

Community Sustainability Research The Challenge of Reciprocity

PETER PHIPPS

Abstract

This paper explores the promise and inevitable challenges of a long-term, multi-site, international, comparative research project on community sustainability. The research project is located at a number of sites concentrated in Australia and others distributed globally with an emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. The aim is to conduct this research over a long timeframe to enable temporal as well as global comparisons, but also as an expression of an underlying ethic of commitment to a long-term relationship with communities in each field site. The challenges are common to many research projects and can be summarized by three inter-related problems: what is the (inter-)disciplinary base of the project and what can it learn from those disciplines? What is the object and who are the subjects of 'community'? And finally what does a long-term, engaged research relationship mean in this context?

Keywords: Community, sustainability, research methods, interdisciplinary research, anthropology, sociology, community studies, reciprocity and exchange in research relationships

Introduction

In *The Age of Extremes* Eric Hobsbawm writes, 'Never was the word "community" used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life'.¹ Perhaps Hobsbawm has in mind the stricter sociological *Gemeinschaft*, as a deep, almost natural communitarian mode of social being which has, in many places, been largely overwhelmed by the *Gesellschaft* of more abstract institutionally-mediated social relations, and further hollowed out by the deeper penetration of market relations into all areas of social life. In this context, which Bauman characterizes as the 'insecure world' of 'liquid modernity', politicians and other powerful social actors from advertisers to corporations and universities are quick

to invoke 'community' as a catchcry to garner support or market share.² In the realm of government and politics this can be for both progressive and very often xenophobic and socially-conservative policy ends; in both cases 'community' is used to invoke something many people in highly-marketized and urbanized societies yearn for, feel they are missing, or have lost.

The *local/global community sustainability* project is an ambitious attempt to come to grips with the complexities of contemporary community life, in an attempt to produce broadly comparative data on very different social phenomena, under the fuzzy umbrella concept of 'community'. The research is located at sites in Melbourne and regional Victoria, nationally around Australia, and globally, with particular emphasis on the Asia-Pacific. The aim is to conduct this research over a long time frame (a minimum of ten years) to enable temporal, as well as global, comparisons, but also as an expression of an underlying ethic of commitment to a long-term relationship with communities in each field site.

The sweeping scope and extended duration of the project pose considerable challenges to researchers. These challenges can be summarized by asking three interrelated questions: What is the object and who are the subjects of this thing called 'community'? What is the inter-disciplinary and theoretical base from which this research is being undertaken, and what can be learnt from those disciplines? Also, what does a long-term committed and engaged research relationship mean in this context?

What is the object, and who are the subjects, of this research on that thing being described as 'community'?

To a large extent research-object choice and definition is dealt with by alignment within a discipline and its sub-fields. For example, social and cultural anthropology have primarily focussed on social solidarity and social reproduction in relatively small, remote communities in the third and fourth worlds. For anthropology, 'communities' have characteristically been seen as complete social entities: tribes, clans, or small rural hamlets defined by kinship and relations of face-to-face social, economic and ritual exchange in an unchanging timelessness of 'tradition'. Ethnographic anthropology has gradually taken on a wider range of field sites to include urban anthropology, with First World ethnographies in some cases following the injunction to 'study up' the social hierarchy.³

In contrast, sociology has tended to concentrate on the social structures of urban First World contexts, and to be more overtly concerned with relationships of social actors as opposed to the mode of production, expressed through a concern with class, employment and the state for example – hence the focus on social welfare, government policy, social movements, and social discipline as the locus of social power. 'The family' (First World kinship for anthropology) and other modes of social reproduction have been in some respects secondary concerns, brought more strongly to the fore in recent decades by waves of feminist scholarship.

For sociologists, the term 'community' has tended, as in anthropology, to

refer to a stable social base that legitimates the existing social order. It can also refer to a community of interest or of practice, (closer to a class fraction, such as ‘professional communities’), communities of ethnic minorities, communities of dissent (social movements), or as a substitute for locality, such as an urban neighbourhood.

These disciplinary presumptions were disrupted, particularly in anthropology, by the powerful, militant national liberation struggles of colonized peoples in the post-World War II period. This was followed by the civil-rights movements of discriminated minorities, in particular the struggles by women and indigenous (Fourth World) for self-determination and cultural survival. Anthropology and sociology were at the forefront of the social sciences’ engagement in the social ferment of that period, and anthropology, in particular, was challenged for its association with the administrative apparatus of colonialism. The authority of the social sciences as objective truth-bearing practices was called into question, as were the power relations that had underwritten exchanges between researchers, the researched and the uses of that research. These social scientists were also presented, perhaps paradoxically – and with a further reinforcement of their authority – in roles as allies and sometime spokespersons for the socially dispossessed and marginalized.

The *local/global community sustainability* project could be characterized as an attempt at something similar to the ‘multi-site’ ethnography of George Marcus, or the ‘multi-local’ fieldwork anthropology of Ulf Hannerz, the ‘travelling theory’ of James Clifford, or the global cultural studies of Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge’s *Public Culture* journal project.⁴ For these cultural and social anthropologists, multi-site ethnographies reflect the mobility and transnational interdependence of a highly-globalized world. At times more akin to cultural studies than classic fieldwork anthropology, this global ethnography has the advantages of reflecting the mobility and interconnectedness of many of the societies now being studied. With this in mind, we are not so much interested in strictly defining community, as having people in specific locales describing to us what they understand their communities to be, and their relationship to them.

What is the inter-disciplinary and theoretical base from which this research is being undertaken, and what can be learnt from those disciplines?

There is a certain presumptuousness to the aims of the *local/global community sustainability* project insofar as it leaps across the domains and methods of a range of disciplines. At its best, the project might be able to offer insights that will shift discourses on the constitution of communities under conditions of intense globalization, through a combination of carefully considered theoretical analysis and broadly comparable case studies from around the globe. At the same time, this very eclecticism and its associated collaborative approach presents some serious challenges for the practical implementation of the project and its intellectual and ethical legitimacy.

The theoretical elaboration of the project is Paul James’ *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism*, which deploys levels of analytical abstraction as a way of understanding the construction of radically different social formations, and the

hugely variable human phenomena that occur within them.⁵ James' work comes from a direct and long-term association with the publications associated with the Melbourne-based Arena Group: *Arena* and *Arena Journal*, particularly the theory of constitutive abstraction most fully articulated by one of Arena's founding members, Geoff Sharp.⁶

James describes his framework as a series of four increasingly abstract levels of description and analysis of social life. They are: the broadly descriptive, quantitative and narrational *empirical analysis, conjunctural analysis*, which describes and analyses the dominant modes of social practice (production, exchange and so on) in different communities; *integrational analysis*, which is concerned with the dominant ways that different societies are held together and operate through institutions and abstract social forms; and finally the most abstract *categorical analysis*, which is concerned with the big ontological questions of social relationships with being, time and space, nature, and so on.⁷

Researchers associated with the project – and the communities they work with – may choose to engage across all these levels of analysis, or focus more on one or a few specific fields. Some areas of community research will invite a focus on the particular level or levels of analysis that are most useful, while others will range broadly across them all. For example, the work being done on the cash-crop coffee production in communities in the hills outside Dili in East Timor, and the subsequent integration of such people into national and global exchanges, is broadly comparable with the work being done on the transition of the town of Daylesford in rural Australia to a leisure-based economy.

Such research might be empirical in nature, comparing life-stories of people from these places, how they perceive themselves and their communities, statistics on the life-chances of people from these places, and so on. At a higher level of methodological and theoretical abstraction – the *conjunctural level* – we could compare the modes of production, exchange, communication, organization and enquiry at these two places, and the effects on communities of these modes and the changes going on within them. The *integrational level* of analysis is more abstract again, looking at social formations based on the primacy of direct face-to-face relationships, land and kinship-based ritual and exchange (East Timor hills, for example), agency-extended integration of institutions of an emergent state (Dili), through to the forms based on increasingly abstract and technologically-mediated relationships associated more with societies under advanced conditions of market capitalism and the associated commodification of expanding areas of social life (the shift from an economy based on logging and agriculture to the relaxation spa and new age therapeutic healing-culture of Daylesford). At the *categorical level* of analysis, James loosely characterizes these ontological forms of society as tribal, traditional, modern and postmodern social formations, acknowledging that, under contemporary conditions of globalization (and previously), there is a high degree of overlap and co-existence of these different modes of social life. At the same time, one tends to be dominant, and to determine the framing of the other modes. So Dili, as the comparatively cosmopolitan capital of an emerging independent state hosting UN and other international agency staff might, for example, have one dominant mode of social integration, while its hinterland, with very little or no modern infrastructure and

minimal penetration of capitalist modes of exchange, has another.

As with all analytical schemas, this one is to some extent arbitrary, culturally and historically specific, and reduces complex social phenomena to metaphors for comparative analysis. However, without some theoretical analytic method, the study of social worlds can easily stop at the level of empirical description, no matter how 'thick' such descriptions might be. Thick description might be fascinating in itself, particularly in the hands of a gifted ethnographic writer like Clifford Geertz,⁸ but it does not necessarily tell us how social formations, such as a self-defined community, operate in relation to other structuring forces in the world, and how it is changing as a consequence.

Like the mainstream of contemporary social theory, the schema of *local/global community sustainability* recognizes, and is deeply concerned with, the violence, alienation, chronic insecurity and environmental destruction caused by the dominance of certain social forms. These are forms generated in the over-developed world, while their destructive effects are often unequally apparent in the developing world. It is also clear that attempts to invoke or return to the imagined communities of a mythic golden age are extremely unlikely to succeed and are probably a nostalgic object of political demagoguery rather than a coherent social policy. As such, this schema is devised to avoid some of the pitfalls of classical social theory, particularly the tendency to reproduce a linear historical narrative looking forward to a utopian (or in some cases dystopic) endpoint in history. While this tendency is most pronounced, and perhaps most elegant in the ideal classless society of dialectical materialism, it is also (though less explicitly) present in liberalism as liberal democracy (or for those in power in Washington the peculiar variant known as 'America'). In structuralism and post-structuralism there is a tendency to foretell a descent, as in the otherwise very different Wallerstein, Friedman or Foucault.

Neither an inevitable historical narrative nor a utopian projection, there are however historical forces in effect that tend to undermine certain social forms, and to produce others. For instance, where nation-states break down under conditions of warfare or institutional failure, or are non-existent, more traditional (in the categorical sense) communities tend to emerge based around more immediate exchanges and locally-managed security (be it communally organized or imposed through forms of warlordism). Under some conditions, tribalism can be sustained over extremely long periods of time even where other modes have become dominant (as in the extremely extended history of tribal identity in India since the invasion of traditional pastoralists millennia ago). Tribalism can also significantly transform or in some cases re-emerge, such as resurgent Maori *Iwi* in New Zealand/Aotearoa.

The project makes a very general claim to an ethical, committed, engaged and long-term relationship with communities. The next section offers some notes on what this means in practice.

What does a long-term committed and engaged research relationship mean in this context?

Increasingly, twentieth-century anthropologists with a social/cultural orientation stepped into colonial and post-colonial contexts, as allies and defenders of indigenous and other marginalized peoples in their struggles for social and resource rights, recognition and survival. While it is relatively common (but by no means obligatory) in anthropology for individual researchers to maintain a relationship with a community (and especially individual informants) over the duration of a career, such an overt commitment to 'be there' for the long term is unusual in social science research. This is both because of the model of data extraction from the field as a short-term or once-off concentrated fieldwork exercise (often ignoring the long-term reciprocal relationships and commitments this entails), and because of the risks associated with such relationships. The risks include such factors as the short-term nature of research project funding and employment, shifts in individual or disciplinary funding and research priorities, loss of individual or disciplinary interest, interpersonal difficulties and so on. One of these risks is that living with *anybody* else can be really hard, tiring work. Add to this the burden of linguistic and cultural differences, and the physical and emotional challenges of living with marginal and under-resourced people for any length of time, and it is understandable that 'commitment' can wear thin for those with the choice to leave. Solidarity across all manner of borders is a great aspiration, but can constitute an emotionally and physically-confronting practice.

Anthropologists have a tradition of both privately, and sometimes publicly, invoking their exotic (and no less awful) tropical illnesses as a talisman of the authenticity of the fieldwork experience. Serious illness is a very real risk of working in communities of impoverished and marginalized people with poor health profiles: dysentery, malaria, dengue fever, hepatitis, and various other infectious diseases are not uncommon among ethnographers. Clifford Geertz's classic Balinese cockfight essay, for example, famously begins with the sentence, 'my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village', with the malaria providing a marker of fieldwork experience and by implication of ethnographic authority.⁹ The body that has been committed and scarred by the experience of fieldwork implies the whole self must have been equally committed.

Gayatri Spivak perhaps unwittingly made a similar move in her keynote address at a recent conference in Melbourne (*Dialogues Across Cultures*, November 2004), when she apologized for her terrible cough, which, she explained, was brought about by a persistent form of TB acquired over years of working with tribal people in Bengal. Ironically in Spivak's case, this statement reproduced a traditional authoritative gesture of anthropology, while concurrently refusing to bring her 'fieldwork' out of the realm of personal commitment (or professional supplement) to an ethnographic – and therefore also an overtly professional – realm. This unselfconsciously-authoritative gesture is surprising given Spivak's thorough deconstructive work on the position of the 'native informant' in Western philosophy.¹⁰ The native informant is a subject that does not speak but is spoken of and for, a subaltern voice written out of

Western philosophy and theory at the very moment it is invoked. Spivak's writing consistently highlights the problem of representing others as a strategy for positioning the self. She articulates the double irony of declaring one's institutional investments; colonizing a speaking position by disavowing one's own.

Like, (and yet utterly unlike) Spivak's ethical commitment to work for the 'incitement of subaltern subjects of the vote', the *local/global community sustainability* project also makes a claim to a form of ethical community engagement. This project demands long-term relationships and a serious attempt at forms of reciprocity in the exchange between researchers and communities. These relationships are highly complex, difficult to quantify and easily inclined to 'end in tears'. It is generally considered the domain of community development studies or social work to engage with and transform communities through action. While the action research paradigm has brought those dynamics to the social sciences, anthropology and sociology have tended to have different understandings of the reciprocal relations they are engaged in as a kind of 'reciprocity lite', and with many good reasons. Reciprocity will always be caught in the inescapable logic of the gift: knowledge, information or participation exchanged by one-sided calls for an equivalent reciprocation, which can never be complete.

This attempt to enter mutually fulfilling research relationships with communities can include the following (by no means exhaustive) examples:

- The ambivalent 'gift' of abstract Western social theoretical analysis of the social circumstances a community finds itself in. This might appeal to communities of Western, formally-educated people, who feel socially engaged and stimulated by participation in the academic processes of social analysis (for example, the Hamilton Community Reference Group have expressly stated such a desire). Social analysis can have profound effects on its audience, effects that can lead to quite the opposite experience of being confronted with destructive and constrictive structural formations beyond individual or group agency to effect. Where these layers of social analysis can bring new powers of comprehension to bear on social phenomena, it is essential to consider the social utility of the knowledge being generated: who is to use it and how is it to be used; from individuals and communities to state agencies and other researchers. If the purpose of ethically engaged research is to provide analytical tools for changing the social world, rather than merely describing it, there is an inevitable ambivalence about who will make use of these tools, and to what use they will be put. While many communities may deeply value building an archive of social history, life narratives and other descriptive material, the forms of abstraction through which they are being analyzed may be alien, seem irrelevant, or even in some cases cause offence to them or their local or national institutions.
- The opportunity to participate in processes that may have state-managed social policy implications that directly affect the community/individuals in question. While communities may value local, regional, national and

transnational government and NGO agencies accessing complex analysis of the communities affected by their social policy, there is no guarantee that freely accessible material of this nature will be used to the benefit, rather than detriment, of local communities. Also, it is relatively easy to alienate governments at all levels by presenting a version of reality that does not coincide with their official representations of the good society they may wish to be: happy, harmonious, widely prosperous or just. Less than flattering data and analysis can spur governments into positive action, but can also incite more authoritarian states to crack down on newly defined 'community trouble makers', deport researchers and discipline communities, their leaders and organizations. Engaging with governments, even producing materials they can access, must always take these risks into account. We may at times have to leave aside some of the richest material because it is too sensitive, provocative to those in power, or otherwise dangerous for the community concerned. Carefully constituted and active Community Reference Groups and local institutional partners are an essential guide in navigating this difficult terrain.

- Reciprocity is sometimes minted in a coin that is as prosaic as it is profound; it can mean providing or facilitating access to resources in our shared experiences as diverse as: money, employment, education pathways, cigarettes, food, alcohol, transport, CDs, cultural capital, sunglasses, buffalo, political influence, pigs, beads, mirrors, computers, axes, information, art buyers, blankets, networks, possum fur and so on. These exchanges are real wild cards, but have been the currency of fieldwork ethnography for generations. It is impossible to do fieldwork without providing some of these tangible and intangible things. Increasingly this can be done through the formal recognition of the role of informants as professional research collaborators, whose participation is remunerated, if only partially, through the project budget. More often than not these things are still provided by individual researchers on an *ad hoc* personal basis, rather than trying to explain to a research finance manager why fieldwork involved a carton of cigarettes and a bag of rice, taxi fares or a feast for a village that involved buying goats, chickens and buffalo. Some societies have carefully-measured notions of reciprocity and structures of exchange with outsiders established over years – or even generations – of contact with colonial and current government officials and institutions, missionaries, other NGOs, anthropologists, tourists, soldiers, pastoralists and so on. Others (particularly from the 'home' society) might find a more general ethos of reciprocity, such as the exchange of amity and occasional hospitality, quite sufficient.

The vicissitudes of funding agencies and reporting structures based on short-term key performance indicators, such as financial years and government electoral cycles, mean research projects are rarely of extended duration. Despite this, researchers involved in the project are being asked to make long-term commitments to its broad methodological and ethical frameworks, and to the communities they are working with, regardless of these cyclical vicissitudes of funding and institutional location. The repeated presence of researchers over time can be an effective form of accountability combined with meaningful

oversight by Community Reference Groups, made up of individuals and existing organizations, that take an active role in the research process and broker broader community access to, and involvement with, project resources.

The *local/global community sustainability* project aspires to do much better than a bureaucratically-sanctioned 'ethical clearance form' in terms of its commitment to forms of reciprocity with communities. While some mutual disappointments and conflicts over the proper forms of that reciprocity are inevitable over the long haul, it is hoped the work bears fruit by making a contribution to positive forms of community sustainability, community-generated social action for change, and to the development of knowledge and methods in the social sciences, not least about forms of solidarity with the communities which so generously share their time, knowledge and unique sensibilities with us.

Endnotes

¹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994, p. 428.

² Z. Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.

³ For example, Paul Rabinow's work with Talia Dan-Cohen on human genome project scientists in California, *A Machine to Make a Future: Biotech Chronicles*, Princeton University Press, 2004 and, *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*, Princeton University Press, 2004; George Marcus' research on wealth in America, *The Gift and Globalization: A Prolegomenon to the Anthropological Study of Contemporary Finance Capital and Its Mentalities*, Gift/Sacrifice Conference, 2002; John Hutnyk's work on tourists in Calcutta, *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation*, Zed Books, London, 1996; and William Mazarella's research on advertising executives in Mumbai, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in India*, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁴ A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996; U. Hannerz, 'Many Sites in One', in Eriksen ed., *Globalisation: Studies in Anthropology*, Pluto, London, 2003; G. Marcus, 'Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System', in Clifford and Marcus eds, *Writing Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986; G. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 24, 1995, pp. 95-117.

⁵ P. James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory back In*, Sage, London, (forthcoming 2005).

⁶ G. Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena*, no. 70, 1985.

⁷ For a full account of the application of this work to the community sustainability project see Scanlon and James at <http://www.communitysustainability.info/research/research-approach-method.html>.

- ⁸ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.
- ⁹ C. Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.
- ¹⁰ G. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

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Peter Phipps is Deputy Director of the Globalism Institute and manager of the Institute's global research on community sustainability. He has conducted research on postcolonial theory and practice in Australia, South and South-East Asia and has organized forums to facilitate dialogue between indigenous people at the annual Indigenous Garma Festival in north-eastern Arnhem Land.