

Connected Lives Project

October 2005 to December 2008

About the project

This project has explored the interactions between social networks, neighbourhoods and communities; how social networks are created and maintained over time, across space and in different contexts. How are networks, neighbourhoods, and communities built, maintained, and dissembled? How do different networks interact in place and what are the implications of these interactions? How should we understand a contested term like community? Are these networks, neighbourhoods, and communities important for health and well-being?

This is a qualitatively-driven mixed-method investigation of networks, neighbourhoods, and communities in a researcher-defined inner-city area characterised by heterogeneity of population including c.58.6% in full time education, a large population of young professionals under the age of 30 years; c.24.7% black and ethnic minority population, and wide inequalities between the richest and poorest groups living in the area.



Our methods

- Participatory social mapping - asking people to represent their networks, neighbourhoods, and communities.
- Walking interviews - asking people to “take us for a walk” around their

neighbourhood and the places important to them.

- Day diaries - recording communications during a day followed by an interview to tease out the unrecorded everyday events and to understand how typical the day was.
- Key informant tours - a walk around the area with local experts who had particular stories to tell about the area.
- Key informant interviews - meeting with local experts and key workers to understand the area, service delivery, particular places, and events better.
- Historical data collection - gaining insights into change and sameness in the area.
- Walkabouts - a regular walk along a fixed route by the research team using visual methods, which, in conjunction with the other methods used in the research, allowed us to tell particular stories about places in the research site.
- Secondary quantitative data collection including publicly accessible census, health, socio-economic, and demographic data at various aggregations down to super-output areas (about 120 households).
- Ethnographic immersion including the writing of extensive field diaries.





Findings and highlights

- Network analysis imposes narrow boundaries around the networks to be investigated, invariably using quantitative methods like questionnaires. Qualitatively-driven approaches (particularly participatory social mapping) reveal rich accounts of the building, maintaining, dissembling, and interactions on a network.
- Combining qualitative methods help us to gain a fuller story, though we can never know the whole story about a network because they are dynamic and ever changing.
- One significant challenge in researching people's networks, neighbourhoods, and communities concerns getting at every-day interactions. Methods need to explicitly probe beyond the extraordinary and the unusual. Strategies of triangulation, through using secondary data, walkarounds, key-informants, and ethnographic immersion are important adjuncts to the face-to-face methods.
- Place is important in everyday life. The walking interviews provoke memories of events, activities, and attachment. They stimulate stories of aspiration and ontological fears and reveal boundaries hidden to the researcher.

- The reports of the death of geographically-situated communities are greatly exaggerated. Localities remain important in people's lives. Some people's networks remain very local-centric, particularly among deprived groups excluded from transport and communication technologies. Others have communities that span the globe. Communities may be reinforced daily or over considerably longer periods through a wide range of different media. However, meeting face-to-face remains the most important way in which ties are maintained.
- Communities reinforce particular identities among particular groups of people. Inequalities are perpetuated through community. These inequalities can not be adequately understood without consideration of dimensions of class, power, and relationships to other communities to achieve basic needs.

Selected dissemination highlights

- A policy workshop with local operational and strategic policy makers in the public and third sectors
- A 'community life' exhibition held in the field-site for local residents and workers to triangulate and disseminate our findings.

See the Connected Lives Research and Publications pages of our website for outputs and publications.

Research Team

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