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.
• 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.