Crow, Graham. "Defining key terms." *What are Community Studies?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 1–6. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849665964.0005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 07:26 UTC.

Copyright © Graham Crow 2018. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

1 Defining key terms

Defining 'community' has been a long-standing challenge. It can be readily agreed that a community involves a group of people with something in common, but it is less easy to find agreement about what that thing is. This book does not set out to solve the problem of defining 'community' to everyone's satisfaction; rather it aims to explore the many different ways in which people understand 'community', and the related variety of methodological approaches that are available to be used in studying community phenomena. Many of the most famous community studies have been undertaken using ethnographic methods that involve the researcher spending time among the people of the community under investigation, observing their behaviour and interacting with them in the conduct of their everyday lives. These studies are celebrated for their ability to capture the texture of everyday interactions, exchanges and routines. The idea of a community study as a contextualized account of ordinary people's everyday lives and of how the various elements of those lives are interconnected as parts of a larger whole provides us with a working definition. It should be emphasized, however, that ethnographic observation is by no means the only research method available to capture the stuff of community relationships, and the exemplars of community studies that will be discussed in this book have been selected with this diversity of research methods in mind. There are multiple ways of doing a community study.

This diversity of approach is a strength, not a weakness. The availability of a wide range of methods, from ethnographic observation to interviews and surveys, from photography and other visual methods to policy evaluation, from social network analysis to experiments, and from documentary analysis to online methods, means that researchers investigate community relationships from numerous angles. In terms of disciplines, community studies provide an interdisciplinary meeting place for anthropologists, educationalists, geographers, historians, psychologists, social workers, sociologists and others interested in how and why community contexts

matter. This is desirable because 'community' is an elusive quarry and debates about it involve different theoretical perspectives. Communities may be associated with particular places, but they do not have to be, as reference to the geographically dispersed deaf community readily demonstrates (Gregory and Hartley 1991). Similarly, communities may comprise people with some shared identity, but pinning down what constitutes the basis of that shared identity often proves frustratingly difficult, especially at the margins of the group where it is unclear precisely who should count as an 'insider' and who an 'outsider'. Next, communities may be constellations of people with shared interests, such as the members of an occupational community (coal miners, fishermen, railway workers and architects are some of the occupational groups that have been studied in this way), but it is evident here as well that such communities built around a common interest can still be quite heterogeneous and have some members who are more active and influential than others. Communities do not come in uniform packages ready for one standardized mode of analysis.

Not all studies of communities are community studies in the sense of attempting an extensive analysis of how the various parts of community life connect. The tradition of community studies research is frequently traced back to a pioneering piece of research conducted in the 1920s by the husband and wife team of Robert and Helen Lynd in the city of Muncie, Indiana, in the United States. In this study the Lynds went beyond their original brief to investigate religion in the life of small-town middle America, and identified five other aspects of everyday life besides religion on which they also focused attention. The book quickly if surprisingly became a classic piece of popular social science. Its core sections were headed 'getting a living', 'making a home', 'training the young', 'using leisure', 'engaging in religious practices' and 'engaging in community activities'. This list of topics, which we can condense into work, home, education, leisure, religion and community action, has become familiar in community studies. Many researchers have sought to follow the Lynds in tracing the interconnectedness of the various elements of community life. *Middletown* (the pseudonym that they gave to Muncie) is a key point of reference for community studies scholars, and the town and its people continue to attract academic interest, as we shall see in one of the exemplars of community research considered in Chapter 3. Beyond 'Muncieology', as this body of research is known, many ethnographers continue to use variations on the format of the six broad topics on which the Lynds focused

nearly a century ago. Community studies do not have to be this ambitious, however; researchers are tending to concentrate on a narrower brief.

The connectedness of community life is often understood as underpinning the social solidarity of community members. The Lynds (1929: ch.XXVIII) used this concept, as did Alwyn Rees (1951) analysing kinship ties, Gerald Suttles (1972) studying neighbourhoods, Arlie Hochschild (1973) observing residential settings, Philip Abrams and Andrew McCulloch (1976) investigating communes, Graeme Salaman (1986) looking at occupational communities, David Rayside (1991) examining small-town change and many others (Crow 2002a). Social solidarity expresses a shared sense of belonging and commitment among community members; it is what differentiates community from an agglomeration of people who lack a firm basis for existing as an entity in which co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are practised. The abstract concept of social solidarity is not easy to operationalize in empirical research, however (Bulmer 1986: 34). In part as a response to this problem, alternative concepts have been developed to capture the idea of communities as groups of people bound together in some way (despite their myriad differences of social class, age, gender, disability and other lines of social cleavage). These include social capital, community cohesion, communities of practice and social networks. A common thread running through these ideas is the notion that being among 'people like us' (or 'people like ourselves') matters and is worth seeking out for the benefits it brings.

The connectedness of people's lives as workmates, family members, neighbours, schoolmates, friends, members of leisure groups, members of religious organizations and community activists is at the heart of conventional communities of place, in which roles and networks inevitably tend to overlap. Any individual relationship between two community members is unlikely to exist in isolation, but rather will be linked into wider webs of sociability that reinforce each other as common bonds and provide a basis for shared identity and action. It has been argued that such solidarities are the strongest where people are brought together by shared poverty and need for assistance – what Raymond Williams called 'the mutuality of the oppressed' (1975: 131) – but as Williams himself notes, there are many examples of active community solidarities outside of those conditions. Nor should it be concluded that poverty always stimulates social solidarity among members of groups faced with limited material resources; the dynamics of such situations are more complex than that. Social solidarity

is one possible outcome, but domination and control of poor populations is another (Brent 2009: 18).

Ethnography has provided a particularly fruitful methodological approach in community studies. Only through participant observation will some aspects of the incredible complexity of ordinary people's everyday lives become apparent. Elements of community life may be hidden from researchers as they would be from any outsiders, due to mistrust; suspicion of being a spy or informant has been reported numerous times (Crow and Pope 2008). It takes time for the presence of researchers to be accepted. Periods of fieldwork may last for years or even decades (Crow 2000: 181), for reasons of trust-building and also because the meaning of mundane everyday activities may not be immediately apparent to either researchers or community members (Goffman 2002). Everyday practices are an important part of how communities function, but they may be too familiar to community members and too apparently insignificant to observers for their significance to be appreciated. It takes time to see things in proper perspective, and to know what to look out for. Participation in community life adds to researchers' observations by giving them more of a 'feel' of what being part of a community is like. Recent reflections by researchers about the practice of research have led to growing interest in sensory ethnography and the breadth of ways in which the phenomena under investigation may be captured by researchers (Pink 2009). This development also reveals the more general point that ethnographic methods do not stand still, but evolve as new ways of thinking emerge about how best to undertake research.

Two further points stand out in respect of recent developments in the methods used in community research. One is that the merits of adopting a mixed-methods approach to the study of community relationships are becoming more widely appreciated. Communities are multifaceted phenomena; it follows that it is unlikely that one research tool will capture this multifacetedness as effectively as an approach in which a combination of methods is employed. The exemplars of community studies that will be examined in Chapter 3 are all pieces of mixed-methods research whose authors recognize that different methods are necessary in order to get at formal and informal relationships, open and hidden, episodic and enduring, consensual and conflictual, sacred and profane, or mythical and real. A photograph may capture some aspect of community life that a person being interviewed could find it difficult to put into words.

A social network analysis may highlight connections and cleavages that conventional mapping of where different social groups reside might miss. And documentary analysis of archived material may cast a quite different light on matters than oral history testimony does. When used together, these methods can provide a much more rounded account of community life than any on its own would be able to, and although different methods always have the potential to generate apparently contradictory results, further analysis has the potential to resolve such issues.

This ties in with the second point about recent developments, the growing tendency for community research to be undertaken collaboratively, with researchers and community members working together in a shared enterprise (Campbell and Lassiter 2014). Collaborative ethnography provides one of the exemplars considered in Chapter 3. The rationale for doing ethnography in this way is instructive: it is framed in terms of granting respect to members of communities that are being researched, recognizing that research has the potential to be intrusive, and to involve costs to participants in terms of time and other things. With these considerations in mind, it is only fair that community members should have a say in what is to be researched, and how it is to be researched, as well as being able at least to ask, 'What are the potential benefits to arise through the publication of research findings?' Put simply, people being researched deserve a voice in the research process. Alongside this set of ethical arguments there is another set of considerations which points in the same direction but on more pragmatic grounds. Without access to consenting community members there can be little if any research, so working with them to secure their agreement to be studied has always been a point to bear in mind. Similarly, willing participants in research are more likely than reluctant ones to provide better quality data, and to be more effective partners in the dissemination of research findings. Researchers thus have a degree of self-interest in working collaboratively, and also in managing expectations about what research achieves; experience teaches us that over-promising about the benefits of research is something that it is important to avoid (Crow 2013).

Community studies is thus a field of research in which there is a recognizable tradition that at the same time has not stood still. Community studies are studies of communities that may be geographically based but do not have to be, because communities are constructed around a number of characteristics that people share, of which place is only one.

Community studies have the potential to focus on a range of aspects of everyday life, from youth to religion, work to home and politics to leisure, but always with an emphasis on the importance of the wider context in which the chosen subjects are to be understood. Ethnographic methods of participant observation are particularly widely used as a route into exploring the interconnectedness of the different aspects of community life, but they can be supplemented by many other methods such as surveys, elite interviews, life histories, visual methods and documentary analysis that also have the potential to capture the realities of ordinary people's everyday lives (Davies 1999; Payne and Payne 2004: 46–50). The Marienthal study in 1930s Austria famously used diary methods and essays imagining the future (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1972). Tony Blackshaw (2010) has added action research, community profiling and social network analysis to the list. Jeremy Brent's (2009) inclusion of autobiographical material brings another dimension, as does Daniel Nettle's (2015) use of experiments. It should be noted that whichever of these methods are used, the ideal of researching ethically always requires attention. The history of community studies includes salutary stories where standards of behaviour have fallen short of what is desirable as well as cases of exemplary achievements that have become the landmarks of research in the community studies tradition. This history is the subject of the next chapter.