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The Limits of Local Identity

Alternative models of local governance make different assumptions about whether the relationship between citizens and their locality is affective, instrumental or irrelevant. Were people emotion**ally committed** to their locality and willing to contribute to it, or did they expect **benefits** from it, or did they think in purely individualistic and/or national terms and therefore not in terms of locality at all? In this chapter we examine the evidence on public commitment to localities, especially to the localities defined by the structure of elected local government, though we also look at the degree of public commitment to wider regions.

Conflicting assumptions about the significance of locality underpin alternative theories of local governance. Even if people are not strongly rooted in their localities they may still need local services, but their attitude to those services will either be that of individual consumers or of citizens of the (national) state. Their attitude will not be that of members of a local community and the concept of local citizenship will be empty or irrelevant. Clarke and Stewart argue, however, that ‘the primary role’ of local authorities is ‘local government and not local administration [and] that role must have its basis in citizenship’.\(^1\) And in their view, ‘the structure of local government should be based, not on the alleged efficiencies of administration, but on the perceived and felt community of place [our emphasis].’\(^2\)

There are some reasons why psychological commitment to localities should be strong compared to other commitments. Locality structures personal experience and face-to-face contacts. To those who live in the Jesmond ward of Newcastle upon Tyne, Jesmond – and perhaps Newcastle – is a daily reality while Europe is an abstraction.
But there are also very good reasons why psychological commitments to localities should be weak compared to other commitments. The smaller the locality the more likely people are to leave it, either temporarily or permanently. Most residents of Jesmond probably leave that neighbourhood every week to work, to go shopping, to visit friends or to go to the cinema. They are likely to leave Newcastle somewhat less frequently, though the huge Metro Centre shopping and entertainment complex lies outside Newcastle, just across the Tyne, in Gateshead. Conversely, many residents of Newcastle would have lived outside Newcastle at some time in their lives. By contrast, relatively few would have lived for long outside Britain, and few would have moved from one religious faith to another. So a local community – as defined by local government boundaries – is likely to be less stable, as well as being less bounded, than the national community or a religious community.

Moreover, British local authority boundaries have been revised quite frequently in recent decades, with major reforms in London during the 1960s, throughout the rest of the country in the 1970s, in metropolitan England in the 1980s and throughout the rest of the country again in the 1990s. So even if people stayed rooted to one place, local government boundaries would frequently have shifted past them.

Objective links to locality

For analytic purposes, we divided Britain into ten regions: Scotland, Wales, London, the South East, South West, North East and North West of England, the Midlands, East Anglia and Yorkshire/Humberside. In our survey, 92 per cent of the public said they had been born in Britain, but only 67 per cent had been born in the region where they now lived and only 36 per cent in the local council district where they now lived.

On the other hand, 80 per cent had lived for more than 20 years in their region and 60 per cent had lived that long in their district; 47 per cent said all their relatives lived in the region though only 19 per cent said all their relatives lived in their district; and 59 per cent said all their friends lived in the region though only 34 per cent said all their friends lived in their district. Thus objective links to the region were 31 per cent stronger than links to the district when measured in terms of birthplace, 28 per cent stronger when measured in terms of relatives, and 25 per cent stronger when measured in terms of friends. For a large majority of the public, the local council