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# Rootedness, continuity and connection: the value of place in discussions of social mobility

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**ABSTRACT**

Political framings of social mobility focus on working-class individuals escaping their background to attain better life outcomes. Sociological literature critiques the individualist nature of social mobility by exploring challenges faced by 'underrepresented groups' in higher education and beyond. These policy debates can misrecognise the value inherent in working-class communities. The significance of rootedness, connection and continuity to valued personhood is ignored. Drawing on a pre-establishedconceptual model of person-value, this article asks questions of social mobility as it is understood in the policy landscape. Based on ethnographic research in a working-class community, I argue for recognition of locally valued personhood as situated within a 'place'. Often not the 'forward-propelling' subjects of neoliberal policy discourse, participants drew upon generational anchoring, collective memory, and the gifting of place to embed value relationally. This was not always easy as devaluation by 'outsiders' was feared. The findings suggest the need to question the policy framing of social mobility and its relevance for working-class communities for whom maintaining rootedness, connection and continuity to people and place is key. The article concludes by considering the role of place in social mobility policy, cautioning against deficit policy framing that seeks to improve working-class communities.

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## Introduction

Social mobility has received much attention within political and academic spheres in the United Kingdom any beyond (Ingram and Gamsu 2022; Maslen 2019; OECD 2025; Payne 2018). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD 2025) latest publication, *To Have and Have Not- How to Bridge the Gap in Opportunities*, the importance of promoting social mobility and equal opportunity amongst member countries is centralised, as it proposes a 'three-dimensional' measure of the state of inequality that covers outcomes, social mobility

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and opportunities. On a comparative level, the UK ranks 11th out of 29 countries on inequality of opportunity with the United States of America coming in last with the highest levels of inequality of opportunity, at 29th. Despite this seemingly promising picture, more than a fifth of people in the UK (14.3 million people) were living in poverty in the latest figures from 2022 to 2023 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2025). The findings from the OECD (2025) report illustrate the pervasive nature of social mobility as an international 'wicked problem' impacting on the quality of life and opportunities of many millions of people. Despite fairing reasonably well in the country comparisons conducted by the OECD, there is still a lot to be achieved in the UK when it comes to life chances.

In the UK, the common-sense narrative of social mobility has been: social mobility is stalling/in decline; this is due to unequal access to opportunities in education and employment; ergo attempts to widen participation within higher education and elite professions is the solution. Much sociological research focuses on entry into higher education and the graduate employment trajectory when exploring social mobility and its aims to make society fairer (e.g. Abrahams 2017; Ashley 2022; Loveday 2015). Within policy literature social mobility is framed as an individual endeavour built upon meritocracy.

Meritocracy has been critiqued by many scholars who note that despite rhetoric around effort and talent, circumstances of birth are challenging to escape as they provide an immutable level of social, economic and cultural capital (Calder 2016; Littler 2018; Reay 2013; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). A significant finding from the OECD's (2025) social mobility report indicates that parental socio-economic background contributes to over 60% of inequality of opportunity at household level for the majority of the OECD's member countries. Ingram and Gamsu (2022) in their critical analysis of the UK's Social Mobility Commission[1] publications boldly state the social mobility agenda is the enemy of equality. This article builds on scholars' recognition of the limitations of individualist social mobility. Widening participation in higher education and achieving diversity in some of the UK's most established elite professions is an admirable aim for a more socially inclusive society, yet it is also important to understand the lives of those who do not aspire to this. Even when working-class people do make it 'to the top', the symbolic violence experienced by them in elite spaces is well-documented (Ashley 2022; Friedman and Laurison 2019).

There is much to be learned about social class, value and belonging in the everyday lives of working-class people. Recognition of the value, skills and experience of working-class people tends to be forgotten as they are encouraged to leave their often-marginalised communities and cultures behind to succeed however uncomfortable this may be (Lawler 1999; Mannay 2015; Ravn 2022). So what happens to those who attach significant value to remaining in a [social] place? Despite repeated malignment of working-class places and values, participants in this research illustrated a strong connection to their community. This echoes work of many scholars who have explored class, place, and value (Jeffery 2018; McKenzie 2015; Paton 2018). For many in working-class communities, maintaining this valued, relational personhood is the signifier of achievement and security.

Staying in your community and maintaining social networks is often positioned as 'lacking ambition', as Evans (2016, 501) notes:

> . . . within both popular and policy rhetoric 'place attachment' is routinely posited as a serious hindrance to successful realisation of aspiration, putatively because it embeds young people in 'place' (e.g. a particular community or geographical location) and prevents them from accessing employment in national labour markets.

The aims of community regeneration and social mobility policies can be seen to interconnect as they position working-class people and places as lacking 'value' and in need of improvement (Paton 2018; Payne 2018). For example, the 'levelling up' agenda of the Conservative Party in the years 2021–2024, defined at the time by government as a 'moral, social and economic programme for the whole of government' (HM Government 2022). It is not hard to see how using language such as 'levelling up' suggests that some communities are lower status than others. The term 'levelling up' has since been dropped by the new Labour government which came into power in July 2024.

The focus of this research, a small urban suburb in south Wales renamed 'Hiraeth', provides the scene for the empirical contribution of this paper. Despite experiencing substantial deprivation, Hiraeth is overlooked and residents reported feeling forgotten about. Unlike other 'high-profile', territorially stigmatised communities, Hiraeth was not subject to urban regeneration projects and is not a post-industrial community (Jeffery 2018; Paton 2018; Preece 2020). The purpose of this article is to illuminate the valued relationship to Hiraeth that is underpinned by significant webs of social relations, constituting valued personhood. This provides the empirical basis to question the relevance of the social mobility policy agenda and demonstrate the importance of place for this working-class community.

Drawing upon findings from an ethnographic project, this paper builds on previous critiques of individualist social mobility in order to refocus on the value inherent in working-class culture and communities. Utilising Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) model of person-value, I argue the importance of recognising the value of relationality as held within a place. Drawing upon 14 months of fieldwork reflections, interviews with 10 community workers and 25 community members across nine families, I highlight the centrality of place to a valued working-class identity and what happens when residents feel their identity is threatened. Identity was constructed relationally across generations through the gifting of place within participants' narratives (Degnen 2005; Loveday 2014). In older participants, use of memory talk helped to anchor themselves and younger generations to the community. This provided ontological security through collective memory (Loveday 2014; Miller 2003).

What these findings suggest is that individualist social mobility does not recognise what is valuable in some working-class communities, namely place-attachment and ontological security. Rootedness is in direct opposition to the dominant social mobility narrative that encourages 'getting out and getting away' of working-class communities to succeed, devaluing working-class culture (as noted by Evans 2016; Lawler 1999; Loveday 2014; Ravn 2022, to name a few). What is missing in current policy approaches is an acknowledgment of the significance of rootedness, connection and continuity to valued personhood. This has implications for the relevance of the social mobility agenda, which, in its neoliberal framing, ignores the role of the collective in discussions of aspiration, opportunity and success.

If philosophically, social mobility is about an uplift in living conditions rooted in the social, then the actualisation of this occurs through the implementation of

social policy. Both conceptual and policy approaches to social mobility are important to explore, but the aim of this paper is primarily the experiential and lived realities of working-class people. The data shared provides empirical evidence to support a refreshed approach to social mobility policy, while debates around the philosophical meaning of social mobility have been rehearsed elsewhere (Folkes 2022).

First, an overview of relevant literature that explores social mobility, place, class and person-value is provided. Following this, Hiraeth is introduced in more detail and the ethnographic approach described. The findings go on to highlight the significance of place to creating a valued working-class identity. The conclusion draws out implications of the findings for policy approaches to social mobility.

## *Exploring social mobility: the role of place, value and class*

A vast array of academic literature explores social mobility, social class, place, and relationality. I offer a brief overview of literature in these areas to provide a foundation for this research, which will build upon previous critiques of individual social mobility. Social mobility is, and always has been, about more than the individual alone (Born 2023; Fercovic 2022; Folkes 2022; Shahrokni 2018).

### *Social mobility and neoliberal notions of self-improvement*

Social mobility is positioned as something anybody can and should achieve, a story of personal investment and perseverance that you will be rewarded for; buying into the myth of meritocracy (Ingram and Gamsu 2022; Littler 2018; Maslen 2019; Payne 2018). Higher education (HE) has become 'the' established route to social mobility, with the unintended consequence of making alternative trajectories seem inferior (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This policy focus has come at the cost of ignoring entrenched inequalities in the education system, particularly around social class and race, as well as ignoring wider emotional connections people hold (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Born 2023; Fercovic 2022; Finn 2017a, 2017b).

Many social mobility researchers document the challenges faced by individuals who attempt to become socially mobile through this established route. Sometimes these focus on experiences and inequalities within HE (such as: Bathmaker et al. 2016; Callender and Dougherty 2018) whilst others focus on post-university transitions (Abrahams 2017; Ashley 2022; Finn 2017b; Friedman and Laurison 2019). While it is important to understand the complex experiences of individual social mobility, it is also essential to build upon the critique of the individual social mobility narrative to clearly delineate its limitations. This requires understanding the lives of people that fall outside of the 'dominant symbolic' (Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

There have been recent moves in mobility research to appreciate the collective roots of social mobility. For example, Fercovic's (2022) work on long-range mobility in Chile and Born's (2023) work on the collective framing of effort for the upwardly mobile in Germany. In addition to this, Shahrokni (2018) highlights the significance of mobility for second-generation North African immigrants navigating elite HE institutions in France. For this group, mobility was situated as a way to give back to their families for

hardships faced during migration. This body of work illuminates the role of relationality in experiences of mobility.

Furthermore, there is a significant body of literature that explores young people's aspirations and how they are shaped by place (Evans 2016; Grant 2017; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015). This literature acknowledges young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have high aspirations that get tempered by expectation when they question what is realistic for someone from their background. In such studies, place is important in thinking about the future as strong attachments to place feature highly in young people's accounts.

The purpose of this article is to continue the well-established critique of individual social mobility by giving space for the alternative narratives of working class people. By drawing attention to the limitations of individual social mobility we can begin to outline what aspiration, opportunity and success look like beyond the dominant symbolic. If we associate 'immobility' with 'lack', we will fail to recognise aspirations rooted in place and relationships (Ravn 2022, 1248). The data presented in this paper develops Ravn's (2022) assertion, raising questions of the absence of continuity, connection and place-belonging in policy approaches to social mobility.

The responsibilisation of self-improvement onto individuals is symptomatic of the neoliberal turn more widely (Finn 2017b; Lawler 2018). In this framing, the individual is encouraged to see themselves as a project of continual improvement; as valued personhood is hinged upon the forward-propelling, upwardly mobile, capital-accruing subject (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This model of personhood is not appealing to all. Instead, participants in this research, and those in Skeggs and Loveday's (2012, 487) research:

> wanted to live life differently, not subject to constant misrecognition and potential devaluation. We could say, following Bourdieu, that they refuse what they are refused. But we also think their responses reveal what they do with that refusal; they try to make life liveable with a different value compass, they invest their energy and time differently.

One way this was achieved was through attributing value to the strength of relationships with others and place. Next, I explore the significance of rootedness, connection and continuity to valued personhood.

## *Belonging in a place: collective memory and relationality*

Sociological understandings of place belonging are well-established. One of the earliest pioneering approaches was that of Elias and Scotson (1965) who utilised figurational sociology to document kinship networks and the construction of two core groups in the community – the established and the outsiders. Such kinship networks are crucial for identity formation as they demarcate boundaries of social inclusion. Through everyday, mundane social practices, a sense of safety, belonging and reassurance is developed and maintained. Swann and Hughes (2016) evidence this in their contemporary application of Elias and Scotson's (1965) work to a south Wales community. A feeling of safety, or what might be referred to as ontological security, is central to forming an anchoring to place. Miller (2003) defines ontological security as the state of being in correct relation to community, history and locality. This was evident in the research presented as residents used a variety of techniques to embed themselves in the place that held value to them.

Temporality and relationality are important to performing and maintaining place-attachment (Preece 2020). Often, linkage to the past plays a significant role in present place-based identities. Collective memory as understood in this research refers to shared discursive practices and meaning-making when recounting and 'gifting' shared memories. Collective memories and cultural history shared across kinship networks maintain anchorage to place via everyday practices (Bennett 2014; Colin 2021; Loveday 2014; Walkerdine 2016). Another way to describe this is 'memory talk' – the enactment of shared memories, experiences and place (Degnen 2005). Within memory talk a complex web of relations is developed over a lengthy period of residence in the community. For Degnen (2005, 739), memory talk forms part of identity formation as it enhances social capital and situates who can/not belong. The desire for continuity and belonging can have negative implications for 'outsiders' entering into communities with strong collective memory, as evident in this research. This serves as an important reminder not to romanticise life in working-class communities as identities and belonging are complex, demonstrated later on in this paper.

## *Role of place in social mobility: moving beyond poverty and regeneration*

Within the individual social mobility narrative, there is limited scope to appreciate what aspiration, opportunity and success look like for people who prioritise different values such as remaining in their community. Here, it is important to turn to place-based policy approaches that have aimed to (re)develop working-class communities experiencing deprivation and underinvestment. Successive place-based regeneration or 'anti-poverty' initiatives have often had limited success because of their failure to work collaboratively with communities; often having unclear aims and targetting funding poorly.

At the time of conducting the fieldwork for this research in 2016, the Welsh government's anti-poverty and community development programme 'Communities First' was well-established. Despite £432 million being invested over the course of the programme's 17 year existence (2001–2018), the success of the programme remains difficult to distil (National Assembly for Wales 2017). The shift away from collaboration with the community towards individual employability led to one community worker telling me 'we've missed the fucking point'. Similarly, the recent 'Levelling Up' agenda of the previous Conservative administration in England 2021–24 has been questioned for its effectiveness (Nurse and Sykes 2023). This was partially due to the political nature of funding distribution, namely to Conservative-held constituencies. Inflation, cuts to local authority funding, and a change in bidding rules further impeded 'Levelling Up' success. The Public Accounts Committee (2024) concluded in March 2024 that there was no compelling evidence for what 'levelling up' has achieved.

This raises the question, is there a role for place in social mobility policy and how can we ensure that this does not result in certain communities being positioned as 'deficit' or lacking? There are moves within education policy that indicate a more regional, devolved approach to tertiary education (for example, the establishment of the Welsh tertiary education regulator, Medr,[2] in 2024; and the creation of Skills England[3] by the new Labour government in Westminster, 2024). It remains to be seen what the success of such bodies will be in ensuring opportunities and aspiration are rooted in communities, but these moves seem to indicate a wider change in approach across the UK. In addition,

churn in the chair and commissioners at the Social Mobility Commission have altered the commission's direction. In their latest report, 'Innovation Generation- Next steps for Social Mobility Commission (2024, 5), the commission sets out its new approach to social mobility, stating:

> We should move away from a 'one size fits all' approach. The evidence suggests that social mobility and opportunity vary significantly between different areas, and place-based strategies are required to understand and address local challenges.

The report goes on to describe a proposed approach to social mobility that is wider, emphasising economic growth and innovation over solely focussing on access to university and professional careers. The commission sees devolution (as committed to in the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2024) as a vehicle for a more joined-up approach that can meet localised needs including skills and employment needs. There is a new emphasis on 'the role of neighbourhood, community and family in shaping the context in which opportunities are opened or closed' (Social Mobility Commission 2024, 11). The shift in tone from previous Social Mobility Commission publications is stark.

These recent changes in policy approach indicate the timeliness and relevance of this research. By providing empirical evidence that illustrates the significance of rootedness, connection and continuity to working-class communities, this paper gives weight to the current policy-thinking around place, education and social mobility, which can contribute to driving this refreshed approach forwards.

## *Hiraeth: the place and the people*

The data presented is from an ethnographic study of one community, 'Hiraeth'. The ethnographic approach entailed 14 months in the field and the collation of fieldnotes, participant observation, family interviews, community worker interviews, and creative methods. The research focused on how social mobility narratives were constructed and the interrelated role of social class, place, and gender within these. Findings presented here are predominantly from interview data yet informed by the immersive approach undertaken. A narrative-discursive approach (Taylor 2010) was taken to data analysis, reflecting the study's social constructionist epistemological positioning. This approach illustrated how dominant discourses were drawn upon, accepted, and rejected in construction of narratives that helped participants make sense of their lives (Skeggs 1997). Throughout the fieldwork my positionality fluxed and was negotiated in my interactions with participants, shaping research encounters and the research process. Although we shared many characteristics, including class identity, there were many distinctions such as our national identities that led to interesting discussions. I have considered the significance of reflexivity in flux at length elsewhere (Folkes 2023). By carefully utilising the ethnographer's toolkit I was able to develop positive research relationships with participants.

## *A brief profile of Hiraeth*

Hiraeth is a majority Welsh, white working-class community in an urban suburb of a south Wales city. As defined by ranking in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation

(WIMD), Hiraeth is one of the most deprived communities in Wales (Welsh Government 2017). Home to around 8000 residents, Hiraeth was previously a small agricultural community before becoming an 'overspill' community housing workers who bussed into the city to work in heavy industry such as the steelworks. Housing development picked up pace after World War II, increasing Hiraeth's population and moving it further away from its agricultural heritage. Many older residents commented on this change as they reminisced about how Hiraeth was a rural idyll prior to increased development. Now predominantly a residential suburb, there is a local high street offering essential services such as groceries, banks and hairdressers down the western edge of the community. The area was chosen due to its overlooked and under-researched status, with many participants commenting they often felt ignored. Hiraeth contrasts with many marginalised areas which are hyper-stigmatised. Fieldwork took place across 2016 and 2017.

## Participants and representation

Sampling was pragmatic and opportunistic as participants were recruited utilising a variety of methods,[4] relying on snowball sampling to build-up participant numbers. Nine families took part in the research over 13 separate interviews, with a total of 25 residents and over 20 hours of audio-recorded material. Family interviews ensured generational breadth as often two or three generations participated. In addition to family interviews, 10 community workers were interviewed. The majority of community workers interviewed formed part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty initiative, Communities First, situated in Hiraeth. Communities First ran from 2001 to 2018 and in its latter years worked using a cluster model of areas that were amongst the 10% most deprived in Wales according to the 2011 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

There are weaknesses of the sample; including its size, over-representation of over-70s, homeowners and a very distinct ethnic homogeneity. This reflects the demographic make-up of the area and the difficulties of recruitment. As an in-depth, qualitative piece, the research was not aiming to be representative of all Hiraeth residents, or all working-class communities.[5] There are, nevertheless, analytical insights to be gleaned from the small number of rich narratives constructed. There may be some similarities between Hiraeth and other forgotten, disadvantaged communities, although caution must be taken when making such comparisons and generalisations, as there are always social, cultural, and historical specificities. Next, I will present data to support the significance of anchorage to place across generations.

## Generational anchoring, collective memory and the gifting of place

When speaking with community workers and families, it became apparent generational anchorage to place was a significant source of person-value (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). A central discursive resource drawn upon by families was the born and bred narrative (Taylor 2010). This was used when recalling memories as a way of constructing continuity in their narrative; pivotal to the inculcation of ontological security (Miller 2003). The use of the born and bred narrative demonstrated attachment to place through length of residence, close kinship ties and a sense of anchoring. In addition to this, families drew

upon collective memory and used memory talk as a discursive mechanism for gifting place across generations (Bennett 2014; Degnen 2005; Loveday 2014).

Weaving personal narratives with the history of Hiraeth and use of shared, local discursive resources were techniques that maintained strong anchorage to place (Preece 2020). This occurs across generational boundaries, or what Walkerdine (2016) describes as 'communal beingness'. The enactment of collective memories occurred through everyday practices of memory talk. Memory talk holds a complex web of relations, developed over a lengthy period of residence and has significant local value (Degnen 2005; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This is often absent in neoliberal understandings of social mobility.

## *Keeping close and anchorage to place*

Of all families interviewed, with the exception of one, there were other family members either living in the same house, on the same street, or in other streets within Hiraeth. Having family near was a locally valued and central facet in the born and bred narrative. This narrative helped participants understand their lives and identities compared with those living nearby (Taylor 2010). Rosemary and Charles, a couple in their 70s, described the proximity of their three children and grandchildren in their interview. For them, being close to their family was important as they provided support, for instance, taking grandchildren to school. Having lived in Hiraeth their whole married life, their children and grandchildren are Hiraeth 'born and bred'. This generational consistency helps maintain value, meaning and belonging for Rosemary and Charles (Miller 2003; Taylor 2010). Similarly, Mary (80s) reflected on neighbours past and present, and her son's upbringing in Hiraeth:

> **Mary:** . . . after we, we moved from my par- my in-laws, we moved to uh, Gendros Avenue, I'm still living in the same house, oh my husband passed away six and a half years ago, but I've been happy there, and I have lovely neighbours and I just feel, safe there, and I want to stay there, you know, as long as I can . . . Carwyn always says he had a very happy childhood and I think it was all to do with people living around you know, neighbours were very uh, they weren't in and out of each other's houses, but they were very supportive, weren't they Carwyn?

Mary's narrative draws upon the significance of her kinship network within Hiraeth and how this contributes to her feelings of safety and security. Having such strong kinship ties ensures belonging (Elias and Scotson 1965). Through achieving belonging, continuity and security are constructed. Sense of security and anchorage to place appeared strongly in participants' narratives as they emphasised its significance to their everyday lives. Investment and connection to others demonstrated the alternative value practices present in Hiraeth outside of the dominant symbolic (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). It is important not to romanticise working-class communities and ignore the many struggles that form part of everyday life, explored later in this paper.

Sometimes family members were in and out of each other's houses as I experienced during my interview with Lisa (30s), her youngest son (under 5) and later, her mother Anne (70s). This extract from fieldnote reflections illustrates the unexpected addition of Anne to the interview:

> *Was there over two hours! Why did I turn off the Dictaphone?! Lisa's mum came in and started talking about the boundary situation, she said she gets post for [neighbouring suburbs] and Hiraeth but she prefers Hiraeth as its posher [compared to surrounding neighbourhoods which are more deprived than Hiraeth]. Lisa's mum, Anne, lives down the road, she came in and was starting on some ironing, very close relationship it seemed.*

At this point, I was wrapping up the conversation with Lisa and her son Brendan when Anne came through the front door, unannounced, directing herself towards the basket of clothes to be ironed in the kitchen. The discussion about address boundaries highlighted the affective nature of class judgement in action as Anne carefully tried to maintain local value via identification with Hiraeth (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This theme carried over into our second interview, where daughter Lisa seemingly corrects her mother by saying 'but we're in Newtown though', Anne rejects this reclassification:

**Anne:** Yeah, but Hiraeth has **always** been here, okay it's classed as Newtown now, you know, as part, I mean my rates bill and all that still comes in as Hiraeth.

Having lived in Hiraeth since she was a child, Anne was protective over her identification with Hiraeth and throughout our conversation repeatedly spoke of the meaning Hiraeth held in her family's narrative. This was not without complication, as is explored later.

What was evident across all families interviewed was the importance of anchorage to place maintained through strong relational networks. In turn, this secured residents' identity and belonging. Relationality and attachment to place were important social values within Hiraeth creating a strong sense of rootedness and security. Local value was placed on connection as opposed to neoliberal models of self-improvement that require flexibility and risk-taking (Degnen 2005; Miller 2003; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Next, I turn to the use of collective memory, memory talk and shared local discursive resources that enabled families to share the gift of place across generations.

## *Collective memory: memory talk and the gifting of place*

As many residents were Hiraeth 'born and bred', alongside previous generations of their family, there were rich historical narratives gifted across generations. Gifting of place in this way allowed families to strengthen their belonging to Hiraeth through multiple social relationships that span past, present and future generations and locations in the community (Bennett 2014). This helps to engender solidarity and communal beingness in working-class communities (Preece 2020; Walkerdine 2016). For Tracy and Michael's family, the prominence of the memorial hall (which still features in the community) and the community café (which has since closed) in their family narrative held particular value.

Tracy (50s) has lived in the same house her grandparents built in the late 1950s since she was born, and now lives with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. Tracy was born in Hiraeth in what used to be a café on one of the community's most prominent streets. On the same street is a memorial hall which has a long history in the community and is often hired out for community events. Using collective memory, Tracy, her

husband Michael (50s), and her daughter Lucy (30s) described the prominence of both the café and memorial hall in their historical family narrative:

**Tracy:** Yeah, yeah. My dad played football for [local football team] and they got the footballers to have dance lessons [Author: *laughs*] and that's where they met

**Michael:** That was the dance teacher

**Tracy:** Yeah and [Author: aww!] that's how he met my mother at the dance lessons [Michael: so] and many a couple of that generation have met via the memorial hall with my grandmother teaching them to dance.

**Lucy:** Either that or the café

**Lucy:** Well, it's a case of if you didn't meet, if people don't remember Nan for the dancing, they would have remembered Nan for the café

**Michael:** And the café yeah, so after, she run the café, she always used to complain about people ordering a cup of coffee and taking three hours to drink it

This multi-generational exchange of collective memory demonstrates the significance of particular places in the community, past and present, in anchoring the family to Hiraeth (Loveday 2014). The use of memory talk (Degnen 2005) enables Tracy, Michael and Lucy to establish their family's longstanding presence in the community and the impact this has had on social relationships across generations. Collective memory illuminates the value of relationality in Hiraeth, not just amongst family and neighbours but the wider community. Retelling this narrative across generations helps to maintain anchorage to Hiraeth whilst gifting place to younger generations (Bennett 2014).

Another technique to gift place across generations was the use of shared localised discursive practices to inculcate a strong sense of community beingness (Taylor 2010; Walkerdine 2016). Shared discursive practices helped demarcate belonging as only 'established' members of the community understood such practices and struggled to explain them when prompted (Elias and Scotson 1965). For example, Diane and Jeremy (70s) who had lived in their home in Hiraeth for 50 years struggled to explain what constitutes 'the village':

**Diane:** Well no, so go Gwahanred Road I mean, bar from Gwahanred Road from when we first came up here to live, I mean that was just all fields [Author: mmm] and farms and a lane, but then they built on that, but actually Hiraeth village hasn't altered

**Author:** And where's Hiraeth village, what counts as Hiraeth Village?

**Jeremy:** Well we still call it the village that's what it was [inaudible]

**Diane:** The village yeah, Gwahanred Road *laughs* I always called it Hiraeth village

**Jeremy:** You know where New Inn pub is? [Author: Yeah] we still class that as uh Hiraeth village

As an urban suburb, it was intriguing to hear the phrase 'the village' in interviews with residents across generations. When asked for more information, both Jeremy and Diane found it challenging to pinpoint what exactly constituted 'the village' and its boundaries. There was an element of implicit knowledge as Jeremy emphasises it is the village because *'that's what it was'*. As both Diane and Jeremy were among the older residents in the research, it was unclear whether such terms were pertinent to younger generations in the community. In further interviews it became apparent this shared terminology was used by younger generations. This suggests discursive practices are gifted and maintained across generations via collective memory (Bennett 2014; Loveday 2014). For instance, in discussion with Michael (50s) and his daughter Lucy (30s), 'the common' is mentioned although positioned as an outdated term:

**Michael:** So how, how else has Hiraeth changed? It, it hasn't changed dramatically, the common is one of the biggest changes [Author: mmm] ummm

**Lucy:** Penrhos Road, nobody knows that as the common any more.

Despite Lucy stating *'nobody knows that as the common any more'* it was frequently used in conversation with Michael and his family. In addition, it was used by younger residents interviewed. For example, Peter (50s) and his son George (under 12), discussed an old peanut factory in Hiraeth:

**George:** Do you remember the peanut shop down on the common?

**Peter:** Oh yeah! That wasn't a shop that was a factory [**George**: yeah same thing] that used to roast peanuts, [Manufacturer's name]

**Author:** *laughs*

**Peter:** Um, the KP peanut factory [Author: oh wow] and it was wonderful because, with a prevailing wind, it was, when you're in Hiraeth, the wonderful smell of roasting peanuts just wafted [Author: ohh!] so much nicer than the smell from the steelworks anyway

This extract is noteworthy as it highlights even younger generations are inheriting localised understandings of place, as George refers to 'the common'. Even though George will not remember the nostalgic '*smell from the steelworks*', he still taps into collective memory and understandings of the community. This illustrates the ongoing maintenance of place attachment via memory talk (Degnen 2005; Loveday 2014; Taylor 2010).

The above extracts demonstrate the generational gifting of place that occurs, providing local value, meaning and continuity to working-class families' narratives (Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Walkerdine 2016). This is diametrically opposed to neoliberal notions of mobility that encourage risk-taking, insecurity and individual competitiveness (Littler 2018). Ontological security maintained across generations was key to person-value within Hiraeth. This was not without its challenges. Next, I explore complexities and contradictions in constructing strong anchorage to place.

## *Troubled class/place identities: internal division and external threats to belonging*

It is important not to lose sight of some of the complex and contradictory identity work undertaken by residents as they managed threats to their valued place identity. It would be wrong to romanticise working-class communities' attachment to place. Residents, through their everyday talk, constructed boundaries of belonging that asserted their relational class/place identities (Degnen 2005; Elias and Scotson 1965). This illustrates the antagonistic nature of class identities as the struggle for value ensues (Loveday 2014). Through careful construction of who can be considered as 'established', the category of 'outsider' is created. Outsiders are a threat to residents' ontological security and the maintenance of a local valued identity.

## *The racialised 'other' and constructions of fear*

For an urban suburb of a south Wales city, Hiraeth lacks diversity across various identity markers. According to the 2021 Census (Office for National Statistics 2022), almost 95% of Hiraeth residents have one or more UK identity/ies, with the largest national identity being Welsh. When considering ethnicity, over 90% of Hiraeth residents are white. The two largest religious groups in Hiraeth are 'no religion' and 'Christian' accounting collectively for almost 90% of residents. Compared to city-wide statistics, Hiraeth is noticeable in its homogeneity. This may help to explain the fear and othering residents constructed when discussing newcomers moving to the community. Community workers noted this difficulty as they attempted to encourage integration across different ethnic groups:

**Abi:** . . . they've got their core community which has been there for years, and then it's been difficult sometimes when new people have moved into the area, but it's about just, I think it's about educating people as well, just letting them know, they're no different to you or me, there's, do you know what I mean? . . . I think it's about educating people as

well, just takes time, cos again it's been years and years of the same thing, and a lot of people don't like change either, so and that again, it's just little like drip feeding and hopefully within time, then they'll make positive changes . . .

Abi outlines one of the key challenges of such strong rootedness to place – resistance to change. Residents in Hiraeth who attach value to being Hiraeth 'born and bred' feel threatened when newcomers move to the community. For many residents, change brought about by newcomers signified degradation of Hiraeth and threatened devaluation. Residents employed discursive techniques to distance themselves from the unknown other who threatened their established localised valued identity.

As Degnen (2005) notes, social memories occur in everyday conversation in a community and are often not neutral as they demarcate who can/not belong. On my second visit to Lisa's home, her mother Anne (70s) contributed to the family interview. Anne explained her fear of the racialised other:

**Anne:** Mind you I shouldn't say it cos I'm not prejudice really but, I was shocked the other day, I was opening my curtains I suppose, and there was this mum and dad, they were, Pakistani or whatever, with all the bits, you know coming out the street opposite me [author: mhm] and we've not had any foreigners in here, in this area at all, well we have one over there didn't we [Rob, Lisa's husband: Yeah there's a few] but, they, they were nice ones, well, they're all nice no doubt but like, she had these three little boys walking and one in the pram, and oh my god, they've moved in over there, and then the next thing was later in the day, three more of these ladies came up with pushchairs, child either side [author: yeah] loads of stuff, and gangs following 'em I thought *whispers* I don't like this [author: yeah], but you don't see much of 'em but it's just thinking of the neighbours, what they must be saying, because it's so quiet, and people don't move very often up here [author: no] you know, unless they pass away, people are not really moving [author: yeah] but uh, you think oh God, is that gunna be, is that the start like [author: yeah], cos you do, they eventually, once they're in a house, another one will go and say well I'll buy that by there [author: yeah] you know, it's what happens ain't it, they take over the area like [author: mm] As I say it shouldn't be like that but . . .

Anne discussed ethnic minority families moving to Hiraeth through notions of shock, shame and fear. Anne being '*shocked*' at seeing an ethnic minority family outside the window and concerned about what the neighbours '*must be saying*' demonstrates a fear of loss of community respectability and person-value (Skeggs 1997; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This fear is verbalised when Anne states '*I don't like this*' as well as references throughout to Hiraeth being 'taken over' by the racialised other. The word '*gang*' brings connotations of large groups, criminality and disorder. It is important not to see anti-migration and racist discourses as a distinctive feature of predominantly white working-class communities,[6] but to recognise such discourses can be found in working-class communities where there are pockets of severe deprivation and a fight for local resources and value (McKenzie 2015).

The fear of difference that several Hiraeth residents portrayed appeared to stem from two core concerns: The first was historical and concerned maintaining familiarity. There was a risk that welcoming outsiders into the community would rupture the established

narrative around what it means to be Hiraeth 'born and bred'. When place rootedness and continuity are perceived to be threatened by outsiders entering the community, identities are defended through the construction of the 'outsider' or racialised other. Protecting valued identities involves the maintenance of respectability and collective memory talk as constructed by lifelong residents (Degnen 2005; Skeggs 1997; Taylor 2010). As Hiraeth historically has seen limited migration in comparison to other diverse suburbs, change does not come easy, particularly when it impinges upon locally valued identities and understandings of self. Encouraging connection across different groups, as was recognised by Abi (community worker) in her interview, is one way to address the fear of the 'outsider' and protect locally held values and identities.

The second concern that fuelled residents' fear of difference was the economic situation of the area. Each interview revealed concerns about the state of the community and the perceived lack of investment in its amenities. I have discussed how these pockets of deprivation impacted residents' identities elsewhere (Folkes 2022), but for residents such as Anne, there was concern that if current residents are not being adequately provided for by local power holders, then bringing more people into the community would only make the situation worse.

Next, I conclude by bringing together the findings to discuss the role of place in policy approaches to social mobility.

## *Where does place fit in understandings of social mobility?*

This article has aimed to extend the critique of individual social mobility by questioning the absence of rootedness, connection and continuity in the social mobility policy agenda. By giving space for the alternative narratives of working class people, I hope to have raised important questions around value. How can we ensure that continuity, connection and place-belonging are 1) valued? And 2) included in discussions of aspiration, opportunity and success? The findings presented illustrate the need for a plurality of valued personhood(s) and this has implications for the relevance and framing of social mobility policy in its current form.

Within the individual social mobility narrative, there is limited scope to appreciate what aspiration, opportunity and success look like for people who prioritise different values. This article has drawn upon evidence to illustrate the significance of place for working-class residents' identities, something which does not feature in the established social mobility policy approach. Building upon previous critiques and drawing on Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) model of person-value, I have illustrated how local, valued identities are formed within a working-class community. Not applying a risk-driven, individualist lens to everyday life, as the neoliberal policy discourse would encourage, Hiraeth residents used a range of discursive techniques to embed value and continuity in relational ways. This was not always easy as fear of change threatened locally valued identities.

Where does this leave the role of place in the social mobility policy agenda? Investing in maintaining the rootedness, continuity and connection of working-class communities (where this is valued) is crucial to ensure cohesive and successful communities whose aspirations are met outside of the dominant symbolic. This will recognise the value inherent in working-class communities without the

requirement to collate capitals and move to a new social, physical and psychological location (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). The framing of place in social mobility policy has to be carefully considered to avoid maligning working-class communities as lacking value and in need of improvement. This is often seen in policies that focus on 'regeneration' or 'levelling up' of communities. The Communities First policy initiative in Wales which featured in this research shifted its remit from working collaboratively with communities to economic activation of community members in its latter years. This individualist, employability approach to community development frustrated many of the community workers interviewed for this research.

One suggestion is that efforts should be focused on providing place-based investment with the goal of supporting local values and needs. This is certainly the policy flavour of the latest iteration of the Social Mobility Commission which has made a point of recognising the localised context and the relational in social mobility (Social Mobility Commission 2024). Increased devolution in England, with more Mayoral Strategic Authorities in place, could provide the vehicle for a more nuanced, localised approach to social mobility. An obvious challenge to this is how much funding and power Strategic Authority Mayors are likely to be able to access. Additionally, the Devolution white paper's remit is England only. There is only so much devolution will be able to achieve if it is not underpinned by significant investment.

Regional approaches are also popular in recent education policy circles, with the creation of both Skills England in England and Medr in Wales in 2024. The focus of both of these organisations is predominantly economic productivity and addressing skills gaps via a clearer tertiary education system. The concern here, and with the Social Mobility Commission's renewed perspective, is that the focus on economic growth eclipses the value of the community. Without a holistic approach, there is a risk of repeating the same mistake of the Communities First programme- individualising responsibility for economic success. Only significant community-level investment can ensure this is avoided.

Given the evidence presented, a refreshed social mobility policy approach should recognise locally held values, invest in the skills present in working-class communities, and start from a position of strength. Place must be considered in social mobility policy to shift entrenched neoliberal ideals around the forward-propelling, risk-taking, capital-accruing individual to fully recognising the value in rootedness, continuity and connection. The policy conversation is moving in this direction, and hopefully this paper provides fuel to keep the wheels turning.

## Notes

1. The Social Mobility Commission, previously the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2012–2016), is an advisory non-departmental body of the Department for Education. They are responsible for producing evidence and policy recommendations around UK social mobility.
2. For more information about Medr, please see: https://www.medr.cymru/en/.
3. For more information about Skills England, please see: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/skills-england.

4. Methods included adverting on a local Facebook community group; approaching community members via fieldwork; and following up on contacts shared with me by current residents.
5. Although participant occupations indicated the sample were working-class, the research went beyond conceptualising class as solely a measure of occupational level. Class is subjective, tied up with an array of moral norms and values, and the approach taken in this research was to explore class in the everyday, as dynamic and relational (Skeggs 1997).
6. I recognise there is no such thing as the 'white working-class' and that the working-class has always been heterogenous. In the case of Hiraeth, however, the large majority of residents are white British at over 90%, compared to 74% for the UK overall (Office for National Statistics 2022).

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## Ethical approval and informed consent statement

This research was approved by the Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee. All participants gave written informed consent to take part in this research and consented to the publication of anonymised data in research articles.

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