ACCOUNTS OF COMMUNITY IN AN URBAN CONTEXT:  
THE PROBLEM OF RECIPROcity

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Abstract

In recent years, research on psycho-social factors in inequalities in health has moved on from an interest in individual social networks to attempts to quantify the impact of the local social environment on individual health. This has brought to the fore the contested concept of social capital and the possibilities of community development as a tool for health promotion. Less debate, however, has focused on the equally contested nature of ‘community’ and the extent to which the same locality may be differently experienced and described by people at different life stages and in different circumstances. This paper draws on preliminary findings from qualitative research carried out in an urban ward in North Kent. This is part of a wider study comparing an urban and a rural locality. The 45 interviewees were largely drawn from three groups: young people without permanent employment, lone parents, and people with a chronic disabling health condition. In the paper I discuss the issue of reciprocity as an illustration of the way in which gender, life situation, and notions of personal and social identity interact in narrative accounts of ostensibly the same community. Reciprocity emerges from these data as a more complex and problematic form of interaction than seems to be acknowledged in much of the policy literature around social capital or neighbourhood renewal.

Introduction
This paper presents some preliminary ideas from my PhD research; a qualitative study in two localities (one urban, the other rural) exploring how people in different situations experience and perceive what is ostensibly the same place. This research is still very much in progress since the foot and mouth epidemic delayed access to my chosen rural locality. What I wish to do here is present some emerging thoughts about one aspect of social capital, namely reciprocity, and would very much value comments on these ideas. The study is designed to eventually allow for consideration of urban-rural dimensions of community although I will concentrate here on data from the urban context. I plan to complete the fieldwork by December 2001 and submit my thesis in autumn 2002.

**Theoretical background**

The theoretical starting-point for the research is the concept of social capital particularly as it is being applied in studies of inequalities in health. My assumption is that most people in the audience are familiar with recent debates around the concept and specifically the tension between, on the one hand, social capital as conceptualised by Putnam and others as a community level resource characterised by high levels of civic engagement and norms of trust and reciprocity, and on the other hand as described by Bourdieu as an individual level resource in which the social capital accessible to an individual depends on the quantity and quality of the social resources of others to whom he/she is linked by networks or groups.

The following quotations – which are frequently cited in the literature - illustrate this fundamental difference in approach:

> “features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.” (Putnam 1995: 67)

> “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital...” (Bourdieu 1986: 248-9)

A further quote, below, from a study of social capital, income inequality and mortality by Kawachi *et al* in 1997 highlights a crucial challenge for theoretical models of social capital; what to do conceptually with social exclusion.

> “The aspect of social capital that makes it a public good is its property of nonexcludability: that is, its benefits are available to all living within a particular community, and access to it cannot be restricted. Hence, a socially isolated individual could potentially benefit from living in a neighbourhood rich in social capital... Measurement of social capital at the ecological level captures something
distinct, over and above the measurement of individual social connections.”
(Kawachi et al 1997: 1496)

For Kawachi and colleagues, following Putnam, social capital is a public good from which no-one is excluded so that even those who are socially isolated derive benefit from living in a community rich in civic engagement and norms of co-operation, trust and reciprocity. Within Bourdieu’s idea of social capital, the opposite occurs. Social capital is unevenly distributed between individuals in keeping with and mirroring the unequal distribution of other forms of capital. The processes of social inclusion and exclusion far from being irrelevant to social capital or ameliorated by the existence of generalised social capital are instead central to the creation and maintenance of such inequality in accessed social resources.

**A conceptual model for the research**

The limitations of relying on individual level accounts of a collective level entity such as community are well known. Yet this uncertain relationship (depicted in Figure 1 below) is common to the survey-based data on which most quantitative analyses of social capital have depended to date.

*Figure 1  The relationship assumed in survey-based measurements of social capital*

My study aims to explore how an individual’s experiences and perceptions of the place where they live – as a physical space and social environment, both with temporal dimensions – are mitigated by aspects of their personal situation. These might include age, gender, life stage, domestic situation, health, employment situation, economic resources, how they came to live in that neighbourhood, length of residence, location of kin, relations with kin, and so on. Such factors are likely to influence the individual’s experiences and perceptions of the locality and the account given in the artificial situation of a research interview. This complexity is represented pictorially in Figure 2.
A striking feature of the data I have generated to date is how narrative descriptions of a neighbourhood combine factual commentary with reflections on the person’s own social identity as played out in the local social environment. Additionally, most accounts contain normative themes addressing not only what a place is like but how communities should be (Cornwell 1984, Cohen 1985). These three dimensions of narratives of community are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 2  The role of a personal context in accounts of a locality

Figure 3  Dimensions of community contained in narrative accounts
In response to questions such as “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” or “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or are they mostly looking out for themselves?” - supposed measures of trust and reciprocity derived from the US General Social Surveys and used in analyses of links between social capital and crime rates (Wilkinson et al 1998, Kawachi et al 1999) – an interviewee may be addressing any or all of the dimensions illustrated in Figure 3.

Research methods

My study is based in two localities - one urban, the other rural - in north Kent. The urban locality corresponds approximately to the size of an electoral ward. The rural locality comprises of a single village and its surrounding area. Both localities have experienced significant economic change over the past 20 years particularly in the nature of local employment with the closure of major industrial employers in both places and a shift towards the service sector and self-employment (predominantly in the building trades). The significance of agriculture as a source of seasonal employment for residents in the rural locality has also declined.

Both the urban and rural localities have relatively high scores for various indicators of deprivation and are perceived by residents as having unfavourable reputations with outsiders. Interviewees frequently and spontaneously address the supposed reputation of their locality and tend to do so in one of two ways. The first type of response is to play down the reputation often by identifying other areas nearby that really are that bad or worse. In this way the interviewee distances the place from the reputation. A second approach is to relate graphic examples of local incidents – usually involving violence – whilst distancing themselves from the kinds of local people responsible for such problems.

A similar process seems to occur in relation to the boundaries of the urban locality. Interviewees living in the east or centre of the ward tend to describe the boundary as falling much closer to themselves than those living in social housing (‘estate A’) on the western edge of the locality. Estate A has a negative reputation but is perceived by its residents as being preferable to the nearby ‘estate B’ located in a neighbouring ward. One woman who lives in the centre of the ward put forward a particularly small version of the locality that excluded both estates. When I queried this by mentioning that residents of estate A had described the locality boundary as falling between the two estates, her response was “Well they would, wouldn’t they?” That response could be interpreted in at least two ways. The first as a recognition of the interaction between place and identity. The reputation of a place impinges on the identity of those who live there and vice versa. Geographical boundaries thus have symbolic significance. Secondly the phrase “well they would, wouldn’t they?” could refer to my naivety as an outsider. In other words, ‘they said that to you because they thought you wouldn’t know any better’. This is a
reminder of important methodological issues connected with the reliance in a study of a community on data from observations and in-depth interviews. However, these are outside the scope of this paper.

In both the rural and urban localities, interviewees express opposition to proposals to build new housing on small vacant sites. Thus, despite dissimilarities in size of local population and density of housing, there is a shared perception among at least some people living in the two places that their community has reached a maximum capacity and there would be detrimental consequences of any expansion to the housing stock. Similarly, residents in the urban locality and the village complain about local social housing being treated as a ‘dumping ground’ for people who are difficult to house elsewhere and who will bring ‘social problems’ with them or contribute little to local affairs since they do not want to live there. Such perceptions of insider and outsider are present throughout much of the data. Yet these distinctions are inconsistent since, as will be discussed below, interviewees frequently present themselves as the outsider when talking about reciprocity or trust. Again, descriptions of a place seem to involve reflective assessments of the status of self within that environment.

The main source of data is in-depth interviews (n will equal approximately 90 on completion; 45 from each locality). Although semi-structured to start with, the interviews have become increasingly less structured as the research has progressed in order to facilitate the emergence of narrative forms of account. In order to explore the issue of social capital as a ‘public good’, the selection of interviewees is geared towards people in situations likely to be associated with potential social isolation and a requirement for locally based support. The focus is on three specific situations: lone parenting, youth unemployment, and living with a chronic disabling illness. The impact of gender is also being explored.

**Place and Self**

As already discussed, place and self are frequently entwined in accounts of the locality.

The following quotation comes from a single mother aged 22 living in the urban locality with two children aged under 4 years. For this speaker, living in a low income area was experienced as personally degrading:

“X is a poor area to live in. Really poor. It’s degrading, it makes you feel so degraded to live in a place like this and go out every day and it’s just the same as sitting in doors cos there’s nothing for you when you get out”

She presented her own lack of opportunities and the fact of having had children young rather than developing a career as the inevitable consequences of having moved to the locality when she was three. If she had grown up somewhere else, she felt that her life might have turned out differently.
Similarly a young man aged 18 hoped to have moved out of the area before having a family of his own. Despite expressing the belief that the area had improved, he regarded it as inevitable that the neighbourhood would turn someone into either a victim or a bully:

“I wouldn’t want to bring my kids up here cos you either get beat or you beat”

A close association between place and self was also evident in the rarer more positive accounts of the neighbourhood. An 84 year old man, Bill, quoted below was initially very non-committal in response to any questions about the neighbourhood. However, in the process of relating details of a fall and subsequent stay in residential care, he seemed to reach a point of recognition of the personal significance of the locality. This occurs at the ‘you know’ point of the following quotation although the impact was most evident in non-verbal clues lost in transcription. Bill did indeed move back to his former home.

“They couldn’t do much for me they said so they put me in a home what they call them residential care. I was in there for twelve months. It was nice nice in there there was food and they keep walking over tending to you. It was alright but I wanted to get home you know back to me roots.” [Bill]

**Community spirit**

Recent discussions of social capital in relation to health and social policy have tended to focus on civic participation as the key measure (Putnam 2000, Hall 1999). The opposite is true in these data. Involvement in community associations or activities is rare among those I have interviewed and such pursuits do not seem to be regarded by non-participants as important for ‘community life’. In contrast, the few interviewed who are or have been engaged in organised activities aimed at tackling a community problem (e.g. neighbourhood watch) express a different view of the significance of participation and are critical of the perceived apathy of the majority who do not get involved.

Trust and reciprocity, however, are spontaneously mentioned by almost all interviewees as critical aspects of ‘community’. Two images of the levels of trust and mutual support found in communities in the past (and by implication a desirable feature absent from contemporary society) occur in several accounts. These images are: being able to leave the door unlocked when out and frequent contact with neighbours. In addition to being located in the past, these idealised images of community are sometimes located in another and distant place (present or past), typically the north of England or in a village setting. The following passage from Jane, a woman in her late 40s originally from Stoke who had been a single parent and is severely disabled by arthritis, illustrates these themes:

“Families aren’t what they used to be. You see in Stoke I suppose they can’t do even now in Stoke like we used to. We always used to have the door the back door open the front door. And the rent man knew where to get his money if you weren’t in. The coal man knew where his money was. You know the milkman’s money
would be under the book, bottle of milk on the table. It was the same in me nan’s.
The insurance man would come in and he’d know what drawer it was in the
sideboard the money and then... You trusted people didn’t you? But now I mean
you really can’t trust anybody can you to come into your home. You know you’ve
got to be very very careful.” [Jane]

Jane returns to the same theme a little later in the interview:

“But communities are changing. People aren’t as um friendly I suppose as what
people used to be. I mean everybody used to be in everybody’s houses didn’t they?
And if anybody was sort of ill or that they’d all rally round wouldn’t they? I mean
the whole lot not just a couple of neighbours everybody would be there but not
now. It seems as if everybody’s got their own little lives and they just centre on
that.” [Jane]

In the second quotation above, Jane emphasises the generalised nature of support in the
recounted past – everyone rallies round to help, not just one or two immediate
neighbours. This view of reciprocity is, however, rare in the interviews analysed to date.
A far more common expectation of neighbourhoods – often disappointed in accounts of
the urban locality – is that of localised trust and help from close neighbours. This is
illustrated in the following excerpt from a mother, Jackie, aged 33. Ostensibly talking in
similar terms to Jane about mutual help and being able to leave the door open, Jackie is in
fact describing shared action by immediate neighbours against a risk of theft that is real
and near at hand. She is presenting a narrowly defined ‘us’ acting against an unknown
‘them’. This is very different from the society Jane describes in which everyone can be
trusted and essentially there is no ‘them’.

“There isn’t a community here. I’ve never ever foun d a community where you can
pop next door and borrow a pint of milk or leave your door open and go down to
the corner shop and somebody else will watch your front door for you.” [Jackie]

Whilst distrust of strangers is almost universal in the accounts, several interviewees
express regret that this is how they react (i.e. they are not suspicious by nature) and
acknowledge that the actual risk is probably less than their actions imply. As expressed
by a single mother in the following quote, the problem is not so much that everyone is
unworthy of trust but the difficulty of identifying the minority who might do you or your
children harm. Trust and distrust can no longer be assigned along obvious categories
such as neighbour and stranger and the nature of the risk you might be exposing yourself
to is also uncertain.

“You are suspicious of absolutely everyone especially living on your own... If
anyone helps you you think ‘oh what are they after?’ You know, instead of them
genuinely helping you out. Shame cos nine times out of ten they’ve done it to help
you and don’t want nothing.”
The multi-dimensional nature of trust

There is a tendency in quantitative empirical research on social capital to approach trust and reciprocity as single-dimensional concepts. What is clear from interviewees is that they understand trust as multi-dimensional and not simply confined to trusting others not to take material possessions or cause physical harm. For some female interviewees, trust includes emotional dimensions as illustrated in the following quote from the 22 year old single mother quoted previously on page 6:

“You can’t trust anybody round here, not at all. You dunno what people are like what they’re in to. A lot of people are two-faced. They’ll say one thing and they mean another and they go back and it all goes round.”

Her reaction to this perceived threat of harm from being let down emotionally or from critical gossip seemed to be to isolate herself from all but a very few friends.

Respecting privacy was also considered an important part of being a good neighbour, especially in the accounts of men. The following example is from a widower in his early twenties whose wife had died soon after the birth of their second child now aged two. An interesting feature of this account is the assumption in the final phrase that everyone shares his preference for privacy over involvement:

“I mean you see them to say hallo to but you don’t go round their houses. I think we all do [keep ourselves to ourselves] it’s the way we all like it I think....

This interviewee had grown up in another urban area of Kent but moved to live with his wife in the East End of London when they got married. As described in the extract below, this interviewee had found the experience of close involved networks based around kin – of the kind presented in several accounts from other interviewees as characterising the idealised community of the past – strange and overwhelming:

“It’s different. Family wise we tend to class family as mum, dad, sisters whereas they class the family as mum, dad, granddad, uncles, aunts cousins, second cousins and they all live together, live in each other’s houses. It’s like you see on the telly everyone knows each other... I couldn’t get on with it over there that’s why I moved back over. I’d come home from work sort of nine o’clock at night and the house’d be full of cousins or whatever but they didn’t know anything different.”

For this man, the lack of privacy was more significant than the positive gains from such closeness:

“my wife came out of the doctor’s surgery and I think the whole town knew she was pregnant before I did.”
Following his wife’s death, the man had brought the two children then aged 2 and a baby to live back in Kent but several miles from his childhood home where his own parents still lived. He had thus made a deliberate choice to remove the children and himself from both his own and his wife’s families; perhaps the two most obvious sources of childcare. This physical distance was compounded by the fact that neither set of parents drove. He had tailored his working hours (as a self-employed builder) to create a position of self-sufficiency with childcare such that contact with family, although regular, was on his own terms. There was a hint in his account that close kinship networks of the kind experienced in his wife’s family would tend to take over the bringing up of children. When I asked whether there was a tendency for family to tell you how to bring up children, his somewhat stark response was “someone else brings the children up”. As a father, and specifically a lone father, this would have left him marginalised in relation to his own children. It serves as a general reminder of the potentially prescriptive and oppressive nature of close involved networks and people’s recognition of this disadvantage.

Barriers to neighbourliness

As well as noting the decline of trust and mutual support as features of community life, interviewees spontaneously offer explanations for this occurrence. Mobility is offered most often as a reason why neighbourliness is no longer once it once was:

“I’ve got quite good neighbours so like I say I know a lot of them by sight but a lot of them I knew by name have sort of moved and other people have moved in you know so a lot of them I don’t know.”

“I don’t know many of the others because they’ve moved in and out since I’ve been here forty seven years. They’ve come and go. But me next door neighbour they’ve been here since I’ve been here.”

“Especially as quite a lot of new ones have moved into the road and very often they don’t want to know. They wouldn’t offer if they saw you struggling they wouldn’t offer go and post a letter for you that sort of thing. They might if you actually asked them but...”

These accounts suggest that it is not simply a question of mobility but that there is a point in time when the speaker got to know their neighbours – perhaps when they first moved into that road or was first at home during the day with young children – but as those neighbours moved out and new people came to live in the road the getting-to-know process was not repeated. The reasons for this are unclear and it is difficult to disentangle changes in the speaker’s life stage from wider societal changes. Established residents may have less motivation to talk to strangers compared with when they first moved in particularly as their life situation and associated interests become increasingly dissimilar from those of newcomers who are predominantly young couples. Alternatively, changes
at a more general societal level in the nature of work, transport, leisure pursuits, and the symbolic significance of the home may be turning neighbourhoods from a prime setting for the enactment of social relations into something of a social ‘no man’s land’.

The last of the three quotes on page 10 - from a woman in her 50s with disabling back problems - makes a distinction, emphasised by several interviewees, between unprompted offers of help and willingness to help if asked. This will be discussed further in the next section.

In addition to the effects of mobility on reducing neighbourliness, a small number of interviewees – as in the following extract from a man in his mid-50s - blame the media and police for encouraging suspicion. Being viewed with suspicion is experienced as being as damaging to reciprocity as feeling uncertain who can be trusted.

“The other day I tried to help a lady with the buggy off the bus and she had a baby and that she you know she’s very ‘who are you?’ sort of thing. They’re aware in case I might be a mugger or something. It’s that aware because police are telling you make sure your handbags, be aware of when you go out and I think more people are sort of in that way you know ‘is he trustworthy?’ I think it’s that as well. I don’t know.”

Keeping a score

As already noted, interviewees tend to experience and view reciprocity not as a generalised form of social interaction but as a series of direct one-to-one exchanges. This carries with it strong moral overtones. Several of the women I spoke to were anxious to emphasise that they were more than keeping their side of the bargain. As one young mother put it:

“I feel I would be prepared to do anything...”

The following account from a woman (Georgia) looking back on ten years as a single mother places the same stress on how she, in contrast to others, would do anything to help a neighbour even it was personally inconvenient:

“...if any of these neighbours that I’ve got here say to me ‘oh can you look after my child?’ if I’ve got something definite you know really important to do I would ‘yeah no problem’. I am that type of person, I’ll go round ‘yeah no problem’. But if you asked them it’s... one of them is ‘I’ll have to ask my husband’ so that comes into it as well, whether they can have another child in the house. And then it’s ‘oh well you know I’m a bit...’ and it’s all about keeping their homes tidy as well...”

[Georgia]
Later in the same interview, Georgia describes a problem faced by single parents in maintaining equality of exchange with friends who have partners or family support with childcare. Her consciousness that even friends may be keeping ‘little mental scoreboards’ of help given and received inhibits her from asking for help:

“I think even out of my friends people do tend if you use them too often it’s that they are being used... It’s the ‘what can you give me if I’m going to give to you?’ type situation and I’m sure they’ve got little mental scoreboards as well... it did used to hurt me but I’ve got the stage now where I don’t expect to go out if suddenly something comes up. I just see whether or not I can get a child minder. But moral support has always just been from my friends. I feel I’m lucky I’ve found some really good ones.” [Georgia]

As in an earlier quotation, a distinction is made between being in the position of choosing to accept or decline offered help, and having to ask for help and thereby risk rejection or incur a feeling of debt. It can be argued that offered help would emerge more naturally in a context of generalised reciprocity whilst localised reciprocity based on one-to-one exchanges places at a disadvantage those with most need of assistance. In other words, current norms of reciprocity – and possibly social capital itself - reinforce rather than resolve imbalances between need of and access to social support.

There is an interesting moment at the end of this excerpt when Georgia becomes aware that she has perhaps been more critical of her friends than she intended. She immediately emphasises the constancy of the moral support they provide and how fortunate she has been to find such qualities. Such changes in direction are a reminder of the self-conscious nature of an account given in the somewhat artificial context of an interview however informal.

**Them and me**

In describing themselves in relation to different social environments, the narratives of people interviewed in the urban locality tend to take one of two forms. The first, described here, can be summarised as a ‘them and me’ narrative. The second, described in the following section, concerns ‘them and us’.

The following passage is from a single mother describing a mother and toddler group that she had tried joining but found too intimidating:

“It just wasn’t me. The people there aren’t my sort of... they’re off the estate and I’m not an estate person. I’ve been brought up around sort of houses not on estates so I don’t really get on with people from estates. It’s like being back at school you get groups. If you wear make-up you’re with them and then you get your scanky mums they’re just like really drab and they don’t put make-up on. I’m a scanky mum [laughs]... So the scanky mums sit one end and the ones that can be
bothered sit the other end. And if you go in one day with make up you don’t know which end to sit at. It’s all about clothes and I’m not like that.”

As in accounts by other female interviewees, the experience of being excluded by groups of women is compared with similar experiences of rejection and exclusion earlier in life, most notably at school. Such experiences provide a repertoire of past moments when self image or identity was at odds with that of the collective or dominant others. Thus current social exclusion occurs within a personal biography as well as social setting. There is, however, also an element of progression in the speaker having now reached an awareness of self-identity that involves, even requires, the rejection of criteria set by others.

A similar process of recognising how a context might create a social identity that was at odds with an established personal identity is evident in the following quotation from another single mother speaking about her first and only visit to the same mother and toddler group. She emphasises that her status as a voiceless outsider was one created by the group rather than her usual response to strangers. However, as with the other mother, she chose to not return to the group rather than risk a hard-won and perhaps fragile sense of self:

“No-one bothered speaking to me. And they were so busy in their little groups that I couldn’t start talking to them. They knew all about each other and planning what they were going to do after play group. I felt like a total outsider. Normally I can talk to anybody but you weren’t always given the opportunity to... You just felt like you’d walked into.. like you were an alien and you had descended on them. They all stared but no-one bothered to speak.”

Similar descriptions of feeling isolated or out of place in a context dominated by others occur in interviews with older people when talking about feeling intimidated by groups of children. As with the single mothers, the most common response is to avoid such encounters. This positioning of a solitary ‘me’ in a context dominated by ‘them’ seems less common in the accounts of young men living in the urban locality except in relation to fear of or experiences of violence directed against outsiders. The following quotation again emphasises a temporal dimension to social exclusion, this time among those perpetuating exclusion in the extreme form of violence:

“An associate of our’s got beaten up down this road and people were like look out of their doors and close their door because people don’t care because they used to do it and their dads would have done it.”

What these different experiences have in common is that they point to the impossibility of generalised trust, support or even tolerance existing within a social environment so differentiated along lines of similarity and difference.
Them and us

In contrast to narratives where the speaker describes feeling completely alone and/or different in a hostile social environment, several interviewees describe places or groups where they feel at home. An important element in these is a perception of similarity of experience with others present. The following description of a Sure Start initiative parent and toddlers group emphasises that a shared identity of ‘having a problem’ creates an environment for mutual support rather than being viewed as stigmatising. In part this may be because, as this mother explains, the ‘them’ are perceived as also having problems but not being prepared to admit it. There is also an element of exclusiveness in being able to keep away from ‘people you don’t want to be with’:

“There’s not many people from directly where you are which is a nice thing because you can keep yourself away from people you don’t want to be with. But it’s nice to hear along there it’s parents do have problems whereas along there [other group] they cover their problems up.... Each of us knows we’ve got a problem with either our children or our lives and we go along there to make it seem a little bit better and no-one judges you see.”

A similar recognition of the significance of perceived similarity as a precondition for trust and reciprocity occurs in the following account by a young woman living in a managed housing project for young people unable to live at home for various reasons. This young woman, in common with other residents, hated the locality but loved living in the housing project:

“I think cos we all come from the same background from similar circumstances we can relate to each other... say Tania’s upset now I’d go over to talk to her. If she didn’t want to talk I’d know to leave her because I feel that way times I’ve felt that way”

As with the multi-dimensional nature of trust and reciprocity, interviewees had a sophisticated understanding of the potential for shared identity and supportive action to take socially negative forms. This most often occurred in references to violence as in the following quotations:

“It’s very neighbourhood watch if you know what I mean. If you can get on the right side of people, if you can get on the right side of the hard nuts you’ve got your back covered.”

“I’ve only seen a couple of one on ones but usually it’s all against one or all against all... say the bloke who’s got a problem with another geezer takes a smack at this other geezer his friends are gonna come in and then it starts to get big and then he’s got a grudge against him his mates gonna do them. It gets bigger and bigger.”
Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this paper seeks to present some preliminary ideas concerning the nature of reciprocity and trust as experienced and described by residents of an urban locality. Fieldwork is still underway and analysis is at a very early stage. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to at least suggest two propositions. The first is the complex and layered way in which people relate to and describe the place where they live; a complexity not really reflected in current largely quantitative approaches to measuring social capital. The second and from a social policy standpoint more concerning suggestion is the impossibility of generalised reciprocity and trust in the types of social environment described by the residents of this locality. Even a more limited understanding of reciprocity in the form of localised and direct exchanges of help seems to place at a disadvantage those perhaps in most need of support. Forms of social environment that are experienced as ameliorating isolation and exclusion do so by establishing a collective identity based partly on a recognition of shared disadvantage but also defined as being distinctive from hostile others. All this is some way from the idealised forms of community presented in many of the narratives.

References


