to explore the role of the neighbourhood in the accumulation and deployment of different forms of capital.

This second shortcoming is one which Butler and Robson overcome in their study of the middle-class transformation of three inner-London localities. They examine how middle-class groups adopt specific strategies to maximise their gains through the differential and interrelated deployment of social, economic and cultural capital, given the resources and circumstances of the particular locality in which they are residentially located. Butler and Robson's study has implications for both our understanding of how people can utilise their neighbourhood for social and economic purposes and for the concept of gentrification.

The Special Issue concludes with three papers concerned with the area effects or the impacts of neighbourhoods—i.e. in what ways can one's place of residence affect individual and social outcomes? Buck outlines a range of models of neighbourhood effects (including, for example, an epidemic model and a competition model) each involving different mechanisms of disadvantage. The problem he highlights, which will affect the ability of neighbourhood policy to deal effectively with such mechanisms, is that in practice it may be difficult to discriminate between them. Echoing our multilevel view of the neighbourhood, Buck argues that different neighbourhood effect processes will operate at different spatial scales. After searching for relationships between area characteristics and social exclusion outcomes utilising a British longitudinal panel survey data-set, Buck begins to illustrate how the cumulative impacts, positive and negative, of

neighbourhood contextual effects might be studied over the life-course using a capital (human, social, cultural and economic) acquisition framework.

Atkinson and Kintrea adopt a different approach to identifying neighbourhood effects. After also setting out a typology of neighbourhood effects including mechanisms and primary and secondary outcomes, they pursue a comparative analysis of survey data collected in two pairs of deprived and non-deprived areas from two cities in the same region of the UK. They find evidence to support the hypothesis of area effects in some respects but not others, with the strongest identified effects being upon the incidence of stigmatisation and employment and health outcomes. In the final paper, Ellaway, Macintyre and Kearns also investigate neighbourhood effects upon health, but using a wider range of health measures than in the Atkinson and Kintrea study. This study points to various pathways between area of residence and health outcomes and suggests that policies for healthy neighbourhoods must focus on both the social and the environmental character of neighbourhoods (such as perceived cohesion, levels of neighbouring, sense of community, attraction to the neighbourhood and the incidence of neighbourhood problems). The study also shows that policies must take into account the fact that the neighbourhood can impact not only upon physical and longer-term health outcomes such as mortality and long-term illness, but also upon mental health, the incidence of common symptoms and self-perceived health.

From the papers in this Special Issue, therefore, we can see that the neighbourhood is significant in a number of ways, such as being: an important component of a competitive social and economic world; a reservoir of resources into which we can 'dip' in pursuing our lives; an influence upon our lifestyle and life-outcomes; a 'shaper' of who we are, both as defined by ourselves and by others; and an important arena for public policy intervention. There is much here for future urban research to pursue, for the significance of neighbourhood for different social groups varies between nations and regions, with the impacts of the neighbourhood being often unpredictable and non-linear. But in all this, we must remember to consider the neighbourhood in context. Our social, cultural and economic horizons are expanding through increased mobility and forces of globalisation: it is indeed the case, as Lyndon Johnson hoped, that "the world will not narrow into a neighbourhood".

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