

## IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY HISTORY

*This editorial response to the preceding article by Dennis Mills addresses the meaning of community history. Rejecting an over-tight definition, we argue for a methodologically distinct community history, combining a micro-historical approach with a sensitivity to the discursive construction of the term 'community'. Furthermore, the role of family and community historians should be to adopt a critical stance towards contemporary meanings of both past 'communities' and past 'families'. The article concludes that Withington and Shephard's schema for approaching the history of 'community' offers a practical way forward for the family and community historian.*

In 1994 Dennis Mills pointed out that there was 'no clearly defined set of community historians practising self-consciously within recognisable guidelines' (Mills 1994: 282). In reviewing the content of *Family and Community History* Dennis rightly concludes that such self-conscious community historians remain an elusive group. If we take the three sets of concepts that he proposes as the central concern of community history - those relating to the definition of communities, relationships within communities and relations between communities - then it is difficult to disagree with his observation that work has focused on the second of these, rather than the first or third. But we would like to expand further on the existence and direction of community history. We do this, first, by discussing some of the assumptions about 'community' that appear to lie behind his article; second, by querying the need for an overly tight definition of community, suggesting instead that the methodology of community history is more important than definitions, and, third, by making some observations about the relationship between community history and other varieties of history. Finally, we ask how 'community' relates to that other part of family and community history, 'family'.

### *Defining community*

Communities are found in localities, but community is clearly not synonymous with locality. Moreover, the word community implies people interacting in various ways within certain boundaries that mark off one community from another. While suggesting the existence of other versions of community the emphasis in Dennis Mills' article is on face-to-face territorial communities, small enough for most people to be known to each other (see also Mills 2001: 9). Defining community in this way inevitably restricts its application to smallish areas. Furthermore, community appears to be viewed as networks of people or groups, held together by economic or political ties. As Wright (1992: 204/205) points out, studies of communities appear to engage with that 'area of social activity' between the 'front doors where the private space of households starts, and the edge of the village or parish where "community" becomes "state"'. Community history is thus confined to how those networks operate in relatively small bounded areas, comparing these across time and space.

But community also has more ideological connotations (Short 1992: 8). Even one of the leading writers of the now discredited school of community studies pointed out that community was both 'an arena of social living marked by some degree of social coherence' and 'community sentiment' (Frankenberg 1966: 15). This introduces a more discursive aspect of community, that 'rhetorical warmth' which, along 'conceptual vagueness', Withington and Shephard (2001) identify as key aspects of the term. As they point out, there is a continuing tension between past and current meanings of community, with the powerful sense that community is the converse of modernity, conjuring up notions of conflict free social relations, a 'by-word for solidity and antidote to anonymous urban life' (Schofield 2003: 5). This ideological or discursive side to community has given rise to calls for more study of the symbols and images of 'community' as much as studies of 'communities' *per se* (Wright 1992: 211). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the difficulty of finding and interpreting relevant sources, historians have been slower to address this issue of the discursive formation and reproduction of community, leaving this to the anthropologists (Cohen 1986), although early modern historians have provided some intriguing pointers (Shephard and Withington 2000).

Nevertheless, community historians are not unaware of this aspect. The fourth and fifth of Finnegan's meanings of community, cited by Dennis Mills, recognises the

‘sense of belonging’ and ‘a claim or invitation to observe common ties and interests’ (in Pryce 1994: 211). The ways in which this sense of belonging are discursively constructed, or the manner in which people are invited to observe common interests could themselves be the focus of research. This might suggest that community is better viewed as a process rather than a place.

### *From definition to methodology*

Dennis Mills puts forward a strong argument for a tighter definition of community. However, others claim that the significance of the community concept lies ‘precisely through its polyvalence, appropriability and capacity for synonymy’ (Withington and Shephard 2000: 2). This echoes the argument of some newer historical approaches that we do not attempt to fit history into neat boxes by overdefining and consequently limiting our categories.

Notions of community in the past must have depended on age, gender, social position, employment, religion or language, to name but some of the key factors that shaped the world of each individual. It is not just that it was possible for people to physically live in more than one community at once. More fundamentally, we do not have one identity but multiple identities. A woman can be daughter and mother, employer and employee, historian and housewife. Similarly, we simultaneously inhabit parallel communities: the community of our wider family or kin group; our estate, village or town; our church, school or place of employment. Finnegan’s list of five meanings of community is indeed helpful in this respect, as Mills argues (1994). But surely it is the breadth of those interpretations of ‘community’ that is so striking rather than the effectiveness of such a list in delineating the term.

Moreover, the contested aspect of the word may itself invite researchers with various disciplinary backgrounds to grapple with the concept. But we can make a distinction here. Given the widespread use of the signifier ‘community’ it is quite possible to re-define and appropriate a wide range of social, demographic and economic historians as community historians (Drake 1994; Drake 2003). Contrasting with this inclusive approach to community history, embracing many scholars who might in no way describe themselves as ‘community historians’, there is a tighter

definition of community history. At the core of this is not a definition of community but a methodology.

Community history is 'something more than just the tracing of unrelated events in a past locality over the centuries' (Drake and Finnegan 1994: 6). More specifically, it is both contextual, setting local places and communities in the context of wider political, economic and cultural processes, and theoretical, relating the local details to more general theories of how communities are constituted, how they function and how they change over time. While definitions of community have perhaps not been explicitly addressed in *Family and Community History*, the stated aim has been to use local data to test, question and sometimes revise more general conclusions.

#### *Community history, micro-history and local history*

But this core methodological aim is not unique to the new community history. Indeed, it flows into the issue of how community history relates to other histories. In particular, community history of this kind would seem to be very similar to 'micro-history'. Micro-history's aim - to 'place emphasis upon the shaping of economics, politics and identities in the material routines of everyday life' through 'detailed work at the level of the locality' (Hudson 1999; Reay 1996) - does not look at first glance to be a million miles away from community history and can indeed even be described as 'micro-historical community studies' (Withington and Shephard 2000: 7).

And yet, confusingly, some readings of community history portray it as closer to local history than micro-history. For example, we are informed that community history 'is a form of local history. It deals with families, groups, organisations and interests in their specific local settings, in context' (Pryce 1994: 215), being distinguished from local history by being inter-disciplinary. Moreover, defining community history as dealing with 'the ways in which groups and communities are created and maintained, ways in which they are changed and how, ultimately, they may sink into decline' (Pryce 1994: 216) resonates strongly with the approach of those doyens of English local history, W.G.Hoskins and H.P.R.Finberg, who called for the study of communities over the long perspective, concentrating on their 'origin, growth, decline and fall' (Finberg 1967).

This 'organic' view of communities rested on an implicit definition that masked assumptions about social equilibrium and harmony of belief and opinion, a position subjected to sustained and withering critique by John Marshall. Marshall rejects the obsession of local historians with 'the single, local and spatial unit (seen as a 'community')' (1997: 81) and calls for a more theoretically informed approach to past localities within a wider frame of reference that escapes the single parish or 'community' and places it in a wider regional perspective. This call intersects with the third of Dennis Mills' sets of concepts, relations between communities, something in which local historians as well as community historians have long been active.

Not only regional historians but local historians of the Leicester School have been keen to escape the palsied grip of the old-style focus on the single 'community'. In the collection of essays in Phythian-Adams (1993) community is used as a spatially bounded concept for a parish or, occasionally, groups of parishes, yet Phythian-Adams calls for a 'need to subordinate "community" to a more appropriate, lesser, place than it once used to occupy conceptually', preferring the concept of 'local society' made up of 'inter-linked communities' (Phythian-Adams 1993: 19-21). Of course, the local historian's 'local society'; could well be the same animal as the community historian's 'community'.

Community history shares a further aspect with local history. The community history emerging from the Open University in the 1990s echoed the pioneers of extra-mural local history in the 1950s and 60s. The intention was to break down the barriers between the 'professional' and 'non-professional'. This democratic impulse has had the laudable aim of encouraging community history on the ground and could be seen as extending micro-history into the field (Drake et al 1995). However, as community history has rolled out it confronts both an established practice of local history that uncritically adopts Hoskins' views of community and a popular narrative that tends to idealize past communities as bounded, homogenous places. In being more 'democratic' community history could yet be pulled back onto a more familiar and traditional local historical terrain.

### *Community and family*

Moreover, how does 'community' relate to 'family'? Is community, as Wright (1992) argues, restricted to the world beyond our front doors, while family is reserved for that private world inside? We would the two terms are more inter-connected than this implies. By not discussing the term 'family' we could lead readers to conclude that the concept of 'family' is more easily defined; that 'family' indeed is not itself contested territory. We are not suggesting that this is Mills' view. But we do want to put on record that as editors of *Family and Community History* we would wish the term 'family' to be subjected to scrutiny equally with that of 'community'. Although the chronological focus of the journal is post-18th century we should bear in mind the debates familiar to the early modern historian around use of the terms 'family/household' in the past. Was the household the boundary of the 'family', and if so what place did servants occupy in the 'family'? By 'family' do we mean the nuclear unit or should we use the term 'family' to denote the wider kin group? If blood ties demarcate the family, what then of step or adoptive members of the household? The term 'family' may prove to be as fluid as that of 'community'. Does that mean however that we need to pin it down in a precise definition in the way that Mills suggests we need to do with the term 'community'? We would argue for flexibility of interpretation on both counts.

Families cannot be understood without reference to the wider social networks or communities they operated in. Similarly communities must be seen as linked families and individuals. As far as we are concerned that is the key reason why this journal bears the name *Family and Community History*. 'Family and local history' would carry with it in an entirely different set of assumptions. As Mills states, in a study of community it is people, not place, that matter. The unique and fascinating contribution of this journal is that it investigates the interplay between people in the smallest social unit beyond the individual, and arguably the most important unit to the individual – the family – and the wider social context in which each family exists and operates.

## *Conclusions*

Community history can thus include within its purview a wide variety of activities that took place across a flexible social space. Attempts to pin community down to particular kinds of networks or types of places seem to be too constrictive. The thing that differentiates community history from other histories must be its methodology, the quest to understand how general processes work out and are transformed in actual places. In this it shares a lot of ground with micro-history. But the word 'community' in community history also suggests that it needs to engage more directly with the discursive construction and reproduction of past communities and with the meanings, representations and symbols employed during that reproduction. The way mundane activities, such as dress or seating arrangements in church, signified power relations within communities, or the manner in which people created and interpreted symbols of their community and how these related in turn to material conditions are all under-researched areas (Withington and Shephard 2000).

Community historians should remain reflective about their use of the term 'community', guarding against its implied cosy and harmonious social relations. Community historians would do well to note the warning of Dicks (1999) that all uses of 'community' tend to encode community within enclosed boundaries where homogeneity is the norm. But, unlike local historians, there is no need for community historians to flee the concept. Although this is an influential meaning of community and one that pervades both popular and heritage narratives, community historians are well placed to be alert to the social construction of communities as well as aware of those networks that spread beyond the walls of territorial communities. Indeed, one aim of community history is surely to pursue community beyond its self-ascribed boundaries, locating it within structures and processes as well as tracing its connections into family life.

Finally, we can take inspiration from the conclusions of Withington and Shephard (2000: 12) who provide us with another typology for approaching community. For them the process of community is best studied through a combination of six parts. There are the institutional arrangements, practices and roles that structure communities, the question of who was included and excluded from communities, the

acts and artefacts that defined it, the geographical places in which it was located, the time it was perpetrated and the rhetoric through which it was legitimated, represented and discussed. Community historians, through focusing on one or more of these aspects in local places at specific periods in the past, can shed light on the making of community as well as on how general processes work themselves out in particular places. Thus, the combination of a methodology shared with micro-history and an explicit awareness of the social construction of community may begin to furnish community history with those 'recognisable guidelines' and clearer definitions that Dennis Mills seeks.

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