

The methods used in community studies

In this section I am going to be talking about 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. An important part of the appeal of community studies is their capacity to provide vivid descriptions of community members' lives. This requires a dedicated period of observation. Fieldwork of a year is often mentioned. Keeping a fieldwork notebook is a key skill. Observation is frequently combined with participation (known as 'participant observation'). It can be argued that participation in community activities leads to deeper understanding by the researcher than simple observation. Participation can also have the advantage of opening doors within a community for the researcher to gain access and build trust. Exit from the field can be difficult; an exit strategy, leaving people who may have become friends, needs to be considered in advance.

Ethnographic fieldwork frequently involves interviews of various types. These may be unstructured and informal, or more formal (for example, if conducted with community leaders). Walking interviews have grown in popularity, using interaction with the physical environment to prompt people to express their thoughts about community.

Visual methods are employed in their own right as a way of capturing 'community'. Photographs have long been used to give a sense of people and place, and also collective identity (for example, through visual materials that capture community rituals). Photographs are not the only visual material. Among other things, maps can be revealing of community patterns. Maps can take several forms, for example network maps. This is a famous example of a network map. This social network map shows dense kinship connections between dots (households) in an upland parish in Wales studied by Alwyn Rees in 1950. Closer inspection reveals that it also shows a minority of households unconnected by kinship, at least within the area mapped.

The connections shown are only those within the administrative area, the parish boundary. 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 Partial coverage can be a serious problem with the use of documentary materials, especially historical documents. The survival of photographs, records of meetings of community organizations, letters, and so on, is patchy. Nevertheless, documents provide an important safeguard against the selectivity of memories, and the problem of past community relationships being romanticised, with the less attractive aspects screened out.

Concern over the unreliability of subjective impressions is one reason why community researchers may use surveys. Surveys give greater confidence that representative samples of communities have been given the opportunity to contribute. 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 that can be very revealing. A study of Swansea used census data to show that patterns of household formation had changed dramatically within the space of a few decades. In the mid-20th century it had been statistically normal there for recently-married people to live with one or other set of parents, but by the 21st century this had virtually disappeared. 46. The comparative method can be useful, studying the same community at two points in time or studying two or more communities that have contrasting characteristics. This has particular appeal in research designed to address a policy issue, such as housing and redevelopment, crime, or informal social support. Sometimes opportunities present themselves when policy initiatives take the form of natural experiments, such as neighbourhood renewal.

Many research methods are available, including ethnographic observation (possibly participant observation), interviews, visual methods, social network analysis, documentary analysis, surveys, official statistics, comparative methods, and several more. With so many methods available, it is unsurprising that 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 in one coherent interpretation of the data. People's accounts of community relationships as like 'one big happy family' may be at odds with data about inequality and conflict, for example. And not all approaches to research into community relationships sign up to methodological pluralism. Action researchers say that their value stance and commitment to change agendas makes their approach distinct from conventional research. Their use of participatory methods in which community members are actively involved throughout the research process gravitates towards a sub-set of the methods available.

There will also be personal preferences involved in the choice of methods. Some people will be comfortable as a participant observer, or taking photographs, while others will prefer different methods. Rarely are individuals skilled practitioners of the full range of methods available.

Teams reduce this problem, but create others. There can be friction in teams, for example. 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.