

## The rationale and research design of community studies

Hello, my name is Graham Crow and I am going to be talk about community studies.

In this first presentation I am going to be talking about the rationale and research design of community studies.

Community studies are well-known in social science and also have a wide lay readership. The classic point of reference is Robert and Helen Lynd's study *Middletown* (1929). This presented an account of a place and its people living their everyday lives. It focussed on six aspects of community relationships and how these interconnected. The six aspects were: work, home, education, leisure, religion and local politics.

The Lynd's study provided a model for later researchers to build upon. Studies vary considerably in terms of the scale of the research that people have undertaken (they do not need to take several years to complete), and their breadth (some concentrate on one issue). But whatever form it may take, the purpose of a community study is to show that placing social and economic phenomena in context leads to a better understanding. Context matters. For example, work and the consequences of how it is organised vary greatly between contexts. Community studies have shown what life is like in occupational communities dominated by one industry, such as mining villages.

Community studies have also been undertaken to show the consequences of changes in work patterns, including where these bring population in- or out-migration and related housing change, or changes in living standards. Community studies have open research designs, not a rigid formula. Researchers spend time observing and engaging with members of a community in order to gain a better sense than outsiders have of how community relationships function. In the course of the research, the focus may well change, as researchers follow up issues that are particularly interesting, intriguing or puzzling. This flexibility is also useful if researchers hit 'dead ends'.

Examples of studies that have changed their focus as they proceeded include some classics. Norbert Elias and John Scotson's *The Established and the Outsiders* shifted focus from youth crime to community divisions. Michael Young and Peter Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* started off as a study of the welfare state but then explored the patterns of informal social support discovered unexpectedly. This switch of focus gave the study great appeal. More than half a million copies of the book were sold, and it became the most cited British community study.

There are many other examples of community studies taking shape through serendipity (which is not the same thing as luck). Robert Merton said serendipity is 'the discovery through chance by a prepared mind of new findings that were not looked for'. This preparedness to pick up on and pursue unexpected aspects of community is significant because so much is hidden, certainly to outsiders, but also sometimes to community insiders (for example, patterns of inequality in which people are immersed). Researchers who are outsiders to the communities that they are studying will be asked about their rationale for doing the study. Community members may not see the point of their lives being studied, perhaps because they think them unremarkable. Or they may have concerns about secrets being revealed – many researchers have reported being treated initially as if they were spies or informants. There may also be concerns about communities being misrepresented. The people of Banbury were upset at being portrayed as snobbish, for example.

There are further examples of communities feeling let down or exploited by researchers. These include cases of unrealistic expectations of change leading to disappointment. Being careful to avoid over-promising of benefits that may follow, certainly within the lifetime of the project, is an important ethical consideration. The description of the research also needs to mention the possibility of serendipitous discovery as the project proceeds.

Access to communities is generally easier for insiders than outsiders. Many studies have been undertaken by researchers who have some prior connections. But it is just as important for ‘insider’ researchers to consider the purpose of their study. Also important is how they gain consent for it from community members, and how they handle issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Giving a pseudonym to a research location is no guarantee that community members stay unidentifiable. Communities that are studied because they are treated as a typical case of a broader phenomenon can more easily be disguised by using pseudonyms (for example the Lynds’ Middletown which was treated as typical of middle America). But some communities are chosen by researchers because they are atypical, extreme cases (for example, Ray Pahl’s study of the Isle of Sheppey). These cases 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 have followed the Lynds in covering a wide range of aspects of community relationships, but these can take up to a decade to complete, sometimes even longer. Ambitious projects can be achieved in a shorter time by research teams, compared to lone researchers. Teams also help in communities that have divisions that solo researchers cannot easily bridge. Researchers also need to decide how best to operationalise the concept of ‘community’, which has a long history of being disputed. This theoretical issue has a crucial bearing on the research methods used in the study.

For example, if community is understood as a social network based phenomenon, then social network analysis will be used. If it is understood in terms of neighbourhood, analysing official statistics may be considered more appropriate. Research designs often employ mixed methods, and that is the subject of the next presentation.