

# Going back to re-study communities: opportunities and pitfalls

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## Abstract

What do members of communities want from research and do they feel that they get it? There are plenty of cases in the history of community research to suggest that what is expected of researchers can be some way away from what they actually deliver, especially if the published reports have a critical edge. This can provide opportunities to researchers undertaking re-studies to seek to put matters right, but there are also pitfalls which may be beyond the control of researchers who go back to communities studied previously.

## Outline of presentation

- Problems in the field
- Where do these problems come from?
- Responding to academic criticisms of romanticism
- Misrepresentation
- Media misrepresentation
- Overpromising
- Mutual misunderstanding
- Strategies for problem-reduction

## Problems in the field

- Returning to the site of her fieldwork in the west of Ireland a quarter of a century on from her original fieldwork, Nancy Scheper-Hughes was not welcomed by all community members and was subjected to ‘drumming out of the village’ (2000: 324)
- Several locals had not taken kindly to her study, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics*, published first in 1977, for its sympathetic yet critical analysis of community decline
- Her return was prompted in part by a sense that her approach may have led her to ‘an overly critical view of village life in the mid-1970s’ (2000: 320), but she found time had not yet been ‘a great healer’ (2000: 328)

## Problems in the field

- Half a century earlier, Art Gallaher returned to ‘Plainville’, Missouri, studied by James West fifteen years previously
- West told Gallaher that ‘to the best of his knowledge, with one outstanding exception most Plainvillers had taken his report “with relative composure”’
- But Gallaher had people saying to him ‘I certainly hope you are not here to do the same thing that feller West did a few years ago... Folks here are mighty unhappy with him... Some would like to lynch him’. Language of betrayal of trust.
- Even more favourably disposed residents were unsure: ‘A nice guy, *but he asked a hell of a lot of questions*’ (Gallaher 1971: 286, 288-9, emphasis in original)

## Problems in the field

- In ‘Springdale’, New York State, no one attempted a re-study after publication of Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman’s *Small Town in a Mass Society* in 1958 led to the authors being hanged in effigy and cast as ‘manure spreaders’
- The authors ‘had expected that Springdale “rightly” would be scandalised by our analysis’, which (amongst other things) failed to achieve anonymisation
- They had knowingly engaged in ‘selling the project to the townspeople’, promising ‘a positive approach’
- Vidich declined an invitation to go back, saying he ‘lacked the inclination and emotional stamina’ (2000: xxxii, 447, 491)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Responding to academic criticisms of romanticism

- Geoff Payne once asked why community studies are so full of ‘nice’ people: ‘the main impression generated is one of a world populated with pleasant, likeable people’
- ‘In the course of fieldwork in several locations in the past half a dozen years, I have encountered people whom I did not like, and situations that felt most unpleasant.... The people in community studies are too “nice”’
- Problems of selective sampling and of ‘selective reporting’ (1996: 21, 22, 23) – less likeable people and unhappier experiences are screened out
- As a result, community researchers may feel pressure to paint a non-romantic picture of local social life

## Where do these problems come from? Misrepresentation

- A re-study of Featherstone, Yorkshire 30 years on from Norman Dennis et al's (1956) *Coal Is Our Life* found a sense of betrayal
- Several inhabitants told Dennis Warwick & Gary Littlejohn that 'outsiders continually get the place and its people all wrong' (1992: 33)
- Memories of previous research can endure, especially if local people feel that trust has been betrayed by researchers who use the opportunity to portray their community in a negative light, and/or to follow poor research practice.

## Where do these problems come from?

### Misrepresentation

- ‘R also thought it bad because it gave a thoroughly distorted picture of the town. Some aspects of life were over-emphasised, even caricatured, some hardly alluded to or even ignored completely. He considered it a bad piece of research. The researchers, in his view, had come with firmly fixed stereotypes in their heads and with preconceived ideas. They had looked only for evidence which would support these stereotypes and preconceived ideas, and of course had not failed to find them’
- Over-reliance on older miners in pubs, one of whom was ‘able to keep up an endless stream of anecdotes and information, so long as the beer flowed’ (1992: 32)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Media misrepresentation

- Yorkshire Post coverage of the 1956 book had ‘an emphasis on the seamy side of life’ (1992: 32)
- Margaret Stacey’s first study of Banbury had its discussion of social status represented in the press as a description of ‘a place pulsating with snobbery and riddled with class distinction’
- This made it a challenge to meet the requirement of the re-study’s funders ‘that there should be evidence that the study would be welcome in the town’
- An open meeting to publicise the project was covered in the *Oxford Mail* under the headline ‘New Probe Into “Snob Town”’ (Bell 1977: 58, 57, 58)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Media misrepresentation

- Vidich and Bensman comment that once a book is published ‘its authors lose control over how it is to be understood, misunderstood, interpreted, and misinterpreted’
- But the genuineness of their ‘bemusement’ is questionable, since in the first edition of the book they noted how ‘The newspaper always emphasises the positive side of life; it never reports local arrests, shotgun weddings, mortgage foreclosures, lawsuits, bitter exchanges in public meetings, suicides, or any other unpleasant happenings’
- It reproduces Springdale’s ‘image of itself’ as ‘Just Plain Folks’ (2000: xxv, 31, 29)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Overpromising

- Vidich and Bensman responded to being ‘pressed by the community to tell what the study was about, who it included, what its purpose was, and what kind of book would be written’ by ‘a line that included’:
- ‘We are not interested in the negative features of the town’
- ‘We have to get back to the older values of the individual, neighboring and the neighborhood, and Springdale seems to provide an opportune setting for this. We enlist your cooperation in helping us to solve this scientific problem’
- ‘We are interested in constructive activities because from this we feel we can help other people in other communities to live better lives’

## Where do these problems come from? Overpromising

- Promise of anonymisation may be hard to deliver, even if greater care is taken over it than Vidich & Bensman did
- ‘A well-thumbed copy of Plainville, U.S.A. in the local library has the real names carefully pencilled by the pseudonyms invested by West’ (Gallaher 1971: 292)
- And what is said/IMPLIED about the benefits of research?
- Oscar Lewis called meetings as part of his re-study of Tepoztlán and reported ‘One dignified, elderly Tepoztecan rose and said, “Many people have come here to study us, but not one of them has helped us”’ (1963: xv)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Mutual misunderstanding

- Mutual misunderstanding about the purpose of research
- Possibility that a researcher will give ‘the impression that he can determine the answers to all of a community’s problems.... Some Plainvillers, at least for a time, viewed me as such a resource person, and there was the uncomfortable problem of having to convince them to the contrary’ (Gallaher 1971: 296)
- The purpose of some research questions is not always apparent: ‘A strange question that!’ (Savage et al 2005: 184; see also Neal and Walters 2006; Crow et al 2002)

## Where do these problems come from?

### Mutual misunderstanding

- Perception of researchers as spies (Crow and Pope 2008; Frankenberg 1990: 174)
- ‘In my early days in the village I would often climb a hill and look sadly down upon the rows of houses on the housing estate and wonder what went on inside them’ (Frankenberg 1969: 16)
- And there can be misunderstandings about the etiquette of repeating things said to a researcher, not only ‘off the record’ statements, but ‘on the record’ statements about community characteristics (e.g. Featherstone as ‘a dirty hole’)

## Strategies for problem reduction

- Not all re-studies encounter dissatisfaction with previous research
- Nevertheless, ‘Publication of field research findings often poses ethical problems. The social scientist learns things about the people he studies that may harm them, if made public, either in fact or in their belief’
- ‘one should refrain from publishing items of fact or conclusions that are not necessary to one’s argument or that would cause suffering out of proportion to the scientific gain of making them public’ (Becker 1971: 267, 284)

## Strategies for problem reduction

- Advice to heed the ‘warning to anyone who tries to comment without first reaching some agreement with the subjects of the research as to the appropriate framework of analysis’ (Warwick and Littlejohn 1992: 33)
- Luke Lassiter et al’s *The Other Side of Middletown* (2004) as an example of collaborative ethnography
- Reassurance that ‘research fatigue’ (Clark 2008) among research participants is not inevitable, even though its roots are all too understandable

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