

# Neighbourhood identity: effects of time, location and social class

Findings  
Informing change

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This study details the construction of neighbourhood identity, its relationship to social class and status, and its resilience to change, through examining three neighbourhoods within the city of Stirling.

## Key points

- Neighbourhood identity was established at a very early stage of each neighbourhood's history, and proved resilient to change. Such identities were underpinned by social class and status – which was sometimes based on historic male employment patterns – as well as physical characteristics, including housing style, type and tenure.
- There was evidence of internal differentiation in each neighbourhood, often through minute differences between households, streets and, in the past, male occupations.
- External perceptions of a neighbourhood's identity were often stronger and more of a caricature than those held by people who lived there.
- Family networks, friends and neighbours were given differing degrees of importance in people's notions of what created a sense of community. However, their presence helped sustain a sense of community and people's own sense of involvement within that community.
- Community was constructed through familiar, everyday social interactions within various localised settings, which were often enough to give people a powerful sense of attachment and belonging. In each neighbourhood, respondents interviewed for the study suggested notions of community were declining in response to ever-increasing individualism.
- Many respondents saw women as playing the core role in sustaining community, through their family and child-rearing roles in local neighbourhoods. With greater numbers of women now working, this role in binding communities was felt to have declined.

## The research

A cross-disciplinary study by Douglas Robertson (housing), James Smyth (history) and Ian McIntosh (sociology), at the University of Stirling.

# Background

## This study explores the ways in which neighbourhood identity is formed and considers the implications for policies that seek to improve and enhance neighbourhoods and communities.

Part of the motivation for the study was to explore why regeneration policies often fail in their objectives and how far the reputations of housing estates – ‘good’ and ‘bad’ – persist or change over time. The study focused on how such reputations are established and understood by those from within and outside particular places and what implications this has for the identities of neighbourhoods and the individuals who live in them.

To explore these issues, the study concentrated on three neighbourhoods in the city of Stirling in central Scotland – Raploch, Riverside and Randolph Road – which were chosen for their distinct socio-economic profiles and differing relative identities. Each was constructed in the 1920s and 1930s as a ‘planned community’. Raploch was selected as being the ‘poorer’ working class neighbourhood, Riverside the ‘wealthier’ working class one, and Randolph Road middle class and ‘aspiring’. The study also explored what it meant to ‘come fae’ (come from) each of these neighbourhoods as a way of understanding issues of belonging and attachment to particular places.

## Neighbourhood identity

The identity of each of the three neighbourhoods was established at a very early stage of its history. These area identities were underpinned by social class and status and were very resilient to change, with Raploch being the most striking example. Given this resilience, the initial ambitions – both explicitly stated and implicitly understood – set in planning a new neighbourhood are critical. This has implications for the future of ‘mixed communities’ and for the planning and design of new housing developments.

Neighbourhood identity was often associated with social class and status, constructed from previous male employment patterns:

- mining and labouring – Raploch;
- skilled trades – Riverside;
- professions – Randolph Road.

It is still social class that fixes the dominant social identity of a neighbourhood, and although historic

employment patterns have altered, these still influence perceptions of the neighbourhood.

Housing type, style and tenure were also found to be core in defining a neighbourhood’s social identity. Housing and its specific locality is a reflection of status, and now with the growth of the private housing market, it is also important to the accumulation of personal wealth. Of particular interest to this study was how the ‘Right to Buy’ scheme effectively maintained, and then over time exaggerated, the social segregation between what had been originally constructed as two large council estates, Riverside and Raploch. Council housing was almost entirely sold off in Riverside and this led to it becoming dominated by owner occupiers, and thus gaining an ‘aspirant’ label, whereas in Raploch such sales were less common and there was no re-labelling. Rather the continuation of a needs-based allocations policy also contributed to its poorer status.

Religion did not emerge as a key marker of identity and difference, as it once did, but there was a marked difference in the denominations of residents in each of the three areas – Raploch had a significantly higher Catholic population, while the other two neighbourhoods were Church of Scotland. There were, however, still remnants of anti-Catholic sentiments which acted as an identifier of difference between Raploch and the other two areas.

## Social positioning of the three neighbourhoods

The relative social positions of Raploch, Riverside and Randolph Road within Stirling remained stable and underwent little change. This can be expressed through the language of wealth and social class:

- Raploch has always been labelled ‘poor’, ‘rough’ and ‘working class’;
- Riverside has been seen as ‘respectable’ and now, with the advent of ‘Right to Buy’, increasingly ‘middle class’ and ‘aspirational’;
- Randolph Road was always ‘aspirational’ and very much ‘middle class’.

These identities had persisted since their original construction, if not before, given the locality in which the housing was built. Raploch’s descriptor of being ‘rough’ and ‘coarse’ dates back 550 years and as such is both striking and shocking. This finding has implications for the planning of future renewal projects, as well as the creation and subsequent management of new ‘mixed’ housing developments.

However it is important not to overemphasise historical continuities and the homogeneity of each area.

There was also evidence of long-standing internal differentiation within each neighbourhood, in terms of often minute differences between households, streets and occupations. Each had its own internal dynamic and residents often had their own stories explaining changes and social gradations within the areas. This was particularly evident in the case of Raploch and Riverside, where new housing developments had created new social divides.

It was also evident that external perceptions of a neighbourhood's identity were stronger and more of a caricature than those held by people who lived in the particular neighbourhood. Residents perceived greater internal social diversity than the homogeneity portrayed by 'outsiders'.

## Construction of community

In each of the three different neighbourhoods, family networks, friends and neighbours were accorded varying degrees of importance in constructing and sustaining community. However, there was general recognition that, as a whole, their presence helped maintain a sense of community and people's own sense of place attachment and involvement in that community.

It seems that what was understood as 'community' was frequently rooted and constructed in the realm of the often mundane and everyday interactions between people in localised settings – chatting at the Post Office or hairdressers, and the conversations related to the school, the bowling club and such like. These were often enough to give people a strong sense of community, attachment and belonging to their neighbourhood. This sense of community was also found to be very fragile and could be lost or gained with very subtle changes to how residents perceived any changes to their surroundings. A good example of this was in Riverside where recent new developments, both private and housing association, were perceived to have brought an influx of new and different residents, some of whom were of another social class.

The core roles played by women in both home and family were seen by respondents as critical to sustaining community, through facilitating community activities and through generating a sense of community. Many respondents perceived a decline of such community networking with the increasing numbers of working women, and said their feeling of community had been diminished by the absence of women in the neighbourhood during the day, undertaking domestic

and family chores, playing with their children and being out on the street.

“...it's not men that make communities, it's the women. ... [now] Women are going from their house to the cars and never being part of the community and arrive back when everybody is in the house.”

Woman, 46, Riverside

“We used to play games out, although we were grown you know, we were married and had children but we used to play games out on the street.”

Woman, 92, Randolph Road

The role played by older people in relation to construction of community was also important, but for slightly different reasons. They often provided a degree of historic continuity for a neighbourhood, given their ability to connect directly with the past history of the place. At the same time, because their social world was focused at the local scale, they also played a similar role to mothers of young children in being part of the local presence that gave people a sense of community.

“But you know the reason for that is, we were retired and everybody else was working. So they're working during the day, we're out, and when they come back what do they want to do? They want to sit down have a meal, maybe watch the television. They're not going to run about socialising!”

Man, 85, Riverside.

## Demise of community

In each neighbourhood, respondents detailed what they saw as a decline of community in response to increasing individualism. What this reveals is another social trend: a move to a more individualised or atomised family existence. The evidence provided by this study is of a continuous decline in what people understand to be community. Given current policy moves to try and engender greater community, this finding does represent a significant challenge to such policy thinking.

“... everybody knew everybody, you could leave yer door open and just say, your mother would say 'go and see if Mrs Binton's needing any messages'. And at summertime we would sit at the foot of the castle steps and Mr Hardy, he had his violin an' everybody would sing. ... I'm down here and I only know about two people now.”

Woman, 86, Raploch

The increased use of cars was another key factor explaining why such processes were taking place. Not only did cars have a major impact on the loss of a past 'street' culture, they were also seen to contribute to the increasing anonymity of community life – the distances people could now travel to shop, socialise or work had, in the opinion of most respondents, reduced and constrained everyday opportunities for social interaction within the local neighbourhood. The car was also seen to take away public space, denying the opportunity for children to play in the street, which had been common in all neighbourhoods in years gone by.

Finally, there is an apparent irony in all this work: the most aspirational neighbourhood was found to have no obvious community focus or sense of community among its residents and this was clearly perceived by outsiders. As people get richer, they move into a more individualised or atomised setting: places where community is largely absent. The social networks and connections of these residents link to a much wider social world, not merely the local neighbourhood. Elements of this pattern were evident in Riverside, and to a much lesser extent in Raploch. Yet despite all this, it still appears that, although society is more individualised and atomised than in the past, people still hanker after some notion of community and belonging.

## Conclusion

The study illustrates the value of adopting a sociologically and historically informed understanding of neighbourhood dynamics, helping to give a clear understanding of how distinct social identities can impact upon the life experiences of people who reside within neighbourhoods. Crucially, such identities can act against the stated ambitions of area renewal projects, thus ensuring they bring about limited improvements.

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## Further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood identity: People, time and place** by Douglas Robertson, James Smyth and Ian McIntosh, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Further information is available from:

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The authors were able to gain a sense of how such identities were originally created and subsequently maintained over time. How communities are planned, then established, sets a physical and social template which this study has shown to have a very long and sustained impact on neighbourhood identity. This has a bearing for current policy work on creating and sustaining 'mixed communities'.

Pre-existing attitudes about the social make-up of each of these neighbourhoods determined the social ambitions set for the housing constructed and, therefore, what sort of people were considered appropriate for each of these localities. There was a pre-existing social ordering of Stirling neighbourhoods, and these new developments were bound into that.

## About the study

The study examined three neighbourhoods in Stirling, Scotland – Riverside, Raploch and Randolph Road. These areas were chosen as they each had different and long-standing socio-economic profiles and social identities. The research was multidisciplinary, reflecting the disciplines of each of the main researchers, namely Housing Policy (Douglas Robertson), History (James Smyth) and Sociology (Ian McIntosh). The study also adopted a historical approach, which involved blending detailed archival research with in-depth qualitative interviewing. In this way, the study was able to look at the way in which neighbourhood identities were established, before detailing their stability and resilience over time. In total, 38 individuals were interviewed, resulting in over 80 hours of digitally recorded material.

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