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**Remoteness, rurality  
and mental health problems**

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**Social Geographies of Rural Mental Health  
(ESRC Funded Research Project, Award No.R000 23 8453)**

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# Remoteness, rurality and mental health problems

## Introduction

This project – partly as it has been framed conceptually, and partly as we have seen it develop through the words of our interviewees – embraces different, if in many respects overlapping, ‘spatialities’. By ‘spatiality’, we mean the manner in which phenomena are spatially arranged within given parts of the world, and how various characteristics of human endeavour are *envisaged* to be constituted, to arise and to proceed, within these parts of the world. What we would suggest is that there are *three* such spatialities emerging within our study: three broad spatial contexts, seemingly encompassing relatively distinctive if cross-cutting features, that are routinely mentioned by interviewees as having some influence on mental health issues within those parts of the world where we have been researching. It has to be admitted that in our questioning we have prompted people to reflect upon these three spatialities, but we have nonetheless remained at pains to avoid ‘leading’ our interviewees, so that we are confident that the richness and the detail of many responses to our questions in this regard – as revealed below and in other related findings papers – reflect a genuine appreciation, interest and, on occasions, deep concern about the three spatialities under scrutiny.

In turn, the three spatialities are as follows:

- **Highlands**, including some feeling for the often quite wild physical landscapes of the Scottish Highlands, but also many thoughts about the more-or-less unique forms of economic and cultural life that have grown up here and which cannot but shape everyday practices;
- **remoteness**, entailing notions about the physical distance of the areas under study from centres of population, provisions and services, maybe exacerbated by poor transport links, coupled to the sense of ‘not being part’ of the normal round of wider society’s interactions, activities and achievements;
- **rurality**, standing for a range of ideas about how the rural (countryside) environment within most of the study areas, as contrasted with more urban (town or city) surroundings elsewhere, creates a distinctive parcel of ‘natural’ and human-made elements that influences countless aspects of local demography, economy, politics, society and culture.

A fascination with rurality and its connections to mental health was the starting-point for our overall project, and it might be argued that Highlands and remoteness are actually subsets of rurality; with rurality comprising the most general category (referencing *all* non-urban localities everywhere), remoteness comprising a more specific category (referencing rural areas that are *also* remote from centres of population), and Highlands comprising the most specific category (referencing a particular named instance of a predominantly rural region, the Highlands). Our interviewees regularly talked across these three categories, sometimes offering generalisations that could pertain to any rural locality, sometimes making comments that would only pertain to those rural localities also defined by their remoteness, and sometimes clearly alluding to matters only really germane to the Scottish Highlands. In our analysis here we somewhat artificially try to separate out these different sets of commentaries, and to thread particular lines of interpretation through the quotes

retrieved in each case, although we do reckon such delineations to be there – if not theorised as such – in the words and thoughts of our interviewees. What is perhaps more artificial is how we have partitioned off some of the materials that might have been discussed below into other of our findings and workings papers, most notably in the case of Highlands physical landscapes and social relations.

Confusing the simple logic of the spatialities outlined above is the fact that our project has tackled four rather different study areas spread across the Highlands: in alphabetical order, *Easter Ross, Inverness and district, North West Sutherland, and Skye and Lochalsh*. In our **Introductory** findings paper, we explain why we chose to explore these four localities, and in our findings paper on **Spatial differences** we profile the four areas *and* consider further how differences between them impact upon our mental health findings. To map back on to the three spatialities, however, we can say the following: **Highlands** – all four of the localities are undoubtedly sited within the overall region conventionally known as the Scottish Highlands; **remoteness** – North West Sutherland and Skye and Lochalsh are both positioned as remote on virtually any criteria and much of Easter Ross is also taken as remote by many (if not all) of its inhabitants, but Inverness, while seen by some as itself remote from the rest of Scotland and Britain, tends to be viewed as *the* regional centre of population, provisions and services from which *other* Highlands places are then considered remote; and **rurality** – North West Sutherland is overwhelmingly regarded as rural, as are both Skye and Lochalsh (although some might see Portree as a town) and Easter Ross (although some definitely see Aines as having urban problems and possibly several other larger settlements as town-like), but Inverness is now officially designated a ‘city’, the ‘capital city’ of the Highlands, and is certainly in most peoples’ perceptions an urban affair even if still being open to the description of ‘rural town’ (as the centre of a dominantly rural region).

In this findings paper, we examine the latter two (obviously closely related) spatialities, those of remoteness and rurality, as they are reckoned to impinge upon questions to do with mental health and ill-health. In a separate findings paper we examine the many different dimensions of how the Highlands are configured – in the words of our interviewees – in relation to mental health problems.

### **Remote locations, isolation and loneliness**

A number of our interviewees have no doubt that their own feelings of remoteness or, as more commonly expressed, isolation are ones very much generated from within their own personal mental health problems. It is these problems that seemingly condition their relationship with the wider world of people and things, rather than any ‘real’ spatial remoteness or isolation dependent on where they are living and spending time: *‘[The] problem with mental health problems is that people feel isolated and alone, they feel rejected’* [Paul SL, 10/9/01]; *‘That’s part of my illness. I become isolated and become more and more secluded from people’* [Jack, ER, 16/11/01]; *‘Well, yes, isolated in the respect that nobody cares, nobody seems to care. You feel, when you’re ill, you feel that nobody seems to care’* [Catherine, INV, 14/6/01]; *‘that was in my own head. That was just me and my illness. I certainly felt isolated, but then I would have been isolated anywhere’* [Ken, SL, 19/9/01]. The question that nonetheless arises for this project is whether it is ever the case that the real remoteness and isolation of certain places, particularly including those found within three of our

study areas (Easter Ross, Skye and Lochalsh, North West Sutherland), can play a role in shaping, perhaps exacerbating existing tendencies towards, the poor mental health of certain vulnerable individuals. We will first consider the physical and infrastructural remoteness of such places and then the social and cultural remoteness, offering a few thoughts on the mental health implications arising from these differing dimensions of remoteness.

### *Physical and infrastructural remoteness*

The sheer physical distances involved in the lie of the land and in moving between places is the key factor when thinking about the remoteness integral to much of the Highlands, notably to the west. Few interviewees remark upon such physical distances *per se* as a factor in their own right, although Gary [ER, 12/12/01] observes that *'the place where I stay is an absolutely beautiful place, really gorgeous. However, there is a lot of space between these absolutely beautiful places, you know'*. What the majority of interviewees from outside of Inverness do comment upon, though, is the distances that have to be travelled in order to get to centres of population such as Inverness, the capital of the Highlands. As such, questions about distance and travel swiftly move into questions about transport, considering what is or is not available and at what cost, and it is unsurprising that for many interviewees of mental health services – most of whom are unemployed, poor and lacking or unable to drive a car – transport is indeed a serious bone of contention. Gary hence follows up his observation about the 'spaces between places' with these reflections on limited transport links at affordable prices:

*There isn't very good bus services. Unless you have a half-price travel card, it is going to cost you an absolute fortune to get anywhere. That leads people to becoming very isolated. A lot of people in Balintore that I know have never gone further than Invergordon because of the cost. They might go to Inverness once or twice a year, and that's about it, because of the cost of that transport.* [Gary, ER, 12/12/01]

A sample (from a much larger population) of similar claims can be extracted, and it is worth doing so to underline how remoteness and what some geographers call 'mobility deprivation' coalesce in creating acute problems of isolation: *'You needed transport to get to shops, you couldn't walk to visit somebody, that's my idea of remote'* [Geraldine, SL, 18/9/01]; *'You couldn't go anywhere much. You could go to Wick, but you could only spend a couple of hours in Wick and you had to return by bus again 'cos that was the last bus'* [Isaac, INV, 6/6/01]; *'It does make you feel quite a lot more isolated up here than it does if you're in a city, because [there] you're in the middle of everything and you can get a bus to go [wherever you want]'* [Larissa, ER, 12/12/01]; *'It [the place] could have been what we all wanted, [but] it was a nightmare because of the public transport and lack of it'* [Jodie, ER, 1/12/01]. The latter quote is telling because it indicates that for Jodie, what might otherwise have been a good place to live – although in practice she does have other issues with remote and rural places (see below) – was being compromised by the absence of what she would regard as 'proper' public transport. The weakness of bus services is a common complaint, and references are also made to the failings of trains and taxis: *'The train goes right through the village and it is the only place it doesn't stop. It stops in Duncraig and all these weird damn places, but it doesn't stop in Erbusaig. Get a taxi service, but that is £3.00 a go, so [it's an] expensive cup of coffee if you are*

*going to your mates*’ [Emily, SL, 26/9/01]. Even Inverness can feel isolated: *‘I’m isolated in the sense that Inverness is miles from anywhere else. ... [I am] more or less trapped in Inverness. ... Inverness has most of the things you need, but ... if you want a change, Glasgow is a long way away and Aberdeen is two hours away. If you just want a change of scene, you’ve got to [go] quite a long way ... ’* [Maria, INV, 10/9/01].

These quotes signal the feelings of isolation from friends, a theme to be revisited in a moment, as well as the sense of infrastructural remoteness, meaning distance from and attendant difficulties of accessing all kinds of shops, entertainment opportunities and services (including mental health services). A general statement on this theme runs as follows, underscoring what can be involved in ‘planning’ an expedition to access what an urban area such as Inverness has to offer, and contrasting this situation with that taken-for-granted in most towns and cities:

*Yes, I mean we’ve got remoteness, you’ve got difficulties of travel. ... You can’t necessarily just go to the pictures or go and see your family or ..., it all has to be planned and, you know, it’s a major operation. Whereas, you know, if you’ve been in a town or a city ... .* [Lisa, NWS, 11/7/01]

*‘I think you’re cut off from quite a lot of services and things, you know, like you need to travel into Inverness to do a lot of things’*, states Charmaine [ER, 22/11/01], while Natasha [NWS, 17/7/01] reflects that for her isolation is really not about the social side (see below) but, indeed, about remoteness from shops and services: *‘I don’t know if it’s the iso... , not the isolation. I mean, I don’t suffer from that really because I’m always getting people coming to, into the hotel, so I get plenty of contact with people, but maybe it’s sort of not having things on tap’* [Natasha, NWS, 17/7/01]. With respect to medical services, Gordon [INV, 14/5/01] speaks about *‘... the distances if you wanted anything, doctors’ appointments, and Belford Hospital, it’s about fifty miles each way, or Inverness’*. Another interviewee worries about accessibility – *‘Because I am isolated down here, I have a forty-five mile round trip, and I have to do that during the day ... that’s why I have applied for a place in towns. My GP says the bigger the town, the better; it was his idea’* [Daniel, SL, 15/8/01] – and there is the indication here that Daniel might be better served by moving into town, perhaps to be nearer to relevant (mental health) services or perhaps simply because doing away with travelling would itself be conducive to improved mental health.

A further physical dimension of remoteness concerns the weather, which in the Highlands and especially in the winter can be harsh and inhospitable: *‘We never go out, you see, in the evenings, so it’s terribly cut-off, and in the winter time we’re snowed in’* [Sarah, ER, 12/11/01]. Another interviewee, meanwhile, declares that, *‘[l]ike in the summer, although you’re stuck, you’re stuck, and you can get out in the garden or move about. But in the winter, you’re stuck and you’re stuck in the house. And it’s a feeling of ... being cut-off’* [Judith, INV, 26/8/01]. Feelings of ‘being cut-off’ are hardly ones productive of good mental health, certainly for people who would like to be reasonably gregarious, and we will return to these mental health implications shortly. *‘I don’t really know if I’m on my own any more in the winter than I am in the summer, but, as I said, quite often I can’t even get out of here to go to the shops’*, reveals Katy [NWS, 9/7/01], and she hints at the possibility of temporal changes – maybe from summer to winter, but most likely just from periods of okay weather to periods of worse weather – in determining the extent of her movements

beyond her house in North West Sutherland. She adds, though, a caveat to the effect that *'[b]ut ... I don't see anybody anymore. Not as far as people coming to the house'*; and we are tempted to see here some overlap between the physical remoteness of her house, the severity of local weather conditions for many days of the year, and the mental co-ordinates of her condition, all three together making it hugely problematic for her to face getting out of the house.<sup>1</sup> As her isolation grows in consequence, she loses touch with people, who then cease to visit her (although doubtless local people still remember and maybe talk about her: see the discussion of rurality and *Gemeinschaft* below).

### *Social and cultural isolation*

*'[I]t's very difficult to pop to my pals for a cup of coffee, you know. ... Public transport, there isn't any'*, says Emily [SL, 26/9/01], and in so doing she clarifies that physical remoteness almost always goes hand-in-glove with other forms of isolation. Notwithstanding communications technologies ranging from letters and phone calls to FAXing, texting and e-mail, where it is hard to cover the physical distances between friends, neighbours and other 'local' residents, the situation must be one of social and cultural isolation. Some interviewees assert that they are not isolated, despite living in very small settlements, due to the presence nearby of helpful kith and loved kin, but even here the distances separating, say, crofting homesteads from one another are often considerably greater – fractions of miles or more, rather than a few footsteps – than is true of residences in towns and cities. Many interviewees duly emphasise the manner in which *'people are scattered'* [Sarah, ER, 12/11/01], and propose that where people live is best described as *'[r]emote rural; there's ourselves and a cottage next door and the museum at the bottom of the hill, but other than that, there's no really, just a few houses just scattered about, quite isolated really'* [Geraldine, SL, 18/9/01]; and again, *'I used to look after a friend's dog away up north, and sometimes you might not see another human for three days'* [Mark, INV, 23/5/01]. Similarly, *'[w]here I lived was just a courtyard of five houses, everyone was out to work all day, so I didn't use to see a soul all day'*, recalls Morag [NWS, 11/7/01], who goes on to admit that *'[on] the isolation bit, [that] there's nobody around is also probably a hindrance. Even though ... I don't get along with people very easily any more, I do sometimes think, gosh, I do wish there was some people'*. Even if people possess family somewhere the Highlands region, the physical distances can still cause a problem, as Miriam [ER, 13/11/01] reveals: *'Sometimes I feel quite isolated from my family, as they are so far away. Even my mum who lives in the Highlands, it takes about four hours to get there by public transport, if you can get a connection'*.

What such social isolation means for people is easy to discern, in that it makes it difficult to build and to sustain supportive social networks, particularly for incomers who cannot draw upon the extended family networks of long-term locals that do

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<sup>1</sup> It should be admitted that this interviewee is to some extent choosing to withdraw from social interaction, and is thus in part isolating herself. More generally, it is clear that quite a few interviewees, particularly at certain phases in their 'illness', may prefer to put up spatial barriers around themselves, and in the Highlands it is possible for them to be utilising the remoteness of their homes as part of a deliberate strategy of self-isolation. Fears of making contacts when unwell could play a role here, of course, and it is chastening to hear another interviewee's account in this respect: *'I don't go out. If I go out it's to the shop or up to see my mother or my sister. You know, I don't make friends with anyone, because I don't want the hassle. I don't want to go anyway, I don't go out to the pub'* [Stephanie, NWS, 17/7/01].

spread over the Highlands (see also our findings paper on **Social differences**). *'[H]ere in the Highlands everybody lives so far away from one another, so trying to make any friendships was very difficult'*, reveals Judith [INV, 26/8/01] when remembering her previous home in a rural district some miles away from Inverness, and it is telling that she adds the following: *'Unless I'd went down into the village at Drumnadrochit and then odd people [would] know me, but it's a very lonely place'*. Such loneliness may well have mental health implications, as we will elaborate shortly, and in terms of identifying possible negative consequences here it is also interesting to hear the observation below about the dangers of being socially isolated:

*... because it is so far away from social interaction ... . Even just bumping into people in the street and saying 'I'm sorry', or ... where do you bump into someone up here? You know, ... it's very isolated and therefore I think they [people] become very isolated within themselves. ... I don't think the isolation up here helps anybody, and therefore what is brilliant [in dealing with this isolation] is the community care, but there isn't enough on the mental health side. [Maureen and Frank, NWS, 26/9/01]*

There *are* places where people can 'bump into' each other, we would reply, but a feature of remote Highland districts is undoubtedly that such places – the post office, the kirk, the fank, the hotel bar – are few and far between, and hence may not be visited all that often (although most people will have little choice but to visit some of them when performing essential tasks). The essence of the quote stands, though, in that social interaction remains limited, and the resulting social isolation is likely to be less than positive for at least some people with or developing mental health problems. A further gloss is provided by Barry [SL, 18/9/01] when stating that *'[c]ulturally we're isolated'*,<sup>2</sup> and the issue here concerns the shortage of cultural activities both to attend and in which to get involved. The absence of meaningful cultural activities available locally, except perhaps through the church and occasional dances, may be felt quite deeply by certain individuals who are too unwell to engage in paid work:

*The isolation comes when every day is different, you wake up in the morning, and you think 'what am I going to do today?', and I've nothing to do. So you sit in the garage with a cup of tea, and you come into the house and look at the dog. You go down the street looking for something to do, and you rarely find it unless it's getting involved in a community project that needs a bit of voluntary work. [Robin, ER, 7/11/01]*

*It was also the thought of being here and continuing to be here, which I felt that I couldn't do, there was nothing I could do about it. In this location, there is just no opportunities to operate as it were. [Vincent., ER, 17/12/01]*

Our findings paper on **Inclusionary social relations and practices** also touches upon the subject of meaningful community roles.

### *Mental health implications*

Several passages above have begun to cover the mental health implications of remoteness and isolation, and it can now be acknowledged that some interviewees are

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<sup>2</sup> Barry's qualification should be noted, though, since he immediately goes on to say *'... but I don't miss the city'*.



in no doubt that these factors do impinge upon the epidemiology of mental ill-health. As one interviewee puts it, *'[o]n a farm, it's very isolated; this is what caused me to have mental health problems, because I lived too isolated and stayed in the house too much'* [Sarah, ER, 12/11/01]. Or, to hear from another, *'I definitely think that isolation, there is an awful lot of depressed people on the island, because of isolation'* [Eve, INV, 30/5/01]. The next couple of quotes speak about intense feelings of loneliness that are undoubtedly pivotal to the mental health problems of the individuals in question. While these feelings are doubtless akin to ones experienced by other mental health sufferers in all sorts of geographical surroundings, we are sure that such feelings are still being exacerbated – possibly channelled and moulded in certain ways – as a result of the basic geographical remoteness and isolation of the places where they are living. Let us listen to what is said:

*[F]or me, the experience of loneliness in Tain was intense, and when you woke up in the morning, it's as if there was no one left in the world, and I knew that if I died, it wouldn't make any difference because nobody knew who I was.* [Alness group discussion, ER, 23/11/01].

*... I was alone in the house and there wasn't anyone in Tain, ... . I was really ill and I didn't have anyone to talk to, but day after day, it was exactly like being in solitary confinement, and it was like in the end I was like the walking dead; living with all these feelings and thoughts, and knowing that if I died no one in the street would know who I was, no one would know anything about my life, I would have been just a statistic. That was horrible, that's how some people actually kill themselves, that sort of sustained remoteness.* [Roisin, ER, 21/11/01].

Gary [ER, 12/12/01], after documenting the physical remoteness of where he stays, he agrees that *'I can see why somebody in that area with mental health problems would find it very difficult'*. When asked about physical remoteness and social isolation, moreover, he speculates that *'it is a bit of both: physical isolation because of where Balintore is actually situated, out on the coast, [the] nearest town being nine miles away which is Tain; then the social isolation too because of the mental health problems'*. In effect, therefore, he hints at physical remoteness due to geographical location dovetailing with social isolation due to suffering from mental health problems, and the possibility of the former aggravating the latter obviously surfaces here, a point reiterated by Gerry [ER, 29/11/01]: *'After a time, people stop phoning you, stop talking to you, so then you get pretty isolated, so the last thing you would want is to get somewhere quite remote'*.

A handful of quotes from two more interviewees can flesh out in more detail some of the connections between remoteness, isolation and mental health problems, and it is important to remember that laying in the background of these quotes is always the difficulties on this count experienced by the interviewees themselves:

*Everything changed, your perspective changes when you move up here, it's not like being in Glasgow. Having known the two, it gives you a better insight into why you tend to feel ... . It's the isolation you feel here, although in Glasgow, it's a big city and you can feel lonely, you are not isolated, because if there is a problem there are people you can contact. Up here*

*you've not, it's finding out who, and then the distances involved again. If you don't drive here, it really is a big problem.* [Susan, SL, 20/9/01]

She continues:

*... it is fairly remote. ... I remember last year when I was going through a crisis point, I'd had enough and I couldn't drive. I got in the car but I physically couldn't drive the car. I couldn't remember what to do, then I felt really isolated because I'm amongst these neighbours that I don't really like, I don't really want to know.* [ibid]

The wish to escape from the remoteness and the possible negative affects of this remoteness on this interviewee's mental health are both inscribed in these remarks, as too is a hint about problematic interpersonal relations arising from her status as an incomer who does not fit in readily to the local community (albeit perhaps partly because of her own reluctance to do so).<sup>3</sup> A specific anecdote relating a reaction to remoteness and isolation on the part of someone with a mental health problem comes from a second interviewee:

*One day, when I hadn't lived here very long, ... my husband usually has an afternoon nap to rest his bad back and all that. And I just left him a note and put 'gone to Wales', and I took the car keys and I just put some clothes in a bag, like a big bag, and I just set off ... hahaha ... to go back to Wales because I felt I just wanted to go back. And I didn't stop at the school to pick up my daughter because I knew she was happy up here. However, I only got as far as Fort William and I phoned, you know, he said 'come on back', but he blamed it on the tablets which I was taking ... . But I think it was just an example of feeling completely isolated. I just wanted to go back.* [Eleanor, SL, 20/8/01].

There can perhaps on occasion also be positive connotations of remoteness and isolation for mental health: *'The place helps me quite a lot. I go out on my own, it can calm me down. It gets me away from people. And the isolation can calm me down'* [Fred, NWS, 24/7/01]; and again: *'But then again, I quite like the isolation. If somebody said to me 'would you like to move into Kyle', I would be very 'no, no, no, don't fancy that''* [Emily, SL, 26/9/01].

### **Rural lifestyles, urban contrasts, idylls and hells**

Rurality is defined and understood in various different ways by our interviewees, often with reference to remoteness (see above), but also, crucially, in contrast with what they perceive as urban. Perceived rural-urban contrasts are indeed central to the second part of this findings paper, and it is signal to note the extent to which rurality (including its mental health implications) is often defined by interviewees in a relational fashion by what it is *not*, meaning urbanism, complete with the multitude of supposed urban advantages and disadvantages in terms of mental health. Sometimes the suggestion emerges of certain centres, like Portree on Skye or Alness in Easter Ross, being themselves 'rural towns', sitting in the middle of a settlement continuum

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<sup>3</sup> Several incomers hence talk about their 'isolation' from the local community: *'here people are more interested in their own world – and we're kind of in a different situation 'cos we are more or less isolated'* [Gareth, NWS, 2/7/01]. This is therefore yet another gloss on matters of isolation.

between, say, tiny crofting townships on the West Coast and, say, a metropolis like Glasgow. It might be noted that many of the quotes in this section are from interviewees living in Easter Ross, possibly because for individuals living here, in a rural area punctuated with larger centres and with Inverness not too far distant, the issue of the rural, urban or hybrid (rural and urban) qualities of their home districts was closer to the surface of their thinking than was always the case for interviewees living in the other three study areas (see also our findings paper on **Spatial differences**). Let us hear a number of observations and points from our interviewees, then, and in so doing we can introduce a selection of themes to be explored in more detail further on:

*I'm not really sure what rural means, so I wouldn't really call it remote either, but closer to remote than rural. I am within reach of shops, not one house stuck on its own, it's a wee village. [Emily, SL, 26/9/01]*

Interviewer: *What makes a rural place for you?*

Jack: *Just a small place.*

Interviewer: *Ever felt that the place you stay is remote at all?*

Jack: *Well, the area is pretty bleak. [Jack, ER, 16/11/01]*

*A rural area is anything that is left if you take the cities out or the big towns, come to that. It will be dominated by the landscape, well [by] farming round here, but you don't have to go far [before] you are really out into the wild Highlands. [Edward, ER, 3/12/01]*

*[On Portree] I would say it was a rural ... a rural town. When I first moved here, it wasnae as big as this, it's grown over the eighteen years. [Cameron, SL, 25/9/01]*

Interviewer: *How would you describe Alness, rural or urban?*

Leah: *Just feels like to me, it feels urban because I am from such a rural area, [where] there isn't shops or anything. But when you compare it to somewhere like Glasgow, it seems somewhere in the middle really.<sup>4</sup>*

Interviewer: *Have any places you stayed been remote?*

Leah: *I have, yeah. Harris, as well as sort of being rural and not being much, because it's an island, it is very difficult to get a city. So, even if you look on Alness as a rural area, you've got Inverness [nearby] which is definitely an urban area, you can get to it really quickly, whereas in Harris you can't get anywhere, so you're cut off. [Leah, ER, 4/12/01]*

*[On Alness] Well, it's a small town, it's got a very village mentality, everybody knows everyone else's lives. It's called a town, but there are no town things, there's no cinema, and nothing really to do. [Miriam, ER, 13/11/01]*

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<sup>4</sup> Alness attracts very different opinions, and one interviewee offers an insight into the settlement's rather 'split' social geography: '*... there is good and bad in Alness, like everywhere else. There's some parts of Alness that are very rough and there's other parts with people just opposite, keep their gardens. It's like walking into two worlds in Alness, because you know the part I am at is quite a good part and maybe the next square isn't so good ... [I]t's a mixture of different types of people*' [Karen., ER, 20/11/01].

*[On Invergordon] That's difficult for me because I am a townie. ... I can't see Invergordon as a town. It's not country as such, but it is very much quieter than what I am used to, much more parochial than what I am used to. [Clara, ER, 27/11/01]*

*Well, like Inverness is a city, obviously, you know, that's a city now. To me, a rural area is somewhere where you're on the edge of the countryside, and you don't have too many shops and things, you know. There's a lot of facilities that aren't here [in her village] that are in Inverness, kind of thing, you know. It [her village] can be quite sort of cut-off at times. [Charmaine, ER, 22/11/01]*

*... Inverness got very urbanised ... . I go to myself, 'this is just like living back in the city again'. The move out to Maryburgh was tremendous as far as I was concerned, you know. [Simon, ER, 19/11/01]*

Interviewer: *How would you describe Tain, an urban place, a rural place?*

Gerry: *A bit of both, it's funny. It's big enough to be a town, but you never feel ... . But you can always escape people if you need to, but they are there if you want them. It's quite a good balance, I think, a good social mix as well, a lot of different people with different incomes, good balance. [Gerry, ER, 29/11/01]*

There is the suggestion in the latter quote of a perception that the rural-urban distinction is less size of settlement *per se*, but more about whether or not you as an inhabitant can 'escape' from the round of people with whom they are familiar on a daily basis (from people who know you and in whose presence you cannot be anonymous).

Taking apart some of the claims made by our interviewees, a first set of remarks position the rural as close to 'nature' or at least as adjacent to green, wooded or even rocky spaces, as typified by remarks about 'scenery' [Nathan, ER, 10/12/01]: *'Where I stay is really very rural! Beautiful, and surrounded by naturalness really. ... It's just very beautiful views, we can see the Moray Firth, it's on the side of a hill. ... . It's very natural, you don't feel, well there will be some pollution, but it feels free of too much of the new world!'* [Justine, INV, 14/6/01]; *'You're surrounded by fields, ...[l]iving on a dirt road track ...'* [Anthony, ER, 21/11/01]; *'you just seem to think out of your back door is the countryside, [it] is there, literally on the doorstep. I could walk twenty yards and be in the Maryburgh Woods, it's lovely'* [Simon, ER, 19/11/01]; *'Out of the town, two minute walk and you're in the countryside'* [Daryl, INV, 21/6/01] Closely related to perceptions about rural areas as closer to 'nature' are claims about an inherent peace and quiet, with the presence of noisy industry, roads and traffic being taken as a signifier of urban rather than rural surroundings: *'it was a lot quieter'*, argues one interviewee, whereas *'where we are just now is beside a busy road, quite noisy'* [Gerry, ER, 29/11/01]. In a related vein, albeit moving into much more subjective judgements about social and cultural features of rurality, numerous interviewees alluded to rural areas as being less 'hurried' than urban areas, thereby linking with definitions of Highlanders as 'laidback' in a temporal if not a deeper psychological sense (see findings paper on **Highlands, economy, culture and mental health problems**): *'I was living in Liverpool for a while, so compared to that it's just, like, you know, very slow, old-fashioned. I don't know, nothing sort of moves*

*quick here, ... So it's a lot more laidback and a lot slower. ... The pace is slower in villages to a turn* [Larissa, ER, 12/12/01]; *'Well, in town, ... people are in a rush to do things, and the further out you go the more relaxed they seem to be'* [Clare, INV, 14/6/01].

A second set of remarks describe the rural as a spread-out and sparsely populated human landscape, one where people are not constantly surrounded by lots of other people, and probably one too with few services, transport links locally and, of course, employment opportunities: *'Mallaig wasn't quite rural ... there are a thousand people in Mallaig, so it's not really all that rural. Rural, I would think of as ... a little place just outside of Mallaig, we had a little cottage there in the summer, summer holidays when we were young, and, em, that was rural, isolated'* [Gordon, INV, 14/5/01]; *'Milkman delivering to your doorstep, just things you would take for granted in a town, you don't take for granted out here'* [Anthony, ER, 21/11/01]; *'... lack of facilities, lack of transport. If you're in an urban area, you have more than one bus an hour. It's very restricted to do anything'* [Miriam, ER, 13/11/01]; *'It's a rural area because if you want to shop properly, and want to work in a job, the place to go is Inverness, and it's twenty-three miles to go shopping, a lot of people working in the town'* [Robin, ER, 7/11/01]. A very specific comment about infrastructure, meanwhile, comes from one interviewee: *'Sort of like Benloch, I would say is more rural to this. I mean, we've hardly had any street lights. We only have the lights round about and I think ... we have enough houses that we should have street lights'* [Bridget, ER, 5/12/01].<sup>5</sup> There is perhaps a gesture in this quote towards safety issues, street lights and personal safety from attack or perhaps traffic often being equated, and we will return to the subject of safety shortly.

A third set of remarks effectively hook into the well-known *Gemeinschaft* conception of the rural as characterised by a particular kind of *'tight-knit community'* [Frances, ER, 10/12/01], with the emphasis on intimate knowledge, neighbourliness and mutuality: *'I would say that [Dingwall] was pretty rural. ... [I]t is a friendly environment, with the locals'* [Peter, ER, 12/11/01]; and *'... everybody knows everybody else in the village, we all know each other. We know most people in the village, know what is going on and that, there's always gossip'* [*ibid.*]. The dimensions of neighbourliness reckoned to exist in Highlands places, particularly as bonds between long-term locals, are considered at greater length in our findings paper on **Highlands, economy, culture and mental health** problems; and, as will be apparent from several of our written documents, we do see the *Gemeinschaft* construct as central to interpreting the articulations of rurality and mental health. Tied into such perceptions are claims from our interviewees about rural areas perhaps being inhabited by people with a distinctive set of *'rural attitudes'* or even a *'village mentality'* [Miriam, ER, 13/11/01]: *'Well, it should be more of a family sort of idea in rural places'* [Gordon, INV, 14/5/01]; *'the attitudes of the people are still rural. It's [a given settlement] is here to serve a rural community, so it's the hub of a rural community, so it's rural'* [Ken, SL, 19/9/01]. While rural people are occasionally identified with certain jobs of work – *'I suppose the people here are country people,*

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<sup>5</sup> Another interviewee touches on street lights in the course of a broader observation about what the urban offers than the rural does not so readily: *'And ... in North Shields it was different, because you had the street lights and ... you had a local ... metro service taking you into the centre of town within twenty minutes, or you could walk to the local village where there was pubs and there was a picture house, and stuff like that, whereas here there's very few street lights'* [Judith, INV, 26/8/01].

*farm workers*' [Nathan, ER, 10/12/01] – others evidently do see this as too reductive an account, particularly given the kinds of economic changes affecting the Highlands (whereby agricultural employment becomes less significant numerically than service employment). Barry [SL, 18/9/01] hence declares that where he lives (on Skye) is '[n]ot rural' but rather occupied by '*lots of rural people. People are rural, even if they don't have farms. I mean, it's just a personality thing*'. In other words, for Barry rurality is now less to do with agricultural activity and involvement with farming, and more to do with an outlook, a mentality, a set of attitudes, as much personal as collective. Barry continues by suggesting that rural people are '*less obsessed with machines*', and have '*got things to do other than watch television and work in an office*'. This being said, he then elaborates further, realising that he is risking making an untenable distinction that too simplistically pigeon-holes rural people:

*Some [rural] people do work in an office. I'm not saying there's no TV around, people watch TV, play computers, it's just ... a lot of them have grown up living in a place [where] they can go out anytime of day and not have to worry about being attacked. People feel safe up here.*

The reference here to safety is an interesting one, certainly meshed into the *Gemeinschaft*-type conception, and it has important mental health implications too that will indeed be revisited presently.

A further possibility emerging from our quotes concerns rurality as a fairly intangible feeling, perhaps changeable, and maybe something varying with someone's mental health status:

Interviewer: *Does it feel, I'm aware Portree is the biggest centre [on Skye], but does this feel rural to you?*

Julia: *Yes, in a manner of speaking, it does.*

Interviewer: *Even Portree?*

Julia: *Yeah, well I suppose it depends how I feel really.* [Julia, SL, 17/9/01]

Perhaps when someone is feeling unwell, a settlement like Portree either acquires the semblance of a small claustrophobic rural outpost or a large alienating urban centre, the exact cast of the associations depending upon the particularities of an individual's exact 'diagnosis', prior experiences and personal predilections. What is further underlined, though, is the complexity, the instability even, in what rural and urban do and can signify in the worlds of people with mental health problems. An additional small point, leading from the explicit reference here to Portree, is the suggestion that locals may regard it as a town whereas it may not feel like a town, certainly not immediately, to incomers with more of a town or city background:

*I laughed when we first moved up to Skye, we came to Portree because everyone was, like, you need to go up the town, go into Portree, into Wentworth Street, and [we] went 'is that it?'. Like, 'where is the town?'* [Collete, SL, 19/9/01]

### *Rural idyll, urban hell and mental health*

For some, a rural area is quite simply the preferred place to be, and many of our interviewees signal their preference for living in rural surroundings. Many comments are of relevance in this respect, as can already be seen from ones quoted above,

position the rural as a kind of 'idyll' over against the excesses of the urban as a kind of 'hell': *'I never wanted to live in cities, cities are aberrations. Open the door on one of these wild places, that I can handle'* [Eric, SL, 17/9/01]. Often such views are informed by first-hand experience of urban living, with Inverness even being the source of negative reactions in some cases, although occasionally it may only be media representations that fuel the rejection of an urban hell. Whatever the basis for such rejection, however, it is easy to detect what some interviewees think about towns and cities as negative influences on good mental health. For some, the urban hell is configured in terms of a thoroughly disturbing built environment, the very scale and look of buildings, streets and townscapes being upsetting, whereas for other it is the density of people, traffic and interactions that prompts distress ('madness' even, as in one quote):

*... I can remember thinking one day when I lived in the city, everything is so big and I'm so frightened, and I can't cope with this.* [Frank, NWS, 26/9/01].

*Might seem a strange thing, coming from Glasgow, but I don't like big crowds. ... I get really uptight if, shopping is a nightmare ...* . [Simon, ER, 19/11/01]

*Looking out [in an urban area] and seeing all those loads of neighbours and roads and tarmac and buses going by, and taxis and cars, och, enough to do anyone's head in that is from the country.* [Patrick, SL, 20/8/01]

*Oh, I couldn't bear to live where they put those asylum-seekers in Glasgow. I think I'd die if they stuck me ... in a tower block like that, you know, somewhere like that where I couldn't get out. ... I mean, I don't really know Glasgow or even Cardiff really, where they've just got streets and buildings and all that, you know. I mean, I just, I couldn't bear it, I don't think.* [Eleanor, SL, 20/8/01]

*So, yes, the cities depress me because when you walk down through, you're walking down Redhill Street [in Glasgow], you've got pretty high buildings on either side of you and you've got the noise of the traffic, and you could be walking down the street with somebody and they cannae hear what you're saying. But here [Skye], you can walk along the street, you can talk to somebody on the other side of the street, and they can hear exactly what you're saying.* [Glenn, SL, 6/9/01]

*I can't even cross the road. I went down [to Paisley] to help my mum and dad move house last year, and their house is on a main road, and my mm gave me some money to go to the shops. ... I stood at the side of the road, and I couldn't get across the road. You don't get traffic like that [in Easter Ross]; even in Inverness, you don't get traffic that you can't cross at some point. It's like madness. I stood there for then minutes and went back to my Mum. She had to take me across the road. It just wastes time going down there, I can't cope.* [Jodie, ER, 1/12/01]

For many other interviewees, meanwhile, the problem is less directly the population and the infrastructure, and is more about the rushed and materialistic life of urban

centres.<sup>6</sup> A few of our interviewees appear to have thought really quite deeply about these ‘evils’ of the city:

*My wife felt that she was very isolated where we lived in Surrey before, even though we had neighbours there, there and there [gestures to indicate proximity]. She found herself very isolated, ... whereas here people say ‘hello’, ‘good morning’ and pass the time of day. It’s not until you’ve lived somewhere like that [Surrey], where everybody is running around so fast that, if you’re not up to speed, then you’re not worth knowing. [Greg, INV, 18/6/01]*

*... city life is routine in that it’s all time and money, time and money, ... and then when you move into a rural area time doesn’t mean so much, it’s just because it’s a different way of life. ... [T]he city was not the place to be because you have to keep on competing ... . I think if you work in a city and you become insecure, and you don’t feel very well, and you are struggling ... , you’re feet aren’t on anything solid, they’re sort [of] on air ... You’ve got no foundation.<sup>7</sup> [Frank, NWS, 26/9/01]*

*It is very lovely, this place [Skye]. I think cities were a big mistake from the very beginning. Not that I could do anything about it [his mental health state when living in a city]; get like William Blake or someone talking about the dark side of the [soul?]. ... I personally think cities are bad for people ... . [Liam, SL, 10/9/01]*

This favouring of the rural over the urban even features in passages where individuals are explicitly citing possible drawbacks of rural as opposed to urban living: *‘I love it, I love it out here [Skye]. Honestly, it has its pitfalls, trying to get clothes, trying to get decent vegetables, different things like that, but I would rather that than be walking down the street in a city. ... Again, I prefer it ... here with its problems to the city with its problems’* [Emily, SL, 26/9/01].

Some interviewees, as we will see, actually think that rural areas are more rather than less stressful places to live, but others, perhaps an equivalent number and a sample of whom can be heard in the last selection of quotes, suppose that rural areas most definitely do not give rise to the same stresses as are produced in urban centres. As Barry [SL, 18/9/01] summarises, *‘so many people come up here on holiday and just stay; they come up to get away from it and realise that all these people are living ... well and are happy, and they don’t have a tenth of the stress they have come to get away from. So they decide to up sticks and just come up here’*. Barry then adds his belief that *‘being in the city is depressing, frightening, stressful’*, a claim echoed by Maria [INV, 21/5/01] when speculating that *‘... people think mental health is about stress, and stress might be thought to be more prevalent in cities, maybe more acceptable there’*. The perceived absence of stress in rural areas is noted by several interviewees as a positive feature:

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, a few interviewees think that this way of life is now arriving, even in the remoter Highlands: *‘it’s too commercialised and the rat race has arrived compared to what it used to be ... . You’re from Glasgow [motioning to the interviewer], that’s all rush, rush, rush, isn’t it. Well that’s here, it never used to be’* [Geoff, INV, 27/6/01].

<sup>7</sup> We cannot resist drawing the parallel here with Marx’s famous quote about capitalism as a socio-economic system in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’, a quote used by Marshall Berman (1982) as the title of his famous book on postmodern urbanism.



Gareth: *No, it's a lot less stress than living in the city.*

Interviewer: *And does that cut down on the medication?*

Gareth: *Yeah, well I'm on a pretty low dose anyway because of the low stress levels, and you don't get the stress here – I've nothing to worry about basically.* [Gareth, NWS, 2/7/01]

The stress issue commonly dovetails with comments about safety: *'Just 'cos you're out in the country, you've no got to fasten your door and things like that'* [Anthony, ER, 21/11/01]; *'people are a lot friendlier up here, and there's less chance of getting in fights and whatever, violence, crime and things like that ...'* [Gareth, NWS, 2/7/01]. Similarly, and as already noted as something central to the rural-urban contrast, one interviewee states that *'[a] lot of them [rural dwellers] grow up living in a place [where] they can go out anytime of the day and not have to worry about being attacked. People feel safe up here'* [Barry, SL, 18/9/01]. Or again, another interviewee, making reference to Inverness when considering differences between rural and urban people, proposes that, *'when they come home [rural dwellers returning from work], there are people that will speak to each other nicely without all sorts of stuff happening. Like, see, nearer to the town centre – I keep calling [Inverness] the town, and it's now the city! – there's more sort of aggro tendencies in the people'* [Clare, INV, 14/6/01]. Drug abuse in cities is mentioned by a lot of interviewees – *'Some of the estates I used to go in Glasgow, they were horrendous. I was just thinking, 'no wonder half these people are on drugs''* [Emily SL, 26/9/01] – although the reality of rural drug-taking was certainly not unknown to them either.

Linked in here are those *Gemeinschaft* type understandings of rural areas as the home of intimate face-to-face social interactions, and one track leading from such understandings configures such rural community life as conducive to better mental health than is found in the city. A series of quotes, damning the absence of *Gemeinschaft* in urban areas – Inverness included, for at least one interviewee – while celebrating its presence in rural areas, whether by implication or more explicitly, can readily be extracted:

*In a town, people often don't know their nearest neighbours.* [Kyla, INV, 1/6/01]

*... you can get socially isolated in cities, very easily. They don't have nay sense of community much like they do here [Skye]. Strangely enough, the culture of the city requires money, so a lot of people are isolated from it [ie. cannot afford to involve themselves in urban social life].* [Eric, SL, 17/9/01]

*... you can get quite isolated in a town like Aberdeen ... because your next-door neighbours aren't watching out for you.* [Rowland, NWS, 5/7/01]

*But I think that most people in this area [a place near Inverness] are willing to give you chance, more than they would in a city. I mean, like, where we were staying in ... Aberdeen, [we] didn't have a lot of friends around that area. People always seemed stand-offish. ... It's just a totally different attitude.* [Daryl, INV, 14/6/01]

*... there's more community [here, Easter Ross]. In Inverness, [it is] very sort of cold and isolated, but here the community were kinder, and they do ask you. More concerned.* [Frances, ER, 10/12/01]

*I can go out and you pass folk in the street, and you know them. It's not like living in the city where you could pass a thousand folk and not know one of them. Here, you pass folk in the street and you know most of the faces, if not a lot of the names.* [Glenn, SL, 6/9/01]

*Unlike cities and that, in a city you can walk about all day and nobody will say 'hello' to you, wherever you go. It doesn't matter [in a village] whether you know the person or not, you always get a 'hi, how are you?'. It's just a totally different set-up from a city.* [Daryl, INV, 21/6/01]

*Out in the country, everybody knows everybody else, which is a very, very good thing. On the other hand, it tends to be too good sometimes! ... Overall, you're part and parcel, it's all one big family from 15 miles-20 miles stretch of glen from one end to the other. Everybody knows and helps and shares.* [Catherine, INV, 14/6/01]

*Whereas here people are more social, that's the wrong word, more interested in getting to know you, sort of thing. More co-operative, a lot simpler ...* [Liam, SL, 10/9/01]

*... you go down to the centre [probably meaning Tongue and maybe the GP surgery there] and there might be another car there. You can always expect a bit [of traffic] in the summer, but you can almost go to these places with seeing very few cars on the road; I mean, even if they are, you can wave to them because you know them, you know ...* [Charlotte, NWS, 10/7/01]

The proposition is that people are more supportive of one another in rural areas: *'I think here it is more of a village spirit, and people are more looking in'* [Josephine, NWS, 4/5/01], as in there being a community spirit prompting friends, neighbours and even more 'distant' fellow rural dwellers to be 'looking in' to see how you are. The links between neighbourliness and various caring acts – such as checking on how people are, particularly if known to be unwell in some way – are detailed at greater length in our findings paper on **Inclusionary social relations and practices**. Furthermore, the smallness and the lack of anonymity of rural areas means that people sometimes have to do things that in urban areas they would not do, simply in order to be accepted by the community (to 'fit in' with the local rules, expectations and the like: see our findings paper on **Highlands, economy, culture and mental health problems**). For many people this may be a bad thing, a hindrance to mental health as we will see, but one interviewee is clear on how she benefits in this respect *'I think it is sort of, because it's a small community, you do feel that you've got to make the effort. In some ways, that's a more positive thing, because I remember feeling very down once, and I forced myself to do something, because I really ought to, and the actual momentum of doing it seem[ed] to help'* [Miriam, ER, 13/11/01].

While not articulated all that clearly by many of our interviewees, there is some indication of a number viewing rural areas, complete with this presumed *Gemeinschaft* type character, as fostering more helpful, even enlightened, attitudes

towards people with mental health problems. One explicit statement with this flavour, working again with a stark rural-urban contrast runs as follows:

*Someone's their cousin ... their sister or brother, you know, [and] just because somebody has problems they're not obviously stigmatised. They are a person first, they don't lose that kind of thing [their perceived humanity], whereas in cities they probably ... you are a nutcase not a human being.* [Eric, SL, 17/9/01]

Being seen as a 'human being' rather than as a 'nutcase' is here taken to be a facet of rural populations, not of urban populations, although it must immediately be acknowledged that other interviewees – as we will see below – perceived the equation to be very much the reverse of what Eric detects (with the rural positioned as less accommodating than the urban, rather than *vice versa*). Nonetheless, evidence in support of Eric does perhaps arise in the shape of known rural tolerance of those reckoned simply to be local 'eccentrics', as documented in the findings papers on both **Inclusionary social relations and practices** and **Highlands, economy, culture and mental health problems**.

A common perception, given this imagery of the rural idyll, complete with its various dimensions, physical, social and cultural, as teased out above, is that people with mental health problems – whether fully developed and diagnosed, or incipient and perhaps barely recognised by the individual concerned – are attracted to live in rural localities (and maybe particularly in those of the Scottish Highlands: see paper on **Social differences**):

*I think a lot of people come to the Highlands, and quite a lot of people with mental health problems, particularly from England. ... I think it's just looked upon as being sort of tranquil and stress-free. I've met a lot of people in the hospital that have come from other areas because of their illness really.* [Maria, INV, 21/5/01]

*For whatever reason, there are quite a number of people come to this island one way or another with strange behaviour patterns ...* . [Ken, SL, 19/9/01]

*Mind you, a lot of them [incomers] have come here because they've got emotional problems and they can't cope with the big wide world, and they think this is the place to come ...* . [Deborah, NWS, 23/7/01]

Many of our interviewees are themselves attracted to these rural surroundings, perhaps because of a more or less consciously reflected upon sense that such surroundings would be more beneficial to their mental health: '*[In rural area] you just don't have millions of people thundering around trying to get to the same place. ... And possibly what you were looking for [turns to his partner, who has a mental health problem] when you thought you just had to leave the city and go and live in a rural place*' [Frank, NWS, 26/9/01]; '*I felt that coming up here away from people and cars would be a help. I felt that I was being overwhelmed by people and cars wherever you went, you know*' [Charlotte, NWS, 10/7/01]; '*And people were saying 'are you no going back to the city?' I said 'no, I'm too fond of this quiet life up here now', so I just stayed*' [Cameron, SL, 25/9/01]. One interviewee had experienced mental health problems when living in Aberdeen, but had been able to recover, at least to some extent, when returning to his roots and family in the rural lands of North

West Sutherland: ‘... my illness was probably something to do with the difference between living in the country and living in the city, and adapting to a new way of life [in the latter]’ [Rowland, NWS, 5/7/01]. In addition, connecting to the obvious pleasure that numerous interviewees derive from the physical properties of upland or island rural landscapes, a few express the sense that their decision to relocate has paid dividends in terms of improved mental health (see also our findings paper on **Therapeutic landscapes**):

*It’s a positive experience. It’s a very positive experience, because I can stand at the back door and look out over the shore. I can look out my front window at the hills across [from] here. I can look and see them.* [Glenn, SL, 6/9/01]

*I’ve always loved the hills, and where I was [before] was very flat, and near the sea, you know I love being near the sea. So, I suppose I found that the scenery and the atmosphere, and the lack of people and lack of cars and general peace, has been very positive in helping me to get over it, yes it has.* [Charlotte, NWS, 10/7/01]

*It’s had a good effect on it [his mental health], knowing we are on an island. ... [I]t does have a good effect on me, comparing it to some place like Aberdeen or Inverness, there’s no comparison. The only better thing about living in those other places is the jobs, it’s down to money. Why bother chasing the money when you’ve got the happiness living on the West Coast?* [Patrick, SL, 20/8/01]

A slightly different take on why a rural rather than an urban location might be more beneficial to one interviewee, hinting at the possibility of someone with a particular form of mental health problem surviving better in the open expanses of a rural setting with ‘room’ to spread out, is given by Ruth, a carer, talking about Nigel: ‘[We] need a place in the sticks. Nigel couldn’t survive living in the city where you’ve got to keep tidy [laughs]. He’d be like the neighbour from hell. ... So, I understand his need to live in the [countryside]. ... I mean, he really, ... he’d like to get a place and go and live down a leafy lane ... ’ [Ruth, NWS, 11/7/01].

#### *Rural hell, urban idyll and mental health*

Looking closely at our interview materials, it is evident that running alongside the rural idyll and urban hell construction, as deconstructed in some detail above, is almost its mirror image, in that for some interviewees rural areas are perceived to be more damaging to their mental health than are urban areas. Indeed, for some interviewees – we would estimate at least as many as spoke to us about in effect rural idylls and urban hells – the situation is reversed to one approaching rural hells and urban idylls. In short, for some of the interviewees rural areas are not quite what they seem, in that they feel that the surface imagery of pretty places, stress-free living and close-knit communities camouflages the more mundane practicalities of coping with mental health problems in rural localities. These interviewees hint too at possibly deeper suspicions, hostility and stigma that arise at the heart of rural social life, and which can have an adverse impact upon people with mental health problems. For such interviewees, as a result, there may be all manner of advantages to urban areas, rendering towns and cities, not the countryside, the more ‘idyllic’ (or at least comfortable) place to be. A useful quote for us, given the particular concerns of our

project, is one highlighting the tension between imagery and reality; or between, on the one hand, the common presumption that these rural districts could not possibly be related to mental ill health and, on the other hand, the aching grind of everyday existence in such districts which, for some, does prompt or exacerbate mental health problems: *'It's okay for people who come up on holiday ... and they can't understand people who are depressed [here], but they haven't seen it when it's bad ... winter time here ...'* [Frank, NWS, 26/9/01]. A loosely similar quote, getting across an element of surprise about the existence of poor mental health in what otherwise seem to be idyllic surroundings: *'In a setting like rural I was surprised because it is quite a nice lifestyle people have, and it's surprising that there is these pressures that are causing people [here] to have mental illness really'* [Justine, INV, 14/6/01].

Rural poverty and deprivation can get some people down, as is very true of Nigel and Ruth [NWS, 11/7/01], who convey almost a 'class' sense of their problems as magnified by living in a very remote and rural North West Sutherland township. Jodie talks about her rural place through much the same lenses, saying that *'Balintore's rural, but it is a village that was built with a purpose; most of the people put in that place are dumped there because of the problem. It's deprived people that they [the local authority] can't put anywhere else'* [Jodie, ER, 1/12/01]. As she continues, *'[t]here's lots of them, people with social problems and a lack of money. It's a very miserable place to live, nobody is all that happy'*, and she then elaborates in such a way that a clear connection is drawn to mental health problems: *'You find when you live in [this] environment, it pulls you down. Instead of living in a place where people are happy and it lifts you a wee bit, you're living in a place where everybody is skint, no money, they are depressed, [and] there's an awful lot of people on drugs down there'*. Larissa [ER, 12/12/01] echoes Jodie on this count: *'It's a lot more depressing up here than it is, like, in the cities and what not, and it's a lot harder to live, a lot more stressful and that. Lack of employment and things like that'*. A feeling of entrapment is aired by Jodie, Larissa and others, one echoed in Gary's [ER, 20/11/01] criticism of his home settlement in Easter Ross for being *'very rural, because it is very rural, it is very entrapping in certain ways'*. All of these interviewees convey the sense that they cannot readily 'get out', 'escape', go somewhere else, get out of places and situations that are troubling them; and such a feeling is particularly significant, likely to have negative ramifications, if someone is enduring a mental health problem. Several claims made previously about the negativity of remoteness and isolation can usefully be recalled here, of course, and useful too is one interviewee's remark that *'I think ... I was sort of trapped, I did feel that when I came home at first ... I was kind of trapped in bed, getting up, it was hard going, I couldn't go very far'* [Anthony, ER, 21/11/01]. Seen in this light, rural areas hardly appear stress-free, and instead they appear as ones likely to be stressful and in the process harmful to at least certain people with incipient or developed mental health problems.

The *Gemeinschaft* aspects of rural areas may also be sources of stress and even harm for the mental health of some people, and we identify here a profoundly double-edged sword that we interpret as central to the whole articulation of rurality and mental health. The argument is that in rural areas with low population levels and limited public spaces (whether streets, shops, health centres or public houses), individuals cannot readily escape the routine face-to-faceness of *Gemeinschaft* – it is the 'stuff' in which they may start to feel totally trapped – and neither can they readily evade the

'gaze', attention and comment of these other local dwellers. As Lisa [NWS, 11/7/01] notes:

*We're limited to ... social contacts, I guess as well. I mean, you can't sort of say 'we'll go somewhere else tonight, you know, because it doesn't make a lot of difference where you go ... you know, [you]'ll meet the same people. Very often even going to Inverness, you're always guaranteed to see somebody from here. It's just the way it is.*

Leah [ER, 4/12/01], reflecting on the effects of closed rural communities when recovering from periods of hospitalisation for mental health problems, indicates that, *'if you didn't know many people, you could really just be left on your own. You could live in Glasgow and not see anyone, really shut yourself off. I suppose in Alness and Harris you wouldn't be able to do that'*. The implications could presumably be both positive and negative, depending on whether an individual wants a lot of human contact (and possible support) or prefers to be anonymous and away from inquiring others (however well-meaning), but the tone of Leah's comments leans more towards stressing the negative than the positive. Others reveal a definite preference for the anonymity of the city:

*... that's why I like cities, I've always liked anonymity, not that there's anything to be anonymous about really.* [Justine, INV, 14/6/01]

*... I like to go away at times while I was able to, to see people and be among a town or a city, just to be among streets and to feel anonymous in it, or going to other places, and to see if I was still feeling the same thing here as I was there ...* [Vincent, ER, 17/12/01].

*Well, having lived down in London, it can be, well, it's more anonymous, you can just be yourself, you don't worry about 'you're going to see all these people again tomorrow' if you're having a bad day. You can say so without ... [having] to come back later on. There's less of having to put on the act a bit. Everything's fine when you're in a large place.* [Miriam, ER, 13/11/01]

*[I] lived in London for a year, which was brilliant, I loved it. The way of life down there is fantastic. You can do what you want, you can wear what you want and not get looked at.* [Emma, SL, 5/9/01]

Such a stance is even taken by a few interviewees when talking about Inverness, with statements such as: *'I actually see it as being much more anonymous in Inverness'* [Michelle, INV, 11/5/01]; while Felix [INV, 31/5/01] agrees: *'in Inverness people are anonymous to an extent'*. Although difficult to document quantitatively, there may be a trend of people with mental health problems leaving claustrophobic rural Highland places to come to Inverness, partly to benefit from the denser networks of mental health services (statutory and voluntary) found here, but partly by presence of other interviewees of such services with whom it is possible to build up informal interviewee networks (see our findings paper on **User networks**), but partly to capitalise on the anonymity of this larger urban centre (now designated a city): *'I want all the facilities in Inverness again, I want the anonymity'* [Eve, INV, 30/5/01].

The preference for the anonymity of the city is fuelled by the feeling that, when in urban locations, it is easier to maintain mental equilibrium. This feeling arises in large measure because there is not the fear of encountering and attracting condemnatory judgements from people who know ‘your’ face, who quite possibly know some of ‘your’ background, history and problems, or who, if not having such knowledge, may be happy to make up stories for themselves to fill in the gaps. We explore the many issues involved here at length in our findings paper on **Visibility, gossip and intimate neighbourly knowledges** – these issues are fundamental to our broader conclusions – but we can explore them here as well, with special reference to the rural connection. Several telling quotes about visibility and gossip in rural places can be repeated, and the evident dangers of such gossip, heightening paranoia and surely being detrimental to the mental health of certain individuals in certain instance, hence run as follows:

*... everybody knows everybody else in the village, we all know each other. We know most people in the village, know what is going on and that, there’s always gossip.* [Frances, ER, 10/12/01]

*The country is a place to stand and gossip and point your finger ... .* [Melissa, INV, 14/6/01]

*... the fact that your business is not just your business, people will talk. They talk in cities, but that is quite impersonal, ‘her down the road’, kind of thing. But here it is with a next door neighbour. They tend to poke their noses in, which is fine if it’s for good, but a lot of people tend to ... [be] gossiping ...* [Susan, SL, 20/9/01]

*But I find it very nose-y, but that’s the way small communities are apparently – I’ve read a bit about ways of life in rural communities. But I’m the incomer, so, you know, I’m the one probably at fault. I don’t know. Time will tell.* [Alex, INV, 11/5/01]

A nice quote weighing up the pros and cons of rural living can be appended here, since it too hints at the downsides of gossip: *‘The scenery is beautiful, weather’s crap [laughs], and watch what you say to certain people because certain people are gossips. It’s like most small places, there’s a fair amount of people that just live for gossiping’* [Collete, SL, 19/9/01]. One troublingly full account of living in a ‘rural hell’ with mental health problems, meanwhile, comes from Jodie, who is living in what she calls a rural place in Easter Ross:

*Hell on earth. It’s a terrible place, but it’s probably a terrible place because it is not where I want to be. I can’t stand it living in the house where every room that I walk into there’s a house; I look out the window, there’s a house on every side of me. ... There’s no privacy unless I keep the curtains shut. Everybody knows when you are going in and out of the house and who else is coming in and out of the house.* [Jodie, ER, 1/12/01].

The contrast is stark between this quote and those from interviewees who praise neighbourliness and being ‘checked up on’: Jodie is forthright in identifying the problems that a *Gemeinschaft*-like rural world can pose for people with mental health problems, while other interviewees can see benefits that such a world can offer them. The fact that both perspectives are very definitely present in the interviews may be

frustrating for anyone wanting a simple generalisation in this respect, we admit, but the empirical findings cannot be denied nor simplified.

A related matter here is the perception on the part of some that rural populations harbour 'backward' attitudes when it comes to mental health. While being hesitant about such a perception, and not wishing to be too judgemental, we think it appropriate to repeat the words of several of our interviewees regarding the constitution of a rural approach to mental health problems that may not always be that helpful to rural dwellers with mental health problems. One interviewee insists that:

*The further south you go, the more modern and lively and open a place is. The further north you go, where the population sort of dwindles, the further north ... . I think, [if] you're born in a thriving environment like a big city, you are more broad-minded about things. You see people through a wider scope in different walks of life. [Clare, SL, 9/8/01]*

She then adds, particularly addressing the views held by ruralites who migrate to Inverness:

*People have come from all the little roundabout middle-of-nowhere areas and they've all come to Inverness, but they've taken their little views with them. A lot of people are happy to keep their views in that box rather than broadening them for something bigger. [ibid.]*

The implication of the two quotes together is to posit a less than entirely open-minded rural mind-set, a tendency to hold 'little views', to think in terms of closed 'boxes', that derives from the limited worldly experiences of some, if by no means all, rural dwellers. Another interviewee explicitly highlights rural intolerance of human difference, gesturing in so doing to the shadows of 'ethocentrism', even racism, that sometimes lay over rural communities:

*It's quite a big shock because in London it's so cosmopolitan ... . I accept everybody, I've worked with green people! You know, they can have two heads. As long as they are nice and kind, it doesn't bother me at all. The way I see it is I moved five hundred miles in an island [mainland Britain] up the road; to sort of experience racism was quite a shock to me. [Alex, INV, 11/5/01]<sup>8</sup>*

It must be remembered that these critical claims are made in the context of discussing rural understandings of mental health problems, and a wafer-thin line therefore separates what the individuals concerned say about rural wariness when confronted with the overall span of human differences from what they say – or at least what they imply – about rural negativity towards people exhibiting poor mental states. One interviewee touches more explicitly on the latter:

*I've seen mentally handicapped people within my own family on Stornaway and seen how they treated them in rural areas. I always remember this little girl, and they were hidden away and not really spoken about. ... I've got a niece from that family and she's got mental health problems, and I truly believe not enough has been done to help that girl. Once they get past the*

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<sup>8</sup> Alex, having moved to the Highlands from London, may have encountered the anti-'white settler' racism that we briefly discuss in our findings paper on **Social differences**.



*handicapped schooling, there is very little made available for them to be accepted in the community, and to go out freely and socialise; they're made to feel quite uncomfortable.* [Eve, INV, 30/5/01]

We explore in more detail this terrain of negative reactions throughout our findings paper on **Exclusionary social relations and practices**, but what we will underscore at this moment is the message communicated by another interviewee:

*I want to go back to this city-rural thing, 'cos sometimes a city is a very safe place in terms of isolation and stigma 'cos you're automatically isolated in a city; everybody expects to be isolated in a city. If you're isolated in a rural community, there's an extra element of rejection because you almost know everyone.* [Alness group discussion, ER, 23/11/01].

This is an especially important quote for us because it gets at the subtle but vital point that, while negative reactions may be endured by people with mental health problems in *both* rural and urban environments, there are perhaps greater emotional effects arising from being rejected in a rural community where people do know virtually everybody: *'there's an extra element of rejection because you almost know everyone'*. In short, so much more appears to be at stake. The rejection is so much more obvious, the stigmatising gossip and the unenlightened understandings are so much more hurtful, and the surrounding atmosphere of negativity is so much more unavoidable, precisely because all of this is taking place on a daily, routine and repeated basis in the glare of a common 'community' gaze, often involving people known to one another – perhaps ex-friends of the person experiencing mental distress – and often circulating around a narrowly circumscribed set of spaces for interaction.

If a person with mental health problems is made to feel unwanted in such a small place, finding that a tight-knit community starts to become a source of antipathy rather than support, that can be so tough to handle that leaving may become the only answer, although entrapment due to financial circumstances (see above) may of course stand in the way of such a solution:

Sarah: ... *I want to move as soon as possible, but I haven't the means at the moment. We've got very strange neighbours, three boys, and they don't talk to us hardly at all.*

Interviewer: Right.

Sarah: *So that's country life for you. They're not all like that ...* . [Sarah, ER, 12/11/01]

People drifting out of rural areas towards the city may nonetheless be the result, as we have indicated may be happening in the shape of an in-migration of some mental health sufferers into Inverness. One interviewee describes such a trend, although stating that he himself thinks that it is a bad idea and unlikely to be of any positive benefit to someone's mental health:

*I happen to know for a fact that people with schizophrenia might drift towards cities like London. ... I've never seen the appeal of going to live rough in a city like London, you know, when you've got mental health problems with no one to help you out, you know. It's crazy.* [Gareth, NWS, 2/7/01]

Turning from people with mental health problems who might wish to forsake rural areas, let us now think again about those incomers who are attracted into rural areas because they think or sense that it will benefit their mental health. Echoing what we said earlier about some dichotomy between image and reality in the realm of rurality and mental health, there can be no doubt that some incomers attracted into rural areas, and in this case to the grand vistas of the Highlands, can end up suffering because the reality of coping with mental health problems in the midst of such scenic rural places is indeed far from easy. As one incomer interviewee put it, albeit someone who was intending to stay in the Highlands, *'I've found since that you can't live on nice-looking lochs and mountains, if you see what I mean'* [Alex, INV, 11/5/01]. Several pertinent observations on this count clearly link into what interviewees say specifically about the laidbackness of Highland life (see our findings paper on **Highlands, economy, culture and mental health problems**), but we think that they possess wider applicability than just Highland rural locations. They run as follows:

*And I do think that people move here ..., you know, they maybe come in the summer and think 'okay, this is nice'. And it can be difficult for folk.* [Lisa, NWS, 11/7/01]

*Some of these folks, they come up and they don't like it, last about a year or two and go back to wherever it was they came from. ... [They] can't cope with all the power cuts and the water leaks and not getting to the shops everyday.* [Joanne, ER, 6/11/01]

*I mean, people come up from the city on holiday to find the countryside, and then they find 'oh, it would be nice to live here', and they live here for about a year, and then they think 'oh, I can't hack this, I've got to go back down [south]': nothing to do, or it's too quiet, or whatever. They're used to living in cities. Everything's there and it's rushing about. And [in these rural settings] it's a slower pace, so you have to be suited to that.* [Connor, NWS, 16/7/01]

*The way of life is different in London. Y'know, when I moved up here I found the it very difficult, the pace of life up here, well trying to get things done, it's always tomorrow you know! In London it's not like that, it's very fast. If you've got the money, they'll do it straight away if they can fit you in, but here it's all 'I'll do that for you', but when? I found that quite perturbing really, I suppose.* [Alex, SL, 11/5/01]

The failure of a removal to improve an individual's poor mental health is explicitly noted in several quotes:

*You know, I lived in a terraced house in North Shields and I dreamed of having a house and a garden and views and, you know, ... I should be a happy. And that was the other thing when I was ill, I kept thinking this is, this is ... this is, we need it, this is as good as it can get, because it's so beautiful. Why am I so unhappy? Why am I so unhappy?* [Judith, INV, 26/8/01]

*I was attracted to it, basically I was a wee bit blinkered. I thought 'yes, it would be quite romantic'. I had come to Golspie for years and years on holiday, and had a wonderful time and a walk along Golspie beach. ... [I]t*

*was all sort of romantic, and have a cottage and stuff. I had a vision of what it would be like. It [her mental health problem] hasn't changed that much, because things didn't work out the way I wanted.* [Clara, ER, 21/11/01]

*... I thought when I came here ... , well now at last I will be in a place where I want to be, and that it will help me solve my problems. But shortly after, I realised it didn't, I had brought my problems with me, and I needed help. I had to admit that I needed help.* [Chloe, SL, 21/8/01]

While it might be too strong to suggest that for these people their envisaged rural idylls have been replaced by experienced rural hells, the impression is nonetheless that the new rural homes for the individuals concerned have not produced the hoped-for therapeutic gains on the mental health front.

Some overview comments to conclude this subsection of the paper can now be given: *'I think people who lived in the rural area, there's a lot of country areas where people suffer depression'* [Eve, INV, 30/5/01]; *'Like finding rural places like Tain and Alness and Invergordon, a lot of people have mental health problems, and a lot of it's to do with where you stay'* [Larissa, ER, 12/12/01]. Alternatively, consider this remark, which suggests a realism that a rural existence might be far more rewarding and enjoyable for an individual *after* they have 'got through' their mental health problems: *'One day I want to live in a rural area, but I want to be healed by then'* [Eve, INV, 30/5/01].<sup>9</sup>

## References

Berman, M., 1982, *'All that is Solid Melts into Air': The Experience of Modernity* (Simon and Schuster, New York)

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<sup>9</sup> Conversely, another interviewee appears to be saying that she wants to remain in a rural area recovering her mental health, so that she can then move back to the city: *'Yeah, I miss the city. I prefer the city, but at the moment I'm just sort of trying to get my health back together again, So, you know, staying up here is probably better for me at the moment, but I would love to move back down to the city again or just move to a city again. I don't quite like sitting at home, or being dead slow ...'* [Larissa, ER, 12/12/01]. Note that Larissa here intimates the wish to get away from the slowness of rural (Highland) life, which is hence seen in more negative than positive terms.