Community identity as resource and context: A mixed method investigation of coping and collective action in a disadvantaged community


Published in:
European Journal of Social Psychology

Document Version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

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Abstract

Community identities enhance well-being through the provision of social support and feelings of collective efficacy as well as by acting as a basis for collective action and social change. However, the precise mechanisms through which community identity acts to enhance well-being are complicated by stigmatisation which potentially undermines solidarity and collective action. The present research examines a real-world stigmatised community group in order to investigate: (1) the community identity factors that act to enhance well-being, and (2) the consequences of community identity for community action. Study 1 consisted of a household survey conducted in disadvantaged areas of Limerick city in Ireland. Participants (n=322) completed measures of community identification, social support, collective efficacy, community action, and psychological well-being. Mediation analysis indicated that perceptions of collective efficacy mediated the relationship between identification and well-being. However, levels of self-reported community action were low and unrelated to community identification. In Study 2, twelve follow–up multiple-participant interviews with residents and community group workers were thematically analysed, revealing high levels of stigmatisation and opposition to identity-related collective action. These findings suggest the potential for stigma to reduce collective action through undermining solidarity and social support.

Keywords: Social identity; community; stigmatisation; social support; collective action

**Introduction**

**Community and well-being**

Creating and maintaining socially cohesive and mutually supportive local communities is an increasingly priority for local and national government (Chaskin, 2008; Sampson, 1999). Well-functioning communities provide a range of material and psychological resources that promote individual resilience and enhance quality of life and psychological well-being. Research on ‘psychological sense of community’ shows that identification with community acts to protect the psychological well-being of residents (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007; Vinson, 2004). Moreover, the Social Identity tradition proposes that the aspect of self concept derived from community can influence how members both cope with and respond to stresses associated with group life as well as acting as a basis for social change (Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

However the communities that could benefit most from these psychological resources are also typically those that face the most discrimination and stigmatisation (Kellaher, Warr, Feldman & Tacticos, 2010). In socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, residents experience a range of daily challenges such as poor quality housing, a lack of local services and amenities, and high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime. In addition, they also have to cope with the stigmatisation of their community by outsiders given that living in these areas is often perceived by non-residents as a “deeply discrediting attribute” (Warr, 2005).

The paradox of community deprivation is therefore that residents are often doubly disadvantaged by reputation as well as by poverty, but must still draw on local
community resources to cope with the daily challenges and stresses they face. The present paper considers how the insights from the Social Identity approach can be applied to exploring how community identity can form the basis for coping with and responding to neighbourhood disadvantage, including the effects of stigmatisation.

Social Identity, Well-being and Collective Action

The Social Identity approach to group processes (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) argues that our social identities play a fundamental role in shaping the way in which we experience and respond to our social worlds (Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010). In particular, social identity has been shown to impact upon wellbeing through the provision of social and psychological resources which enable group members to cope with adversity (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009). These resources include a) social support, b) perceptions of collective efficacy, and c) the means to effect collective action (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia & Branscombe, 2009; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

Firstly, in terms of the provision of social support (Haslam, O’Brien, Jetten, Vormedal & Penna, 2005), increased levels of social identification are typically associated with higher perceptions of social support which are in turn associated with positive psychological outcomes. For example, Haslam et al., (2005) found that increased identification with one’s family was associated with lower stress, higher levels of self-esteem and higher life satisfaction in heart surgery patients. This relationship was mediated by perceptions of social support. Similarly, the authors found that the relationship between identification with a work group and perceptions of work-related stress and job satisfaction was also mediated by perceptions of social support. Outten et al. (2009) looked at the extent to which endorsement of individual and group-
based coping options mediated the relationship between social identification and well-being in African-Americans, finding that those who were more highly identified with the group were more likely to perceive social support as being available from other group members.

In addition, the perception of a shared social identity among group members has been demonstrated to increase the level of helping behaviour given and received and to increase the likelihood that offers of help will be perceived in the same way that they are intended (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier & Reicher, 2002; Levine, Prosser, Evans & Reicher, 2005). Likewise, in Haslam & Reicher’s (2006) prison experiment study, behavioural observation of participants suggested that increased levels of identification were associated with an increase in the amount of social support sought and received by prisoners from other prisoners. This suggests that a sense of shared identity translates into actual helping behaviour.

However, the relationship between identity, social support and positive psychological outcomes is complex. For instance, while Outten et al. (2009) found that group identification was associated with increased perceptions of social support, social support did not mediate the relationship between identification and well-being. Likewise, Gleibs, Haslam, Haslam, & Jones, (2011) did not find evidence for this relationship in their study of the effects of membership of water clubs (designed to promote water-drinking among elderly residents of a residential facility) on well-being. Instead they found that perceptions of social support among members of the water clubs lead to the establishment of a sense of shared identity which in turn enhanced well-being. Thus the relationship between social identity, social support and well-being demonstrably varies across different group contexts.
The second positive impact of social identity on collective wellbeing involves perceptions of increased collective efficacy. Outten et al. (2009) reported that in their study, group identification predicted beliefs that the group could effectively cope with disadvantage. In particular, envisioning the group working together to challenge discrimination and prejudice was positively associated with self-esteem and life satisfaction and mediated the relationship between group identification and these variables. Outten et al. (2009) did caution that envisioning one’s group coping with disadvantage may not always translate into behaviour. However, in their prison experiment, Haslam & Reicher (2006) found that increased levels of identification among prisoners occurred alongside increased feelings of collective efficacy and suggested on the basis of observational data that this led to the mobilisation of prisoners in their challenges to the authority of the guards.

Following from this, a third positive impact of social identity upon collective wellbeing is posited to occur through collective action. Social identity is posited as the basis on which collective action can occur such that shared identification can coordinate and direct action to effect social change and thereby improve the group’s situation (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Reicher, 1996). However, the variety of factors affecting collective action in the real world means that this is not a straightforward analytic task. There is variability in the basis of group mobilisation: as self-labelling, shared emotion, or even shared ideology and opinions (Wright, 2009). Motivations have been found to include emotion, instrumental judgement, and intragroup concerns as well a personal and interpersonal consequences (Sturmer & Simon, 2004). The social structural variables including the perceptions of group inequality, its evaluation as unfair and the possibility of social change (Haslam & Reicher, 2006) will also constrain collective
action, while in turn the outcomes of collective action will have consequences for the future participation of group members (Drury & Reicher, 2005) as well as its impact or not on the conditions of the group (Louis, 2009). As Haslam and Reicher (2006) admit, the relationships between identification, collective action and social change are often far from clear.

Disadvantage and Stigmatised Identities

While the protective, beneficial properties of social identity outlined above are assumed to operate when groups have a positive and valued sense of identity, the question arises of what happens when the identity itself is problematic. Stigmatisation, or the imposition of a negative identity upon a group, has been demonstrated to have a profound impact on a range of psychological and social factors including health, education, mental and physical illness as well as an accumulation of reduction in life chances (Link & Phelan, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This is thought to be mediated by a range of cognitive, affective and interpersonal processes which perpetuate underachievement and poor relations with others (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

At first glance then, identification with a stigmatised identity would appear to have largely negative consequences. Despite this, the findings from the social identity approach on stigmatised identities are surprisingly positive. The work of Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey (1999) suggested that rejection by a dominant group can actually lead to the strengthening of ties among the group which in turn has a positive effect on well-being. Their research indicated that for African Americans, perceived prejudice has a direct negative effect upon well-being but also has an indirect counter effect mediated by ingroup identification when it is perceived as illegitimate and the outgroups’ prejudice is discounted. Indeed, spontaneously constructed minority identities can
afford this protection in response to perceived illegitimate prejudice (Schmitt, Spears & Branscombe, 2003).

Even in cases where positive identity reformulation is not possible, a stigmatised group identity can be a source of support as well as shame. Crabtree, Haslam, Postmes & Haslam (2010) found that for individuals with mental health problems, identification with this group increased social support, stigma resistance and stereotype rejection. These effects were found to suppress a more general negative relationship between identification and self-esteem. Consequently it would appear necessary to make a distinction between coping and striving such that the analysis of a group’s ability to cope with the negative effects of disadvantage should be considered separately from its ability to change the situation of disadvantage in which it finds itself.

In terms of collective action, research suggests that stigmatisation can potentially undermine collective behaviour. While Branscombe et al., (1999) found that rejection by a dominant group can lead to increased resistance among the minority, more generally the social identity approach to intergroup relations suggests that individualisation and avoidance is the typical response to a devalued identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Haslam & Reicher, 2006). Perceptions of the stability or fairness of inequality and a lack of collective efficacy will preclude collective action. Perceptions of one’s own group’s conditions as illegitimate, inevitable and likely to worsen are associated with the emotions of fear and sadness which in turn predict disengagement and avoidance (Smith, Cronin & Kessler, 2008). Moreover previous experience of collective frustration and failure will not predict future involvement (Drury & Reicher, 2005). In sum, while even stigmatised identities can provide coping resources, stigmatisation itself is not a positive predictor of collective action.
Theoretically then, while the role of social identity in coping with disadvantage is well delineated, the path to collective action in this process is more complex and variable. Additionally, the impacts of stigmatisation upon these coping and collective action processes are potentially profound, but poorly understood. Furthermore, while these processes have been examined in relation to broad ethnic and national groups, they have not been examined in relation to disadvantaged residential communities. In the current research we are interested in exploring how community identity impacts upon the wellbeing and collective action of residents in the context of the stigmatisation of their community.

The research reported here was conducted in Limerick City, Ireland. Limerick is a medium-sized city with a population of 90,000 and displays “a high degree of socioeconomic polarisation which is sharply delineated in geographic terms” (Limerick City Development Board, 2001). In disadvantaged areas of Limerick city, educational attainment rates are well below average (Walsh, Feeney & McCafferty, 2001), unemployment is five times the national average, and there is a high rate of violent crime (Fitzgerald, 2007). Media representations of these areas are overwhelmingly negative and the occurrence of high-profile violent crime has been used to characterise the local population. A major programme of urban renewal targeting four of the city’s most disadvantaged areas was established in 2008 with the aim of physical, social and economic regeneration that would improve the quality of life of residents.

The aims of the present paper are to (1) investigate what community identity factors act to enhance well-being, and (2) explore the consequences of identification with the community on community action. In line with previous research, we
hypothesised that identification with the community would have a positive influence on psychological well-being and that this relationship would be mediated by perceptions of social support and collective efficacy. Furthermore, we hypothesised that identification with the community would be associated with community collective action, i.e. community members joining together to address the problems in their neighbourhood.

We employed a mixed method design (Cresswell, 2009) to firstly use a large-scale survey of residents to establish the relationship between the variables of theoretical interest and then to explore the possible meaning of these statistical relationships though an analysis of indepth interviews with residents and community workers.

**STUDY ONE**

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 322 residents of each of the four areas targeted for regeneration took part in this research. There were 109 males and 212 females and 1 unspecified. The modal age of participants was between 45 – 64 years. Most were long-term residents with 86.8% having lived in their neighbourhoods for more than 10 years. 55.8% of residents owned their home and 39.8% were renting. 28.7% had completed education to primary level only and 17.2% had completed to secondary level. 25.8% described themselves as working full- or part-time, 17% were unemployed or looking for work, 22.3% worked in the home, and 28.2% were retired (4.4% declined to answer).

**Procedure and Measures**

The data was collected in a door-to-door household survey across the four areas designated for urban regeneration. Participants completed measures of community identification, perceptions of social support, collective efficacy, self-reported
community action and psychological well-being. The order of measures was
randomised within each questionnaire. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5
(strongly agree) except where otherwise indicated.

**Predictor variable**

**Community Identity**

Community identity was measured using the social identity measure from
Cameron (2004). This measures social identity using three dimensions: (1) cognitive
centrality, (2) ingroup affect, and (3) ingroup ties. Cameron (2004) notes that it can be
adapted to multiple groups. It contains items such as “I feel strong ties to other people
from this area” and “I don’t feel good about being from this area.” Reliability analysis
indicated that three of the items measuring centrality (“I often think about the fact that I
am from this area”, “Overall, being from here has very little to do with how I feel about
myself”, and “The fact that I am from this area rarely enters my mind”) did not scale as
they exhibited low, negative corrected item-total correlations. Deletion of these items
improved overall alpha from .72 to .87. The total score was calculated by averaging the
responses to the remaining seven items.

**Mediators**

**Social Support**

Social support was measured by four items relating to both giving and receiving
support based on items contained in the Social Capital Assessment Tool (Krishna &
Shrader, 1999), for example, “I can get help from my neighbours when I need it” and “I
often do favours for my neighbours.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .86.

**Collective Efficacy**
Perceptions of collective efficacy were measured using four items adapted from items used in Reicher & Haslam (2006). Items included “we can always manage to solve difficult problems if we try hard enough” and “we can usually handle whatever comes our way.” Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .87.

**Outcome variables**

*Psychological well-being*

Psychological well-being was measured using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978). This is a widely-used screening instrument for psychological disorders. Responses on a four-point scale from 1(never/not at all) to 4 (always/a lot). The bi-modal scoring method of 1-1-0-0 was used to score responses with scoring reversed where appropriate. Total scores were calculated by summing all the items. Higher scores are indicative of poorer psychological well-being. Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .82.

*Community Action*

Self-reported community action was measured by asking participants how often they had joined with other members of the community in the previous 12 months to address a problem or common issue. Responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (frequently). These were re-coded to yes or no for the purposes of statistical analysis.

**Study One Results**

In this study we were interested in identifying the community identity factors that act to enhance well-being. The proposed mediators suggested by previous research are social support and collective efficacy. Firstly, we hypothesised that community identity acts on well-being through community members’ perceptions of social support and collective efficacy. Secondly, we were interested in the consequences of community...
identity for community action, namely, can envisioning what the group can do translate in to the enactment of coping strategies. Therefore, we hypothesised that community identity would be related to community action and that this relationship would be mediated by social support and collective efficacy.

Table 1 illustrates the pairwise correlations between the variables. This preliminary analysis indicates that community identity was significantly related to psychological well-being, $r = -.32, p < .001$, suggesting that those who identified with the group reported better psychological health. Furthermore, identity was also related to both group-based coping responses. Those who identified with the community displayed increased perceptions of both social support, $r = .62, p < .001$, and collective efficacy, $r = .46, p < .001$. In turn perceptions of social support and collective efficacy were related to better psychological health, $r = -.26, p < .001$, and $r = -.39, p < .001$, respectively. However, while perceptions of social support were weakly associated with community action, $r = .10, p = .04$, the same was not true for collective efficacy or community identity, $r = -.02, p = .36$ and $r = .05, p = .19$, respectively.

Community Identity and Psychological Well-being

To test whether social support and collective efficacy act to enhance psychological well-being, we used Preacher & Hayes’ (2008) bootstrapping method. Both mediators were tested simultaneously. Results of normal theory tests are also reported. The results of the meditational analysis are reported in Figure 1 and significance tests of the mediation effects are reported in Table 2.
The results of the mediation analysis are consistent with the correlational results. The overall relationship between community identity and psychological well-being was significant, $\beta = -1.10$, $SE = .20$, $t(299) = -5.40$, $p < .001$. Community identity was a significant predictor of both social support, $\beta = .68$, $SE = .05$, $t(299) = 13.17$, $p < .001$, and collective efficacy, $\beta = .45$, $SE = .05$, $t(299) = 8.90$, $p < .001$. Collective efficacy in turn was a significant predictor of well-being, $\beta = -1.16$, $SE = .22$, $t(299) = -5.15$, $p < .001$, but social support was not, $\beta = -.29$, $SE = .22$, $t(299) = -1.30$, $p = .19$. The combined mediation effect of was significant, community identity no longer predicted psychological well-being (to $\beta = -.38$, $SE = .26$, $t(299) = -1.49$, $p = .14$). This was confirmed by the fact that the 95% confidence interval did not contain zero (-1.09 to -.38). However, it was found that this effect was driven by collective efficacy (Sobel $z = -4.48$, $p < .001$). Contrasts between the potential mediators did not reveal any significant differences.

**Community Identity and Community Action**

Only 32% of participants reported engaging in community action in the preceding 12 months. As mentioned earlier, preliminary correlational analysis indicated that community identity was not associated with community action. Preacher & Hayes (2008) suggest that the presence of an association between a predictor and outcome variable is not a necessary requirement for the testing of a mediation model as long as the predictor is related to the mediator and the mediator is related to the outcome variable. Thus, Preacher & Hayes (2008) bootstrapping method was used to test whether perceptions of social support mediated the relationship between community identity and community action. This method can be used with dichotomous outcomes. The coefficients of the model are estimated using logistic regression.
The overall relationship between community identity and collective action was not significant, $\beta = .16$, $SE = .16$, $z = 1.02$, $p=.31$. While this analysis again confirmed that community identity was related to perceptions of social support, $\beta = .68$, $SE = .05$, $t(309) = 13.68$, $p<.001$, social support was not related to community action, $\beta = .24$, $SE = .18$, $z = 1.31$, $p = .19$. The combined effect was not significant as indicated by the fact that the 95% confidence interval contained zero (-.08 to .44).

Study One Discussion

Results suggest that identifying with the local community has positive consequences for psychological well-being. Furthermore, those who identify with the community feel that the community provides support and that the community can collectively cope with the challenges facing it. The mediation analysis suggests that community identity acts on psychological well-being through perceptions of collective efficacy rather than social support. However, it should be noted that both mediators are correlated which could mean that the effect of social support was attenuated.

A separate mediation analysis was conducted using only social support as the mediator between community identity and psychological well-being. Normal tests of social support as a mediator approached significance, Sobel $z = -1.95$, $p=.05$, while the 95% confidence interval suggested that social support was a significant mediator as it did not contain zero (-.64 to -.02).

However several questions remain in relation to these identity processes. Firstly, while the evidence points to the possibility that social support and collective efficacy can contribute separately to well-being, the practical real world mechanisms whereby this might occur remain unclear. Secondly, there are many possible reasons why
identification, social support and collective efficacy do not predict community action and these bear further investigation in this instance. This is particularly important if we see local community empowerment and action as desirable and if this research is to have any policy implications in this regard. Finally, these communities exist in a complex set of local circumstances which are affected by relations between residents, interactions with authorities, media reportage and (as has been extensively documented elsewhere e.g. Devereux et al 2011; McNamara, Muldoon, Stevenson & Slattery, 2011) intense stigmatisation of their identity. In order for the interpretation of these survey results to have validity in their real-world context some exploration of these relationships is required.

**STUDY TWO**

**Method**

14 interviews were conducted with two samples of individuals in stigmatised local communities in Limerick. Six interviews were held with individuals or groups of residents from each of the four main stigmatised estates across Limerick. These 10 participants (six male, four female) were selected on the basis of spanning the diversity of the local population and ranged in age from 20 to 65, contained a mix of employed and unemployed participants, and had been resident in the areas from 3-25 years. A further eight interviews were conducted with groups of community workers (n=16: ten female, 6 male) involved in a range of local community organisations which provide non-statutory services including youth clubs, crèches, job clubs as well as adult social and recreational activities. Some participants (n=8; 6 female, 2 male) were current or previous residents of the local communities or other deprived communities nearby and
were strategically selected to provide an insight into the collective activities of the communities.

Community workers were approached, recruited and interviewed in their place of work while residents were recruited via a postal approach and interviewed in local community centres. All participants were informed that the interview concerned people’s experiences of living and working in the local communities. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted using an open-ended schedule designed to facilitate as much initiation of discussion on the part of the participants. Topics were generated from local news and previous research in this area. Interviews with community workers and residents were conducted in groups as this was the wish expressed by the participants themselves. As noted by Wilkinson (2003), if conducted effectively, group discussions can be egalitarian, participant-focused exchanges, more akin to everyday conversation than formalised one-to-one interviews (although two interviewees requested one-to-one interviews).

All discussions were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were entered into N-Vivo text tagging software for analysis. In accordance with the aims of the analysis, all instances in which participants talked about their community identity, interactions with neighbours, and involvement in community issues were identified resulting in over 94 extracts across the 14 interviews. The extracts were analysed using a theoretically guided thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three broad themes were identified in the data: stigmatisation and its consequences; division within the community; and opposition to community action. From this, an account of all the data was developed inductively and deviant case analysis (Silverman, 2001) was
used to examine exceptional instances to amend and develop an exhaustive account of
the data.

Analysis

Theme One: Stigmatisation and its consequences

The stigmatisation of disadvantaged areas of Limerick city in the media has been well
documented (Devereux, Haynes & Power, 2011) and previous research has shown that
negative attitudes towards deprived areas are shared by their residents and outsiders
alike (McNamara, Muldoon, Stevenson & Slattery, 2011). This stigmatisation was
mentioned by all interviewees and universally presented as having a negative effect
upon the local community. The following is a typical extract from two residents:

Extract 1. Resident interview 3: ‘It’s only all bad news you hear about’

R1 I never, I never did put it on application forms, never put down [deprived area]

I Okay, application forms for jobs and things?

R1 Jobs, I’m starting on Monday, I’ve a new job again right now, but I put down
[different area], and that

I Is that because of? Why?

R1 The reputation here, the reputation, you know, cos all you see in the news is
stabbings and shootings and drugs and car thefts like, it’s only all bad news you
hear about in [deprived area], you never hear anything that’s good,

The awareness of the negative reputation of the area was reported by many residents to
lead them to conceal the location of their homes. In classic social identity terms, as their
group membership is not easily determined by an outsider, they can adopt an individual
‘exit’ strategy by managing their spoiled identity at a personal level (Tajfel & Turner,
1979). Some residents reported ‘passing’ (Goffman, 1963) as residing elsewhere for
years among outsiders and co-workers. Others reported the discriminatory reactions of outsiders, including government agencies and service providers, which they argued had led them to be unwilling to disclose their origins or to expect negative treatment if they did. In addition it is notable that even here within the interview context, residents were keen to demonstrate that they had nothing to do with criminality, making clear distinctions between criminals and themselves as ordinary decent residents who did not fit the external stereotypes. The apparent net consequence of these accounts was that overt identification with the local area was low and residents were unwilling to associate themselves publically with the spoiled identity of the locale.

For community groups, this means that their job of building links within the area becomes much harder. In the following exchange two community workers discuss the challenges posed by this prevalent stigmatisation:

Extract 2. Community Group 3: ‘People just tar everyone with the same brush’

R3  I suppose people on the outside would assume that everyone from that community is similar but they’re not like

R2  There’s just a stigma really isn’t it, it’s the stigma attached to living

R3  Lack of knowledge and understanding

R2  In disadvantaged areas where people just tar everyone with the same brush

R3  Yeah ‘they’re all lunatics’ [...] 

R2  And it’s trying to, we’re trying to kind of in some of the community projects that [named individual] and ourselves are involved in is trying to get young people having more pride in their own area and having, getting that, building up that sense of belonging to the community again. And like we have heard young
people saying you know ‘oh we’re from [deprived area]’ and you know ‘we’ll take you on and we’ll do, we’ll beat ye and we’ll do this and we’ll do that’

In this detailed account of the effects of stigmatisation we see just how fractured and undermined community identity in these areas has become. Not only has there been a general decline in community activity and a rise in outsiders’ fear of the residents, but some of the young people have adopted this negative identity as a badge of honour. The task of the community workers therefore becomes doubly difficult. On the one hand they must try and engage a reluctant and socially marginalised community in order to build local community infrastructure. On the other, residents do not want to be associated with a negative community identity and those that do end up endorsing and perpetuating an identity based on anti-social behaviour and fear. Consequently, the community workers must try to re-define the community’s identity in the face of external prejudice and discrimination.

Theme Two: Community support and division

The second major theme concerns the division within the community. Previous research on stigmatised communities in the UK (Warr, 2005) suggests that residents often have complex understandings of group dynamics and are both “trustful and wary” of their neighbours. In our interviews, Residents and community workers rejected the negative stereotypes of people living these areas, but admitted that drugs, crime and anti-social behaviour were adversely affecting the neighbourhoods. Typically this was done by reporting that the community was divided between socially responsible and anti-social individuals with the anti-social element constituting a small and unrepresentative minority. In the following extract a community worker explains how these divisions have come to pass.
Extract 3. Community Group 5: ‘Most people don’t want trouble at their door’

R1 There’s a type, I don’t know exactly how you might phrase it, but it’s the type of people who have left like in some instances I understand people who would be a positive influence on the community so they’re gone and the people who they were almost counter-weighting are staying ...it’s actually got worse which you know

R2 I think visually it’s far worse

R1 Yeah. But I know like maybe you could, both of you would know better than I the kind of people that have left you know

B I know there are some really solid families have left but there has been a mix of people that have you know. Like basically my experience from being here is that the vast majority of the people living in this area are really just nice people who just want to get on with it, you know they want to live their lives the very same way as everybody else in the safety and comfort of their home and be able to rear their children you know. Most people don’t want trouble at their door you know.

In this extract we see a typical discussion of how the various social housing policies that have been implemented in these areas have allowed a division between the ‘decent’ and the criminal elements to develop. The departure of more active community members is presented as a drain on the community and the arrival of less positive influences is presented as undermining local community. The consequence of this narrative is not simply community division but the phenomenon of disengagement by the ‘decent’ majority of residents. In this way community groups often indicated that the social situation had exacerbated low levels of participation and undermined identity.
Likewise, residents themselves directly attributed the lack of community activity
to fear of these antisocial elements.

Extract 4. Resident Interview 4: ‘Now you’re afraid to leave your house’

R2  You say part of the community, I don’t feel part of the community, I don’t think
there is a community ((brief laugh)) as such, you know

I  Okay, why would you say that?

R2  I don’t know, it’s, you hear people talking about what used to happen years ago,
you’d have all, you’d have the kids out playing, they’re all out doing this that
and the other, now you’re afraid to leave your house

R1  Yeah, close the gate and just play around the garden, you say to the kids like
and whatever, you know, so I think the community, the community spirit is gone,
I think

Mirroring the community group accounts, community spirit is presented as
characteristic of a bygone era. However this is more than simply a narrative of social
decline as these residents are reporting fear of other (unspecified) elements within the
communities and specifically fear on behalf of their children. Overall we noted that
parents were keen to disengage their children from the local community in order to
protect them from criminal elements. One of the other consequences of this division
was that residents typically refused to talk of a single unified community even in their
more positive accounts of local neighbourhood life.

Extract 5. Resident Interview 1: ‘I don’t know about ‘community’...’

I  So, what about your area, would it give you that sense of feeling like you’re part
of a community?
Ahm, I don’t know about ‘community’ but I mean we, I do have neighbours that we would look out for each other, and we do, we talk about the road like and if someone has trouble or if something happened they would, you know they’d come and ask me or I’d, you know, we’d talk about it together and that, you know, but maybe there’s like three or four people in the road you know

Alright, so it would be mostly your close neighbours

Yeah, I mean I wouldn’t, yeah, just the close neighbours

Here these residents did mention local activities and the informal exchange of support and resources among neighbours. However it is notable that the respondent is actively resisting the interviewer’s suggestion that this may be construed as community rather than individual level activity. In the same manner as in extract 1, the participant here is involved in complex management of her stigmatised identity is adopting a distanced ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1957) from the community so as not to be heard as part of a negatively evaluated community. In this way the residents typically refused to articulate a single unitary community, preferring instead to talk of a divided or individualised locale.

It is worth noting at this point that the issues facing the community workers and residents are more complex than simply identification or lack of identification with the community. The community is divided and the workers and residents see a threat from the other antisocial and criminal side of their neighbourhood. In this way community is actually the source of many of the problems for these respondents and participants as well as a potential site of support and solidarity. More generally, community forms both the content and the context that is negotiated by the respondents in these interviews and their daily lives.
Theme Three: Barriers to community action

A third theme concerned the absence of community collective action and often contained the outworking and consequences of elements of the previous themes. From the community group perspective, lack of action was often attributed to the negative experiences of the local community in previous engagements with local authorities as well as fear of the other criminal elements of the community:

Extract 6: Community Group 6: ‘People just didn’t want to know anymore’

I Yeah and you were saying that you noticed a dip in people’s I guess dealings with community and that what do you think brought about that? Why is there a sense of that, or a lack of a community spirit at the moment?

R I suppose you know there’s a lot of factors, there’s a lot of factors and I’m never quite sure what the real one is at the end of the day, but some of them include you know I suppose it’s the lack of kind of, the State agencies that are responsible say for housing and responsible for, say such as Guards, Limerick City Council have neglected the communities and certainly have, you know, I suppose ‘neglected’, yeah it is the right [word], you know. And I suppose housing policy you know, putting people into houses and even particularly this area that was one of the factors that contributed to the kind of a fall of the area really was putting people in who were for want of a better word drug dealers. I mean they put them in and then a whole series of events sparked from just by doing that to kind of the destruction of a community. And people started to fear. People don’t and won’t ring the Guards for fear and there’s a huge, there’s a huge intimidation and fear factor and people just didn’t want to know anymore.
In this lengthy extract, the community worker is giving an account of the degeneration of local community. Here, in addition to the ill thought-out housing policies that are argued to have introduced criminality into these areas, the respondent mentions the consequences of community division and stigmatisation. On the one hand, the residents are faced with neglectful and ill-advised authorities. On the other, they cannot act as a single community for fear of reprisal from the criminal elements.

From the perspective of residents, community action was rarely reported. When it was mentioned, the focus was on the legitimacy of the cause rather than the efficacy of the action. In the following extract a local residents gives a detailed account of action taken to ensure delivery of basic services (running water):

Extract 7. Residents Interview 6: ‘If there was a few of them in the same situation…’

R1 We had water but only a dribble, we had no heating or

I And who, who takes care of that so when that happens to you?

R2 Well the Regeneration we had to go to them and complain but they were saying that it was our own fault because we were privately owned houses

I Right so that ye had to look out to fix it yourselves?

R2 We had to fix ourselves, they wanted us to fix it ourselves but there was a whole row here from my house up to the block that had no water so we had to fight.

I Alright so was it a group of you came together?

R1&R3(together) Yeah, yeah

I Would you find if there are any other kind of community problems like the water or like anything like that would you find that people would group together to sort it out or is it sort of left for each person themselves to look after themselves?
R2 If there was a few of them in the same situation they probably would.

R1 There’s other people now in that situation on the other side and when I done the survey to see who had no water before I went down to the Regeneration they were all okay but they’re not now and they’re beginning to form over there so I think it’s just ‘needs must’.

Here the issue being discussed is the consequences of the demolition of local abandoned houses for the remaining residents. Previously demolitions disrupted the water supply to private home owners and here some of the residents affected are talking about the impact upon them. Also, the division between homeowners and social housing occupants in these local areas was a salient one and often co-articulated with residents distinctions between decent and socially irresponsible elements of their communities. Hence the refusal of the local authorities to help these homeowners in the delivery of the most basic of amenities was a matter of much bitterness and taken as evidence of the government’s prejudice against the entire community.

What is particularly notable throughout the extract is that the residents are avoiding adopting a community identity in their talk of this collective action. Although the demolition programme affects the entire local area and the residents are to a degree interdependent for receiving their services, the collective action is described as limited to those directly involved. Due to the deeply fragmented nature of the local neighbourhood, there is no report of more widespread support from other residents. Likewise when asked directly about the basis of collective action in the area, the residents report that this is conducted on an issue-by-issue basis by those directly affected. In other words there is no suggestion for common identity basis for the undertaking of collective action.
In terms of more politicised local community activity, few participants reported being involved in or even knowing of local community action groups. There was a single exception to this broader pattern of inactivity where in one of the residents’ interviews respondents reported being proactively engaged in politicised activity. Even then, the expectation was that their efforts would fail:

Extract 8: Residents Interview 5: ‘They don’t want to listen to it’

I Yeah, and why do you think they’re being ignored or excluded from
R1 Because you’ve got jumped up [inaudible]
R2 Because they talk and they tell the truth to what’s going on
R1 Yes, and they don’t want to listen to it, that crowd down there, because you’re
giving them paperwork, and half of them might say I don’t even know how to
read or write properly
R2 Or ‘get rid of him, he’s opening his mouth, get rid of him’

Here we see that the respondents expect a negative reaction from the local council to their community interest group, which they present in contrast as ‘telling the truth’. Specifically the administration of the local city council is presented as incompetent and obstructionist in their response. The basis of this negative depiction however lies in the past experiences reported by the respondents elsewhere in the interview and here expressed as expectations of negative and dismissive treatment from the council. The ideal role of the council, to hear and facilitate the feelings and wishes of the local population are contrasted with the expected response of not wanting to know. Finally, the reluctance to engage in action could also be articulated as a desire to be unnoticed or invisible to the local authorities.
Extract 9. Residents’ Interview 1: ‘They didn’t even know [this area] was on their books’

I Yeah, so would you say that ahm, I mean, you’ve both been here a long time now, would you say it’s changed, the area’s changed?

R1 It has

I Over the last ten years even?

R2 when I first moved into [deprived area] below, we had a community, eh people would actually pay fifty pence, each week, towards the upkeep of a lawnmower, ahm, ladders, a few bits and pieces that were needed round the place, sweeping brushes, and people cleaned and tidied, kept the place very well, even had a reference from [named individual] who is a corporation official, who said one time that they didn’t even know [this area] was on their books, that the people seemed to paid their rent, and that was it,

This extract illustrates that while individual cooperation is presented as desirable, collective voice is not. Indeed this is articulated from the viewpoint of a government official whose recommendation or ‘reference’ is, ironically, that he was not aware of the area. In this way the response of residents to media and institutionalised prejudice was often to avoid and psychologically distance themselves from their stigmatised identity, even to the extent of desiring an absence of representation within the civic arena.

General Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate the community identity factors that act to enhance well-being and promote community action in the face of stigmatisation. While there is a significant body of research suggesting that identification with a group is typically associated with enhanced ability to cope with disadvantage, less is known
about how this relates to collective action (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). This is partly due to the complex network of personal, motivational, social structural, experiential and group level factors leading to collective action and partly due to the variability in real world groups and forms of collective action (Wright, 2009). The present study identified a positive relationship between identification and well-being within a stigmatised community, finding firstly that identification led to well-being through perceptions of collective efficacy but that neither collective efficacy nor perceptions of support led to collective action. Secondly, qualitative analysis of strategically sampled interviews indicated a complex pattern whereby stigmatisation reportedly undermines the coping mechanisms as well as collective action within this community.

At the most basic level, our research provides further evidence of the utility of the social identity approach to well-being and coping in real life groups. The relationship between community identification and well-being was positive and strong and adds to the growing support for the impact of group level processes on individual level health benefits. This is notably even the case in these local communities which have been isolated and stigmatised and experience a high level of deprivation and criminality.

Also, the research specifically provides support for the collective coping mechanisms posited to deal with the perception and experience of disadvantage. We found that in this community, higher levels of identification were associated with both perceptions of social support and collective efficacy. However, collective efficacy, or the perception that the group can cope with adversity, was largely responsible for this elevated well-being. From study two it would appear that one reason for this could be the reported effects of stigma in undermining social relations between group members.
In line with the work of Kellizi et al., (2009), who demonstrated how a spoiled identity can isolate targets from their communities, here a spoiled identity could work to problematise social support. Therefore while increased identity may lead to an increased perception of social support, the positive evaluation of this support and its association with wellbeing may be more tenuous.

Furthermore, the research examined an outstanding question raised by Outten et al. (2009) as to whether the processes underpinning the protection of well-being also contribute to the genesis of collective action: our mediation analyses suggest that two separate processes govern coping and action. Insofar as collective efficacy has been linked to the ability of the group to mobilise in order to change their situation, this distinction may seem puzzling. However if we consider that the measure examining collective efficacy (taken from Reicher & Haslam, 2006) examines how the group member imagines coping with problems facing the group, rather than proactively attempting to change the circumstances of the group, we might not expect this measure to predict collective action. Indeed we could initially speculate that this is particularly the case in marginalised and stigmatised communities where collective behaviour is pathologised (Devereux et al., 2011; Warr, 2005).

Our qualitative study bears out these suggested interpretations. Residents and community workers did occasionally report giving and receiving support at local community level as well as instances in which elements of the community responded effectively to external threats. However, these basic collective coping strategies were complicated and undermined by a series of interlinked factors. Prejudice and discrimination from external sources, including government authorities, were reported to lead to personal and collective disengagement from local community identity.
Furthermore, the community was not understood as a single entity, as residents and community workers strove to cope with the co-existence of a criminal element within these areas (Warr, 2005). In effect the community environment itself was paradoxically a source of stress and fear as well as of support and coordinated action. In other words the community formed the aversive context as well as the basis of the stigmatised identity. Finally, as a consequence of past negative experience and the negative expectations of residents in relation to local authority, collective action was rarely articulated in community identity terms.

Conversely, we noted that where help and support was reported, this was not under the auspices of community identity or at least not the identities with negative reputations. Likewise where community action was reported, this was undertaken in relation to specific causes and involving specific constituencies affected by the problem (e.g. those affected by a water shortage). In this way action was presented as a practical necessity rather than the mobilisation of a spoiled identity. Together this helps explain the poor predictive ability of identification, social support, and collective efficacy upon community action in the survey results above. At the same time it explains why collective efficacy, or responding to a practical threat to the group, is understood as an acceptable activity, in contrast to proactive identity-expressive community action.

Of course the inherent limitations of the present research mean that much more remains to be done in order to provide a definitive account of residential community identity processes and responses to stigmatisation. Over and above the limitations inherent in cross sectional survey research, our analyses indicate that a greater degree of specificity is needed when measuring collective efficacy. Specifically, a clearer distinction between the group’s ability to cope with threat and its ability to change their
social position are needed. This distinction is central to the social identity understanding
of social change (Tajfel, 1978; Reicher, 1996) and is vital to the study of how
communities can transform (rather than tolerate) their social circumstances.

Moreover, the qualitative research outlined here is limited in its scope and in
effect relies upon accounts of experience rather than experience itself. Further research
should focus on the actual real-life day-to-day occurrences of prejudice and
stigmatisation which shape the community’s identity, especially with those in authority
(Tyler & Blader, 2003). A more detailed ethnographic account of these experiences as
well as the actions of the community to cope with and transform its situation would
shed greater light on the lived reality of community identity.

Bearing these limitations in mind, the practical implications of our research are
twofold. As noted above, the community, even in stigmatised and marginalised
neighbourhoods, is a resource for well-being. Urban renewal often ignores social
development in favour of physical and economic regeneration. Our research indicates
that to do this wastes the valuable collective psychological resources already present
within the community. Secondly, in order to harness these collective resources, urban
renewal needs to directly tackle the prejudice which undermines the potential coping
processes and confront stigmatisation at institutional as well as media level. This
requires local authorities and service providers to identify and eradicate institutional
prejudice and to politically engage the community in a positive and empowering way.
In other words, the authorities need to change the context of community life and foster
community identity development in order to release the social and psychological
resources of the group.
Table 1: Correlations between variables

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Adjusted $R^2 = .17$, $p<.001$

Figure 1: Multiple mediation test of the relationship between community identity and psychological well-being

*** $p<.001$
Bootstrap Results for Mediated Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>ME (SE)</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Mediated Effect</td>
<td>-.72 (.19)</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>-.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>-.20 (.16)</td>
<td>-.52</td>
<td>.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective Efficacy</td>
<td>-.52 (.11)</td>
<td>-.81</td>
<td>-.32</td>
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Table 2: Magnitude and confidence intervals of the multiple mediation effects of community identity with social support and collective efficacy as the mediators for psychological well-being.

ME = mediated effect, SE = standard error, CI = confidence interval, SS = social support, CE = collective efficacy.

Boldface type highlights a significant effect as determined by the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval (95% CI).
Figure 2: Multiple mediation test of the relationship between community identity and community action

***p<.001

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>.17 (.13)</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
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Table 3: Magnitude and confidence intervals of the mediation effect of community identity with social support as the mediator for community action.

ME = mediated effect, SE = standard error, CI = confidence interval, SS = social support.
References


Limerick City Development Board (2001). *City analysis*. Available at: http://www.limerickcitydb.ie/RAPID/NorthCityArea/AreaProfile


