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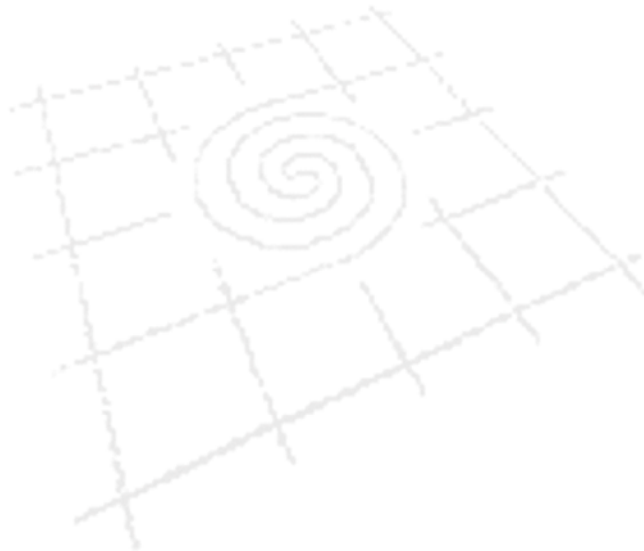
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## Local Family Circles and Suburban Social Life in Ireland

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## **Local Family Circles and Suburban Social Life in Ireland<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents some findings from a research project that sought to generate an empirical account of the texture of social life in new Irish suburbs, through a comparative analysis of four suburban areas. The paper focuses on differences in the structure of family and kinship relations in different kinds of suburbs, and suggests some ways in which those differences are linked to levels of attachment to place amongst couples with young children. We found that, in new Irish suburbs, many families continue to have access to family circles in the locality or nearby. They rely more on kin for everyday social support when their children are very young, but the extent to which they increase their reliance on neighbours as children reach primary school age varies according to the socio-demographic composition of the suburb where they live.

## **Introduction**

In Ireland, the period of economic boom known as the “Celtic Tiger” that began in the mid-1990s, was accompanied by rapid and extensive suburban development. ‘Sprawl’ has since become the focus of publicly articulated anxieties about changing family and community life. These anxieties have centred on the growing numbers of mothers in the labour force, and on the perception that dual-income families in the commuter belt are socially isolated – that they have reduced interaction with extended kin, and that they are less likely to be active participants in their local communities. The perception is based mainly on anecdotal information though, as we will show, it finds echoes in some sociological depictions of suburban life. This paper presents some findings from a research project that sought to generate an empirical account of the texture of social life in new Irish suburbs, through a comparative analysis of four suburban areas. The paper focuses on differences in the structure of family and kinship relations in different kinds of suburbs, and suggests some ways in which those differences are linked to levels of attachment to place amongst couples with young children.

## **Suburbs and Families: Recurrent Themes**

There are two, interwoven reasons why family patterns are of particular interest to a sociological examination of the suburbs. First, suburbs have played a particular part in the evolution of modern family ideals and practices. Second, social commentators have repeatedly worried about the extent to which suburban living isolates conjugal families from wider social relationships with neighbours and extended kin. According to Miller (1995, p. 394), the rise of suburbs in England and North America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was connected with a new preoccupation with

domesticity. “At the same time as the family was being redefined as a source of companionship and emotional sustenance, the suburbs began to be seen as the ideal location for it.” After the Second World War the suburban ideal became accessible to working class families and “beliefs about domesticity, family togetherness, and life in the suburbs became more tightly intertwined than ever before” (Miller 1995, p. 401). Migration to the suburbs occurred alongside a closely sequenced set of early family life transitions: marriage, setting up home and having children. In their classic study of “Family and Kinship in East London,” Young and Wilmott (1957, p. 146) highlighted the extent to which moving to a suburban estate was associated with increasing isolation from kinship networks, making the nuclear family “more self-contained in bad times and in good.” In Ireland, Humphreys’ (1966) ethnographic study of “New Dubliners” found that respondents living in recently developed housing estates had more formal and less frequent interactions with their neighbours than those living in older, inner-city areas, and that neighbours were considerably less likely to assist one another in times of crisis.

More recently, however, the sequence of early family life transitions associated with the post-war suburban ideal has been “unbundled.” Plane et al. (2005, p. 15317) observed that, in the contemporary United States, individual “departures from the parental home, career initiation, family formation, and childbearing may well be spread over a decade or more.” Moreover, the gender division of labour so strongly associated with the suburban ideal has been altered, as growing proportions of women, especially mothers, enter the labour force. Together with increased rates of divorce and remarriage, these changes in the family life course have led to greater diversity in suburban household composition (Ogden and Hall 2004; Champion 2001). Against this backdrop, sociologists and lay people have articulated a new set

of concerns about the social isolation of suburban families. According to an influential literature on social capital, the trend for increasing proportions of suburban mothers to work outside the home, together with long commuting times, has intensified the trend for suburban families to spend more social time with immediate family members, and less with friends and neighbours (Coleman 1987, Putnam 2000). In Ireland, a public consultation process carried out by the Government appointed “Task Force on Active Citizenship” (2006) found that people commonly identified dual-earner family work strategies, and long-distance commuting, as barriers to volunteering and civic engagement, although their own commissioned research did not support the hypothesis that there has been a decline in community engagement (TFAC 2007). Some scholars proposed that personal relationships outside the local community have become more important in people’s lives, either through the use of new communications technology (Wellman 2005), or through a greater focus on the workplace as a site of social support (Poarch 1998).

In a somewhat contradictory literature, a number of scholars have argued that, as patterns of family formation become more diverse and unpredictable across the life course, the ‘extended family’ has returned, this time as a ‘family of choice’ that may include non-kin as well as kin relations. In other words, friends and extended kin increasingly perform functions formerly thought to have been confined to the nuclear family unit (Stacey 1992, Weeks et al. 2001). In a study that tends to contradict the suggestion that dual-earner, suburban couples are isolated within their communities, Hansen (2005) showed how the requirements of raising children cause them to construct and maintain networks of interdependence amongst family and friends. Paradoxically, these studies mirror – from a different angle - earlier findings that, over time, suburban residents developed circles of friends and neighbours that

compensated for their reduced access to extended kin (Wilmott and Young 1960; for the Irish case see Gordon 1977). Pahl and Spencer (2004) have identified the extent to which much of the literature on contemporary “families of choice” rests on historically imprecise and ill-informed understandings about inter-personal relationships in the past. While they find evidence of considerable complexity in people’s “personal communities,” they are sceptical about the idea that this complexity reflects a secular trend in family life. Similarly, Thomson (2005) has identified the notion that people are less tied to their communities (however defined), than in the past, as a “theory that won’t die,” despite the absence of adequate empirical support.

In light of these ambiguities in the sociological literature, and of the dearth of empirical research in the Irish case, the “New Urban Living Project” sought to develop a rich account of social life in four Irish suburbs in the greater Dublin area, that were selected in order to capture differences in the nature and timing suburban development, and in the relationships between suburbs and the metropolitan centre.<sup>1</sup> Ratoath, in County Meath, provided a good example of completely new peripheral growth in a previously rural setting. The new electoral division of Lucan-Esker, sited to the south of Lucan village in County Dublin, has grown at a staggering rate, in a locality that was already suburbanised. New estates on the periphery of Mullingar pointed to a new situation, one in which the suburbs of a provincial town in the Irish midlands now also functions as a suburb of the distant metropolis of Dublin. Finally, Leixlip, in County Kildare, offered a counter-case of an older, stable suburban neighbourhood that did not experience continued growth during the Celtic Tiger period. The study used a range of methods that combined quantitative and qualitative

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<sup>1</sup> We gratefully acknowledge funding provided by the Royal Irish Academy Third Sector Research Programme, the Katherine Howard Foundation and the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis.

data. We carried out a survey of a random sample of two hundred local residents in selected estates in each location between 2002 and 2004, and these data form the basis of the analysis in this paper. However, we also conducted focus group interviews with various social groupings in each locality, including older people's organizations, mother and toddler groups and sixth-class primary school pupils. In each case the pupils also completed essays on "The Place Where I Live." A series of in-depth interviews were conducted as a follow-up to the survey, focusing on selected respondents who actively participated in the collective life of the local area. Through this multiple-method approach, we aimed to capture how the attributes of different suburbs, treated as whole spaces of interaction (cf. Fine and Harrington 2004), affected residents' experience of family and community life, and their sense of attachment to where they lived.

In the following paragraphs we begin by illustrating some differences and similarities in the household and family life-stage composition of our suburban case studies. We then demonstrate the varying significance of kinship ties in the personal networks of social support identified by respondents living in conjugal family units in each area. Finally, we provide some evidence on the different kinds of support couples with young children received from kin in each case, and on how kinship ties mediated their participation in local community life and their sense of attachment to place.

#### **Four Irish Suburbs: Demography of Families and Households**

As described above, the cases in our study were selected according to two criteria, namely, their distance from Dublin city centre and their rate of growth during the initial wave of suburban development associated with the Celtic Tiger era. Not surprisingly, then, the three suburban areas characterized by new or continued rapid

growth had a relatively youthful age profile, with those aged 26-39 – the peak years for family formation – predominating. It is notable, however, that amongst these three, Ratoath has a slightly older age profile, with more respondents aged 40-55 years. The Leixlip estates surveyed in our study displayed the characteristics of an ‘ageing’ suburb, with greater numbers of adults who were both younger and older than those likely to have dependent children at home

<Figure 1 about here>

Figure 1 shows the distribution of household types by study location. It illustrates the striking homogeneity of Ratoath, where those comprising couples with children were greatly predominant. In the other rapidly growing suburbs, couples without children (most of whom were aged between 26 and 39), comprised a greater proportion of households. In Leixlip, couples with adult children were the most common household type, followed by adults living with relatives. There is likely to be considerable overlap between the latter two household categories in Leixlip – many of them were probably identical in structure, with the variation being caused by which adult in the household was randomly selected for interview. In this established suburb, couples with children comprised the least common household type.

<Figure 2 about here>

Turning to the distribution of households by family life stage, Figure 2 shows that Ratoath had a greater proportion of households with children of primary school age and younger, compared to Lucan and Mullingar where households with children tended to be at an earlier stage of the family life cycle. Interestingly, however, more than half of these families had moved to Ratoath within the last five years, in contrast to the other two growing suburbs where similar families were more likely to have



been born in the vicinity (Mullingar), or to have lived there for more than five years (Lucan). This distinctive feature of Ratoath appears to be associated with the particular salience of 'lifestyle' concerns in the decision to move there, together with the fact that it grew so rapidly around a small rural village that was not adjacent to other urban or suburban developments.<sup>2</sup>

<Figure 3 about here>

Ratoath residents' particular orientation to the place where they live is further illustrated in Figure 3, which shows that, of our three cases where there were numerous families with young children, Ratoath had the highest proportion of households with a "breadwinner" family-work strategy. While in each area there is evidence that mothers "scaled back" work commitments as children came along, in Ratoath they appear to have scaled back at an earlier family life-stage (that is, when there were fewer and younger children in the family), and to a greater extent (that is, they were more likely to leave the labour force entirely than to work part-time).

In summary, then, the demographic composition of our suburban case studies is the outcome of a complex mix of socio-spatial processes including suburban ageing, the unbundling of young adult life transitions, diversifying family-work strategies and the emergence of new forms of suburban development. Leixlip can be described as a mature suburb, where most households comprised older families with adult children living at home. The high proportion of young adults living with relatives in this area most likely reflects a growing national trend towards adult children delaying independent household formation. Lucan-Esker represents a suburban area characterized by continuing rapid development. Many of the households were therefore comprised of families with young (mostly pre-school age)

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<sup>2</sup> See the more detailed discussion in Corcoran, Gray and Peillon (2007).

children. However, reflecting a growing national trend for couples to postpone childbearing, there were also many ‘pre-family’ households in the area. Most likely because of its nearness to the metropolitan centre, Lucan also has relatively high proportions of households with adults living alone, or with unrelated others. The new suburban estates around Mullingar represent an emerging pattern of ‘counter-urbanization’ in the Irish context, generated mainly by locally driven urban expansion, but also by the phenomenon of long-distance commuting. Similar to Lucan, this suburban area had relatively high proportions of ‘pre-family’ couples when we carried out our survey, but the proportion of households comprising young families with pre-school age children was somewhat greater, with correspondingly fewer households comprising single persons or unrelated adults. Finally, Ratoath represents a different form of counter-urbanization. Here suburban development appears to have been driven by a desire on the part of couples with children to establish a more ‘rural’ lifestyle around what was once a small country village, while continuing to work within the greater Dublin metropolitan area. As a consequence, Ratoath was characterized by a high degree of demographic homogeneity – by what Swisher, Sweet and Moen (2004) have described as “life-stage community fit” for young families. The great majority of households comprised families with children, many of whom were of primary-school age.

### **The Structure of Personal Social Networks: Family Circles in the Suburbs**

The overview above highlighted the ways in which suburbs differ in terms of their family and household composition. Today, depending on where they live, suburban couples with young children encounter varying opportunities and challenges to meeting the requirements of family life. Do these challenges cause them to be

isolated from extended family members or from neighbours in the local community? Or does contemporary suburban life create opportunities for the development of “families of choice” to meet their needs? In order to explore these questions, in the remainder of this paper we focus particularly on the three growing suburbs in our study namely, Ratoath, Lucan/Esker and Mullingar.

In our survey we collected data on individual networks of social support using a modified form of the procedure adopted by Cochran et al.(1990) in the Comparative Ecology of Human Development Project. We began with a ‘name generator’ question asking respondents to provide a list of people who were important to them in one way or another. We then asked respondents to identify which of the people on their list they could rely on for practical support (childcare, help when respondent or a child was sick, lending items), emotional support (talk to when worried) or for socializing with. Respondents were asked to identify how they were connected to the people on their list, using a list of options provided by the interviewer. They were also asked a set of questions about where the people on their list lived, and how often they visited or phoned them. Once all responses had been secured for the names on the list, respondents were asked if they wanted to add more names in light of those questions.

<sup>3</sup> The average number of ties reported by our respondents was just over five in each study area.

<Figure 4 about here>

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<sup>3</sup> The name generator question was as follows: “I would like you to think about the people who are important to you in one way or another. I mean people you might turn to – or who might turn to you – for general help or advice, or where to find out information. Or they might be people you talk to when you or they need to borrow something, or perhaps when a personal problem is on your mind. Or they might be important to you for some other reason. Can you think of these important people in your life? Could you give me just their first names?” Our procedure differed from Cochran et al. insofar as they used role and context-related prompts to elicit names, working systematically through neighbours, relatives, workmates, schoolmates and so on, whereas we did not prompt beyond the initial question, except to ask respondents if they wanted to add any additional names, once they had worked through all the questions pertaining to the network schedule.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of ties that were kin, reported by couple respondents with young children in the three study areas under consideration.<sup>4</sup> Compared to Lucan and Mullingar, more respondents in Ratoath reported no kinship ties in their networks. International research suggests that people tend to rely more on kinship ties when their children are of pre-school age (Ishii-Kuntz and Seccombe 1989). To what extent do differences in family life stage account for variations across our study areas?

<Table 1 about here>

Table 1 shows that in each case, the proportion of respondents reporting no kin ties is greater amongst those whose youngest child is of school-going age – although the difference is not statistically significant in the case of Lucan. In Ratoath, notably, nearly fifty percent of couple respondents with young, school-aged children named no kin ties; double the proportion in each of the other two cases.<sup>5</sup>

<Figure 5 about here>

Whether or not a network tie is identified as kin does not tell us very much about the quality of the relationship between that individual and the respondent. How far away did they live? How often did the respondent meet them? Bonvalet and Andreyev (2003) defined a family circle as consisting of close relatives whom ego is in contact with at least once a week, and who help or have been helped by ego. Using this definition, Figure 5 shows that Mullingar had the largest (48%) and Ratoath the smallest (13%) proportions of respondents with local family circles. Lucan had the

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<sup>4</sup> By ‘couple respondents with young children’ we mean people who identified themselves either as ‘married’ or ‘living as married,’ and who had one or more children less than 12 years of age living with them.

<sup>5</sup> Odds ratios for no kin ties amongst couples with youngest child primary school compared to those with youngest child pre-school: Ratoath 3.03 (95% C.I. 1.37-6.72); Lucan 2.10 (95% C.I. 0.54-8.12); Mullingar 5.85 (95% C.I. 1.43-23.84).

largest proportion of respondents with family circles nearby (35%). In general, respondents were more likely to rely on kin for emotional help, than for practical assistance – including with childcare. In Mullingar, however, kin represented, on average, a greater proportion (58%) of ties providing practical help to couple respondents with young children, compared to Lucan (49%) or Ratoath (31%).

In summary, our study shows that while some of the differences in the extent to which couples with young children relied on kin for everyday social support may be attributed to whether or not their children had reached school-going age, this does not account for all of the variation. In general, Ratoath respondents were relatively less likely to be integrated to circles of family and kin. Mullingar respondents, on the other hand, were embedded in dense local family circles on whom they relied for practical as well as emotional assistance. Lucan represents an intermediate case, where greater proportions of respondents were integrated to family circles nearby, but not in the locality. As we have shown elsewhere, Ratoath residents were more likely to have moved there after children were born, and to have done so for ‘lifestyle’ reasons that included living in a ‘rural’ environment that was thought to be better for raising children. In doing so they may have moved away from the kinds of kinship ties that provided support to residents of the new Mullingar estates, most of whom had not moved far from their home of origin. Practical considerations, including reasonable housing costs and proximity to jobs and amenities in the metropolitan centre seem to have governed Lucan residents’ decisions about where to live. Their move to the suburbs entailed moving away – but not too far – from the family circles to whom they looked for support.

Our study cannot show that proximity to extended family determined the likelihood that respondents relied on them for help although, on the face of things, it

does seem likely to have played a part. However, while Ratoath couples with young children were less likely to be integrated to extended kinship networks, they were no more likely to be socially isolated than their counterparts in Lucan. About 60% of respondents in each case had networks where more than half of the ties named were local. (This was true of more than 80% of similar respondents in Mullingar).

Moreover, Ratoath respondents were able, on average, to identify a greater number of ties on whom they could rely for practical help than Lucan respondents.<sup>6</sup>

Did Ratoath respondents mobilize alternative personal networks in the community in order to secure the kinds of practical help and support that respondents in the other two study areas drew from within their family circles? We used cluster analysis to specify different configurations of personal networks in our data.<sup>7</sup> Four configurations were identified:

1. Dense, local kin-oriented networks. Substantial numbers of local, frequently visited ties in which kin and friends predominated.
2. Moderate, diffuse kin-oriented networks. Fewer local, frequently visited ties and smaller numbers of ties overall.
3. Dense, local neighbour-oriented networks. Large numbers of local, frequently visited ties in which neighbours predominated.
4. Not local, weak networks. Small networks with few local or frequently visited ties.

<Figure 6 about here>

Figure 6 shows the distribution of these network configurations amongst couple respondents with young children in Ratoath, Lucan and Mullingar. While the two

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<sup>6</sup> Mean number 4.69 compared to 3.85 (p. < .01, Mann-Whitney test).

<sup>7</sup> We used the two-step procedure in SPSS to cluster the following variables: number of local ties, frequently visited ties, kinship, neighbour, friend and other ties. Because they are count data, we treated the variables as categorical (log-likelihood distance measure).

kin-oriented networks accounted for most respondents in each case, Ratoath is distinguished by the relatively high proportion of neighbour-oriented networks (26% of respondents compared to 13% in Lucan and 3% in Mullingar).

### **Family Friendly Communities? Attachment to Place in the Suburbs**

The discussion above has shown that the extent to which couple respondents with children were embedded in circles of family and kin varied according to family life stage, but also across suburban locations. While much of the social commentary on family life in the suburbs rests on the assumption that suburbs are isolating places for parents of young children, a number of scholars have sought to identify the features that characterize “family-friendly” suburbs. Swisher, Sweet and Moen (2004) found that couples with young children rated their communities to be more ‘family friendly’ when the proportion of similar families was high. They called this phenomenon “life stage neighbourhood fit.” While their data did not allow them to specify precisely how life stage neighbourhood fit improved the quality of life for couples with young children, they did find that having a large percentage of friends in the neighbourhood was associated with higher ratings of family-friendliness. In an ethnographic study Bould (2003) found that suburban “caring neighbourhoods,” where neighbours reported that they worked together to care for one another’s children, were characterized by a lower emphasis on family privacy compared to other suburbs, that was in turn linked to a high proportion of homemakers in the community. Both studies suggest that being embedded in local networks of friends and neighbours increases peoples’ satisfaction with the place where they live. However, in an influential study, Logan and Spitze (1994) found that levels of

interaction in the community were predicted by the number of “family neighbours” available to respondents.

We have already seen that Ratoath was characterized by considerable “life-stage community fit” for young families, and also by a relatively high proportion of homemakers. Respondents here also identified proportionally fewer kinship ties, especially when their children were of primary school age, and proportionally more of them had neighbour-oriented personal networks. Each of these characteristics would lead us to expect Ratoath respondents to feel more attached to the place where they live, and we found that indeed that was the case.<sup>8</sup> Nearly 80% of Ratoath couple respondents with young children reported themselves to be attached, or very attached, compared to 55% in Lucan and 68% in Mullingar. However, when we controlled for family life-stage, we found that this difference occurred only amongst families with preschool children. Just over half (55%) of respondents in this category said they felt ‘neutral’ towards, or ‘detached’ from Lucan, compared to 23% in Ratoath and 36% in Mullingar. While their numbers were small, most Lucan couples with primary-school aged children (17 of 20) said they were attached to the place where they lived. Turning to the question of “family neighbours,” we found that, in Mullingar, respondents with local family circles were more likely to feel attached.<sup>9</sup> We did not find a similar relationship in either of the other two cases under consideration. However, in Lucan, amongst those without a family circle in the locality, respondents with preschool children were less likely to feel attached.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, in our case studies, attachment to place amongst young families seems to increase as children reach school-going age. In our focus-group interviews

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that we did not find any individual level relationship between family work-strategy and attachment.

<sup>9</sup> Eighty-three percent of respondents with local family circles, compared to 53% of respondents without (O.R. 4.16, 95% C.I. 1.59-10.87).

<sup>10</sup> Forty-four percent (20 of 46) compared to 88% (14 of 16). Odds ratio 0.33 (95% C.I. .02-.54).



respondents in Ratoath and Lucan often commented on the importance of children for meeting neighbours:

“It takes the kids to start getting to know people” (Lucan Homestart Group)

“Kids make you settle in more” (Ratoath Mother and Toddler Group).

In Mullingar, by contrast, the ready availability of dense networks of family and friends seems to have made many young families relatively uninterested in developing ties with neighbours:

“All my mother’s family are around, a bit too close for comfort!”

“Friends are always there and you can easily talk to them.”

(Mullingar Women’s Community Project)

Our analysis of the survey data suggested that some of the differences between Ratoath and Lucan in terms of interaction with neighbours and attachment to place were related to differences in the significance of family circles in their daily lives. The families in Lucan tended to be younger and therefore more likely to seek help from family members – and they were somewhat more likely to have such family circles either in the locality or nearby. However, the qualitative data suggest additional reasons why Ratoath families feel more attached to place. Because Ratoath was a ‘new’ suburb that developed at an extraordinary pace around what was once a small rural village, respondents shared a sense of being “pioneers.” Our notes from a conversation with one woman in the Mother and Toddler group provide a rich account of how she mobilized both extended kin and neighbours in her personal network:

R’s family still lived in Dublin but she found that she could rely on the people of the neighbourhood for help and support. This she put down partly to the fact that because Ratoath is a developing place people are nice to each other and generally welcoming...R actively made connections within the community when she first came to Ratoath. Her first stop was the Community Centre. She also got some direction as to how to make links in the area through a Church leaflet. The various ways she found the neighbours especially helpful was in the way they would offer to mind the children or collect them from school. She felt

the need to 'get established' in Ratoath from early on although she sees her extended family often...Her mother of 80 years comes to visit regularly and is collected when this occurs. Her sister still baby-sits for her (although she does not reside in Ratoath herself). R explained how she did not feel isolated from her extended family at all. Nor did she feel restricted where she lived because she did 'not feel bad about asking' (for help) when she needed it. (Ratoath Mother and Toddler Group)

In contrast to Ratoath, Lucan was already a well-developed suburban area that had continued to grow. An older informant described how a similar pioneer spirit had characterized community life when she first moved there, but things had changed:

I'm here thirty years and when we came here first, it was when the babies came along and through the children we got to know one another. Our husbands went out to work so the car was gone and there was no second car, so we were very dependant on each other. If you had a hospital appointment for your child or yourself, you would have to get your neighbour to take your other child or whatever. So like now there's the next generation and they're all working, so there isn't that, they're all working now and they're so busy getting their children and their homes organized for the next morning that they're too busy and you can't socialize in the same way as before. (Lucan University of the Third Age)

This theme was echoed by young mothers in the mother and toddler group:

"Ten years in the estate. Never had a get together. Everybody seems to work. Neighbours, they would do anything for you, but on an emergency basis."

"People's time is much more structured. It does not necessarily involve the community."

"It's more family than community." (Lucan Homestart)

It should be noted that women participating in the mother and toddler group were much more likely to be homemakers, and may thus have felt their difference from their neighbours more keenly than working mothers. Nonetheless, the comments suggest some of the ways in which family life-stage homogeneity, combined with high proportions of homemakers in the community, facilitate neighbourhood integration for families with young children. By contrast, having family circles in the

locality or nearby may inhibit the development of neighbourly – though not necessarily local – relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The idea that suburban families are socially isolated – either from extended family or the local community – is a recurrent theme in both public discourse and some sociological scholarship. Contrariwise, some sociologists have emphasized the extent to which parents of young children mobilize complex “personal communities” in order to meet the challenges posed by contemporary changes in family life. Our research suggests that, in new Irish suburbs, many families continue to have access to family circles in the locality or nearby. They rely more on kin for everyday social support when their children are very young, but the extent to which they increase their reliance on neighbours as children reach primary school age varies across different types of suburbs. The availability of dense local kinship networks in the adjacent, established town, appear to have inhibited the development of more neighbourly relations in the new estates around Mullingar. People feel attached to the place where they live because of the proximity of family and friends. In Ratoath, on the other hand, the absence of local family circles in a totally new suburban development pushed residents to develop more ties with their neighbours and to develop a strong sense of attachment to place. This process was facilitated by a high degree of life-stage community fit, and by the presence of a relatively large proportion of homemakers. In the established but expanding suburb of Lucan/Esker, the availability of family circles nearby meant that parents with young children did not have to establish ties with neighbours to the same extent as in Ratoath. But the existence of greater household diversity, together with higher proportions of dual-earner families,

meant that they were less likely to establish more local connections as their children reached school-going age. While they were not socially isolated, Lucan families were less well-integrated to the local community, either through family or other neighbours, and in consequence felt less attached to the place where they lived.

## **Endnote**

1. This paper was presented at the CRFR International Conference, Edinburgh, 27-29 June 2007.

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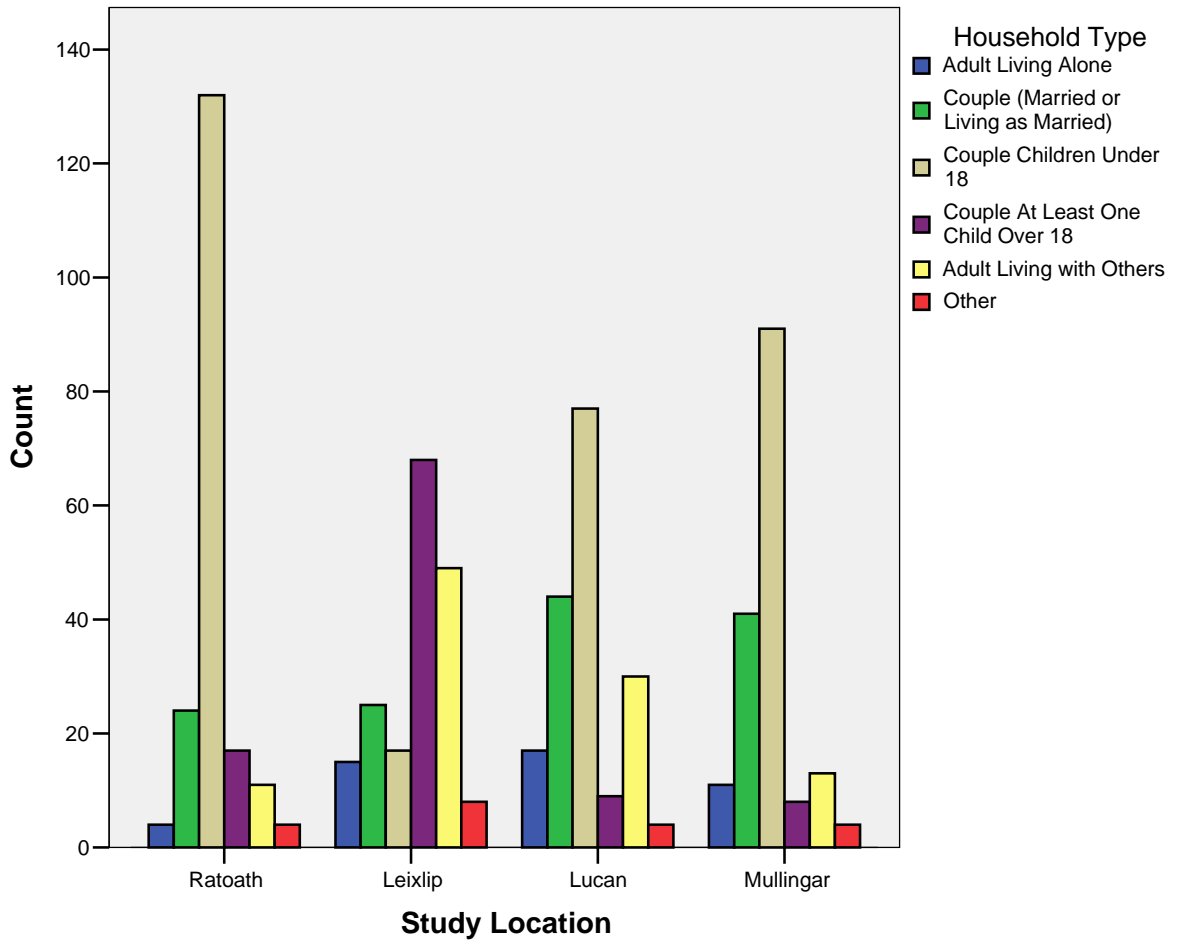
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Table 1. Percent Kinship Ties Reported by Couples with Young Children  
By Age of Youngest Child

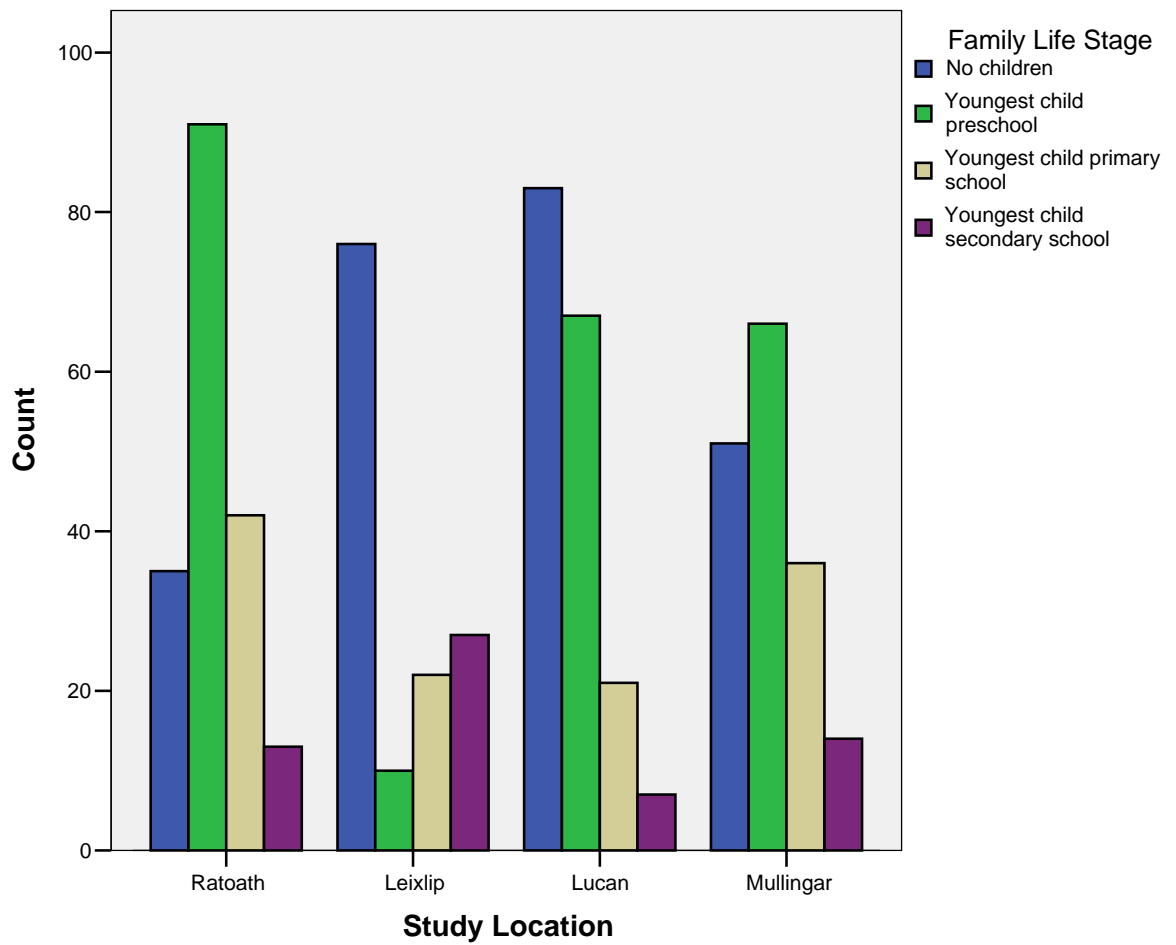
Study Location	N	Percent Ties Kin		
		None	< 50%	>=50%
<b>RATOATH</b>				
- Preschool	87	23.0	42.5	34.5
- Primary school	40	47.5	22.5	30.0
<b>LUCAN</b>				
- Preschool	62	11.3	33.9	54.8
- Primary school	19	21.1	36.8	42.1
<b>MULLINGAR</b>				
- Preschool	60	5.0	35.0	60.0
- Primary school	34	23.5	20.6	55.9

**Figure 1. Household Types By Study Location**



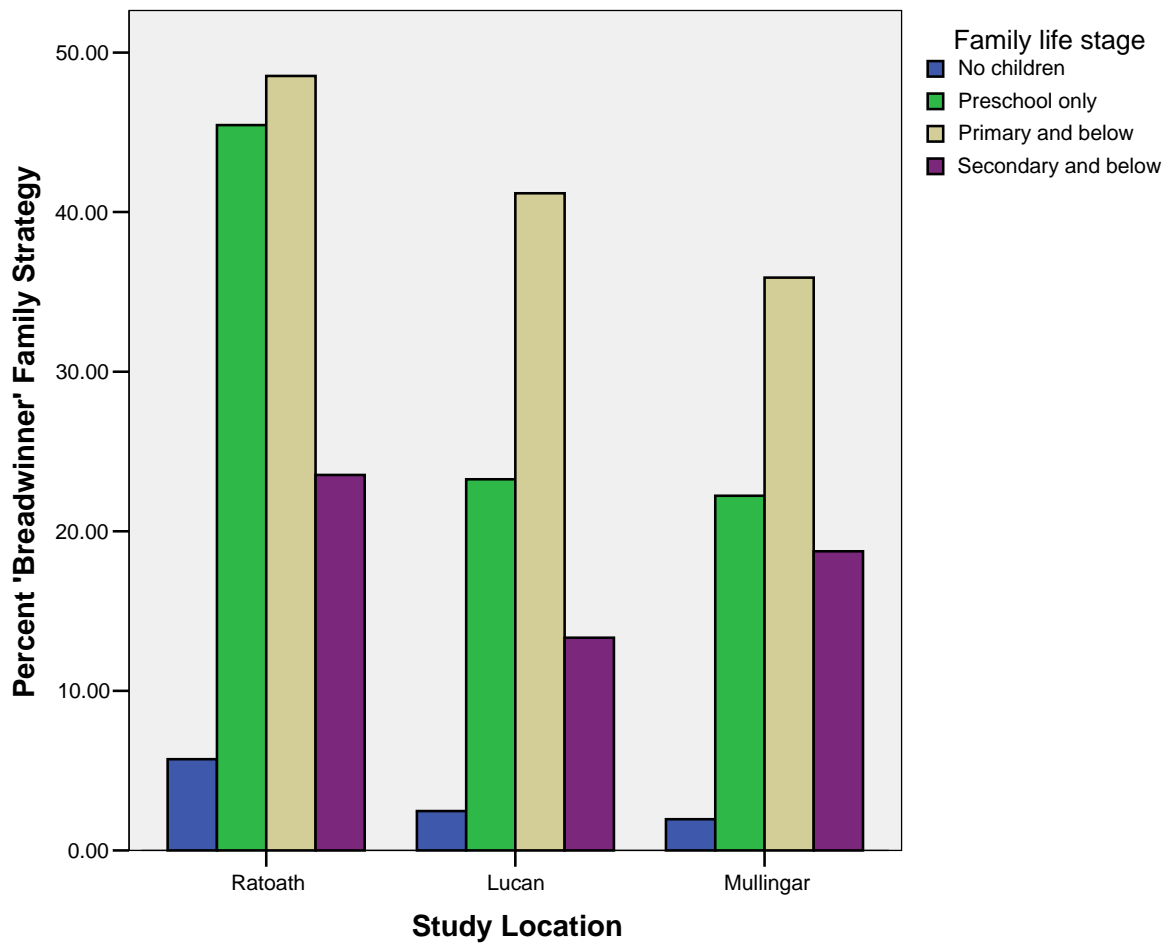
Source: New Urban Living Datfile

**Figure 2. Family Life Stage By Study Location. Respondents Aged 55 Years or Less**



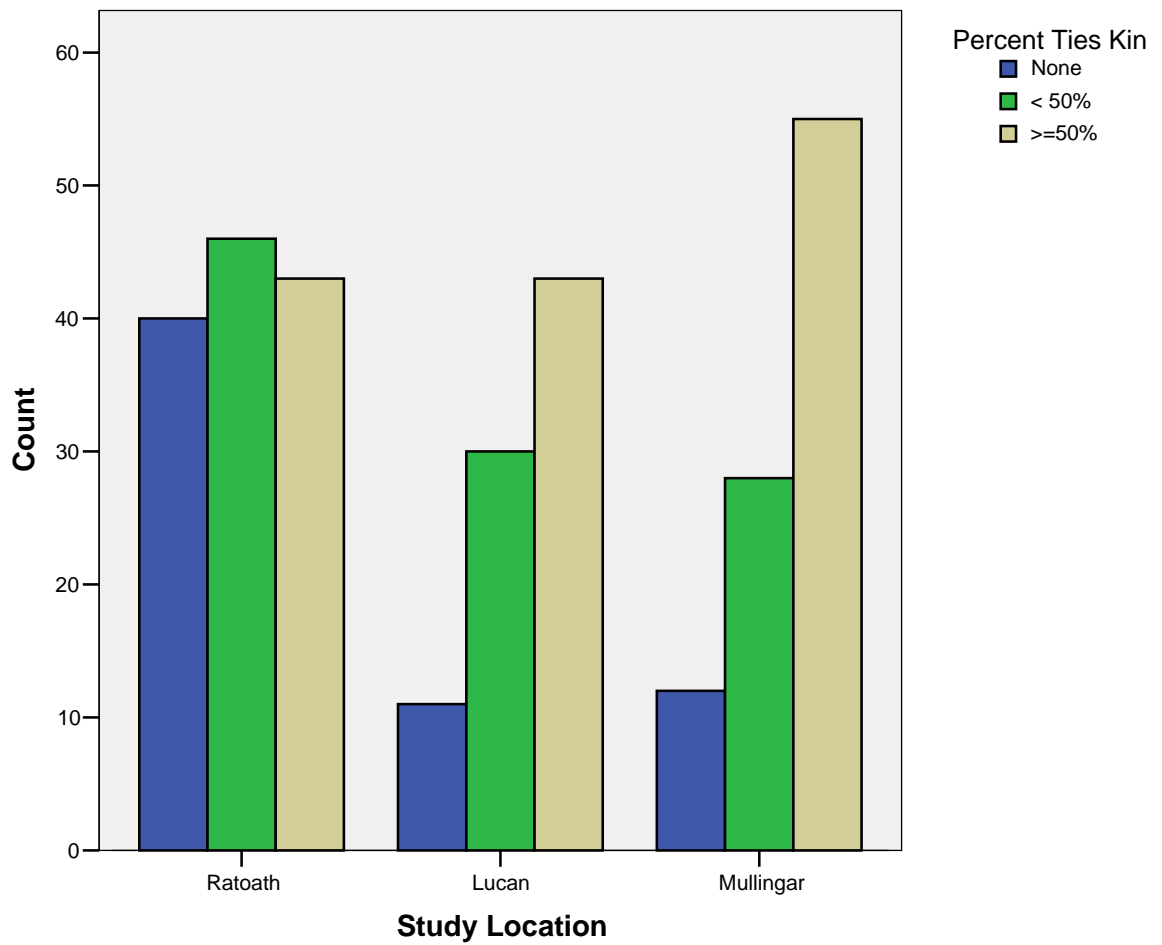
Source: New Urban Living Datafile

**Figure 3. Percent Respondents With 'Breadwinner' Family Strategy By Family Life Stage (Respondents Aged 55 Years Or Less)**



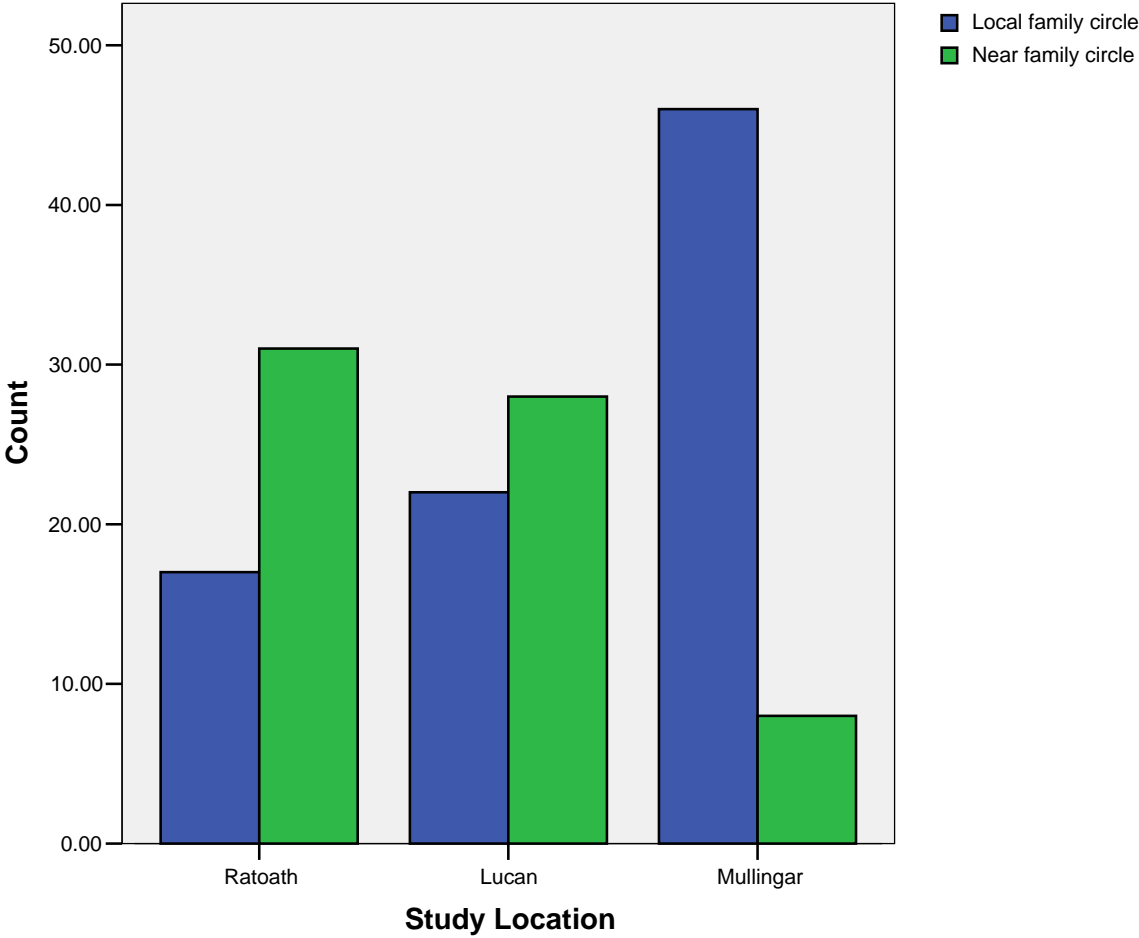
Source: New Urban Living Datafile

**Figure 4. Couple Respondents With Young Children By Percent Network Ties Kin**



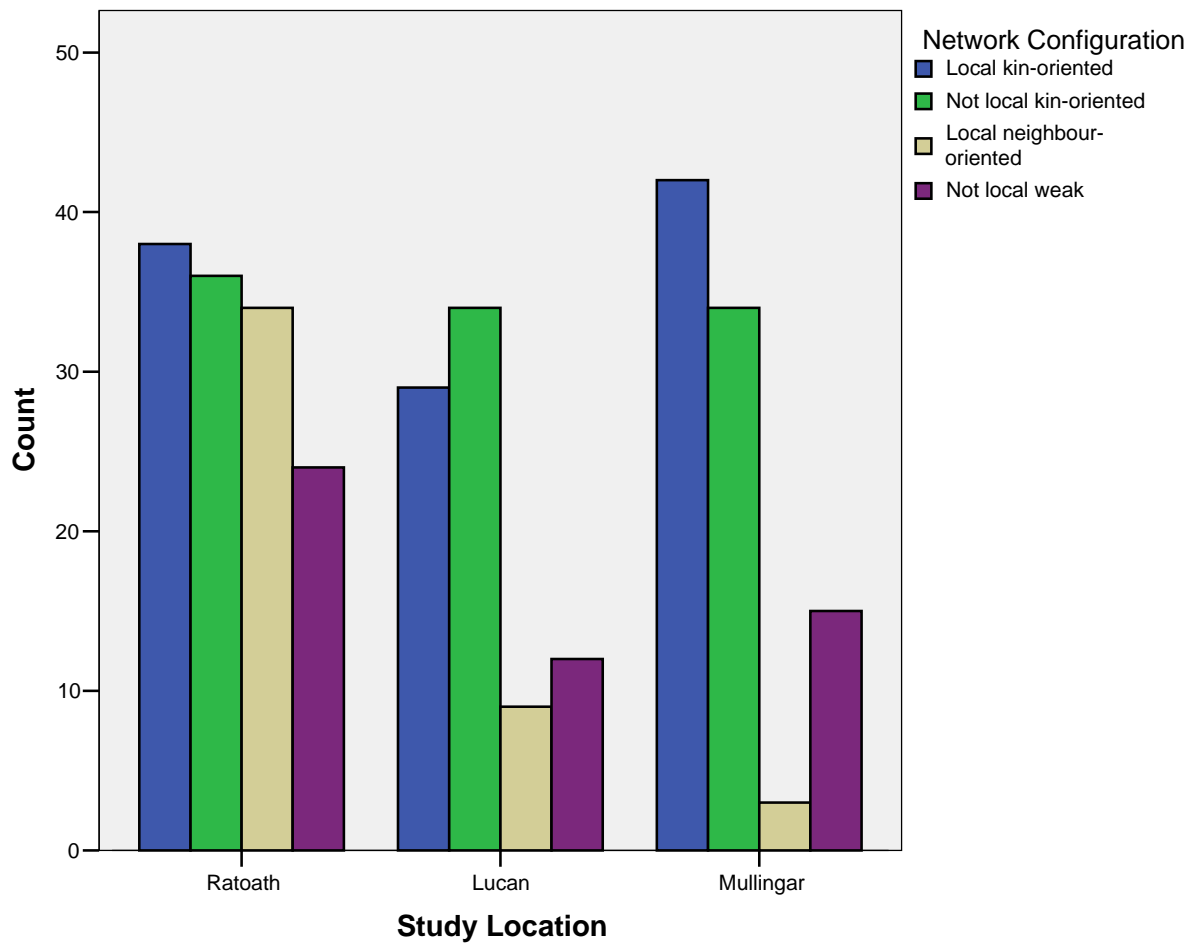
Source: New Urban Living Datafile

**Figure 5. Couple Respondents With Young Children By Local and Near Family Circles**



Source: New Urban Living Datafile

**Figure 6. Couple Respondents With Young Children By Network Configuration**



Source: New Urban Living Datafile