"Community - arianism"

Chapter Four: Understanding neighbourhood communities

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For most agencies and professionals engaged in community development or community practice a geographical rather than a sociological approach to community analysis is required. For however sophisticated one's analysis of the notion of community day to day work is likely to take place within geographical boundaries. Some urban researchers and practitioners therefore prefer to use only the term neighbourhood at least in respect of the topics dealt with in this chapter. (Menahem and Spiro 1989). We shall first look briefly at the tradition of urban and neighbourhood studies as found in the sociological, geographical and planning literature, with a particular emphasis on the work and influence of the Chicago school. We will move on from there to look at the battery of techniques available to practitioners wishing to carry out analysis of a particular local community; the process known as Community profiling, or neighbourhood appraisal. Our aim is to show that a statistical description of a locality combined with a local mapping exercise can help immensely in understanding neighbourhood life and in planning community work or local government policy, and to suggest some ways in which such research can be carried out.

The concerns of geographers and urban planners have naturally enough been primarily spatial and locational. It is tempting to view many settlements, such as an isolated village, or an urban neighbourhood bounded on all sides by waterways and railways as "natural communities." (Suttles 1972, Dennis 1968). However our earlier discussion about the work of Cohen (1985) makes clear, communities are socially constructed and their meanings should never be taken for granted in this way. Purely at a geographical level one needs to be aware that territories designated as communities are often far from "natural". Administrative areas such as an electoral ward or a metropolitan borough have been defined sometimes in arbitrary ways for a wide range of bureaucratic and political reasons.

One fundamental concern in geography and planning has been to explain why particular pieces of land come to be used for particular purposes, for agriculture and industry, for financial centres and corporate headquarters buildings, for desirable residential areas, or for slum housing and ethnic ghettos. A second concern has been about relationships between places, the hierarchies of power and influence that exist between different types of settlements, from the metropolitan megalopolis to the remote village. Out of this comes an interest in transportation, patterns of mobility and the diffusion of ideas, technologies and cultural forms across space, a concern about communication between communities, now speeded up so much by the development of information technology (Castells 1989). Planners in particular have wanted to know how land use patterns and the design of the built environment affects patterns of social life, for example is it the case that high rise apartment blocks tend to produce lower levels of sociability than terraced streets or twenty houses nestled around a village green. For an overview of the state of the art in geographical approaches to community life the reader is referred to Herbert & Davies (1993).

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Urbanism as a way of life

It will be no surprise given the history of concerns about the loss of community, that issues around urbanisation, and more recently counter-urbanisation have been high on the agenda of scholars and practitioners in the field. In western culture there appears to be a fundamental duality between the notions of rural and urban life with a strong value bias in favour of the former. A folk theology that "God made the country, man the town" is a dominant theme despite a Bible that ends in "a city of Gold" and the influence of Augustine's "City of God". Romantic reaction to the crisis of urban growth in nineteenth century Europe has made a profound impression. However, urban sociologists and geographers in the late twentieth century have increasingly questioned the assumption of the rural urban divide. Louis Wirth's (1938) "Urbanism as a way of life" is one of the most often cited papers in the urban sociology literature and has had many expositors and defenders (e.g. Morris 1968). Wirth suggested that three main features distinguished urban life from rural, firstly the larger dimensions of urban communities, secondly the higher density of residential settlement and thirdly the heterogeneity of the populations to be found in cities. The result was a web of impersonal and instrumental relationships, which tended to produce fragmentation, superficiality and "anomie" leading to all the familiar social and psychological stresses associated with city living. Wirth's conceptualisation of the urban, with its obvious links to Tonnies' Gemeinschaft / Gesellschaft duality, has been the problematic around which debate has centred.

The debates between Redfield (1930) and Lewis (1951, 1965) on the folk-urban continuum based on studies of Mexican village life are one well known variation on Wirth's theme. Another way of capturing the idea that there is no categorical duality between city and village life was to talk about an urban-rural continuum. Pahl's (1965) study of commuter villages in South East England for example shows how urban and rural orientations co-existed in a single location. So even the idea of continuum does not work, Newby's work on change in rural areas of England provides further evidence that rural life is increasingly urban in form and culture (1980, 1985). Harper (1989) reviews the literature on this theme and highlights the necessary change in emphasis towards area based studies covering economic restructuring of both city and countryside. Wirth's characterisation of the urban has also been critiqued by researchers who argue empirically that urban life "just ain't like that". Community studies in various cities have repeatedly discovered evidence of Gemeinschaft forms of community, especially in working class neighbourhoods and ethnic villages. The Bethnal Green studies of Young & Willmott (1957) and Gans (1962) work on urban villages in the USA and suburbanism as a way of life (1968) are only two out of many pieces of work which can be cited against Wirth. And even in the largest most impersonal cities personal network studies (Wellman 1979) show that most people have enough contacts to feel part of a community, which need not be geographically concentrated, and that estrangement and alienation from others is a feature of public life but not of private life (Fischer 1981).

Another line of attack on Wirth's notion of urbanism has been that of Castells (1977). He suggests that the concept of urban culture is an ideological one, which masks the economic processes and class conflict which can be found in both city and country. Wirth's organic evolutionary view of the city locates alienation in the psychological response to technology and complexity rather than in the oppressive relationships of production, and gives the false "reassuring impression of an integrated society united in facing up to its common problems". Harvey in his early work (1973) also takes a Marxist approach to the unjust allocation of resources between different neighbourhoods, stating that "capital will flow in a way which bears little relationship to need or to the condition of the least advantaged territory. (Capitalism) is not consistent with the ends of social justice.... nothing short of comprehensive government control" can change this. In "The Urban Experience" (1989) he recognizes the value of Wirth's conception and argues towards a synthesis where the "urbanisation of consciousness has to be understood in relation to the urbanisation of capital". In particular Harvey shows how the concept of community has itself become a marketable commodity, and that local and other community loyalties are often in struggle with the

placeless individualism of money and capital.

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The Chicago School

Despite the critics, discussions of policy and practice in the community are still deeply influenced by the Chicago school of urban sociology, in which Wirth was an important contributor, which grew up in that city in the early part of the twentieth century. The context was one of a rapidly growing, and ethnically diverse industrial and commercial mega-city, where the presence of organised crime (e.g. Al Capone) and the corruption in local politics suggested imminent social collapse. The Chicago sociologists developed a range of methods from quantitative analysis to street corner ethnography to help them read what was going on in the city. (Burgess 1925, Park 1926, Park, Burgess & McKenzie eds. 1925, Bulmer 1984) They attempted to map the social composition of the city in great detail, and divided up the territory into a number of natural communities which are still reflected in the government of the city today.

A key concept for the Chicago school was urban ecology. They took as a model the notion of plant and animal life colonising apiece of land and saw how ecological processes led to a shifting balance in patterns of land use. They examined how market forces were reflected in the price of land, and how this led to different uses by government, commerce, industry and various groups of residents. Their model of the city was one of concentric zones. In the centre was the Central business district (in Chicago the Loop, formed by the elevated railway system). The next zone was the twilight zone / inner city slums, ethnic ghettos and industries and warehouses. Beyond this came the zone of "working men's homes" stable if not affluent residential communities. Furthest out was the zone of affluent suburban commuters. As a general if simplified model this fits the description of many Western cities in the mid twentieth century. However, modifications had to be made, for example to deal with natural barriers such as rivers and waterfronts, and major arteries of transport. Sectors were introduced into the model to allow for patterns of development that were not in concentric circles; why for example in London as in so many British cities are the noxious industries and working class districts so concentrated to the East of the city centre, while in the West affluent residential areas stretch outwards to the suburbs? Prevailing Westerly winds and sensitive upper class noses provide one clue.

A second key insight from the Chicago urban ecology model is that of invasion and succession, a direct parallel with the ecology of plant communities. Just like a "fairy ring" of mushrooms one group of people establishes itself in an inner city neighbourhood, then as it prospers moves outwards, leap-frogging over intermediate groups. New groups then colonise the vacant inner area. Classically this pattern is seen in the geography of ethnic minority residence. Rex & Moore use the insights of the Chicago school in their classic study of Sparkbrook, Birmingham as a twilight zone (1967) and it is developed further in Rex & Tomlinson (1979). However, their notion of housing class demands serious adjustment to the ecological model of urban land use in societies like Britain where municipal housing policy and the allocation of Council homes have overridden the natural ecological processes. In East London a vivid example of the invasion - succession process is seen in the often mentioned seventeenth century Huguenot Chapel in Brick Lane. Taken over by Methodists in the 18th Century, it became a synagogue for Jewish refugees around 1900. By 1980 as the Jewish Community had relocated in suburban areas such as Redbridge and Golders Green, the building had become a mosque for local Bangladeshis, who as the 1990s progress are increasingly found five miles further east in Newham, in housing vacated by and outwardly mobile whites and Asians from Sikh and Hindu communities.

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Using census data

The study of urban neighbourhoods in ecological terms depends extensively on the availability of quantitative data, most usually that collected by government Censuses of population. Geographers and planners have developed a range of sophisticated techniques to manipulate such data which provide valuable insights to anyone wishing to understand particular local neighbourhoods and their relation to wider urban tends (Willmott & Hutchinson (1992), Willmott ed (1994), Boddy et al. (1995). However, before we summarise the most important approaches, it is important to bear in mind some of the limitations of census data. Firstly Census data is usually only collected once in ten years and is almost always between three and twelve years out of date. Secondly there is a growing tendency for Census data collection to be reduced in reliability by non-response and avoidance, especially by marginalised groups. For example the UK 1991 Census is estimated to have failed to collect data on a million or more people and young black men are particularly under-represented (Simpson and Dorling 1994). Thirdly census organisers only collect the minimal amount of information related to the policy concerns of government, for example in the England there is no census information on religion or language use; an infuriating situation for students of communities in multicultural urban areas. Finally the output data from Censuses is usually at a geographically aggregated level. Modern techniques of information technology allow area from small areas to be processed quite easily. Researchers can work with data sets broken down into the smallest administrative districts or areas defined by postal codes or map references, or even with a random sample of anonymised individual records (Dale & Marsh 1993). However, it is still geographically determined and predominantly deals with people as residents, rather than as people who spend different parts of their life in different places. As such it is intrinsically vulnerable to a statistical effect known as the ecological fallacy which is the mistaken tendency to infer that because a census tract has a high average score on a particular variable, say overcrowded housing that every resident of the neighbourhood suffers from this problem (Timms 1971, Blackman 1995).

The simplest practical technique for using census data in neighbourhood studies is to plot important variables onto local maps showing census tracts or enumeration districts. It becomes easy using computerised Geographic Information Systems to produce a huge set of maps showing areas with high proportions of ethnic groups, of rented housing, of unemployment, of old people living alone. However it is easy to be submerged in an ocean of data, and to choose indicators or threshold levels in arbitrary or controversial ways.

Techniques for reducing census data to manageable proportions for policy purposes have long been available. Policy makers when allocating resources to districts and neighbourhoods would ideally like a simple formula to measure social need. The usual approach is to construct an index of deprivation combining key indicators of need selected from the census data. These are then standardised statistically, in terms of an area's difference from an overall average value (Z score method), or in relation to the difference between counted and expected numbers of particular categories of people in an area. (Chi squared method) (Dept. of Environment 1994, 1995). the obvious problem in constructing an index of deprivation is the choice of indicators, who is to say whether the number of unemployed men, or the number of children in single parent households should be included in such an index, and if so what weight should they be given. An alternative approach is to build a model in which a range of possible census indicators can be tested for their contribution to expalaining the variation in rates of a relevant variable measured at the same geographical area. For example Noble et al. (1995) have produced a regression analysis model which accurately predicts the numbers of Income support claimants from five weighted census indicators, a version of which is used by the Church of England to assess parishes' eligibility for grants from the Church Urban Fund..

A rather less arbitrary way to reduce the complexity of census data sets about neighbourhoods is to apply techniques such as factor analysis and cluster analysis to a wider range of census variables (Folwell 1993). Factor analysis is a correlational technique which groups together variables which go together, e.g.

proportion of elderly people, small households and rates of long term limiting illness. Social area analysis using this approach (Shevky & Bell 1955, Robson 1969, Timms 1971) has been applied to many American, European and Australasian cities. One widely replicated finding is that three dimensions of social class (affluence / poverty), ethnicity and family status can be empirically separated. Particular neighbourhoods can be located conceptually in these three dimensions according to the proportion of rich and poor, black and white, and singles, families and elderly people. Cluster analysis is a comparable data reduction method, but in this case it is areas that are grouped together, according to their similarities or differences on a range of census indicators. Factor analysis and cluster analysis can be combined in substantive studies of a local community such as Newham. (Smith 1996b). In this case statistical analysis of 1991 Census data revealed how patterns of deprivation in adjacent neighbourhoods related to ethnic composition and housing tenure. Some form of deprivation and high unemployment was found in almost all areas, but housing conditions and overcrowding was greatest in predominantly Asian, owner occupied areas, while lone parent households and low car ownership was more typical of white majority / above average African and Caribbean council estates.

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Measuring segregation

A further area of concern which can be explored using Census data is that of ethnic and other social segregation. In divided communities such as Belfast or South Africa under apartheid residential areas are often totally homogeneous. In most Western cities the patterns are less clear cut, and policy makers are interested in measuring the extent of segregation and changes over time (Rex 1981, Massey 1986). A commonly used technique is the Index of Dissimilarity (Peach 1975, Peach, Robinson & Smith 1981). An Index of Dissimilarity (ID) is calculated by comparing the percentage distributions of each group, by summing the differences between the two groups in each sub area; the ID is one half the sum of these differences (ignoring their signs) and is often expressed as a percentage. It ranges from 0% representing no segregation to 100% representing complete segregation and describes the percentage of one group which would have to move if there was to be no segregation between them. The ID can be calculated at different areal levels though it is to be anticipated that it will increase in value as the size of the areas involved decrease. An example from 1991 Census data for Newham is given in Table 4.1 to show how useful such an approach can be for understanding the interrelationship of neighbourhood community and ethnicity.

Table 4.1

Indices of dissimilarity for ethnic groups in Newham

IDS At ward level

	White	Black	Asian	Indian	Pakis.	Bangla.	Carib.	African
White	*	20.18	44.93	47.09	40.14	46.67	23.94	16.35
Black		*	33.74	36.97	30.99	33.38	4.56	5.99
Asian			*	5.47	11.18	16.45	32.64	34.63
Indian				*	14.44	19.90	35.88	35.32
Pakistani					*	22.72	30.52	31.67
Bangladeshi						*	32.00	34.36
Caribbean							*	10.39

African	*

ED Level indices of dissimilarity for main ethnic categories

	Black	South Asians
White	25.50	53.30
Black	*	40.81
South Asians		*

IDs have been calculated for Newham for many of the pairings of seven of the census ethnic categories at the ward level and for the three grouped categories of white, black and (South) Asian at the ED level. These figures show that there is a significant degree of ethnic residential segregation in Newham although it falls far short of the 80% plus figures reported at census tract level for "Negro ghettos" in U.S. cities (Kantrowitz 1969). In Newham, Asians (and in particular Indians and Bangladeshis are more segregated from whites than are Caribbean blacks, and (especially) African blacks. Segregation between Blacks and Asians falls in the intermediate range while segregation rates between ethnic categories within the Black and South Asian groupings is lowest of all. The most plausible explanation of these patterns rests on the general exclusion of South Asian households from Council housing, as a result of a combination of factors including preference for owner occupation, the threat of racial harassment in white Council estates and a historically racist allocations policy.

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Neighbourhood profiling

Agencies involved in community work are have a specific interest in understanding census data about their locality in terms of making their own practice relevant to the residents, and in lobbying for funding, or political change on behalf of a neighbourhood. Increasingly funds for urban regeneration are being targeted at areas of evident deprivation and community organisations applying to government and charitable trusts are required to show a high level of appreciation of the nature and extent of local needs. Since Census data now tends to be sold rather than given away by the agencies of the state, community organisations often have to rely on the goodwill of their contacts within local academic or local government bodies to obtain this sort of information.

When the Census does not contain the required information it may be necessary to collect original data. Community groups are unlikely to have the resources or skills to carry out quantitative studies first hand. More established organisations are sometimes able to employ research consultants to develop their case. More usually they decide to carry out small scale do-it-yourself neighbourhood profiles, community audits or similar research. Fortunately there is now a growing literature and resource base to help in these tasks. (Percy Smith 1992, Burton 1992, Hawtin, Huges & Percy Smith 1994, Everitt & Gibson 1994, A.C.W. 1994, and from a church perspective MKCF (1986) and Beckett (1991).

It is worth tracing in outline how the practice of such neighbourhood research has developed in the UK since about 1970. During this period a number of networks of practitioners have been developing, using and teaching a battery of techniques for local situational analysis deriving ultimately from some of the insights of the Chicago school. The repertoire includes mapping an area, using relevant census statistics, community surveys, discovering local life by networking, interviewing key people and participation in local community groups, or even in experiential techniques like the "urban plunge", a survival exercise on 1 a day. Until recently little has been published other than as very "grey" literature, and judging from my

own experience it seems to have developed as an oral tradition among urban church and community workers, health and social service professionals, and freelance researchers rather than in the mainstream of the academic world. Church organisations have played a vital role in this movement. For example the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield, and Church Action on Poverty produced kits and the Evangelical Urban Training Project ran workshops with local congregations which aimed to "know your church, know your neighbourhood and know your gospel". One important recommendation of the Faith in the City Report in (ACUPA 1985) was that every local parish should conduct a parish audit, which would include both a congregational analysis and a neighbourhood profile. At a national level the Church of England worked closely with the Department of Environment to make census information from 1981 and 1991 available at the parish level. More recently local authorities have been required to undertake needs assessment research in the context of community care policies (Blackman 1995) and are making use of or reinventing a similar repertoire of techniques.

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Qualitative information about neighbourhoods

While statistical information about neighbourhoods is essential for those who wish to serve their residents, it is usually helpful to supplement this with qualitative information. There is no substitute for long term participant observation in a community and professionals who are serious about the "community" nature of their practice should always consider the benefits of taking long term local residence. There is perhaps no better way of understanding a local community than walking to the local shops and sending one's children to the local school. But qualitative research techniques can also be used by outsiders. We shall mention four of them, reading the streets, maps, listening to people and networking local agencies.

Reading the streets of a neighbourhood is a largely intuitive technique but can be developed to a high level of sophistication. Initially one can note the physical appearance of the neighbourhood, whether the houses or flats and their gardens, if they have them, are well maintained or decaying. The public face of an area is seen in the range and condition of shops and other public buildings, in signs and notices, in the quantity, language and content of graffiti. Observing people in the street can become serious ethnography, but something less than that will suffice as a background to community work. Who uses the streets? Do different groups dominate at different times? What sort of interactions take place in different places? Are there typical or extraordinary incidents which betray the nature of the neighbourhood? Are there times and places which are evidently less safe than others? Obviously the keen observer of the streets in certain tough neighbourhoods needs to be "street-wise" enough to know when participant observation becomes a high risk strategy in terms of personal safety.

A large scale map or model of a neighbourhood can be used to visualise and summarise a vast range of information. Boundaries of the neighbourhood can be plotted; in some cases these are obvious barriers such as rivers, motorways, rail tracks, the edge of the forest or a major park. Other boundaries are more psychological, such as the transition between owner occupied and rented housing, the point beyond which local people are more likely to use an alternative shopping street or underground station, or the invisible divide between Muslim and Hindu territory. Individuals may have very different mental maps of an area; a useful exercise is to ask a sample of residents to draw a line on a map representing what they see as their "patch" or "turf" (Pacione, 1983). In urban areas the lack of agreement on boundaries may be great, and frustrating for the staff of an agency that works to officially demarcated boundaries, which seem rather arbitrary. Also on the map can be marked major through routes, central places such as shopping streets and transport interchanges, and popular pedestrian routes between them and residences. Local public buildings such as shops, schools, pubs, health centres, churches, mosques and community centres, and facilities such as parks and open spaces can also be marked. Industries and other non, residential uses

should also be shown, and different types of housing style and tenure can also be colour coded. Visual techniques such as photomontage or a home video record of a walk through the neighbourhood can help bring the map to life. In a community development situation local people can be encouraged to respond to the representation provided by the map, and to comment as to whether it captures the reality of their lives.

Listening and asking questions of local people can be a very productive strategy for filling out a neighbourhood profile. A full time community practitioner will be listening most of the time, but the listening may not be very systematic. At the opposite extreme is a full blown research process involving semi-structured in depth interviews of a large number of local people. Ideally the respondents should be a representative sample or at least a broad cross section of local people, and the interviews should be transcribed and analysed to bring out key themes and shared perspectives. Listening to group discussion about community issues, using the research technique of focus groups (Krueger 1994) is another valuable technique. Computer software such as Text-base Alpha or Nudist can be used to facilitate the task of analysing transcripts (Tesch 1990).

Mapping voluntary activity in a neighbourhood completes the picture of community life in a neighbourhood. Local life would have little right to claim the title of community in the absence of community organisations. Many attempts have been made to assess the levels and significance of voluntary activity in local communities (Chanan 1992, Reynolds et Al. 1994, Marshall 1995, Knight 1993). As a research activity the attempt often gets bogged down in questions of definition; what constitutes a community organisation or voluntary activity, how local does local have to be in the case of branches of wider organisations, do we count a religious group with several daughter organisations for different age groups as one agency or many? However, simply undertaking a mapping of the field is a valuable exercise for community practicioners and communitarian activists. Drawing up a list of all known groups, contacting them and talking about their work is in itself both enlightening, and an important part of community development, as information is shared and networks of relationships are built. Snowball networking, in which each agency contacted is asked to nominate further groups or individuals with whom it is in contact is a still more powerful method for discovering how a local neighbourhood community interrelates.

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Participatory research

One important emphasis in neighbourhood research from the grass roots up, is that it has often sought to be both participatory and emancipatory. Local residents and community group members have been involved at all stages, including designing questionnaires, interviewing, data input and presentation of findings in the context of lobbying. For example disabled people in Newham devised a survey of the views and needs of disabled and elderly people, carried it out with minimal professional support and used its findings to influence local care in the community developments (Everitt & Gibson 1994). The participatory research style derives form the Freirean tradition of community action in the Two Thirds world (Feuerstein 1988, Mikkelson 1995, Nicolls 1991) and can be used for action research and evaluation as well as for neighbourhood profiling. It has links with the established paradigm of action research (Lees & Smith 1975) and with the developing practice of Community Operational Research (Ritchie et al. eds. 1994). It tends if anything to favour qualitative rather than quantitative methods, and makes no apology for beginning from a critical value base. As a result it is not usually easily appreciated by official and bureaucratic agencies who tend to favour "objective" and "hard numerical" data. Yet as community policies become more popular, user involvement and citizen empowerment rises up government agendas, the opportunities for bottom up methods of community research are greater than ever before. Of course participatory research is also cheaper, which means not only cost savings but that

where the findings are uncomfortable to policy makers it can be more easily dismissed!

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Key books for Chapter Four

Hawtin, M Hughes, G Percy-Smith, J., (1994), Community profiling: auditing social needs", Buckingham, Open University Press

Davies W.K.D. & Herbert D.T., (1993) "Communities Within Cities; An Urban Social Geography" London, Belhaven Press.

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