

BELONGING

Only when we can define, measure and quantify our emotional reactions to place can we design interventions that positively affect how we feel

by Nicola Bacon

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The 2016 EU referendum result exposed a crisis of belonging, starkly revealing deep divides about what we felt we belonged to and what it meant to feel at home. This emotion is seen far more widely and deeply than just in attitudes to one political institution. Recent polling for *The Guardian* shows that some of the deepest fissures between leavers and remainers are on culture and identity.

The Collins dictionary defines belongingness as “the human state of being an essential part of something”. It is a core element of our quality of life. The organisation I run, Social Life, explores the relationship between people and the places in which they live. Our work is about understanding how people’s day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment – housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets – and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas.

There is increasing recognition of the importance of our psycho-social lives to our experience of the places and spaces where we spend our everyday lives. Beyond Brexit, if we are to address what lies beneath some of these emotional divides and if these concepts are to influence policy and practice, we need to get better at defining what we mean.

Home comforts

Belongingness is a concept that intuitively makes sense. We all recognise the importance of feeling ‘at home’ in the places and spaces we pass through regularly. It is a human need; it features in Maslow’s hierarchy, halfway up the pyramid. Love and belonging are

necessities for people to develop self-esteem and confidence, and to be able to self-actualise; to be able to live creatively and maximise our potential. Experience has taught us that it is important to be precise about how we think about the emotional side of place. Too often different concepts – of neighbourliness, belonging and community – are used interchangeably and nebulously, in a way that can cause more, rather than less, confusion. This makes it easier to dismiss these factors, which are at the best of times difficult to describe and define, in favour of tangibles: schools and hospitals, poverty and crime. It also makes it easier to sign up to unproven theories about the pernicious influence of difference, diversity or migration on our sense of belonging and neighbourliness.

Belongingness is complex. We may feel at home in our homes, but not at work or at school, or at home in one part of the town we live but uncomfortable in other areas. People who are new to an area, even new to the UK, may experience belonging (and not belonging) in particular ways, influenced by their individual history and circumstances. We all carry multiple identities within us. Discussions about improving diversity and inclusion in the workplace now recognise that belonging has been the missing ingredient; it is not enough to be included, you must also feel that you belong.

Feedback loops

Nearly 10 years ago, when I was at The Young Foundation (a centre of social innovation and research), we developed a framework of ‘belonging feedback loops’ to understand the ways that we belong in the different dimensions of our lives: at work, in civil



society, in sport and in the media. This takes the premise that we all instinctively sense acceptance from family, colleagues, neighbourhoods, people who provide services and our political representatives. Our hunch was that in order to feel like we belong, we all need to experience belongingness in enough of these dimensions. Belonging feedback loops can help to structure conversations and dialogue about belonging, as well as about feelings of exclusion, and can help us to think about how individuals and even groups or communities can feel more secure in their lives. They help us to understand how all the different aspects of our lives reinforce each other, or collude to undermine each other.

The feedback loops give us a tool for conversation but not a metric. To fill this gap, Social Life has analysed data from national surveys and matched this to small local areas to generate predictions of our attitudes towards places. The Understanding Society survey – the UK’s largest and best-established longitudinal study – explores different aspects of our

everyday experience. Using the Office for National Statistics’ Output Area Classifications, we modelled the survey results to local areas. This allows us to predict how people feel about where they live, including perceptions of neighbourliness, wellbeing, feelings about people from different backgrounds, loneliness and belonging.

We can use this data to benchmark small areas, giving us context about how neighbourhoods compare with similar places. This approach can be replicated across the UK, and in other countries that have good local open data.

By comparing actual data with our predicted data we can see if a place is meeting expectations and how it compares with other places. A neighbourhood that fares better will have something going on that is boosting people’s perceptions. Where it looks like an area is doing worse than expected, this suggests that something is undermining relationships to that place.

When we map our predicted data we can see that belonging relates to deprivation in most areas, ▶



but not all. For example, in London there is an area of low predicted belonging running from Covent Garden to Marylebone in Westminster, which cannot be explained by poverty.

We used our predictive data on an estate in west London to understand, over time, the social impact of its radical regeneration programme. South Acton Estate is the biggest council estate in Ealing. Before redevelopment began it included over 2,000 homes. The estate is incrementally being demolished and replaced by social and private housing.

In 2015, Social Life's first social sustainability assessment found belonging, local identity and neighbourliness to be higher than expected among people living in the older estate, but lower (although similar to comparable areas) in the new housing. At the time, only 167 of the proposed 2,500 new homes had been built. When we went back to the estate in 2017 (now with 763 new homes built), repeating the same survey, belonging was still high in the older estate and had risen to the same level in the new homes. Around a quarter of people in the new homes in 2017 were long-term residents, rehoused by the council, so are likely to have transferred their attachment to the neighbourhood and neighbours. Our research shows that between 2015 and 2017, this had spilled over to the new

arrivals, and that they had become more strongly identified with the place.

From this, we can deduce that it is not necessarily true that being new to a place stops people feeling that they belong. In 2018, we worked with Canadian psychogeographer Colin Ellard from the University of Waterloo to explore feelings about the area around our office in Walworth in south London. We took 100 people, some local residents, others new to the area, on a five-stop walk around the location asking them to assess each stop on a series of criteria. The places that scored highest for making people feel they belong were the Pullens community garden, an intimate yet accessible place with lush planting and greenery; and Walworth Road, near the McDonalds. People felt most interested and welcome at these two locations. The community garden scored highest for feeling relaxed and Walworth Road scored highest on 'excitement' and on being welcoming and interesting. We can conclude from this that greenness and tranquillity support a sense of belonging. But so do familiarity and dynamism, and the inclusiveness of London's thriving hyper-diverse shopping streets.

The impact of 'outsiders'

Our research has revealed high levels of belonging in many areas that outsiders may perceive as hostile,

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including some areas that are characterised by high deprivation. Crucially, we have found no evidence that diversity in itself hampers belonging – in places that are comfortable with diversity.

Recent research in the English town of Corby, talking to residents and community groups, throws more light on belonging in places where there are possibly more tensions about diversity. One of the town’s assets is its strong sense of local identity, linked to its industrial history and the large numbers of people migrating from Scotland to work in the steelworks 50 years ago. For many residents, this accounts for Corby’s distinctive sense of place. In the aftermath of the closure of the steelworks Corby continued to grow; however, new employment became more casualised, mainly in distribution or low-skilled manufacturing, and is now dependent on migration, often from eastern Europe. There are weak links between longer-standing communities and foreign migrants and reports of discrimination and hostility.

There is also nervousness about Corby’s future in the face of automation, Brexit and poor-quality work. Belonging is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition in a place’s resilience and while people may feel they belong in an area today, it does not necessarily follow that they feel they will belong in the future.

A fear frequently voiced when we speak to people about their futures is that the place they call home may not be ‘for us’ in the future. Many who describe feeling at home in their neighbourhoods today – whether they can track their local roots back for generations or have moved in more recently – describe how they are questioning whether they will feel they belong in the same way in the coming years.

People are fast to read the symbolic meanings of new buildings, homes or shops, and quick to decide what these say about change and who is the intended beneficiary. When we feel that change is not working in our best interests, that it is restricting, rather than increasing, our options, then the sense of belonging in the future is threatened. This is compounded by other pressures on everyday life. The cumulative impact of rising housing costs, changes to benefit regimes, immigration policy and the gradual erosion

of services as a result of public-sector austerity are all increasing insecurity.

The American clinical psychiatrist Mindy Thompson Fullilove describes the psychological trauma of displacement as “root shock”. It is possible that the fear of displacement and loss of belonging can be pernicious and damaging to wellbeing and quality of life, regardless of whether your home is under immediate threat or not. This seems to be a similar process to the way that fear of crime can affect people independently of their actual experience of crime. It is possible that it is the attack on future belonging that underpins some of our strong feelings about the EU; on being inside or outside of a community.

We all deserve to feel that we belong in the places we call home, and confident of our place in their future. As well as understanding what is happening in our neighbourhoods we are also trying to understand what can be done to support our sense of belonging and security, and how we can all feel at home in the places we live. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

Breathing Spaces

A £2,000 RSA Catalyst Seed Grant has been awarded to Rebecca Kinge FRSA to go towards Breathing Spaces, which aims to reduce air pollution and improve public health. Breathing Spaces, a community project, has set up several sensors in the St Denys area of Southampton to measure particulate matter and monitor peaks and troughs. The Seed Grant will be used to test out whether a bus shelter can act as an ‘air quality hub’ in the city. As part of a partnership with Solent Showcase Gallery, the shelter will feature artwork and encourage passers-by to access an online air quality map for the city. Breathing Spaces has also set up several ‘Clean Air Cafés’ where the local community are invited to get involved and share their worries and ideas for solutions.

As a port city with an airport and surrounded by motorways, Southampton has long had a problem with high air pollution levels. “The way to do something effective about air pollution is to get people from all kinds of backgrounds together. We believe in science and art working together with the community, local people and professionals,” says Rebecca. “We’re all about driving social change through collective action.” The project hopes to inspire people to get involved in Breathing Spaces and/or set up their own scheme to tackle air pollution.

■ To find out more about Breathing Spaces, contact Rebecca on rebecca@socollective.org.uk. Rebecca is working with the RSA to organise an event in the autumn for Fellows