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## INTRODUCTION

### **ECOLOGICAL THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTING**

It has always been recognised that a child's circumstances are likely to have an influence on their developmental progress. In the past psychologists in particular have focused predominantly on the behaviour and skills of parents, looking at the extent to which they have gained educational qualifications, attained employment at different levels of the occupational 'ladder', or provided opportunities for their child – to play, to meet other children, to attend schools of good quality and so on. Personal characteristics of the parents such as their personality, attitudes or mental health were also considered to be of importance in understanding both their child's development and their parenting behaviour. In contrast, sociologists paid more attention to community influences.

What has changed in the past few decades is the acknowledgement by a number of disciplines concerned with child and family development, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, psychiatry and social policy, that parents and children occupy systems beyond the family system, that they need to be understood in context, and that their environment makes a difference to their health, well-being and progress. Now it is recognised that individual, family and wider community factors need to be addressed together rather than being considered separately. For instance, 'broken windows' in a neighbourhood have long been associated with levels of criminal and delinquent behaviour (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Wilson and Kelling hold that if someone breaks a window in a building and it is not quickly repaired, others will be emboldened to break more windows. Eventually the broken windows create a sense of disorder that attracts criminals, who thrive in conditions of public apathy and neglect. Their argument in relation to interventions to reduce crime and delinquency was that, if you send the message that people care about this neighbourhood (by fixing windows), this also sends the message that if something happens someone may catch you or at the very least notice. The theory would predict that this attention to the structural 'well-being' of the neighbourhood will change people's behaviour, not just about whether they break windows but whether they mug old ladies and whether or not they burgle houses and so forth. More recently structural aspects of a geographical community such as the broken windows indicator, or general community neglect, have been linked with a range of other issues including health

problems (Cohen et al., 2000), parenting problems (Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997), children's educational achievement (Gibbons, 2002) and child behaviour (Boyle & Lipman, 1998).

The environment of a child or a family, including their immediate dwelling and conditions in the home, has been intensively studied by researchers around the world using instruments such as the HOME inventory (Bradley & Caldwell, 1976; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984). However, as much if not more attention is now also being directed towards understanding the importance of neighbourhoods or communities, and towards the relationships that children and parents have within their neighbourhoods with non-family groups or communities of interest. Thus there is both a physical community in which they are placed, and a community of relationships that may influence them.

Although talk about 'ecological influences' and 'community intervention' is becoming commonplace<sup>1</sup> it is important to understand the theoretical underpinnings of this trend as well as the limitations of current knowledge. Much of the literature pertaining to the possible relevance of the community to children and parents has been inspired by, and gives credit to, the theoretical work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). His ideas provided the mainspring for a wealth of research and writing over the following decades. Very simply put, he proposed that a child's development should be examined as an evolving interaction between the person and the environment; that development is defined as the way in which the environment is dealt with. It was his concept of the environment that was original, described as a 'set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls' (p. 3). Some of these 'dolls' would be actual settings in which the child moved (microsystems; e.g. the home, the classroom), others would be 'virtual dolls', the interaction between settings that the child occupied (mesosystems; e.g. between home and school), and yet other layers would be settings in which the child did not move, but which were occupied by key figures in their world (exosystems; e.g. their parents' workplaces). Finally the complex inter-relationship between nested levels will be influenced by the prevailing culture or subculture (macrosystems). He stressed that 'what matters for behaviour and development is the environment as it is *perceived* [his italics] rather than as it may exist in "objective" reality' (p. 4). He further suggested that, rather than basing social policy on research evidence 'Basic science needs public policy even more than public policy needs basic science', going on to conclude:

Knowledge and analysis of social policy are essential for progress in developmental research because they alert the investigator to those aspects of the environment, both immediate and remote, that are most critical for cognitive, emotional, and social development of the person (1979, p. 8).

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, a Google search using the terms 'ecological, influence, child, development' produced 905,000 hits; 'ecological theory' produced more than three million (3,370,000); using the terms 'community, intervention, child, development' produced 11,100,000 results; and entering the terms 'community, intervention, child abuse' led to 4,560,000. A Psychlit search entering 'ecological' produced 32,407 hits, and the term 'Bronfenbrenner' produced 14,000 results.

Belsky (1980), expanding on Bronfenbrenner's ideas, linked child maltreatment with ecological theory and in turn to neighbourhood influences. He showed that child maltreatment is multiply determined by 'forces at work in the individual, in the family, and in the community and culture in which the individual and the family are embedded' (1980: p. 320), allowing for a broader perspective on vulnerability and on ways to support families. With respect to the 'exosystem' he concluded that two factors played an important role in the aetiology of maltreatment – the world of work and the neighbourhood. The extent of social isolation and absence of local support systems had been seen to typify many parents who were identified as maltreating their children. While Belsky suggested that the absence of local support systems may indicate familial deficits, an inability to establish and maintain friendships, rather than a real neighbourhood feature (the absence of neighbours who are friendly), he also emphasised the relevance of the values of the society towards violence, corporal punishment and to children in general. Although values towards parenting behaviour such as smacking are often reported at a cultural level, or at the individual level, it is important to recall the many subcultures that exist, often associated with particular communities.

A decade later, influenced by a number of subsequent publications (Belsky, 1993; Garbarino, 1985; Gelles, 1992; Melton & Berry, 1994; Pelton, 1981; Schorr, 1988), the United States Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect of the National Research Council was asked to review and assess research on child abuse and neglect so that priorities could be identified for the future. They adopted an 'ecological developmental perspective' to reflect the transactions between the growing child and the social environment or ecology, commenting 'The panel's ecological perspective recognizes that dysfunctional families are often part of a dysfunctional environment' (1993, p. 4). While this approach may now seem the only logical way to proceed, at the time it was a bold step, taking the focus away from individuals and their inter-personal relationships and recognising that support for children and families needs to be conceptualised at levels beyond the individual or the family, in the communities in which they live. Similarly, the working group of the American Psychological Association Coordinating Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect concluded that:

Research has shown that prevention programs that target single risk factors are not nearly as effective as prevention programs that assume an ecological model and examine risk factors in the context of the individual, the family, community, and society (Willis, 1995, p. 3).

In the UK, somewhat later, the Department of Health revised their guidelines for social workers undertaking comprehensive assessments of families. Areas seen to be crucial in their assessments of potential risk included not only 'the child's developmental needs' and 'parenting capacity', but also 'family and environmental factors' (DoH, 2000, p. 1). While the recommended measures focused on somewhat narrow aspects of the environment, such as home cleanliness or safety, the tri-partite model for assessing families does allow for those involved in working with children in need and their families to incorporate important aspects of the family's community and their integration into community networks.

In addition to work directed at supporting families and children in need, the UK Government has become community-focused in its work to reduce crime and in particular to prevent delinquency. The Home Office established the Active Citizenship Centre which is part of its Civil Renewal effort, designed to increase the extent to which residents become involved in their local communities. Their website states:

Civil renewal is at the heart of the Home Office's vision of life in our 21st century communities. As a political philosophy it has been around for centuries but it is, increasingly, being taken up by public bodies, people working in the voluntary and community sector, and active citizens in their own communities, as the effective way to bring about sustainable change and improve the quality of people's lives. Civil renewal is the development of strong, active, and empowered communities, in which people are able to do things for themselves, define the problems they face, and tackle them in partnership with public bodies. A key reason for pursuing civil renewal is that local communities are just better at dealing with their own problems. They have the networks, the knowledge, the sense of what is actually possible, and the ability to make solutions stick... The ethos of active citizenship is derived from the Athenian tradition which unites the values of democratic self-determination with mutuality and solidarity. It is about reconnecting citizens to their communities and institutions to become more actively involved in addressing their common problems and enhancing the political process (<http://www.active-citizen.org.uk>, February, 2005).

Involvement in one's community is now being conceptualised more broadly than in the past, including not only the more traditional activities associated with community development such as improving the environment and bringing local groups together, but widening to focus on individuals within the environment, their health and well-being, to integrate micro-, meso- and macro-levels. For example, in Canada throughout the 1970s and 1980s there were calls for community participation in health. New social movements challenged traditional authority, questioning the efficacy of the medical model and supporting disadvantaged groups in the public policy process (Labonte, 1994). In 1980, the Health Promotion Directorate of Health and Welfare Canada launched the Health Promotion Contribution Program (HPCP) to implement the government's community participation strategy (Boyce, 2002). The aim was to provide financial resources to community groups for projects to help them to identify and solve their health problems. This was based to a large extent on the ideas of one government minister (Epp, 1986) who suggested that community participation was a strategy for 'helping people to assert control over factors which affect their health... and enhancing people's capacity to cope' (p. 9), citing self-care groups and mutual aid voluntary associations designed to enhance coping skills in disadvantaged persons as prime mechanisms for community participation. This community health approach is perceived to differ from traditional thinking in that it contextualises power inequalities within multiple ecological levels of analysis leading to interventions that are community-driven, involving partnerships between professionals and disadvantaged people (Nelson, Prilleltensky & Peters, 2003).

Thus, the ecological approach to understanding child development and family life has been incorporated not only into much of the more traditional developmental

psychology research, but has also proved the basis for re-thinking ways to intervene to enhance the lives of those living in disadvantaged circumstances. The rest of this book describes, discusses and evaluates ways it has been used to understand the development of children and parents, and to make their lives more rewarding.

## DEFINITIONS

### Communities and Neighbourhoods

Throughout this book the terms 'community' and 'neighbourhood' will appear frequently. It is important, therefore, to look into their meanings in order to understand how they are used, why one is used specifically rather than the other, and why some writers use them interchangeably. Communities and neighbourhoods provide the places and the contexts for children to develop. There is widespread agreement that they have an impact and that, in some cases, community change is desirable and achievable. Nevertheless, the development of relevant and sensitive indicators and strategies that are directed at enhancing circumstances for children and families pose numerous conceptual and methodological challenges; in particular, there is the question of what is meant by the terms (Coulton, 1995). Issues related to methods of assessing communities are dealt with in detail in Chapter 3; here the discussion is limited to definitions. It becomes clear, when reading the literature, that there is little theoretical agreement about the nature of the concept 'community', or whether it is synonymous with 'neighbourhood'. Definitions of one sometimes include the other and the distinction between them is not consistent (Chaskin, 1997).

Historically, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) provided a definition of 'community'. He is best remembered for his distinction between two basic types of social groups (Tönnies, 1957). He argued that there are two basic forms of human will: the essential will, which is the underlying, organic, or instinctive driving force; and arbitrary will, which is deliberative, purposive, and future-(goal)-oriented. Groups that form around essential will, in which membership is self-fulfilling, Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft* (which is often translated as 'community'). In contrast, groups in which membership was sustained by some instrumental goal or definite end he termed *Gesellschaft* (often translated as 'society'). *Gemeinschaft* was exemplified by the family or neighbourhood; *Gesellschaft*, by the city or the state.

Comparing dictionary definitions in a review for the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, Barry (1991) concluded that the term 'community' is more general than 'neighbourhood' saying:

The terms "community" and "neighborhood" are used frequently, and at times seemingly interchangeably, to denote a grass roots approach. However there are real differences in meanings and they are important . . . the term "community" is the more general of the two. It may refer either to a place, or to a class of people having something in common . . . the idea of a broader sense of community which transcends place is a relatively recent theoretical concept, resulting from advances in communication and mobility. The term "neighborhood" has not taken such a leap however. All

Webster's definitions still involve the concept of nearness, proximity or "neighborliness", which presumably means geographic proximity. People may belong to a number of communities, depending on their interests, affiliations, and the way community is defined. But most will presumably belong to only one neighborhood, based on the location of their primary residence (1991, pp. 4-5).

However, in their report the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect embeds the concept of community within its definition of a neighbourhood saying 'A neighborhood is a small geographic unit consensually identified as a single community' (cited by Garbarino, Kostelny & Barry, 1998, p. 288).

The debate about the meaning of these terms is by no means new, some writers using only the term community but giving it several meanings, others making a distinction between community and neighbourhood. Yet others use the terms interchangeably. A review completed several decades ago (Hillery, 1964) noted 94 different definitions of community, arising from two broad camps: advocates of a territorially-based conception of community (neighbourhood), and advocates of a notion of community based on social network relationships. This dichotomy was noted by others (e.g. Gusfield, 1975) who similarly asserted that the relational type of community is concerned with 'the quality of character of human relationships, without reference to location' (p. xvi). However, the existence of such a large number of competing definitions within each of these general camps indicates that there is much ongoing debate and disagreement (Puddifoot, 1996).

Willmott (1989) enlarged on Hillery's (1964) distinction by proposing subdivisions between the two basic uses of the term: the population of a particular geographical area (the territorial or spatial community), and people who share in common something other than physical proximity (the interest community). He made a second distinction, applicable to either of the basic types, between local and non-local communities. He went further by suggesting a third dimension, the 'community of attachment' that brings together a density of social relationships and sense of identity with a place or group.

Chaskin's review of the concepts of neighbourhood and community (1997) provides further differentiation between the two terms, mirroring to a great extent those identified by Hillery (1964) and Barry (1991). He states:

On the one hand, "community" implies connection: some combination of shared beliefs, circumstances, priorities, relationships, or concerns. The networks that bind individuals of a given group to one another as a community may or may not be rooted in place. Ethnic and religious communities are bound by culture and systems of beliefs; professional communities and other "communities of interest" are connected by common interests, circumstances or priorities...although local communities are place based, they are not seen as simply geographically bounded subdivisions of land... in both the local community and the community of interest, it is the existence of some form of communal connection among individuals - whether or not such connection is locality based - that provides for the possibility of group identity and collective action. "Neighborhood", on the other hand, is clearly a spatial construction denoting a geographical unit in which residents share proximity and the circumstances that come with it. The neighborhood is a subunit of a larger area and is usually seen as primarily, if not exclusively, residential (1997, pp. 522-523).

While these terms, thus described, appear to be distinct, he goes on to explain that they are not really so clearly separated:

In the urban context, in fact, the neighborhood is often considered the more primary unit of actual and potential solidarity and social cohesion. Thus there is a conflation of community-like expectations of solidarity and connection within the geographical construction of neighborhood (1997, p. 523).

Chaskin concludes that, despite definitional difficulties, sub-areas of cities are recognised and recognisable, both to residents and to outsiders (such as researchers or those planning interventions). However the delineation of boundaries is a 'negotiated process', combining individual cognitions or mental maps, collective perceptions and organised attempts to codify boundaries.

Overall, Chaskin (1997) suggests that it is best to think about neighbourhoods not just as spaces on a map but as open systems linked to other systems, which may become more or less important to an individual or a family. Indeed he concludes that:

Individuals may claim and value membership in more than one [local community] at a time. The local community may thus be seen as a set of (imperfectly) nested neighbourhoods – a hierarchy of local constructions – and individuals often recognize such localities by name and are comfortable with more than one name to describe local areas differently constructed (1997, p. 540).

Although recognising that relational networks can be dispersed beyond the neighbourhood, Chaskin reinforced the importance of physical neighbourhoods, concluding that instrumental relationships between neighbours remain common and provide important support and identity and may be the basis for collective action, particularly in areas of residential stability. However he also noted that neighbourhoods are experienced and used differently by different populations (e.g. women, married people, those with higher incomes, children, the elderly), and that this must be taken into account in any attempt to describe a neighbourhood or introduce neighbourhood-intervention programmes.

The UK Government, while focusing strongly on community development in many of its policies (see Chapter 6), has concluded that the term 'community' cannot easily be defined, though taking the approach that it is usually taken to mean either an area or a group of people with a common interest. To answer the question 'What is the government's definition of community?' the Home Office-sponsored active citizenship website provides the following information:

There is no one definitive definition of "community". A community is a specific group of people who all hold something in common. Community has tended to be associated with two key aspects: firstly people who share locality or geographical place; secondly people who are communities of interest. Communities of interest are groups of people who share an identity – for example Afro-Caribbean people; or who share an experience – for example people with a particular disability. (<http://www.active-citizen.org.uk>. February, 2005).

## Space and Meaning

The size of a community or neighbourhood and its boundaries may be defined by administrative demands, political expediency or historical accident, and it can indeed vary widely in scale: from a few streets to an area as large as a nation, or even a nation group (e.g., the European Community, now known as the European Union). The most common scale in the communities discussed in much of the research literature, however, is much more local, a few adjacent streets, a neighbourhood (usually between 3,000 and 10,000 residents), or a small town or district in a city (up to 75,000 residents). Indeed, recent evidence suggests that individual definitions of personal neighbourhoods are fairly small and limited, which can differentiate them from territorial communities. In a study of Chicago communities (Sampson, 1997a) residents were asked if their neighbourhood had a name, and to indicate its boundaries on a map. Almost three-quarters (70%) were able to name their neighbourhood, and the average, mapped size was 30 city blocks, equivalent to a population of approximately 7,500 people. This is significantly smaller than the 77 traditional Chicago communities with populations of 39,000 on average. These smaller areas identified in this study were termed 'neighbourhood clusters' by the researchers. Barry (1991) made a different type of distinction with regard to territorial communities, suggesting that the term 'neighbourhood' may be used more often in an urban context while the term 'community' is used more frequently when describing rural settings. However he also suggested that 'community' may be used to denote an entire town, city or county while a neighbourhood is much smaller.

Whether boundaries are statistical, political or phenomenological, some areas are well-defined, often by barriers such as major roads, rivers or large buildings, while others are amorphous. Some neighbourhoods have names that are widely used and understood by residents and outsiders while others exist only in the eyes of the census or the local political parties. Still others exist according to residents' experiences and the concreteness or reality of a community's boundaries may be related to its impact on residents. If a political ward has no impact on one's life it will be ignored, while a boundary related to local policing may have much more relevance if it means that you do (or do not) benefit from a new initiative such as Community Support Officers (<http://www.policecouldyou.co.uk> February 2005).

However, a neighbourhood is more than boundaries drawn on a map, the land that is covered or even the perceptions of that area by the people resident within its boundaries. It also encompasses the physical structure and conditions and events taking place within those boundaries (such as crimes). None of the definitions discussed takes the physical attributes of the areas or events occurring within them into account, focusing more on the way in which an area is perceived, or labeled, by residents.

Garbarino, Kostelny and Barry (1998) suggest that, beyond a spatial dimension, most definitions of neighbourhood include some sense of history represented by the evolution of residential patterns and 'psyche', a sense of shared identity among residents, indicated for example by a common usage of the same name for the neighbourhood (p. 288). They propose that, apart from the spatial element of a neighbourhood, there are three other components: social, cognitive and affective. This suggests that one could only say that a neighbourhood exists after conducting

some kind of survey of residents to verify that these other components are also present – social interaction as indicated by informal social support and social networks, a shared cognitive understanding of the area and an affective dimension indicating a shared sense of belonging and an attachment to the neighbourhood. Thus in these terms a neighbourhood has to be a community as well, though a community does not have to be a neighbourhood. The affective dimension of neighbourhood, viewed in this manner, is most closely akin to the concept of ‘psychological sense of community’ (McMillan, 1976), the sense of mutual help, support and attachment to a neighbourhood felt by a parent or child (see Chapter 2).

It could be argued that neighbourhoods of residence have little relevance if individuals have minimal involvement with others locally. It is certainly less likely that they will be influenced positively or negatively if they do not talk to anyone, are not out and about in the streets at times when neighbours are about (possibly going everywhere by car or other means of transport), and do little shopping in the immediate area. With the focus on home-improvement that is so much part of culture in Western societies it is possible to be immersed in a private world within one’s home, set within a locality but without any sense of being in a neighbourhood. This can change once there are children in the family. For many, and especially in areas of disadvantage, young children are taken to local health facilities such as doctors’ surgeries or child health clinics. Then they may attend local schools where there is a chance to meet other parents, although this recedes as they move on to secondary (junior high and high) school. It is at that time that the community becomes important to the children themselves. Even if they do not attend a school in their local area, they are likely to have to travel through their neighbourhood to reach school and to return home again. In addition, as they are allowed more freedom, they become concerned about the quality of resources for their sporting, shopping and other leisure pursuits.

At all these stages in a family’s life cycle, children and parents may be more distanced from their immediate area if they have more financial resources. Favoured doctors may be sought in other areas, children may be sent to fee-paying schools at some distance, and leisure activities may be organised using the family car rather than locally or by public transport. The parents themselves may commute to work in other towns or cities, or in some cases even other countries. Based on this idea, that with affluence comes a separation from the community, Barry and Garbarino (1997) noted that many professionals responsible for decision-making about communities, for whom geographical boundaries no longer have significance, may underestimate the relevance of neighbourhood with respect to its impact on the poor and on child and youth outcomes. Parents, particularly those living in deprived areas, may not occupy the world of work or move large distances from their place of residence, especially if they have few resources, and for them the territorial community could be of greater relevance.

### **Communities of Interest**

Community may of course not refer to a physical space at all. It has been suggested that, in today’s urban centres, the notion of a community based on relationships

linked by ideology such as shared political affiliations, beliefs or religion, has most relevance (Crump, 1977, cited in Glynn, 1986) and that urbanites have 'portable personal communities' made up of social networks detached from any specific locality. As long ago as the 1960s the likelihood of 'community without propinquity' was discussed, most notably in the seminal work of Webber (1963). In response to current sociological writing suggesting that there was a loss of 'community' in (then) modern-day cities, Webber showed that friendships could be maintained at a distance and community could emerge on the basis of professional groupings and other organisations in addition to those developed on the basis of a common neighbourhood. His ideas have proved prophetic in view of the current usage of the Internet to develop communities, and hence those ideas have been revisited.

The ever-changing developments of the Internet have led to greater attention being paid to communities of interest. Wellman (2001) proposed that, in view of the concept of 'communities without propinquity', people may live closely within a geographical area (their neighbourhood) but they may not feel close socially with their neighbours, instead having strong links outside the area (their community). However, Calhoun (1998) questioned Webber's original conception. When discussing the relevance of the Internet to communities of interest, he had some doubts about the quality of virtual communities. He suggested that community to Webber meant no more than 'clusters of personal relationships characterized by some common identity and perhaps some emotional warmth.' He asserted that there was no clarification of the differences in the patterns of relationships that might vary with degrees of propinquity, and that make 'the community of a remote coalmining town a different thing from the professional bonds and personal friendships of say the more dispersed "community" of social theorists' (p. 374). Calhoun suggests that the excitement over the new technology had led to an overstatement of its relevance to community, pointing out that most members of multi-user domains (MUDS) remain anonymous or shielded by pseudonyms, that commitment levels are low, and that participation is episodic. However he goes on to say that the Internet certainly matters to communities of interest, though mainly as a means of supplementing face-to-face contact, and to gain technical information. This is supported by a number of researchers who have argued that virtual communities can increase involvement within people's face-to-face communities by increasing democratic participation and other community activism (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2002; Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Schuler, 1996). This has been substantiated in some empirical research (Wellman et al., 2001).

It has also been demonstrated that members of some virtual communities do have a shared psychological 'sense of community' (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) with clear rules about membership, boundaries, group symbols, exchange of support and emotional connectedness (Baym, 1993; 1995; Greer, 2000; Preece, 1999; Rheingold, 1993), indicating that, far from being virtual, some at least if not all Internet communities can be real communities.

Membership of communities of interest may for children and parents be defined by personal characteristics such as ethnic group, religious affiliation, or some defining feature such as being the parent of twins, having a child with a

handicapping condition, being a single parent, or being in a same-sex parent household. These communities are sometimes, but not always, formed as a means of collective empowerment, in the context of being ignored or treated negatively by society (Gilchrist, 2004). Under these circumstances there is less debate about what defines the community since it is clearly defined by its members. The Gingerbread organisation is a good example of this ([www.gingerbread.org.uk](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk)). Established in 1970, at a time when the needs of lone parents were seen to be ignored by society at large in the UK, it was created by one lone mother who was finding survival in London a struggle following her divorce. It now provides a range of support and advice; local groups have been created so that they can meet each other, and a number of additional features include reasonably priced holidays for single parent families, who generally pay more than two-parent families for package deals, and can feel socially isolated from 'typical' holiday-makers. The organisation also acts as an advocate for its members with politicians and with businesses that appear to discriminate against single parents.

More recently, groups have emerged for non-traditional families, such as Pink-Parents UK (<http://www.pinkparents.org.uk/index.shtml>) which provides support to reduce the isolation and discrimination that lesbian and gay families face; and the Internet-based IVFworld.com, supporting parents who are attempting or have conceived using in vitro fertilisation techniques, which opens its home page with the statement 'Welcome to the community'.

A community designed to provide more tangible activities and linking ethnic status and identified needs of children, is the African-Caribbean Network for Science and Technology. This educational charity was established in 1995, stating as its mission:

The singular objective is to advance the educational achievements and career aspirations of Black youth within the fields of Science, Mathematics and Technology, by engendering the ethos that the pursuit of such qualifications and careers can be fun, empowering and achievable (<http://www.ishango.com/index.html>. Accessed April, 2005).

With evidence since the 1950s of poor achievement by African-Caribbean children in school, it aims to develop links throughout the African-Caribbean community in the UK to increase the number of youth with that background taking up careers in science and technology. Science clubs in schools draw on ethnic pride in past scientific achievements in Africa. For example, the Ishango Science Clubs are named after the Ishango Bone, a carved bone, over 11,000 years old, discovered at Ishango, on the shore of Lake Edward in Zaire (Congo), indicating early evidence of a calendrical/numeration system, in that part of Africa.

What becomes clear from the debate surrounding these two terms, neighbourhood and community, is that almost all people live in neighbourhoods (unless they live in isolated rural housing), but they may not necessarily all be part of the neighbourhood in the sense of taking any active role in its improvement or having any social interactions with neighbours. They may also be members of a number of communities. However, members of a community – be it virtual or one that comes together in real space and time – will in all likelihood have some vested

interests and interact socially, though they may never meet in person. Whether or not communities of interest in fact provide any benefits to other community members is a separate issue altogether. Indeed it is easy to think of examples of members of certain communities, defined on the basis of a common interest in, say, taking illegal drugs, who may lead other members of the group into situations that will be deleterious to their health, well-being and freedom. Similarly, some communities defined according to rigidly structured patriarchal societies may provide a great deal of social contact for community members, but it may be designed to control their behaviour in ways that are oppressive rather than providing any benefits.

It is all too easy to think that the labels associated with glossy new initiatives have only a positive interpretation, when the terms have historically been otherwise. While community-building is currently in favour, it is well to remember that communities benefit from diversity in addition to cohesion. A sense of 'them' versus 'us' can lead to conflict and violence, and minority groups, while benefiting to a certain extent from liaising with each other to create communities, may not always prosper through this kind of community involvement.

## CONCLUSIONS

The concept of individuals developing within ecological frameworks is now accepted as one of the most useful ways both to understand development and to effect change. While there has been a considerable amount of progress in theory, basic research and community-focused intervention relevant to enhancing parenting and improving children's development in the past two decades, it is important to rethink the links between child outcomes and ecological influences in more detail. In order to plan effective intervention strategies it is necessary to understand specifically what impact the community or neighbourhood may have on family functioning and on the lives of parents and children. It is clear, however, that it may be difficult to understand how to interpret research related to the impact of communities on parents and children, or to develop ways to intervene, while the concept remains so nebulous and open to debate. One might argue that this kind of ambiguity is common to much of social science, take for instance the concept of intelligence. However, there are more tried and tested methods of assessing intelligence. At the moment the science of measuring communities or neighbourhoods is not so well developed. In the remainder of this volume we lay out the theories that have been developed to explore and explain the importance of communities for children and families. Then measurement methods are reviewed, providing more clarity about definitions. Research will then be presented to understand more about what is known regarding the importance of communities, and whether they can be manipulated to enhance developmental outcomes. Finally, we consider what the implications are for future policy, practice and research to further the understanding of the role of communities.