

Building a cumulative body of knowledge



- **Community studies have evolved as more sophisticated methods have emerged, as well as in response to criticisms.**
- **One example is the development of on-line research methods to study on-line communities.**

- **However, change is evolutionary.**
- **Social network analysis, visual methods and interviewing are also among long-used methods that have become more sophisticated.**

- **A key criticism of community studies was that they did not generate a cumulative body of knowledge.**
- **Early attempts to synthesise findings from different studies fell down because theoretical expectations were not confirmed.**

- **Findings showed that geographical location does not determine social behaviour.**
- **The rural-urban continuum had to be abandoned because it could not deal with phenomena such as ‘urban villagers’.**

- **The view that researchers bring their own values to the field and find what they are looking for casts doubt on research being straightforwardly cumulative.**

- **Subsequently, researchers have been more mindful of how choice of theory and methods affect findings, and of the need for transparency.**

- **Re-studies have become an important way in which community studies contribute to knowledge and understanding of social change.**

- **Robert and Helen Lynd were pioneers of this approach, following *Middletown* (1929) with *Middletown in Transition* (1937).**

- **Another re-study is Geoff Dench and his colleagues' *The New East End* (2006), revisiting East London half a century on.**
- **Patterns of migration and economic change had transformed the area.**

- **This re-study included one of the original researchers, Michael Young, but re-studies can be conducted by wholly new individuals or teams.**

- **Re-studies are generally quicker to conduct than completely new studies.**
- **The original study will have set a research agenda that can be revisited.**

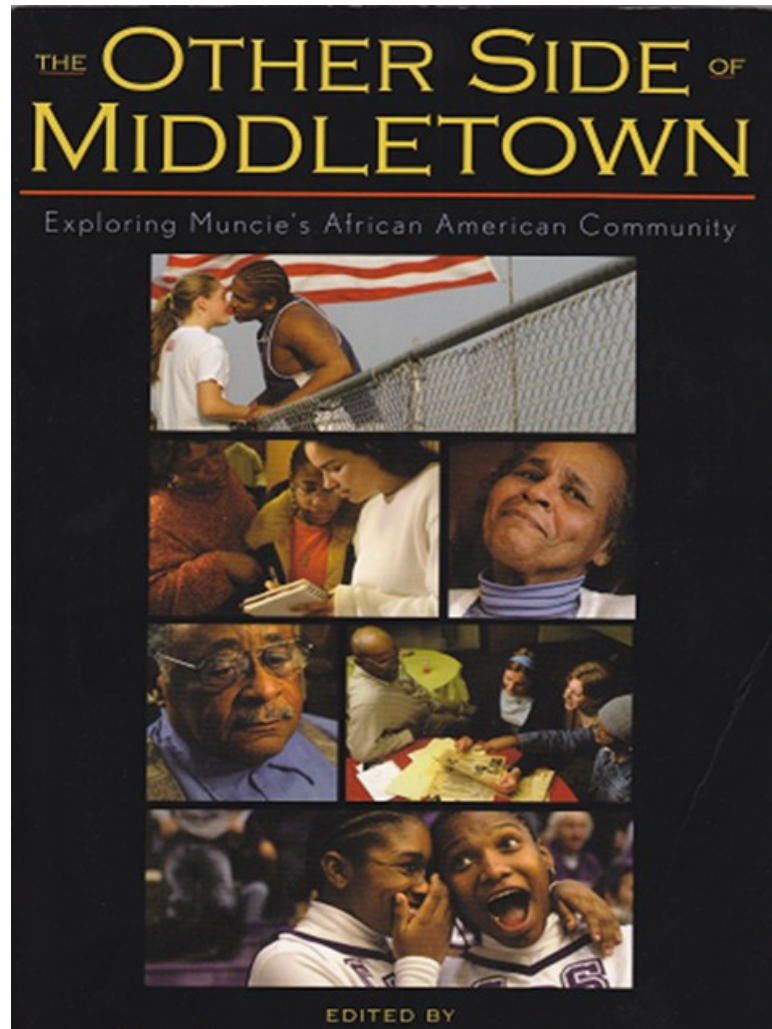
- **The same point applies to the choice of research methods used.**
- **Community members may be familiar with the research process, so making the negotiation of access quicker.**

- **Openness about the research process by the original research team and methodical archiving of materials bring invaluable benefits for any re-studies.**

- **How long is allowed to pass before a re-study is contemplated varies, but somewhere around a generation is typical.**

- ***Middletown*** continues to be studied, recently as an interdisciplinary project.
- ***The Other Side of Middletown*** (Eric Lassiter *et al.* 2004).

- **The project explored the lives of Muncie’s African-American community, which previous research had generally overlooked.**
- **Three quarters of a century of research had still left a ‘missing piece of the puzzle’.**



- **Students from several disciplines.**
- **Fieldwork completed in 4 months in 2003, 300-page book published in 2004.**

- **Other social groups overlooked in previous research include women in male-dominated environments, children, and older people.**

- **Researchers may naturally gravitate towards ‘nice’ people, and as a result produce accounts that are too good to be true.**

- **Concern not to offend community sensitivities may also pull research reports towards an overly-positive account.**

- **Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* dealt with the sensitive subject of mental illness and she was unwelcome when returning to Ireland two decades later.**
- **The book's 2001 second edition reflects thoughtfully on this.**

- **Critical social science does not have to be antagonistic in its treatment of taboo subjects.**
- ***The Other Side of Middletown* broached the issue of racism successfully.**

- **Ray Pahl researched the hidden economy of illegal working.**
- **Karen O'Reilly (2000) was able to get beyond the implausibly positive gloss put on life in the British expat community in Spain, and later to return.**

- **These three studies are used as exemplars of community study research in my 2018 book *What Are Community Studies?***
- **They are all in their different ways both rigorous and imaginative.**

- **They have contrasting research designs, scales, and methodological approaches.**
- **But they all demonstrate the potential of community studies to add to the stock of useful and interesting social scientific knowledge.**