

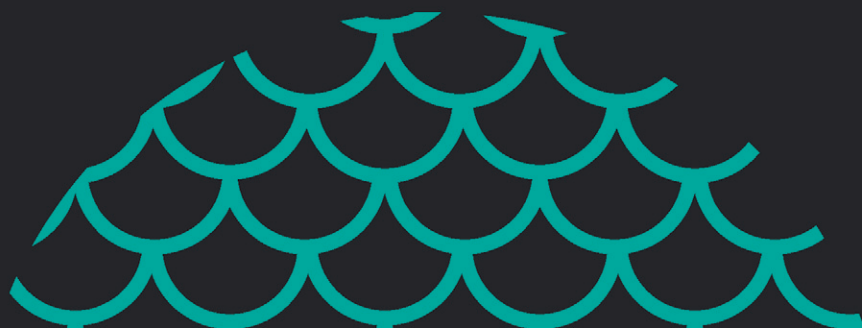


EMERALD POINTS

CREATING SPACES FOR AN AGEING SOCIETY

The Role of Critical Social
Infrastructure

SOPHIE YARKER



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The Role of Critical Social
Infrastructure

BY

SOPHIE YARKER

The University of Manchester, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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THINKING INFRASTRUCTURALLY ABOUT AN AGEING SOCIETY

Upon hearing the word ‘infrastructure’ your mind might immediately go to the hard and physical infrastructures of roads, dams, communication networks and power plants, the type of infrastructures often referred to as ‘critical’ signifying their central role in keeping the economy going. This book is concerned with a particular type of infrastructure, social infrastructure, the places and organisations that keep the *social* economy going by allowing us to have social interactions, develop social connections and maintain relationships. Eric Klinenberg (2018, p. 17) defines social infrastructure expansively as;

Public institutions, such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools...sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other spaces that invite people into the public realm. Community organisations, including churches and civic associations, act as social infrastructures when they have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art and other consumer goods. Commercial establishments can also be important parts of the social infrastructure.

Much like its physical counterpart, social infrastructure is largely taken for granted by the majority of the population. Infrastructure is in the background, keeping things going and going mostly unnoticed. That is, until it fails. Ask yourself how often do you notice and comment upon a well-surfaced and maintained road compared to how often you notice and comment on one riddled with potholes? Or how often do you spend time thinking about the privilege of having electricity in your house? The answer is you probably don’t until there is a power failure. When infrastructure fails or becomes absent

altogether is when we notice it the most and when it can, all of a sudden, become a pressing concern.

The coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020, and the social distancing measures brought into place as a result, forced us all to reflect upon the spaces in which we have our social interactions in a way we had perhaps not considered before. As well as no longer being able to meet with friends and family in public places, many of us also found ourselves cut off from the multiple smaller, more fleeting and seemingly more inconsequential interactions we have on a daily basis. We no longer saw the same familiar faces at the bus stop on our commute to the office, for example, nor were we able to exchange a few words with those we see at the gym. Instead, for many of us the sphere of face-to-face social interactions contracted to include a limited set of interactions perhaps with our immediate neighbours, with those we might come to recognise over time in the local park or with the staff in shops nearest to us. The majority of research discussed in this book on how we use public space was published before 2020; however, this research still has important lessons for how we might think about social infrastructure differently as we start to recover economically and socially from the pandemic. The unprecedented measures taken to limit social contact in our everyday lives has caused us all to pause and think about what social interactions do we value the most and what are the important spaces in our communities that facilitate these interactions.

However, the undervaluing of our social infrastructure runs deep. Thinking in terms of ‘physical’ and ‘social’ infrastructure might itself be unhelpful if we are trying to increase the profile and significance of social infrastructure. Dividing the two can serve to reproduce a false division between the relative importance of different types of infrastructures with the ‘hard’ physical infrastructures of roads and power plants being seen as vital to the economy and social infrastructures such as libraries and parks thought of as nice to have but not essential.

The relative value of social and hard infrastructures is also complicated by the fact that it can be more difficult to identify, measure and quantify social impacts. The impacts of a new high speed rail link, for example, can be measured in passenger numbers or the number of new businesses relocations. Measuring the number of social interactions and the value of the networks they might go on to produce is more elusive. The more subjective nature of social benefits, either to the individual user or to the wider community, means that they can be more difficult and problematic to measure.

These issues of subjectivity versus objectivity and the respective credibility that can be associated are mirrored in discussions around the natural and

social sciences. The labelling of the former as the ‘hard’ sciences has brought with it the assumption that natural sciences are more complex and specialist, whilst social sciences are easier to comprehend. Duncan Watts at Microsoft Research in New York City has pointed out: ‘Everyone has experience of being human, and so the vast majority of findings in social science coincide with something that we have either experienced or can imagine experiencing’ (quoted in *Nature* editorial, 2012). However instead of this being seen as a virtue, it can often serve to undermine the value of social science research. We see similar accusations levelled at the qualitative methodologies that are more commonly associated with the social sciences with questions being raised around their reliability, rigour and susceptibility to bias. In short, the social sciences and the qualitative methodologies have a history of being viewed as more inconsequential than natural sciences. We see a similarly unhelpful division when we talk about skills in the workplace. Social skills such as being a good listener or being able to develop positive working relationships are often referred to as ‘soft’ skills which seems to position them as somehow lesser in importance than Information Technology (IT) or presentation skills, for example. It seems that to use ‘social’ as an adjective is to undermine something’s relative worth and importance. This book argues that the social is critical and that social infrastructure is also critical infrastructure.

THE INFRASTRUCTURAL TURN

This book both draws upon and hopes to contribute to what has been referred to as an infrastructural turn within the social sciences. This is a turn towards an explicit focus on infrastructure as a way of studying and understanding the social world. It has resulted in a new wave of interdisciplinary, and increasingly qualitative, thinking on how the functions and impacts of infrastructures shape countries, regions, cities and neighbourhoods.

Latham & Layton argue that to study social infrastructures is to study ‘one way that the good city might be realised’ (2019, p. 10). By thinking infrastructurally, they continue, social scientists are better placed to ‘consider the kinds and qualities of facilities that allow social life to happen, the kind of sociality that is afforded by them, and how this can be recognised as a public life’ (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 4). For the purposes of this book, thinking infrastructurally allows us to think about the kinds of sociality needed as we age and what facilities and qualities of public spaces can provide opportunities for social connections for older people.

Whilst social infrastructures are important for everyone, Klinenberg argues they are especially important for children, older people and for those whose limited mobility or lack of autonomy binds them more closely to the places where they live. This is especially true for older people living in more economically deprived neighbourhoods (Hickman, 2013). But why are these spaces so important? Klinenberg (2018) stresses social infrastructure is necessary for nurturing public life but also for addressing and preventing some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary urban life; countering social isolation, negotiating difference and creating places for all;

When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when it is degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves.

(Klinenberg, 2018, p. 5)

This was demonstrated most clearly in Klinenberg's analysis of the differences in neighbourhood death rates during the 1995 Chicago heat wave (2015). Studying two low-income neighbourhoods, Klinenberg argued that the significantly lower death rates of one of those neighbourhoods could be attributed to the presence of diverse, good quality and accessible social infrastructure. Conversely, the neighbourhood with higher heat-attributed deaths had very little accessible public space nor amenities. Klinenberg concluded that when community members have more opportunities to bump into one another, exchange pleasantries and become, to some degree, familiar with each other, they are more likely to check on neighbours during a crisis, offer help and assistance and to receive help if it was offered. For Klinenberg, in this case the sociality supported by social infrastructure saved lives.

Several reports have come to similar conclusions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A report measuring the changing nature of community in the United Kingdom looked at both physical assets and civic institutions, as well as less tangible dimensions such as social relationships and positive social norms in communities in the United Kingdom and found that local authority areas with the lowest COVID-19 related death rates also tended to have higher numbers of community-owned assets, more residents who were members of and actively involved in groups and organisations and higher levels of volunteering (Tanner, O'Shaughnessy, Krasniqi, & Blagden, 2020). Better social infrastructure may have translated into more locally based support. A report for the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2021) analysed data from Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK and concluded that places with more community facilities had

higher levels of mutual aid activity during the pandemic. Although the authors of this report caution against taking this as evidence of a direct causal relationship (and that factors such as educational levels and household incomes would need to be taken into consideration too, for example) they do conclude that ‘communities with better social infrastructure find it easier to respond to, withstand and recover from crisis’ (Kelsey & Kenny, 2021, p. 6).

Further research will be needed into how different communities responded to the pandemic, but we can perhaps begin to build a hypothesis that communities with more amenities, parks and public libraries, etc. were better equipped to respond to the crisis because this social infrastructure had facilitated social connections and networks between residents that was able to respond swiftly and provide vital support locally. In the context of ageing populations, fractured societies and alienated communities, an understanding of how we can use the structures in our neighbourhoods to create social connections seems a pressing one. In the context of a global pandemic, it gains even more urgency. Social infrastructure therefore takes on its own a critical role.

Taking an infrastructural approach also provides a way of understanding the elusive concept of community. As a concept, community has a lively albeit complex history. Many texts before this one have attempted to define it and chronicle its development (see Crow, 2018) and the intention is not to replicate any of those discussions here, instead, as part of the introduction to the concept of social infrastructure this chapter will briefly consider how it can be used to study and understand community.

Community can be very loosely defined as a group of people who share something in common. This commonality can be associated with a particular geographical location, shared identity or shared interests. Belonging to or identifying with a community infers some degree of connectedness that Crow describes as ‘underpinning the social solidarity of community members’ (2018, p. 3). This solidarity can form the basis of community-building practices such as co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity. How to operationalise social solidarity and connectedness has been a recurring question for community studies. Social capital, social networks and social cohesion are just some of the conceptual avenues that have been explored. If social connections are the starting point for the formation of community then examining the spaces and places, where social connections are formed, allows us to shed light on the beginnings of community.

The story of social infrastructure is also the story of community. Both the state of our social infrastructure and how we use and experience it can tell us a lot about the places in which we go about our everyday lives. A narrative of

decline has come to dominate discussions around community in contemporary Western societies demonstrated by a UK poll in 2020 which found 71% of respondents felt there had been a decline in community during their lifetime (Tanner et al., 2020). Social infrastructure, either directly or indirectly, has become part of this narrative of decline often expressed through pointing to a deterioration in social infrastructure. There is some tangible evidence for this. In the United Kingdom, 26% of pubs have closed since 2001, 28% of libraries have closed or reduced their services since 2005, and post offices have reduced from just over 22,000 in 1982 to just over 11,000 by 2018 (Tanner et al., 2020). People point to the decline of social infrastructure as evidence of both physical deterioration but also often as a manifestation of a feeling of coming apart from the places where they live themselves, of feeling rootless or culturally displaced. This is often felt more deeply for older residents who may have lived in a place for longer periods of time and hold longer memories of a place. There is also worrying evidence about the long-term changes affecting communities. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) review of trends in social capital in the United Kingdom highlighted significant developments over the past decade, with evidence of less positive engagement with neighbours, less help being given to groups such as older people and a reduced sense of belonging to the communities in which we live (cited in Phillipson et al., 2020).

However, it is important to remember there was never a golden era of community. Most of us use the term ‘the good old days’ with a sense of irony and an awareness that, in many ways, we are a lot better off than previous generations. However, as is argued by a UK report on the Politics of Belonging, ‘quality of life has been deteriorating – in the strength of community and sense of neighbourliness that defines (their) place – and this loss matters deeply to people’s sense of belonging’ (Onward, 2020, p. 3). To dismiss a feeling of being adrift from a place as simply a nostalgia for another period in history is to misunderstand these sentiments. As Carol Stack (1996) argues, no one is seeking to turn back the clock. People are seeking a place in which their lives and their strivings matter and will make a difference. In order for a place to offer such opportunities, it must be equipped with the social infrastructure necessary to support social interactions and the development of social networks between residents. So, the loss of social infrastructure is not simply about the lack of amenities, but it is about the loss of having something in our neighbourhoods to belong to. Social infrastructure is the scaffolding that enables us to build and be part of a sense of community where we live.

AGEING POPULATIONS

This book considers the role of social infrastructures in the context of an ageing population. Population ageing is one of the defining characteristics of the twentieth century and is set to continue. There has been an unprecedented increase in the average life expectancy as well as a rapid fall in fertility rates in many countries across the world. In the Global North, the percentage of the population aged 60 years and older has grown from 12% in 1950 to 23% in 2013 and is expected to rise to 32% in 2050. In the Global South, we find the same pattern but occurring at a slower rate with the percentage of over 60s growing from 6% in 1950 to 9% in 2013; however, this is expected to accelerate to 19% by 2050 (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018).

The result of these trends has been a huge expansion in both policy and research interest in ageing populations. This has focused on a range of questions from those of physical and mental health, to financial security, civic participation and employment. The particular area of ageing this book is interested in is that of social connections and how these can be developed and maintained in later life to support healthy ageing in its broadest sense. This is part of a broader recognition within ageing policy and research that it is not simply enough to be able to live a long life, or even a long life free from life-limiting illness or disability (although we might all hope for that), but that we must aspire to more than this. We must strive for an experience of later life where we feel connected and valued, visible and useful much of which stems from our social relationships with others. Humans are social beings, and social connections are important for all age groups, but there is a growing recognition of the particular importance for our wellbeing of social connections in later life.

Addressing Loneliness and Isolation – The Importance of Social
Connections in Later Life

The shift in focus in how we consider the challenges of an ageing population means that wellbeing questions of how our social connections and our relationships can support us as we age have become vital ones for us to understand. Thus, loneliness (and the associated concept of social isolation) has moved significantly up the ageing agenda. Whilst it is difficult to know with any degree of certainty what the prevalence of loneliness amongst the older population is at any given time, research from the UK-based charity Age UK argues that we are facing a crisis within the older population of limited and

decreasing social contact with others. Their research suggests that half a million older people living in the United Kingdom go at least five or six days without seeing or speaking to anyone and that two-fifths of older people say the television is their main source of company (Bolton, 2012).

The terms loneliness and social isolation tend to be used interchangeably, but they are quite distinct concepts and require separate attention. Social isolation is the objective absence of social contacts whereas loneliness is a subjective negative experience that results from inadequate meaningful connections and where there exists a discrepancy between one's social and emotional needs and our actual experience. The phrase 'lonely in a crowd' is a useful one here in thinking about the distinction. Someone can have a busy work life that brings them into contact with many different colleagues. They can have an active social life with multiple social engagements. They may even have people they call 'friends' but if they feel they have no one to talk to about personal or emotional matters, or if they feel none of the people around them really understand them, they might still experience the feeling of being lonely. Those who have a partner or spouse may be shielded from loneliness to some extent, but this is not a given. The relationship may not meet the person's emotional needs, and there is evidence to suggest that single people have larger social networks than those who are part of a couple (Klinenberg, 2013). This also raises the distinction between emotional loneliness and social loneliness, the former being a feeling of having no one close to talk to and confide in and the latter a feeling of no one to socialise with. Equally, a person can be socially isolated and have very limited social contact with others, but they might not feel lonely if they are satisfied with this arrangement and if it is through choice.

Nonetheless, the majority of us need at least some form of social contact with others, even if this is fleeting and irregular. Loneliness and social isolation are not just concerning for the individual; they are public health issues. There is a wealth of research indicating the health and wellbeing benefits of social connections and the consequences of being without them. For example, social connections can act as a buffer to negative life events, giving us both the tangible and emotional resources to be able to cope with life's adversities and adapt to new challenges. Having social connections can also promote engagement in social and civic life such as having a friend to introduce you to volunteering at a local organisation or having someone to attend a sports club with, for example. Being lonely can also have physiological impacts. It can affect a person's sleep, increase their risk of hypertension, lower the immune system and leave them more susceptible to depression (Bolton, 2012). At its most stark, the impacts of loneliness and social isolation can be seen in their effects on mortality. A meta-analysis of 148 studies into social relationships