‘Neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you’: Neighbourly connections and bonding social capital

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Abstract
Neighbourly relations have been theorised as ‘friendly distance’ in contrast to connections which are theorised as strong or intensive ties. The article explores the neighbourly relationships between residents of a peri-urban regional area outside Sydney in Australia. Strong interview themes emerged regarding the ways in which residents who were well connected within their locality talked about their neighbours, and this was in direct contrast to those living with a chronic condition – these people expressed a lack of connection with their neighbours. The major theme, ‘not in each other’s pockets’ reflects the negotiated nature of neighbour interactions, while the theme ‘neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you’ speaks of isolation. The interactions of neighbours may in many cases constitute bonding capital as important weak or casual ties. These may not be available to the chronically ill or socially isolated or adequate without linking and bridging capital.

Keywords
bonding social capital, community resilience, neighbour relations, strong and weak ties

The importance of neighbourly connections is examined in our research in relation to everyday life as an indicator of resilience for when disaster strikes. It has been noted that in disaster situations neighbours will assist each other as much as they are...
able to, taking into account the resources available to them (Hawkins and Maurer 2010).

In this research, we engage with ‘neighbourhood’ as a small parochial physical locality, and ‘community’ as extending beyond that to encompass a number of neighbourhoods. The article focuses on the voices of interview participants recounting their neighbourhood relations and interactions.

**Background**

An emphasis on individual households is driving disaster preparedness policy despite the focus of research on community resilience. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (Council of Australian Governments, 2011) outlines the levels of preparedness that are required in times of disaster with emphasis on the need for households to prepare themselves. Within Australia as elsewhere a previous lack of preparedness for the impact of fire has led to loss of large numbers of homes built and maintained to various standards without the impact of bushfire in mind (Cretikos et al., 2008; Kapucu, 2008; Levac et al., 2012). Much effort has been expended by state governments on facilitating household preparedness and personal evacuation planning. The public are advised that emergency services are not going to arrive to rescue them (RFS, 2017).

Although the emphasis placed on individual households is pertinent, there are individuals living in the community without the capacity or the resources to manage their properties or to leave the area when necessary. Older residents, those with chronic conditions or disability and many who lack personal transport options, including women with young children, may not be able to manage alone in disaster (Aldrich and Benson, 2008). The need for communities to be prepared has also been flagged in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (Council of Australian Governments, 2011) though it remains unclear how community involvement is conceived. It can often be confined to the efforts of emergency services to the exclusion of other community organisations that are familiar with those who may require extra assistance (Ingham and Redshaw, forthcoming).

Preparedness is seen primarily as developing family communication and evacuation plans, maintaining a disaster supply or emergency kit, and becoming informed about home emergency preparedness (Diekman et al., 2007). As a key aspect of community resilience, preparedness is considered by some to include cultivation of well-being and intentionally engaging in preparedness, so that readiness becomes more than risk management; it becomes an integrative, fluid, and health-promoting state that facilitates adaptive post-disaster trajectories (Gowan et al., 2014). All of these factors remain centred on individuals and households nevertheless.

The importance of community networks in the complexity of preparedness includes personal and contextual factors such as health status, self-efficacy, community support and the nature of the emergency (Levac et al., 2012). Interaction between neighbours has been shown to be effective in motivating people to prepare for disaster (Paton et al., 2008). Our research sought to explore the experiences of a range of residents in the Blue Mountains following the fires in 2013 in which residents were advised to leave the area early if they were going to leave.

In the following, theorisations of neighbourhood relations and the types of interactions that are prevalent there will be considered in order to highlight the ongoing importance of
neighbourhoods and how vulnerable people might relate to their neighbourhood. Recent focus in sociology has been on large population studies such as ‘neighbourhood effects’ research. In this article, the importance of closer consideration of community interaction is emphasised and community resilience and social capital research outlined in connection with neighbourhoods and the types of social capital that are represented at neighbourhood level. Community resilience research has focused beyond individual households to consider capabilities at community level. The community level is where individual resident’s vulnerabilities can be addressed and accounted for, such as lack of transport options to evacuate in times of disaster.

**Neighbourhood effects research**

The focus in sociology has been on the impact of race, gender, socioeconomics, class and other factors at urban levels through neighbourhood effects research on large urban areas. Distinctions in socioeconomic level, race, criminality and other factors, and the impact of these factors on health, and on children and adolescents and the aged, are considered at population levels beyond what we mean by neighbourhood in this article (Mohnen et al., 2011; O’Campo et al., 2015). Neighbourhood effects research, including neighbourhood dynamics, has focused to some extent on significant social ties (van Ham et al., 2013) but has not taken social interaction into account with its focus on broader populations rather than relations.

A focus on variables such as gender, ethnicity and class in quantitative research can look at large effects, though it takes attention away from everyday interaction (Abbott, 2010; Crossley, 2011: 21). It is important to maintain and develop ‘methodologies and tools that foreground interaction, relationships and networks’ (Crossley, 2011: 21). We take a relational and qualitative approach in order to highlight neighbourhood interaction and document the kinds of interaction that are prevalent for those who are most vulnerable.

Neighbourhood interaction has been difficult to place in social theory (Kusenbach, 2006). Neither distinctly private nor public realms, ‘communal worlds are distinct, vital, and ubiquitous fixtures of everyday social reality, deserving of independent investigation and theorising’ (Kusenbach, 2006: 280). Following Lofland (1998), Kusenbach offers the ‘parochial realm’ as suggesting a communal relational form and defines neighbourhood as ‘a normative set of interactive practices that characterises neighbourhoods as one kind of parochial territory’ (2006: 280).

The focus of the research in this article is the interactions between neighbours and how these are experienced by different people. Access of particular communities or neighbourhoods to social capital has been considered through different types of social capital and how they work at a neighbourhood level. The types of social capital have been investigated in relation to Granovetter’s (1973, 1983) strong and weak ties. These are outlined in the next section, followed by discussion of neighbourhood studies.

**Community resilience and social capital research**

Research on how communities can be more resilient has drawn on the social capital framework in order to include important aspects of community that relate to the capacity to deal with and come back from disaster:
A community that is building capacity is one that plans for positive growth as well as decline, integrates economic and social goals, and fosters connections across diverse groups within its borders. (Zautra et al., 2008: 131)

Community resilience and shared responsibility have become important considerations in many countries in determining how best to prepare and develop communities to deal with disasters. Social capital has been connected with community resilience by researchers (Aldrich, 2012; Cox and Perry, 2011; Patterson et al., 2010; Poortinga, 2012; Sherrieb et al., 2010) and with community engagement (Coles and Buckle, 2004; Cox and Hamlen, 2015; Milton et al., 2012; Wells et al., 2013). The importance of social networks and community participation has been emphasised for health and well-being (Abbott, 2010; Aida et al., 2013; Akama et al., 2014; Cattell, 2011; Moore et al., 2011; Wagemakers et al., 2010) and research includes extensive work on social capital and health (Berry and Walsh, 2010; Kawachi et al., 2008; Mohren et al., 2011). Strengthening social capital through community engagement is key to building community resilience (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015).

Social capital is seen as one of four aspects of community resilience (Norris et al., 2008; Sherrieb et al., 2010). The four primary sets of adaptive capacities are Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication, and Community Competence (Norris et al., 2008). Social capital comprises the networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). While human capital is related to the capacities of individuals established through knowledge, skills and competences, social capital is relational and arises from myriad everyday interactions between people (OECD, 2001).

Different types of social capital have also been identified: bonding capital, bridging capital and linking capital (Healy and Hampshire, 2002; Putnam, 1993; Winter, 2000; Woolcock, 2000). Bonding capital is seen as connecting individuals with those like themselves through informal social connections and typically refers to the relations among members of families, neighbours, close friends and ethnic groups. Bridging capital connects individuals with those unlike themselves, who may be of a different socio-economic status, from a different generation or a different ethnic group, often through formal networks based on common interest, such as work or education, sport, church or voluntary associations. Linking capital enables individuals to have relationships with people in positions of power such as Members of Parliament, senior government officials and senior executives of business and philanthropic organisations and draw upon resources, ideas and information from outside their local context.

In the social capital literature, neighbourhood relations are recognised as a form of bonding social capital (Beaudoin, 2009; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). It has been proposed that bonding social capital assists with the diffusion of knowledge and information, maintenance of behavioural norms, promoting access to services and facilities, and as facilitating social support and mutual respect (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000).

Residents of New Orleans with low incomes relied on, and built upon, all levels of social capital for individual, family and community survival in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Bonding capital was important for immediate support, while pathways to longer
term survival and wider neighbourhood and community revitalisation required bridging and linking social capital (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010).

Research post-Katrina indicates that poor areas can have strong bonding capital but lack access to important resources and to bridging and linking capital (Aldrich and Cook, 2008; Elliott et al., 2010; Hawkins and Maurer, 2010). Fewer trailer parks were set up in areas with high levels of social capital post-Katrina (Aldrich and Cook, 2008), and local network capacities of poorer area residents relative to those of a more affluent neighbourhood tended to evaporate before, during and after the disaster (Elliott et al., 2010).

**Bonding capital and strong and weak ties**

Bonding capital has been associated with strong ties and bridging capital with weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Frequency of borrowing or exchanging things, visiting with and assisting with repairs or shopping were considered indicators of neighbourliness and used to construct an index of bonding capital (Beaudoin, 2009). One of the criteria that Granovetter (1973) explores is whether people know about each other’s strong ties. Those who are known to each other would constitute the strong ties of a clique group whereas those who are from different groups would constitute weak ties. High frequency of visits and exchanges between neighbours (often or very often) would indicate strong ties or bonding capital (Beaudoin, 2009). Connections with neighbours may not mean knowledge of each other’s ties however. Borrowing or exchanging things or assisting with daily tasks such as shopping or meals with neighbours may not mean that neighbours then know each other’s friends. Leonard and Onyx (2003) considered weak and strong ties in organisational links and found that bonding often involved both strong and weak ties. Granovetter (1983) himself revised his position in a later paper, accepting that neighbourhood ties could be weak ties and emphasising that connections with bridging capital gave significance to these ties.

**Neighbourhood relations**

It has been claimed that neighbourhood relations have declined in significance due to the links formed by people who are away from home through employment, increased mobility and social networking via electronic media (Beck, 1997; Crow et al., 2002; Sennett, 1998). Neighbourhood relations have remained important nevertheless and different styles of neighbouring identified (Crow et al., 2002). Negotiations of privacy and friendliness appear to have persisted over the decades with these themes being found in subsequent research (Crow et al., 2002; Mollenhorst, 2015; Mollenhorst et al., 2009).

Crow et al. (2002) emphasise the middle ground and the need for negotiation within norms of ‘friendly distance’. Crow et al. found in the communities they studied that neighbour relations did not result in either encapsulation or fragmentation, and that relations between neighbours were important and common. Framing neighbour relations as friendly distance presents a means to understand and consider the experiences of interviewees.

Social networks and involvement are recognised as important contributors to health (Cattell, 2011; Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Valente, 2010) and include
participation in formal and informal organisations and leisure activities (Abbott, 2010; Almedom, 2005; Cattell, 2011; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004; Hawe and Shiell, 2000; Wakefield and Poland, 2005). Socioeconomic factors such as education, income and unemployment, in addition to social support and health behaviours, are recognised determinants of individual health outcomes (Berkman and Kawachi, 2000; Franzini et al., 2005).

For those who have a chronic condition such as mental illness, learning difficulty or physical impairment, negotiations of ‘friendly distance’ may be hard to achieve. In investigating the connection between social vulnerability and community resilience, Bergstrand et al. (2014) found that high levels of vulnerability correlated with low levels of resilience. Social vulnerability includes many parameters such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity and age, and aggregate measures of these factors (Bergstrand et al., 2014; Cutter and Finch, 2008; Cutter et al., 2000, 2003; Phillips et al., 2010; Wisner et al., 1994). Community resilience as a whole will be strengthened when the most vulnerable are strongly connected with community resources beyond, but including, neighbourly connectedness. Considering how those with health issues are able to negotiate friendly distance and strong or weak ties with neighbours and the implications for community level involvement is the purpose of this article.

**Research method**

**Research context**

The Blue Mountains local government area is comprised of a series of villages dotted along a single major highway, the only road in and out of the region with large areas of bush land surrounding villages north and south of the highway. It differs from city and other urban environments in its geographical composition and this is likely to impact on interactions between neighbours. The majority of residents are white Anglo Saxon Australians living in suburban, predominantly separate housing. The population consists of 16.5% overseas born, with 6.2% from non-English-speaking backgrounds (5.5% did not give birthplace) (ABS, 2011). The region ranks relatively highly at the 68th percentile on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Disadvantage. There is some significant variation within the Blue Mountains region itself, however, with seven villages ranking lower and seven villages above the 68th SEIFA Index of Disadvantage percentile (ABS, 2011).

The Community Connections research was a partnership between Charles Sturt University, Blue Mountains City Council, Katoomba Neighbourhood Centre Inc and Springwood Neighbourhood Centre Co-operative Ltd. Ethical approval was provided by Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee in May 2014. The project employed a participatory action framework. This partnership approach provided access to particularly vulnerable and at-risk community members in a safe and supportive environment.

The study involved interviews with community members held between August and November 2014. Participants were reached through advertising in a local newspaper and participating organisations and proceeded through snowballing in the community.
Interview participants. Details of the 12 interview participants can be seen in Table 1 (11 interviews were conducted, with one couple being interviewed together). Interview participants were from across the mountains, three lived in rental properties and the remainder owned their own homes. Interviews lasted from 15 minutes to one hour, with an average interview length of 44 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. Those who had few contacts tended to have less to talk about and interviews were shorter. Interviews were conducted in people’s homes (7) or at a suitable meeting place such as a Neighbourhood Centre or local library (4).

The purpose of the research and the interview was explained, permission sought from each individual for recording of conversations and a consent form signed. An informal semi-structured approach meant a number of broad topics were introduced, designed to encourage discussion and elicit comment on neighbourly connections and planning for emergency situations. Participants were asked about the neighbours they knew, friends and family they had contact with, and the fires experienced in 2013 and how they had responded to them.

Data analysis. Data analysis and findings were discussed at regular meetings of the project working group. Analysis was primarily conducted by one researcher, who conducted all interviews. This allowed for consistency and a detailed knowledge of participants and the range of views that were expressed. Interview recordings were transcribed and transcripts entered into NVivo 10. Key word queries were run in NVivo to extract comments from participants relating to neighbours, neighbourhoods and interaction on a neighbourhood level.

All transcripts were reread and key words extracted following a thematic analysis process (Liamputtong, 2009). In the first analysis, transcripts were coded and themed in relation to the broad questions posed. Key themes emerged in the next level of analysis, when the findings from individual transcripts were correlated across transcripts. The aim was to include and represent the range of participant views and levels of contact with neighbours evident in the interviews and to relate these to the demographics and circumstances of participants.

Results

In the following, the interview themes ‘not in each other’s pockets’ and ‘neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you’ are illustrated through interviewees’ evident relation
to their neighbourhoods. The theme ‘not in each other’s pockets’ was found both explicitly and implicitly in those interviews, where there appeared to be a strong sense of belonging and sense of inclusion. The theme outlined the form of interaction many expected with neighbours and illustrated an ability to negotiate ‘friendly distance’ with neighbours. The theme ‘neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you’ was common to interviewees who were less sure of their place and had a weaker sense of belonging.

‘Not in each other’s pockets’

The phrase ‘not in each other’s pockets’ previously found in neighbourhood research (Crow et al., 2002; Galster, 2001; Kusenbach, 2006) was used by three interviewees in describing neighbour relations. The expression refers to not spending a lot of time together or knowing too much about everyone’s business and can be related to the idea of ‘friendly distance’ outlined by Willmott (1986) and Crow et al. (2002).

The colloquial meaning of the phrase is illustrated in the interviews in this study through comments such as, ‘you can have a chat over the back fence and things like that’ (Interview 2), knowing each other and watching out for each other’s homes (Interview 5) and the ‘whole neighbourhood is really community minded so we look out for each other without being in each other’s pockets’ (Interview 6).

Further elaborations of the theme of ‘not in each other’s pockets’ included not having regular arrangements to meet up, though they could involve occasionally having a cup of tea or coffee in each other’s houses, feeding the chickens, bringing in the mail, saying hello and swapping things. Neighbours were described as acquaintances and not friends, but ‘friendly neighbours’:

So we just say ‘Hi’ and we swap produce sometimes and help each other out, but we’re not, we’re not sort of over at each other’s places for dinner type. We just chat in the sun. A couple I’d call friends. The rest of them are more friendly neighbours. (Interview 6)

Being friendly neighbours might involve knowing who is away and having keys to each other’s houses in ‘an unwritten rule in the street’. But there is no regular arrangement for going out for meals together or on holidays together (Interview 5).

A boundary was drawn where more intimate encounters, such as having dinner together or regular coffee or tea, would not be normal neighbour-to-neighbour interaction. That the latter might occur occasionally with casual talking in the street was more usual. Watching out when people were away, collecting the mail, looking after animals and picking up something when out, were common. These were regarded as friendly activities with neighbours, as distinct from friends.

Not ‘making a point’ (of having coffee) or being ‘over at each other’s places’ (for dinner, for example) are phrases that express a lack of expectation and a respect for privacy delineating the boundaries of expression of ‘not in each other’s pockets’. People are acknowledged and make exchanges by collecting each other’s mail when away and chatting in the street, but it is not expected that they know all about each other or have regular contact. Going into each other’s homes was only occasional and even rare. Even constant daily interaction could be regarded as informal in this sense. An interviewee in her 70s had daily contact with at least one neighbour (Interview 3).
There were special occasions where there was an acknowledgement of sharing more personal issues:

Her husband’s not very well so on the odd occasion you’d say, ‘Hello, how are you getting on?’ (Interview 2)

Well, like one of our neighbours had a new bathroom so she invited all the neighbours in for afternoon tea. (Interview 5)

Closer encounters with neighbours were discussed by a number of interviewees. One related having taken a neighbour to hospital:

Accepting people and being there when there’s a crisis, so [wife] took one of the neighbours to the hospital. Being aware of people. (Interview 5)

and then when she was in hospital one other time she’d gone off in an ambulance in the middle of the night and the daughter came in and I took the daughter in, in the night dress and all of this. So it’s on a needs basis. (Interview 3)

‘On a needs basis’ expresses being prepared to be there when needed, but not to bear primary responsibility for someone on an ongoing basis: ‘it was having somebody there more as reassurance that I could ring an ambulance or whatever’ (Interview 3).

Another participant talked about giving additional attention to someone who had suffered a loss:

We’ve had dinner with L a couple of times. She lost her husband a year ago and we started just sort of dropping in on her a bit more often. We’ve been forever giving her all of our milk cartons because she uses them for seedlings. So now we just sort of knock on the door and say hello a bit more. (Interview 6)

Previously known as an acquaintance, this neighbour is nevertheless provided with a bit more contact though still on a ‘friendly distance’ level.

Looking out for particular neighbours was fairly common:

This morning, the neighbour across the road, she’s a bit older than me, and she’s had a bad cold, so I phoned her up … I’ve been looking out for her and if I haven’t seen her in her front garden I’ll give her a call. (Interview 4)

This could lend itself to neighbours becoming or being regarded more as friends:

One or two of them are, B across the road that I phoned today, she’s a friend. S next door is a friend … the other side of me there’s a family, and they’re quite busy with two teenage children, so they’re neighbours. I wouldn’t say they’re friends, they’re neighbours, acquaintances … (Interview 4)

High levels of interaction with some neighbours was not uncommon, but most also had an awareness of others in the area and of the properties around them. The extent of
knowledge that some have of their neighbours can be more intimate, though overall it was less intimate unless neighbours had become friends. Neighbours were regarded predominantly as friendly, able to keep an eye on things, check mail and carry out other small activities that required physical proximity, with more intensive encounters on some occasions.

‘Neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you’

Two interview participants did not have a very strong experience of neighbours. The first interview participant had lived in his rented flat for five years, the second had only been six months in her rented house. Neither were able to describe encounters with their neighbours in much detail:

Neighbourhood is if they come out and talk to you. That’s the neighbourhood. But you don’t see anyone, I only see L … I hardly see anyone in this complex. They all keep to themselves. (Interview 7)

If I see them I say hello, but that’s about it. Next door there’s an elderly couple and they are lovely and then down below I just occasionally say hello, but that’s about the only ones I speak to. (Interview 8)

There were not many encounters for interviewees 7 and 8 to describe and the interviews with them were brief for this reason. Both had chronic illnesses and were clearly less connected to their communities. The woman had previously lived in the same village but those she knew from that location were not mentioned as friends or potentially assisting her if she was in need. She had no family and could not recount stories of friends nearby. She said she would have difficulty in a disaster getting her dog and cats and trying to get to the train where she would not be allowed to take her animals anyway. Both of these interviewees are connected to a local agency providing them with some transport and social engagement opportunities.

Another interviewee lived in an assisted housing block with about 30 units where not many had contact with each other:

Often where I live there are a few of us that like to come out, there’s probably about six or seven of us that will come out and sit around and just have a chat and sit in the garden and have a catch up. (Interview 12)

She described the occupants of the units as having physical or mental issues or illnesses and keeping to themselves because they feel powerless and afraid of losing what little they have. Many have no family or friends to speak of. She herself had family out of the area and some connections within the Blue Mountains, but is also confined at times because of her condition. She had some awareness of others in the unit complex though not a lot of acquaintance with them.

Neighbour relations were clearly common for most people interviewed who could talk at length about who lived in the street. Those renting and with a chronic condition are in a different position. They were unable to relate situations where they felt able to
call on others or were called on to collect mail for example. They were essentially disconnected from their neighbourhood. Whether these relations constitute bonding capital or strong ties is the subject of the following discussion.

Discussion

Neighbours are described in most interviews as friendly, but ‘not in each other’s pockets’. Visiting with neighbours and spending a lot of time with them is not the norm in these interviews, though checking up on each other and helping each other out is seen as within the norm. Reciprocity is evident though this did not constitute emotional support of the kind noted in Leonard and Onyx (2003) as a central aspect of strong ties.

High frequency of visits and exchanges between neighbours (often or very often) have been considered strong ties or bonding capital (Beaudoin, 2009). This does not necessarily fit with people’s accounts of neighbourliness in our study. Neighbours are more like acquaintances that do not have knowledge of each other’s ties. When neighbours become friends then there may be more connection with their friendship network. There was no discussion of broader social networks in the interviews, with people focusing on their neighbours and even neighbours they are friends with.

While ‘not in each other’s pockets’ could be said to be the latent norm of neighbourliness (as defined by Mann, 1954) and an expression of it would be ‘speaking in the street’, it does require confidence and an understanding of the norms as well as willingness to engage. ‘Friendly’ is an accepted norm of neighbour relations, though it appears to have more meaning for those who are more established and connected within their neighbourhoods. No participant spoke ill of their neighbours and many could track who had come and gone in their street, depending on their length of residence. For those who were less secure, however, whether through housing tenure or a particular health condition, the connotations of ‘not in each other’s pockets’ were less clear and less accessible.

The connections with neighbours are more like weak ties than strong ones though nonetheless important. Granovetter placed more importance on weak ties, characterising a strong tie as a ‘combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie’ (1973: 1361). According to Granovetter weak ties extend beyond a person’s social circle to provide access to information and resources ‘but strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available’ (Granovetter, 1983: 209). Strong ties may be more easily available in the sense that they are family and friends who can be accessed more freely. Neighbours, however, may also provide easily available access due to proximity even though not representing strong ties.

Exchanges between neighbours may be more intensive and perhaps more frequent for certain individuals, such as those over 65 years of age who are at home more and have more opportunities to become involved in street happenings. Most participants showed concern for neighbours and those who fitted in with their neighbourhoods found it possible to interpret and relate to the norm of ‘not in each other’s pockets’.

The participants related another aspect of neighbour relations that further reinforces the idea that these are not generally strong ties. As neighbours, all participants indicated that they were happy to ‘be there’ for people in times of need, but not to be the primary
source of assistance on an ongoing basis. One of the concerns that was raised through talking with people in interviews was the burden that could potentially be placed on neighbours in times of emergency. The demands on neighbours and the potential for exclusion of those who are ‘not like us’ has been noted in other studies (Eriksson and Emmelin, 2013; Portes, 1998).

People who lack the means to manage for themselves require a community level input to assist them as governments make it clear that emergency services are not responsible to act in this capacity during an emergency situation. The importance of ‘community’ is acknowledged in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (Council of Australian Governments, 2011), but it is unclear what that could mean or how it could function. Governments devolve responsibility to individuals and households under neoliberal policies, as if each household had all the resources necessary to manage in a crisis when clearly this is not the case for any household let alone those lacking in basic resources. As Schmidt argues:

Neo-liberalism conceives of the polity as made up of the individual first, the community second, with legitimate state action extremely limited with regard to community-based demands on the individual. (2016: 320)

Local government does not provide services that could assist, though many in local communities who lack the means to manage alone have connections with or are known to local community organisations. It is this community level that neoliberal policies fail to recognise or appreciate.

The question of who looks after vulnerable people requires some deliberate consideration and cannot be left to the chances of a neighbour being available and sympathetic. As we have argued elsewhere vulnerable people have hopes that the community will look out for them. Some interview participants suggested that the fire brigade know their location and would come and get them if it was necessary (Ingham and Redshaw , forthcoming).

Conclusion

Neighbourly relations have implications for theorising community resilience; however to what extent this is the case, and in what capacities, requires further investigation.

The importance of conceptualising the type of interaction occurring within neighbourhoods has been highlighted in this article. While representing a small sample, our interviews indicate a strong contrast between those who are comfortable in their neighbourhoods and with their neighbours, and understand the tacit rules of neighbourly relations, and those who find it more difficult to relate to their neighbours, to assume an interest on the part of others in their well-being and to manage the rules of engagement. This demonstrates that communities may be cohesive because they have weak ties between neighbours, although these weak ties do not constitute bonding capital under current theorisations.

We posit that moving away from conceptualising disaster and resilience from an event-centred approach, towards a process approach, in which resilience is understood as
an evolving quality built through daily living and community connectedness, will expose
the ways in which social capital operates, who benefits from existing forms and how they
are maintained (Elliott et al., 2010). Understanding community connectedness requires
further investigation of interactions and connections where bonding capital is generated
on a neighbourhood level to understand exclusions and the need for engagement of
bridging capital beyond the immediate neighbourhood, especially in times of disaster.
The notions of resilience and social capital can contribute to understanding sustainability
if consideration is given to the complex and varied community, and neighbourhood inter-
actions between state and individual.

**Funding**

This research received funding from Charles Sturt University, Springwood Neighbourhood Centre,
Katoomba Neighbourhood Centre and Blue Mountains City Council.

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