

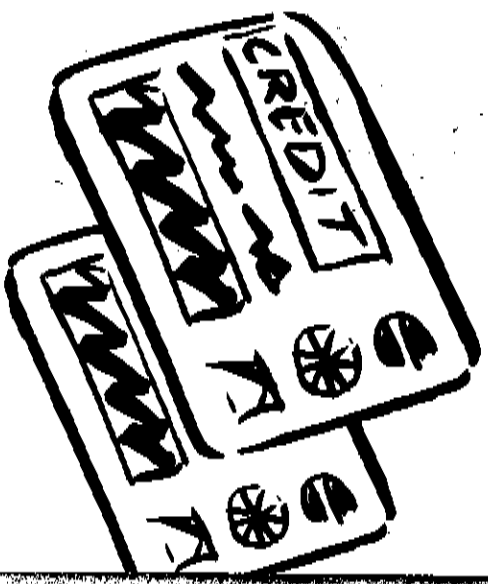
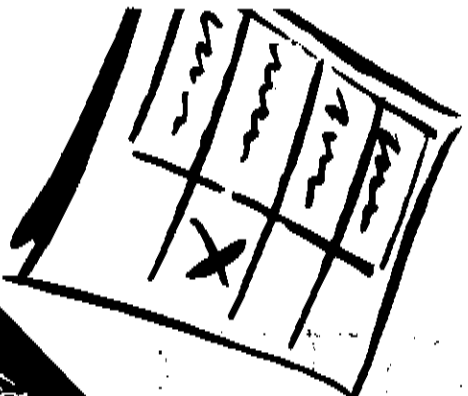
LIVING IN
A CHANGING

Society



Changing Communities

Prepared for the course team by
Norma Sherratt
with Anne Fletcher and Andrew Northedge



Community Education
The Open University

Contents

Study guide	6
1 Introduction	8
2 The meaning of community	10
2.1 What is a community?	10
2.2 Do you live in a community?	19
2.3 Do we need communities?	21
3 Are communities a thing of the past?	25
3.1 The golden age of communities	25
3.2 The growth of industrial cities	26
3.3 Studies of country and city communities	28
4 Communities in context	41
4.1 A community in Rochdale	41
4.2 A community in Hull	47
4.3 Why communities change	51
5 People in communities	53
5.1 Personal ties	53
5.2 Social networks	55
5.3 Personal experience of communities	58
6 The power of 'community' as an idea	64
6.1 Community as policy	64
6.2 Planning a community	64
6.3 Community care	68
7 Your experience of communities	74
7.1 Communities and the family	74
7.2 Communities and the state	75
7.3 Communities and the economy	75
7.4 Images of community	76
7.5 Communities and meaning	76
8 Conclusion	79

STUDY GUIDE

If you read this study module carefully, stopping to think, take notes, and work on the activities, we estimate that it will take you about 18 hours. The table opposite shows how long you might expect various sections to take. We have grouped them into ten chunks of time, on the assumption that you will probably want to spread your reading over a number of sessions of study.

You may find you work more quickly than this, or that it takes longer than we have estimated. It is up to you to decide whether to study every section equally closely, or whether even to leave some sections out. We assume you will take as much from the module as you want.

Apart from reading the module itself, from time to time you are recommended to turn to the set book, *The Good Study Guide*. The estimated time for this has been incorporated in the times in the table. Listening to the cassette has also been included. Beyond these formal components of the module there are the more general study activities, like sorting yourself out, filing notes, checking back to the Course Introduction and Course Overview, reviewing your progress, planning your strategy for the tasks ahead, and so on. Allowing 2 hours for these gives a total of 20 hours of study time. But if you are looking for a quick read, you could do it in considerably less than that.

Course component	Estimated time	Sessions
Book		
1 Introduction	1/2 hour	— session 1: 2 1/2 hours
2 The meaning of community	2 hours	—
2.1 What is a community	1/2 hour	— session 2: 1 hour
2.2 Do you live in a community?	1/2 hour	—
2.3 Do we need communities?	3 hours	— sessions 3 and 4: 1 1/2 hours each
3 Are communities a thing of the past?		
4 Communities in context	2 hours	— session 5: 2 hours
4.1 A community in Rochdale	1 1/4 hours	—
4.2 A community in Hull	1/4 hour	— session 6: 1 1/2 hours
4.3 Why communities change		
5 People in communities		
5.1 Personal ties	3/4 hour	—
5.2 Social networks	3/4 hour	— session 7: 1 1/2 hours
5.3 Personal experience	2 hours	— session 8: 2 hours
6 The power of 'community' as an idea		
6.1 Community as policy	1/4 hour	—
6.2 Planning a community	1 hour	— session 9: 2 1/2 hours
6.3 Community care	1 1/4 hours	—
7 Changing communities, changing society	1 3/4 hour	—
8 Conclusion	1/4 hour	— session 10: 2 hours
Book total	18 hours	
General study activities	2 hours	
Total estimated study time	20 hours	

section 1 INTRODUCTION

This module is about communities. But what do we mean by a 'community'? It is a word we use quite freely in conversation and yet it turns out to be quite slippery once we try to get a firm grasp on it. We live in such a large and variegated society that 'community' probably means rather different things in different places. Is a community in the Scottish Isles the same as a community in Middlesbrough or Belfast?

In some ways it seems easier to get hold of the idea of community by looking back to the villages and small towns of the past. If we were able to travel backwards in time three or four hundred years, we would find that most people in Britain lived either in a village or a small town.

Imagine yourself to be one of them, looking out of your window. Who would you see? Almost everyone who passed by would be someone you knew. Not only would you know *who* they were, you would also know a lot about them. You would know where they lived, with whom, and what work they did. In fact, you would have known them for a long time. Although you would not necessarily feel friendly towards everyone passing by, you would nevertheless share a lot in common with them, having grown up in the same place and experienced a lot of the same times of hardship and plenty. People's past deeds, good and bad, would be known to all so that reputations once gained, for better or worse, would tend to last. Quarrels might run on from one generation to the next. But equally, loyalties would run strong and in times of need you would expect to be able to call on support. In short, as you looked out of the window you would see people with whose lives your own life was intricately enmeshed.

This is putting it a bit simply, but it will serve for now as one kind of image of community life. How different is it from the life you live in Britain in the 1990s? Try answering the Activity question below.

Activity 1

Look out of your window (or else imagine looking out). Who do you see?

- Do you see people you know?
- How much do you know about them? (And how much do they know about you?)
- How long have you known them?
- How much do you have in common with them in terms of your life experiences?

Looking at your answers, would you say that you live in a community?

Before you begin these questions, read the section headed 'Activities' in the Course Introduction.

Perhaps you have concluded that you live in a community very like the village of a few centuries ago. Somehow, though, it seems unlikely, unless you live in a very remote part of the country. Alternatively you might feel that you *do* live in a community, but one of a different kind. Although you might not know people as well as villagers of centuries ago would have, nevertheless you may feel that you have links with the people out there. On the other hand you might feel that you have very few connections with people around you and that there is no sense of community in the area worth speaking of.

In this study module we are going to explore the extent to which we actually live in communities today and, if we do, how far they are close knit communities of the kind sketched out above. To guide us in this exploration we shall be setting out to answer the following questions.



This is a good point at which to listen to the audio cassette as far as the end of the discussion between Ann Hanson and Norma Sherratt.



These six questions correspond broadly to the six main sections of the module, so you can return to them if at any point you lose your sense of where the module is heading.

section 2 THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

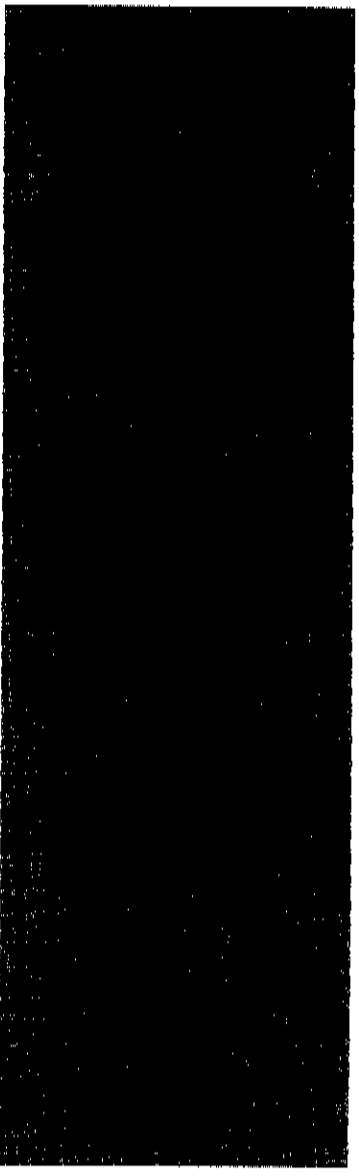
2.1 What is a community?

To be able to talk about communities, we need to get a better grip on what we actually mean by the term.

Activity 2

Write down a few notes on what the word 'community' means to you.

Think of your own experience, if any, of living in a community.
How does life in a community differ from life without a community?



We shall now approach our question from another angle, by trying to pick out what the distinguishing features of communities are. We shall examine five photographs very carefully. We can tell a great deal from pictures, provided we know what questions to ask.

Activity 3

Look at the five photos. They all show groups of people, but do they show communities? Which would you pick as the odd one out?

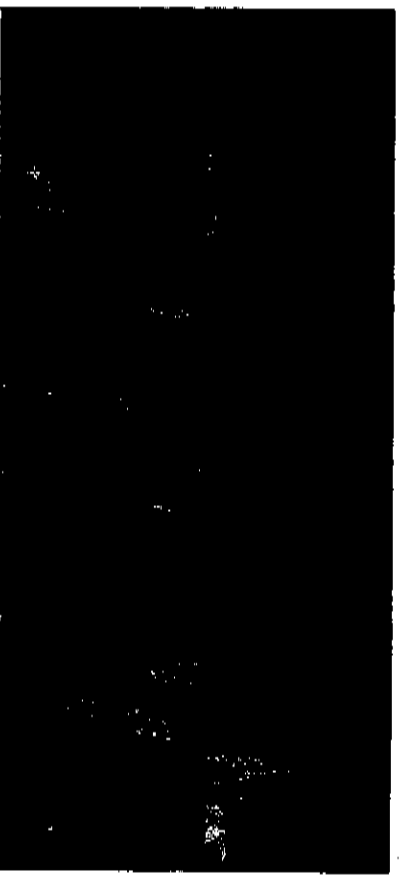


Photo 1
Quechua Indians
farming in Callejón
de Huaylos, Peru

2 THE MEANING OF
COMMUNITY



Photo 2 A street scene in England in the 1950s



Photo 3 London Bridge at five o'clock in the afternoon

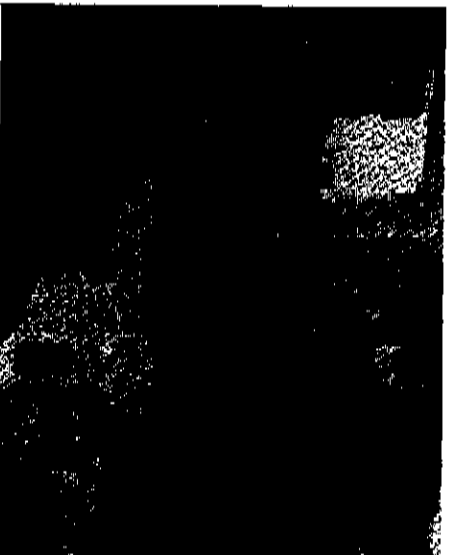


Photo 4 An Afro-Caribbean club in north London



Photo 5 Afternoon at the school gates

Photograph 3 is meant to be the odd one out. We shall consider why in a moment. If you picked a different one, make a note of why and then see if you disagree with what is said in the discussion below.

The following activity will take longer, but will tell us a great deal. It is important to get your note pad and do this one carefully.

2 THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

Activity 4

Look at Photograph 1 and write down answers to each of these questions:

- 1 Do you think that these people share a sense of belonging to a community?
 - 2 If so, how close-knit do you think that community is?
 - 3 What are these people doing?
 - 4 How often do you think they see each other?
 - 5 How well do you think they know each other?
 - 6 How important do you think they are to one another?
 - 7 If one of them was ill, what do you think the others would do?
 - 8 What kinds of things do you think they might talk to each other about?
 - 9 Do you think a stranger would find it easy to join the group?
- Now answer the same questions for each of the other four photos.

Here are my answers. Obviously I am guessing, but that is the nature of the exercise. I expect my answers are longer than yours and will be different on some points. I have also added a few extra notes that I made. Don't be concerned about such differences. There are no 'right answers' here. Your answers will reflect your experience and ideas as my answers reflect mine. I am simply giving you something to compare with. The answers are numbered to match the questions.

PHOTO 1: THE PEOPLE FARMING

- 1 Yes, I would imagine they feel very much bound up in a community.
- 2 It looks as if it would be a very close-knit community.
- 3 They are farming – working together to produce food. If this communal activity fails, they will go hungry.
- 4 I would guess that they see each other every day and perhaps most of the day.
- 5 They know each other very well indeed, I imagine. Probably each of them knows almost the entire life history of each of the others.
- 6 I would guess that they are very important to each other; that their whole lives are affected by their relationships with each other.
- 7 They would certainly notice the loss of labour if one was ill; but I imagine they might also help out with food, looking after children, and so on.
- 8 I assume they would talk about whatever is important to them and to village life, though they might not need to talk a lot, since they already know a great deal about each other and share many of the same ideas.

- 9 I imagine they would feel uncomfortable, even hostile, if a stranger joined them. It might take a long time to be accepted within this group.

Here are some other notes I have made. I noticed that men, women, and children are all together while work is going on. This might mean that conversation and play might go on alongside the work (unlike more formal workplaces, where people are apart from their families and are supervised by managers who are not personal acquaintances). I wondered who would be organizing the work. Is one of the men making decisions about how to do the work and keeping the others hard at it? I also wondered whether distinctions between family and community members might be blurred. (Are the people in the picture all members of one family, or are neighbours involved too?) I noted too that they are working within sight of where they live. This must give them a very strong sense of belonging to the area.

PHOTO 2: THE CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE STREET

- 1 Again I would imagine that these children feel very much part of a local community.
- 2 I would think of it as a close-knit community, but not perhaps quite as close as the village, in that whole families and their neighbours would not all work together. Some of the adults might work in the same factory, but not as communal teams. Nevertheless, I imagine people's lives being bound together a lot.
- 3 The children are entertaining themselves together and doing the very important work of play (which all children need to do).
- 4 I would guess they see each other most days and often for long periods.
- 5 I imagine they know each other very well.
- 6 I would think that they are very important figures in each others' lives – figures they will remember many years later.
- 7 They would know about any illnesses and talk about them. They might also visit and take a present.
- 8 They would talk about everything that children need to talk about as they learn about getting on with others of their age.
- 9 I can imagine them being quite hostile if you were a strange child – only letting you into the group if you were prepared to earn your place.

This picture gives me a strong sense of an enclosed, self-contained environment, which would be 'the world' for these children. I imagine it being a shared 'territory' in which they are thrown together with limited resources to construct their own entertainments. I note their collective

ingenuity in making a swing. I imagine them having a shared street culture, with rhymes and local slang and special rules. All of this will help to make the street 'theirs'. I think too of what 'growing up together' implies about sharing a common experience, developing common values and beliefs, and having a sense of loyalty to the community. I imagine that, for better or worse, this street would always be a very 'special' place to these children.

PHOTO 3: THE START OF THE LONDON RUSH-HOUR

- 1 I would assume that, joining the *mêlée* heading home from work, these people would feel no sense of being part of a community – more a sense of competition for places in queues and seats on trains.
- 2 This is not my idea of a community at all.
- 3 They are each, as individuals, getting from one place to another.
- 4 They might actually see each other quite often, but they will not be aware of it, since they are not taking in the faces they see.
- 5 There may be a few people walking in pairs, but in general they will not know anything about each other.
- 6 Again they will not, by and large, be of any importance to each other.
- 7 If one of them fell ill, the others would not even know about it, let alone care, or take action.
- 8 Unless they have a specific reason, such as buying a newspaper, asking the way, or trying to get past somebody, they will not talk to each other at all.
- 9 There is no group to join. They are all strangers.

I noted down that there are too many people here to give a sense of community. These people may all have the same purpose – to get home – but it is not a *shared* purpose, they are not doing it *together* as a joint activity. They may cooperate with each other, for example, by moving aside to avoid bumping into each other, but it is a very matter-of-fact, routine cooperation. I would describe most of the relationships between people in a setting like this as *instrumental*, that is, relationships which serve a specific purpose, such as buying a bus ticket or finding out the time. They are not relationships that have any wider aspects, such as sharing an interest in music or a concern for the future of the environment. They do not take account of whether the other person was divorced last week, or won the ladies' darts trophy at the pub. These relationships last as long as is necessary to get a specific job done. Indeed, they serve as an 'instrument' for getting that job done; hence the term 'instrumental'.

PHOTO 4: THE MEMBERS OF THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN CLUB

- 1 I would imagine that these men have quite a strong sense of belonging to a community.
- 2 The smiles on their faces and the relaxed-looking atmosphere suggest to me that this is quite a close-knit community, but possibly of a fairly informal, part-time, come-and-go-as-you-please kind (unlike the farming community or the children in the street, who would be stuck with each other much of the time and most days).
- 3 They are collectively engaged in entertaining themselves – playing games and chatting.
- 4 I would guess that they might attend the club for an hour or two several times a week.
- 5 They seem to know each other well enough to share a joke and to converse in a relaxed way. It's hard to tell whether they would know intimate details of each other's life histories and current circumstances.
- 6 I would imagine that they are moderately important to each other, to the extent that they might initially miss someone who moved to another area, but they might fairly soon get used to being without them.
- 7 If someone was ill, I guess the others might mention it in conversation and someone might even call round to visit. But on the whole, I imagine they would think of it as a domestic matter rather than a club matter.
- 8 I guess they would talk about male interests. I imagine that intimate, personal, or domestic concerns might not seem appropriate to share in this setting.
- 9 I assume it would be easier as a stranger to join this group than the rural group in the first picture, so long as you 'fitted in'; though you might want to hang back a bit on your first visit, picking up the atmosphere and laughing at *their* jokes before venturing one of your own.

This scene presents a striking contrast with London Bridge. Instead of isolated individuals, each striding purposefully towards a personal goal, we have people gathered together in informal groups. Instead of rushing off to important business elsewhere, these people are taking the time to talk to each other, to joke, to share in a game or simply to stand by taking an interest. The essence of the relationships here seems to be 'social' rather than 'instrumental'.

Yet the setting is not entirely informal. I notice that some people are dressed up for the occasion. This is a place where you would want to 'be

somebody' - to uphold your reputation. You would care what other people think of you. It is the kind of place that has a strong and distinctive shared culture. You wouldn't suggest an interlude of Morris dancing, or put on a record of brass-band music. So, although it looks relaxed, that does not mean that absolutely anything goes.

PHOTO 5: THE MOTHERS AT THE SCHOOL GATE

- 1 I would guess that the women here have some sense of belonging to a community.
- 2 Depending on the surrounding area, this scene could be set in a fairly close-knit community or a very loose-knit one. Either way, though, there is a kind of community formed simply by meeting together regularly, in the same place and with the opportunity for informal conversation. (I would think of this as a more communal scene than, say, a queue at the health clinic.)
- 3 They are passing the time chatting, as they wait for their children to come out of school.
- 4 They will meet most weekday afternoons in term-time, over a period of several years, with a new influx to the group each September and an equivalent outflow each July.
- 5 Over this time some may get to know quite a lot about each other but others may keep themselves to themselves.
- 6 Some of the group may become quite important to each other as people to turn to in difficulties or to get advice from. Others may not be interested in anything more than casual exchanges of a few words.
- 7 An illness might well become a topic of conversation and someone might call round to see if help was needed with shopping or looking after children.
- 8 I would imagine the talk being of school, of children, of immediate domestic concerns and local issues, but perhaps not of their deepest worries.
- 9 It would be fairly easy to join the group if you were a mother with children in the school. But perhaps if you were a father, or black, or spoke with a different accent, it would be more difficult.

One thing which struck me was the expressiveness of the faces of the women near the middle of the picture. Again this is not a businesslike or instrumental relationship we are looking at. Whereas rush-hour faces are more or less blank, these faces show strong emotional engagement with what is being said. Even the woman to the right is listening even though she is not directly involved in the conversation. She is not just standing there, she is participating in the conversation in the role of bystander,

just as there were bystanders at the domino game. You couldn't imagine participating as a bystander in the London rush hour. There would not be anything meaningful to participate in. These women may be here for the practical purpose of picking up their children, but the main purpose of what we see going on is social interaction. If one of them were in a clinic waiting-room instead, she would not know the other parents so well, she would feel more regimented and controlled, and she would focus more on the instrumental purpose of getting in to see the nurse. At the school gates, however, there is the informality and the regularity of contact for something more communal to develop.

ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS

What can we pull together from this discussion of the photographs? In the first two, I concluded that we were looking at close-knit communities which involved men, women, and children engaged in shared activities, using limited resources to produce collective benefits. In the village in particular, collective *work* looked to be a very important focus for community life. Indeed, communal relations in a village like this are not an optional extra; they are essential to producing the basic means of life. In the village photo, there was an impression of community and family being bound up together very closely, and a blurring of the distinctions between work, childminding, and play. Perhaps this would also apply in the case of the working-class street. In both cases I thought that strangers would tend to be eyed with suspicion and accepted only slowly. In other words *membership* of the community would have fairly sharp boundaries. It would mean a lot to belong and it would also mean something not to belong.

The last two photographs seem to show more loose-knit communities with more casual membership and less serious business. These are 'part-time' communities, with the members not so tightly bound to a specific place. Talking together seems to be the main purpose in both scenes, and groups seem to have formed informally, with some people looking on as interested bystanders. These are places where people can, to some extent, express emotions and share their experiences. The relationships here exist as an end in themselves and are not 'instrumental' to achieving some other purpose. Finally we should note that these pictures are set in present-day Britain, whereas the first two are set either in a different place (Photo 1) or a different time (Photo 2). Can we say that the last two photos are more 'typical' of community relationships in our society? We shall come back to this question later.

Now to the main question: what do all four communities have in common? They all involve 'doing things' together. There is a shared purpose in what is going on, whether it is work, entertainment, or conversation. They all involve people meeting often. They involve people

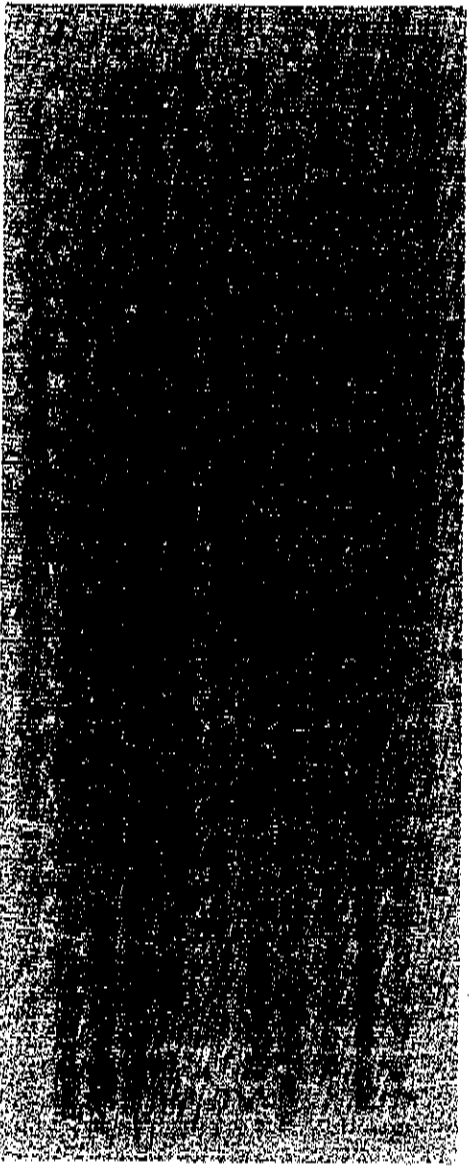
2 THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

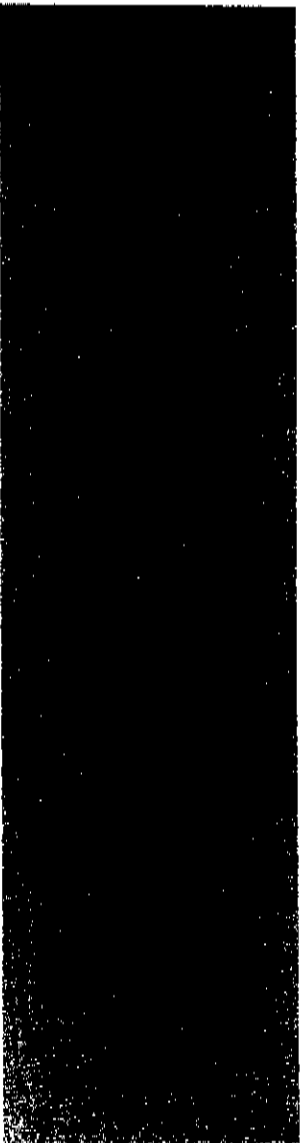
communicating with each other over matters of common interest – not just exchanging the bare minimum for a business transaction.

Community members tend to know about each others lives – a lot in the case of close-knit communities and less in the case of looser-knit ones.

They take at least a passing interest in each other's welfare and, in a close-knit community, may do quite a lot to support each other. Lastly there is a difference between being a member and being an outsider, though the boundary is sharper in the close-knit communities. Members will have a sense of 'belonging' to the community. They may also feel bound up with a particular place.

This brings us to the final point of the whole exercise: a list of features which seem to be typical of communities. This is not a final and definitive list, since we have drawn it from only five photographs. But it gives us a good working base for continuing our discussion.





2.2 Do you live in a community?

Having arrived at this list of features of communities, you can now consider the extent to which you yourself live in a community.

Activity 5

Make brief notes in answer to these questions.

Have you ever lived in a community which would get a tick against each of the features in our list? What is the most close-knit community you have lived in?

Do you live in a community now; if so, how close-knit is it? Check against each of the features in the list. Which features, if any, are missing?

Would you prefer to live in a close-knit community or not? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

When I tried this activity myself, the first group of questions seemed to me fairly straightforward. I have never lived in the kind of close-knit community shown in the first two photographs. I suppose, apart from two short spells in very big cities, when I lived in a flat or bed-sitter, I have always lived in what we loosely call the suburbs. I don't associate the suburbs with close-knit community life. I think of community as being to do with village life, or with other societies which are not so 'advanced' as ours. Twentieth-century British suburbs seem a different thing altogether.

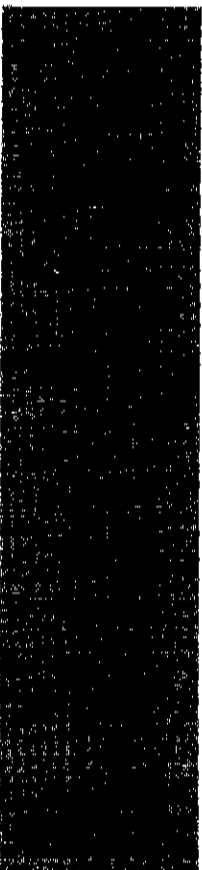
On the other hand, when I look at the list of features, I can see that my road is perhaps in *some* ways a community. It is a cul-de-sac of perhaps forty houses, and I can probably name the people who live in three-quarters of them. Some of the people in the road (though not all) are friendly with each other. They go out together, look after each other's children as necessary, work together for the guides and scouts, organize bonfire parties, and belong to baby-sitting circles. They are also, at the moment, trying to organize a neighbourhood watch scheme, in response to a series of burglaries in the road. I would say there is a certain feeling of belonging, at least in the case of the children growing up together,

some of the younger families, and some residents who have lived there a long time.

However, the picture is quite complicated. Some people in the road have ties which reach beyond – to the local church, a local political party, or relatives or work contacts outside the area. For many, these ties are quite clearly more important than their ties to the people in the road. At times, too, we in our road are linked into groups from a wider area. For example, recently a lot of energy has gone into organizing opposition to a proposal for a motorway service station nearby. Moreover, it is not all sweetness and light in the road. Sometimes there are sharp divisions and arguments about, for example, parking or noise levels. Does this suggest that it is not such a harmonious community after all? Or are quarrels part of healthy communal life?

In my own case, my life seems to be based very much around family and work. I do not have the intensity of attachment to the road that some of my neighbours have. Yet I *do* have quite a strong feeling that I would like to belong to a really close community. I accept that there may be disadvantages. You only have to listen to *The Archers*, or watch *Neighbours*, to get the idea that conflicts and divisions are an important part of life in small communities, and that everybody knowing your business may not always be desirable. But in spite of these potential drawbacks, I still feel strongly attracted by the idea of 'belonging' or having 'roots', of sharing experiences, particularly in local festivities, which seem to me to epitomize life in a 'real' community. I like the idea of a village shop where everybody knows me, of my children going to the local school, and of the network of care and support that I think of communities as providing.

So, out of all these thoughts, what is my score on the issue of whether I live in a community? The 'community' in our road shares a common purpose when we participate in organizing guides and scouts, bonfire parties, and a neighbourhood watch. We also know most of each other's names and support each other with child-minding. And some of us have a sense of belonging. However, the scores in general are fairly low, especially on points two, three, and four. Contact between us could not really be described as regular, the range of things over which we communicate is generally fairly narrow, and we don't really know a lot about each other. What's more, the ties which reach beyond the street suggest that the community's boundaries are rather weakly defined. Given that it takes a poor third place in my life, a long way behind family and work, is it really a community worthy of the name? It seems to be *something*, but not such as you would put alongside traditional village community life.



Check back to your
answers to the
activities on pages 8
and 10.

No doubt your answers were different from mine, but perhaps you too were unable to decide conclusively whether or not you live in a community. Nevertheless, I hope you have a sharper focus on the issues now than when you worked on Activities 1 and 2. We shall continue to explore these issues in later sections of the module. But before ending this section, I want to raise one more question. Are communities of any great importance in a modern society?

2.3 Do we need communities?

If some of us are uncertain as to whether we live in communities, is the concept of community relevant any longer in our kind of society? After all most of us have the private world of 'home', in which we can hope to form relationships capable of supplying many of our needs. And if home and family fall short, there is always the state, which can be called on to supply services to us, its citizens. Has the state not taken over the role of the traditional community?

Activity 6

What is your view of the following statements? Note down whether you agree or disagree and your reasons.

- 1 It is wrong for old, sick, or disabled people to be shut away in large, state-provided institutions. They should be cared for in the community as they always were in the past.
- 2 The community should not be expected to cope on its own with people who need a lot of care. The state should accept some responsibilities. Communities are not as close-knit as they were and the burden of care is too great.

Here is the reply of someone I asked to do this exercise.

To start with, I agree with both statements. They both seem reasonable and caring points of view. People do live fuller and happier lives if they are not in care in impersonal institutions. The ideal solution would seem to be that as many as possible are cared for in their own communities. But I also agree with the second statement. It does seem to me that the recent

2 THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

closing of wards in large hospitals and returning of people to their communities has placed enormous burdens on families particularly.

But how can I agree with both statements? Each takes a different position in relation to the community-care debate. Statement 1 seems to support moving people back into communities to be cared for, whilst statement 2 reflects a lot of hesitation about community care. I'm really rather confused.



You can read more about the role of the state in modern societies in the module *Change and the Modern State*.



You can read more about the place of families in modern society in the module on *Changing Relationships*.

This response implies that ideally communities ought to be capable of giving a better quality of care than the state. State institutions are thought of as more impersonal than a local community. To the state, you are just another number. After all, isn't it *supposed* to be impartial? It is not interested in you *as a person*, just as one of its many citizens. It is not that it is hard-hearted, but that it is too big and bureaucratic to deal with you as an individual. For the state to operate efficiently, it has to treat every patient just like every other, every doctor like every other, and every case like every other.

But if the state is too cold, what about the family, the imagined haven of personal warmth and individual attention? Why should it not be the main supplier of support and care? For one thing, a significant proportion of the population at any given time is not living in a family. But even if we were *all* living in families, they would not necessarily be able to take the strain. Families can be fragile and riven with tensions, and nowadays a proportion of them eventually collapse. Alternatively, families may be short of money, or lack the skills and knowledge for some kinds of care. Moreover, some forms of support are so demanding that no family, however able and well-resourced, could reasonably be expected to cope on its own.

So if we have people who do not live in families, and problems which spill out beyond the capabilities of families, is there any port of call short of the 'cold bureaucratic state'? This is where we feel we would like to be able to call on support from the local community. The community seems to offer a useful 'buffer zone' between the intimacy of the family and the impersonal, cost-counting state, a half-way house able to offer some of the personal, caring capabilities of the family, but also some of the breadth of resources of the state. The diagram on page 23 tries to capture this idea. On the left it shows a society in which – when you step outside the family – you are dealing directly with the state. On the right it shows a society in which – when you move outside the family – you are in the community, which acts as a buffer zone between you and the state.

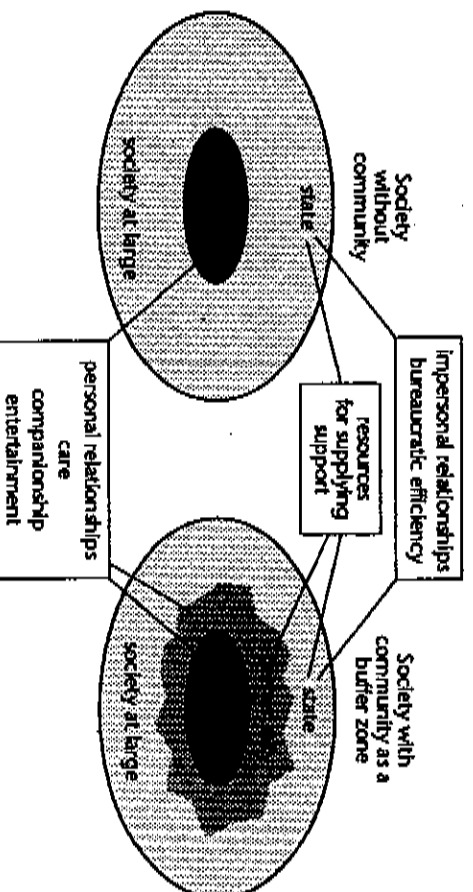
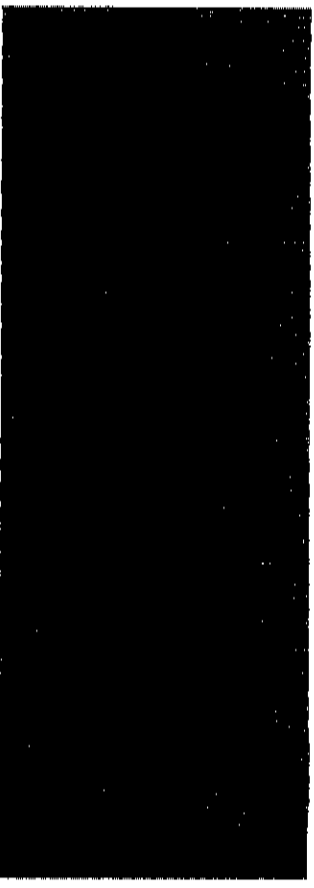


Figure 1 Community as a 'buffer zone' between family and state

If we are attracted to the version of society shown on the right, then clearly communities are important. After all, many of us are likely to need support at some point in our lives: as babies, toddlers, or school children, or as old people, or if we are without housing or work. At all these times the idea of local community-based support, which can be responsive to local conditions and needs, and to us as individual people, is likely to be attractive. But can modern communities themselves take the strain? We shall be looking in more detail at this question in Section 6.

However, we must not think of communities *only* in terms of care and support. Many people hanker after the idea of community for vaguer and more general reasons. Somehow it seems that belonging to a community ought to make life more meaningful. If you ask yourself the question, 'Who am I and how significant am I?' and then think in terms of the state and society at large, you will probably seem anonymous and unimportant. But if you think in terms of your family, that can seem a bit limiting. After all, you may not currently belong to a family and, in any case, a family nowadays is a rather small group, which may give you a very restricted backdrop against which to view your life and works as meaningful. The fact that your family thinks of you as a source of comfort and warmth, or as a high flyer, or as a black sheep, is important, but not necessarily satisfying as the entire basis on which to assess the meaning and worth of your life. It seems more appropriate to have a larger and more impartial group of people amongst whom your actions and qualities can carry significance. So communities can be important in adding another level of meaning to life, as well as offering practical care and support.



SECTION SUMMARY

In Section 2 we have been considering what the term 'community' means to us. We have examined some photographs in detail and arrived at a checklist of the features we might look for in a community. We then considered whether, in the light of this checklist, a contemporary suburb can be properly thought of as a community and were unable to come to a clear-cut conclusion. Finally we asked whether, in a modern society with an efficient state, community is any longer an important concept, and we then considered the idea of communities standing as buffer zones between the private arena of the home and the impersonal arena of the state.

If we draw the conclusion that communities *can* play an important role in modern societies, then we need to continue our enquiry as to what we mean by a community, so that we can try to ensure that they flourish. However, in Section 3 we shall look at whether, in trying to sustain communities, we are in effect trying vainly to recreate the past. We shall look at where our ideas of community come from and at how these ideas have changed over the years, as people have studied communities from different points of view.