

The methods used in community studies



- **Community studies are associated with various research methods, often in some combination.**
- **Most commonly, they are associated with ethnographic research methods.**

- **Community studies appeal because they provide vivid descriptions of community members' lives.**
- **Fieldwork of a year is often mentioned. Keeping a fieldwork notebook is a key skill.**

- **Observation is frequently combined with participation ('participant observation').**
- **Participation in community activities often leads to deeper understanding.**

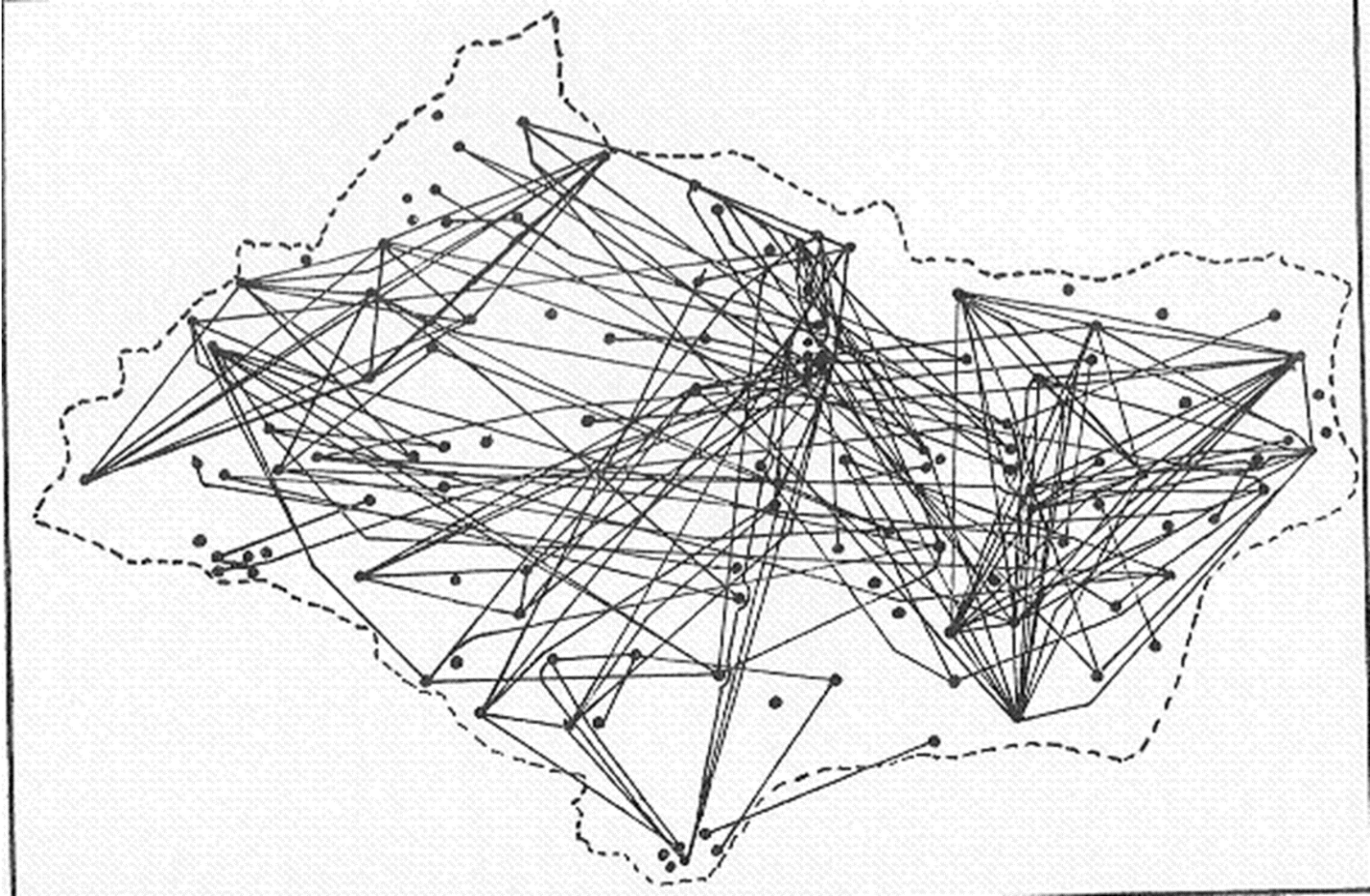
- **Participation also helps to gain access and build trust.**
- **Exit from the field can be difficult; an exit strategy needs to be planned.**

- **Ethnographic fieldwork frequently involves interviews of various types.**

- **Walking interviews have grown in popularity.**

- **Visual methods are employed in their own right as a way of capturing ‘community’.**

- **Photographs are not the only visual material. Maps are another.**
- **Maps can take several forms, e.g. network maps.**



- **This social network map shows dense kinship connections between dots (households) in an upland parish in Wales studied by Alwyn Rees (1950).**

- **The connections shown are only those within the administrative area.**
- **Visual material is selective in the same way that other types of data are.**

- **Partial coverage can be a serious problem with the use of documentary materials, especially historical documents.**

- **Nevertheless, documents provide an important safeguard against the problem of past community relationships being romanticised.**

- **Concern over the unreliability of subjective impressions is one reason why community researchers may use surveys.**

- **Even so, there are systematic patterns of uneven involvement in survey research in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, and other lines of social division.**

- **Official statistics are another quantitative method.**
- **Swansea census data showed that patterns of household formation had changed dramatically.**

- **Recently-married people typically used to live with one or other set of parents, but this has virtually disappeared (Nickie Charles *et al. Families in Transition, 2008*).**

- **The comparative method can be useful, studying the same community at two points in times or studying two or more communities.**

- **This has particular appeal in research designed to address a policy issue.**
- **Sometimes opportunities arise when policy initiatives take the form of natural experiments.**

- **Many research methods are available, including ethnographic observation, interviews, visual methods, social network analysis, documentary analysis, surveys, official statistics, comparative methods, and several more.**

- **With so many methods available, community studies typically involve a mixed methods approach (combining quantitative and qualitative elements), or at least a multi-method approach.**

- **Methodological pluralists argue that no one key opens every lock, and so a flexible combination of methods has advantages.**

- **But there is no certainty that the results of different methods will combine smoothly.**
- **People's accounts of community relationships and official statistics may be in tension.**

- **Not all approaches to research into community relationships sign up to methodological pluralism.**
- **For action researchers, their value stance and commitment to change agendas makes their approach distinct.**

- **Action researchers use participatory methods which tend to favour a sub-set of the of methods available.**

- **There will also be personal preferences involved in the choice of methods.**
- **Rarely are individuals skilled practitioners of the full range of methods available.**

- **Teams reduce this problem, but create others.**
- **And choices will be influenced by what previous researchers did, if links are made to their work in order to build a cumulative body of knowledge.**