Crow, Graham. "Criticisms and defences." *What are Community Studies?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 59–80. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849665964.0009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 00:17 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.

5 Criticisms and defences

The preceding chapters have shown that community studies have their advocates, but also their critics. The views expressed that 'the genre of community studies is currently in crisis' (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005: 29) and that we may have witnessed 'the death of community studies' (Day 2006: 50) indicate that the criticisms levelled at work in this tradition need to be taken seriously if community studies are to offer a viable approach for future social scientific research. Many of the points at issue are not new. Challenges to the community studies approach go back several decades (Bell 1977; Bell and Newby 1971, 1974; Brook and Finn 1978; Frankenberg 1976; Stacey 1969; Vidich, Bensman and Stein 1971). Nor should it be assumed that researchers located by others in the community studies tradition necessarily saw themselves as part of a common endeavour; there has been criticism from within. In concluding their book on 'Ashton' that has often been treated as an exemplar, Dennis and his colleagues were keen to distance their account from the error that they detected in 'modern functional anthropology' (1969: 246) of neglecting national influences on local life. At other points in the history of the field, attempts to reorient the practice of doing a community study have been made. For example, Wellman and his colleagues argued confidently that their reconceptualization of communities as networks 'moves "community studies" out of its role as an academic sideshow and into the heart of sociology' (1988: 131). Proposals to fundamentally rethink community studies would not have been needed had all been well with the existing body of work; evidently it was not. This chapter will explore the criticisms of community studies, and the responses that have been made to them in recent years, under five broad themes. These are that community studies are variously too parochial, too static, too positive, too descriptive and too prosaic.

5.1 Are community studies too parochial?

The essence of the first criticism is that community studies focus too much on the specifics of the community under investigation and too little on wider relevance, so that their concerns are 'merely of local interest' (Mills 1959: 368). The network map of kinship connections in Rees's study of rural Wales showed only the linkages within the parish boundary, conveying the impression of an inward-looking community unconnected to the outside world. Rees could not entirely avoid acknowledging the growing influence of wider forces, such as the pull of employment elsewhere, but although the discussion of outmigration offered something of a corrective, the principal focus on the local perspective was reasserted by the comment that 'the bonds of kinship and locality retain their hold upon those who have gone away, and several have returned home to retire' (1951: 76, 148). The disruptive impact on local communities of outside forces presented a serious challenge to researchers whose primary interest was in recording the details of a place and the distinctive way of life of the people who lived there. Stacey, who also used network mapping to trace connections within her fieldwork site, found her remit 'to study the social structure and culture of Banbury' so dominated by immigration (as people from elsewhere made those born in the town a minority) that traditional 'Banbury society' (1960: v, 17) was becoming progressively less distinctive, and thus less researchable. By the time of the restudy, external influences on the town's social order had further fragmented it to such an extent that 'no single hierarchy of social class or social status' (Stacey et al. 1975: 132) could be found, and Stacey (1969) concluded that the concept of 'community' was of doubtful usefulness.

The titles of many classic community studies do reinforce the impression that the principal purpose of the research was to capture particular expressions of local social life: *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (Williams 1956), *The People of Ship Street* (Kerr 1956) and *The Tory Islanders* (Fox 1978) serve as examples. These and other studies of communities that stood outside of the modern mainstream could be justified as attempts to follow Lévi-Strauss and record 'cultures sadly but rapidly on the wane' (Scheper-Hughes 2001: xxvii) before the opportunity had disappeared. Such studies offer insights into a bygone age, and although the ways of life described may appear parochial by today's standards, there is still value

in the research record that they provide. Parochial in this sense does not necessarily mean unworthwhile, because it furnishes a point of contrast (Stacey et al. 1975: 3). It is interesting and useful to know about remote Gosforth as it was before the establishment of the atomic energy station in the neighbouring parish at Sellafield (Williams 1956: 229); to be aware what traditional working-class family routines were like in slum areas of central Liverpool before urban redevelopment (Kerr 1958); and to be reminded that past patterns of community life in rural Ireland could vary from those described in Arensberg and Kimball's classic account (Fox 1978: xi). Local studies do not have to be of only local interest.

A second response to the charge of community studies' parochialism is to note the growth in studies that have explored international and even global connectedness. Such a perspective was already present early on in the key Chicago School study of migration to the United States from Poland (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). In addition to examples discussed above that extended this theme such as the British in Spain (O'Reilly 2000a), Welsh settlement in Argentina (Williams 1991) and the Bangladeshis in London (Foster 1999; Dench, Gavron and Young 2006) and Swansea (Charles, Davies and Harris 2008), the idea of transnational communities is advanced by Peggy Levitt (2001) through research into migration flows between the Dominican Republic and Boston, Massachusetts. Her book, *The Transnational Villagers*, implicitly develops Gans's (1962b) theme of urban villagers, which had also been based on Boston fieldwork. The patterns of movement back and forth between the two places that Levitt traces involve people 'keeping feet in both worlds'. This is not only the familiar story of migrant workers sending back remittances to kinsfolk in their country of origin; people's active engagement in 'social relationships that span two settings' and their sense of membership of a transnational community that obliges them to 'do right' by that community are also described. Levitt's reference to 'global culture at the local level' (2001: 21, 10–11) reminds us that local does not have to be parochial. A rather different study makes the same point through an image of global connectedness linking a mile-long street in London (Walworth Road) with the more than twenty countries of origin in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas of the shopkeepers who have settled there (Hall 2012: 34). The contrast with Rees's parish-bound network could not be starker.

The criticism of community studies as parochial raises the key methodological issue of the unit of analysis that is employed. There are many

instances of 'community' being treated as synonymous with a particular place, sometimes as large as a town or as small as a street, with parishes, villages, neighbourhoods or islands providing other geographically bounded foci of attention. Pahl grappled with this issue on Sheppey, where the survey that he commissioned provided an overview of the whole island but 'could not pick up the contours of small, relatively self-contained social worlds'. He was mindful 'that these distinctive residential areas very often have different cultural styles and traditions', which would have been revealed by 'an intensive survey of a few streets' had his team undertaken one. In one place he refers to the island as 'a small community', in another to the island's 'communities' plural (1984: 182, 173, 155). Douglas Harper has been critical of community research projects that take for granted that community relationships are contained within administrative boundaries, noting that this is a problematic assumption for the types of research he has undertaken. Studying the tramp community whose members are constantly on the move led him to conclude that 'community, in this case, more accurately described bundles of cultural expectations than populations in a location'. He learned the criteria by which membership of the tramp community could be identified, and that sociologists who equated homeless people with the permanent population of 'skid row' were operating with extremely partial understanding of the community. His next study was likewise provocative, focusing on one rural mechanic, 'Willie', in upstate New York and the network of reciprocal relationships built up around him. Harper treats it as a normative community, notwithstanding the fact that it would not be 'discernible through censuses' (1992: 143, 144, 146). Both projects are instances of community case studies, and both force the recognition that community relationships go beyond bureaucratic categories, and invite us to rethink what we understand by a 'case'.

Harper's study of Willie's network uses a way of getting at community that is parochial only up to the point that the reader realizes that this is a case study of resilience in the face of change being wrought in a traditional world (1987: 166). One individual's story can speak for a much broader body of people, just as Pahl used Linda and Jim to do. In a different fashion, but following the same principle, is Wellman's use of his own engagement with the virtual world to illustrate what can be learned from the method of tracing ego-centric networks, such as his involvement in Twitter (Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev 2011). This is one way to 'build a theory of community' (Harper 1992: 139), moving from the individual case towards larger

categories. Another approach is to build comparison into research design so that points of similarity and difference can be drawn out from different communities in which the same methods of investigation have been employed. Whereas the original 'Ashton' study presented an undifferentiated picture, the restudy by Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) reported on its findings broken down into four localities that presented variations on the culture of mining communities. St Leger and Gillespie's (1991) comparison of care in three areas of Belfast, Butler and Robson's (2003) exploration of the meaning of gentrification in six parts of inner London, Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2005) study of place, neighbourhood and community in four areas of Greater Manchester, Corcoran and her colleagues' use of four Dublin suburbs to convey suburban diversity and Marilyn Porter's (1993) contrasting accounts of women's work in three Newfoundland communities are further examples of this approach. Rosser and Harris's (1965) analyses of the contrasts between the four neighbourhoods in Swansea had already demonstrated the value of this technique. It was used again to good effect in the restudy (Charles, Davies and Harris 2008) to show the city's diversity, in the process providing an effective counter to the criticism that community studies produce only parochial knowledge.

5.2 Are community studies too static?

Alongside the criticism that community studies focus on people in only one particular place that is of limited interest is the related criticism that they focus on only one moment in time, and in doing so fail to capture the essential dynamism of community relationships. This criticism was advanced by scholars who associated community studies with a functionalist approach to social research. This treated phenomena under investigation as integrated wholes whose various parts were in a state of balance within a social system that had a tendency towards equilibrium. Thomas Eriksen has highlighted the powerful tradition in social and cultural anthropology of emphasizing 'the study of interrelationships and sociocultural wholes' (2001: 257), and this undoubtedly left its mark on many classic community studies. The *Yankee City* study treated community as a "'working whole" in which each part had definite functions which had to be performed, or substitutes acquired, if the whole society was to maintain itself' (Warner and Lund 1941: 14). The reorientation required to

appreciate that 'societies or cultures are not tightly integrated, unchanging or closed systems' (Eriksen 2001: 257) took a long time. It involved numerous innovations in both theory and method, within anthropology and beyond. These developments have demonstrated the capacity of community studies to accommodate both movement and change.

The mobility of Harper's (1982) tramp community and Levitt's (2001) transnational community discussed in the previous section have echoes in a number of other studies. These include Alice Goffman's 'fugitive community' (2014: 195) of young black men in urban America, Judith Okely's (1983) traveller-gypsies whose preference is not to lead a settled life in one place, and the less obvious but still real mobilities of Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor's housing estate residents whose lives were characterized less by immobility than by 'flux' (2011: 180). Another example would be the networks of musical connection that took Ruth Finnegan's new town residents away from their immediate neighbours during their leisure time and along 'pathways in urban living' (1989: ch.21) towards others with shared cultural tastes. Appreciation of the significance of mobility can be found in earlier studies, such as Rosser and Harris's account of 'families in a mobile society', which explored the connections between social and geographical mobility as social trends unfolded, taking people away from 'the Cohesive Society: small in scale, limited and narrow in its social horizons, homogeneous in social composition, familiar and familistic, with a strong community consciousness generated by common residence and common necessity' (1965: 15). This study concluded that family and kinship networks within communities could adjust to emerging patterns of geographical mobility, engaging with the ideas of the functionalist theorist Talcott Parsons in the process. The restudy also directed attention to 'continuity in the face of change' and cast doubt on the idea that 'the "local community" has disappeared' (2008: 58, 228). The earlier study had pointed out that the traditional working-class communities that had grown up around iron and steel works and coal mines had been made up of migrants from the surrounding countryside and beyond; geographical mobility had been present before the mobile society.

Conducting a restudy is one way in which researchers can rebut the criticism that community studies are too static. Community restudies go back to the Lynds' return to Muncie to produce *Middletown in Transition* (Lynd and Lynd 1937), and other titles also convey their capacity to capture shifts that have occurred in the interim: *Power, Persistence and Change*

(Stacey et al. 1975), *Affluent Workers Revisited* (Devine 1992), *Social Change, Suburban Lives* (Bryson and Winter 1999), *The New East End* (Dench, Gavron and Young 2006) and *Families in Transition* (Charles, Davies and Harris 2008). Returning to a community has the potential to reveal the dynamic nature of community relationships. Such work has to confront the challenge of differentiating social change in community relationships from changes to the analytical frameworks used to capture them – what Colin Bell in his discussion of the Banbury restudy referred to as the distinction between ‘social change’ and ‘sociological change’ (1977: 60). This is an issue even where the return to the field happens within only a few years of the original study, but is obviously all the greater when longer periods have elapsed. Nor should researchers fall into the trap of looking only for change in community relationships, because dynamic processes can result in the reproduction of social arrangements, as the reference to ‘persistence’ in the Banbury study implies. The comment by Charles and her colleagues that continuity in family practices constitutes their Swansea restudy’s ‘most striking finding’ (2008: 224) makes this point well.

A sense of history, including continuities as well as changes, can also be conveyed by community studies that include historical context. Pahl devotes a whole chapter to doing this for Sheppey (1984: ch.6), as do Goodall and Campbell for the history over two centuries of Muncie’s black community (Lassiter et al. 2004: ch.2). Vidich and Bensman cover a similar time frame in describing the ‘social, economic and historical setting’ of Springdale (2000: ch.1), as does Jeremy Tunstall’s (1969: ch.1) account of the development of the Hull fishing community; other examples of such contextualization are Blokland’s account of ‘the origins of Hillesluis’ in Rotterdam as ‘a heterogeneous working-class district’ (2003: 21), Max Farrar’s ‘brief history of migration to Chapeltown’ (2002: ch.3) that sets the scene for multi-ethnic relations in Leeds between people who had moved there from the Caribbean, South Asia, Eastern Europe and across the four nations of the UK, and Levitt’s (2001: ch.1) historical narrative of migration across the Americas. History is even more central to Williams’s (1991) analysis of the Welsh in Patagonia, and in Harper’s narration of change in rural communities in the half century since the archived photographs that provide the historical record on which he focuses were taken. The visual record of farm life in the 1940s provides an insight into a lost age when neighbours’ co-operation in undertaking work was not only rational from an economic point of view but also had a ritual quality to it, and

'integrated the group, reaffirmed collective values, and created the basis for shared understanding of experience.' Harper acknowledges Durkheim's ideas in this discussion of how the rituals of shared work reinforced bonds of community 'outside the larger culture of individualistic, competitive capitalism' (2001: 181). He also recognizes the need to explain how such a dramatic change could occur in such a short period, historically speaking, and does so by reference to how technological innovation had unfolded in the American context.

Not only are community studies able to accommodate change, it can also be argued that they illuminate large-scale processes of change unfolding in particular community contexts (Crow 2002b). These include the impact of various social scientific themes such as industrialization (Williams 1991), deindustrialization (Harris 1987; Pahl 1984; Pappas 1989; Wight 1993), proletarianization (Williams 1981), militarization (Giarchi 1984), secularization (Littlejohn 1963), medicalization (Cornwell 1984), inferiorization (Dempsey 1992), privatization (Blokland 2003; Devine 1992), counterurbanization (Benson 2011), suburbanization (Berger 1968; Bryson and Winter 1999; Gans 1967; Keller 2003; Richards 1990; Seeley, Sim and Loosley 1963), Jamaicanization (McKenzie 2015) and globalization (Eade 1997; Foster 1999; Levitt 2001; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005). In the development of such analyses, researchers are able to draw on the findings of previous generations of community studies but also on the growing body of work about community relationships in times past that oral historians have produced. These studies are important not only for their intrinsic interest but also as a source of research questions that comparative perspectives throw up. Trevor Lummis's account of East Anglian fishing communities around 1900 contains the telling observation that these were working-class communities possessed of solidarity largely through the 'mutual aid ... constructed and operated by women' (1985: 167). The broader companion study in which Lummis was also involved makes the related point about women's 'crucial role in social change' (Thompson, Wailey and Lummis 1983: 181), that it is mothers who are the primary influence on the attitudes and understandings of new generations. Lynn Jamieson and Claire Toynbee's study of growing up in early-twentieth-century rural Scotland ends by reflecting on how things are different now, and why, with the arrival of 'the incomer population of migrants from the towns' (1992: 217) constituting a strong element in any explanation of change.

5.3 Are community studies too positive?

One of the key arguments in favour of community studies advanced by Lodewijk Brunt is that they allow researchers to get beyond the 'public face' that is 'presented to the outside world' (2001: 84), and to access what lies behind. This is a contested claim. Critics of community studies argue the opposite, that there is a tendency for researchers to be persuaded by partial and romanticized accounts of how community relationships operate, that is, to be taken in by the myths presented to them. The criticism of the ICS for directing attention to the warmth of the traditional working-class community of East London, and in particular for eulogizing the matriarchal 'Mum' character as the pivotal figure in such communities (Cornwell 1984: 24), has parallels with criticisms of oral historians being misled by the selectivity of their respondents' memories. Not for nothing did Payne cast doubt on community researchers' capacity to capture the less attractive sides of community about which people are more reluctant to speak: violence and conflict, prejudice and intolerance, inequality and exclusion. As a consequence, Payne writes, the result 'is a sociological portrait of communities that is a flattering one' (1996: 23). Such overly positive accounts may be attributable to poor practice by researchers who gravitate towards respondents with whom they feel more comfortable, but it may also reflect a bias inherent in the very concept of 'community', which Raymond Williams has described as a 'warmly persuasive word' that 'seems never to be used unfavourably' (1983: 76). These are both plausible reasons why community studies may present their subject matter too positively.

At one level the charge of community studies being too positive is easily contested. The titles of several monographs include the word 'conflict' (Dench, Gavron and Young 2006, Foster 1999, Rex and Moore 1967), and others carry indications of social problems such as 'dispute' (Waddington, Wykes and Critcher 1991), *Turf Wars* (Modan 2007), 'redundancy' (Harris 1987), 'poverty' (Coates and Silburn 1973), 'social exclusion' (Smith 2005), 'decline' (Brody 1973), 'ruination' (Mah 2012) and *Endless Pressure* (Pryce 1979). Arguably the bravest choice in relation to titles was Scheper-Hughes's inclusion of 'schizophrenia' in her book on rural Ireland, given the stigma attached to mental illness. Prompted by a desire 'to bring out of the shadows a hidden dimension of social life' that constituted 'a

collective social tragedy', the study examines 'the costs of loyalty to family and village' that fell on those left behind in the oppressive world in which the demands of 'family, Church and community' placed an intolerable burden on many individuals. The opinion that the Durkheimian concept of 'anomie' described 'the emotional state of a majority of Ballybran villagers' (2001: 46, 33, 50, 122) was not judgemental, but a statement of just how problematic local social relations were. This was quite the opposite of an unduly positive representation. It stood in sharp contrast to 'the harmony of the rural social system' (Brody 1973: 6) that Arensberg and Kimball's classic study of the Irish countryside had celebrated, inappropriately in the eyes of several later researchers.

What is true of some titles is even more true of the substance of many studies. Pahl's (1984) Sheppey study is an account of social polarization, and in *The Other Side of Middletown* Lassiter and his colleagues (2004) tell a story of racial separateness, if not segregation. Both of these sets of findings appear to contradict the essence of community as a phenomenon of positive togetherness, but they make greater sense when the capacity of communities to accommodate division is explored further. Ken Dempsey's study of *Smalltown* in rural Australia notes that residents hold a favourable image of themselves as 'one big happy family', but it goes on to show that this rhetoric is at odds with the presence of 'marginality and antagonism'. This extends beyond familiar categories of deviants such as 'no-hopers' (people with problematic relationships to alcohol, gambling and personal hygiene), and 'blockies' (people in substandard housing and in a precarious economic situation), to include the 'marginalization of non-deviants' such as newcomers who experience difficulty breaking into established social networks, and the elderly. The reality of life in *Smalltown* is thus at odds with the professed belief in 'egalitarianism and the Gemeinschaft-like characteristics of caring, fairness and honesty' (1990: chs 3-4, 53). *Smalltown* residents perceive life there to be 'superior physically, socially and emotionally to life in many other places, and especially to life in the city' (Dempsey 1992: 25). This is not an isolated finding. It echoes, for example, the discrepancies that Vidich and Bensman found between the images of themselves as 'just plain folks' who are 'all equal' that the residents of Springdale held and the realities of division expressed through the 'universal derision' with which 'the shack people' (2000: ch.2, 69) are regarded. Vidich and Bensman's message was received no better by the townspeople of Springdale than Scheper-Hughes's had been by

her villagers; in both cases community members were unhappy with their negative representation.

Failure of communities in practice to meet aspirations of togetherness and mutual supportiveness ought not to be that surprising a finding given the potential of community relationships, either present or past, to be idealized. Unrealistically positive ideas about community have been fostered by the use of idealizations of the past as 'a stick to beat the present' (Williams 1975: 21), that is, a point of comparison to highlight today's purportedly lamentable state by emphasizing the theme of the 'loss of community' (Lee and Newby 1983: ch.4). Scrutiny of the historical record has raised awkward questions for the loss of community thesis by unearthing evidence of the less attractive features of violence, intolerance, hostility towards outsiders and resistance to change. Traditional working-class community life was not all reciprocity and solidarity (Crow and Allan 1994: ch.2). Blokland reports that in 'the allegedly cohesive working-class neighbourhood' of early-twentieth-century Hillesluis, 'neighbour relations used to be inevitable and exacted a heavy toll if they were bad'. Paradoxically, she suggests, the loss of community thesis can be inverted for some present-day individuals: 'Now that people are less dependent on fellow neighbourhood residents for social support, and networks are less locally embedded, some people have managed to develop intimate bonds with fellow neighbourhood residents that used to be harder to establish' (2003: 27, 14–15, 214). The message here is that the symbolism of community is open to reworking in each generation, and it follows that idealization of community relationships is not restricted to the past.

O'Reilly's (2000a) study of British migrants to Spain provides a good example of how belief in the loss of community in their country of origin is compatible with a conviction that positive community relationships await them in their new home. Compared to the participants in O'Reilly's study Michaela Benson's British migrants to rural France were more middle-class, but they were similarly motivated by 'their imaginings of a better way of life', in this case revolving more around integration into the local host community. They are described as pursuing 'an imagined community' that was expected to 'provide them with the antidote to their malaise with life in contemporary Britain' (2011: 80, 45). The story of discrepancies between expectations and lived realities has much in common with other research findings about the pursuit of community as an ongoing quest of migrants to belong to their new environment. The literature on relations

between community insiders and outsiders is by no means all positive, in the sense that outsiders can find themselves excluded and stigmatized, or at least accepted as full members of their new communities only after a probationary period, sometimes quite prolonged (Crow and Maclean 2013). This phenomenon is most extensively documented for place-based communities, but it has also been noted for internet communities (Hornsby 2013), among others. When prolonged exclusion is encountered by outsiders they may retreat into an encapsulated community, set apart from the mainstream (Anwar 1985: ch.11), and this fate may also befall local populations where in-migration is numerically dominant (Newby et al. 1978: 194). Community studies that report on such segregation cannot be regarded as unduly positive.

5.4 Are community studies too descriptive?

The difficulties with theory that community researchers have encountered are well known. Work in the Chicago School tradition was criticized on the grounds that it often 'consisted of lengthy, detailed descriptions which resulted in very small amounts of theory, if any' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 15). Conversely, Tönnies's distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* was framed at the very general level that characterized much nineteenth-century theorization, and its simplification into the rural–urban continuum had become unsustainable by the 1960s. Functionalist theories of communities as 'natural' wholes fared little better, since the underpinning concept of equilibrium meant that they had difficulty in dealing with either conflict or change. Elias's comment that 'the theoretical aspects of community studies are less advanced than the empirical work in that field' (1974: ix) underplayed the problem, perhaps because he was mindful that his own approach offered one solution. In their analysis of Winston Parva, Elias and Scotson's challenge had been to account for the surprising fact that 'the inhabitants of one part thought of themselves as vastly superior to those of the other'. Elias saw in Scotson's MA thesis research 'a vehicle for the development of his own theorising' (Mennell 1992: 116). The theory of what Elias called the 'established-outsider figuration' had applicability far beyond this one suburb, and related to the processes by which social superiority and inferiority are reproduced, including the acceptance of this state of affairs

by those marked out as inferior. The exercise of power to exclude and to stigmatize, and to excuse the presence of shortcomings among members of the dominant group, appeared sufficiently familiar from other studies that Elias could even countenance the model containing elements that were 'universal' (Elias 1994: xvii, xvi, xvii). Elias's recommended focus on 'the specific interdependencies between people who form with each other that kind of figuration that we call a community' (1974: xvii) has some similarity to the analysis of the structuring of social relationships through networks, and the conclusion that the people involved resembled 'puppets on a string' (1994: lii) confirms the importance attached by this approach to structure.

Elias's approach has not in practice been a particularly prominent influence on more recent community research, at least not directly. It can, however, be regarded as having some effect through the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and the development of thinking about gender. Elias's attention to the interdependencies between members of communities did highlight the necessary connectedness between both 'I' and 'we' (1991: Pt III) and 'we' and 'they' (1978: 130), but Bourdieu's attention to distinction has more resonance with the focus on the appeal of community's exclusivity. It has been noted already that the quest to live among 'people like us' comes through strongly in studies of middle-class mobility (Benson 2011; Butler and Robson 2003; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005), but the desire to share residential space with people perceived to be similar in terms of cultural capital is a more general one. In the final publication from the Sheppey project, Pahl and Wallace quote the working-class participant who was unhappy with the fact that 'a lot of the people round here, they are not our type of people' (1988: 139) and interpret it as contemporary evidence of the familiar distinction between rough and respectable lifestyles. Other studies that draw on Bourdieu include Warwick and Littlejohn's deployment of the idea of 'local cultural capital' (1992: 15), Wight's analysis of 'taste' (1993: 121), Lennart Roselund's account of 'distinction' expressed as 'spatial differentiation' (2009: 304), Charles and her colleagues' focus on the role of social reproduction in understanding 'processes of change and continuity' (2008: 230); Scheper-Hughes's (2001: 43–6) comparison of her fieldwork site with Bourdieu's Béarn; Simon Charlesworth's (2000) exploration of working-class stigmatization; and Lisa McKenzie's use of the concept of 'habitus' to help in understanding 'how negative namings and stigmatised positions can be absorbed into an identity' (2015: 206). It is

not difficult to find echoes of Elias's thinking in any of these analyses, but the implication is that Bourdieu's concepts take them further.

The influence of Elias can also be traced on the reorientation of community studies in relation to gender. The observation in *The Established and the Outsiders* that 'it is difficult to imagine communities without women and children, though one can imagine communities almost without men' (Elias and Scotson 1994: 146–7) gave impetus, along with other prompts such as that from Frankenberg (1976), to researchers concerned to explain community's gendered character. At one level what was required was an updating of accounts in the context of the growth of women's employment, as noted for example by Bryson and Winter's (1999) restudy. Bennett Berger's working-class suburb had been 'manless during the day' (1968: 6), but Lyn Richards found dual-income households meant that *Nobody's Home*. She also found that the move away from the male breadwinner type of household that had been predominant in the era of the classic community studies did not herald the changed domestic power relations that might have been expected to follow. Gendered differences in labour market opportunities and rewards stood as one obstacle to greater equality between partners, but so did the fact that 'home' continued to mean 'very different things to men and women', and the same point applied to 'community'. In relation to the latter, Richards criticized previous researchers for overlooking 'women's local relationships as work', and highlighted in particular the importance of women's contributions to everyday neighbouring and 'network management' (1990: 135, 180, 182). In Newfoundland, Porter was discovering 'how invisible much women's work was, especially caring or health-related work' (1993: 130). These studies took Pahl's (1984) extension of the definition of 'work' one step further, and the focus on neighbouring chimed with developments elsewhere.

Abrams's investigations into neighbouring are particularly pertinent to the discussion of the role of theory in community research. His findings included women's greater involvement in neighbouring and also that men had a different style of relating to their neighbours that involved 'help with specific problems' that contrasted with the deeper relationships cultivated by women. Elias might have understood this as evidence that what he called 'the We-I balance' (1991: Pt III) is gendered. Following Durkheim, Abrams regarded solidarity as 'the most interesting element of social relationships' but also like Durkheim found it a difficult concept to operationalize, unsure whether to focus on solidarity as 'intensity, style of transaction,

density, “multiplexity”, range, frequency of contact, location of contact and clustering’ (Bulmer 1986: 76, 33–4). A person could have extensive contact with a neighbour without the content of the interaction necessarily having great significance, for example, and the motivation to engage with neighbours could be more or less altruistic. Abrams had already grappled with these challenges in his study of communes with McCulloch, which sought to explore the conditions under which ‘people want to do what they have got to do’. This study pointed in addition to the methodological conclusion that attempting to get at these issues through a questionnaire was ‘naïve’, and that better-quality data came through the development of friendships which generated ‘more detailed, intimate and probably reliable information’ (1976: 154, 222, 226), albeit that the use of these data in turn raised the problem of consent. This problem contributed to Abrams’s conclusion about research into neighbour networks that they may be hard ‘to get to know from within’ (Bulmer 1986: 251), but the thrust of his argument was nevertheless that analysis of networks offered a promising way forward in the study of informal social relations (Bulmer 1985).

There are plenty of examples of recent community studies using the concept of social networks, often in conjunction with the concept of social capital (Blokland and Savage 2008; Charles, Davies and Harris 2008; Corcoran, Gray and Peillon 2010, Levitt 2001, Phillipson et al. 2001, Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005), or related concepts such as social support (Richards 1990). These help to meet the first part of the criticism of the community studies tradition as ‘atheoretical and uncumulative’ (Pahl 1980: 1), but the second element is less easily countered. Leaving aside that not all studies that employed the concept of social networks had generated their data through social network analysis, which has developed rigorous and sophisticated methodological procedures (Scott 2012), the problem that the concept of social capital has roots in the work of Bourdieu, Putnam and Coleman and that these theoretical frameworks are not readily compatible has to be confronted (Fine 2010: ch.3). Put another way, while it may be accepted that community studies have previously been guilty of following an atheoretical approach, there can also be dangers in adopting theoretical ideas that point in different directions because of their diverse origins in traditions of thought that can be traced back respectively to Marx, de Tocqueville and rational choice theory.

For some researchers the attraction of social capital and social network approaches is their openness to quantification, and thus the measurement

of the patterns of reciprocal exchange. However, analyses of such phenomena are only as good as the data on which they are based, and more sophisticated concepts alone would not have helped Pahl when both survey and interview data from the Sheppey project 'suggested that people typically claimed that they did more informal work for others than they received themselves' (1984: 250). This finding is unconvincing because, in the round, giving and taking must balance, but it is a common finding nevertheless (Crow, Allan and Summers 2002: 139). Pahl's explanation in terms of people's desire not to appear dependent means that the familiar methodological challenge remains of what people say that they do not necessarily corresponding to what they actually do. It does not follow that researchers are unable to draw any conclusions, and Corcoran and her colleagues (2010) report variations in patterns of social capital in their four fieldwork sites, while Charles and her colleagues are confident enough to declare that, for Swansea, 'claims about the decline of social capital ... are, at the very least, premature' (2008: 227). Furthermore, Savage and his colleagues found the concepts of social capital and networks useful in reworking old ideas about community into the notion of 'elective belonging' (2005: 29), which they argue is better suited to understand attachment in the age of globalization.

5.5 Are community studies too prosaic?

The working definition of community studies with which this book began focuses on ordinary people's everyday lives, and it is worth noting that the participants of Savage and his colleagues' (2005: 11) research, and many other studies, emphasize their ordinariness. The stuff of 'community' is necessarily routine and mundane, and community researchers will seek to convey this, but this is not to everyone's taste. Mills, possessing a distinctive style of presenting his ideas (Crow 2005: ch.6), was dismissive in his assessment: 'The endless "community studies" of the sociologists often read like badly written novels' (Mills 1959: 358). It is relevant to note that Pahl considered presenting his Sheppey research as a novel or a film rather than a conventional academic book as the best way of conveying 'the reality of ordinary people's lives' (1984: 8). To this end he included ten photographs of the island and its people, and in doing so followed an established tradition of community studies (Fox 1978; Gans 1962b; Rees

1951; Rex and Moore 1967; Thompson, Wailey and Lummis 1983; Tunstall 1969; Williamson 1982). This tradition of including visual images has continued, and arguably grown in popularity. The centrality of photographs to the work of Lassiter and his colleagues (2004) and of Harper (1987, 2001) has been noted already, but they are also used effectively to give a fuller sense of people and place by many others (Baumann 1996; Benson 2011; Bryson and Winter 1999; Cohen 1987; Corcoran, Gray and Peillon 2010; Dench, Gavron and Young 2006; Finnegan 1989; Foster 1999; Jamieson and Toynbee 1992; Keller 2003; Low 2003; McKenzie 2015; Mah 2012; Modan 2007; Mumford and Power 2003; Nettle 2015; Pappas 1989; Phillipson et al. 2001; Rogaly and Taylor 2011; Rosenlund 2009; Scheper-Hughes 2001; Warwick and Littlejohn 1992). Photographs help to bring the text of community studies to life, and so fit in with the ambition of community researchers to make their work engaging and accessible.

The issue at stake here is the criticism of academic work that courts popularity at the expense of rigour. It was noted in Chapter 2 that the negative evaluation of the output of the ICS for being impressionistic contributed to the decline of community studies in the old tradition, and this tension over the purpose of inquiry has not disappeared. The argument developed in Chapter 4 around efforts to combine research that is both useful and interesting has relevance to the most famous ICS publication, *Family and Kinship in East London*, which had sold over half a million copies by 1992 (Crow and Allan 1994: 24) and was brought out in a new edition fifty years on from the date of the original. In their introduction to the new edition, Kate Gavron (one of the authors of the restudy, *The New East End*, that had come out the previous year) and Geoff Mulgan celebrated Young and Willmott's 'plain language' which contrasted with 'the cultivated obscurity of so much of the sociology of the succeeding decades' (2007: vii). Moreover, it does not follow that the achievement of accessibility has to be at the expense of rigour; and Gavron and Mulgan note how the research for the book was innovative by the standards of the time, including input from Phyllis Willmott (Peter's wife). They also point out that the book was written for an audience of policymakers as well as general lay readers and academics. Arguably it had greater influence on 'strategies of social action rather than ... social research' (Dench, Gavron and Young 2006: 14). One of the lessons for the design of social research was the value of ensuring that the capacity exists to follow up unexpected findings. In their introduction to

the 1986 edition of the book, Young and Willmott recall how the original plan had been to investigate housing policy, but 'as happens so often with research, more interesting than what we were seeking was what we stumbled on' (2007: xiv), namely the kinship network that came to be the project's central focus.

Relating how the research process led to unexpected findings can provide the basis of a compelling narrative. There is an element of Young and Willmott taking readers into their confidence by admitting that their research focus had been hit upon 'more or less accidentally' (1957: xvi). Scheper-Hughes has recalled how she 'did not go to Ireland with any intention of seeking out madness', and that 'certain serendipitous events altered the original focus' (2001: 22–3) of her study, including unplanned encounters. Hochschild reports that her participants were 'part of a community I did not expect to find' (1973: xiv). St Leger and Gillespie describe their study aims being as much 'to encounter serendipitous findings as to provide a test of specific hypotheses' (1991: 163), while Pahl admits that at the early stages of his fieldwork he was following 'a rather confused idea' (1984: 9) of the informal economic activity that he would go on to write about in *Divisions of Labour* only after a prolonged period of reassessment. Harper has commented that, 'Sociologists are probably always strangers, in some sense, to the communities that they live in' (1987: 8), and their reports on those communities allow the reader to share the experience of discovering things about people and practices other than their own. Gans had gone to the West End of Boston because he 'wanted to know what a slum was like, and how it felt to live in one' and, mindful of his outsider status, 'tried to describe the way of life of lower level people as they might describe it themselves if they were sociologists' (1962b: ix, x). Such work can be a revelation. Maurice Stein argues that it has the capacity to leave readers 'enthralled', explained by 'the sheer descriptive appeal of the community study' (1964: 96, 97) and the opportunity to become familiar with other people's experience that it provides.

Mills's unfavourable comparison of community studies to novels was reworked in a more qualified fashion by Ruth Glass. Her much-cited reference to 'the poor sociologist's substitute for a novel' applied, she said, to the genre 'too often', but was not universal, since her judgement was that 'distinguished' community studies had also been written, such as the Lynds' *Middletown* books. The problem was that the analytical social scientific element was 'usually missing', leaving reports on research too

rooted in the particular case and too little engaged with general processes; to undertake a community study well 'requires a rare combination of empirical and literary skills of a high order' (1989: 86). Written in the 1960s, Glass's critique raised common concerns of the time about comparability and generalizability, but did not rule out the possibility of these concerns being addressed. Indeed, some researchers at the time were doing just this. Rosser and Harris acknowledge 'most valuable help' from the ICS with the planning of their research in Swansea, recognizing comparison to be 'a central necessity for all sociological investigation'. Their report may have begun with an extended account of one case study, that of the Hughes family of Morriston that originated from a meeting 'by chance' early on in the fieldwork, but they go on to set out the need to consider the book's key themes 'in a more general manner' and they do so using a range of different types of data including survey data. They also include the interviewing schedule as an appendix, and a further appendix on 'the representativeness of the sample' (1965: 33, 4, 18, 309–22, 323–6). Other examples of community studies that have used appendices to provide detailed information about the study's methodology include Abrams and McCulloch (1976); Bulmer (1986); Charles, Davies and Harris (2008); Corcoran, Gray and Peillon (2010); Dench, Gavron and Young (2006); Gans (1962b, 1967); Goldthorpe et al. (1969); Holme (1985); Jamieson and Toynbee (1992); Keller (2003); Kerr (1958); Levitt (2001); Lynd and Lynd (1929); Mumford and Power (2003); Newby et al. (1978); Rex and Moore (1967); St Leger and Gillespie (1991); Scheper-Hughes (2001); Seeley et al. (1956); Stacey (1960); Stacey et al. (1975); Tunstall (1969); Wallace (1987) and Whyte (1955). It is only relatively recently that archiving of such material has become standard, and in this sense community studies may be considered among the pioneers of the practice of providing technical details of how social scientific research has been undertaken for other researchers to learn from and in some cases replicate.

The co-operation between different researchers allowed Rosser and Harris to build on Young and Willmott's (1957: 16) finding that twenty-one of forty-five couples began married life living with either the groom's or more frequently the bride's parents, and to report that for a larger sample of 620 Swansea couples, 61.7 per cent had done so in the two decades to 1960. They also showed that starting married life with one or other set of parents was the case for the majority of middle-class as well as working-class couples, and that the percentage of newly-wed couples living on their

own declined to 31 per cent from the figure of 52 per cent that applied to the preceding period 1914–39 (Rosser and Harris 1965: 250). Four decades on (reporting 2002 data), Charles and her colleagues found Swansea's extended family households to have 'declined to such an extent as to be insignificant' (2008: 188), constituting a remarkable transformation even without the additional consideration of the shift that occurred over the period from tenancy to owner-occupation as the principal tenure type. It is an even more remarkable change from the situation described by Madeline Kerr where married daughters living with their Mum was an 'ideal custom' (1958: 14). Anthea Holme's (1985: 9) retracing of Young and Willmott's footsteps in East London pointed (via a different indicator) to the same broad direction of travel, with 17 per cent of her one hundred young families sharing accommodation with relatives or friends. Another example of an issue open to comparative investigation through the use of quantitative data is that of length of time a person lives in the same property. Charles and her colleagues (2008: 59) discovered an increase (compared to what Rosser and Harris had found) to over one-third of their respondents who had lived at their present address for over twenty years, and a similar finding for Luton was reported by Devine (1992: 77) for the mobile workers first studied by Goldthorpe and his colleagues (1969). Pahl was able to contrast this with the 'high level of intra-Island dwelling mobility' (1984: 183) that his survey had discovered. He argued that it reflected a distinctive attitude of Sheppey people towards the use of housing improvement to pursue upward social mobility. It can therefore be intriguing if repeating a research question throws up different findings.

This is not to say that community studies researchers should have responded to the criticism of being like second-rate novel writers by adopting a standardized template. As Brunt has observed, community studies 'remind us time and again of the subjectiveness and onesidedness of social perception' (2001: 84), including that of researchers, and we would expect reports of findings to vary. By having leeway to follow up different things that struck them as interesting and engaging, we have the benefit of Keller mentioning that in the early years of the Twin Rivers development the social events included 'Husband Appreciation Night' (2003: 113), something another researcher might have overlooked. Similarly we have Blokland's perceptiveness to credit for relating the story from her respondent of how in Hillesluis in the first half of the twentieth century the division between Catholics and Protestants was reproduced

in tensions about trade union organization, with Protestant workers being stigmatized as 'the EVC, the Eternal Vacation Club, of course that wasn't its real name but we called it that ... they had strikes all the time' (2003: 137). A third example of the potential for community studies to be more poetic than prosaic is Middletown resident Dolores Rhinehart's elaboration in the film that accompanies Lassiter and his colleagues' (2004) book of her point about the need for people on low incomes to manage money carefully: 'Don't drink champagne if you're on a beer budget!'. A variation on this theme is the use by Bill Williamson of his grandfather's expression, 'See to your needs first, then your wants' (1982: v) as a way of introducing him as a Northumberland coal miner from a bygone age with a life story of contemporary relevance.

Such vignettes can be extended. Williamson's book uses the life story of his grandfather James Brown as a means for presenting 'a biographical study of social change in mining', and 'to show that biography is a form of writing and analysis appropriate to the study of social change' (1982: 1). Pahl's account of Linda and Jim towards the end of his book also sets out to follow Mills in linking biography and history. Rosser and Harris did something similar with Mr Griffith Hughes, with whom they started their book. In the course of the latter's story, the point is made that his Welsh-speaking father, migrating from the countryside, 'could hardly speak a word of English when he first came into Swansea round about 1870' (1965: 8–9). Bilingualism was an issue revisited in Charles and her colleagues' restudy, but with the additional angle to it of parallel processes of adjustment to change among the more recently arrived Sylheti-speaking Bangladeshi community (2008: 109). The restudy replicated the original 'as far as possible' (Charles 2012: 438), but was not prevented from exploring issues of race and ethnicity that had arisen since the 1960s. The community studies tradition contains numerous demonstrations of imagination in terms of both purpose and modes of presentation designed to engage readers (Atkinson 1990). It is sufficiently flexible to evolve and capture emergent social phenomena, and also to find new ways of recounting the diverse routes by which we have come to be where we are.