
"Community - arianism"

Chapter Five: Community studies; the ups and downs of a genre

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Community studies as a sociological tradition can best be described as a genre rather than a subdiscipline. As an enterprise such work flourished in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and drew their inspiration from two main sources, the Chicago school and the social anthropology of late British Imperialism. The huge variety in method and findings and their relative paucity of theoretical analysis have earned them the description "The poor sociologist's substitute for the novel". (Glass 1966 p148). For the most part methods have been drawn from Anthropology rather than sociology, which has predisposed researchers to use qualitative, participant observation methods, and a structural functionalist theory. It is hard, given the nostalgic connotations, and ideological weight on the notion of community for a researcher interested in a given community, to avoid portraying it as static, harmonious, and functionally healthy. This has led in turn to a general neglect of historical perspectives and an emphasis on the folk / rural / or small town end of the continuum.

In the UK the highpoint in the theory and practice of Community Studies is probably the publication of two books by Bell and Newby in the early 1970's. In the first (1971) they thoroughly reviewed the achievement and limitations of the genre to that point in time, and in the second (1974) they presented a collection of key papers from the international literature. Their critique of the genre was widely accepted as a powerful one. Community studies they argued were a rag bag of assorted observations of varying quality, there was no unifying approach, theory or method. In consequence the genre was non-cumulative and had little to offer to the development of sociological theory, or study of human society in general. Across the Atlantic Stein (1960) had already advanced a similar critique in his aptly titled "Eclipse of Community". A consensus was growing around Stacey's (1969) suggestion of abandoning the "myth" of community and doing research on local social systems might be a better way forward.

Other lines of attack can also be mounted. For example, researchers in the genre have never been able to study a representative sample of communities, they decide to work in a place where they already have contacts or involvement, or because it matches the main strands of their theoretical concerns, either as typical or esoteric. Marxist or Critical theory approaches will want to remedy the neglect of power and class relations, and to introduce black and minority perspectives. Feminists would argue that even a study which detailed the differing roles of men and women in a community is inadequate. They would want to see explicit analysis of male dominance and power, as a step towards emancipatory action for women in both public and domestic spheres (Dominelli 1990).

A growing awareness of the difficulties arising from a purely local focus in studying urban society. As soon as research begins to make a serious attempt at economic structural analysis, for example in the work of the CDPs on the causes of deprivation in Canning Town, or Coventry (Loney 1983), it is impossible to proceed without examining historical and global processes. Explanations cannot be found in the locality alone, and solutions to local problems demand political action at the national or international level. Even Marxists found it hard to make connections between global theory and local reality or

community action, except perhaps in Latin America through Freirean praxis, although Castells (1977) made a serious attempt to grapple with some major themes in a way which has inspired further work. (Mullins 1987).

In the UK at least emphasis has moved onto the study of localities as opposed to communities (Cooke 1989). In the 1970s and 1980s comparative studies of local labour markets, or the patterns of social and demographic change, such as counter urbanisation and gentrification was more common than descriptive and analytic work on individual neighbourhoods or settlements (Harris ed. 1990, Robinson 1981, Bridge 1993a) . Much of the most recent research has been comparative work carried out by geographers and economists with a clear policy related agenda (Robson et al. 1994).

However the 1990's may well provide an opportunity for "the rejuvenation of community studies", a title used for an article by Martin Bulmer in 1985. Bulmer argues that one impetus for this is methodological in the development of the techniques of social network analysis. A second is policy driven, in that there is a wide consensus in Britain for the decentralisation of service delivery, and in favour of the provision of "care in the community". Increasingly community studies, or at least community profiles are needed by professionals in local authorities, health services and the voluntary sector to inform their practice as they move from an institutional base out into the community. Indeed it is significant that a very high proportion of references to "urban communities" on the Social Sciences Citation Index during the last five years are the work not of mainstream sociologists but of medical practitioners with interests such as epidemiology in cities and in ethnic groups, or of social work practitioners concerned with isolation of elderly people. (Moon 1990, MacIntyre et al 1993, Wenger 1994, Cattell 1995)

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The classic community studies

If sociologists have been rather dismissive the general public have been avid consumers of popular community studies, particular if the community studied is their own. Photographic histories of local communities are prominently displayed, and presumably purchased in bookshops everywhere. TV documentaries often cover local community life, although it is perhaps more significant that the favourite genre of viewing for the mass market is the soap opera. Here one key element is the daily or weekly life of an imaginary local community, a community which for some viewers may become more significant and real than the one in which they live. "Neighbours" may evoke more concern than neighbours, issues in "East Enders" are more likely to be talked about than issues of the East End. There have been many more thorough attempts to describe the life of local communities in Britain from a journalistic rather than a truly sociological perspective. Some of these are very perceptive, and most contain useful empirical data. Among the most important for urban communities are Parker's "The People of Providence, (1983), Harrison's "Inside the Inner City" (1983), Dervla Murphy's "Tales from Two Cities (1987). However the authors make no claims to be social scientists and have little desire to add to the theoretical understanding of communities.

Serious claims to be included in the sociological genre of community studies can only be made for publications based on extensive sociological research. Bell and Newby's two books (1971, 1974) are a more than adequate introduction to the major trends in community studies in the mid twentieth century and the contributions to the latter volume by Elias (1973), Arensberg and Kimball (1967), and Simpson (1965) are particularly interesting. A summary of the field from the same period is found in Worsley (1970). Crow and Allan (1994) offers a more up to date coverage of the field with an emphasis on the impact of economic restructuring, mobility and the growth of home ownership, while Davies and Herbert (1993) is comprehensive from an urban studies perspective. It will not be possible here to do anything more than refer to a selection of the often cited studies from North America and Britain. In order to

appreciate the findings of each the reader will need to access the original sources, and the evaluation of many of them found in the books cited above.

The American tradition of community studies begins in "typical small towns" with the Lynd's study of Middletown first reported in 1929 and revisited in 1937. Changing readings of the same local story are presented by Hoover (1989). The Yankee City studies led by Lloyd Warner (1941) are a massive corpus, Questions of race and ethnicity appear quite early in the American literature. The classic study of racism in a Mississippi community is "Deep South" (Davis et al 1941). The work of Gans in the Italian community in Boston has already been mentioned (1962). Urban community studies in the USA are dominated by social ecologists of the Chicago school. Besides overview work on the city (Park, Burgess & McKenzie 1925), the neighbourhood focus comes through in such studies as the Ghetto (Wirth 1928), the Gold Coast and the Slum (Zorbaugh 1976 first published several decades earlier) and Whyte's Street Corner Society (1955). Suttles "Social order of the Slum" (1968) carries on the Chicago tradition into the era of the American urban crisis and the war on Poverty. Gans' second major work on the Levittowners (1968) moved the focus to the suburbs and showed how the rapidly emerging and seemingly vibrant organisational life of a new housing estate sifted the residents into a limited range of community activity and low level of local identification. In Canada too social scientists have developed an interest in community studies of which "Crestwood Heights" is the best known suburban example. (Seely et al (1963). However some of the most significant Canadian work, that of Wellman and his colleagues will be covered in more detail in the section on network analysis in Chapter 7

There is a similar diverse tradition of community studies in the British Isles; Crow and Allan's (1994) book begins with a map and list of 55 key published sources. Frankenberg (1966) gives a handy summary of much of the early work which includes his own study of a Welsh village (1957). His account begins with rural studies in Ireland (Arensberg 1939 and Arensberg & Kimball 1940), in Wales (Rees 1951) and Gosforth in Cumbria, England (Williams 1956). The study of a Yorkshire mining village (Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter 1956) is set alongside Stacey's study of Banbury (1960 revisited in Stacey et al 1975) and Birch's work on Glossop (1959). Urban housing estate studies are represented by work in Liverpool by Lupton and Mitchell (1954), in Sheffield by Hodges & Smith (1954) and the well known Watling study by Durant (1959). The urban section of Frankenberg's morphological continuum is based on the work of the Institute of Community studies (see below.)

Subsequent rural village and small town studies of note include Littlejohn's (1963) study of a Cheviot parish, Harris' (1972) study of an Ulster border community, Gilligan's (1990) report on change in the Cornish town of Padstow, and the account of a Shetland fishing community by Cohen (1987). Change as a result of immigration has often been found worthy of study for example in the work of Elias and Scotson (1965) and more recently in a rural setting in Day and Murdoch (1993).

The dominant stream in urban community studies in the UK has been that centred on East London and associated with Michael Young, Peter Willmott and their associates at the Institute of Community Studies. Their research has concentrated on family, kinship, neighbours and friends as the foundation of local community. The classic study on family and kinship in Bethnal Green (Young & Willmott 1957) was followed up by research on suburban Greenleigh (1960) (showing some similarities to Levittown). Their next study on the evolution of community in the Dagenham estate (1963), traced the effects of the large scale outmigration of post-war years. An evaluation of the work of the Institute was published by Platt (1971). Willmott and Young's influence remains in East London even in the myths and images held by local people. Cornwell's (1984) study focussed on health and illness, while Phil Cohen's work from a cultural studies perspective (1972) looked at change and ethnicity in the area and more recently at how local people redefine and imagine their communities and identities (Cohen, Quereshi & Toon 1995). The Dagenham study has also been revisited after three decades by O'Brien (1996).

Broad brush community studies of other large scale urban areas are comparatively rare. Jackson's work in Huddersfield (1968) struggles to get beyond the stereotypical warm beer flavour of Northern working class life. Birmingham is represented by the Sparkbrook Study (Rex 1968, Rex & Moore 1967), and by

Handsworth (Rex & Tomlinson 1979). South London is the scene of Foster's ethnographic study of crime in the community (1990). Sandra Wallman and associates have produced a substantial corpus of research on neighbourhood life in South West London (1982, 1984), from a social anthropology viewpoint. The impact of social and economic change on local communities is addressed in Moore's work on the impact of oil in Peterhead (1982) and Newby's (1980) work in rural East Anglia, as well as in case studies of such places as Swindon, Lancaster and Thanet in Cooke's 1987 collection. In a class of its own so far appears to be Revill's (1993) paper on "Reading Rosehill" an inner area of Derby. Here we see an avowedly postmodernist approach to the culture(s) of a neighbourhood.

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Ethnic minority communities

In recent years community studies in urban Britain have concentrated on the (changing) cultures of ethnic minority communities. Patterson (1965) deals with the early days of settlement in Britain while Pryce (1979) is based on participant observation of West-Indian life in Bristol. Anwar's (1979) study of Pakistanis in Rochdale is one of the most significant and makes effective use of social network analysis. There are other studies from an anthropological perspective on Pakistanis (Saifullah Khan 1977), on Gujeratis (Tambs Lyche 1980), Sikhs (Ballard & Ballard 1977) and collections of essays such as Watson (1977). Eade (1989) is concerned with Bangladeshis in east London, but the focus is restricted largely to local politics. Most of these either concentrate on specific aspects of ethnic minority life and/or use traditional techniques of participant observation to describe and elucidate the processes subsequent to migration.

Kosmin's various studies of Jewish communities in the U.K. use social survey techniques to paint a broad brush picture, and pioneered the involvement of local community members as partners and interviewers in the research process (Kosmin & De Lange 1979). The Linguistic Minorities Project (1985) (in which the author worked) tried to develop these methods in the Adult Language Use Survey, carried out in 11 languages in three British cities. The project was unique in that it's focus was on communities defined by minority language use, rather than definitions based on race, religion or ethnicity.

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Whither community studies

Despite the critique and evident inadequacies of the community studies genre, it is likely to be making a come-back thanks to the increased emphasis on community policies, and the growing impact of communitarian philosophy. The following section attempts to sketch out a model or theoretical framework to guide community research, in order to give the most adequate possible account of what Stacey (1969) described as a local social system.

A local social system, particularly in a modern urban setting is not a closed system, but has relationships of conflict and collaboration with systems and structures operating in various spheres at different levels. We can conceptualise the six crucial levels involved using the model laid out below in Table 5.1.

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INSERT Table 5.1 HERE

The line between levels 3 & 4 symbolises an important difference between the higher and lower levels. Above the line the systems / spheres / levels claim (and sometimes achieve) a universal sovereignty within their spheres and territories over everyone and everything at inferior levels, and ultimately have coercive powers. There is a linkage between this and the communitarian emphasis on subsidiarity in decision making. Below the line we meet voluntarism and plurality where individuals, networks and organisations have a large measure of freedom of association and choice about their actions. Or perhaps they have only the illusion of freedom, given the constraints imposed by the higher levels, and the economic, social and cultural structures and forces which shape, or as some would argue, determine their lives. The lower levels would generally be recognised as the sphere of "community" although with the growth of community policy means that at least level 3 also has some claim to be included.

It also needs to be pointed out that the middle line is not to be seen as a separation of geographical levels. For a nation state could have a tiny territory; indeed that seems to be the trend in Europe even without Lichenstein and the Vatican City. Conversely a voluntary organisation (e.g. GreenPeace), a church, or even a family can be thoroughly international.

Clearly the boundaries between the levels are not always discrete and obvious, and the economic, political and social forces exerted between the levels mean that the degree of autonomy / control that any level has over its own sphere, or over other spheres may vary over time, space or with different issues. For example religion in Europe until recently, (in Eastern Europe until very recently) was located at level 2 rather than level 4. Current political conflicts in Britain are eroding the importance of level 3 by transferring functions formerly assigned to the local state to levels 2 & 4. The Thatcherite vision of the 1980's tended to magnify levels 1 (market forces) and level 6 (individuals) by eliminating the remaining levels (labelled "society").

The most important point is that there is a network of relationships between the different levels, but that the network is not complete ... some ties are missing, some are stronger than others, some are mainly in one direction and some are expressed through different media than others. In the vast majority of ties there is an inevitable power imbalance between the parties which cannot be ignored in any serious analysis. As a general principle relationships at a direct, personal or face to face level only occur either within a single level or between adjoining levels. Relations crossing two or more levels are far more likely to be perceived as impersonal social forces, which are impossible to challenge and change. This is one of the root causes of powerlessness, and the sense of resignation with which individuals and local grass roots communities, especially but not only in deprived neighbourhoods, respond to issues such as poverty, unemployment and the environmental crisis.

Thus

Individuals relate to;

The **global economy** as consumers, (non)workers, house owners, migrants, (mediated through the local labour market, with communication through mass media, advertising etc).

The state as tax payers, voters, claimants, subjects under the law, fillers in of forms, immigrants/citizens, with communication through mass media and bureaucracy

The local state (or local manifestations of National state) as voters, lobbyists, council tax payers, students, clients of social services, tenants, customers of environmental services, patients with communication through bureaucracy, on paper and in offices

Voluntary organisations as members, committee members, volunteers, clients, service users, fundraisers & givers with communication through face to face meeting and bureaucracy

Relational networks as neighbours, friends, workmates, relatives with communication through face to face meeting + phone

Relational networks relate to

The global economy: when as consumers they reinforce mass media marketing by personal endorsement of products.... as workmates in industrial conflict ;

The national state: as branches of political parties, trade unions and campaigning groups e.g. by petitions or mass lobbies

The local state.. by becoming local pressure groups on specific issues, as next of kin / carers / parents of patients, clients or students. as particular personal networks within municipal structures. using petitions, letter writing campaigns or as a group visiting a councillor

Voluntary sector: as members, volunteers, clients who are often recruited through such informal networks by word of mouth. Networks sometimes grow into organisations and organisations sometimes become relational networks as friendships are formed (cliques). Usually by face to face contact

The voluntary sector relates to

The global economy as consumers (of computers, offices etc.), as fund seekers and image enhancer / conscience for companies, occasionally now as economic development agencies : usually by writing, often also with personal contacts

The national state as lobbyist / pressure group, fund seeker, as organisations under charity law etc., as contract provider of services,: by written bureaucratic methods

The local state as lobbyist / pressure group, fund seeker, as contract provider of services, by personal networks of influence among officers and councillors: by written bureaucratic methods

The local state relates to

The national state as lobbyist / opposition, fundseeker, provider of (enabler of) local services: usually by formal and bureaucratic contact

The global economy as consumer, as lobbyist for investment, as employer, investor, educator: usually by formal written media, but increasingly in economic development using personal networks with business leaders

The national state

relates to **the global economy** as economic manager, employer, investor, consumer, through Europe: In theory by formal bureaucratic means, but with Right Wing governments there are often personal ties (of the Old School variety!) and common interest if not corruption between capital and government..

There are also important patterns of horizontal relationships at especially in the lower levels of the model. It is almost tautologous within the model to say that individuals and households relate to other individuals and households in networks of Kin, friendships, neighbours and workmates. It is also obvious that such networks are not usually self contained but are usually connected if only through a small number of bridge people with other networks of personal relationships. In so far as there are boundaries to informal networks they are concepts of the researcher, devices to make the research task manageable. More

significant are the horizontal relationships in a local social system between organisations in the voluntary sector. Whether they are formally structured, such as branches of a larger body, political party or religious denomination, or in the form of an umbrella body or forum of agencies, or just a network held together by dyadic ties, they can and should be studied if we are to understand the local social system as a whole. It is of course also possible to discover and study these kind of relationships at the high levels, for example, between different departments of local or national government, or between different companies in the capitalist system but that would go beyond our local field of interest, and be way beyond the resources of most imaginable community studies.

The purpose of this relational model is to suggest that any community study, wishing to provide an overall account of a local social system needs to consider what is happening at each of the six levels, and wherever possible the interactions between them. It highlights the existence of a complex network structure, of relationships between individuals, informal groups or networks and institutions. It also introduces the concept of network analysis, which is the subject of our next chapter.

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Key books for chapter 5

Crow G. and Allan G., (1994), "Community Life; An Introduction To Local Social Relations", London Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Bell C & Newby H. (1971) "Community Studies; An Introduction To The Sociology Of The Local Community", London, Allen & Unwin

Bell C & Newby H. eds. (1974) "The Sociology of Community; a selection of readings" London: Frank Cass

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Table 5.1 1) Global Economic / International Capitalism

2) National Political... government, taxation, law etc

3) The Local State... service delivery.. other statutory bodies with local manifestations

- 4) Voluntary Organisation & religion.... mainly at the neighbourhood / parish level (but some wider structures)
- 5) Relational level... informal networks of neighbours, workmates, friends, kin
- 6) The privatised household / individual