THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY:
A RE-EXAMINATION

David B. Clark

If the concept of community is dead, it stubbornly refuses to lie down. Recent years have seen writers so frustrated by the apparent ‘myth of community studies’¹ that they have sought to despatch the term once and for all. The case for this execution is usually based on Hillery’s unearthing, some years ago, of ninety-four different definitions of community;² such seeming confusion and little subsequent clarification of the term leading Stacey to write it off as a ‘non-concept’³ and Pahl to comment that ‘the word “community” serves more to confuse than illuminate the situation in Britain today.’⁴ Yet as fast as the attempt is made to thrust the concept of community into limbo, it as obstinately emerges again; of late in such notable titles as ‘community relations’ and ‘community development’, to name but two. It would seem, therefore, that rather than turning one’s back on the term, it would be useful to examine with a little more care how it has been employed in the past and to make some positive suggestions regarding its future application. What follows is intended as a starting point for the re-instatement of the concept of community. The discussion is based on a wide range of material which Reissman has usefully termed ‘the empirical’, ‘the ecological’ and ‘the theoretical’ approaches to the subject.⁵

Community as Locality

‘Many contemporary sociologists tend to underrate the importance of locality’, writes Pahl;⁶ a mistake easy to make even with regard to the study of community. For MacIver and Page, however, locality is one of the fundamental ‘bases’ of community,’⁷ a view implicit or explicit in a good number of community studies. For example, amongst empiricists, Williams in his study of Ashworthy asks for attention to be paid to ‘the spatial and environmental aspects’ of communal life,⁸ whilst Pahl in examining the influence of London on the metropolitan fringe of Hertfordshire stresses the close links between the sociology of community and social geography.⁹ The ecologists, from Park on-
wards, have made a major contribution to the study of community in emphasizing the effect of the physical environment on social relationships,¹⁰ and amongst more theoretically oriented writers, Tönnies goes so far as to claim that ‘the metaphysical character of the clan, the tribe, the village and town community is, so to speak, wedded to the land in a lasting union.’¹¹ Though few today would adopt Tönnies’s view without many qualifications, it must be accepted that there has been a certain neglect of the influence of place on community. Growing awareness of this fact has led to some effort to re-examine how, for example, buildings of historic note, well known local landmarks, traditional gathering places and so on become what Herbert calls ‘fixes’, physical points identifiable as symbolic of a common life, past and present.¹²

Nevertheless to argue that place influences community is a very different matter from assuming that certain geographical units or areas are synonymous with it. Stacey rightly points out that confusion has arisen because the term community has been applied to places ranging from the small neighbourhood to the entire nation.¹³ Williams, for example, in his study of Gosforth, has a chapter on ‘Community’ which obviously pitches the concept at the level of the village,¹⁴ whilst Willmott calls his survey of Dagenham (with a population of 90,000 and described by the author as ‘the biggest housing estate in the world’) The Evolution of a Community.¹⁵ Homans’s comments on the New England settlement (population 1,000) he investigated are very apt here: ‘Because Hilltown still has a name, geographical boundaries, and people who live within the boundaries, we assume that it is still a community and therefore judge that it is rotten. It would be wiser to see that it is no longer, except in the most trivial sense, a community at all.’¹⁶ It would thus seem quite pointless to attempt to tie down the term community to any particular geographical entity.

Despite this there has remained an extraordinarily tenacious belief that community is a phenomenon which can be physically engineered; what Pahl calls the pursuit of the doctrine of ‘architectural determinism’.¹⁷ The later was especially prominent in relation to the vogue for the so-called ‘neighbourhood unit’, originally conceived by Perry in the late 1920s.¹⁸ Its popularity reached its height during the optimistic era of post-war reconstruction—White at this time asserting that ‘all the evidence suggests that there are certain fairly well-defined limits of size, population, and density within which neighbourliness
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

is easily fostered, and outside which the community tends to disintegrate. Unfortunately 'the evidence' does not, or at least no longer continues to, support White, as those striving to create community within neighbourhoods have found to their cost. Differences, even relatively minor, of social class have confounded many such attempts and even in very homogeneous areas residents have still proved very reluctant to make more than superficial contact with community facilities provided for their entertainment and edification. The conclusion reached by Morris and Mogey, that the main attractions of the Berinsfield (Oxfordshire) community centre 'were undoubtedly the jumble sales and the bingo drives', can hardly be said to be of great inspiration to those concerned with the establishment of community at any real depth, though this is not to underrate the value of such activities for some people. Thus one must agree with Herbert after his very thorough examination of the subject that 'in terms of a concept which sees society as intricate and involved, the idea of the neighbourhood unit must be regarded as an over-simplification, to say the least', and with Kuper, on a broader plain, that 'there is obviously no simple mechanical determination of social life by the physical environment.

Community as Social Activity

In recent years there has been a move to relate the investigation of community to specific types of social activity, in part as a reaction against the 'raw empiricism' of those studies which, though informative and vivid in style, remain theoretically superficial (an approach initially typified by the Lynds' first description of Middletown in the 1920s). Frankenberg, for example, has argued that a detailed description and analysis of 'dramatic occurrences' (special events, ceremonies or customs) can reveal a great deal about communal life.

One of the few examples of a full examination of the dramatic event occurs in Frankenberg's own book Village on the Border, in which he describes at length the circumstances which led to football being replaced by the local carnival as the external symbol of village unity. Falling within the category of ceremonial (and at times custom), Frankenberg suggests such dramatic occurrences as '(a) Ceremonials surrounding individual and family life crises—such as christenings, weddings and funerals and (b) reactions to individual tragedies such as "whiprounds" after fire, flood, and accident. (c) Perennial occurrences such as Christmas, Easter, bank holidays, holidays in general, elections and meetings. (d) Occasional celebrations such as Corona-
This approach to the study of community opens up a fresh and interesting means of enquiry and may well provide a more penetrating understanding of what is actually happening within the group, especially in regard to group attitudes and motives, than more traditional methods allow. But there could be a tendency to lay too much stress on actions witnessed or views expressed when group members are obviously tense (dramatic event) or acting in accordance with communal traditions (dramatic ceremonial or custom). The question raised is the extent to which these occasions accurately represent the 'real' sentiments of the group. Social drama could well be just another name for what Sumner calls 'conventionalization'. The latter 'creates a set of conditions under which a thing may be tolerated which would otherwise be disapproved and tabooed... This intervention of conventionalization to remove cases from the usual domain of the mores into a special field, where they can be protected and tolerated by codes and standards modified in their favour, is of very great importance. It accounts for many inconsistencies in the mores.' The study of dramatic occurrences could thus lead to a wholly misleading understanding of current and 'genuine' norms.

Two other major problems can be mentioned here. One is the difficulty of deciding the criteria for the selection of the dramatic occurrences studied. For example, Davies and Rees criticise Franken-berg himself, in his study of Glynceiriog, for being too concerned with football, the village carnival and local government when in fact the chapel and its functions would be of at least equal importance to Welshmen. The other difficulty is how such incidents, which are often spontaneous and periods of intense activity, physical and verbal, can be recorded with sufficient accuracy to stand up to detailed analysis at a later date. Indeed all these factors taken together make it rather hard to accept that 'the analysis of a cycle of dramatic incidents within their historical and geographical setting seems... to be the way forward for British community studies.'

Community as Social Structure

The study of community has perhaps most often been approached via an examination of the social structure of the group, especial prominence being given to the study of institutions and of the concepts of rôle, status and social class. Typical here is Stacey's case-study of Banbury, where social class was the key analytical tool, though the
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

enquiry also revealed the two equally important categories of the ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ resident. On a wider plane, Frankenberg’s survey of Communities in Britain concludes with a summary of the main features of rural and urban life styles in dominantly structural terms.

Those adopting the structural approach have been most prominent in suggesting that the word ‘community’ be dropped altogether and replaced with such a phrase as ‘the local social system’. The latter focuses attention on the ‘social network as the meaningful arena for social relationships’. Fully to understand this, Stacey argues, community studies should give pride of place to an examination of such phenomena as the degree of inter-relation between institutions and the amount of ‘multiplex role playing’, whilst Benson adds that men can only be said to experience a common life ‘to the extent that there exists among them a consensus about the rules that define the various roles that individuals can occupy.

There is of course nothing wrong in all this so far as it goes. It is true that those stressing structure (in contrast to those emphasising social activity, are inclined to place community within a rather static framework, but their approach is usually orderly, clear and descriptively valuable. On the other hand, it does seem that a fundamental question has been begged: can one by structural analysis alone come to discover whether any particular social aggregate is more or less of a community?

The major problem here is that so frequently community has, without much thought, been taken as synonymous with certain broad patterns of social relationships. Even the classic study of the theoretician Tönnies can at this point be called into question. Tönnies describes and analyses the social system by means of the ideal types Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (association). Heberle pinpoints the problem here when he writes, ‘If one should, e.g., define the family as a Gemeinschaft, the road to sociological understanding would thereby be barred; it is the peculiar task of the sociologist to find out how far the family in a concrete situation (e.g., the wage earner’s family in a great city) approaches more nearly to the type of Gesellschaft than a family in another situation (e.g. on a farm).’ Tönnies, at least in his earlier writings, appears to fall into just this trap. He so reifies his types that the distinct impression is left that on the empirical level Gesellschaft excludes Gemeinschaft. For example, Tönnies writes that ‘as the town lives on within the city, elements of
the life in *Gemeinschaft*, as the only real form of life, persist within the *Gesellschaft*, although lingering and decaying. "The entire culture", he states, "has been transformed into a civilization of state and *Gesellschaft*, and this transformation means the doom of culture itself if none of the scattered seeds remain alive and again bring forth the essence and idea of *Gemeinschaft*, thus secretly fostering a new culture amidst the decaying one."

From Tönnies onwards there has been little attempt to understand community as anything other than an exclusive property of the *Gemeinschaft* type of social structure, ranging from Glynceiriog to Bethnal Green. As a result community easily becomes a concept that is historically dated—with all the consequent nostalgia—or culturally conditioned. If there is a real desire to get rid of the kind of sociological sentimentalism often associated with *Gemeinschaft* than there is an urgent need to look not only at the structural *expression* of community, which as noted begs many questions as to its intensity, but at its *essential nature*. For Stacey to assert that "our concern as sociologists is with social relationships" is too simple. For whether those studying the sociology of community like it or not, their work involves them not only in an examination of social forms but in how people regard them. Some writers forget, states Mann, that "what is perhaps one of the most important factors in the analysis of urbanism is the distinction that must be made between the overall social structure and the social structure as seen and felt by the individual." Any perceptive study of community, therefore, must take into account not only the usual pattern of social behaviour as it appears outwardly, but the attitudes of people towards the normative order as a whole.

**Community as Sentiment**

It is believed that the reinstatement of the concept of community must begin where MacIver began half a century ago in his major work on *Community*. He writes, "Life is essentially and always communal life. Every living thing is born into community and owes its life to community." Simpson, in another notable examination of the subject a few years later, adds, "Without the presence of community men could not will associational relations." Here are initial definitions that point in the direction of a phenomenon that is universal and enduring. But what is the essential nature of this phenomenon? Simpson continues: "It should now be obvious that community is no circumscribed sphere of social life, but rather the very life-blood of social life.
munity is not simply economic, nor simply political, nor simply territorial, nor simply visceral. Nor is it all these special elements added together. Ultimately, it is a complex of conditioned emotions which the individual feels towards the surrounding world and his fellows... It is to human beings and their feelings, sentiments, reactions, that all look for the fundamental roots of community. Or, as MacIver and Page state more directly, 'Community is... sentiment.' It is so regarded in what follows.

There are other terms besides 'sentiment' which might be employed to sum up the nature of community, but most lay too much stress on the activity of the mind (such as 'attitude') or on the emotions (such as 'feeling'). The word 'sentiment' seems to be the best available to describe the phenomenon under consideration. It will be seen later that all the relevant sentiments, out of the complex Simpson refers to above, appear to converge into, and be subordinate to, two absolutely basic ones.

It might be suggested that in treating community in this way a psychological rather than a sociological point of view is being adopted. This is partly true in that community sentiment is in one respect amongst what Homans calls the various 'internal states of the human body'. But this criticism reveals an artificial simplification of the empirical situation and indeed Homans regarded 'sentiment' as an essential concept for his own study of The Human Group. The psychological and sociological aspects of the study of human behaviour are for ever complementing each other and, in the field of community studies, it is necessary to bring the two as close together as possible. Merton's comments regarding the concept of anomie apply equally to community; both need to be examined 'as subjectively experienced' and 'as an objective condition of group life'. Both facets of the whole must be kept in mind if any investigation is to prove adequate.

There are of course dangers in this approach. As Klein notes in her comments on the work of Mogy and of Stacey, one can easily confuse the psychological and sociological levels of analysis. But this need not be so. It is quite possible to keep clearly in mind what MacIver and Page term the 'psychological configuration' of community—as they use it a corporate not an individualistic phenomenon—whilst distinguishing this form from its more obviously sociological expression through social activity and social structure. In fact a great deal more confusion seems to have arisen as a result of researchers concentrating all their attention on the social expression
of community without having first clearly defined its essential nature.

The Essential Elements of Community

The two fundamental communal elements of any social system are a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance. A sense of solidarity is a sentiment very much akin to what MacIver and Page call 'we-feeling', which they define as 'the feeling that leads men to identify themselves with others so that when they say "we" there is no thought of distinction and when they say "ours" there is no thought of division.' Solidarity is by far the most commonly accepted ingredient of community and it is this sentiment which writers have in mind when they refer to social unity, togetherness, social cohesion or a sense of belonging. It encompasses all those sentiments which draw people together (sympathy, courtesy, gratitude, trust and so on), a river into which many tributaries flow. Solidarity is a sentiment very highly prized especially in this country, and is commended not only in many community studies but, for example, in that series of post-war films typified by Whisky Galore, The Titfield Thunderbolt, Passport to Pimlico and The Galloping Major.

Unfortunately preoccupation with solidarity has led to the neglect of the second essential communal element: a sense of significance. The latter is very similar to what MacIver and Page term 'rôle-feeling', defined by them as 'the sense of place or station' experienced by group members 'so that each person feels he has a rôle to play, his own function to fulfil in the reciprocal exchanges of the social scene.' That significance must stand side by side with solidarity is emphasized by Klein when she states, 'Not infrequently in practice people want a show of appreciation more than they want affection.' Again significance is made up of a complex of subordinate sentiments, such as a sense of achievement or a sense of fulfilment, all contributing to the larger whole.

A search for further essential communal elements reveals only one other possibility: a sense of security. MacIver and Page in fact include this in their definition of community sentiment and call it 'dependency-feeling'. They write, 'Closely associated with rôle-feeling is the individual's sense of dependence upon the community as a necessary condition of his own life. This involves physical dependence, since his material needs are satisfied within it, and a psychological dependence, since community is the greater "home" that sustains him, embodying all that is familiar at least, if not all that is congenial to his life.' Two objec-
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

tions arise here. On the one hand, it is by no means clear that physical dependence always leads to a sense of solidarity; for example, prisoners of war rarely feel attached to the enemy authorities who provide them with food and shelter. As mentioned later, obligatory interaction does little to increase any sense of belonging. On the other hand, a sense of solidarity can be very strong even when, or indeed just because, a group is materially or physically in very dire straits. No more telling example of this can be quoted than the sense of solidarity shown by the people of Biafra, many of them starving, during the Nigerian civil war. Such was their communal strength that vital relief supplies were refused from 'unfriendly' countries. If social security, or 'psychological dependence', as McLver and Page call it, is considered, the association with a sense of solidarity seems so close that a separate category is uncalled for. As Goldman underlines in his comments on the basic needs of children: 'Emotionally, a child needs to be secure, and the roots of this need lie in the experience of love. A child therefore needs to feel he belongs, first of all, to an intimate family, then to a community which cares for him. A sense of security is born out of a sense of solidarity rather than vice versa.

Solidarity and Significance in Community Studies

The two essential components of community described above have emerged as the result of an examination of a wide range of community studies. Here it is only possible to refer briefly to some of the leading writers in this field amongst empiricists, ecologists or theoreticians.

Of the empiricists, Jennings comes as near as any to recognizing clearly what constitute the essential communal elements, perhaps because she herself worked for so long among the people of Barton Hill, Bristol, about whom she writes. At the outset of her book she states that 'the important question for the sociologist is not only that of individual happiness, but even more that of the effects of change on the maintenance of the social bond on which the very existence and quality of society itself depends. What in the past has made individuals and groups feel that they “belonged” and had a part to play?' In these last few words Jennings at once puts her finger on the two fundamental components of communal life. These features are emphasized throughout her book but it will perhaps be best to illustrate her understanding of the nature of community from her valuable summary.

In connection with solidarity, she writes that 'at the turn of the
The inhabitants of the old (Barton Hill) area were bound together in a local society which was unified by the twin factors of place and class. A self-contained and common place of residence was the context of a sense of solidarity achieved through localized social activity, extended kinship ties and strong links between neighbours. At the same time the “working class” was a defined and recognized entity with the solidarity induced by common interests and aims.

A sense of significance was present because people in Barton Hill felt that they counted. They were given the opportunity to choose the site and type of house they liked, even if accommodation were rented; they could achieve recognized status as skilled workers if they had the desire; and virtually all could experience a sense of significance in informal ways. Referring to the latter, Jennings notes that the racey storyteller in the “local”, the darts or football player, the key worker in the mission or social club, the successful pigeon club member or allotment-holder were all known outside their specialized field of association. Within the streets, the careful housewife who had special skills in cookery or as a dressmaker for her children, the good husband with special abilities in house decoration and repairs, and the organizers of street festivities or entertainments were accorded generous recognition. Prestige was attached to persons as such, and often through them to their families also, rather than solely to income and occupation, which formed only one element in the composite picture.

In her conclusion Jennings writes that from all the factors moulding the old area of Barton Hill there emerged a society in which individuals counted (significance) and the social bond was strong (solidarity) and found expression in the wider society. Such a comparison (of the way the old Barton Hill developed in relation to the new estate at “Mossdene”) offers hope for the future. Yet some new factors seem to demand explicit recognition and purposive action if the old ideal of individual significance, social unity (solidarity) and effective democracy (significance) are to be given new and appropriate forms of expression. First, the traditional ties with defined localities may be increasingly threatened by the conquest of space and by the fragmentation of interests and bonds (lack of solidarity) resulting partly from new types of economic organization. Secondly, there is a danger that the individual may come to count for less (lack of significance) if the tendency to large-scale organization and administration continues. Thirdly, the growth of powerful and specialized and professionalized...
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

corporate bodies within the state may tend to make the man in the street less able to play an effective part (lack of significance) in the shaping of society. It may be that another age of discovery demands a rethinking of the aims, machinery and functions of corporate society in relation to the individual and to organized groups.63

The attempt of the classical ecologists to focus attention on the physical and structural organization of life is not very closely related, in their theoretical endeavours at least, to what are regarded here as the communal elements of the social system. Park, however, does touch on the importance of solidarity and significance when writing about the level of human living he designates 'societal', and notes that society 'always includes something more than competitive co-operation and its resulting economic interdependence. The existence of a society presupposes a certain amount of solidarity, consensus, and common purpose.64 Referring especially to significance he adds: 'This world of communication and of "distances", in which we all seek to maintain some sort of privacy, personal dignity and poise, is a dynamic world, and has an order and a character quite its own. In this social and moral order the conception which each of us has of himself is limited by the conception which every other individual, in the same limited world of communication, has of himself, and of every other individual. The consequence is—and this is true of any society—every individual finds himself in a struggle for status: a struggle to preserve his personal prestige, his point of view, and his self-respect. He is able to maintain them, however, only to the extent that he can gain for himself the recognition of everyone else whose estimate seems important; that is to say the estimate of everyone else who is in his set or in his society. From this struggle for status no philosophy of life has yet discovered a refuge. The individual who is not concerned about his status in some society is a hermit, even when his seclusion is a city crowd. The individual whose conception of himself is not at all determined by the conceptions that other persons have of him is probably insane.65

On the whole the theoreticians have been more concerned with the phenomenon of solidarity than significance, probably the consequence of a certain preoccupation with the Gemeinschaft or folk type of human grouping. Of their number the one who comes as near as any to appreciating the need for both solidarity amongst and significance for members of the social aggregate is Simpson, who underlines the communal necessity of both major sentiments in relation to the quali-
ties of the primary group. He states that the problem facing mankind is that of communalizing those who are to conflict. That is a large problem. It is the problem of carrying over the ideals of the primary or face-to-face group which is most easily communalized, to the larger groups, and ultimately to nations and international action. The ideals of the primary groups are shaped by symbiotic behaviour, the feeling of interdependence (solidarity), and the need for fulfilment (significance; though it is doubtful whether Cooley really stressed this aspect in connection with the primary group). There has latterly been much discussion of the need for a return to primary groups. But what is needed is a return to the ideals of the primary group in such a shape and so adjusted as to be capable of application to cosmopolitan conditions. Otherwise, a sort of return to the communal womb is being urged, a nostalgia for the infantile. Simpson again stresses the element of solidarity when he comments that ‘in community men’s deepest desires for love, fellowship, understanding, sympathy, solidarity, are realized.’

In connection with significance, Simpson argues that ‘what men are now failing to realize is that the individual must be made significant in a new type of community.’ ‘An individual’, he continues, ‘becomes communally important either negatively, when his actions are restricted in order that certain customs, conventions, and laws may remain intact; positively when his labours are necessary to the further vitality of other men. . . . Within community, the individual is positively significant if the foundation upon which community rests can remain firm through the interaction of individuals as responsible human beings.’

The Relation Between Solidarity and Significance

The two essential components of community—solidarity and significance—are closely linked. No person can feel a sense of belonging to a group without thereby gaining some sense of significance. To the outsider it may seem that in certain situations (as in a monastic order, an army regiment or a totalitarian state) individuality is completely lost in the whole. That this is by no means always the case is underlined by Klein when she quotes Zweig’s discussion of the worker’s relation to his union: ‘The mass-organization gives the worker his individuality, his freedom, his self-esteem, his self-confidence. A middle-class man has no such experience and cannot understand it; it seems to him rather like a contradiction in terms. A worker does not
lose his individuality in his trade-union; it is quite the other way round. By identifying himself with the union he gains status and strength in his own eyes and in everyone else's.\textsuperscript{170}

In a similar manner no person can experience a sense of significance without feeling some sense of solidarity with those who make this possible. Klein writes, "The individual's assurance of his worth depends on group-membership."\textsuperscript{171} Whatever rôle is played some sense of attachment to the rest of the cast is virtually inevitable.

This close relationship between solidarity and significance merely emphasizes the fact that community, though made up of a complex of sentiments, is a phenomenon which, however analyzed, must in the end be treated as an entity.

Nonetheless, though numerous groups exist within which people experience both a strong sense of solidarity and significance, it is not true that these two essential elements of community are always present to the same extent. There are numerous situations where the group that provides members with a strong sense of solidarity does not give them a sense of significance of the same intensity, and vice versa. For example, some people discover a very strong degree of solidarity within the nuclear family whilst not finding that it gives them the chance to attain a fully adequate sense of significance. Some people derive a very strong sense of significance from their work whilst not experiencing a very strong sense of attachment to fellow workers. It is therefore crucial in any study of community that solidarity and significance should be treated as analytically distinct phenomena and not be assumed to vary in direct proportion to one another.

If it is accepted that a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance are the two essential communal indicators, then the following working definition can be suggested: \textit{the strength of community within any given group is determined by the degree to which its members experience both a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance within it.}

Such a definition taken seriously means a considerable re-orientation of approach to the study of community which has dominated the scene for a number of decades. It means that, despite all the potential dangers, what has deprecatingly been termed 'community-in-the-mind'\textsuperscript{172} must in fact be the springboard for any realistic examination of the phenomenon. It is how the members of the group themselves feel that is the basic concern. The investigator must not be misled because a particular group does not seem to him to be one in which he
himself would experience a very strong sense of belonging or of significance; it is how the participants view the situation that counts. The point is stressed by Becker in a somewhat similar context. Outlining a sequence of types of social aggregate based on attitudes of people to innovation and change, he states that 'a sacred society is one that elicits from or imparts to its members, by means of sociation, an unwillingness and/or inability to respond to the culturally new as the new is defined by those members in terms of the society's existing culture.' Just as the definition of what is 'new' must be determined by the society under investigation, so it is with the intensity of solidarity or significance. The overt expression of these sentiments, verbally or in other ways, especially when spontaneous, is a key indicator of the strength of community present within the group. Gans's views are pertinent here when he writes of the area he studied: 'If Levittowners report that they find their community satisfying, as they do, their opinion ought to be respected. Although the suburban critics insist that these satisfactions are spurious and self-deceptive, they offer no valid evidence, so that their charge only indicates their differing standards for the good life. . . . The observer always sees more than anyone else, if only because that is his job, but if he evaluates what he alone sees, he must still do so by the standards of the people whom he is observing.'

Communities of Interest

Investigation thus begins not with a special kind of locality, nor with particular patterns of social activity, nor with certain types of social relationships taken as synonymous with community, but begins with community as sentiment. Because of this a good deal more attention needs to be given to such phenomena as beliefs, values and attitudes than has hitherto been the case. For example, it is a noteworthy feature of social life that strangers with religious beliefs in common can experience what is undoubtedly a strong sense of solidarity after only relatively short acquaintance. The importance of attitudes, having considerable bearing on a person's sense of significance, is stressed by Frankenberg when he distinguishes between 'rôle-commitment and rôle-attachment', the former being a rôle accepted without deep feeling as something of a routine obligation, the latter being a rôle played out with total concern and often enthusiasm.

To begin here—to attempt to stand first where people themselves
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

stand and to appreciate their sentiments and concerns—brings into prominence what Pons calls 'communities of interest'\textsuperscript{77}; those groups which gather first and foremost because of shared beliefs, values and concerns rather than because of proximity of residence or because of established patterns of social relationships. The exploration of such communities of interest is no soft option. As MacIver demonstrated some years ago the classification of interests needs careful consideration,\textsuperscript{78} though he himself eventually reduced his earlier complex analysis to two major interests, 'common' and 'like'.\textsuperscript{79} But such an empirical starting point would give a new dimension to community studies, though it must still be remembered that communities of interest also reveal differing intensities of community sentiment according to the degree of solidarity and significance experienced by participants.

To focus more attention on communities of interest would underscore once and for all that man in modern society finds solidarity and significance within numerous groups, none in itself self-sufficient, but many overlapping and interpenetrating one another. It would assist in sorting out just what communities of interest, and for whom, were contained within the locality, and which were found within wider geographical contexts.\textsuperscript{80} It would reveal more clearly that community is not being eclipsed but that its expression is shifting from a 'local' to a 'cosmopolitan' form of activity and social relationships.\textsuperscript{81} Furthermore with communities of interest as the empirical springboard the phenomenon of community fostered through secondary groupings (such as the trades union, the professional association, the church and the nation) or indirect contact (such as the mass media) takes on a new importance. Community thus spontaneously engendered amongst virtual strangers—as is often typical of the youth scene today—gives added weight to the need for a new point of departure. At the same time such an approach, by concentrating on and demonstrating the variety and diversity of interest communities to which people belong, reveals with greater force how one community can come to oppose another community and how, because the sentiments involved are so powerful and so basic, often intense conflicts can occur.\textsuperscript{82}

Other Indices of Community

The need to stand where people stand and the value of beginning one's study of community by investigating interest groups and the sentiments participants experience therein is not to argue that other
more general sociological indices are of no consequence. Much work has already been done on what Merton termed, as noted earlier, the objective conditions of group life and their relation to solidarity and significance.

For example, referring to a sense of solidarity, Klein writes, 'The more interaction, the more positive is the sentiment towards others in the group and towards those who interact frequently in particular.'\(^{(83)}\) The degree of interaction thus seems a useful index of the intensity of solidarity existing among members of any given social aggregate. But there are exceptions. One is that interaction which is felt (note again the importance of sentiment) to be obligatory rarely strengthens a sense of belonging.\(^{(84)}\) Another is the case 'where interaction does not give information about personalities . . . (or about) the sentiments of other members.'\(^{(85)}\) This may occur, for example, in a work situation where people fail to talk much about themselves or their families.

In relation to a sense of significance, Homans, putting the point negatively, states that 'as the norms of a group decline in the degree to which they are clear to, and held in common by, all members of the group, so the ranking of members of the group will become less definite.'\(^{(86)}\) As ranking becomes less definite, so it becomes ever more difficult for people 'to know where they stand' and to attain a sense of significance.

The investigation of such indices must continue and where shown to reveal the strength of solidarity and significance, or their weakness, be fully employed. In this article, however, the point stressed is that the investigation of community must begin where people are experientially and not proceed on the assumption that patterns of social activity, norms, rôles and status systems can, unrelated to sentiments, reveal the full or even the major part of the picture.

*From Sociology to Ideology*

The assumption, without very careful examination of how people feel about their social situation, that particular kinds of social activity or social relationships are synonymous with a very strong sense of community has often led to the use of the word 'community' as an ideological tool. To accept that the strength of community within any given social aggregate can only be decided by the degree to which the group members themselves experience both a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance may be infuriating for social, political or re-
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

Religious reformers. But if this criterion is set aside in favour of what the outside observer deems best for others, however altruistic his motives may be, then it is not sociological but ethical, philosophical and theological judgments that are being made. This is of course an area of quite proper and indeed vital debate, for the 'quality' of community life is something which concerns all of us, but here the sociologist as sociologist withdraws. It is hoped that his contribution will then have been to have shown where sociology ends and ideology begins.

London.

3 Stacey: op. cit., p. 137.
6 Pahl: op. cit., p. 110.


13 Stacey: op. cit., p. 135.
David B. Clark


21 Herbert: op. cit., p. 195.


29 D. Jenkins et al.: Welsh Rural Communities, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1960, p. xi.


37 Tönnies: op. cit.


39 Tönnies: op. cit., p. 265.

40 Ibid., p. 270.
The Concept of Community: A Re-examination

41 C. T. Stewart, Jnr.: 'The Urban-Rural Dichotomy: Concepts and Uses', American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 64, No. 2, 1958, pp. 152-158. In relation to cultural conditioning, Stewart argues that certain elements (e.g. density of population) taken for granted as typical of rural-urban differences in the Western World cannot be transposed without further thought to other parts of the globe (e.g. the Far East).


46 Ibid., pp. 97 and 71.


51 MacIver and Page: op. cit., p. 291.

52 Ibid., p. 293.


54 MacIver and Page: op. cit., p. 293.


56 MacIver and Page: op. cit., p. 293.


60 Ibid., p. 208.

61 Ibid., p. 209.


63 Ibid., pp. 224-225 (the words in brackets have been added).

64 Park: op. cit., p. 181.

65 Ibid., p. 176-177.

66 Simpson: op. cit., p. 39 (the words in brackets have been added).

67 Ibid., p. 33.
David B. Clark

68 Ibid., p. 88.

69 Ibid., p. 101.


75 For a useful introduction to this aspect of the subject see T. M. Mills: The Sociology of Small Groups, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1967.


78 MacIver: op. cit., p. 108.

79 MacIver and Page: op. cit., p. 32.


82 See the valuable discussion of 'communal' and 'non-communal' conflict in Simpson: op. cit.


85 Klein: op. cit., 1956.

86 Homans: op. cit., p. 365.

This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.