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6 Summary and where next?

A short book cannot provide an exhaustive coverage of community studies, but the preceding chapters have sought to make and illustrate five key points about the community studies tradition of research. These are that community studies are bold in their ambition to highlight the connectedness of social and economic life through analyses that place this connectedness in context; that an evolving range of methodological tools are available to pursue this goal; that community studies' findings have the potential to be both of practical use and theoretically interesting; that this tradition of research has a history that continues to be reworked as the world around us and our tools for understanding it develop; and that community studies give rise to impassioned discussion about what should be studied, and how and why. These things are not unique to community studies, but it is not every branch of social scientific endeavour that records researchers being at one extreme fêted as champions of ordinary people yet at the other being hanged in effigy by unhappy readers.

To begin with the fifth of these points, it has not been possible to resolve to everyone's satisfaction the what, how and why questions. The meaning of 'community' remains contentious, as does the related issue of what constitutes a community study. Despite Warner's expectations that he would, Goffman did not write up his fieldwork on Unst as a community study; he introduced his report by saying, 'This is not the study of a community: it is a study that occurred, *in a community*' (1953: 8, emphases in original). So community studies are a subset of research undertaken on communities. The examples of community studies considered in this book vary in the ways that they go about exploring the connectedness of different parts of everyday social and economic life, but these are variations on the theme first articulated by the Lynds that people's work, home, school, leisure, religious and political lives are intertwined, underpinned by the related (Durkheimian) observation that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. These patterns of connection are often, but do not have to be,

place related. The precise relationship of community to place continues to be debated in the wake of the demise of attempts to link them deterministically (Cresswell 2004), a discussion to which several studies examined above have contributed. Blokland's observation that 'everybody has to live somewhere' is one example, and her book's maps help to convey the point. She also uses her findings to contest Wellman's reduction of 'community' to personal networks because this fails to include the "'imagined" aspect of communities' (2003: 158, 24, 29, 60). Different conceptualizations of 'community' thus connect to different operationalizations of the concept in empirical research (Crow and Mah 2012). There are also different rationales offered for undertaking community studies, both practical and theoretical, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Rationales matter, because community studies are not undertaken lightly. Most of the community studies referred to in the chapters above have been books, a format that allows fuller exposition than journal articles. They typically take years to complete, even decades, through either the employment of a team or the efforts of the generalist researcher captured in Bell's description of 'the sociological jack-of-all-trades that doing a community study requires' (1977: 61). As Glass noted, the purpose of a community study is 'to show a "total" picture' (1989: 87), and the original Middletown study that she commended ran to 550 pages. Even the shortest of the six topics considered in the book (training the young) had over forty pages devoted to it and this alone exceeded the size of a typical article, while the length of the longest of the six (engaging in religious practices) was more than double this length (Lynd and Lynd 1929). Ironically this topic, which had provided the springboard for the study, is one that subsequent researchers have been prepared to drop as part of efforts to make undertaking a community study manageable (discussion of religion is missing from *Divisions of Labour* and *The British on the Costa del Sol*, for example). Community studies are expensive in terms of time, resources and commitment, and the remarkably speedy delivery of *The Other Side of Middletown* was achieved only because of the team's exceptional resourcefulness and commitment.

The Lynds' ambitious agenda may have been pared down in many subsequent studies by dropping one or more of their six topics in order to achieve a feasible focus on a more manageable pattern of connection. Even if we leave to one side the demands to speed up that characterize 'the age of accelerations' (Friedman 2016), there are several reasons why the classical

community study format has come under pressure. Methodological innovations and concern to highlight the importance of social and economic phenomena being placed in context have encouraged more comparative work, through comparisons between places (as was noted in Chapter 5's discussion of responses to the charge of parochialism), or through comparison over time (facilitated, for example, through the developments in oral history and use of archival material). There are also new things that researchers have sought to include, such as Corcoran and her colleagues' (2010) decision to give voice to children in their study of suburbia; as a result they provide a more authentic account than is typically the case when children are merely spoken for by adults, or simply left out altogether. Community studies have a proud tradition of giving voice to social groups not usually heard, sometimes taking their lead from developments in neighbouring research fields (in this case childhood studies (Mayall 2002)).

The argument that changes in research practice have been necessary for men's perspective to be captured is somewhat surprising given that community studies have been criticized for problematic portrayals of women, but the case bears scrutiny. Charles and her colleagues report that 'it was more difficult to find men than women who would agree to be interviewed' (2008: 43), so that women (who were regarded by many of the potential participants that they contacted as better placed to speak about family matters) comprised 63 per cent of their sample. Pahl achieved greater success in avoiding survey data collected 'disproportionately from either men or women' (1984: 201), possibly reflecting his research focus on work, but certainly due to innovation in sampling practice. Phillipson and his colleagues were unsurprised that their sample of older people was 62 per cent female because of the (then) earlier age of retirement for women, but they were still concerned about 'the absence of men' (2001: 31, 9) as expressed in the photographic record of the past and the written record in classic studies that had focused on matrilineal (and arguably matriarchal) networks. McKenzie devotes a whole chapter to 'the missing men' with whom she had crossed paths very little in her previous research on the St Ann's estate in Nottingham, when she had been guided by the maxim 'if you want to know anything about a neighbourhood, ask the women' (2015: ch.3, 52). She reports being able to track down the men easily enough, once she had appreciated that they spent their time in different places to the women of the estate, such as the gym, and had useful additional perspectives to add.

McKenzie's research revisits the location of Coates and Silburn's (1973, 1980) studies of poverty and develops the familiar theme of community change and continuity. The old slum housing has gone through wholesale regeneration, but the story is an object lesson of how compound social problems cannot be solved one at a time; the area remains 'a neighbourhood of disadvantage' (2015: 39). The understanding of the community's multiple deprivation is undoubtedly useful, but the way in which the book is written is also interesting theoretically, particularly for the discussion of the misperception of people living on poor estates. There are echoes of William Foote Whyte's classic study *Street Corner Society* in which he describes upper-class ignorance of 'Cornerville', whose residents 'appear as social work clients, as defendants in criminal cases, or as undifferentiated members of "the masses"' (1955: xv). McKenzie draws on Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* to make this point about misunderstanding: 'Whatever people say I am, that's what I'm not,' a statement by the novel's central character that conveys the anger generated by misrepresentation and 'being "looked down on"' by people on the outside. Her concluding comment lamenting the 'lack of positive namings' (2015: 25, 76, 201) of communities like St Ann's says something not only about familiar processes of stigmatization, but also about the challenge of how communities get defined. This is not unique to disadvantaged communities but more general. O'Reilly's remark that 'it is easier to describe Britons in Spain in terms of what they are not than what they are' is made in the context of discussing how, despite their many differences, they could all contrast their situation with what they had left behind; life in Spain was understood in terms of 'all the opposites of what Britain is, namely crime, greyness, drudgery, routine, certainty, scripting' (2000a: 157–8), disregarding the fact that their narratives of hope and pursuit of a dream were recognizably scripted. Anya Ahmed's more recent study of women retirees in Spain supports this idea that they had been taken there by a shared quest to live among 'people like us' (2015: 126). Immigration into Britain had in their view made living there problematic. A positive image of one's own community is reinforced by a negative one of another (Cohen 1985), and the images become reinforced when a restricted range of social contact leaves people 'insulated' (Newby et al. 1978: 209) from alternative points of view.

This issue of how understandings of 'community' are constructed is made particularly interesting by fundamental ways in which the world

is changing. Martin Albrow's observation that 'the moment migration enters into the frame for community studies a new range of questions arises' (1997: 41) highlights a key challenge concerning the very categories of community members. It is worth remembering that the Banbury restudy spoke of more than half of the people living in the town being 'immigrants' (Stacey et al. 1975: 13), defining these as people not born in Banbury, harking back to an earlier era when people were less mobile. Over time the insider/outsider distinction came under increasing strain, and Savage and his colleagues use the finding that 'insiders and outsiders do not exist as fixed categories' to argue that length of residence has become less important to community membership than 'elective belonging', described as a new kind of solidarity 'among people who chose to live in particular places' (2005: 31, 53). This fits with the string of findings covered in the preceding chapters in which community is understood as being among 'people like us', as when Blokland refers to the process of imagining communities constructed out of like-minded people and with an external reference group. In this thinking 'we belong together; they belong together, and they do not belong with us' (2003: 63). In an age of frequent mobility, including mobility on an international scale such as that described by Levitt (2001) and O'Reilly (2000a), previously used distinctions such as that between insiders and outsiders require fundamental reconsideration, along with more systematic empirical investigation of whether 'elective belonging' applies as much to tenants as it appears to apply to owner-occupiers. It follows that research methods will need to change along with analytical frameworks if the tradition of research being useful and interesting is to be sustained.

Diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches is a key characteristic of the community studies tradition. This openness to a plurality of approaches has periodically been the subject of critical assessment, but the stance adopted here is that it offers the flexibility and openness to innovation that are important for sustainability into the future. The case for pluralism was set out by Colin Bell and Howard Newby, informed among other things by their (Bell and Encel 1978; Bell and Newby 1971, 1974; Newby et al. 1978; Stacey et al. 1975) knowledge of community studies, which fed into their view that there cannot 'be only one style of social research with *one* method that is to be *the* method. Rather there are many' (1977: 10, emphases in original). Developments in social science in the ensuing period have seen the range of methods available (either

singly or in combination) continue to grow, and *Divisions of Labour* was selected as one of the exemplars in Chapter 3 because of its ambitiousness in combining multiple methods. Mixing methods may now be the norm in community research, if the one hundred items considered in a recent annotated bibliography are a guide, since most of these used a combination of two or more methods, including interviews, ethnography (or participant observation), case studies, policy analyses, surveys, discourse, media or textual analyses, visual methods, archival methods, participatory methods, focus groups, network analyses, online/virtual methods and mobile methods (Mah and Crow 2011: 1). Current practice has moved a long way from the 'imperialism' that Bell and Newby (1977: 17) warned against, although tolerance of pluralism is not universal. Lassiter indicates that there are 'those who dismiss collaborative research outright' and others who believe that it is 'always appropriate for all types of research' (2005: xi), to give one example of a field where 'methodolatry' (Bell and Newby 1977: 16) can still be found.

Theoretical and methodological pluralism do not mean that decisions about analytical frames and tools of investigation are inconsequential. These choices matter, both for the quality of the resultant research, and also for the researcher. The outputs of community studies reveal something about the researcher as well as the topic under investigation, and it remains true that 'the great studies ... always have the quality of individuality, integrity and discovery' (Vidich and Bensman 1971: vii). The discussion in Chapter 3 of the exemplars was sufficiently extensive to convey something about their authors' qualities and the learning curves on which they found themselves. The researcher's investment of him or herself in the research process is an important reason why restudies can never be simple replications, because no two researchers will approach things in identical ways. McKenzie's (2015) return to St Ann's as someone with decades of first-hand experience of living there gives her account a very different colour to those of Coates and Silburn (1973, 1980), notwithstanding the similarities of their motivations as researchers. The issues raised by community research being done by 'insiders' as opposed to 'outsiders' will continue to be the subject of intense debate (not least because these terms are contested by some people as insufficiently nuanced), along with the discussion of the relative merits of individual and team approaches. *The Other Side of Middletown* demonstrates that teams can not only involve both insiders and outsiders, but also incorporate ways of working

collaboratively and creatively. The intensification of time pressures on researchers, including demands to produce results quickly, suggests that research students will continue to generate a significant proportion of book-length studies that require the focused commitment of years; *The British on the Costa del Sol* has been our exemplar. And the growing availability of material archived by researchers at the end of their projects allows more modest partial restudies to be undertaken. Dawn Lyon's (2017) revisiting of Sheppey with colleagues could not hope to match the scale of *Divisions of Labour*, but nevertheless adds to knowledge of that community. Such developments are very much in the spirit of pluralism which has characterized the community studies tradition and which promises to underpin its continued vitality.