Participatory Network Mapping for Public Action[1]

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Abstract

In this chapter, we present findings from a participatory mapping project undertaken in the Black Caribbean community in the London Borough of Lambeth commissioned to create a Systems Map of community support available to unemployed people and identify the barriers and leverage points to their economic engagement. We introduce the case study and go on to outline our design philosophy to enable the community to find its voice using participatory mapping and storytelling. We show how we applied this philosophy in the Lambeth case study. Through storytelling the community took stock of its issues and the available support services. The stories and additional desk research formed the basis of a community support network map. We then went on to develop a participatory mapping meta-model of bridging the community-institution support divide, outlining design dimensions to further strengthen community support.

Introduction

In this chapter, we demonstrate the role of participatory community network mapping as a tool for addressing the wicked societal problems of social and economic inequality that persist for people in marginalised communities across a wide range of spatial and temporal scales and settings. Frequently embedded in the post-industrial and post-colonial geographies and histories of communities, such deeply entrenched problems are a complex interlinked set of issues that perpetuate cultural and social disadvantage and the power relations that sustain them and as such they can appear to be intractable. Like communities everywhere they are made up of complex social networks of relationships, interactions and connections embedded in the mesh of wider structures of the communities and agencies they interconnect with. These networks include the micro-scale informal networks of community members and local groups, meso-scale networks of community support agencies and NGOs and macro-scale networks of institutional support services and the wider societal context. In attempting to unpick these complexities there is a need for tools and processes that are attuned to the specific needs of the community, that can identify the networks of the community support ecosystem and the agencies and stakeholders that operate in the wider social and public sector

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domains to help build collaborative solutions. In the midst of this complexity people seeking solutions to their problems can find themselves lost in the bewildering landscape of fragmented service provision and access to information, help and advice. Equally service providers struggle to connect with the communities they are supposed to serve.   These boundaries between community members, community support services and the wider networks of external institutions and agencies can be hard to bridge.

What they need is a map!

We introduce the case study which was commissioned to create a systems map of the community support ecosystem available to unemployed people in the Black Caribbean and other minority communities in the London Borough of Lambeth and identify the barriers and leverage points to their economic engagement. Next, we outline our design philosophy to enable the community to find its voice using participatory mapping and storytelling. We show how we applied this philosophy in the Lambeth case study in which the community takes stock of its issues and the available support services through storytelling, using this as an input for map making; creating a community support network map; and initial steps for redesigning community support together with the stakeholders. We present a participatory mapping meta-model of bridging the Community-Institution support divide which outlines dimensions to further explore using mapping and storytelling for stronger community support.

The Lambeth Case Study

To illustrate the potential of participatory community network mapping as an approach for addressing these challenges we present the findings from an urban case study from research undertaken with The Ubele Initiative[2] a Black diaspora organisation who commissioned a social systems map as part of the 'Black on Track' initiative, a project that aimed to address issues of unemployment and underemployment and the deeper systemic changes needed to remedy the barriers that are limiting the opportunities, prosperity, and well-being of the community (Brayshay and Mackie, 2023).

Today Lambeth's Black communities are struggling to overcome a legacy of economic marginalisation that can be traced back to the early days of the 1940-50s Windrush[3,]   when people arrived from the Caribbean Islands and West Africa in response to the British government's call for workers to come to help rebuild post-war Britain.   Decades of social and racial inequality followed their arrival. Located in the complex entanglements of post-colonial history, Lambeth's Black communities have relied on local councils and central government to deliver public services and provide a safety net for support in times of hardship. However, as central government austerity policies have continued to reduce state support, many communities have found themselves falling into a gap, neither having the top-down protection of state provision nor the bottom-up grassroots resource networks within the community   (Mould, 2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic showed all too clearly that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people have been acutely affected by pre-existing inequalities across a range of areas, including health, employment, accessing Universal Credit, housing, and the no recourse to public funds policy (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2020). In response to this crisis community-led initiatives are working to self-organise and build community resourcefulness that recognises the agency needed to be present within a community to resist oppression and marginalisation (MacKinnon and

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[2] https://www.ubele.org/
[3] The MV Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks on 22 June 1948.

Derickson, 2013). This has resulted in new approaches to co-production and collaborative forms of co-working and co-design to social problem-solving and building a more equitable civil society (Chatterton, 2022, Sendra, 2023). A major challenge is one of building bridges across the gaps between an isolated community, and its community organisations and external institutions to maximise the social capital available to them.

A further barrier facing both service providers and service users in their capacity-building efforts is the fragmented nature of the intra-community and institutional/public support ecosystem. Although partially embedded in each other's networks, significant gaps emerge as the community struggles to find the available resources to help meet its needs, and organisations and institutions in the support ecosystem also struggle to reach those most in need. Previous research undertaken in Lambeth's Black communities with a specific focus on evaluating dissatisfaction with council services (Equinox, 2013) and building capacity in the Community and Voluntary Sector (Equinox, 2017) addressed issues of major concern and the availability of support services in the Borough. Unemployed people who took part in the research reported that a lack of ready access to the job market was affecting them not only financially but also impacting on their pride, dignity, and mental and physical health.

It is into this relatively uncharted territory of Lambeth's Black community support networks that we developed a map-making and map-reading methodology to begin to visualise its social support ecosystem and identify pathways to bridge the gaps between the community and institutional support networks. It comprised of two participatory mapping workshops with members of the Black on Track project. These comprised of a storytelling workshop to discover participants' experiences and perceptions of the community and the support network which formed the basis of issue and support network maps. Additional desktop internet searches for service providers supplemented the support network data set. This was followed by a 'sensemaking' workshop to explore pathways to the support network identified in the mapping.

Finding the Community Voice: Participatory Community Network Mapping and Storytelling

The map design process is inspired by the CommunitySensor methodology for participatory community network mapping of de Moor (2017, 2018) who describes it as a core communal sensemaking activity, a participatory process of capturing, visualising, and analysing community network relationships and interactions. A process in which a community maps its objectives, participants, and resources to give meaning to their collective experiences and to gain an understanding of who they are and what they aspire to. An essential part of the process includes mapping aspirations as well as identifying community issues, assets, and resources so that the mapping becomes a collective re-imagining not only to make sense of the community but to build a collective vision for the future. Key to this mapping approach is that the community does not just map itself but also the wider context outside of its boundaries to enable the community to collaboratively design solution directions for the wicked problems it encounters. By explicating and jointly making sense of not just community needs but also the collaboration ecosystem in which it lives and works, collective, scalable, and impactful solutions can be woven together with stakeholders both inside and outside of the community, including the institutions it needs to engage with. However, empowering the community remains of the essence. The starting point for the participatory mapping and collaborative sensemaking of the CommunitySensor methodology

is for the community to define its needs on and in its own terms, including both problems and capabilities, resources, and any solutions they already have. In other words, the community needs to find its own voice first.

The first step was to identify the communities needs and capabilities. However, just mapping the resource base would do little to incorporate the subtle interrelationships between the community's needs, help identify leverage points to economic engagement nor address the many socio-cultural barriers to realise community support.

Undertaking work in communities with people who are ethnically, culturally, or economically different from ourselves provokes us to think deeply about issues of positionality, and situated knowledge production (Pratt, 2009; Kincaid, 2022). Recent research by Black geographers has focused attention on the complex spatialities of Black life, those of decolonisation, racism, marginalisation, justice, and representation, evidenced in the continued economic and social marginalisation of communities such as Lambeth. Our research practice is guided by the work of Fricker (2019), Hawthorne (2019). Kidd et al., (2017) and particularly Walker and Boni (2020) who highlight issues of epistemic in/justice as foundational to a reflexive, inclusive and decolonial approach to knowledge production and its importance in participatory research practice.

To this end, we step back so that the community can speak for itself through the medium of storytelling to discover its own concepts, language and proto issues as well as strengths and capabilities that can then be further situated, discussed, validated and co-owned by the community. Our storytelling approach is based on the principles of Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) which uses storytelling as a tool for communities to make sense of complex situations and work towards socially innovative solutions for problem-solving, focusing on weaving together individual perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experiences (Kurtz, 2013; Copeland & de Moor, 2018).

Step 1 - Community Stock-taking: Telling the Stories

The first participatory workshop aimed to explore with participants the barriers and challenges they had faced that had brought them to their current situation and their needs and aspirations to plan for a better future for themselves and the community.

The research tools used in the storytelling were derived from persona creation and user journey mapping, frequently used in the design of web-based products and services (Følstad and Kvale, 2018). Personas are fictional characters created by participants based on real life user experience. The creation of fictionalised characters as a vehicle for storytelling allows participants to transfer their very personal experiences to the character that can be less revealing for those who may not want to disclose sensitive information publicly. The workshop took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore had to be held online. A group of twenty participants were divided into smaller breakout groups of five or six participants. Each group was asked to create a persona that was a typical character from their community challenged by unemployment. Participants then took their personas on a user journey drawn from the experiences that had brought them to their current situation, the obstacles they face going forward as well as their aspirations and goals.

Two persona examples distilled from the storytelling workshop will be used to illustrate the methodology.

Persona Women's Voices 'Lydia'

Lydia's story speaks to issues of racial and gender discrimination experienced by women in the Black community. Her key issues are single parenting, gang culture, police surveillance of Black youth, affordable childcare, and balancing work and childcare commitments. Her aspirations are to find a pathway out of zero-hour, low-paid work into self-employment and achieve a better work-life balance for herself and her children. Lydia's story illustrates gender and racial discriminatory issues encountered by women in the Black community.

Persona Older Unemployed Men 'Sam':

Sam has been made redundant and is now the primary carer for his wife. Redundancy and his domestic situation have cut him off from both the financial benefits and social networks of work. Sam's key issues are depression, poor mental and physical health, isolation, loneliness, lack of ambition, and financial stress. Sam's story illustrates the complexity of his interlinking health and support needs to help him into active and productive employment.

These examples of personas and user journeys illustrate the complexity of unemployment-related needs and ways to address them, which are much more intricate than simply matching an unemployed person up to the local Job Centre as would often be seen as the 'quick fix, whereas the community can and should be a catalyst in finding support. The storytelling workshop generated a range of issues and barriers experienced by participants summarised in broad thematic clusters in Table 1.

Community	Thematic Cluster	Issues in Community Terms
	Health Issues	Alcoholism, autism, addiction, drugs, fitness for work, mental health, obesity, physical health
	Social/Cultural Issues	Anti-social behaviour, dysfunctional families, food poverty, gang culture, gender discrimination, isolation, knife crime, lack of parenting skills, loneliness, low expectations in education, low expectations in family, no entrepreneurial culture, racial discrimination, racism, unsafe streets, single parents
	Personal Issues	Lack of ambition, lack of confidence, lack of education,
Institutional	Service Barriers	Access to housing, access to local jobs, access to business advice, gentrification, local poverty, lack of tech/digital skills, policing of Black youth, poor local economy, poor local environment

Table 1. Issues identified by the community in the storytelling workshop

Lydia and Sam each have support needs and issues some of which they can find within the Lambeth Black community, but they also need institutional support from public services such as Healthcare, Employment, Education, Training and Social Services, and they need to know

where to find them.

Significant findings from the workshop were: Participants were not aware of the range of support available to them and that that a great deal of service provision is invisible to them; conversely the council know   they offer so much and that people can't find them; as a result institutional services may not be in line with the complex needs identified by the community; all of which demonstrates the need for service redesign.

Step 2- Mapping the Community Support Networks

Moving on to visualise and collectively redesign the community support network began with creating a composite map linking the resource base mapping of community and institutional support networks together with the issues mapping from the storytelling workshop. It shows which community-based organisations provide community support around which issues. It also includes the same for the institutional services available, although that is still only an incomplete and partial view through the eyes of the community, as the institutions themselves were not yet included in the process.   The composite map showed that the Lambeth support ecosystem is a loosely coordinated set of organisations; some of which collaborate with each other and whose members have different goals, command different resources and follow different processes. It includes community organisations and groups, such as community centres, local voluntary groups and community resources such as schools, nurseries, libraries and NGOs and mutual aid groups such as Age UK and Alcoholics Anonymous who provide services in the borough. Institutional state services that relate to the participant's issues are also included in the resource base mapping such as Lambeth Borough Council, Unemployment Services, the NHS and Metropolitan Police (note the map is dynamic and content is increasing as the project continues).
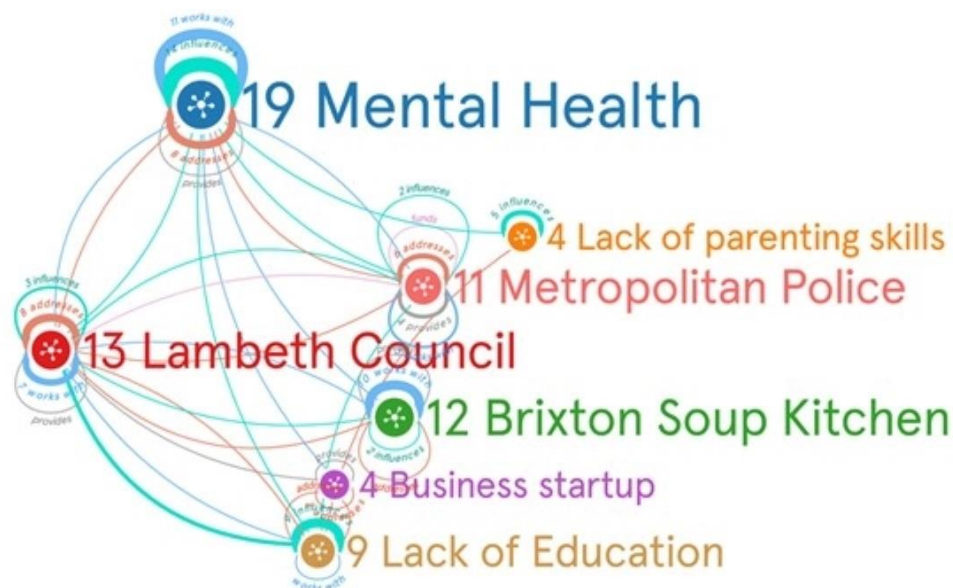

Figure 1. A snapshot from the composite map of community issues and support services. For See Brayshay and Mackie, (2023) for the network maps.

The composite map thus visualises the overall structure of the network and can be used to trace development pathways for both individuals and organisations by connecting personal needs to support organisations and vice versa. As such, apart from taking stock of support provided by the community itself, it represents a first step towards cross-boundary knowledge sharing between the 'life world' of the community and the 'systems world' of service providers. Future work with representatives of these institutions themselves will explore how they contribute to building service bridges into the community from their point of view.

Step 3 - Redesigning Community Support

An essential next step in the process was to make the outcomes from the map-making accessible and usable for collaborative 'sensemaking' with the community itself. To this end, data cards with details of the issues and organisations on the map were generated by the Graph Commons mapping software[4]. The cards formed the basis of an iterative Domino-style game as a collaborative exercise in which participants used the cards to explore the community support ecosystem by creating existing and potential combinations of issues and organisations and discussing them in the group, jointly coming up with suggestions for redesigning community support provided by both community organisations and institutional service providers.

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions resulted in opportunities to play the beta version of the game being limited to an online workshop. Future envisioned in-person sessions with the community and different stakeholder situations will allow for more direct forms of engagement with the cards, which is especially important in marginalised community settings for building trust and a sense of community.

Now that the community is finding its voice and its resources how do we continue? Still missing is how to build bridges into the world of the institutions that are or should be servicing the community, and vice versa. Our current composite map focuses on mapping issues with community capabilities and institutional support services as identified. However, it does not say anything about how to redesign community support that aligns community capabilities with additional institutional services. In Figure 2, we present a participatory mapping metamodel that we designed to capture and extend the community support design dimensions to be put on the map. These dimensions contain ideas about providing and improving community support consisting of community capabilities, institutional services, and their amalgams.

The five main design dimensions of the model are:

1. Community Capabilities: Community organisations provide more or less informal capabilities/opportunities for meeting citizens' needs.
2. Community Collaboration: Community organisations working together more effectively and efficiently to provide better community-owned support.
3. User Service Pathways: How citizens find and interact with institutional community support services.

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[4] All maps were created using Graph Commons software (https://graphcommons.com/)

4. Community Support Touchpoints; Support interfaces where the community and institutional worlds meet, matching community-owned support capabilities with institutional services.
5. Service Leverage Points: Institutional service (re)design for providing more integrated service palettes that better meet community support needs.
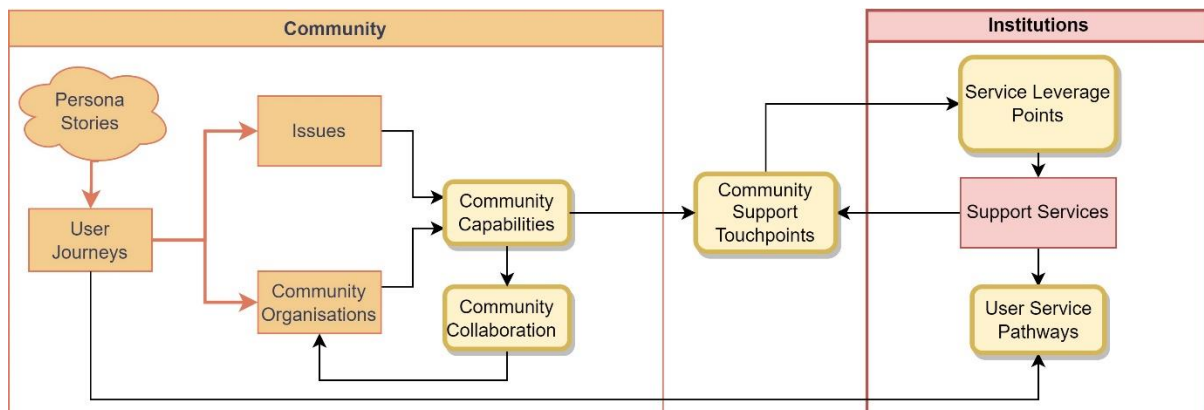

Figure 2. A participatory mapping meta-model of bridging the community-institution support divide

A narrative using the persona of Sam   illustrates how the model could hypothetically be applied as a source of inspiration for future mapping and sensemaking exercises that would help to inspire ideas for community support redesign, amplifying existing community resources, and better aligning community-owned support with institutional services. The persona narrative begins with an initial starting point within the Black community's capabilities, Sam joining the local Domino Club [Community Capability]. There is potential to build powerful collaborations that weave community organisations into intra-community networks. An example could be that the Brixton Soup Kitchen setting up in the Lyon Lloyd Community Centre has the potential to reach more clients who come there for other activities [Community Collaboration]. Every month in the Community Centre, Age UK holds an advice session just prior to the Soup Kitchen starting to deliver food [Community Support Touchpoint]. While Sam is waiting for his soup, he gets to talk to the Age UK representative who introduces him to their Lambeth My Social programme which offers a range of social and advice services for elderly people   [User Service Pathway]. The Age UK representative also directs Sam to Mind, a UK mental health charity, who can give Sam more personal advice and support to help him with his depression. By piggybacking on the institutional capacity of Age UK, in this way Mind can reach many more clients than they otherwise could [Service Leverage Point].

Such network weaving, which the mapping project aims to address, will help build Black equity and result in a much more effective support system within the community. Reaching beyond the community network to bridge the gap into the institutional-state sector, service touchpoints draw institutional services into the ecosystem creating possibilities for intra-community and inter-community collaborations that are needed to strengthen the community support ecosystem. The service leverage points are directed towards possibilities for service redesign in which institutional state sector provision is also more integrated and connected.

Further mapping of the networks of organisations and individuals in Lambeth, including research organisations, community organisations and government services aims to increase connectivity and share knowledge that can impact systems change at community, institutional and combined levels. It will have the ability to encourage rich webs of connections so that there are always alternative support pathways available.

Conclusions

Marginalised communities face many issues, but also have many capabilities and strengths to address them. Communities are not islands, but part of a much larger societal ecosystem. Many institutional services exist that could better benefit communities, if only the divide between the community and institutional service provision could be bridged. Better community support is thus a resultant of the community being better able to identify its needs and capabilities and more effectively engage with relevant institutional service providers for additional support. In this, it is of the essence that the community can find its own voice to engage with its surrounding institutions on an equal footing.

We have presented a participatory community mapping approach consisting of a community first identifying its needs and existing support through storytelling, then creating a composite map matching issues with potential community and institutional resources, and subsequently engaging with the community and ideally institutional representatives to redesign community support. We have introduced a case study in which we used this approach to help the Black community in Lambeth to co-create better community support for its unemployed people. We outlined the next steps that could and will be taken in future work to further extend the approach, in particular for aligning the (re)design of community capabilities with institutional service mixes.

All too often, communities and institutions see each other as 'the other side' however, they need and can work together to create joint, more sustainable, impactful solutions for many of the wicked societal problems communities face. We have begun to map the uncharted 'territory' of Lambeth's Black community networks, and we are just at the beginning of our exploration of how participatory mapping can help bridge current community-institution divides ,also characteristic of other societal problem domains like climate action. We hope our tale from the lived experience of the Lambeth community inspires some to join us in our quest.

Endnotes

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