Community Studies

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1. The rationale and research design of community studies

- **Community studies are well-known**
- **Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* (1929) is the classic study.**

- **The Lynds provided an account of a place and its people living their everyday lives.**
- **They focussed on six aspects of community relationships: work, home, education, leisure, religion and local politics.**

- **Community studies vary in scale (they do not need to take several years to complete), and breadth (some concentrate on one issue).**

- **Community studies show that placing social and economic phenomena in context leads to a better understanding.**

- **Community studies have shown, for example, what life is like in occupational communities dominated by one industry, such as mining villages.**

- **Community studies have also shown the consequences of changes in work patterns, including where these bring population in- or out-migration.**

- **Community studies have open research designs, not a rigid formula.**
- **Researchers spend time observing and engaging with members of a community.**

- **The research focus may change.**

- **Researchers follow up issues that are interesting, intriguing or puzzling.**

- **Flexibility is useful if researchers hit 'dead ends'.**

- **Some classic studies famously changed their focus.**
- **Norbert Elias and John Scotson's *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965) shifted focus from youth crime to community divisions.**

- **Michael Young and Peter Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) changed from studying the welfare state to the patterns of informal social support, discovered unexpectedly.**

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Family and Kinship in East London

Michael Young
Peter Willmott
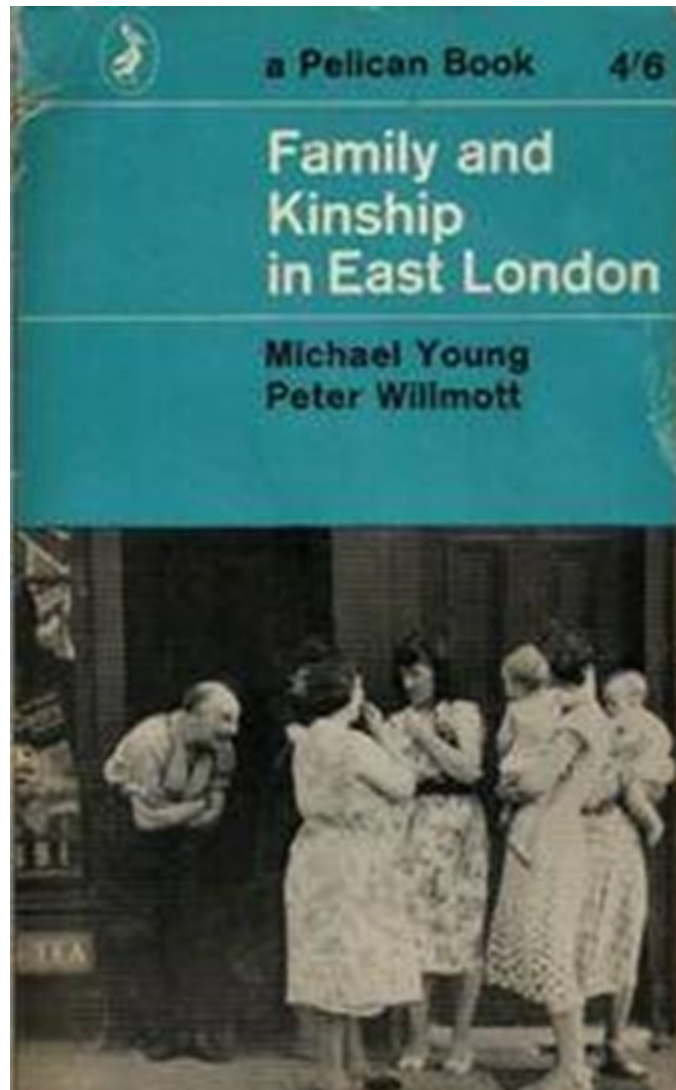
- **Switch of focus gave the study great appeal.**
- **500,000+ copies sold, and the most cited British community study.**

- **Community studies may take shape through serendipity (not luck).**

- **Serendipity is 'the discovery through chance by a prepared mind of new findings that were not looked for' (Robert Merton).**

- **Many aspects of community are hidden, to outsiders and also sometimes to community insiders.**

- **Outsider researchers will be asked about the study rationale.**

- **Community members may not see the point of their lives being studied.**

- **Or they may have concerns about secrets being revealed.**

- **There may also be concerns about communities being misrepresented.**

- **Communities may feel let down or exploited by researchers.**

- **Unrealistic expectations of change can lead to disappointment.**

- **Avoiding over-promising is an important ethical consideration.**
- **The possibility of serendipitous findings also needs to be mentioned.**

- **Access to communities is generally easier for insiders than outsiders.**

- **But it is just as important for 'insider' researchers to consider the purpose of their study.**

- **Also important are consent, anonymity and confidentiality.**
- **Pseudonyms are no guarantee that community members stay unidentifiable.**

- **Communities that are studied because they are typical of a broader phenomenon can more easily be disguised.**

- **Communities chosen by researchers because they are atypical are harder to disguise, and not all researchers try to do this.**

- **Researchers need to decide how ambitious their study should be.**
- **The most ambitious studies cover a wide range of community relationships.**
- **These can take a long time to complete.**

- **Ambitious projects can be achieved more quickly by research teams.**
- **Teams also help in divided communities.**

- **Operationalising the concept of 'community' is a key challenge.**
- **This theoretical issue has a crucial bearing on the research methods used in the study.**

- **For example, community may be understood as a social network based phenomenon.**
- **For some other understandings, analysing official statistics may be considered more appropriate.**
- **Research designs often employ mixed methods.**