

What are Community Studies? - Book Review

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What are Community Studies?

Graham Crow

London: Bloomsbury

2018

ix + 107pp

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Graham Crow's new book is a hymn to sociological studies of community. A short text, part of an introductory research methods series, this focused and precise volume is a perfect first-step in understanding the long history of community studies, the key debates surrounding the approach, and a guide to the lessons previous community researchers have learnt.

That Crow knows this literature inside out is beyond doubt. The book is meticulous in providing examples from a range of contexts to present multiple views on contested issues (whether community studies are too positive or whether they are even worthwhile). At the centre of the book are three well fleshed-out case studies – Ray Pahl's *Divisions of Labour*, Karen O'Reilly's *The British on the Costa del Sol*, and the *The Other Side of Middletown* project led by Luke Lassiter – which are explained in full and then used as reference points for insight into debates. This model works well and gives the book a solid structure, giving deep respect to some high quality studies. The Middletown study in particular seems important to Crow's analysis. This recent restudy of the Lynd's classic examination of Muncie, Indiana, took a collaborative approach to data collection, incorporating a research team including local civil rights leaders, more than a dozen undergraduate students, community advisors, and a host of others, meaning that community members were closely involved with the project, ensuring visibility, accountability, and a mutual respect, aiding the project's reception. This was important given the original study bypassed the local African-American community, but also because of Crow's strong belief in the sociological usefulness of both the restudy and the application of innovative and inclusive methods for asking longstanding questions.

A highly useful and satisfying chapter sees Crow present five criticisms of community studies - that they are too parochial, too static, too positive, too descriptive, and too prosaic – and then offer the case for the defence. One could not accuse him of holding back in presenting the charges, yet at the same time, the reader is fully aware of which side Crow is on. The rebuttals against these five charges are fun to read, comprehensive in the empirical and theoretical evidence provided to dismiss the accusations, and all in a style which is easy to learn with and easy to learn from.

Despite its aim as an overview text, Crow does allow room for more singular issues to get attention, alongside the staples of definitions, history, and controversies. One of these is the importance of serendipity in (community) research, and how the stumbling researcher can happen across their key data and as a result construct what emerge as their most compelling narratives. This will terrify the strictures of most research ethics committees, but Crow does a great job in explaining and showing how studies develop over time (often by luck rather than judgement), that research questions can change as soon as the field is encountered, and that the realities of how strangers' lives are lived can never really be known in advance. The nature of the insider-outsider relationship is also discussed throughout, with Crow supporting Doug Harper's adage that sociologists are always strangers in some sense in the community in which they live.

Overall this book will make a great text for students either studying or conducting empirical research in or about a 'community' (the term's occasional uselessness is unpicked by Crow, and he includes digital communities in his analysis), but also for established researchers and lecturers looking for a touchstone text that draws together all the existing questions and contentions. The book's

meticulousness does mean there are occasionally bland passages, such as when a third of a page is given over to listing 25 studies which have included a methodological appendix, but one knows there is a doctoral student out there somewhere looking for exactly such a list. And so, when viewed as a whole, Crow's short scoping intervention feels like an argument against throwaway sociology and the accelerated academy – instead we have to value the revisit, the restudy, doing something again (but differently), and most of all value taking a long view of how research is done and what we know.

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708 words