

1 **Capturing complexity in the evaluation of a major area-based initiative in community**  
2 **empowerment: What can a multi-site, multi team, ethnographic approach offer?**

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1 **Capturing complexity in the evaluation of a major area-based initiative in community**  
2 **empowerment: What can multi-site, multi team, ethnographic approach offer?**

3  
4 **Abstract**

5  
6 In recent years there has been growing emphasis on the need to develop ways of capturing  
7 'complexity' in the evaluation of health initiatives in order to produce better evidence about 'how'  
8 and under what conditions such interventions work. Used alone, conventional methods of  
9 evaluation, that attempt to reduce ~~phenomena-intervention processes and outcomes~~ to a small  
10 number of discrete and finite variables, are typically not well suited to this task. ~~Among the~~  
11 ~~research~~ ~~Therecommunity there~~ have been increasing calls ~~among the research community~~ to  
12 take more seriously qualitative methods as an alternative or complementary approach ~~to in the~~  
13 ~~evaluation of health initiatives~~ ~~intervention evaluation~~. Ethnography has been identified as ~~being~~  
14 particularly ~~well~~ suited to the purpose of capturing the full messiness that ensues when health  
15 interventions are introduced into ~~compex~~ ~~complex~~ settings (or systems). In this paper we ~~draw~~  
16 ~~reflect~~ on our experience of taking a long term multi-site, multi team, ethnographic approach to  
17 capturing complex, dynamic system processes in ~~the first phase of~~ an evaluation of a major  
18 area-based community empowerment initiative being rolled out in 150 neighbourhoods in  
19 England. ~~Through reflection on the practice of conducting multi-site, multi-team ethnography in~~  
20 ~~the first phase of this evaluation,~~ ~~W~~we consider the utility of our approach for capturing the  
21 complexity inherent to understanding the changes that ensue when the initiative is delivered into  
22 multiple diverse contexts/systems as well as the opportunities and challenges that emerge in the  
23 research process.

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3 In recent years, there has been growing emphasis on the need to consider 'complexity' in the  
4 evaluation of health interventions in order to improve and better understand intervention  
5 effectiveness and indeed failure. This 'turn to the complex' (Cohn *et al* 2013) is reflected in efforts  
6 to define and establish guidance on evaluating 'complex interventions' - that is interventions that  
7 typically comprise 'several interacting components' (Campbell *et al* 2000, Craig *et al.* 2008).  
8 Evaluators have often been concerned with making better sense of these multiple interacting  
9 components, focussing, for ~~example~~example, on identifying particular 'active ingredients' or  
10 understanding how different components combine to produce intervention effects. Such  
11 approaches, however, frequently reduce complexity to interventions themselves and the  
12 interaction between their constituent parts (Hawe, Shiell and Riley, 2009). ~~On the other hand,~~  
13 ~~Others~~ have rather sought to consider complexity beyond the intervention itself, orienting  
14 attention toward generating understanding of how specific contextual conditions work to activate  
15 (or trigger) the change mechanisms embedded within interventions (Moore *et al.* 2015, Pawson  
16 and Tilley 1997). Such analysis, it is postulated, has greater potential for informing if and how  
17 initiatives can successfully be replicated elsewhere and under what conditions. Yet, ~~such~~  
18 ~~empirical~~ accounts ~~nevertheless following this vein tend~~ frequently tend to conceptualise context  
19 as something external to the intervention, facilitating or constraining outcomes in a one directional  
20 relationship, and often fail to capture the full messiness and dynamic nature of intervention effects  
21 (Barnes, Matka and Sullivan 2003). This separation between intervention and context is  
22 necessarily artificial and the relationship between the two ~~should~~can be considered as being  
23 much more blurred (Shoveller *et al* 2015). In order to understand 'how' ~~health~~-interventions  
24 prompt changes in complex social settings, context and intervention can be better understood as  
25 two interdependent elements of the same system; coexisting, interacting and adapting over time  
26 (Hawe 2015, Durie and Wyatt 2013). Indeed, in ~~many many cases instances it may, for example, be~~ elements  
27 of the context itself that may become changed as a result of the introduction of and intervention  
28 by the intervention into a given setting or system (Orton *et al.* 2016).

29  
30 Reflecting this emphasis, evaluators are increasingly coming to employ the conceptual tools and  
31 language offered by 'complexity science' to interpret and articulate the full messiness that  
32 ensues when ~~health~~-interventions are introduced into complex settings (or systems), such as  
33 communities, schools or health care systems, that may be characterised by constantly shifting  
34 social, economic and political processes (Hawe 2015, Orton *et al.* 2016). -Following Brainard

1 and Hunter (2016) we use the term 'complexity science' as an umbrella term for a number of  
2 closely related theoretical perspectives including systems thinking; systems approaches; and  
3 complexity theory. Such approaches already assume complexity of social setting, [not just the](#)  
4 [intervention itself](#), and offer a useful way of conceptualising how intervention change takes  
5 place. In evaluation terms, rather than viewing initiatives as external to the contexts in which  
6 they are introduced, approaches drawing on complexity science conceive of health interventions  
7 as 'events' occurring within 'complex adaptive systems' (Hawe *et al.* 2009, Hawe 2015).  
8 'Complex adaptive systems' (CAS) are conceptualised as 'open' and dynamic, comprising of  
9 any number of interacting components and processes that are emergent, self-organising and  
10 unpredictable often operating in non-linear ways, making chains of causality hard to follow.  
11 Integral to this perspective is the recognition that alteration in one part may provoke change  
12 throughout the system and that the effects of such alteration may be amplified and dampened  
13 by system conditions. In terms of evaluation, a complexity science approach places emphasis  
14 on tracking over time the dynamic system events, interactions and changes that stem from the  
15 disruption of introducing an intervention into a given setting to generate a better sense of how  
16 and under what system conditions interventions will have the best outcomes (Petticrew 2015,  
17 Hawe 2015, Orton, Halliday *et al* 2016).

18

### 19 **Using ethnography in evaluation to understand complexity**

20

21 Used alone, standard methods of evaluation, such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), that  
22 [typically attempt to reduce complex ~~intervention phenomena to processes to~~](#) a finite number of  
23 discrete [mediating and](#) outcome variables, are unsuited to fully capturing systems complexity  
24 (Agar 2004, Diez Roux 2011, Cohn *et al.* 2013, Pawson 2013). Alongside developments in novel  
25 quantitative techniques such as social network analysis and systems dynamic modelling, there  
26 have been increasing calls among the research community to take more seriously in-depth  
27 qualitative methods as an alternative or complementary approach to the evaluation of health and  
28 social initiatives (Bonnell *et al.* 2012, Cohn *et al* 2013, Durie and Wyatt 2013, Woolcock 2013,  
29 Orton, Halliday *et al* 2016). ~~[Ethnography, with its promise of 'holism', has been identified by](#)~~  
30 ~~[some as being particularly well suited to the purpose of capturing systems complexity in](#)~~  
31 ~~[intervention evaluation \(Agar 2004, Reynolds 2016, Bikker \*et al\* 2017\).](#)~~

32

33 [Ethnography has been identified by some as being particularly well suited to the purpose of](#)  
34 [capturing systems complexity in intervention evaluation in part because of a promise of 'holism'](#)

1 [\(Agar 2004, Reynolds 2016, Bikker et al 2017\)](#). Yet among anthropologists, following the ‘crisis  
2 in representation’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986) the notion that ethnography can generate holistic  
3 insights has been widely disputed. It is now broadly accepted that ethnographic accounts will  
4 always only ever be partial and incomplete and what is ‘knowable’ about a population, place or  
5 practice under study is shaped by the social location of particular researchers or groups of  
6 researchers who are grounded within concrete cultural settings (Stanley 1990). This shift in  
7 thinking about the nature of ethnography has been underscored by broader developments in the  
8 conduct of contemporary ethnographic inquiry (some of which are discussed in more detail below)  
9 that does not necessarily resemble the classic vision of the lone ranger, embedded for extended  
10 periods of time in the field with the aim of capturing and explicating ‘a complete culture’. The idea  
11 that holistic explanation is unattainable aligns well with the thinking of complexity science, which  
12 asserts that complex adaptive systems can never be fully known (Cohen et al 2013). This is in  
13 part based on the understanding that social systems are shaped by human agency and are  
14 therefore never ‘closed’ but subject to ever-present emergence – that is ongoing, often unplanned  
15 and unpredictable change [\(Dalkin et al 2015-\)](#).

16 The utility of ethnography for understanding complexity in intervention evaluation lies, we would  
17 argue, not in the certainty of holistic explanation, but in the methodological privileging of  
18 immersion in the field often (but not always) over an extended period of time (Lewis and Russell  
19 2011). This brings with it a commitment to the generation of rich contextual data and identifying  
20 and tracking the intricate processes and relationships through which ‘particular events, practices  
21 and things’ interact and take shape and become meaningful and important within a given context  
22 (Hastrup 2004). These deeper meanings are usually revealed through multiple observations  
23 over a period of time, although some contemporary ethnography may focus on engagement with  
24 more ephemeral events via the accounts of key informants with whom they have built up trust and  
25 rapport (Paulsen 2009). The express aim of ethnography nevertheless is to build complicated  
26 pictures of patterns of many interacting things (Agar 2004). This entails a detailed study of the  
27 interaction between social action, representation, organisation and meaning (Atkinson 2004).  
28 Rather than attempting to ‘unravel’ complexity (i.e. reduce processes to measurable variables)  
29 the aim with ethnography is to represent the full messiness of constantly evolving dynamic system  
30 processes. For Agar (2004) this is the missing part of conventional science, but the whole point  
31 of ethnography. As such embedded within ethnographic logic (Agar 2004) is a level of closeness  
32 and attention to picturing interconnection that is particularly appropriate for capturing the dynamic  
33 and constantly emerging processes and objects that not only interact with each other, but come

1 to be defined by those interactions. Indeed, it is one of the central contentions of this paper that  
2 ethnographically grounded approaches to intervention evaluation have a certain utility for  
3 elucidating processes of emergence that can enrich our understanding of how interventions take  
4 shape in different contexts.

5  
6 Not only does ethnography inherently entail the study of complexity but ethnography itself can be  
7 understood as a complex (and adaptive) system/process of which we, as researchers, are  
8 inevitably a part (Agar 2004, Cohen *et al* 2013). It begins with comparative disorder (shifts and  
9 changes in focus) and may end up with conclusions that were not expected at the beginning (or  
10 even throughout fieldwork). ~~Not only may it help us to understand emergence, but~~ the  
11 methodology itself is characterised by ~~it to emerge.~~ As we learn how to ask questions in  
12 new ways and of new people and we discover new questions that we didn't anticipate when we  
13 started. Methods evolve as local information about how to do a study accumulates. One insight  
14 often leads to another unexpected insight. In other words there is also non-linearity in the research  
15 process itself (as well as the phenomena we study). Flexibility and creativity to adapt to the  
16 unknown is key to the revelation of knowledge about systems complexity. In terms of the  
17 evaluation of social and health interventions, ethnography allows for the identification of emergent  
18 happenings - events, experiences and processes – flowing from intervention implementation and  
19 the research process itself that are otherwise liable to be left out of more traditional evaluative  
20 accounts.

21

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### 23 **Multi-site and multi-team ethnography**

24

25 While in the above section we have outlined the value in general of ethnography for capturing  
26 complexity in intervention evaluation, for the purposes of this paper, it is useful to elaborate briefly  
27 on the use of two particular approaches to ethnographic study and the additional methodological  
28 insights they offer for the study of complexity. As we have already touched on above,  
29 contemporary ethnography rarely resembles the image of the lone ranger embedded within the  
30 field for extended periods of time and since the 1980s 'multi-site' ethnography has been  
31 recognised as one of several distinct methodological advancements in anthropology (Marcus  
32 1995, Hannerz 2003). Rather than understanding phenomena within a particular bounded frame,  
33 multi-site ethnography usually seeks to track particular phenomena; relationships or events that  
34 are perceived to be continuous but spatially non-contiguous (Falzon 2009) within and across a

1 number of sites that exist within and in relationships with the wider 'world system' (Marcus 1995).  
2 As Hannerz (2003) points out what multi-site studies tend to have in common is that they 'draw  
3 on some phenomenon or topic, which is significantly local, [but] not confined within some single  
4 place' (Hannerz 2006 p.204). For Hannerz, multi-site ethnography can be distinguished from a  
5 more conventional comparative ethnographic study of single localities and as such places  
6 emphasis on linkages that flow across sites, for example, between a world-wide 'community' of  
7 foreign correspondents or a geographically dispersed group of professionals.

8  
9 In this paper, however, we use the term 'multi-site' somewhat differently, and perhaps more  
10 simply, to describe the multiple locations where fieldwork took place. Although the approach used  
11 in our study adopts some of the characteristics of traditional multi-site ethnography by, for  
12 example, identifying particular lines of inquiry to follow in each site (see methods section below),  
13 our aim was not to track linkages (people, events) across and between sites. Each site is  
14 considered to be relatively bounded, but experiencing similar events in that each has had the  
15 same highly adaptable intervention introduced to the setting. The inclusion of a diverse set of field  
16 sites within the sample was primarily aimed at generating data about how and why the intervention  
17 under study embedded and prompted change differently within different types of system. Our  
18 intention though was not to produce a series of individual ethnographic cases for comparison  
19 (although comparison between sites inevitably took place during the analytic process), but to build  
20 up a set of general (and [potentially](#) transferable) but sufficiently detailed propositions about broad  
21 system changes that could be used to describe 'how' and 'why' the intervention might work and  
22 progress differently under different system conditions.

23  
24 Team ethnography (and team research in general) has also become an increasingly common  
25 trend, not least in response to increasing pressures on academics to develop ever more  
26 collaborative projects which are multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional and frequently multi-national.  
27 The advantages of such approaches perhaps seem obvious in terms of efficiency and the  
28 production of better quality evidence to address increasingly complex research questions. As  
29 Mauthner and Doucet (2008) point out, the epistemological imperatives for collaborative team  
30 approaches in academia appear self-evident. With a larger and more dispersed team there are  
31 greater opportunities to reach geographically spread sites; to divide workload; and to allocate  
32 research problems to those best skilled to tackle them. Team composition and the way in which  
33 collaboration is managed is important to realising the benefits of such an approach, however, and  
34 both multi-site and multi team research require considerable resources to co-ordinate. Although



1 accounts of the challenges of carrying out team ethnography have become more common in  
2 recent years (Mautner and Doucet 2008), few reflect on the processes of carrying out team  
3 ethnography where researchers are located within different field sites. Fewer still comment on  
4 the use of such approaches particularly for the purposes of evaluation (with some exceptions, for  
5 example, Bikker *et al* 2017; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Cabantous 2014).

6  
7 In this paper we reflect on our own experience of taking a long term multi-site, multi team,  
8 ethnographic approach to capturing complex, dynamic system processes, specifically in the  
9 emergence of capabilities for “collective control” ~~amongsamongt~~ the residents of relatively  
10 disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The research involved an evaluation of a major area-based  
11 community empowerment initiative being rolled out in 150 neighbourhoods in England. Despite  
12 growing interest in the role of ethnography for unveiling complexity in intervention evaluation  
13 empirical accounts of the application of ethnographic approaches in such studies, particularly  
14 those that also incorporate multi-site, multi-team elements, remain scarce (Orton *et al* 2016). By  
15 describing some of the key findings from the first phase of our study and reflecting on the practice  
16 of conducting multi-site, multi-team ethnography, we consider the utility of our approach for  
17 capturing the complexity inherent to understanding the changes that ensue when an  
18 empowerment initiative is delivered into multiple diverse contexts/systems, as well as the  
19 opportunities and challenges that emerged during in the research process. We first provide some  
20 background on the initiative under study and our methods of data generation and analysis.

### 23 **The Big Local Initiative**

24 Big Local (BL) a major area based initiative in England. Funded by the Big Lottery and managed  
25 by a charitable trust, Local Trust, residents of 150 relatively disadvantaged geographical areas in  
26 England have been allocated over £1 million each for a period of 10 years or more to support  
27 them in making their neighbourhood a better place to live. The funding is accompanied by a range  
28 of support from Local Trust and other national organisations they commission. A core principle  
29 underpinning the initiative is that decisions over how to use the money are put directly into the  
30 hands of local residents through the formation of a resident led ‘Big Local Partnership’. There is  
31 no formal requirement for residents to engage with local government structures or public sector  
32 organisations. Local partnerships are, however, encouraged to collaborate and network with  
33 professionals and other organisations in order to achieve local priorities or deliver activities in their

1 plans (Local Trust 2015). This distinguishes BL from many similar initiatives aiming to involve  
2 residents in decision making about their neighbourhoods that often only involve resident  
3 consultation on local priorities and where the money remains in the hands of local councils or  
4 other community and voluntary organisations (see for example Lawless 2012, Lawson and  
5 Kearns 2014). Although BL is not explicitly described as a health intervention, by giving residents  
6 greater control over decisions that affect their neighbourhoods the initiative has the potential to  
7 impact on social, psychosocial and environmental determinants of health ([Popay 2010](#),  
8 [Whitehead et al 2016](#)).

9 While BL operates within a shared framework that flows from involving local people, forming a  
10 partnership led by residents, developing a neighbourhood plan, implementing the plan and  
11 reviewing it over time; BL is subject to much local adaption as areas use or spend their funding  
12 to meet locally derived priorities. Thus while there is consistency of overall function (the  
13 fundamental principles of the initiative) across different locations, there may be great variation in  
14 the form the programme takes locally (Hawe, Shiell and Riley 2004). As a social initiative - that  
15 is introduced into complex 'open' community settings (or systems) and where the aim is to enable  
16 residents to take action in support of neighborhood improvements (i.e. not to do what  
17 interventionists tell them) - BL entails great complexity. The dimensions of individual local area  
18 systems including its demography (population size, ethnic diversity) geography (area boundaries,  
19 population density, green/blue space), economy (material resources, local economy, employment  
20 rates) and - importantly - the social relationships in place (local decision making structures, level  
21 of community organisation, existence and role of public and third sector organisations) will shape  
22 the kinds of system shifts the intervention prompts. The level of control afforded to residents in  
23 driving local action arguably makes these processes unusually unpredictable and harder to track.  
24 Within each local area system, a multitude of pathways and feedback loops may be triggered by  
25 the BL initiative, which may result in both positive and negative neighbourhood effects. The  
26 potential for such diversity within each neighbourhood presents great challenges to the way we  
27 evaluate BL and generate general theoretical propositions about how the intervention works (or  
28 fails to ~~work~~) in different settings.

## 29 **The Communities in Control evaluation study**

### 30 *Study aims*

1 The Communities in Control (CiC) study is an ongoing independent longitudinal mixed methods  
2 multi-site, multi team evaluation of the BL initiative and its impact on health inequalities and their  
3 social determinants. Within the public health literature, there is growing recognition of the role of  
4 'collective control' as a key mechanism for improving health and reducing inequalities (Wallerstein  
5 2002, Wallerstein 2006, Popay 2010, Marmot 2010, PHE and NHS England 2015, Whitehead *et*  
6 *al.* 2016). Our research seeks to contribute to the limited evidence base on whether and if so how  
7 community empowerment initiatives work to improve health and reduce health inequalities (Popay  
8 *et al.* 2007), and the pathways through which such improvements may take shape.

9 The study is being carried out by five multi-disciplinary research teams who are all members of  
10 the NIHR funded School ~~for~~ Public Health Research. The data and methodological reflections  
11 described in this paper are based on the qualitative element of the study that was carried out  
12 across ten sites in the first phase of the research between March 2014 and November 2015. This  
13 element of the study involved a team of fifteen researchers each at various stages in their  
14 research careers and with disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, history,  
15 psychology and public health. The overall objective of this component of the study was to capture  
16 the events that flowed from the introduction of the BL initiative in each individual system under  
17 study, creating 'thick description' of how the initiative was unfolding 'on the ground' and if and how  
18 it might lead to any changes in the capabilities for collective control amongst residents of BL  
19 neighbourhoods. As already indicated, our aim was not to produce a series of individual  
20 ethnographies, but to produce one large corpus of data with greater purchase for understanding  
21 the broader kinds of (system) changes emergent as BL embedded within our field-sites.

## 22 *Data generation*

23 Fieldwork was conducted by five teams (one involving collaboration between two universities, one  
24 a collaboration between five universities, and three further single institution teams) in 10 disparate  
25 geographical areas that were already involved in the BL initiative. Areas were selected for the  
26 study to reflect diversity in local context and to include those at different stages of the BL  
27 framework (~~as outlined~~described above). The decision to involve a number of research teams  
28 from across the country allowed us to include in the study a diverse range of geographically  
29 dispersed field-sites, with each research team taking responsibility for carrying out all fieldwork in  
30 the research site that was closest in proximity to them. The sample of ten sites included seaside,  
31 urban inner-city and outer city areas in the North and South of England. Methods of data  
32 collection included a rapid review of documents describing the social and economic history of field

1 sites; transect walks around the local areas accompanied by residents; informal conversations;  
2 and in-depth qualitative interviews with residents and other stakeholders; regular observation of  
3 relevant meetings of BL resident-led partnerships and other groups and events; and documentary  
4 analysis of meeting minutes, locally commissioned research reports and policies and protocols  
5 developed as part of the BL initiative. In some sites participatory group activities were also carried  
6 out, which involved participants mapping local neighbourhood histories; places of importance;  
7 and their BL journeys so far. Fieldwork involved repeated researcher visits to each field site, by  
8 the same members of the research team responsible for data collection in that site.

9  
10 To ensure some consistency of data generation across sites a tool kit of standard interview topic  
11 guides and templates for capturing information during transect walks, informal conversations and  
12 observations at meetings and events, and to extract details from documents were created  
13 collaboratively by the whole cross site team. This process was led by two senior researchers  
14 from one of the research teams who had additional responsibility for managing and coordinating  
15 fieldwork across all ten field sites. Opportunities for other researchers to feed into the  
16 development of these materials were provided. While each individual researcher often made their  
17 own free-flowing notes to help them make sense of what happening in their own sites, the  
18 templates helped ensure that data collection followed similar lines of inquiry in each site to aid  
19 later comparison and aggregation of data. Templates were structured around themes pertinent to  
20 our aim for this phase of the study: to develop 'thick description' of how BL was embedding in  
21 local field sites and if and how it was contributing to changes in residents capabilities for collective  
22 control. Our focus was on capturing the characteristics of local field sites their histories,  
23 relationships in place and assets and any signs of whether and if so how these were becoming  
24 altered by the introduction of BL. Field notes were, therefore, written for an audience, rather than  
25 as 'aide memoirs' for individual researchers as in traditional ethnography. This, like in Scales *et*  
26 *al's* (2011) research, encouraged us to keep 'making the familiar strange' throughout the data  
27 collection process and not to take shortcuts in our observations and reflections so our field notes  
28 could be interpreted by other cross site team members who did not have a comparable level of  
29 familiarity with our particular field sites. As described in more detail below, such processes  
30 allowed for data generated across the 10 sites, by the different research teams, to be shared and  
31 understood among the study team from an early stage in the fieldwork process. Procedures for  
32 gaining informed consent in each field site and disseminating findings publicly including to

1 research participants were also agreed collaboratively by the team and integrated into the tool kit  
2 that ultimately constituted the agreed principles and terms of engagement for the whole team.

3  
4 Our approach to the ethnographic method, therefore, resembles much contemporary  
5 ethnography involving shorter stints of fieldwork, more focused research activity, multiple field  
6 sites and researcher collaboration, than in conventional ethnography (Marcus 2008, Reynolds  
7 2016), but with a commitment to long-term, immersion within a field and developing a sense of  
8 'being there' through observations, encounters and conversations (Lewis and Russell 2011).

#### 9 10 *Data analysis*

11 The five teams, working across 10 sites, produced a large volume of research data, including:  
12 138 interviews with residents and other stakeholders; 18 participatory group activities and around  
13 440 hours of observation. A comparative narrative synthesis was conducted across fieldwork sites  
14 and methods. Nvivo version 10 was used to store and manage cross site data and an initial coding  
15 frame was developed across the research teams to help organise data and identify initial  
16 themes. Cross-case analysis was initiated through the sharing of ~~memos~~ data and early analytic  
17 interpretations via email and a through a series of regular face-to-face data analysis workshops  
18 involving all team members where early findings were presented by each of the five research  
19 teams as a way of identifying patterns and relationships across the data set. Analysis then  
20 continued in smaller working groups focussed around particular themes identified in the early  
21 phase of analysis. ~~They were~~ led by one researcher from each of the five research teams and  
22 involving at least one researcher from each of the other teams to maintain detailed and tacit  
23 contextual knowledge about each individual site ~~continued~~ these working groups continued  
24 focussed analysis through a combination of data tabulation and narrative techniques until an  
25 'overall story' to describe their findings had emerged ~~to describe their findings~~ (Popay *et al.*, 2006).  
26 This involved an iterative process of review and refinement between working group members until  
27 consensus was reached about a set of general theoretical propositions in relation to the cross site  
28 data (Yin, 2009).

29  
30 One of the core challenges of bringing the data together across sites was in relation to balancing  
31 attention to what was happening locally (at each individual site) versus delivering an "overall story"  
32 about the initiative and the kinds of changes it was engendering. By identifying and exploring  
33 commonalities and divergences in common "processes", for example in relation to changing social  
34 relationships, structures, group efficacy and connections with external organisations, across our

1 field sites we aimed to develop an understanding of broad system changes applicable [to the](#)  
2 [development of resident capability for collective control](#) across sites, while maintaining attention  
3 to individual context. [Taking this approach, we hoped this would enable us](#) aimed to build up a  
4 picture of the core processes that were engendered by the initiative and the diversity of ways in  
5 which they might be shaped in each system. While we wanted to maintain some of the complexity  
6 and specificity of what was happening in individual sites, the aim ~~was~~ [was not for holistic](#)  
7 ~~representation of each local area “system” but~~ to explore common processes that were occurring  
8 in each site [\(or system\)](#) albeit perhaps in quite different ways.

9  
10 Using empirical data from the study, we now reflect on how multi-site, multi-team ethnography  
11 enabled us to build up a general theory of the way in which BL might bring about changes in  
12 residents capabilities for collective control and the kind of system conditions that might influence  
13 these developments. We also reflect briefly on some of the opportunities and challenges we  
14 encountered as a team.

#### 16 **Capturing systems complexity in the evaluation of BL**

17  
18 As already indicated, one of the central aims of this phase of our study was to understand how  
19 BL might prompt changes in capabilities for ‘collective control’ among residents where the  
20 initiative was implemented. A focus on how these capabilities were taking shape was the subject  
21 of some of the smaller group analyses described above. Through repeated observation and  
22 encounters in the field, individual researcher teams were slowly able to build up a picture of the  
23 ways in which the BL initiative was impacting on development of capabilities for collective control  
24 amongst residents in these neighbourhoods. Through the sharing and interrogation of structured  
25 field notes from each site and regular ongoing team discussion, we were able to identify within  
26 the data set a number of common shifts in the emergence of these ~~capabilities that~~ [capabilities](#)  
27 [that](#) were occurring to different extents across our field sites.

28  
29 Employing constructs drawn from the empowerment literature (Rowlands 1997, Kim 2007) we  
30 categorised these shifts in capabilities for and the exercise of collective control as occurring within  
31 the domains of: ‘power within’, ‘power with’ and ‘power to’. Our Power Framework is discussed  
32 in detail elsewhere (forthcoming). In this paper we consider how bringing data together from  
33 across the teams enabled us to identify the kinds of system conditions and structures that might  
34 influence the development of collective control capabilities in each site. These are described in

1 more detail in **Box 1**. Focussing specifically on 'power within' - the development of internal  
2 communal characteristics such as collective identity group efficacy and 'know how' – we also  
3 reflect on how our data enabled us to identify important, yet subtle, ebbs and flows in the  
4 emergence of the capabilities for collective control ~~deemstating~~demonstrating how such  
5 processes were emergent, occurring in non-linear ways over lengthy periods of time. **Box 2**.  
6

### **Box 1: understanding system influences**

#### Levels of social cohesion

Whilst it is understandable that BL funding is allocated to specific geographical areas this means the initiative defines the social as well as the physical boundaries for action. Sometimes these boundaries were contiguous with pre-existing social groupings that 'made sense' to local residents (a housing estate, for example). At other times - particularly in the larger BL areas – the initiative brought together previously unconnected social groupings (several villages for example, or estates separated by a major road).

Our research suggests that the pre-existing 'cohesiveness" of groups within BL areas (whether they had a shared sense of place, a shared history, previous experience of collective action) greatly influenced the speed at which residents engaged with one another, developed a shared plan and brought about change in their area.

*There's loads of like-minded people out there but they don't know each other and I think that's going to be a big part of it; getting everyone together focusing on this, you know, this opportunity. It's the only way we can make the most of it. (Field Work Area 4 Interview Partnership Member 06)*

#### Pre-existing organisational and decision making structures

Looking across our field sites we were able to understand how BL came to be positioned within pre-existing organisations and decision making structures. In areas with pre-existing community organisations and activism BL Partnerships often embedded and operated through established networks between a wide range of local stakeholders. In area FA3, for example, the BL initiative initially became embedded within a pre-existing community partnership which was eventually transformed into the BL Partnership. Already established productive working relationships were harnessed and BL activity became increasingly embedded within local council structures, enabling the resident led partnership to work

towards common goals with the council. In contrast, areas where there were few pre-existing links between organisations, or where residents did not view these relationships positively developing relationships with others could take more time.

A common observation across all sites was that pre-existing social relationships between residents and between residents and other organisations played an important role in determining the networks through which BL was acting and the direction and speed at which these networks were developing.

Past experience and collective memory shape the emergences of capabilities for collective control amongst residents

Shared memories of previous place based initiatives impacted on trust, speeding up or slowing down the processes through which BL impacted on capabilities for collective action amongst residents. In areas where residents had difficult past experiences and negative attitudes towards, external agencies they were reluctant to engage with them.

In contrast, where past experiences were more positive, multiple interactions were developing with local agencies in the public, private and/or third sector, which could work to maximise actions on issues prioritised in the BL plan. [As one resident described:](#)

*I have had a separate conversation about the idea of linking up all of the organisations together and having a conversation with public health [department in the Local Authority] across the whole of the area about potential joint funding and you know larger scale projects. (Fieldwork Area 5–Interview–Partnership Member-4)*

Non-resident stakeholders were often seen to bring extra skills/powers/leverage as well as benefits arising from joining with others to achieve common goals. Residents' expectation that the behaviours of other organisations matched their ethos and priorities was an important driver of these interactions. Shared memories of previous place-based initiatives also shaped expectations of what could be achieved by BL. In some areas, an apparently slow pace of change brought back negative memories leading to demotivation, people dropping out or worries about the wider public perceptions of the ability of the BL partnership to bring about change. We witnessed the continuation of these processes as new, shared memories



were created through the recounting of stories, both celebratory and cautionary, which had a role in moving residents forward.

*Adapted from Orton, Halliday et al (2016).*

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As the excerpts in **Box 1**, above, illustrate, the processes whereby the Big Local intervention was able to impact on capabilities for collective control amongst residents were permeated by characteristics of the system that shaped the potential for these changes to come about in each setting. Aspects of pre-existing social context - including common identity, shared memories/past experiences of working together and with others, pre-existing social networks and structures – influenced how the kinds of changes that the BL initiative brought about. The creation of a collective (of local residents), the identification of shared priorities, how residents were able to engage with each other and other local organisations, including local councils and community and voluntary organisations to begin to identify and ultimately work towards common goals were to different extents influenced by these elements of the setting. Across our sites we could see how local differences impacted on system dynamics. In particular, we were able to explore the ways in which local residents were/or were not able to come together with each other and with others- to develop capabilities for collective action.

Our examination and discussion of cross site processes also sensitised the research team to the potential for the development of capabilities for collective control to progress at different speeds and in different ways over time, rather than to build in a straight forward linear way. It was by examining the different narratives emanating from each site we could fully comprehend the fragility of these developmental processes, which could be compromised by tension and conflict within and beyond BL partnerships ~~that~~ were often inextricably tied to the social conditions and histories of the area described in **Box 1**. In **Box 2** we describe some of the ways in which we identified how the development of capabilities for collective control ebbed and flowed within our field sites.

**Box 2: Capturing ebb and flow in the development of capabilities for collective control: the example of “power within”**

As already noted 'Power within' pertains to capabilities internal to a community – to the collective identity, collective efficacy and 'know how' that provide the drive, knowledge and skills necessary for communities of interest or place to act collectively to change things or to influence others. Our data indicated that on some occasions negative experiences with 'more powerful' organisations could dampen the collective confidence of residents in their ability to make changes in their neighbourhood. In one field site, with strong community organisations and history of community activism, for example, the recruitment of an out of work surveyor to the BL Partnership resulted in a strong sense of confidence about the ability of the group to establish a new community hub. Plans were drawn up and initial support from the local Council seemed promising. Partnership members appeared positive and enthusiastic about progress towards their goal. They struggled, however, to acquire land from a local housing association on which to build, and felt both the housing association and the local Council were evading them. Many participants linked this action to perceived longer term neglect of the area by, and fractious relationship with, the local Council. For some participants these challenges resulted in a loss in their sense of group efficacy and worked to instill a sense of powerlessness in relation to making change in their own neighbourhoods. As one participant described:

*"Yeah, yeah, I mean if it could get off the ground then, yes, it could, could give local people the incentive to, to really get their act together to say, this is what we want to do. This is how we want to do it. Not, this is what you're going to do and this is how you're going to do it...but at the moment that's not going to happen...It could happen if the main people who give you the, the ability to do it would allow you to do it. But at the moment there is a, that brick wall going, you're not going to do it. And until that comes down or something happens they're not going to allow you to do it." [Fieldwork Area 6-Interview-Partnership Member-5]*

For others, this challenge resulted in a shift in priorities from a focus on a new building for a hub to providing services out of existing council or housing association owned buildings. Over time the group were able to re-build confidence in their ability to achieve their goals through a re-focus on new priorities where they were able to make greater progress. Their confidence and willingness to work with the council going forward, however, remained severely compromised.

1  
2 In summary, our long term multi-site, multi team ethnographic approach enabled us to build up a  
3 broad picture of how the introduction of BL might prompt changes in resident capabilities for  
4 collective control through shifts in neighbourhood social relations and organisation structures;  
5 ~~how~~ the extent of these shifts might be influenced by the characteristics of different  
6 neighbourhood (system) characteristics; and the emergent and dynamic nature of such system  
7 changes. Through both an 'up close' ethnographic engagement with what was happening in  
8 relation to emergent capabilities for collective control in each of the BL areas while at the same  
9 time taking a broader perspective by looking across multiple field sites we were able to build up  
10 an empirically informed theory about how the initiative might lead to increased capabilities for and  
11 the exercise of control among residents and how these changes might be promoted in different  
12 settings. The longitudinal aspect of the study proved invaluable in enabling us to track and  
13 capture the temporal nature of changes in capabilities for collective control that were emergent,  
14 ~~and~~ not always in a linear fashion.

15  
16 Crucially, it was through the collaborative analytic process where we were able to build up a fuller  
17 sense of the broad whole system changes BL as an initiative might trigger and where the value  
18 of the multi-site, multi-team approach really came to the fore. While the pooling of data added to  
19 the breadth and depth of our understanding, regular team discussion also worked as an analytic  
20 and reflexive tool that forced individual researchers to think more deeply and critically about their  
21 individual data and interpretations of 'what was happening' in their own field sites in light of the  
22 interpretations of others in the wider team. These collective processes took place in what Wasser  
23 and Bressler (1996 p.6) refer to as the 'interpretive zone', defined as 'the place where multiple  
24 viewpoints are held in dynamic tension as a group seeks to make sense of fieldwork issues and  
25 meanings'. Developing a sense of trust and a 'safe space' where open discussion could take  
26 place was critical to this process and was facilitated by regular face to face meetings and social  
27 gatherings involving team members at all levels where researchers could get to know one  
28 another. Interpretive discussions were inevitably shaped by and inflected with the diverse  
29 backgrounds of researchers involved in the project at different stages of career who each brought  
30 a different set of identities, experiences, beliefs and theoretical knowledge to bear in the  
31 interpretative zone. From this diversity of background and interpretation the team had to derive  
32 new, often more nuanced, collective understandings through discussion and debate (Scales *et al*  
33 2011).

34

1 ~~While this asymmetry within the team undoubtedly expanded and enhanced our understanding~~  
2 ~~of our data, it nevertheless rarely led to direct conflict and dissonance said to bring valuable~~  
3 ~~analytic power (when consensus is hard won) (Clerk and Hopwood, 2014). Our experience was~~  
4 ~~characterised more frequently by a polite stalemate and a tentativeness and unwillingness to be~~  
5 ~~decisive and critical of the ideas of others resulting in an expanse of interpretations that needed~~  
6 ~~to be carefully honed.~~ It was ~~also nevertheless also~~ important to remain alert to the risk of arriving  
7 at consensus and a shared story too early, unduly privileging particular accounts and obscuring  
8 options for multiple and expansive interpretations. When and how to open-up and foreclose data  
9 interpretation, therefore, required careful consideration. It was here that the guidance of more  
10 senior and experienced academics on the team became particularly useful.

11  
12 Although our aim had ~~always~~ been to ensure the involvement of all team members in the analysis  
13 process, it was often the role of a single researcher, - especially those who were closest to the  
14 data - to take responsibility for the challenge of textually 'putting together' the accounts of multiple  
15 researchers following discussion and creating an overall narrative about the findings (Mautnher  
16 and Doucet 2008). While this may have run the risk of reducing collaborative analysis to a more  
17 'top-down' or 'solo' approach, individual researchers were engaged in ongoing basis in the final  
18 descriptions of the findings, adding additional thoughts and contextual and tacit knowledge where  
19 appropriate. This synergistic approach, we would argue, enabled us to arrive at a fuller and more  
20 rigorous, yet not complete, interpretation of 'how' the BL initiative might work to enhance collective  
21 control in different settings.

### 22 **Understanding complexity: What can multi-site, multi-team ethnography offer?**

23 So, for evaluation, what can multi-site, multi team ethnography add to understand complexity in  
24 social initiatives like BL? Did it produce 'better' evidence about the initiative?

25  
26  
27 The multi-site approach met our aim of developing understanding of the broad system changes  
28 (common processes and mechanisms) that BL might bring about by looking across sites and also  
29 added understanding of the range of ways in which these might be influenced by the constituent  
30 parts of the same system. ~~By~~ treating the data not as individual cases but as one large corpus  
31 of data gave us much greater purchase for generating transferable insights about how the  
32 intervention might work in different settings. The collaborative analytic process enabled the  
33 comparative work to build up, interrogate and refine these insights, improving the quality of our  
34 interpretation. The use of ethnographic methods employed over a relatively lengthy period of time

1 enabled us to shed light on the ways that the emergence of greater capabilities for and ultimately  
2 the exercise of collective control among residents of these neighbourhoods is temporally tied,  
3 emergent and subject to ongoing shift in non-linear ways-

4  
5 These are insights that we would argue may have been left out of other accounts that adopt more  
6 conventional methods of evaluation. Taking an approach like ours may be particularly useful for  
7 evaluating initiatives over the longer term where change does not necessarily 'happen' in linear  
8 or predictable ways. For evaluation, insights such as these might help us to understand what  
9 changes to expect in what circumstances; why things might not be moving in the expected  
10 direction; and at which points within the system to intervene and direct resources to support  
11 desired change.

12  
13 A number of challenges remain, however. Within ethnography, we know that holistic  
14 representation is impossible: our accounts will always partial and selective, and unknowns will  
15 always remain. Even though our approach enabled us to uncover subtle non-linear processes of  
16 change unfolding and shifting over a period of time, there were limits on how far we could track  
17 these system dynamics. We were only able to produce situated accounts for understanding  
18 unpredictable dynamics and longer term trajectories that depend on national and global as well  
19 as local processes. Our research necessarily can only provide a (perhaps more extended than  
20 usual) snapshot of ongoing dynamic processes unfolding over the longer term.

21  
22 There is a ~~further remains a~~ tension in multi-site multi-team ethnography in balancing attention to  
23 the particularities of each individual site ~~and taking advantage of the inerrant felxibility that~~  
24 ~~ethnography allows for this (particularly in terms of capturing systems complexity)~~ -whilst also  
25 producing data that are comparable across sites and teams (through the use of common  
26 observation templates, for example). One of the benefits of our multi-site multi-team approach,  
27 however, ~~may have~~ helped to address this. Critical reflection ~~on our data collection tools~~ was  
28 facilitated ~~by the multi-site multi-team approach~~ through long term engagement ~~withat~~ our field  
29 sites and through ~~the~~ team reflexive sessions that were built-in to our approach from day 1. By  
30 coming together and sharing research experiences and emergent findings from across field sites  
31 we were able to adapt the research tools as time went on so they were more suited to capturing  
32 the data we were coming to learn was important to our understanding of BL and how it was  
33 embedding in ~~local-different local~~ field sites ~~and use this data to expand our overall interpretations-~~

1  
2 can help capture complexity of emergent system dynamics - that ensue in the implementation of  
3 public health initiatives in to complex community settings. Identifying such processes is crucial to  
4 understanding 'how' interventions prompt change within a system and enabling the transferability  
5 of successful interventions into other settings.  
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