

Building a cumulative body of knowledge.

In this section I am going to be talking about building a cumulative body of knowledge.

Community studies have evolved due to the development of more sophisticated methods, as well as in response to criticisms. The development of on-line research methods to study on-line communities is an example of changing methods.

However, change is evolutionary. For example, Robert Kozinets's *Netnography* has its roots in pre-digital ethnography. Social network analysis, visual methods and interviewing are also among long-used methods that have become more sophisticated. One of the key criticisms of community studies was that they did not always build on previous work to make a cumulative body of knowledge. Early attempts to synthesise findings from different studies fell down because the evidence did not fit the prevailing theory. Findings showed that geographical location does not determine social behaviour, and empirical findings meant that the rural-urban continuum had to be abandoned. 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. Oscar Lewis revisited the Mexican community of Tepotzlán previously studied by Robert Redfield and challenged his findings which had downplayed division and conflict. Subsequently, researchers have been more mindful of how choice of theory and methods affect findings, and of the need for transparency in their accounts of how research was conducted.

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* with *Middletown in Transition*. Amongst other things, this was able to explore how the community had changed as a result of the Great Depression following the 1929 Wall Street Crash. Another re-study is Geoff Dench and his colleagues' *The New East End* which revisited the location of Family and Kinship in East London half a century later. In the interim, 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, for several reasons. The original study will have set a research agenda that can be revisited, either in full or in part. The same point applies to the choice of research methods used (though innovation is possible). Community members may be familiar with the research process, so making the negotiation of access quicker (unless previous researchers have made people wary of involvement in research).

Openness about the research process in publications by the original research team and methodical archiving of materials bring invaluable benefits for any re-studies, though there are limits to what gets archived. There is variation over how long is allowed to pass before a re-study is contemplated, but somewhere around a generation is typical. A decade is quite short, and a half century quite long; both have been known.

Middletown continues to be studied, recently as an interdisciplinary research project involving 14 students, together with lecturers and community activists. This was published as *The Other Side of Middletown*. The project explored the lives of Muncie's African-American community, which previous research from the Lynds onwards had generally overlooked. Studies of the city spanning three quarters of a century had still left a 'missing piece of the puzzle'. Students from several disciplines were involved in the project. The fieldwork was completed in 4 months in 2003, and a 300-page book published in the following year.

Other examples of returning to studies to collect data from social groups overlooked in previous research include paying attention not only to minority ethnic groups, but also to women in male-dominated environments, to children, and to older people. The argument has also been made that researchers naturally gravitate towards 'nice' people, and as a result produce accounts that are too good to be true because less generous-spirited people don't contribute.

Research reports may also be pulled towards an overly-positive account by a desire not to offend community sensitivities, with taboo subjects avoided. Having published *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* in 1979, Nancy Scheper-Hughes did not envisage being unwelcome when returning to Ireland two decades later, but her research dealt with the sensitive subject of mental illness. The book's 2001 second edition reflects thoughtfully on this issue.

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 and survived to tell the tale. Karen O'Reilly was able to get beyond the implausibly positive gloss put on life in the British expat community in Spain to discuss its downsides with people there, and later to return.

These three studies are used as exemplars of community study research in my 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.