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A 'left behind' habitus? understanding local political disengagement using Bourdieu

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ABSTRACT

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is applied to interpret the structural conditions and experiences of citizens in 'left behind' places (LBP) along the Cumbrian coastline (UK). The findings from a longitudinal participatory study imply a 'left behind' habitus where citizens disengage with local and national politics. This suggests that place-based initiatives aimed at reducing spatial inequalities, such as Levelling Up and the current devolution agenda, will be ineffective without considering the subjective, physical, distance LBP feel from political institutions. Future research needs to explore relational strategies which align the local democratic field with local civic habitus to foster liberal democracy.

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Left behind places; local democracy; grounded theory; habitus

1. Introduction: conceptualizing 'left behind' places

Notions of individualism and freedom are believed to be the foundation of liberal democracy, based on the assumption that all citizens share an equal right to make informed choices concerning national and local governance and that these choices are given legitimacy (Levine, 1981). However, it is well understood that inequalities exist concerning the degree of choice citizens feel they have in democratic processes (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023). The concept of 'left behind' places (LBP) has been adopted globally as a policy construct to advance a political agenda concerned with addressing inequalities within liberal democracy (Hannemann et al., 2023; Tierney et al., 2023; Tups et al., 2023). A recent wave of political discontent has led to the development of the concept of LBPs in policy science (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023), with former industrial regions seemingly turning to populist parties to express their anger and dissatisfaction with contemporary politics (see also Hendrickson et al., 2018).

The term LBP, which is socially and political constructed, principally based on economic composition, has been conceptualized as combining a range of characteristics, notably 'economic disadvantage, lower living standards, population loss/contraction /

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low-growth, a lack of infrastructure and political neglect and disengagement' (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 42). It is suggested that these conditions are a consequence of a 'geographically uneven development' (p. 41) and the concentration of skilled knowledge economy jobs in cities (Feldman et al., 2021; Florida, 2021). The structure elements of LBP have been presented a typology shown in Table 1:

However, given the socially constructed nature of the concept, further interpretative scrutiny is imperative. When this perspective has been considered, the complex ontological dynamics of the objective dimension have been found to impact the subjective, lived experience (Pain, 2019; Tomaney, 2018; Tomaney & Pike, 2021), but there is a lack of conceptual clarity concerning their interactions.

Several conceptual frameworks have pointed to the economic, social, demographic, political and cultural conditions associated with LBP, drawing on the objective and subjective dimensions of the phenomenon (Dijkstra et al., 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). When focusing on the subjective experience of citizens, it is suggested that the key intermediate variable is the perception of neglect by mainstream politics, resulting in disengagement in representative politics and a propensity towards populism, described as being symptomatic of 'a geography of discontent' (McCann, 2020, p. 545) and 'regional embitterment' (Hannemann et al., 2023, p. 1). This subjective ontology, it is concerned with the cognitions, emotions, interpretations and perceptions of citizens in response to external conditions, such as historical underinvestment and political neglect (Martin et al., 2021). Developing a more nuanced conceptual understanding of the lived experience of citizens in places considered 'left behind' is critical in challenging narratives, politics and practices that may hinder participation in liberal democracy.

Lived, or embodied experience, can be quite different from the detached, structural perspectives that are common within places that share a historical grounding in an industrial world that has vanished. Studies seem to indicate that citizens feel alienated from national policy, believing their communities are facing worse economic conditions than those faced by the country as a whole (McDowell & Bonner-Thompson, 2020; McKay, 2019; Telford, 2021). This, in turn, suggests a need for localized, place-based research that enables an understanding of how people in LBP engage with and feel about their towns and cities in terms of local communities as opposed to national comparisons. Such an understanding could inform a policy definition of LBP that drives an approach to address the problem in which the role of local place attachment and sense of belonging in practice are key factors. Indeed, MacKinnon et al. (2022) call for a wider appreciation of the role of place attachment and sense of belonging in

Table 1. A multi-dimensional model of left behind places (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

Economic	Economic decline Below average levels of educational qualifications and skills Above average levels of poverty and disadvantage
Social	Limited connectivity and investment in social and economic infrastructure
Demographic	Outward migration to cities An ageing population and demographic shrinkage Poor health
Cultural	Poor civic assets and community facilities Reduced service provision

understanding LBP, particularly in terms of a loss of industry and accompanying collective identity (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Mathieson et al., 2008; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

A nuanced understanding of the local political landscape has the potential to show how local democracy interacts with the lived experience of daily life and reveal the role of social infrastructure in participation. Where the role of place has been considered, studies have revealed that the intersection between social infrastructure and place attachment can facilitate hope through organized community activity, a form of civic participation (Tomaney et al., 2023; Tups et al., 2023). It is argued that ‘moral communities’ are created through community activity, whereby subjectively subtle acts can create significant change (Tomaney et al., 2023, p. 2). Community organizing as a form of civic engagement in LBP challenges the dominant deficit discourse surrounding the term ‘left behind’, and a critical reflection on the assumptions behind the construct is needed to ensure the meaning constructed through the term emphasizes the need to reduce spatial inequalities rather than simply highlighting the shortcomings of a given place. A focus on the interaction between acts of civic engagement and political (dis)engagement would help to develop conceptual clarity surrounding the term, its usage and the impacts of such.

In light of the developing understanding of the complex interactions between the pre-existing structural conditions in LBP and the subjective, lived experience of citizens, this article seeks to provide an original contribution to the ‘affective turn’ of LBP literature (Tomaney et al., 2023, p. 1). I draw on Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory to clarify how we can view LBP, explicitly acknowledging the role of both structural and agentic conditions in the creation of social reality and the formation and maintenance of social inequalities. Through this, a critical reflection of the meanings associated with politically constructed concepts such as ‘left behind’ will be framed within a wider debate surrounding political disengagement and its importance in the context of liberal democracy. Throughout this argument, civic engagement and participatory democracy are viewed as a means to facilitate liberal democracy, and the research described in this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of this topic through critically analysing the interaction between acts of civic engagement and political (dis)engagement.

1.1. Background: research content and context

This paper draws from ‘Community Power’, a relationally-based community-level participatory action research project which aimed to foster collaboration between Cumberland Council and communities in policy development across the policy cycle. Working closely with 40 residents in four low-income coastal communities considered ‘left-behind’ (Local Trust, 2019), participatory workshops explored enablers and barriers to civic and democratic participation. Particular attention was given to perceived and aspirational relationships between communities and the Council before facilitating co-creative forums. These forums provided the communities and the Council opportunities to collaborate in co-creating innovative approaches to promote engagement in the local democratic system.

The LBP involved in this research are positioned as being both physically and symbolically peripheral, a perception shaped by structural inequalities, a deep collective history and a strong collective identity (Wilson, 2024). This collective, subjective perception of

distance is influenced by complex intersections between race, gender, class and place (Condor & Fenton, 2012; Crenshaw, 2013; Lawler, 2012; McDermott, 2006; Moore, 2013; Sanderson & Thomas, 2014; Spanierman et al., 2013; Spracklen, 2016), shaped by a strong collective history and perceived shared trauma. This was in seen to manifest in behaviour, such as disengagement in politics concerning in the LBP along the Cumbrian coast, as has been evidenced in other post-industrial communities in northern England (Telford, 2021, 2023; Telford & Lloyd, 2020).

2. Understanding local political disengagement in 'left behind' citizens through the social reproduction of inequality

2.1. Capital, habitus and political agency

The following argument will apply Bourdieu's social reproduction theory as a conceptual framework to interpret the interaction between acts of civic engagement and political (dis)engagement in low-income coastal communities. This conceptual perspective provides a framework to reconcile structure and agency, whereby external structures are internalized into the habitus, thereby appreciating the role of subjectivity amongst objective structures. This dialectic argues that individual agency can be unconsciously shaped by external forces within the social field, the most significant being capital.

2.1.1. Capital

Bourdieu extended the Marxist idea of capital to all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social or symbolic, arguing that these can be drawn on to maintain and enhance positions in the social order. These were described as 'social relations of power' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 375). These forms of power and their unequal distribution amongst individuals and groups were argued to be the fundamental causes of societal inequality and exclusion. Capital is considered to be a 'set of actually usable resources and powers' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114), having a 'market value in the struggle for privilege' (Kingston, 2001, p.89). Different kinds of knowledge are socially constructed and ascribed a value; if it is culturally appropriate, knowledge is considered an 'asset', in the same sense that economic theory ascribes value to capital. Bourdieu posited that there are as many different forms of capital as there are fields, but four forms of capital received particular attention: economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital.

Bourdieu argued that economic capital refers to traditional understandings of economic wealth. When considered in relation to civic and political participation, economic capital can be understood in terms of having the material wealth to access elite educational institutions or the ability to contribute financially to a political party. When considered in relation to civic and political participation, social capital can be understood in terms of access to networks with social status and influence within the political field. The role of intersectionality with regards to gender in social networks and policy has been critically reflected upon by, highlighting the complexity of social networks, and also highlights that social networks between dominated groups, who do not possess the socially prescribed, legitimized attributes, can still work collaboratively to influence societal change (Bebbington, 2007).

The concept of cultural capital was designed as an alternative to the functionalist definition of education, which neglects to acknowledge educational inequalities and social reproduction. To acknowledge the influence of families and broader social status, Bourdieu developed the notion of cultural capital, referring to ‘familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use educated language’ (Sullivan, 2002, p. 145). It was asserted that three forms of cultural capital contribute to societal inequalities: embodied (an internal appreciation for a cultural good or piece of work), objectified (the physical cultural good or piece of work), and institutionalized (the educational system).

The internalization of this legitimizing power sees social structures become connected with cognitive structures, where individuals and groups then unconsciously reproduce the social order by classifying the social world with the same categories with which it classifies them. Within this, we can see the formation of different social classifications resulting in social exclusion and discrimination. Here, in-group out-group relations are formed, providing a ‘logic of difference, of differential deviation’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 237), whereby social groups are hierarchically differentiated. Bourdieu exemplifies this differentiation in explaining voting behaviour, where dominated group self-exclude from the democratic process, thereby reproducing exclusion (Bourdieu 1979). This behaviour was described as *doxa*, one’s perceived ‘sense of limits’, where individuals unquestionably accept their social position.

2.1.2. *Political habitus*

Bourdieu offers an epistemology to understand the interaction between the individual experiences of citizens and societal structures that are constructed and maintained by those in positions of power in local democracy, reconciling the gap in the LBP literature. ‘Left behind’ is presented as being a product constructed from unequal positions of power, an enactment of the concept of *doxa* in practice. Bourdieu’s concept of the field, understood to be a spatial metaphor of the social world, defines the struggle for power that takes place between those in dominant as opposed to subordinate positions (Bourdieu, 1998). Local political actors, who possess the socially constructed capital – which is to say, a resource that carries significant weight within a community – dictate the language used and setting the modes of production (the ways citizens can engage in local politics). This ‘way of being and doing’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 456) is at odds with how citizens view their position as one which they ‘ought’ to occupy’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 454), a concept Bourdieu coined ‘*habitus*’.

Habitus, understood as being a set of dispositions, tendencies, attitudes, beliefs or values (Sullivan, 2001), provides a lens through which we can interpret the experience of the social world within LBPs, appreciating how internal conditions can materialize into practice, for example, political disengagement. *Habitus* summarized as one’s ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128), is characterized by unconscious, cognitive processes, which not only impact on the present but also anticipate the future encounters and behaviours, which can, in turn result in social exclusion. Within the political field, it is argued that political *habitus* generates a self-exclusion, often manifest through a disengagement with politics (Bourdieu, 1984). Applied in the context of LBP, perceiving that the field of politics is not an area in which they are competent or entitled to inhabit, citizens self-exclude, a consequence of the dominant political class

exercising symbolic power. This doxic self-exclusion is additionally a source of symbolic violence, where social hierarchies are unconsciously taken-for-granted (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In the social space of the political field, habitus feeds the formation of different social classifications, making explicit the differences between those with political power and those without. In the context of LBP, these social hierarchies can explain why citizens strongly differentiate from what is perceived to be the political elite and could be said to exemplify a 'regional embitterment' (Hannemann et al., 2023, p. 1) that is directed towards those in positions of power. This political hierarchical differentiation results in both the subjective and objective exclusion of LBP in the local democratic field.

3. Methods

The findings presented are from a wider policy action research project aimed at bringing local policy actors and citizens together to co-produce an original approach to foster local participatory democracy. The research questions guiding this research were: What forms of participatory democracy do socially excluded communities want to see introduced by local government? How can socially excluded communities work with local government to embed this? Through introducing democratic processes and different methods of participatory democracy using creative and interactive tools, each group produced an original approach to foster engagement in the local democratic process in their communities (see Wilson, 2023 for more information).

3.1. Participants

The research recruited 40 participants from three communities, with 15 young people (aged between 11–17 years old) and 25 adults (aged between 18–81 years old). All participants were white, 35% were male and 65% female. Of the adult sample, 48.9% were retired, 15.1% were employed, and 29.8% were of working age but unable to work. Of the sample of young people, all were in some form of full-time education. These figures are not representative of the general population but are more representative of socially excluded groups, for example, including higher than average proportions of people who were unemployed, retired or have additional physical or learning needs.

Essentially, the research sought to understand the interaction between civic engagement and political (dis)engagement and adopted a place-based approach to seeking the opinions and beliefs of agents in areas that may be considered subject to the regionality embitterment of political discontent associated with LBP. Communities, all located in a mainly coastal region of Northwest England, were selected for inclusion based on their embodiment of the characteristics of LBP ('suffered from significant levels of economic and social deprivation based on existing accepted definitions', Local Trust, 2019). According to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) all communities were in the 10% of the most deprived areas in the county (IMD, 2019) and thus were considered to be LBP. Although relatively dated, the 2019 Multiple Indices of Deprivation Index demonstrated the limited and unequal access these places had in terms of education, employment, income, and healthcare (IMD, 2019). More recent data from the 2021 census suggests that these levels of deprivation and inequality remain, with all

communities indicating high levels of economic inactivity, long-term unemployment and levels of disability when compared with local and national rates (Office for National Statistics, 2022). These suggest structural inequalities within these peripheral communities, an argument strengthened by data concerning limited access to leisure and culture (Arts Council England, 2024).

Building on specific community-based recruitment used previously by the author (Wilson, 2020) and in keeping with ground theory, purposive sampling was used, targeting specific community organizations. Existing community groups were identified through an advisory panel or through my own pre-existing networks and visited by myself, where information about the research was shared verbally, accompanied by PIS and consent forms. In the groups involving young people, parental consent forms and assent forms were issued. All participants received a shopping voucher of their choosing for £50 per person, acknowledging the value of their time. Furthermore, as has proven successful in previous research, all participants received a certificate confirming their participation in the study (Wilson & McGuire, 2022).

3.2. Procedure

A total of six 2-hour interactive workshops took place in a community centre located in the target communities, combining focused group and paired activities with group discussion. The aims of the workshops are summarized in the table below (Table 2):

Although a structured programme was developed, this was applied loosely during the workshops, allowing participants to take the lead in the direction of conversations and topics. In one community, the participants agreed that they would prefer to talk rather than complete the structured activities prepared. By allowing conversations to flow naturally, a number of unexpected themes arose in all groups.

3.3. Analysis

In keeping with the grounded theory approach, audio recordings of each session were transcribed and analysed shortly after completion using Nvivo software, allowing for constant comparative analysis and for topics to be revisited if more information or clarity was needed to reach theoretical saturation. All data were anonymised using pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy. A Straussian grounded theory approach was chosen for this research, applying the following stages to the analytic process: Open, Axial, and Selective coding.

Table 2. Aims of Community Workshops.

-
1. Build and maintain relationships within each group
 2. Provide a space for participants to reflect on their community, particularly in light of participation with local and national democracy
 3. Introduce key elements of the local democratic process
 4. Produce an original approach to engage communities in the local democratic process
 5. Identify key policy actors to recruit as policy participants
 6. Prepare participants for working alongside the policy actors to finalize an original approach to engaging communities in the local democratic process.
-

3.3.1. Open coding

Open coding involves the initial identification of codes, assigning codes to similar instances emerging from the data. During this stage, categories may also be identified, clustering related codes. Following each workshop and co-creative forum, the data produced (transcripts, photos of materials and field notes) underwent coding and emerging categories were identified. As the workshops continued, there was a constant comparative analysis, using theoretical sampling and sensitivity to consider what emerging codes and categories require further investigation. Using Nvivo to organize the data, this stage in the analysis generated 11 categories.

3.3.2. Axial coding

Axial coding requires the identification of a core category, counting the constant comparative analysis. During this stage measures to ensure theoretical saturation is achieved through theoretical sensitivity. As the workshops approached completion, core categories were selected from the data and the results will be examined to check for data saturation. Two overarching categories were identified (communities and relationships) and written up in a descriptive report, seeking to explore an emerging storyline in the categories, describing the conditions, events and outcomes associated with each category (Spracklen, 2016, p. 2015).

3.3.3. Selective coding

In selective coding, the data are viewed on a purely conceptual basis, and relationships between concepts are identified. The categories and accompanying properties are revisited, compared against the data again, reorganized and integrated, resulting in the generation of concepts that make up the substantive theory. The findings were presented as a set of interrelated concepts by documenting each category and emergent properties in a table, where contradictions in the data and different perspectives were considered. Interpretations were associated with each category, reflecting on the practices, mentalities and discourses within this, along with explaining possible the processes behind these behaviours. Organizing the data in such a way at this stage provided a systematic way to view the complex categories and properties, and identity categories behind each concept.

3.3.4. Theory development

In generating the final substantive theory, the analysis must be refined to present an integrated theory, grounded in the data, explaining processes related to specific phenomena (Birks & Mills, 2015). Here, the set of concepts developed throughout the analytic process was communicated as an interrelated whole (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In practice, the different perspectives considered in the axial coding stage were critically considered, and the epistemological position of constructivist structuralism was chosen to inform the development of a substantive theory. Key concepts associated with Bourdieu's approach were synthesized with the concepts developed through the research to present an original interpretation of the experiences of low-income coastal communities in relation to local participatory democracy.

4. Findings: civic engagement and political discontent

Following the systematic coding procedure previously outlined, three principal concepts were identified, based on their distinct properties. Civic engagement relates to citizen's construction of the role of supporting others in the community and the impact of which when this is not felt to be honoured by local political actors. Political discontent was conceptualized through five distinct beliefs that shaped attitudes and subsequent behaviour. Finally, the concept of citizens as political actors critically reflects on the exception to political disengagement, where citizens have proactively sought to engage with local political actors. Following this conceptualization, these findings were then interpreted through habitus, providing a framework to consolidate the structural conditions within LBP and citizens' subjective experiences.

4.1. Civic engagement

Many citizens expressed shared values centred around localized civic engagement ('the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future', Adler & Goggin, 2005). These were evidenced through numerous accounts of formal and informal caring roles within the community, including volunteering and helping neighbours. Citizens spoke proudly of how the community 'rallies' together at times of crisis, 'like when we had the floods everybody pulled together'. Civic engagement can be understood as a set of socially constructed norms and accepted practices, which citizens used to classify their conception of their community, exemplified in the statement, 'that's what we're like there'. The importance of civic engagement was deeply internalized in the habitus of the citizens involved in the research, where a 'good community' was considered somewhere with strong social networks, where 'people have time for each other' (Andrea).

Understanding civic engagement as a habitus of LBPs provides a framework to traverse the objective and subjective worlds, where the financial hardships and struggles encountered by the community are responded to with a propensity to help others, defined by a set of internal dispositions characterized by pride and belonging, concerned with community wellbeing: 'we work well together and I think everyone that comes here will admit that it's really engaging ... you've got to look after people' (Mary). This civic habitus demonstrates how communities can exercise agency within their hyper-local social field (i.e. immediate community), in spite of potentially exclusionary objective, structural conditions such as financial hardship and difficulties in accessing infrastructure.

Caution must be exercised, however, in extrapolating this argument across the population more widely, these accounts come from a small fraction of an LBP. Relatedly, habitus could be argued to be limited in its tendency to generalize cognitions and practices of a given group, perhaps to the detriment of intersectional considerations. Nonetheless, the notion of a civic habitus is helpful in understanding the tendencies and dispositions of a specific faction of the LBP, particularly in highlighting the value placed on helping others and the expectations surrounding this behaviour.

When citizens spoke positively of local political actors, it was around a fulfilment of this civic engagement, where their values were felt to be aligned and embedded in the

wellbeing of the immediate community. In contrast, dissatisfaction was expressed when local political actors were perceived as not fulfilling their expected role of civic engagement which was felt to derive from a different value base, concerned with self-promotion:

Deborah: You've got [elected member] that goes and grits around [the local shops] but he stands there posing for photos.
 Joseph: He puts all over [social media] and had the pleasure of spending today with [the] Community Centre.
 Chloe: They like the glory of stuff but not the work.

Here, Deborah, Joseph and Chloe evidence that citizens' definition of responsible civic engagement was often at odds with that of the political actors whom they encountered. This appeared linked to a shared belief that these actors were more frequently driven by the self – promotion and political success associated with their roles than by the values of engagement that they themselves held and which they (the citizens) perceived being key to an 'authentic' form of engagement.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is helpful in interpreting findings, such as those in which the conduct of local political actors either strengthens or damages trust in the local democratic system, centred around the perceived civic division of labour. An exertion of political power is explicitly attributed to the behaviour of local political actors, where they were felt to be driven by self-interest and political success (a political habitus) rather than in the interest of the community (a civic habitus). These conflicting habitus mark a social hierarchical distinction defined by the perceived values and consequent behaviour. The formation of this habitus sees citizens unconsciously accepting a perception of themselves and others, although they also simultaneously reject this domination. This highlights the complex levels in which consciousness operates in constructing the social world and provides a useful framework for understanding the interaction between LBP perceptions surrounding civic engagement and political discontent.

4.2. Political discontent

The first collective belief, that *local political systems are not interested in the views of LBP*, dominated the narrative throughout the workshops, exemplified in the following statement:

You don't know if they're just humouring you, to say what you want to keep you quiet. Nine times out of ten they won't do anything with what you've said, they've just let you in to humour you, so you feel like they're doing something.

These perceptions impacted on communities' motivations to become involved in consultations or any other participatory opportunities: 'we've already decided that we're not being listened to. So, they don't get the uptake because people are like, well what's the point?'. The process of past experiences (not feeling heard at consultations) can be seen to influence an internalization of a dominated position (expectation of not being listened to), impacting behaviour (lack of engagement, abstention). Here, the epistemological positioning of habitus, where the interplay between the subjective experience of the position objectively occupied, can be used to understand how citizens subjectively interpret the concrete, objective structures regarding forms of political engagement

(modes of production), such as consultations. Within this subjective interpretation, we see a habitus of political discontent, a doxic, taken-for-granted assumption that communities will not be listened to. This is leading a socially constructed self-exclusion from local democracy, perceived as a conscious agentic act, where, in fact, it may be an unconscious, internalized response to the structural dimensions of the local democratic field.

Rather than being concerned with the views of the community, it was felt that local political actors were driven by self-interest, manifested in *a lack of trust in local government to act for the benefit of the community*:

May: Nobody's going to believe [them] because they never do what they say they're going to do.

Jane: They promise you the world and say that they're going to, they'll feed that back and they'll feed this back and they'll do this, and they'll do that, but it never happens.

The discussion above outlines the feeling of being let down and of promised actions that never transpire. The motivations for these false promises and 'biased' behaviour were attributed to local political actors seeking to gain votes from the community: 'oh I'm going to show this and I'm going to show that, and that's just to get your votes'. These findings resonate with Bourdieu's reasoning behind the deep distrust and consequent doxic self-exclusion from local democracy. Those in dominant positions exercise their political power (which they possess, and citizens do not, both in quality and composition), which is perceived as driven by the self-motivation to maintain their social position, that is, gaining votes and remaining in office. Once this political power is reproduced, local political actors are seen to disregard their promises to LBPs, creating a collective distrust and helplessness within local democracy.

One specific area of the local political system LBP distrust was decision-making process, which was a doxic, taken-for-granted belief that *council decisions are predetermined*, with any consultation being tokenistic and for promotional purposes: 'you always think it anyway'. It may be argued that the citizens themselves have made their minds up about the relation between the community and local policy actors. In exploring the roots of this attitude, residents described a lack of awareness of how decisions are made and added that they felt this was a deliberate strategy to exclude citizens in decision-making, as Janet alludes to, 'They're not very inclusive and there's no transparency. It's all cloak and dagger. You'll find out what's happening after it's happened'. Bourdieu's argument that the political field is designed and defined by those in dominant positions is relevant in understanding why citizens feel excluded by decision-making processes. The perception of citizens across all workshops was that local councillors were manipulators of power and control of each ward (the political field) and lacking in transparency, unable to engender relationships of trust with communities. Without the socially constructed capitals (social, cultural, political, symbolic) to navigate the political system, citizens feel 'left behind' and ill-equipped to effectively participate. and thus, do not engage, as exemplified in Jane's statement below:

I think sometimes that's a barrier because you can have all the feelings and wanting change in your community, but if you've got, let's say an arrogant man in front of you that's reading all these policies and spouting all this, you're just going to think, well what's the point. I'm not going to get my point across, I can't compete with that.

Through the concrete objective world, decision-making structures create the conditions in which citizens subjectively feel unwelcome, not a social space they are permitted to inhabit. This is manifest in a 'left behind' habitus, where the relative social positions of citizens and local political actors are accepted, causing a doxic symbolic differentiation and a clear 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471) within the local democracy is experienced. Again, this can be framed as demonstrating the relationships between the doxic and structural, whereby communities are positioned as acting agentic self-exclusion; when the forces driving the behaviour could be more unconscious in nature.

A fourth collective belief related to an *assumed superiority policy actors hold toward the community* exemplified in the passage below:

As soon as they become a councillor, they think, 'do you know who I am?', 'Yes, you're just a councillor, and you're supposed to be the voice of the local people, but clearly not because all of a sudden you think you're special.

Here, Joseph reflects on a perceived power inequality, whereby being in office is associated with an assumed superiority attributed to a change in character. The shift in status was met with resentment, mainly because the role was to be the 'voice of the people', which is not felt to be honoured.

An explicit use of status to exert political power and dominance can be seen, which citizens interpret as local political actors possessing what Bourdieu termed an operational habitus, a perceived right to express a personal view and expectation to have these views accepted as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1984). Consequently, a 'left behind' habitus is produced in LBP, a product of the subjective interpretation of the objective position occupied and habitus misalignment based on perceived unequal power allocation, which is internalized and, albeit reluctantly, accepted.

A consequence of the beliefs presented so far is a taken-for-granted acceptance that *local government do not care about LBP*. In this final belief, a number of citizens said that local government don't 'give a shit' about their community, and it was widely felt that 'they don't care about us at all'. These accounts suggest a feeling of powerlessness, where decisions are made that impact their lives without considering the consequences for the community. Trish summarized this sentiment when proposing that the local Council's attitude toward investment in social infrastructure was 'we'll just take it away, it doesn't matter'. The Council's deliberate exertion of political capital and power characterizes a clear distinction between local policy actors and citizens. The objective, structural power within the Council, for example, having the authority to close community playparks, an asset symbolically, although not objectively, belonging to the community, intersects with a subjective internalization of powerless and 'sense of limits' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). This example illustrates the complexity of political habitus, civic engagement and political (dis)engagement whereby the relationships between the doxic and the structural results in in a habitus of deep distrust towards local democracy and the doxic self-exclusion from the field.

The concept of habitus and Bourdieu's wider argument provide a compelling perspective to view the experiences and beliefs of citizens. The belief that local policy actors' values lie in self-interest implies a conscious acceptance of the power positioning, in contrast with Bourdieu's argument that domination is principally unconscious. This critical reflection again highlights the complex and multiple levels in which consciousness

operates in constructing social reality. Furthermore, as the next section will demonstrate, not all behaviours by a given group are shared, and the research found numerous examples of citizens engaging with and challenging local political actors. This contrasts with Bourdieu's general argument of a 'homogeneity of habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85), that is, shared cognitions and actions amongst social groups, with differing accounts being treated as 'structural variant' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86). Thus, the findings from this study indicate that Bourdieu's argument surrounding the homogeneity of habitus is not necessarily applicable to the case studies of this research. Likewise, the political contentment that occurs when habitus is felt to be in alignment with local politics reveals that political discontent is not predetermined and is influenced by the actions of the local political actors (for example, when they are perceived to be enacting civic engagement). It must also be recognized that the context in which Bourdieu developed his arguments differs from the context in which this research is situated. The ways in which class was understood in France during the 1960s-1980s, when much of his work was published, are distinct from the current UK landscape, as are the cultural histories of dominant groups. Acknowledging these limitations, the value that constructive structuralism can bring to understanding LBPs remains with a number of theoretical and practical implications.

4.3. Citizens as political actors

Despite most citizens reporting that they did not engage with their local democracy, there were some accounts of when citizens had attempted dialogue with local government to challenge a decision or to work collaboratively. These include protesting against the closure of a hospital ward and challenging the conduct of local political actors on social media. Another example describes negotiations with the Town Council concerning the future of a bowling green where were felt to be unbalanced in terms of the physical presence of local political actors and also the time allocated for contributions:

There was quite a few of us went to the meeting and there was more councillors and they all said, you've got ten minutes to talk. One of the lads done all the talking for us, then they started talking and they talked for nearly an hour. And we got no answers. All they wanted to do was show that they were in charge.

Within this passage is a common use of 'they' when referring to the local authorities, implying distinct social identities and a perception of group conflict, where the local Council asserts dominance over citizens. The interpretation of this meeting suggests an unequal allocation of power, which left citizens feeling dissatisfied and unheard.

Viewed through the lens of Bourdieu, this exchange can be seen as local political actors assuming superiority and exerting their political power, a power which citizens unconsciously accept they do not possess, informed by the socially-constructed capitals said to dominate these fields. This is a place where the objective structures (in this case, the Council ownership of a local bowling green) and subjective interpretations (feelings subjugated) meet. Although citizens were conscious of the power dynamics present, they did accept their dominated position, but it could be argued they did not constrain them by repeatedly challenging local political actors in response to what they felt was unjust treatment.

To summarize, political disengagement in LBP is based on a perceived unequal distribution of political capital, where the field of local democracy is defined by a political division of labour by those who possess socially constructed competence associated with the field. This leads to a propensity of citizens to self-exclude from the local democratic field, thereby maintaining a social order that does not reflect their needs. The 'left behind' habitus is characterized by an indignant attitude towards local government, shaped by five socially constructed beliefs; local government is not interested in the views of citizens, local government cannot be trusted to act for the benefit of the community, elected representatives assume they are superior to the community they serve, Council decisions are predetermined, and local government does not care about LBP. Habitus offers a framework to understand how internal dispositions result in practice in the social field, in this case, how values and attitudes result in the perception that the local political field is 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 77). Importantly, it also demonstrates the relationship between objective, for example, economic and spatial dimensions of LBP and subjective, for example, political discontent.

4.4. Summary and critical reflection

Workshops with citizens from communities considered 'left behind' provided insights into their lived experiences, their unconscious assumptions and drivers behind their political discontent and disengagement. A critical reflection on the findings reveals two specific themes that are of particular importance: local civic engagement and taken-for-granted assumptions of LBP regarding local political actors. Community centres were presented by citizens as a hub for focused community activity, providing a space where citizens felt able to take action and position themselves as agents with their own socially-constructed capital. These findings resonate with previous research with LBP, whereby local social infrastructure built 'moral communities' and fostered a collective hope (Tomaney et al., 2023; Tups et al., 2023). The moral habitus developed within the local social infrastructure demonstrates the need to appreciate the different forms of fields (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013), which can be mobilized as spaces for political engagement and deliberation. A conscious shift to a strengths and values-based framing of LBP, emphasizing a moral and civil habitus could challenge the deficit discourse surrounding LBP and bring the focus back to reducing inequalities.

The accounts from citizens highlight a divide between political and civic engagement and call into question the definition of civic habitus in this context. Here, 'the tacit and embodied collusion of citizens with forms of power pervading in the public sphere' (Pettit, 2016, p. 90) explains political than civic engagement (or lack of), which is embedded in forms of power. A local civic habitus was present in the field of LBP, characterized by a sense of belonging and neighbourliness, resulting in micro-level community engagement with minimal contact with formal power structures. A 'left behind' habitus was presented within the field of local democracy, characterized by distrust and resentment, where citizens chose to minimize engagement with formal power structures. The extent to which the habitus differ in terms of engagement highlights the importance of the field and suggests that the potential for political engagement can be released by bringing the local democratic field into the field of civic engagement, creating a habitus of engagement.

The five beliefs which form negative attitudes towards local political actors and result in subsequent political disengagement can be understood as being an exercise in symbolic violence. The concept explains how, although power structures are consciously acknowledged, LB citizens do not appear to appreciate that their disengagement with the political field perpetuates the reproduction of political power and inequality. Citizens feel unheard and neglected by local political actors, yet the predominant action is to abstain from voting and not explicitly challenge. Citizens are indignant about the exclusionary decision-making process and that local political actors assume superiority, yet they do not feel able to challenge this injustice. Here, we can see how Bourdieu presents a political world purposefully crafted by those in power to be only accessible to those like themselves and to the deliberate exclusion of others, such as LBP. These findings provide insight into the ways in which these deliberate strategies are internalized and expressed through action, or inaction.

The doxic beliefs towards local political actors are accepted as norms within the community, which, although met with indignation, are rarely challenged, indicating the impact that mental structures (such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs) can have on objective structures of power (such as who is voted into local and national office). Accepted norms within communities significantly influence behaviour and are particularly important considering that the sample consisted exclusively of white citizens. The unquestioning acceptance of dominant narratives within low-income, white LBP has previously been associated with populism, a lack of community cohesion and nationalist attitudes (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Schütze, 2023). This paper adds to this literature, providing insight into the political discontent element in ‘white working class’ LBP (Begum et al., 2021).

For a liberal democracy to function, a deep understanding of the barriers perceived by those who are discontent and do not engage is needed. This includes the subjective, psychological mechanisms that impact behaviour and a critical examination of the forces driving these perceptions. A consequence of not doing so risks further intergenerational disengagement and growing support for populist parties that actually reject many of the defining facets of liberal democracy (freedom, individualism). In contrast, a subjective understanding of this political construct, appreciating place attachment, relationships and power dynamics, is a useful starting point to understanding the mechanics – socially, economically, politically – inside a community by asking what we really mean when we describe somewhere as ‘left behind’.

5. Discussion: can a ‘left behind’ habitus explain political disengagement?

This paper has highlighted the interaction between acts of civic engagement and political (dis)engagement, particularly the engagement with local civil society and community organizations and the ways these influence representative democracy. These findings offer numerous implications for policy, practice and research. From a policy perspective, the importance of understanding citizens’ perceptions of local democracy, in addition to the national perspective, is highlighted. By understanding the subjective, lived experience of political engagement and disengagement it can be seen that local government is not necessarily considered ‘local’ to residents or that greater trust exists in government on a local level. From a UK policy perspective, these findings have clear implications for the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP), which seeks to reduce ‘regional inequalities’

(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p. viii). Here, devolution and elected mayors are considered an authentic method of fostering ‘community power’ (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p. 215), an approach which, according to the findings from this research, would not be deemed authentic by citizens (Hickson, 2024).

This finding contributes to an evolving understanding of the complexities of place and place-based policy interventions, such as those relating to reducing regional inequalities. Spatiality and locality influence subjective, lived experiences concerning engagement and disengagement in politics, but this perception is much more complex and nuanced than a dualist conception of communities feeling disengaged in national politics and engaged in a local democratic system. The concept of political peripherality is both physical and symbolic and not mutually exclusive.

The implications of this can be viewed with respect to anti-politics, a negativity targeted towards the institutions of representative democracy and the way they currently work (Clarke et al., 2016). The concept resonates closely with the political discontent associated with LBP, and has been used to explain the rise in populism in the UK. Anti-politics as a concept is particularly relevant within the theoretical framework and the research context given its active negativity (rather than passive disengagement) which can be used to describe political and social events such as the referendum to leave the EU and the recent civil unrest attributed to the murder of three children in Southport, UK in July 2024. Both events can be associated with areas considered LB, and research exploring the interlinkages between a ‘left-behind’ habitus, and anti-politics would potentially reveal further insights into the subjective mechanisms driving political discontent.

Top-down interventions are ineffective in engaging communities who feel disenfranchised by local politics, as has been seen in other LBP regarding Levelling Up (Telford, 2023; Tomaney & Pike, 2020). Rather, a micro-level approach is recommended where local levelling up workers collaborate with residents to co-create strengths-based model for community development and regeneration on a neighbourhood level, whilst acknowledging the structural barriers that have resulted in LBP becoming so. Further participatory action research to reduce regional inequalities is needed to understand how different forms of community power are created on a micro-level in different compositions of communities, appreciating the importance of subjective, lived experience, and the role of civic engagement, social infrastructure and moral communities in fostering hope within LBP.

Democratizing community development can build trusting relationships and foster social inclusion, and community engagement practice can be informed by the five habitual beliefs concerning local democracy. The importance of a shared value surrounding civic engagement was paramount in LBP. It is recommended that policies and practices are developed to reflect this and encourage local political actors to volunteer time in their communities, engaging with key gatekeeping organizations. Such engagement would start the process of bringing the local democratic field into the field of civic engagement, a space located within LBP’s habitus. This could be further developed to provide opportunities for deliberative discussions with LBP’s whereby local political actors can demonstrate a willingness to authentically listen and to respond with humility and respect. A shift in perspective from a transitional to a relational working culture could support

this practice, building trust and willingness to engage (Wilson & Slavin, 2019). The recommendations are important in the current UK political context, where trust in politics is at an all-time low (IPPR, 2022) and where LBP are suffering the consequences of the increased cost of living, the fallout of Brexit and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Health, 2022). These recommendations reinforce existing literature (Agranoff, 2008; Bartels, 2018; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Medina-Guce, 2020) and provide an original analytic approach to interpret the results. More research to understand how more relational forms of governance and community engagement could interact with local civic engagement could further inform strategies to build trust and hope and foster engagement.

From an academic perspective, the epistemological position presented in this paper situates LBP as being both subjectively and objectively constructed, providing a new conceptual framework for understanding this contemporary policy construct. It is appreciated that the concept of habitus is among Bourdieu's most contested and critiqued concepts, bringing both conceptual and methodological challenges. These include capturing the temporal and historical dimensions of an already conceptually fluid and arguably ill-defined concept (Costa et al., 2019). Acknowledging the shortcomings of habitus in interpreting lived experience, the conscious and unconscious mechanics that construct the subjective world offer an original framework to analyse and understand LBP. A critical analysis of other elements of Bourdieu's work, such as the different forms of capitals, would support this epistemological approach as a legitimate contemporary theoretical framework to understand persistent inequalities in LBP. Moreover, further research concerning the interplay between civic and political habitus could inform community engagement strategies in a local and national context, developing a theoretical framework appreciating the subjective dimension of LBP and recognizing that aspiration and hope exist within these places. Further research would strengthen the knowledge of the subjective dimension of the construct 'left behind'.

Reflecting on the limitations of this research, certain marginalized groups, such as migrants, were not represented. The narrow ethnic demographic boundaries of the sample are representative of the region, which is, on average, 96.2% white British (Office for National Statistics, 2022). However, this lack of diversity presents the risk that key issues concerning other groups were omitted and could even present a context whereby participants did not feel able to present views which diverted from the dominant narrative. Predominately white, coastal communities are only one example of places vulnerable to being 'left behind'. Indeed, a majority of the places identified within the seminal Local Trust report were urban, with greater ethnic diversity (Local Trust, 2019). Further participatory research targeting specific groups would deepen the understanding of the complex intersectional social fabric of LBP. This would need to be sensitive to communities' issues of cohesion, identity and local politics and appreciate the intersectionality of ethnicity.

Although seemingly effective numerically, the recruitment practices adopted throughout the research may be exclusionary in themselves. Purposeful sampling through gatekeepers and snowball sampling provided access to existing networks but, by nature, potentially excluded those with poor or weak social networks. More inclusive, purposeful methodologies should be adopted to ensure that research better represents the population. This includes being mindful of the function of intersectionality and focusing specifically on multiply excluded groups. A wider geographical application of this

habitus framework in other LBP could identify commonalities across different LBP and thus further inform national policy and practice.

6. Conclusion

The political construct of 'left behind' is understood to consist of both objective, such as economic disadvantage, and subjective dimensions, for example, political disengagement. A 'left behind' habitus provides a framework to understand the interplay between these dimensions, which can also be understood as structural and agentic. Characterized by five shared beliefs, citizens from LBP collectively express negative attitudes toward political actors and was manifest in political discontent and disengagement. This can be understood as symbolic violence being exercised on LBP, which reproduces the unequal distribution of political power and perpetuates social exclusion. This exclusion is most strongly observed within a political habitus in this research through a socially constructed self-exclusion from local democracy. Civic habitus, where civic engagement is valued and an expected norm, is featured significantly in accounts from citizens. In contrast, it was perceived as absent in local policy actors, creating a habitus misalignment. A micro-level, strengths-based approach to democratizing local community development and regeneration is recommended. Within this approach, local political actors are encouraged to build a model of relational rather than transactional governance and practice. This original conceptualization of LBP explains the interplay between the objective and subjective dimensions of LBP, providing an original contribution to the emerging LBP literature which goes beyond an 'affective turn' towards a 'hopeful turn', creating dialogue centred around relationships, community participation and social inclusion. A critical reflection of the meanings associated with political constructs such as 'left behind' needs to be further developed and framed within a wider debate surrounding political disengagement and its importance in the context of liberal democracy.

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Suzanne Wilson is a Research Fellow at The University of Central Lancashire, working with communities to identify effective and sustainable means of fostering social inclusion. Her expanding research portfolio focuses on how low-income coastal communities, regarded as 'left behind', can overcome barriers to participation in civil society. Areas of particular focus are education, community development and democracy. Rooted in participatory action research and citizen social science, the research process itself is recognized as a tool for social inclusion, and her research has influenced significant changes in local policy and practice. Suzanne is a community activist and passionate about equitable education and inclusive communities. Previously a

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