



## Neighbourliness and Privacy on a Low Income Estate

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### Abstract

This paper critically examines theories which suggest relationships between neighbours have diminished in importance in people's day-to-day lives because of macroscopic and microscopic forces such as: greater social mobility, the growth of individualism and an ever increasing number of women entering into paid employment (see Young, 1999 and Putnam, 2000). In this paper I provide new empirical evidence that challenges theories of neighbourly disassociation. By drawing on fieldwork data collected on a low income housing estate in the South of England, I am able to illustrate that: 1) intimate and strong relationships existed between neighbours that were moulded out of, and strengthened by, the need for shared solidarities in the face of financial, emotional and social hardship brought about by personal circumstances; 2) residents understood and accepted there was a 'trade-off' between neighbourly assistance and the issue of privacy; 3) contrary to current British and American literature (see Putnam, 2000; Garland, 2001) women were still actively undertaking the role of social facilitators on the estate; 4) community and neighbourly bonds were reinforced through trivial and traumatic events such as children's parties to the death of a loved one; 5) and residents' interest in one another engendered a sense of security for women in the public environment.

**Keywords:** *Neighbourliness; Low Income Estate; Social Capital; Conflict*

### Introduction

**1.1** There has been considerable debate over the status of community, and whether it has survived in a climate of individualism. Many scholars and social commentators have claimed that the growth of individualism has resulted in a fragmented and isolated society where no one looks out for, or assists one another. For example, Young (1999:14) argued that increased relative deprivation, economic vulnerability, the added pressure of personal insecurity, and, the growth in individualism, all seriously affected 'community' living. Similarly, Bottoms and Wiles (1996:62) concluded that 'As we enter the new millennium Britain is arguably a more fractured society than at any point since the Second World War'.<sup>1</sup>

**1.2** Alongside theories of community demise there have been misgivings as to 'whether or not neighbouring of any form is still prominent in social networks' (Logan and Spitze, 1994:454). As far back as 1938, Wirth argued that the neighbourhood was declining in 'importance in people's social lives' (cited in Logan and Spitze, 1994:453). Such arguments are still common in contemporary literature with scholars such as Beck (1992:97) suggesting organised neighbourhoods have been shattered. Although popular in political rhetoric and theoretical ideas about shifts in society, empirical research has undermined these claims. For example, in 1960 Stacey identified neighbours as one of the 'most important sources of friendship and help' to both young mothers and the elderly, (1960:104) and 3 decades later Devine's (1992:91) research in Luton concluded that 'neighbours are often an important source of intimate relations and mutual support' (see also Crow *et al*, 2002:131).

### Methodology

**2.1** The empirical research, on which this article is based, was undertaken on a post-war, satellite estate,

over an 11 month period from May 2002 until April 2003. It forms part of my PhD thesis and because the sensitive nature of my work, which focused on issues connected with pseudo- paedophilia, I have given the estate and its adjoining city fictitious names.

**2.2** The participant observational phase of my research enabled me to witness the everyday, mundane aspects of life on the estate and the challenges that residents and their families faced emotionally, financially, socially and practically. In total, I undertook over one hundred and seventy two hours of observational work which brought me into contact with 45 residents who lived on the estate. The bulk of this time was spent in the Square Room, a council funded, family orientated, network centre, where I attended different groups. For example, every Monday for five months, I went to the babies and toddlers class in the morning and a parents' support group in the afternoon. Occasionally, on a Friday, I attended a singing class which was useful for further developing my relationships with some of the women on the estate. I also attended the Residents Association, and Community and Police Enforcement group (CAPE) which was attended by a local councillor, residents, and police officers and was intended to tackle crime and anti-social problems on the estate on a neighbourhood basis.

**2.3** I combined participant observation with interviews to draw out the 'complex relationships between attitudes and behaviour' that may otherwise have been missed (Hammersley, 1997). This enabled me to 'get under the skin of what is happening and try to understand the human and social processes at work' (Power, 1999:23). Of the 35 formal interviews I conducted, fifteen were with men and twenty with women. Interviewees were a mixture of established residents and newcomers. Established residents had lived on the estate most, if not all of their lives, with multiple generations of their family living around them, whilst newcomers had lived on the estate for less than 6 years.

**2.4** My interview sample was broadly opportunistic. I sought interviews with men and women of different age groups, who were either active or inactive in the community. I partly relied on the process of snowballing, whereby one interviewee would give me the contact details of others on the estate whom they believed would be willing to speak with me. On average I spent two and half hours with each of the women, normally in their homes, although not all of this was formal interview time. I spent over an hour interviewing the men, two of these interviews took place in their homes with the rest (unintentionally) taking place in a public setting. I also interviewed professionals connected to agencies on the estate such as social services and housing. All but one of my interviews were recorded on a mini-disk player and then transcribed before uploading onto NUDI\*ST 6. The collection of primary data was supported by secondary sources including content analysis of national and local newspapers and statistical information gained mainly from the UK census.

## **'Stanley'**

**3.1** Solmyre council started constructing Stanley in 1946 to alleviate a chronic housing shortage resulting from displaced people brought about by the Second World War, and the city's slum clearance programme. 'Stanley' was a stigmatized, marooned estate that was home to some 14,000 residents in 2001, of whom 51% were female and 49% male (Census, 2001). Stanley was not an aesthetically unpleasant environment; there were plenty of green spaces and the housing stock, made up mainly of terraced houses and some maisonettes, was well maintained. Residents were predominantly white, with only 2% of the population recorded as belonging to a minority ethnic group. A high number of residents required assistance from state agencies. In 2001 for example, 4.3% of Stanley's residents were unemployed (1% higher than the national average for England and Wales), and, of this group, 28% were classed as long-term unemployed. 11 % of the population were retired, 10% were lone parents with dependent children, and 6.2% were permanently sick or disabled. 41% of adults aged 16-74 had no formal qualifications, a figure 11% higher than the national average (Census information Stanley, neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk).

**3.2** During the 1980s, the Conservative government's 'Right to Buy' policy allowed council tenants to purchase their council homes at a considerable discount (Forrest and Murie, 1988). The 'Right to Buy' policy significantly changed the housing composition of Stanley from a predominantly local authority estate to mixed tenure: a combination of owner-occupied, local authority and housing association. The 2001 census showed that 55% of homes were owner-occupied (although at the time of the research the local housing manager, the MP and a local councillor claimed owner-occupiers comprised at least 70% of the estate); 30% of the households still rented their homes from the council (a figure still higher than the national average); 6.3% of households rented from the local housing association; and the remaining 8.7% lived in private rented accommodation.

**3.3** The estate itself was geographically separated from the more affluent suburbs that surrounded it by natural and man-made barriers. This geographic isolation affected the residents psychologically. Over the years, they developed a conviction that they were treated relatively poorly in comparison with the rest of the city. For example, residents referred to a motorway that was built through the middle of Stanley in the late 1960s as well as a refuse tip that, until a few years before, bordered the estate.

**3.4** In common with many mass-built, local authority satellite estates, where planners and architects failed to take into account the social and practical needs of residents (White, 1946; Power, 1999), Stanley had poor facilities and transport links to other parts of the city. As Teri, a lone parent in her early twenties said: 'It costs 50p to get the bus to the bottom [of the estate]. You can buy a bus pass that costs £10.50 a week and sometimes trying to afford that [the bus pass] is hard. When I have got one of those bus passes, I am never in doors I make my use out of it'.

## **Family Ties**

**4.1** Perren *et al* (2004:967) argued that most people 'no longer live in the same neighbourhood as their

families, their work colleagues or their friends. Consequently the links between individuals and their neighbours may have become attenuated'. With reference to families, this was not the case in Stanley where family and kin networks were well established and enduring, serving to provide stability for residents. These networks were one of the most striking aspects of Stanley's social structure and it was not unusual to find three generations of one family living in close proximity to one another:

Living in Stanley is not everybody's cup of tea, people come and go, people stay here because of family connections. One of the things I found especially in this location, a lot of families stay here. There is one family that hit the national press a couple of years ago that has over 300 hundred relatives living in the area (laugh) uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces - you name it (laugh) (Richard)

**4.2** During my fieldwork, I quickly became aware how important these networks were, not only to individual families, but the community as a whole, because large family networks helped strengthen community and neighbourly bonds. For example, of the 35 interviews I carried out, 14 of these were with established residents and the majority this group had extensive family and kinship ties across the estate. As a female resident in her mid-forties said:

My mum and dad have always lived here so that is how I came to live here. They lived in White Street first, then they lived in Church Street for four years. There is nine of us, seven sisters and one brother. I am married with four children, they are all married and there is only one of them that has got no children. My mum's got twenty-nine grandchildren and five great grand children. My sister lives at the back of my garden. My other sister lives in Lea Road, the other one lives with me mum, the other one lives down Lesco, my brother lives in Leeds, one sister in Roxburgh and the other over the hill in Widdley, but other than that we all live round this way (Nancy).

**4.3** Another female resident in her early 30s said:

I have got my mum, me dad, my brother and cousins living on the estate. My Nan did used to live across the road but she died. And loads of cousins really, I have a cousin that lives up there with all her kids, cousins up the top of Rigby [a 2 minute walk away], an uncle that lives along this road as well. I had a cousin that lived up David Street just up there (Jan)

**4.4** Stanley's dense social configuration was not accidental. The local authority had tried to house Stanley families together, but state housing shortages meant that multi-generational housing was no longer possible. As one local councillor explained: 'Although I would try and keep it as generations of local people, those days are gone, especially in view of the waiting list and housing demand. It is escalating upwards now with the selling-off of all the houses and it takes a long time before one comes empty' (Sam).

**4.5** Alongside family networks in Stanley, there were also entrenched social networks based on friendship and mutual associations that had developed over decades. Networks were facilitated through 'the associations of a lifetime in common' (Young and Willmott, 1957:105) and reinforced by daily events such as taking the children to school (see Cohen, 1982:75). For a significant proportion of people on the estate, childhood friends, teenage boyfriends/girlfriends and family friends all shared very similar working class backgrounds. Everyone knew everyone else, if not on first name terms, at least to smile at or nod to. Although much has changed on the estate since the 1950s, for example a number of 'families had come and gone', new houses had been built on the peripheral of the estate and other local landmarks, such the local public house, had closed down however, this did not distract from the fact that residents who live in the same street for any length of time "cannot help getting to know people, whom they see every day, talk to and hear about in endless conversation" (Young and Willmott, 1957:105; see also Dennis *et al*, 1969; Klein, 1965). This idea was supported by two residents, Irene for example, said: 'I know literally all my neighbours up my Close.' Whilst John said: 'I live in flats I know all my neighbours and I get on with them extremely well. There are 6 flats in a block I know them all well. I know others too in the other blocks'. (John)

### **The Estate for Newcomers**

**5.1** Community researchers have shown that newcomers can often feel intimidated or overwhelmed by others' family and social connections within close knit communities (Stacey, 1960; Elias and Scotson, 1965; Gans, 1967; Merry, 1981). As Crow *et al* suggested 'the insider/outsider distinction exists in all communities and societies, between those who belong, who are part of 'us' and those who may be experienced as foreign or alien' simply because it is common for residents to make distinctions and judgements about who 'fits in' and who does not (Crow *et al*, 2001:30 citing Billington *et al*, 1998:171). In Stanley, 7 out of 13 newcomers whom I interviewed, claimed that when they first moved to the estate they felt isolated and experienced an overwhelming sense of loneliness: 'I must admit for the first year or so, I mean we did keep ourselves to ourselves pretty much really, but the first year or so I didn't really have any real contact with, you know, no friends or such, anything like and that was like really sad' (Ruth, married mother of two in her early forties). Another resident in his mid 40s said: 'I was quite lonely at home and did not know anyone in Stanley. I took my kids to school and said 'hello' to a few people outside, and you talked to a few mums and dads but there were not many. It was pretty lonely.'

**5.2** Many of Stanley's newest residents had no real choice about where they were housed as they were often single parents, homeless or ex-prisoners and it quickly became apparent that some newcomers found it more difficult than others to 'fit in' and mix with more established residents. This resulted in some newcomers only mixing with other newcomers, or just not mixing at all.

**5.3** Newcomers who did not seek social interaction with the rest of the neighbourhood did so because they preferred to spend time on their own, arguing that this made for a more peaceful life and less neighbourhood conflict. These findings are common in community literature and have been documented by many scholars (see Bulmer, 1986; Foster, 1999; Crow *et al*, 2002). One of my interviewees, a 21 year old single parent called Tessa, had a few on the estate. She had no one to help her with child care or even socialise with over a coffee. She was at home all day, every day, looking after her young son. Tessa had moved from the city to Stanley two years previously to escape the confines of her social networks and family. One of her only links to the outside world was her estranged partner who had continually pressed her to break off ties with the only person she met up with on the estate. Tessa claimed that she was not interested in developing or maintaining any neighbourly or friendly relationships on the estate and would go to her old neighbourhood for companionship:

I have got lovely neighbours. I have an old couple next door, he is neighbourhood watch. Next door they keep themselves to themselves I know them but not chat-wise. They always say 'hello' and are always polite. Her other half has given me a lift to the shop once or twice. I have a few friends down town so I normally go and visit them there, so if there is any shit or trouble it stays down there it does not come to my doorstep. I keep myself to myself ...Nobody knows me. I pass the same old people on the street and recognise faces, but I get no trouble from no one.

**5.4** Tessa claimed to be lonely but was happy living on the estate 'I love it around here it is so quiet. There is no trouble.' Tessa was untroubled by her lack of interaction with others on the estate, especially her neighbours whom she had lived next to for over a year. She saw the fact that they were not intrusive and interfering as a positive aspect of where she lived.

**5.5** There were also established residents who claimed to interact infrequently like Marvin, who was in his late 50's. He said: 'I am a loner and I just wanted to be left alone' However, Marvin's actions contradicted his 'expressed and practiced norms' (see Bulmer, 1986:50) because he was secretary of the Residents Association, a member of the Community and Police Enforcement group. I also witnessed Marvin frequently visiting his neighbour across the street for something to eat and a chat.

**5.6** Tessa and Marvin's experiences echo the arguments of numerous writers on community (Young and Willmott, 1957:147; Bulmer, 1986:66) where some newcomers (and established residents alike) said 'a good neighbour' was one that kept 'themselves to themselves'. But, in doing so, they were cut off from social networks and benefits that neighbourliness brought.

**5.7** Ethnographic research often highlights nuances and contradictions within a community setting and whilst Tessa chose to isolate herself, other newcomers seemed to find support and comfort from interaction with other mothers and children of the neighbourhood. Although they were concerned about issues regarding privacy on the estate this was negated when they considered the cost-benefits of social interaction between one another. As Sally a lone mother of two in her mid-twenties said: 'I use to live next door to people [in her old neighbourhood] I did not really know. People were very private there but up here it is very different, everyone is in your business but it is nice the way we all stick together'. Another lone mother of three in her thirties said:

I know all the children around here. One little one chapped [knocked] my door and said 'here's a card for you'. That is because I let him wash my car as he was saving up to buy a special Christmas present for his mum - everyone knew this in the street. Where I used to live I did not know the children that lived down my road, they didn't mix. It's good to live on an estate but not in other ways when you don't want all the neighbours knowing everything about you (Jordan).

**5.8** To illustrate how friendly their neighbours in Stanley were, many newcomers would compare new neighbours to old: 'It is more like a village really. You always know someone that lives somewhere. I probably got more people to say hello to here than I did all the time growing up in my old street.' (Mary, who was in her early twenties) Another resident in her late thirties said:

I do find that the people up here are a lot more friendlier, you know and it doesn't bother me, like I work evenings, and it doesn't bother me walking home at night on my own. I feel safe enough, whereas if it was down, where we were before, there was no way I'd go out to work in evenings and come home on my own.

**5.9** In Stanley knowing your neighbours and interacting with them seemed to engender a sense of security that some did not have when living elsewhere. As Merry (1981:151) argued "It appears that notions of danger are related to whom one knows and whom one does not know: they are a function of the shape and boundaries of social networks".

## **Social Capital and the Importance of Neighbours**

**6.1** Living in the same locale engenders regular contact between neighbours, especially women, who have often been viewed as 'neighbourhood builders' and it has been well documented that women are 'more avid social capitalists than men' (Putnam, 2000:94 see also Devine 1992). However, some social commentators have suggested that the expansion of the welfare state, rising affluence (Perren *et al*, 2004) and restructuring of employment markets with increased numbers of women entering the workplace have eased the financial burden of daily living but had a negative impact on women's role as social facilitators (Garland, 2001:77-82; Putnam, 2000:194). As a result there has been 'declining social connectedness' (Putnam, 2000:203). However, as I shall illustrate below, this was certainly not the case Stanley because

there was social connectedness and many women *were still* embracing the role of social facilitator.

**6.2** The traditional source of everyday assistance and help has always been regarded as the duty of close family members (Roberts, 1986:242, cited in Crow and Allan, 1994:42; Logan and Spitze, 1994:454; Bulmer, 1986). As Giddens (1990:101) explained 'Kinspeople can usually be relied upon to meet a range of obligations more or less regardless of whether they feel personally sympathetic towards the specific individual'. Family assistance was evident in many ways on Stanley, and unsurprisingly it centred around child care responsibilities i.e. grandparents looking after their children's children whilst they went to work, and an aunty that helped with the childminding chores of her niece's children when she needed to go to the hospital.

**6.3** But, for a number of my interviewees, neighbourhood and friendship ties were the only sources of support they could call upon in their day-to-day lives and I found that there were several explanations for their need to develop 'alternative webs of support' (Dominguez and Watkins, 2003:120). Firstly, the 2001 census figures for England and Wales reported that one in ten households in contemporary Britain are headed by lone parents, and 'more than nine out of ten' of these are headed by a lone female (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001>). In Stanley for example, the 2001 census recorded 10% of households headed by lone parents, most of whom were women. (Stanley Neighbourhood statistics). This affected the tapestry of social capital on the estate in that partners and spouses, who have been viewed as the 'most common source of help', could no longer be relied upon for 'mundane' daily forms of mutual aid and assistance (Wellman, 1979:122; see also Bulmer, 1986:50; Logan and Spitze, 1994:470). Van Every (1999:179) observed, whilst many women can call on their husbands or partners to help with housework and child caring duties, this is not an option for the lone mother. Secondly, some Stanley parents attributed their need to create other support networks to family conflict, which meant they were unable to depend on or utilise family connections to help with child care and other work and family commitments that might traditionally have been done by grandmothers or another family member (Dominguez and Watkins, 2003:113). For example, Audrey had a turbulent relationship with her mother, which was further strained when she was six months pregnant with her first child. After an argument, her mother threw her out of the family home and then waged a campaign of intimidation against her (the mother and her partner threw bricks through the windows of Audrey's temporary accommodation). Another resident, Eleanor, was also unable to rely on family networks because her mother had died after a long illness and her relationship with her father had become difficult some years before when he became involved with another woman whilst still married to her mother. Thirdly, others developed links and relied on those living around them because they had no kin living close by, and it was impractical and expensive to travel long distances on public transport to receive mundane forms of assistance.

**6.4** An alternative source of assistance (other than friends) was also given by neighbours on the estate. I observed the principal forms of 'positive neighbouring' outlined by Bulmer (1986:29) taking place in Stanley including: friendliness – acquaintance (casual greeting), participation in individual or family events (weddings and funerals), participation in collective events (street parties), and, helpfulness - watch and ward (keeping an eye on each other's houses), and routine, recurring help for example, babysitting, taking a neighbour's child to school. It would also be possible to apply the classification of five types of provisions and support suggested by Wellman and Wortley (1990:560) to neighbourhood relations in Stanley: emotional aid, small services (lending and borrowing household items), large services (child day care), financial aid and companionship.

**6.5** For example: At Christmas time, Belinda had planned to take out a loan of £50 from a company called Provident in order to buy some extra presents for her children. People with difficulties in securing other types of loans, because of their past credit history or who were not in full time employment, could apply for loans from this company either in cash or gift vouchers. This method of money lending was attractive to people living on very low incomes such as single parents, the unemployed and the elderly (who do not want to resort to illegal money lenders) as they were able to pay very small amounts back such as £2 or £3 each week. However, these loans were calculated at very high rates of interest and someone borrowing £50 could end up paying back £68 over the period of the loan. Wellman and Wortley (1990:574) observed in their study that parents were most likely to give financial aid. However, in this instance it was Belinda's friend's partner who dropped in one day whilst I was there to give her a loan of £50 so that she would not have to pay back inflated rates of interest through the Provident system. To my knowledge Belinda was not asked to pay interest on this money or give anything else in return - all that was asked for was full payment when she had the money.

**6.6** It was not simply financial help that was provided. In another case a resident did some gardening for another neighbour, a recently estranged mother of two, in return for her babysitting his two children whilst he and his wife went out. Another resident helped out his wife's friend, a lone parent with a child of her own and two foster children, to dispose of an old sofa and other pieces of household furniture that had been lying outside her back door for many months. In return the recipient of assistance had offered to buy some beers and cook lunch. There were also exchanges in child care where mothers would take turns collecting their friends and neighbours' children from school. There were also offers of clothes to friends and neighbours whose children had grown out of them (see Pahl, 1984).

**6.7** In these cases favours were reciprocated or 'credited' over a short period of time. However, not all forms of assistance had an immediate redemption period or obvious motives for assistance as this interviewee, a lone parent of two, explained:

My other next door neighbour [Sam] lives with his girlfriend, he is in his 60's and it was Jack's [her son's] birthday last month and I was going to the farmhouse for his party. I got in the car, I was taking the next door neighbour's kids as well, and it [the car] did not start. I needed to be there in 20 minutes, all the way down the Eastern Road and with all those road

works. If I call a taxi I am going to be really late and every one will be sat there waiting for me. I went to [Sam] my neighbour and asked if he had 'any jump leads', and he said 'take my car'. He just let me take his car. I offered him money and petrol but he would not take it. (Reba)

**6.8** Although tangible services are examples of aid and assistance of emotional and social benefits also derived from neighbours and friends. There was no real shutting-out the outside world and living in small family units for, in Stanley, often neighbours became friends or acquaintances and would interact with one another in each other's homes.

**6.9** Different points during the family life cycle can influence how much or how little interaction a person has with their neighbour. For example Devine (1992) found that women tend to become more involved in neighbouring when they were raising a family. My empirical data supported Devine's claims, but I also found that in Stanley one group in particular, lone mothers, relied heavily on their neighbours and friends for assistance and emotional support because they had no partner to depend on. It appeared that not all families in Stanley were 'self-sufficient' in that they were unable to pay for goods and services and were as a result more dependent on others to assist them (Coleman, 1988:102; Bulmer, 1986).

### **Reinforcing Neighbourly Bonds**

< **7.1** Events like those described above were not only characterised by assistance and aid they were also symbolic acts which brought people together in times of need.

**7.2** In Stanley, residents characterised their sense of community through events involving mutual assistance. These varied from the trivial to the traumatic. However, every event revealed significant issues about their perceptions of community and neighbourliness and how this was reinforced. Jane explained:

I would say that if, like, when the chips are down everyone pulls together, definitely. You know they [other residents] are there - you may not see someone for ages and then something could happen and then they're on your doorstep. They all [neighbours] tend to pull together when there's some sort of drama going on.

**7.3** Bulmer (1986:23) suggests 'A caring environment ... may be felt to exist but not revealed until a particular situation of need calls it into play and neighbourly help is mobilised'. The death of a relative, a partner or friend also evoked neighbourliness for many newcomers and established residents alike, as this was seen as a time when friends and neighbours rallied around. Small gestures were remembered and people had peace of mind, knowing that others were at hand to help out, which took the pressure off having to undertake routine tasks, such as collecting children from school, or cooking dinner. It was a reaction centred on people coming together to aid, help and offer support, driven by care and a desire to ease the burden, but also the realisation that they could find themselves in such a position of need in the future.

**7.4** The death of a loved one was also used by Stanley residents to illustrate how community and neighbourliness existed on the estate. As Sid explained: 'We look out for each other. When someone dies, they come round with a collection box for the funeral.'

**7.5** Another resident said:

When my sister died, they was good, like good friends, they'd see to the kids and that for me. Offered me help, like 'phone me any time, day or night, and sent sympathy cards. And don't forget my mum had a heart attack at the funeral [believed to have been brought about by the stress of her daughter's death]. I did not have to worry about my kids I had every one else there to do it. All the people that lived round here and my friends that knew me and that, like people down the school if you don't want to pick them up (Nat).

**7.6** I also observed this process at work when a woman's partner died suddenly (of natural causes) a few weeks before Christmas. Friends and acquaintances helped her with funeral arrangements and saw to the children. At Christmas everyone bought either Deborah or her children presents and one of the workers at the Square Room cooked Christmas and Boxing Day dinner for them all. This level of support was common amongst this group, as Jeremy noted 'when Steven died it was amazing how many people pulled together. An awful lot of people came out and you know it were really the same as one of our dad's sons died and we pulled together'.

**7.7** Death as an event brought family, neighbours and friends together at a time of distress and its impact was noted by Bulmer (1986:51) and also by Foster (1999:18), who explained that established residents on the Isle of Dogs would refer to responses to death as one of the outward signs that people cared about each other by rallying round. It was also a singular event which promoted solidarity. Durkheim, when observing the totemic religion practised by the Australian aborigines, also considered the importance of symbolic unity within the clan system as being crucial in re-enforcing the collective consciousness which was often acted out in 'periodic ceremonial and ritual gatherings of exceptional social intensity' (Thompson, 1982:131-137). Events of pivotal importance like the ritual of death and mourning played similar kinds of roles in Stanley.

**7.8** Other less traumatic events, which centred around the social interaction of children, also encouraged residents out of their homes and onto the streets, reinforcing neighbourly bonds. For example, the warm weather during the summer months: 'I know everyone. I think there is a couple of new families but I will get to know them more in the summer because all the kids play downstairs' (Jack). The yearly celebration of Halloween on the estate was another example, and one where I observed mothers with young children

knocking on neighbours doors and being welcomed in. One young mother explained what happened in her street:

Halloween was nice 'cause every child in the street went out. I went out with mine because they were smaller but it felt really safe. When I was in Larkwood [another area of the city] I never went trick or treating. One year me and some mates went out and we did not see anyone else and people just shut the door in our faces. But everyone here, that was in, answered the door and a couple of people came and said 'sorry, we have run out of stuff'. So every single kid in the street was out and that was nice (Kim).

## Conflict

I have never seen anything bad in Stanley I have heard bad things and neighbours wherever you go are always fighting each other and that is a natural part of life (Jamie).

**8.1** For decades community researchers have been accused of ignoring undercurrents of neighbourly conflict, instead preferring to overlook, and delight in, the positive aspects of community living (Crow and Allan 1994:2). It would also be wrong of me to portray Stanley as an area where all residents got on well, helped one another out and that no conflict existed. Undercurrents of competition and suspicion existed between some Stanley residents, perhaps because residents were isolated physically, heavily stigmatised and splintered into entrenched enclaves of family and personal groupings. Residents were a mixed group of people with different agendas and ideas, but the majority staunchly defended the estate's reputation and the life they had created for themselves. They did not form a single harmonious group and it was not unusual to hear unkind words from one resident about another.

**8.2** Gans (1967) argued that neighbours' willingness to confront anti-social behaviour, especially that of children, was one way of harmonising the neighbourhood and making different groups such as children and youths conform (see also Putnam 2000:313). In Stanley, neighbourhood disputes were frequently caused by disruptive children or youths and such incidents were difficult to resolve in that different residents had different perceptions of how children (often their own) should behave in public (see also Pearson, 1983; Loader *et al*, 1998). One resident mentioned a dispute with a neighbour over her grandson playing in the street where a:

Bloke over the road put his hands round Shane's [her grandson] throat and threw a wheel trim at him. The police came up and said to me 'it is only your word against his' and I said 'Well next time I am not going to bother phoning you but I know who I will 'phone and I said that bloke won't be walking over there.' He said 'well you will get done then won't you.' I said 'fair comment but at the end of the day you've got to prove it.' The thing that really pisses me off now with him [the neighbour] is another lot of kids play outside his house kicking a ball in his garden, and he don't say a dicky bird, soon as Shane gets out there he starts (Sadie).

**8.3** Another interviewee said that she was having trouble with some youths in her street who had been accused of scratching cars and causing a general nuisance. This caused problems between a number of families who had different versions of what had gone on. The accusing party felt these youths should not be allowed to congregate on the streets every evening, getting into mischief, while their parents believed that the neighbour (whom they claimed was nothing other than a busybody) had wrongly accused their children and that it was ridiculous to suggest that they should have to stay at home all time. This supports Pearson's (1983) view that ageing generations become increasingly intolerant towards youth, criticizing their actions, music, dress, mannerisms, conduct and moral compass.

**8.4** There was deception too, which caused friction between some neighbours. As one resident explained:

Two doors up the woman was getting fencing put up and so was sorting it all out and I had to give her the money [to have her fence erected]. The blokes in her family were going to do all the fencing for free, and put it up for us, and we would only give her the money for the fence. But she did us all out of a lot of money [by not doing the work] and she was a really good friend with the other next door neighbour. And they broke friends. But it is things like that - she did everyone out of money, even her friend. I was not happy (Reba).

## Conclusion

**9.1** Drawing on 11 months ethnographic research, I have been able to illustrate that neighbourly interactions in Stanley were common place, and acted as a vital part of residents' basic social contacts: a source of friendship as well as conflict.

**9.2** The underlying roots of social cohesion on the estate were attributed to the development of a strong collective identity fostered by notions of victimisation, geographical isolation and stigma (see also Power, 1999; Campbell, 1993) coupled with face-to-face relations and low rates of geographical mobility. In particular I found that residents with limited social networks, such as newcomers and/or lone parents, tended to rely on their neighbours for emotional support and other types of assistance including: money lending, the borrowing of generic household items and the exchange of services. Faced with personal and financial 'hardships' solidarities emerged that were based on mutual aid and the principle of reciprocity (see Bulmer, 1986 and Waddington *et al*, 1991). Neighbouring was also important as 'an alternative form of socializing for people who do not have access to broader networks' (Logan and Spitze, 1994:454-7) (see also Bulmer, 1986).

**9.3** These findings undermine theories, which have continually claimed that non-familial relationships, such

as those between neighbours, have been eclipsed or diminished somewhat in recent years (see Beck, 1992:97; Giddens, 1990; Putnam, 2000). The shattered neighbourhood thesis, which so many scholars have embraced, was not evident in Stanley. Stanley was a place where neighbours knew one another, had long standing associations and shared commonalities. Nor was there concrete evidence of staunch individualism or social isolation as many Stanley residents sought the companionship of others living close by. Even those residents who claimed to shy away from neighbourly interaction, because of issues of privacy and conflict, appeared to contradict their 'practiced and expressed norms' (see Bulmer, 1986).

**9.4** In Stanley the 'local' had survived, and its survival cast into doubt some of the empirical foundations and methods of demonstration underpinning contemporary forms of sociological theorising about globalization and individualism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Community' is an elusive concept that is difficult to define neatly and can be perceived in different ways by different people and influenced by a number of different factors (Crow and Allan, 1994). Even in a single locality it is not unusual for people to have competing ideas and expectations about the place where they live (see Parker, 1992).

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