THE NEW ECONOMICS OF COMMUNITY: LOCAL EXCHANGE AND TRADING SCHEMES (LETS)

by

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Research into LETS has concentrated on the structural, economic and political dimensions of LETS involvement. In this context, LETS have often been portrayed as a solution to the problem of social exclusion. This thesis, however, suggests that involvement in LETS is more to do with communal sociability, and consequently has devoted attention to the ways in which community was created and maintained through LETS involvement.

The thesis reports on a study of the communal activities of members from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS. The analyses are based on data derived from a questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The fieldwork was conducted between 1995 and 1998.

The data indicate that the active creation of community is part of an on-going process of social, cultural, economic and symbolic reproduction, which is characterized by perceived structural changes taking place in members’ lives. These perceived changes, the creation of shared communal symbols and participation in a common symbolic discourse are important ways in which members reflexively construct the boundaries between themselves and non members.
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## INTRODUCTION

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

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'Let's be reflexive: On the continued significance of community in the 21st century'.


Signed: 

Date: 


INTRODUCTION

I begin this introduction by providing a brief biographical account of my initial involvement with Local Exchange and Trading Schemes (LETS). I do this to provide the reader with a picture of my starting point in the research process, and perhaps more importantly, to make explicit my belief in the importance of reflexivity in the research process. Researchers should 'be aware of the ways in which their own biography is a fundamental part of the research process' (May 1993:14) and both the experiences of the researched and researchers are important. A second task of this introduction is to guide the reader towards the general research aim and related research questions. Finally, a map of this thesis is provided.

As a second year undergraduate student I read with interest an article, in a national newspaper, about Local Exchange and Trading Schemes, about the creation of alternative local currency. It stirred my interest. How could anybody just make up a currency? How could it work? Surely the government would not allow this to happen. Were such people just cranks? Was it part of the 'alternative' scene? Perhaps it was just a joke. A year later I read with interest in my local paper that a meeting had been arranged in Kingsbridge, the small market town where I lived, in order to set up a Local Exchange and Trading Scheme (LETS). I was fascinated. Immediately I pencilled it in to my diary. My final year programme of study included a module on 'Work, Employment and Society'. The dissertation I was in the final throes of writing at the time was also entitled 'Time, Work and Money: The problematics of work-sharing in mass consuming society'. These studies made me question not just what work was, but also the changing structure of employment, and the paradox of 'un(der)employment' and 'overemployment'. Perhaps LETS was one way of overcoming such inequity of
working hours and thus monetary reward. Was there another way of organizing and paying for work? I was also completing a module on ‘Third World Development’. Could LETS also be the solution to poverty in the Third World? The creation of alternative currencies raised many questions in my mind, the implications of which potentially could be quite far reaching.

I attended the first meeting in Kingsbridge and it became clearer how the economic side worked. It made sense to me. Why should I not offer my services and skills to others in the local community and also get others to do things I was not able to do, or that I had little time to do? It made me question the skills I could offer other people. But more than that it made me question the skills I would like to offer. Having offered the use of my computer for the computation of the accounts, I was then invited to volunteer my computing skills; I was the only one with such skills at that time. I was therefore pulled in right from the beginning as a Core Group member and took on the role of Kingsbridge LETS accountant.

This involvement gave me direct experience of the start up of a LETS and of its workings in theory and in practice. It also gave me valuable insight into the active and energetic creation of a group which previously did not exist. How would it evolve? How long would it last? Would it fizzle out quickly? Would these energetic people get bored with it? Would people exchange skills and services on a regular basis? It introduced me to a whole new set of people who lived in the same geographical area but whom I previously had not known.

Although my interest was primarily that of an active member, it struck me towards the end of my undergraduate studies that LETS would indeed be an interesting object of
study in its own right. I embarked on a part-time mode of PhD study as funding was not available for the first three years. Life was quite difficult financially during this period. However, I was a member of LETS so hopefully I would be able to use LETS services to provide extra support for me and my family.

The theme of this thesis is encapsulated in its title: *The New Economics of Community: Local Exchange and Trading Schemes*. The title is deliberately broad. This contribution started off as an exploration of LETS rather than from any pre-determined theoretical framework. Nevertheless, implicit in the title are two assumptions: first that LETS are a new form of economics and second, that community is, to some extent, also involved. From here further issues require illumination: for example, what is the nature of 'community'; in what ways do new economics underpin it? The often-assumed means through which researchers illuminate LETS is by sole focus on the economic dynamics of LETS. However, in addition to economic issues, we must also ask how did a group which previously did not exist come to be, in members' own words, a 'LETS community'? What I became more interested in, as the study evolved, was how members subjectively felt about the concept of community. What did it mean to them, and how did the 'LETS community' work in practice? Who were the organisers? What were the dynamics of the core group? Did they meet with any problems in the running of the LETS? How did they solve problems? Did they always agree? An interest in these issues prompted this research project to investigate whether and how the active creation of community occurred through LETS involvement.

In terms of content this thesis begins in Chapter One by setting the historical context within which alternative currencies are located. It also defines LETS for the newcomer,
and sets out in more detail how LETS as community emerged as an under-researched area.

Chapter Two goes on to review relevant literature concerning the nature of the concept of 'community'. I begin by examining the legacy of classical sociology. I then consider whether or not there has been some kind of 'loss of community' before moving on to look at more recent literature which takes a cultural turn. Here 'symbolic community' (Cohen 1985) and the notion of 'reflexive community' (Lash 1993; 1994) are explored.

Chapter Three outlines some of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. This is done because his work was of use to me for two particular reasons. First Bourdieu's concepts have proved useful in handling and organizing my data. Particularly illuminating is his discussion of different forms of capital. A second reason for using Bourdieu is his approach to method. His constant insistence on reflexivity as a necessary aspect of the research process was a particularly important issue especially since I was both an 'insider' in one LETS and an 'outsider' in a second.

Chapter Four outlines the design of the research. A case study approach was deemed appropriate. It was decided that the study would employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative element of the study involved the administration of self-completion questionnaires to Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members. This was largely exploratory and aimed to pinpoint the social characteristics of members as well as to identify themes deserving more detailed exploration. The qualitative element of the study involved observation and in-depth interviews in order to get at the subjective communal knowledge of shared meanings and the routine background practices of LETS members.
The next three chapters present the findings of the study. Chapter Five presents the social characteristics of members from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, as derived from the survey data, and confirms the importance of ‘community’ to members of LETS. Chapter Six attempts to develop the contextual framework for the study by providing a more detailed account of the way in which LETS as ‘community’ is formed and shaped from the bottom up, a process which contributes to group identity and group dynamics. This is followed in Chapter Seven by an analysis of different forms of capital at work within LETS and an illustration of how each contributes to the active creation of community for members of LETS.

In Chapter Eight the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the research aim and related questions as well as in relation to the theoretical debates about the problematic concept of community and its changing nature. The final chapter presents the conclusions.

This thesis attempts to fill a gap in sociological literature, and thus provides a small contribution to the discipline. Findings will also be of interest to those people involved in LETS, as well as policy makers concerned with community issues.

Notes

1 I studied on a part-time basis for the first three years picking up part-time teaching and part-time research posts. In the fourth year I gained funding from the University of Plymouth which enabled me to concentrate fully on writing up the thesis.
CHAPTER ONE: THE CONTEXT

Introduction

Money is a brilliant human invention. As a ‘means of exchange’, money enables people to exchange goods and services in a way that is much more flexible than barter. The problem with money however, as Liz Shephard (1992:3) pointed out at a Berlin conference, is that it ‘tends to be a commodity in limited supply’. For this reason money will tend to: ‘be loaned, leading to the charging of interest; accumulate in some places, depriving others; be subject to theft or loss; and, still be subject to devaluation’ (Shephard 1992:3).

Money can also move anywhere; it is universally transferable. The flight of money deprives communities and regions of wealth created locally. The money has become externally controlled, even if it is re-imported into the region. ‘The process causes local areas to lose control of their economy, their political decision-making process, their culture and their environment’ (Weston 1991:38). A centralized currency has the effect of causing regional unemployment, transfer of resources, collapse in asset values in under-performing areas and movement of people to ‘better off’ areas of the country. These are the kind of disparities experienced by the outlying regions in Britain that are subjected to a centralized English currency. Yet, as Liz Shephard (1992:3) points out ‘many low-income areas still possess human skills, potential and all kinds of material resources. All the elements needed for wealth creation are there locked away, together with all kinds of needs. The one thing missing, essentially, is a means of exchange - a local communication system to link supply with demand’.
LETS can offer this missing link - an internal communication system for any locality. LETS are local non-profit making 'exchange' networks in which all kinds of goods and services can be traded among a network of individuals, families and local businesses without the need for conventional money. They run with a local currency and consist of a series of accounts belonging to the members of the system. The principle behind LETS is that if someone wants or needs something, then it has value, whether or not they can afford to pay for it.

Moneyless systems of exchange are by no means an 'invention' of the 1980s and 1990s. A number of unorthodox historical proposals illustrate previous attempts to find alternative means of exchange. My starting point, therefore, is to follow Offe and Heinze (1992:70) for, as they point out 'A good framework to use as a basis for examining the great variety of types of examples from the past is provided by asking what arrangements the various schemes made for organising exchange operations'. Here I will focus on three cases: firstly Robert Owen who was reputed to have inspired the early co-operative movement; secondly an experiment in Worgl, Austria, with money that decreased in value; and thirdly the LETSystem which came into being in Vancouver, Canada in 1979. This is far from exhaustive, however, it will highlight the fact that the search for an alternative to national currencies as the sole means of exchange has been going on for much of the last century. The LETSystem that began in Vancouver, is different from the earlier attempts, for the simple reason that it is not based on money substitutes, but rather on a 'subsidiary currency', nor does it have any material basis. LETS in the UK will then be explored in more detail. LETS in the UK are similar to those started in Canada. However, they are more sophisticated and have developed with direction from a central development agency, 'Letslink' UK. A look at the scale of LETS in the UK highlights their phenomenal growth and popularity. My
next task will be to draw upon academic papers and empirical studies that emerged during the course of this study so that the reader can clearly see how I began to move from an economic analysis of LETS to a community focus. Finally, I briefly examine writing which suggests that local communities are responding assertively to encroachment upon their boundaries.

**Alternative currency experimentation: A brief history**

**A. R. Owen and the Equitable Labour Exchange**

*Robert Owen* (1771-1858) the nineteenth century social reformer, is reputed to have inspired the early consumer co-operative movement in Britain in the 1820s and 1830s. According to Owen the major ‘defect’ in the capitalist economic system was a problem of value. Instead of human work being the natural measure of value, an artificial, unnatural measure, namely money, was used as a basis for calculating all economic transactions. This was the source of the problem - capitalists withheld from the workers, as the real producers, the full revenue from their work. For this reason, and in order to solve the problem, Owen proposed the formation of a Labour Exchange principally for the unemployed and partially employed - a moneyless system of exchange and supply. He drew upon the ideas of Adam Smith, in arguing that labour was to be accepted as the natural standard of value and the principal source of wealth.

Owen went to America in 1824 to establish his ideal society on a small scale. While he was away, his friends in Great Britain founded societies in support of co-operation, with co-operative shops and ‘labour exchanges’ for the marketing of goods, and proclaimed their views under the new term ‘socialism’³ (Woodward 1962:131). The covered market, or bazaar, with its hundreds of little stalls, was an old institution.
However, by 1827 a new bazaar was in being. This bazaar acted as a centre for the exchange of products made by unemployed members of London trades - carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, and others who were put to work on materials bought out of trade union funds (Thompson 1963:869). On his return in 1830 Owen found himself head of a mass movement. He delivered an Address at the National Equitable Labour Exchange on 1 May 1833 'denouncing the Old system of the World and announcing the Commencement of the New' (Thompson 1963:867). Not only would the profit motive be displaced by co-operation, the vices of individualism by the virtues of mutuality, but also all existing social arrangements would give way to the federations of mixed agricultural and industrial villages.

The 'Equitable Labour Exchange' was the model favoured by Owen. The organisational structures of the consumer co-operatives were bound up with the idea of a currency covered by goods. The equitable labour exchange was a market on which workers exchanged their wares in their dual capacity as producers and consumers. As Owen saw it 'the producer was also a consumer, and along with his followers felt that some intelligent effort should be made to, at least, produce as much by the labour of the unemployed as would enable them without injury to others to keep life in themselves' (Weston 1985:3). The labour exchange was essentially a depot where individual co-operators exchanged their products without the use of money. A currency of labour notes was used, representing hours of labour time. To facilitate the process of exchange, Owen devised National Equitable Labour Notes in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 40 & 80 hours (Weston 1985:3). The value of the goods was determined by assessors - appointed for that purpose - according to the market price of the day and then converted into Labour Notes. Thus the notes represented the value of the raw material and the average working time needed to produce the goods. The notes could
then be used to purchase requirements at any time from the warehouse of the exchange. A labour note for sixpence was the equivalent of an average hour's work. To cover running costs a brokerage fee of 8.5 per cent was levied on all goods sent in. The labour notes in circulation were supposed to correspond exactly to the value of the stocks of goods (Offe & Heinze 1992:71-72).

Hence, and as Weston (1985:3) sums up, the process consisted of three major steps. The first step was to import the initial stock of raw material—this was the 'pump primer'. Secondly, within the Bazaar, workers formed those raw materials into goods, which were then priced by evaluators, using 6d = 1 hour as the conversion rate. When the goods were sold, (minus the 8.5 per cent transaction charge), the workers would receive hourly based Labour Notes. The Labour Notes, in turn, would be used by the workers to purchase food and manufactures produced by other workers, and also the raw materials for the next day's work. Thirdly, some of their products were sold to other workers (the Labour Notes acting as internal currency) and some were sold outside to raise money (external currency) to replenish the raw material stock.

The first equitable labour exchange was opened in September 1832 in London with financial and organisational support from Owen. Next year branches were opened in Birmingham, and probably also in Liverpool and Leeds, and there were plans for other localities. The Labour Exchange Bazaar set up in London on Gray's Inn Road by Owen himself in 1832 was the largest and best known. Here we can see how materials were brought in, purchased with money loaned by Owen. At this point, it appears that, with the need to 'prime the pump', external 'capital' currency could not be avoided (Weston 1985:3). There are interesting parallels between this problem and those of current Third World and local economies which cannot obtain capital goods and/or raw materials.
without using 'external currency'. At the Bazaar, Owen was the external/internal financial broker (Weston 1985:3). At that time there was no state monopoly of the issue of currency, so that there were no formal obstacles to the issue of labour notes. Reports in the periodical *Crisis*\(^3\) suggest that at first the London exchange was extremely successful and had a large turnover\(^6\). However, no business documents of the exchange have survived, so that the information, as to which there is some conflict of detail, cannot be checked.

Thus the Equitable Labour Exchanges, founded at London and Birmingham in 1832-3, with their labour notes and exchange of small products, did not materialise out of the air by 'paranoiac prophets' (Thompson 1963:870). Thompson (1963:870-71) lists a number of the products, which were bought for exchange in the Co-operative Congress in Liverpool in October 1832, and, in this way suggests we can also form a mental picture of the people involved.

From Sheffield, cutlery and coffee-pots: from Leicester, stockings and lace: from Huddersfield, waistcoat pieces and shawls: from Rochdale, flannels. There were diapers from Barnsley, stuffs from Halifax, shoes and clogs from Kendal, and prints from Birkacre. A spokesman of the Birmingham Equitable Labour Exchange said that the people of his district 'knew not what to do with their masses of iron, brass, steel and japan wares': why should they not be exchanged for Lancashire cottons and Leicester stockings? The long list of trades who proposed to bring their wares to the Birmingham Exchange includes (in the 'Bs') blacking-makers, bell-ringers, birch broom makers, button and trimming makers, brace-makers, braziers, brush-makers, bakers, bellows-makers, bedstead-makers, basket-makers\(^7\). (cited in E. P. Thompson, pp. 870-71).

Why did it not continue and spread and become part of our co-operative fabric? The Labour Exchange or Bazaar, in Gray's Inn Road, was, 'a spectacular muddle' (Thompson 1963:877). Its most unstable millenarial elements came largely from two sources: the benevolent well wishers\(^8\) and the very poor\(^9\) (Thompson 1963:877).
Moreover, literature suggests it was, against Owen's advice, started prematurely (Weston 1985), without sufficient preparation, financial resources or competent organisers (Offe & Heinze 1992). The flaws in organisation that hounded the translation of the new, novel concept into practice - a too hasty start without sufficient preparation - could have been avoided in theory. However, there were also two structural reasons largely responsible for the failure of the experiment. In the first place, it soon became difficult to balance supply with demand as regards the type and quality of goods. Luxury articles piled up in the warehouses, while the craftsmen's main object was to obtain urgently needed foodstuffs in exchange for their goods. Owen had not provided any market smoothing mechanism to counter any disequilibrium in the market. Ever the optimist, he had assumed that if a gap in supply appeared one simply had to call on producers of the goods in demand and the problem would be solved (Offe & Heinze 1992:72-73). In the second place, revaluation of the goods was difficult, complicated and by no means as just as Owen had thought it would be. It was inviting for everybody who was earning less than sixpence an hour on the open market to join the exchange. However, it was hard to attract those who were earning more. Moreover, workers who had to produce their goods under less profitable conditions were hard put to cover their costs at the average prices, and as a result, they complained. Owen thought that run-ins of this sort were just teething difficulties, which the assessors would overcome before long. However, this merely concealed the Achilles' heel of his system, which was that the value of one piece of work would never be exactly the same as another, unless the two were produced under identical conditions.
Ambivalence towards utopian theorists is clearly evident in Marx and Engels's writing. Karl Marx in his polemic against the early socialists frequently touched on this sensitive matter. In 1847 (1969:84) Marx wrote:

In exchanging these two quantities of working time you are by no means exchanging the mutual situation of the producers or altering the respective situations of workers and manufacturers in the slightest degree. As long as the method of production was left unchanged, moneyless exchange experiments only reproduced the prevailing market conditions. The early socialist theory of labour value was nothing more than the 'scientific expression' of the economic conditions of contemporary society (cited in Offe & Heinze 1992:73).

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engles were scathing in their criticisms of the utopian socialists. This is what Marx had to say about them:

They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society? Hence they reject all political, and especially revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavour, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social gospel. (From *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848], in Feuer, 1976:79)

There are two principal criticisms here, each of which contribute to Marx and Engles characterisation of the type of socialism which they refer to as ‘Utopian’. In the first place ‘Utopian socialism’s appeal was counter-productive: it was objectively impossible to expect all classes to usher in socialism’ (Dobson 1995:151). In the second place, ‘its strategy of change through “small experiments” and “force of example” was an unfounded attempt to change people without changing the conditions in which they lived and worked’ (Dobson 1995:151 emphasis in original).
It is widely known that Marx’s solution to the problem put forward by the false universal appeal of the Utopian socialists was to advocate the identification and formation of a class in society (given the right historical conditions) whose prime interest lay in changing that society (Dobson 1995). This is how he put it in his *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* of 1844:

Where is there, then, a *real* possibility of emancipation in Germany? This is our reply. A class must be formed which has *radical chains*, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong*, but a *wrong in general*. There must be formed a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status, a sphere which is not opposed to particular consequences but is totally opposed to the assumptions of the German political system, a sphere which finally cannot emancipate itself without therefore emancipating all those other spheres, which is, in short, a *total loss* of humanity and which can only redeem itself by a *total redemption of humanity*. (cited in Bottomore and Rubel, 1984:190 emphasis in original)

Thus according to Marx, there are three basic characteristics of the ‘sphere of society’ (or ‘class’) capable of bringing about profound social change. First, ‘it had to have “radical chains”, such that, second, its emancipation would involve the general emancipation of humanity; and third, it had to be opposed not just to the “particular consequences” of a political system but to its general “assumptions”’ (Dobson 1995:152). And indeed, for Marx, this class with a universal historical mission was the proletariat.
B. Worgl, a Small Town in Austria - yet another experiment

The financial theorist Silvo Gesell (1862 - 1930), originator of the ‘free economy theory’ proposed a different way of solving the economic problem. Money was not substituted as a medium of exchange by resorting to the exchange of goods facilitated by money substitutes as proposed by Owen. Rather, the money circulation should ‘regain its health’ by reducing the natural advantage money has over goods. The problem as Gesell saw it, was that money does not ‘deteriorate’ as do goods, but is durable, and hence, can be hoarded. Gesell suggested that this could be overcome by building an automatic reduction in value into the money system.

Thus if money is not to have any prerogatives over goods, like them it must rust, go mouldy and rot, must be eaten away, get sick, run away, and when it’s all gone the possessor has still to pay the fee of the guarantor. (Gesell 1922:8 cited in Offe and Heinze 1992:76).

Constant devaluation would give its owner no motive or incentive to hoard the new currency. Gesell recommended that this ‘free money’ should lose 1 per thousand of its purchasing power weekly, making 5.2 per cent annually (Offe and Heinze 1992:76). The money was then to be ‘re-valued’ by affixing stamps equal to the loss of value, otherwise it would be completely worthless as a means of payment. As a result, it was expected that individuals would strive not to pay the loss in purchasing power out of their own financial resources, but would either spend the money, or take it to a savings bank as soon as possible where it would be stored, without interest, but also without loss of value. It could then be restored to the money circulation in the form of interest-free loans. Thus, money would be in a constant state of forced circulation. The new currency was intended to replace conventional currency entirely.
In the early 1930s the small town of Worgl in the Austrian Tyrol was suffering much like every other town in Europe and America from the Great Depression. The mayor, or Burgermeister, Michael Unterguggenberger was an admirer of Gesell’s ‘free money theory’. Unterguggenberger became mayor in December 1931. He immediately encountered a desperate economic situation: the treasury was empty; unemployed citizens could not pay their taxes; roads, bridges and buildings were in need of repair, for which the town could not pay; and, idle men and women were earning no wages (Weston 1989:4). His simple solution was to create money locally. A resolution was passed in the local council to introduce emergency money in the form of ‘work confirmation certificates’. ‘Labour certificates’ to the value of 32,000 Schillings were printed, in denominations of one, five, and ten Schillings respectively. The amount spent during the period of the experiment (totalling no more than 12,000 Schillings) was deposited with the local Raiffeisen Bank as collateral. The notes became valid only after being stamped at the town hall. In accordance with Gesell’s theory, the notes lost one per cent of their normal face value each month, making twelve per cent annually. The devaluation had to be made good before the end of each month, by purchasing stamps equal to the devaluation. Notes were returned at the end of each year for new ones. If the required stamps had been affixed, no charge was made for the transaction. The town also undertook conversion of the certificates by paying an exchange fee of two per cent of the face value in ordinary Schillings. The trustee deposited, at the local Raiffeisen Bank (credit union) an amount in Austrian currency equivalent to the issued local currency, in order to facilitate this conversion and thereby provide cover for the relief certificates. The money was then loaned out to ‘trustworthy’ wholesalers at six per cent interest. Interest therefore flowed back into the town treasury, further facilitating transactions with the ‘outside’ world (Offe and Heinze 1992).
Unterguggenberger put this money into circulation by paying, with their consent, fifty per cent (later raised to seventy-five per cent) of the wages of the town’s clerical and manual workers in this new money. The inhabitants of Worgl appeared to have little difficulty about being a part of the currency experiment. All shops in Worgl accepted the currency at face value, which meant that local people could use it to buy all immediate necessities such as food, clothing and rent. Economically there appeared to be no disadvantages - inflation did not rise and people seemed to become used to affixing their stamps at the end of the month. Because it was a depreciating currency, it circulated with rapidity thereby boosting the local economy. Additional income was received from both the sale of the ‘devaluation’ stamps and from the exchange fee, for the simple reason that inhabitants and traders had every incentive to get rid of the ‘shrinking’ money by paying local taxes at the end of the month. Further, many paid their taxes in advance since it was financially advantageous. These taxes were used to provide social and public services. Physical assets were also created. These included improvement in the main street and its drainage system, street lighting, new road construction, manufacturing of kerb stones and drainage pipes, construction of a ski-jumping platform, fencing, and construction of a new water reservoir (Weston 1989, 1991). In fact, there still stands a bridge where a plaque commemorates the fact that it was built by debt-free, locally created money. Consequently, some work was provided for the unemployed. One interesting and unanticipated circumstance arose. The experiment attracted much attention and Worgl became a ‘Mecca for free money enthusiasts’, who took the depreciating money home with them as souvenirs, so that in the end the volume in circulation had seriously diminished - an unexpected form of hoarding (Offe and Heinze 1992:78).

If the Worgl money was unanimously accepted at the local level\textsuperscript{10}, there was great
opposition from two central forces - the Tyrol Labour Party and the Austrian State Bank. The Social Democratic Party in the Tyrol made it difficult for Unterguggenberger and pressured him to give up the experiment, which did not feature in the party manifesto. The Austrian National Bank went even further. They regarded Worgl’s declaration of independence as an infringement of its monopoly of issuing notes and feared, with very good reason, that the experiment might spread. After a long legal battle, the Austrian Supreme Court decided in favour of the Bank. The Bank obtained a court order in September 1933 forbidding the constantly depreciating money. The experiment lasted for over fourteen months and involved a group of some six thousand persons living in Worgl and on surrounding farms (Offe & Heinz 1992).

The success of the experiment is difficult to assess. On the one hand we see a healthy flow of payments to the treasury and taxes were paid. This is, however, probably due to the fact that the devaluing money had restricted its own usability rather than the devaluation of the money. The experiment also stimulated tourism, an indirect yet favourable consequence. The overall effect of the plan was to boost the turnover of the local economy. As Weston points out ‘Within one year, the 5,000 Schillings had circulated 463 times, creating goods and services worth over 2.3 million Schillings. The conventional Schilling, by contrast, circulated only 213 times. Unemployment fell by twenty-five per cent and major infrastructural improvements were carried out’ (1991:40). So, the experiment can be seen as an emergency measure, which was, in fact, a success in the short term. However, it is almost certain that it was not due to the depreciating money incorporated as part of the structure. The only principle acquired from Gesell’s ‘free money theory’ was that of forced circulation through constant depreciation of money. It did not replace conventional currency in its entirety as intended by Gesell. It would appear that two monetary systems were working side by
side. Hence, there is little evidence that suggest this theory could work in practice. The experiment was always confined to the immediate neighbourhood, acceptance was always voluntary and it would seem that local currency only served to assist or supplement the conventional monetary system.

The above two examples have been detailed to illustrate past attempts to find an alternative to national currencies as the sole means for exchange. The next part of this chapter focuses on contemporary developments.

**Contemporary Developments**

A large number of local currency systems are in operation at the end of the 1990s\(^\text{12}\). For example, a paper currency similar to Owen's national equitable labour notes is popular in the United States. This paper currency is named Ithaca Hours. The 'Hours' in question are labour notes which circulate in the local economy – in the United States town of Ithaca. One hour is equal to $10 which is the average hourly rate (North 1997:19). According to Glover (1995: 152-3) Ithaca Hours had approximately 800 members in 1995. By the end of 1995, 250 businesses also accepted this paper currency (Pacione 1999:67).

Also popular in the United States is the Service Credit movement. Offe and Heinz (1990:102-125) detail how Service Credits participants provide care for elderly people and earn hourly credits for the time they put in which they then accumulate to pay for their own care when their time comes (North 1997:14), or give it to friends or relatives who need care immediately (Seyfang 1994:4). This experimental approach to welfare
provision is interesting in that 'it is a currency expressly fashioned to reward mutual self-help...[and] seems able to mobilise resources which neither the private market nor the public sector presently tap' (Cahn 1986 cited in Seyfang 1994:4). By 1994 there were over 150 schemes operating in 30 US states (Pacione 1999:68).

C. LETSystems and Michael Linton

In many ways LETS takes its place alongside these other examples. Although there is considerable debate as to where the idea of LETS originated (North 1997:14), most accounts trace the origin back to Michael Linton who introduced the idea in the small town of Courtenay in Comox Valley, Vancouver Island, Canada in 1983 (Offe and Heinze 1992:86; Williams 1996 a,b,c,d; North 1997:18; Pacione 1999:68). At the time the town was mainly dependent upon two employers, a local US Air Force base and a timber mill. However, the American base was transferred to another province and the timber industry went into recession (Offe and Heinze 1992:87). The result was a massive increase in unemployment. When local unemployment rises, for whatever reason, people lose their incomes and thus have less money to spend. Many local people experienced financial problems.

According to a number of reports, Michael Linton, a trained teacher of the Alexander Technique, was motivated partly by the fact that as a consequence of the shrinkage of the local economy and in the absence of adequate social security and health insurance, many of his patients could no longer afford his services. Linton had apparently tried bartering his own skills, however, had found that it was a hopelessly slow method of trading (Dauncey 1988:52). LETS is essentially an extension of barter, but it extends it
onto a non-profit, multi-centred, community-wide basis. It does this by inventing a new kind of local money called the ‘Green Dollar’, which facilitates local trade.

LETS systems differ from others described in this chapter in that exchange within the local economy is based not on money substitutes based on ‘work money’, time credit notes, or money substitutes based on time measurement, but on a ‘subsidiary currency’ (Offe and Heinze 1992:87), the ‘Green Dollar’. A second interesting point is that it has no material basis at all. Unlike other money it is invisible. There are no coins, notes or certificates, only debit and credit balances, which appear only as figures in bank accounts. The currency remains very much integrated into the system of market prices, and maintains a relationship with the ‘official’ dollar.

The LETS started by Michael Linton in Courtenay began trading in 1983 (Weston 1985; Dauncey 1988; Williams1996 a,b,c,d; Pacione 1997a,b). In the first twenty months, about $100,000 in ‘green’ dollars of trade occurred (Weston 1985). By 1985 it is reported to have had over five hundred members who had done over $300,000 worth of trading (Dauncey 1988:53). By 1987, a dozen LETS systems were operating in Canada. Many enquiries were being answered, and interest was spreading. With fears of a global recession just around the corner, many Canadian communities were struggling to find ways to regenerate their economies. LETS appeared to provide some useful answers.

The concept of LETS was first introduced into the UK by Michael Linton in 1984 when he presented a paper at The Other Economic Summit13. (Linton 1986) In Britain, the first LETS was established in Norwich in 1985 (Lee 1996:1379). However, it was not until the 1990s that the idea really began to take off (Lee 1996; Williams 1996a,b,c,d).
D. LETS schemes and Letslink UK

The recent phenomenal growth and development of Local Exchange Trading Schemes in the UK has resulted from the pioneering work of Letslink UK, the world’s first LETS development agency, which has promoted their development since 1991. Letslink was founded by Liz Shephard as an agency and national network to explore and develop the potential of local exchange (or ‘community currency’) networks. The approach taken by Letslink has been to develop appropriate, low cost methods for any group to establish and maintain their own interest-free system of exchange. As Letslink state in a leaflet ‘As popular grassroots initiatives they can “reach the parts other currencies can’t”’ (1994 emphasis in original), mobilising all kinds of skills and resources to meet local needs. Letslink operates a national LETS advice line. It also produces a range of literature, recommended model rules, guidelines, materials, and the UK LETS magazine ‘Lets/ink’. Letslink UK organises conferences, seminars and working groups, and provides consultancy services, workshops and presentations. Currently, Letslink is working on approaches to poorer communities, as well as establishing links with the health sector, credit unions, co-operatives, local businesses and local government. It has also organised a campaign ‘Lets Eat’ to encourage sustainable local food production. Letslink has created a popular range of materials and handled 40,000 enquiries from individuals and a wide spectrum of organisations seeking to join or set up their own networks. In 1994 Letslink received the first Schumacher Award ‘for a triumph of voluntary effort’ (Letslink leaflet).
LETS are growing at a startling rate as communities latch on to this simple and effective way of tackling economic hardship at a local level. In the UK there are now estimated to be up to 20,000 people trading in up to 400 LETS networks in cities, towns and rural communities (figures from Letslink UK 1996). The fastest growth is in the Southwest of England, where LETS is firmly established on a regional basis. Devon has the largest number of LETS (18) of any county in Britain (Letslink 1995).

Nor are LETS confined to the UK. Having been conceived in Canada in 1979, they have now taken root in the USA, Australiasia and Europe where they are mushrooming. The worlds biggest LETS is in Blue Mountains, Australia which began in February 1991 with a committee of 5. It has now grown to a current membership of 1,100 accounts (about 1,800 members) and is trading the equivalent of about $360,000 per annum (LETS Kingsbridge Directory 1995).

Letslink has also generated interest in community currencies world-wide and has introduced the concept into over sixteen European countries (assisting the setting up of national support networks in seven of these), and helped to introduce them in parts of the developing world including in Africa, the Middle East and South America.

**How do LETS Schemes Work?**

Anyone, anywhere, can start his or her own LETS and anyone can participate. What usually happens is that a group of people from a particular locality get together and agree to barter among themselves using their own 'local currency'. At this stage decisions have to be made. These include naming the local currency, for example
Manchester trades with Bobbins, Plymouth named its currency Plums, Totnes has Acorns and Kingsbridge trades with Bridges. Another early decision concerns whether the currency will have parity with the national currency, that is one credit is equal to one pound, or whether a local unit is related in value to a standard hour of work. A Core Group of members, who are usually volunteers from the initial meeting, run the LETS scheme. The core group usually consists of a co-ordinator, an accounts keeper, a publicity officer, a sterling treasurer, a membership secretary, a directory compiler and a social events co-ordinator. This group gets the LETS ‘off the ground’. A launch date is set and announced in advertisements; cheque books and membership forms are printed; and information distributed via local institutions such as libraries, health centres and community colleges, in order to increase membership.

The next step is to compile a directory of the members’ available skills, goods and services. This is circulated to all members and updated regularly, especially in the early stages as new members join. Offers and requests are usually grouped into major categories. These include such things as: domestic and family, transport, business and office services, repairs and maintenance, manufacture and construction, arts and crafts, gardening and horticulture, clothing and textiles, catering and food, second-hand goods and loans, therapies and health, building services, equipment for hire, space and accommodation, spiritual, sports and social, retail, teaching and tuition, entertainment and miscellaneous. Each of these divides into many more sub-categories. Offers include childminders, dog walkers, accountants, plumbers, bricklayers etc. Specialist goods can be hired, for example garden equipment/ladders, sewing machines, car battery chargers as well as beds, books, tapes and holiday accommodation. Tuition is offered in languages, yoga, adult reading, music and alternative health care. Used
goods are also traded, as are unavailable or rare items that are difficult to acquire in the market economy, for example organically grown farm produce, special handicraft items, custom baking etc. The directory is similar to British Telecom ‘Yellow Pages’, albeit on a very much smaller scale. A major difference is that the directory not only advertises ‘offers’, but also ‘wants’ or goods/services required. Members trade directly with each other as and when they wish.

On joining the scheme a ‘LETS Members’ Agreement’ is signed. This is a legal requirement of the Data Protection Act. A similar clause appears on the membership form to be signed by the applicant which reads: ‘I agree to the conditions of the Members’ Agreement, and to the LETSystem holding my details on computer and distributing to other members details relevant to the purposes of exchange’. At this stage new members are usually asked to pay a small annual fee in sterling\(^5\). This is needed to cover cash items such as printing, paper and postage. An account is then opened and a LETS chequebook issued to pay for purchases. These cheques are sometimes referred to as trading receipts.

Once a transaction is agreed and work completed, a trading receipt for the agreed amount is written out. This is given to the person who has done the work or provided goods. For example, I require a piano lesson for my child. I look in the LETS directory and see that music tuition is offered for 14 Bridges per hour. I arrange a lesson. At the end of the lesson, I write out a trading receipt for 14 Bridges. The music tutor’s account will be credited 14 Bridges, my account debited the same amount. The point is that it is not a favour for a favour. I may then get a call from someone else because I offer computer lessons. My asking price is 20 Bridges per hour although negotiable. Once a final price is agreed upon and the lesson completed, again a trading receipt is written
out; my account is credited and the buyers' account debited. In other words, one need not swap services with the same person. One can debit and credit one's account as often as one trades. In this respect, it works in exactly the same way as does conventional money. Money is supplied to the seller's account and taken from the buyer's account as each transaction occurs.

LETS transactions need only consist in part of an exchange of the scheme currency. In other words, there can be a cash component as well. Here there is a distinction between local value, which is paid for in local currency (usually labour) and the externally purchased materials (capital) needed such as petrol, paper, building materials etc., which are paid for in conventional currency. In this way, a much wider range of transactions can occur for the simple reason that members can offer services without having first acquired capital. Businesses\textsuperscript{16}, in theory, can also benefit from partial payment. Shops for example, have to pay rent and rates, and order stock for which they have no choice but to pay in conventional currency - money. They therefore must have some way of recouping this cost. Nor are businesses discouraged from taking part in such a scheme. Selling goods or services in this way could result in more custom, again for the simple reason that customers buy without needing as much capital. In theory trade increases.

The lynchpin of this scheme is the central accounting system. This is because transactions in the local currency, in LETS units, do not exist as notes or coins, only as a measure for keeping accounts. No physical money is issued or deposited. The account keeper is therefore extremely important. A sophisticated computer package is often used to keep the accounts.\textsuperscript{17} Trading receipts are collected from central points by the account keeper or sent directly to him/her. Transactions are then recorded in personal
accounts just like a normal bank. The difference is that there is no charge if an account is in debit and the amounts recorded are open and available for scrutiny by other members of the scheme. Individual statements are sent out on a regular basis informing each participant of the transactions he/she has completed and the balance of the account. All that a negative balance means is that one has issued LETS currency to others, not that one has ‘borrowed’ from them. It signifies a commitment to return a service to the ‘community’ at one’s own pace.

To understand the scheme one must forget conventional notions of budgeting. Credits need not be earned before they are spent. Debt is not only not frowned upon in the LETS scheme, it is actually encouraged. This is because the only way of creating a LETS unit is by going into debt - it is a debt driven system. As Richard Knights explains ‘…within the scheme one person’s debt must mean another person’s credit’ (O’Neill 1994). Overall, it balances out to zero. Therefore ‘[I]f people join and then try to accumulate credits before they spend, then the LETS system is doomed to failure and nothing will happen’ (O’Neill 1994).

Nor is there any reason to accumulate credits because LETS is not inflation proof. LETS units usually reflect market prices. Thus, if the annual inflation rate was say 20%, LETS currency would probably reflect this in the form of increased prices. This has the effect of penalizing any member holding onto a large unspent credit as it would, in fact, depreciate in value by 20% over the year. This has the effect of providing an incentive to keep the local currency moving instead of hoarding and consequently increases turnover.
LETS also differ from normal banking in that interest is neither collected nor paid. Why? A LETS is a non-profit making community institution that is run for the benefit of the local people. There is no need to charge interest. Interest is used to control and regulate the flow of scarce money. However, since LETS units are created simply by the act of trading, there need never be any scarcity of them to regulate in the first place. These credits are as plentiful as people's willingness to share their skills. Consequently, it costs nothing to run a deficit.

One may well ask at this stage, what about the potential problem of bad debt or 'free riders'? This problem is approached through 'moral persuasion' (Rostein & Duncan 1991:425). Members who look as if they may be on their way to becoming offenders are ostracised. In a small community this treatment is harsh. Furthermore, at the time of the transaction both parties have access to information regarding the volume and balance of their partner's account. A negative balance of an unduly long duration may well be viewed with suspicion and the seller is in the position to withdraw from the transaction. In other words, 'excessive' debts are sanctioned not by interest charges but by refraining from doing business with the buyer. Such moral persuasion and the lack of banking secrets do make it more difficult to abuse trust. In this way, it appears that an automatic mechanism is built into the system ensuring trustworthiness which maintains the scheme and which, in turn, leads to expansion.

Reflections: LETSystems and LETS Schemes

At this stage it is useful to highlight and reflect on the distinction between LETSystems which have been, and still are, advocated by Michael Linton, and LETS schemes which
are favoured by Letslink UK. North (1997:19-21) brings attention to, and usefully points out, four major differences. To begin with, Linton’s original design for the LETSystem unconditionally linked the value of the local unit to national currency. On the other hand, LETS schemes have tended to leave the value of the local currency more open. Second, Linton, was explicit in terms of his conviction of attracting businesses to LETS. For this reason a neutral name for the currency – ‘the Green Dollar’ was adopted. LETS schemes, however, tend to adopt a more quirky, local name such as the ‘Bobbin’ (Manchester LETS), the ‘Acorn’ (Totnes LETS) or the ‘Plum’ (Plymouth LETS). Thirdly, ‘LETS Schemes are run by a committee, or core group’, which usually meet on a regular basis, and ‘which sees its role as one of actively fostering the LETS scheme and building up trading’ (North 1997:19). A trustee, on the other hand, runs LETSystems and no meetings are held. Finally, the local aspect is of considerable importance in LETS schemes. As North points out ‘They seek to build stronger local economies and communities, whereas LETSystems are not necessarily locally based. They may serve a community of interest rather than a geographical community’ (1997:20).

The design of Linton’s LETSystem envisages that a local LETS will evolve into a MultiLETS registry. A MultiLETS registry is in essence a non-profit business, which organizes the accounts for several LETSystems. A MultiLETS registry, Linton argues, is more sustainable than a voluntary core group, which he believes, will be unable to keep up with the consequent high levels of economic activity. As a result the LETS core group suffer ‘burn out’ due to the workload involved (North 1997:20).

The difference between a LETSystem and a LETS scheme has been much debated, in particular on the ‘econ-lets’ mailbase email discussion group. In fact it has generated
heated debate. In this study I specifically refer to LETS schemes rather than LETSystems. The majority of LETS in the UK are by Linton’s definition schemes.

Moving From the Economics of LETS to LETS as Community

The above section has detailed the theoretical and practical intricacies of LETS. The focus is explicitly economic. The only other literature available on LETS in the United Kingdom at the start of this study was mainly anecdotal evidence recorded in newspaper reports. Such reports also focused on economic exchange that occurred through LETS involvement. Headlines included “Payment in kind” is replacing the pound’ (Bennett 1993), ‘From tiny Acorns – a way out of recession’ (Holdsworth 1992), ‘Goodbye Ecu, hello Stroud’ (Fewins 1992), ‘The barter economy gains currency’ (Sylvester 1994), ‘Lets take barter a step further’ (Dibben 1991).

Yet, this is not the only objective. In the Letslink UK Draft Constitution that is circulated to all local groups (Letslink UK 1994), two objectives are set out:

- ‘To stimulate the creation of social and economic benefits by and for its members and the people of the locality’; and
- ‘To develop and encourage the experience of community in the locality through the establishment of a local exchange trading system’

Not only are LETS intended to stimulate the economy, they are also to encourage ‘community’. As the first year of this study progressed, more literature became available. A more detailed and critical review of this literature is now provided in order
to give some understanding of the work that has been conducted thus far in the LETS field. It will also make clear how I moved from an economic focus to one of ‘community’.

Guy Dauncey’s *Beyond the crash: the emerging rainbow economy* (1988) presented an insightful discussion of the early Green Dollar System, which can be applied to the workings of LETS in the UK. Included was an uncritical chapter on community-led economic development. This literature provided a useful starting point in that he detailed not just the economic benefits of LETS involvement but also the social advantages. For example he began to link LETS with concepts such as ‘a general broadening of the sense of community’, whereby ‘friendships’ and ‘new relationships’ are created, even if he did so in a very uncritical way (Dauncey 1988:61-62).

Offe and Heinze (1992) explored economic and social phenomena in the ‘grey area’ between commercial market provision and domestic self-supply. They looked at the possibility of labour being organized differently from the way the market does it without loss of efficiency and other features of rationality, and whether the results of useful human activity could be allocated in ways other than through the medium of money. Of particular interest was the chapter on Canada’s Local Employment and Trading System. Offe and Heinze invaluably cite historical precedents for such organized networks, three of which have been drawn upon earlier in this chapter. They concentrate on the problems involved in organizing non-monetary exchange systems on a larger scale than that of occasional exchange between friends, neighbours, relatives or members of a club. They further argue that it is not unrealistic to suppose that such developments towards a non-monetary but exchange-led parallel economy can make a very positive contribution to the solution of many social and economic problems.
characteristic of societies suffering from high unemployment, from much personal
isolation and from a poorly functioning welfare state. The research carried out,
however, was completed in a very early stage of the evolution of LETS and as such
reported optimistic expectations rather than experience.

Thorne’s Masters thesis examined LETS as an economic system. It was re-written
(1996) using Polyani’s concept of ‘disembedding’, conceptualising LETS as a case of
re-embedding (which she describes as the creation of feelings of collective well being).
Interestingly Thorne cautions against LETS being seen ‘...simply as a vehicle for local
economic growth and development’ and argues that the longevity of LETS, and part of
its raison d’être, lies in its being distanced from the mainstream economy. Dobson
(1993) and Lang (1994) explained the workings of LETS in great detail and claimed
that LETS were able to solve economic problems. As such they provided
unsubstantiated argument and description rather than an analysis of the claims they
made.

Seyfang’s (1994) Masters thesis on ‘Diss LETS’ in Norfolk represented the best British
attempt to study the political economy of local currencies. Using Diss LETS18 as a case
study, she uncovered an eclectic combination of theoretical foundations and justified its
relevance to conservative, liberal and socialist/anarchist theorists and environmentalists
alike. Seyfang’s methodology also showed certain refinements. She conducted a social
audit of Diss LETS scheme, compared it to other LETS and measured it against its own
objectives. Interestingly Seyfang (1994:63) found low levels of trade in her study of
Diss LETS, and concluded that:

There were few net economic benefits; the levels of trading were low,
and 'insignificant' compared to cash income or expenditure for all members interviewed. LETS was seen as marginal to economic activity as a whole.

More interestingly she also concluded that there were:

very large social and community benefits, which far outweighed the economic importance of the system for most members...[and the] community strengthening aspects were seen as the most attractive features of Diss LETS to its members..., and it was in this area that the system most successfully fulfilled its objectives (emphasis in original).

However this study still remained limited as the main focus was on political/ideological aspects. As a sociologist it seemed to me that the concept of community cried out for more analysis. While this study provided insights, more detailed work was needed which was obviously beyond the constraints of such a small study.

Similar findings have been made in Britain by Williams (1996 a,b,c,d)\textsuperscript{19}. The four studies of LETS in the UK conducted by Williams focused on LETS and social exclusion issues. The key finding of his studies of Calderdale LETS (1996a), a National Survey of LETS (1996b)\textsuperscript{20}, Totnes LETS (1996) and in a paper entitled 'An Appraisal of Local Exchange and Trading Systems (LETS) in the United Kingdom (1996d), is that LETS are helping the poor and unemployed in terms of their social exclusion, poverty and inability to participate in productive activity. In each of these papers Williams argues that the role of LETS could be extended through alterations in the internal and external operating environment of LETS.

While the studies conducted by Williams provided some data on LETS which was previously unavailable, the knowledge produced was still limited. This was because all four were survey based and provided little depth. They also appeared to report the
potential for LETS rather than what LETS were in practice. Moreover, the response rates were very poor and therefore no claim to representativeness was possible. Claims were made for LETS that were exaggerated in terms of LETS being a solution to social exclusion.

As a sociologist I found more interesting the community-building aspects referred to by Williams. In one survey (1996d) a postal questionnaire was sent to all LETS in the UK. Ninety responded (a 32% response rate). The survey results revealed that 59.3% gave community building as a factor in their rationale for setting up. It also indicated that 73.4% of co-ordinators judge that they are successful at re-building social networks (their community-building objective). In an earlier study of Totnes LETS (1996c) Williams also concluded that ‘Totnes LETS not only provides economic benefits to its members and helps those who are relatively deprived to partially mitigate their circumstances but also appears to have significant community-building impacts’.

Community-building impacts were also found in his study of Manchester LETS (1996b). However, as an economist Williams focused more on social exclusion issues rather than providing an analysis of how community-building occurred.

A study undertaken by Lee (1996) took a more sociological tack, even though it retained a geographical reference point given that Lee was a geographer himself. He describes LETS as ‘economic geographies’ and as such they are more than a simple response to social exclusion. He reminds us that economic geographies are complex social constructs, which are not necessarily reducable to the confines of accumulation. Lee argues that economic activity generated by and conducted through LETS is based upon direct forms of social relations and a local currency which facilitate locally defined systems of value formation and distinctive moral geographies. Lee (1996) also
refers to community and his findings indicate that ‘there is often a set of shared beliefs and prior commitments – a community of philosophy – that serves to draw like-minded people to LETS. They are very much linked to people who think about the environment, vegetarianism, people who think about the humanities.’ (emphasis in original).

Moreover, Lee (1996:1388) asks ‘What motivates conversations in the direction of LETS?’ He answers that ‘Here again (unintended) exclusions occur and shift the trajectory of LETS away from issues of social exclusion. Respondents talked of rebuilding a little community of an effort to start people talking to each other...More ambitious objectives include an attempt to engender empowerment and community spirit which is something...central to a sustainable future by providing people with something to give them identity in a sea of anonymity, a sea of anomie’ (emphasis in original). Again the concept of community is drawn upon which calls for more sociological analysis.

Barnes, North and Walker (1996) investigated the development of LETS activities among low-income communities, the first systematic research of its kind. The general aim was to ‘assess the potential of LETS to meet personal needs, to build community and to restart the local economy, as well as how to overcome the barriers to achieving this’ (1996:1). The research found that it was rare to find LETS established in areas of concentrated unemployment, and therefore looked at the barriers to developing effective LETS in low income communities. At the start of this study I was interested in comparing one LETS in an urban area with one in a rural area. The study by Barnes, North and Walker, however, confirmed my feelings of the limited chance of finding a thriving LETS case study in an urban area.
North (1997) used social movement theory as a tool for an analysis of LETS as a form of political action in his PhD thesis. North put to use ‘Sociological Intervention’ which was designed by Touraine to help militants in a social movement develop their understanding of their historicity in order to identify a pre-eminent social movement (Touraine 1981:150-183). However, and as North himself points out, his methodology may have limited his study. The approach raised ‘failed to give sufficient emphasis to those who joined for non-political reasons. They [a number of Manchester LETS members] did not think there were problems with society as presently organized that needed to be rectified, but wanted a babysitter’ (1997:246; 1998:578). Borrowing Touraine’s model of sociological intervention had the effect of strengthening the voice of the more overtly political member. Chapter Eight of North’s (1997) thesis, however, had more value to me as a sociologist in that it did look at changing conceptions of money, work and community. In a interesting but brief section titled Changing conceptions of community (pp 216-20) he began to touch on how community within LETS is created. As he states:

LETS is an economy built on friendship, connections, trust and co-operation. Community is built through linking economic and social life into what members call “relationship trading” – the opposite of the ethos “nothing personal – it’s just business” (North 1997:216).

Again the study remained limited as the main focus remained on LETS as a social movement, yet it did begin to provide more insights. As a sociologist I was more interested in taking this kind of analysis forward. The process involved in the creation of LETS as community required further investigation.

A more stimulating empirical study became available as my research progressed. Purdue et al. (1997) and O’Doherty et al. (1997) conducted face-to-face interviews
with members from Glastonbury, Bristol, the Forest of Dean and Stroud LETS. They also sent a postal survey to Stroud LETS members and conducted a focus group with members from Avalon LETS in Glastonbury. The research therefore represents a more in-depth study of LETS and its members than had previously been carried out. The methods used provided a more refined analysis of LETS. There are four main reasons for finding O'Doherty et al.'s (1997a, b) analysis stimulating. Firstly, it was an attempt to grapple with LETS as 'community'. I was very aware of the problems of defining 'community'. Interestingly O'Doherty et al. (1997 a, b) try to get round this problem by substituting the term 'milieu' for the term 'community', however, they then go on to use the terms 'community' and 'milieu' interchangeably.

Secondly, the analysis they present moved beyond the purely economic ideology of LETS to argue that LETS are also 'a project for enhancing social solidarity' (Purdue et al. 1997:656). Here Purdue et al. (1997:656) turn to the work of Mauss (1990). In pre-modern societies which lack exchange systems comparable to the modern market, there is a gift economy, 'in which gifts were exchanged as symbols of webs of obligation that link members of the community and distribute honour and status between its members' (Purdue et al. 1997:657). In relation to this, LETS activists, suggest Purdue et al. (1997:657),

share with many communitarians a Durkheimian diagnosis of global anomie. They see the global market not only as sucking money away from local communities, but also breaking the web of social connections between members of a locality, leaving in its wake anomie as well as poverty. Trading on the LETS resembles the gift relations described by Mauss rather than the purely utilitarian exchanges of the global market. Thus the symbolic significance of trading on the LETS outweigh their material economic performance. Trading indicates membership of a version of the local community and confers honour within that milieu. That is, LETS members make claims on each other as members of a community of like-mindedness, in ways that exceed the allowable
expectations defined in the purely abstract terms of the market.

Purdue et al. 's (1997) analysis was also more refined in that they observed the discourse of LETS. They quite rightly point out that LETS discourse substitutes the term 'commitment' for the term 'debt' which is indicative of the gift cycle. As they further note, having 'accepted the gift of a good or service the 'committed' LETS member is obligated to the others'. Debt is put to use to bind the LETS community together, rather than using it as a lever for extracting money from a person in the form of interest. Individuals are thus encouraged to see themselves as 'committed' to the LETS community by their spending, and others are encouraged always to trade with the most 'committed' members (Purdue et al. 1997:657). However, according to Purdue et al. (1997:657) 'trading imbalances take a curious form – surplus is a bigger problem than deficit'.

Finally, Purdue et al. 's (1997:663) paper further stimulates interest in that it concluded that 'The social fabric of everyday life in current society is being radically transformed by globalization processes... Global issues and cultural flows are turned into matters of personal concern, action and aesthetic innovation, using emerging globalized repertoires to reshape local milieux'. Furthermore it suggests that 'LETS are responding to social change affecting patterns of family life and employment, by fostering trust through post-traditional community building'. Could LETS be a response to social and economic change? It is to this that I now turn.
LETTS: A response to social and economic change?

Misztal (1996:200) states that:

A sense of transition or even of the ending of an era is the dominant feeling... The last decades of this century are commonly characterized as being full of ambiguity, disorganization, dissatisfaction with the existing institutions and distrust of the old authorities... Since the end of the 1960s distrust between the citizen and the state has become a dominant feature in many Western countries.

Growing social polarization, increased levels of unemployment, weakening family bonds (Saunders 1995:88), the declining ability of the welfare state to meet demands and growing ethnic, racial and religious diversification of modern societies have also been undermining the social consensus of the 1950s and 1960s (Misztal 1996:201). At the same time, the process of globalization, by reducing the state’s capacity to steer its economy and increasing the mobility of financial and industrial capitals, creates new conditions for framing identities and loyalties (Misztal 1996:200-1).

The awareness of the transitional character of present Western society is widely acknowledged in the social sciences and is labelled in many different ways: some researchers write about 'post-modernity' (Lyotard 1986; Haraway 1997; Harvey 1989, 1996), others about 'post-industrial society' (Bell 1974), others about the 'late modern age' (Giddens 1990, 1991), others about 'reflexive modernization' (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) and yet others about 'global society' (Albrow 1996). Perhaps until more stable patterns emerge which will restore confidence and predictability to our social, political and economic arrangements, 'things once taken for granted will increasingly be subject to complex and difficult negotiations' (Wolfe 1991:468). Much has been written about a collapse of traditional categories around such issues as family, work,
discipline, the decline of industrial and class identities, the increase of culturally specific identities (ethnic, racial, territorial), the weakening of the welfare state and the decline and suppression of national boundaries. This does raise a vital question for modern society: where are we to look for reliable bases for social solidarity, cooperation and consensus?

It has been argued that non-conventional forms of religiosity become more popular during periods of ‘rapid social change’ or ‘cultural unrest’ (Heelas 1996:149). Bryan Wilson, for example, argues that ‘sects proliferate in periods of social unrest’ (1959:8). Johansson (1994:223) also suggests that ‘In times of rapid social and cultural change, when people experience a dissonance between observed reality and the beliefs and values of their culture and the established religions, we find an increased interest in mysticism’. Heelas suggests that there might be some truth to this:

When established orders are disrupted, when people are shaken out of their customs, it is clearly more likely that those affected will be prompted to look for replacements or alternatives. And if indeed rapid change serves to undermine the securities of the established order, it is quite conceivable that – in the absence of other options – people turn within for identity provision’ (Heelas 1996:149).

Cohen (1985:109) speculates as to why communities respond assertively to encroachment upon their boundaries. His first response is that ‘their members feel themselves to be under so severe a threat from some extrinsic source that if they do not speak out now they may be silenced forever’. A second response is ‘because their members recognize their own voices within them, and, because they feel the message of this vocal assemblage, though general, to be informed directly by their own experiences and mentalities’. Finally, ‘because their members find their identities as individuals through their occupancy of the community’s social space: if outsiders
trespass in that space, then its occupants' own sense of self is felt to be debased and defaced'. This sense, according to Cohen:

is always tenuous when the physical and structural boundaries which previously divided the community from the rest of the world are increasingly blurred. It can therefore easily be depicted as under threat: it is a ready means of mobilizing collectivity. Thus one often finds in such communities the prospect of change being regarded ominously, as if change inevitably means loss. A frequent and glib description of what is feared may be lost is "way of life"; part of what is meant is the sense of self' (Cohen 1985:109).

Conclusion

We may then conclude that local currencies are not new, in fact, they have a rich history. Looking at contemporary developments we can locate LETS schemes as part of an evolution from earlier LETSystems that were started in Canada. Yet an examination of the early LETSystems and LETS schemes reveals noteable differences. As detailed, the economic aspects are not the sole objective and trading levels are typically low, a major conclusion of this thesis. Creating community is another objective and empirical research clearly confirmed the importance of this. Thus, while 'community' has been documented as an important motivation for involvement in LETS, of the few who have looked at LETS, none24 have produced a definite answer to the apparent simple question: how does LETS involvement enhance community cohesion and how does this relate to a sense of feeling part of a community? It is to the concept of 'community' that I now turn.
Notes

1 Founder of the United Kingdoms first LETS development agency.
2 I could have used other examples such as the French socialist Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), who attempted not to reorganize work, but to reform the money and credit system; or, Emile Lederer, who in 1933, proposed the creation of small domestic markets for the production and distribution of products of the natural economy, the American Frank Graham also put forward a similar proposal in 1933; or, the utopian socialist Edward Bellamy (1850-1898 who, in the Netherlands, established small production co-operatives; or, the self-help movement of the unemployed in the US during the 1930s; or, the Guernsey experiment (1815-1836, 1914 to the present).
3 According to Woodward (1962:131) Robert Owen made use of this term about 1817 and the term was used in the Co-operative Magazine in 1827 to denote as 'Communonism or Socialists' those who believed that capital should not be held in private hands.
5 The Crisis was started by Owen in April 1832 and is the main source of information on the National Equitable Labour Exchange. The paper was first edited by Owen, then by his son, Robert Dale Owen, and finally by J. E. (Shepherd) Smith.
7 Crisis, 30 June, 27 Oct, 8 & 15 Dec 1832.
8 As Thompson (1963:877) points out, Owenism attracted numbers of philanthropic gentlemen and clergy. Some greatly enriched the movement. Others gave money without which its experiments could not have been undertaken. However, in most of the communities there is the figure of one or more cranky gentlemen, whose inexperience in the practice of any collective unit, and whose utopian experimentalism, drove the Owenite artisans to fury.
9 Thompson (1963:879) notes the revival of messianic movements during this time. The sects apparently were taking on 'peculiar and perverted forms which perhaps require more attention from the psychiatrist than the historian'.
10 This is not necessarily true, for as Offe and Heinze (1992) point out, the retail traders although gaining from a certain increase in turnover directly connected with the issue of the emergency money, the wholesalers whom they obtained their supplies from, and who had greater market power, were not so keen to accept the money. Thus critics of the experiment argued that by accepting the depreciating money the retailers were in effect having to pay a 'hidden tax' on turnover, since they could not really use the money for business transactions.
11 Kitzbuehi, a nearby town followed suit with a similar program. Furthermore a meeting of some 200 Austrian mayors also decided unanimously to follow the Worgl experiment. Prominent people including Daladier of France, visited and were enthusiastic (Offe and Heinze 1992; Weston 1985, 1989, 1991).
12 For a more detailed history see Galbraith (1975); Greco (1994); Douthwaite (1996).
13 TOES is a forum for ‘new economics’ thinkers which runs alongside the G7 Economics summit (Williams 1996d:260).
14 A Letslink survey conducted in 1993 found that 35% of systems do not peg their currency to the pound.
15 The 1993 Letslink survey found that some systems made no charges while some asked for £15 per year. Kingsbridge LETS ask for £12 per year plus 12 Bridges.
16 The Letslink 1993 survey results suggest that local business involvement is low.
17 39 (68%) of the 57 responses to the Letslink survey (1993) were using computers to keep accounts.
18 Established in July 1993 and at the time of the study approaching its 1st anniversary. According to Seyfang Diss LETS was a small scheme with 35 members. It had shown slow but steady growth in membership and trading in its first year.
19 Indeed, and as North (1999:70) points out the overall tone of academic writing on LETS is to conceptualise LETS primarily as a response to financial exclusion (in addition to the work of Williams see also Barnes et al., 1996; North, 1996; Pacione, 1997 and 1999).
20 Although this paper also reported on a survey of Manchester LETS which found that ‘although the poor and unemployed are capitalising on LETS to gain access to work and credit, it is utilised mainly by what can be called the ‘disenfranchised middle-class’. For this reason he argues that for a wider cross-section of the poor and unemployed to become involved change must be made to the internal and external operating environment of LETS.
21 Peter North conducted an ethnographic study of Manchester LETS.
O'Doherty and Purdue along with Durrschmidt and Jowers, worked on this project together whilst writing joint papers on the project. Thus I refer to both O'Doherty et al. and Purdue et al. separately but within the same section. However, for clarification they are referring to the same study.

Where Williams (1996 a,b,c,d) found that economic motives were primary reasons for joining LETS. Purdue et al.'s. (1997) findings were in stark contrast where the most cited reason for joining "was to do with attachment to local community" (O'Doherty 1997:6). This is their reason for moving beyond a solely economic focus.

Although perhaps Purdue et al. (1997) have come closest to this.
CHAPTER TWO: ‘A SENSE OF COMMUNITY’

Introduction

The notion of community is one whose popularity conceals a multiplicity of meanings. The concept of community is widespread - there is ‘care in the community’, ‘community policing’, ‘community architecture’, ‘community development’, ‘community mental health’ and, as Hoggett (1997:3) points out ‘we now even hear of “punishment in the community”’. Further, a growing number of professionals working in both the private and public services now have the term ‘community’ attached to their job description (Hoggett 1997:3). As Day and Murdoch (1993:85) argue “‘community’ is a concept that just will not lie down’.

In the 1960s Margaret Stacey (1969) concluded that the idea of community had become hopelessly debased as a tool of social analysis. Yet, the way in which new social groups have begun to appropriate the term ‘community’ and new cultural meanings have gathered around it, cannot be doubted even if attachment to a sense of place has declined. For example gays, and others talking about gays most notably the media, now speak of the ‘gay community’. Christians speak of ‘communities of faith’, while the new generation of travellers call for the ‘right to community’ and, very pertinent to this thesis, Hoggett (1997:3) points out that ‘activists engaged in local non-monetary trading schemes speak of the creation of a “LETS community”’. Consequently, if the concept of community has any value in contemporary society, it must refer to something ‘far more differentiated than the notion of a Gemeinschaft community based upon the ties of blood and soil that Toennies first introduced into the lexicon of the social sciences towards the end of the century’ (Hoggett 1997:4).
In this chapter I will begin by establishing some of the terrain from which contemporary usages of the term have sprung. I will do this by starting with Toennies’ account of social change. I then consider the ‘loss of community’ thesis. Yet, Hoggett (1997:7) suggests that one of the distinctive features ‘towards which we seem to be heading may be the decoupling of the sense of community from the sense of place’. I therefore look at literature linking culture and ‘symbolic community’. More recent sociological writing has referred to ‘reflexive community’ (Lash 1994). The final section of this chapter is therefore devoted to this notion. This will provide a way in to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which is drawn upon in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

The Legacy of Classical Sociology

According to Elias (1974), the origin of the sociological concept of ‘community’ is to be found in Toennies (1887) notion of ‘Gemeinschaft’. The onset of modernity is addressed here in terms of a change in the nature of human associations from Gemeinschaft (community) to Gesellschaft (society). According to Toennies, a Gemeinschaft community is in many ways like an extended family group. ‘The closeness and mutual dependence of family life involve strongly shared sentiments based on natural instincts and emotions reinforced through shared activities and experience’ (Francis 1987:7 cited in Misztal 1996:39). The unity of sentiment which characterizes Gemeinschaft and which flows from the ‘natural’ bonds of common kinship (a unity of blood), common neighbourhood (a unity of place) and shared religious faith (a unity of belief) is disrupted by the growth of industrial capitalism and
puts in its place a precarious unity based on monetary calculation and the resolute pursuit of self-interest through market transactions. The possibility of a relation in the Gesellschaft assumes no more than a multitude of mere persons who are capable of delivering something and consequently of promising something. In Gesellschaft every person strives for that which is to his or her own advantage and affirms the actions of others only insofar as and as long as they can further his or her interest. In all spheres of Gesellschaft, individual choice and decision are perceived to be more important than shared sentiments and obligations (Misztal 1996:39).

It thus appears that ‘...relationships based on trust can only exist in Gemeinschaft’ (Misztal 1996:39). Relationships based on trust and trustworthy people are only natural in community. They are the result of natural will, based on natural instincts and emotions. Therefore, ‘trust cannot be artificially created; it is an automatic by-product of community social and economic conditions’ (Misztal 1996:39). More specifically, it is community integration, strengthened and intensified by moral and religious values. This has the effect of facilitating trust relationships, which in turn stimulate further community cohesion. By way of contrast, the anxious, calculating and self-interested modern person cannot be trusted, and does not trust others, since to fulfil their needs each person requires the possessions of others, and this leads to manipulation and instrumentality (Misztal 1996:39-40).

Durkheim shared Toennies’s interest in the profound social changes brought about by the industrial revolution. Durkheim counterposed mechanical and organic forms of solidarity, seeing these two forms of social bonding as characteristic of traditional and modern conditions within western European societies (Hoggett 1997:4). Despite obvious similarities, Durkheim and Toennies interpreted modernity somewhat
differently. For Toennies modern *Gesellschaft* amounts to the loss of social solidarity - the inevitable result of the gradual erosion of ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ bonds of the rural past, leaving only the ‘artificial’ and ‘mechanical’ ties of the present. Durkheim reversed the language used by Toennies to make this very point. Modern society he labelled ‘organic’, suggesting that today’s world is no less natural than before, while he described traditional societies as ‘mechanical’, because of their regimentation. Thus according to Durkheim modernity meant not so much a loss of community as a change in the basis of community - from bonds of likeness (kinship and community) to ties of interdependence (the forced division of labour). Durkheim’s account is both more complex and more positive than that of Toennies. While Toennies longed for ‘a better world which was lost’ (Elias 1974:xiii), Durkheim at that time was still confident about the value of progress in the society he perceived about him. Elias makes a very notable point:

> Ever since, the use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages. (Elias 1974:xiii)

However, and as pointed out by Hoggett (1997:5), Elias does overlook one very interesting point:

Toennies, despite his romanticism, provided a far sharper critique of exchange relationships than Durkheim did. Whereas for Durkheim the development of organic solidarity is linked to the division of labour and industrialization, for Toennies *Gesellschaft* was virtually synonymous with capitalist society rather than industrial society per se. The target of Toennies’ critique is unequal exchange, a concept almost entirely absent in Durkheim’s description of the [forced] division of labour’ (Hoggett 1997:5)

thus encouraging the glossing over of crucial social divisions (Lash 1993:193).
The contrast between Toennies' and Durkheim's typology is according to Elias (1974:xii) 'symptomatic of one of the main sources of confusion in sociology – to the fusion of statements about structures and statements about ideals in sociological theories'. Yet these analyses have been enormously influential in shaping twentieth century thinking about modern forms of sociation. They provide a useful starting point, which firmly locates the concept of community within the discourse of modernity.

**Withering Community?**

Sociological and social historical interest in community studies is well established. Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies and Weber - the nineteenth-century intellectual founders of sociology - were all interested in the ways in which the development of industrial capitalist societies transformed the basis of social relationships. The theories they presented, however, were never as simple as ‘modernity destroys community’. Yet for a brief period, in the 1950s and 1960s, this death of community thesis became something of an orthodoxy. As Jamieson notes:

> In this orthodoxy, a sense of belonging to, and being one with, the people of a particular locality, united by ties of neighbourliness, kinship and friendship, was an experience of a relatively homogenous, pre-modern or traditional society, which was incompatible with complex modern society, except in remote rural or highly traditional backwaters. (1998:80)

Strong community ties were judged irreconcilable with the demands of geographic and social mobility combined with the inclination towards private family-based personal life. Conservative rhetoric also picked up on the death of community thesis; a rosy past
where everybody helped and was friendly to everybody else was contrasted with an unpleasant selfish present. Few scholars now subscribe to this simple ‘bad present’ versus ‘good past’ view of the world. The ‘loss of community’ thesis, is only sustainable ‘if selective, romanticised views of the past are adopted’ (Crow and Allan 1994:3). Yet ‘this is not to suggest that nothing has changed in the field of community relations, however, and it is as mistaken to portray contemporary community life uncritically as it is to romanticise the past’ (Crow and Allan 1994:3).

Diligent historical research in North America and Europe has unfolded segments of this account of progressive community decline, finding threads spun from the wrong premises (see Jamieson 1996; Crow and Allan 1994; Anderson 1980; Bulmer 1987; Finch 1989; Fischer 1991). In part, the error of the ‘modernity destroys community’ version of social change stems from a distorted representation of the communities of the past. For example it has been clearly established that geographical mobility was a feature of pre-industrial life (Anderson 1994:68). Hence, the disruption of communities through work-led migration is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. Although modern forms of transport and communication obviously make work-led migration much easier now, maintaining ties over distance was a problem not absent from former times. Social historians have also demonstrated that extended kinship ties were not as widespread or significant in preindustrial Europe as has generally been believed (see for example Anderson 1994; Wall 1983; Fischer 1977).

It is also now clear that there has never been an idyllic time in which extended families and friendly neighbours typically looked after each other and overflowed with mutual kindness. For as Jamieson (1996:81) points out ‘Brutalized, uncaring, suspicious and indifferent relationships were a feature of the past as well as the present and
circumstances of necessity sometimes worked against looking after others'. For example, Anderson (1980, 1994) has documented how the old were not more likely to be cared for by kin in the past. In the nineteenth century many elderly people spent their last days in institutions. Finch (1989) also makes clear that a sense of obligation to others has always been contingent on economic circumstances and quality of relationships (Jamieson 1998:81).

The assumption made by Toennies that 'intimacy and a sense of security have been lost in the transition to modernity' and that the emotional richness of social relations in the past has been replaced by a colder, more instrumental orientation to life, therefore almost certainly exaggerates the degree of intimacy in the past. Clearly the industrial revolution did spark off a major upheaval in people's lives. However, the 'intimacy and security of the pre-industrial world was never as strong as writers like Toennies seemed to assume' (Saunders 1995:87).

Further criticisms of Toennies' typology have been put forward. For example it has been pointed out that he stresses the negative aspects of modern individualism and neglects its positive features (Saunders 1995:84). It is certainly true 'that some features of those institutions which traditionally fostered a sense of identity and belonging - family, church and village community - have been weakened' (Saunders 1995:84), and that 'modern capitalism has created conditions of insecurity at the same time as it disrupts old social arrangements' (Saunders 1995:85). For example, one only has to look at unemployment rates. Nor, according to Saunders, are feelings of insecurity limited to problems of unemployment and redundancy. The experience of constant change in the modern world is almost unquestionably irreconcilable with any strong feeling of permanent order or a firm sense of belonging, for it disturbs established
patterns of sociability. 'Where once our lives were grounded in familiar routines based upon the centrality of kinship and ties to natal localities, we are today forced to place our trust in strangers with whom we never directly interact' (Giddens 1989 cited in Saunders 1995:85). Because modern social life has been 'stretched' over space and time (Giddens 1984), we are dependent upon the actions of an abundance of faceless people scattered all over the world rather than upon the conduct of those who are physically and emotionally near to us. For this reason, Saunders argues,

we are obliged to place our trust in those we do not know, and this fundamental change in the nature of our experience of trust, security, risk and danger places a huge existential question mark at the centre of our everyday lives. The old certainties have withered away and the future is always to some degree threatening. Ontological security in the modern world is inherently fragile' (Saunders 1995:85).

However, and as Saunders (1995:86) further points out, there 'is another side to all this. Insecurity is the price we pay for increased personal freedoms'. Even if it could be said that some degree of

intimacy and a sense of belonging have declined as compared with the period before the onset of industrial capitalism, this has enabled individuals to expand the scope of their lives, to explore different facets of their personalities and to develop new faculties and capacities which would in earlier times have remained latent, stifled and unfulfilled' (Saunders 1995:86).

The power of the concept of community to signify a world of more congenial social relations which had passed, can be seen in the tradition of 'community studies', which emerged during the 1950s and 1960s in Britain. During this time, the focal point of many of the community studies was on homogeneous working-class communities, assuming that they represented an enduring way of life. As Jamieson (1998:81) points out 'These communities were often centred around particular heavy industries in
localities where local employers hired a relatively undifferentiated (in terms of pay and conditions) male workforce long enough to support a stable population of locally housed workers and their families over two or more generations’. Representations of ‘traditional’ working-class communities have therefore romanticised a past in which people were more willing to help each other. Ethnographic studies during this time — although rich in detail — were often deeply flawed. The communities which were revealed were strangely undifferentiated and non-conflictual and somehow or another separate from any wider social context of social change or structured inequality (Crow and Allan 1994:13-14; Hoggett 1997:5). In essence these community studies were often empirically rich but theoretically impotent. Elias (1974:ix) broached this problem when he wrote that ‘the theoretical aspects of community studies are less advanced than the empirical work in that field’ (cited in Crow and Allan 1994:12). Abrams (1978:12) identified the problem more explicitly - ‘the problem of community is the coexistence of a body of theory which constantly predicts the collapse of community and a body of empirical studies which finds community alive and well’ (cited in Crow and Allan 1994:14). As Crow and Allan (1994:15) suggest for all their worth, classical theoretical works like Toennies ‘posed great difficulties when it came to operationalizing concepts such as *gemeinschaft* in the context of modern societies’ (emphasis in original).

By the late 1960s the time had arrived for the concept of community to be killed off. Stacey (1969) delivered the finishing blow in her article ‘The myth of community studies’. Stacey’s view was that ‘as a concept “community” is not useful for serious sociological analysis’ (1969:134). This view proved an influential one. Stacey argued that the concept of community remained tied to ‘the obstinate, but still mythical, remnants of the romantic model’. Moreover, the concept had also taken on two more modern meanings: the first referred to social relations within a geographical area, the
second to the sense of belonging to a group which community is said to entail. Neither of these meanings, she argued, upon examination, was analytically valid.

Stacey demonstrated how sociologists arguing in favour of either of these meanings were unable to provide any reliable definition of either 'the defined geographical area' which was appropriate to the term 'community' or of the boundaries of the group within which the sense of community was said to belong. Instead Stacey substituted for the concept of community the term 'local social system'. Consequently, during the 1970s little empirical community research was undertaken. The community studies genre had gone out of fashion (Eldridge 1980). However, the concept of community continued to receive a good deal of critical attention (see Crow and Allan 1994:15-18). Those who did try to revive it, for example Seabrook (1984), were generally regarded as 'polemically inspired romanticists' (Hoggett 1997:6).

While Stacey's idea of local social systems had little direct impact upon the sociological community in the UK (Hoggett 1997:6), in the 1980s the concept of 'locality' as a geographical area intensely shaped by its role in the spatial division of labour became a key term. As Crow and Allan (1994:17) note 'a wealth of locality studies were produced providing a rich analysis of the local impact of and responses to economic restructuring' (see for example, Bagguley et al. 1990; Cooke 1989; Dickens 1988; Harloe et al. 1990). However, placing emphasis on the spatial impact of restructuring 'conceals from view the possibility that the meanings people ascribe to places where they live [which] can often not be simply read off from wider economic and social forces' (Hoggett 1997:6). "Community" is still very much part of contemporary expression, including the way in which the respondents of locality studies express themselves, and in this light the summary dismissal of community

The death of community studies in the decade and a half following Stacey’s paper also partly stemmed from the rise of structuralist theories within the social sciences (Hoggett 1997:6). Yet as Anderson (1991) argues, the imaginary dimension of community is as important as its structural elements. At the present time there are signs that the idea of community is once more making a comeback. As Hoggett (1997:6) notes:

A new generation of sociological and geographical researchers appear to have registered the fact that outside of the seminar room the idea of community appears to remain alive and well and people, misguided or not, continue to refer to it either as some thing they live in, have lost, have just constructed, find oppressive, use as the basis for struggle, and so on.

Elias, in his Foreword to Bell and Newby’s (1974:xiv-xv) collection of essays The sociology of community, asks if it is possible ‘to move beyond a condition of community research in which untested conventions and beliefs determine what one perceives as significant’. Hoggett (1997:7) responds that ‘It seems that this question can be as appropriately applied to those who have persisted in the belief that “community” has no conceptual significance as it can be to those whose analysis of community has been influenced by their implicit assumption of its value’.

Unfortunately the rebound from the possibility of guilt by association with nostalgic conservatism has for too long prevented a serious encounter with community as a code word ‘for specific structures of human bonding whose common features change in characteristic manner according to the stage of development of society’ (Elias 1974:xv). This definition is particularly pertinent given that, and as detailed in the
introduction, new social groups have begun to appropriate the term community and cultural meanings have gathered around it. As Hoggett (1997:7) notes 'one of the distinctive features of the society towards which we seem to be heading may be the decoupling of the sense of community from the sense of place'.

The recent development of cultural studies has played an important role in opening out the conceptual space within which non-place forms of community can be understood. Cultural studies literature provides one particularly productive attempt at understanding community and collectivity today. This literature has been invaluable in understanding social change. For example Stuart Hall has provided necessary tools for an analysis of the declining significance of social class, the increased significance of the cultural in comparison with social factors, and the increased importance of leisure in comparison with the sphere of production (Lash 1994:146).

The work of Anthony Cohen (1985) is also useful. Cohen argues that communities are best understood as communities of meaning in which 'community' plays a crucial symbolic role in generating and sustaining people's sense of belonging. Cohen (1985:118) argues that 'the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically making it a resource and a repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity'.

The starting point for Cohen is that 'community' encompasses notions of similarity and difference, 'us' and 'them'. This focuses attention on the boundary, which is where the sense of belonging becomes most apparent:

The sense of difference...lies at the heart of people's awareness of their culture and, indeed, makes it appropriate for ethnographers to designate
as 'cultures' such arenas of distinctiveness...people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries (Cohen 1982:2-3).

Collective social forms, such as 'cultures', are thus produced by the local sense of difference at the boundary. The boundaries of communities help people to identify those with whom similarities are shared and those who are different.

But Cohen does not stop there, he further argues that while community membership means sharing with other community members a 'similar sense of things', it does not entail a local consensus of values or conformity of behaviour. 'Community', for example covers a range of meanings and means different things to different community members (Jenkins 1996:107). Differences of opinion among and between members of the same community are normal, indeed necessary. As Jenkins (1996:108) points out 'They are concealed by the appearance of agreement and convergence generated by shared communal symbols, and participation in a common symbolic discourse'. In effect this constructs and emphasises the boundary between members and non-members. Thus members can present a consistent face to the outside world.

But for Cohen, 'community' is not material or practical in the way that identity is generated in interaction, neither is 'community' a 'structural' phenomenon. For Cohen it is definitively cultural, and as such, mental or cognitive:

Culture – the community as experienced by its members – does not consist in social structure or in 'the doing' of social behaviour. It inheres, rather, in 'the thinking' about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural construct (Cohen 1985:98).

The emphasis on community as a mental construct is a major problem in Cohen's work. The contrast between 'thinking' and 'doing' which runs through his analysis is
problematic (Jenkins 1981; 1996:109). As Jenkins (1996:109) argues 'It is in and out of what people do that a shared sense of things and a shared symbolic universe emerge. It is in talking together about “community” which is, after all, a public doing – that its symbolic value is produced and reproduced' (emphasis in original). This is where the analysis put forward by Scott Lash who draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu is more useful. It is in the shared social rituals and social practices, that people reflexively commit themselves to, that all the characteristics of community are to be found. The meaning is already there inscribed in the practices. In other words, it is in the ‘doing’ of community rather than in the ‘thinking’ about community. The only possible way forward therefore ‘is to begin with the self that is already situated in a matrix of background practices’ (Lash 1994:153). By linking culture and community, contemporary sociology has started the process of revealing the concealed or secret terrain of ‘elective groups’ and ‘intentional communities’, which seems now to be a feature of contemporary life. So what does Scott Lash mean when he talks of ‘reflexive community’?

From Classical Sociology to Reflexive Community

‘Reflexivity’, as ‘community’, remains a contested concept within contemporary social science (Welch n.d.:5), which raises a number of questions. Why is the term ‘reflexive being used? How has it been used? What according to Lash is a ‘reflexive’ community’? These three questions form the basis of this section. The answers provide an introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu whom Lash draws upon for his analysis of ‘reflexive community’ in late modernity, and thus provide a stepping stone into the following chapter.
Lash (1994:110) argues that the crucial elements of a ‘turn-of-the-twenty-first-century
critical theory can be found in the framework of “reflexive modernity”...’. He develops
the theory of reflexive modernity in three ways. First, he argues that reflexive
modernization is a theory of the ever-increasing powers of social actors in regard to
structure. The main point here is that the receding social structures are ‘being largely
displaced instead by information and communication structures’ (Lash 1994:111
emphasis in original). Second he draws attention to the aesthetic dimension of
reflexivity rather than the cognitive dimension highlighted by Beck and Giddens
(1994). Thirdly, he argues that ‘the theory of reflexive modernization is a very ‘strong
programme’ of individualization. In the third part of his chapter ‘Reflexivity and its
Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community’, he ‘transforms the concept of aesthetic
reflexivity into a more hermeneutic direction in an attempt to throw some light on the
shifting ontological foundations of [the] recurrent phenomenon of community in late
modernity’ (Lash 1994:111 emphasis in original). It is this third section which is
particularly pertinent to this thesis. But why ‘reflexive modernity’?

Lash (1994:112) argues that the notion of reflexive modernity is a ‘creative departure
from the seemingly endless debates between modernists and postmodernists’. On the
one hand modernist social theory has been reproached ‘for presupposing a utopian
“metanarrative” of social change’, while on the other, ‘postmodern analysts such as
Foucault have counterposed what seems to be a dystopic evolutionism’. Lash maintains
that the ‘idea of reflexive modernity seems to open up a third space, a fully different
and more open-ended scenario’. It points to the possibility ‘of a new twist to the
Enlightenment’s dialectic’ (Lash 1994:112).

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Lash follows both Beck's and Giddens' analyses of reflexive modernization, which are based on a three-stage conception of social change (Lash 1994:113). In this way, all three writers (albeit in slightly different ways), move away from a straightforward and dichotomous juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, so dear to the hearts of the giants - Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Toennies - of classical sociological theory. The three-stage conception of social change moves from traditional to (simple) modernity to reflexive modernity. According to this version, simple modernization is only partially modern. Reflexive modernity comes after simple modernity. In other words, 'traditional society here corresponds to Gemeinschaft; simple modernity to Gesellschaft; and its successor to a Gesellschaft that has become fully reflexive' (Lash 1994:114). The motor of social change in this process is individualization. In this context Gesellschaft or simple modernity is modern in the sense that individualization has largely broken down the old traditional structures - extended family, church, village community - of the Gemeinschaft. Yet it is not fully modern because the individualization process has only gone part way and a new set of gesellschaftlich structures - trade unions, welfare state, government bureaucracy, formalized Taylorist shopfloor rules, class itself as a structure - has taken the place of traditional structures. Full modernization takes place only when further individualization also sets agency free from even these (simply) modern social structures' (Lash 1994:114).

Lash draws attention to the very different nature of traditional and simply modern social structures. According to Lash (1994:114) 'both traditional and modern social structures 'presuppose a not fully developed individualization'. However, the kind of structures they presuppose is immensely different. Traditional societies 'presuppose communal structures', whereas 'simply modern societies presuppose collective structures' (Lash 1994:114). These latter collective structures take for granted that:
communal ties are already broken down, and the ‘We’ has become a set of abstract, atomized individuals. Thus social class, as Toennies emphasized, was not *gemeinschaftlich* but *gesellschaftlich*. It was a collectivity, which already presupposed facelessness, already presupposed the impersonality of social relations. If communities presume shared *meanings*, then collectivities presume merely shared *interests* (Lash 1994:114).

The point that Lash is trying to make is that in the reflexive phase of modernity, further individualization has liberated individuals from the ‘collective and abstract structures such as class, nation, the nuclear family and unconditional belief in the validity of science’ (Lash 1994:115). Consequently reflexive modernity is achieved only ‘with the crisis of the nuclear family and the concomitant self-organization of life narratives; with the decline of influence on agents of class structures - in voting behaviour, consumption patterns, trade union membership; with the displacement of rule-bound production through flexibility at work; with the new ecological distrust and critique of institutionalized science’ (Lash 1994:115). But, what exactly is meant by reflexivity?

According to Lash there are two kinds of ’reflexivity’. On the one hand, he refers to *Structural* reflexivity ‘in which the agency, set free from the constraints of social structure, then reflects on the ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ of such structure; reflects on agency’s social conditions of existence’ (Lash 1994:115). *Self*-reflexivity, on the other hand, is where agency reflects on itself. Here previous ‘heteronomous monitoring of agents is displaced by self monitoring’ (Lash 1994:116).

So how are ‘new contemporary communities’ reflexive? Firstly, they are so ‘in the sense that members of the new communities are typically quite aware of the symbols central to the creation of the new identities’, and secondly they are so ‘in that
membership is a matter of choice and entails risk on the level of identity'. Traditional Gemeinschaft, Lash quite rightly points out, was not chosen. The new communities are therefore present as alternatives. ‘Aesthetic reflexivity is now presented as the basis of such post-traditional Gemeinschaft’ (Lash 1993:206 emphasis in original).

Hence, Lash (1994:161) argues that communities are reflexive for a number of reasons. First, ‘one is not born or “thrown”, but “throws oneself” into them; second, they may be widely stretched over “abstract” space, and also perhaps over time; third, they consciously pose themselves the problem of their own creation, and constant re-invention far more than do traditional communities; fourth, their tools and products tend to be not material ones but abstract and cultural’.

Lash asks, what is the meaning in contemporary reflexive communities? He answers that we should ‘not so much ask the question of the creation of meaning but look for the meaning that is already there...The point is that perhaps in various subcultures, in various practices that we reflectively commit ourselves to, the meaning is already there, already inscribed in the practices’ (Lash 1994:163). This is interesting in term of LETS involvement. What is the meaning of LETS to its members and how is this inscribed in the actual practice of LETS?

Lash argues that ‘Community must in a very fundamental sense be in a “world”, or “worlded” (Lash 1994:157). Communal knowledge is hermeneutic knowledge, and this kind of knowledge is only possible ‘when the knower is in the same world as and “dwells among” the things and other human beings whose truth she seeks’ (Lash 1994:157). Again this is interesting and offers some direction in terms of research
methods. Community is rooted in shared meanings and routine background practices, which are guided not by rules but by schemata, by Sitten, by habit.

Everyday activities in the 'we' are about the routine achievement of meaning: about the production of substantive goods, and guided by an understanding of more generally what is regarded as substantively good by that community. The substantively good is not encountered by communal beings as an 'imperative', divorced from the mundane and the everyday. It is instead already present in the world of meanings and practices into which human beings are thrown when they become part of the 'we'. The meanings and practices incorporating the substantive good are learnt, but then become unconscious as if inscribed on the body' (Lash 1994:157).

'Reflexive community' can be instructively understood with regard to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Time after time Lash returns to Bourdieu. Rather than attempting to derive the 'we' from the 'I' as post-modernists do, Lash argues that we should rather 'begin with the self that is already situated in a matrix of background practices' (Lash 1994:153). It is to Bourdieu that I now turn.

Notes

1 Although one must remember that there is a distinction between a tool of social analysis and a piece of lay discourse.
2 Although there was always a distinction between 'geographical' and 'interest communities'.
3 Toennies argued that social relations are the products of human will - he identified two types. Natural will (Wesenwill) is the expression of instinctual needs, habit, conviction or inclination. Rational will (Kurwille) involves instrumental rationality in the selection of means ends. Whereas natural will is organic and real, rational will is conceptual and artificial. These forms of will correspond to the distinction between community and association, since communal life is the expression of natural will and associational life is a consequence of rational will (Abercrombie et al. 1988:254).
4 Lash here understands 'structure' in Giddens' sense of 'rules and resources'.
CHAPTER THREE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF BOURDIEU

Introduction

One of the advantages of Pierre Bourdieu’s work is that it moves away from fixed vertical models of the social structure. Bourdieu positions social groups in a highly complex multi-dimensional space rather than on a linear scale. His theoretical framework incorporates discussion of four categories of capital: cultural, economic, social and symbolic. Moving beyond economic capital gave me a way of handling and organising the data I had collected without imposing a pre-determined model of the social structure. This allowed me to describe the character of commitments that tie people in differing degrees to a specific social environment.

Bourdieu’s main focus is on the visible world of practice. Granted, this is not particularly new. Social action, everyday life and social behaviour have always been the staple diet of sociology. Where Bourdieu appeared to differ was in his attempt to ‘construct a theoretical model of social practice, to do more than simply take what people do in their daily lives for granted, and to do so without losing sight of the wider patterns of social life’ (Jenkins 1992:68).

Moreover, Bourdieu’s work is of relevance to this thesis because of his ever-present reflection ‘upon the effects which doing research in specific ways and contexts have on the theorised products of the research process’ (Jenkins 1992:176). As May points out:

...a failure to understand the forces which act upon the process of social research and the conditions under which it is enacted, leads to a limited understanding of its place and value in social life. (May 1998:160)
This is a particular strength in Bourdieu's work and for this reason, not only is he 'stimulating', he is also 'good to think with' (Jenkins 1992:176).

**Bourdieu and the Forms of Capital**

A 'field' in Bourdieu's terms, is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources, or stakes, and access to them:

> I define a field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation...in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions... (Waquant 1989:39).

As Jenkins (1992) explains, fields are defined by the resources which are at stake, such as cultural goods (life-style), housing, intellectual distinction (education), employment, land, power (politics), social class, prestige etc. 'A field can therefore be seen as a structured space of positions, in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources, or "capital"' (Thompson 1991:14). These resources, or forms of capital, can be grouped into four main categories: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital. These different forms of capital offered valuable insights for this LETS study and emerged as key concepts.

In an article entitled 'The Forms of Capital' (1986), Bourdieu explains the interconnection between the various forms of capital. Economic capital is immediately
and directly convertible into money, and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights. Cultural capital, under certain conditions, may be converted into economic capital. This is most obviously institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. Social capital is largely made up of social obligations, or ‘connections’, and is therefore closely linked with symbolic capital. Social capital, under certain conditions, is convertible into economic capital, and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu 1986:243).

The existence and functioning of a field is dependent upon a belief on the part of participants in the legitimacy and value of the capital which is at stake in the field.

Thus, one of the most important properties of fields is the way in which they allow one form of capital to be converted into another - for example, in the way that particular educational qualifications can be converted into lucrative jobs (Thompson 1991:14). Or, in the case of LETS the way in which social, cultural and symbolic capital can be turned into an ‘alternative’ form of economic capital (or vice versa).

Bourdieu writes at length about what he calls cultural capital or knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education, and allows its owner to achieve social status. Cultural capital is the lynchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people’s tastes are predominantly a marker of class. For instance, Thornton (1995:10) points out that ‘in Britain, accent has long been a key indicator of cultural capital, and university degrees have long been cultural capital in institutionalized form’. Cultural capital differs from economic capital. High levels of income and property often correlate with high levels of cultural capital; however, the two can also conflict. As Thornton (1995:10 emphasis in original) further suggests ‘Comments about the “nouveau riche” or the “flash” expose the possible
frictions between those rich in cultural capital (like artists or academics) and those rich in economic capital but less affluent in cultural capital (like business executives and professional football players).

One of the many advantages of Bourdieu’s project is that it moves away from fixed vertical models of the social structure. Bourdieu positions social groups in a highly complex multi-dimensional space rather than on a linear scale. His theoretical framework incorporates ‘discussion of a third category - social capital - which stems not so much from what you know as who you know (and who knows you)’ (Thornton 1995:10 emphasis in original), in other words, the various kinds of valued relations with significant others. Connections in the form of friends, relations, associates and acquaintances can all bestow status. As Thornton (1995:11) further notes ‘The aristocracy has always privileged social over other forms of capital. So too have many private members’ clubs and old boys’ networks’. The notion of social capital is also useful in explaining the ‘criteria of acceptability (social competence, whether or not someone’s “face fits”)’ in LETS recruitment (Jenkins 1992:121).

A fourth category is that of symbolic capital. This is interesting in terms of the glue that hold a LETS together. By this Bourdieu is referring to accumulated social prestige or honour. The accumulation of social capital involves the ‘acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability that are easily converted into political positions as a local or national notable’ (Bourdieu 1984:291 emphasis in original). In sociology, honour has been understood mainly through a Weberian perspective, which assumes that it is the characteristic of specific groups - that is status groups. Honour comes with membership of these specific groups, which have the potential for social control based on the ability of the membership to withdraw
recognition from disobedient individuals and to remove their special honour. For Bourdieu, honour as symbolic capital, ‘is always credit in the widest sense of the word, i.e. a sort of advance which the group alone can grant to those who give it the best material and symbolic guarantees, it can be seen that the exhibition of capital is one of the mechanisms which make capital go to capital’ (Bourdieu 1977:181 emphasis in original).

In addition to these four major forms of capital - cultural, economic, social and symbolic - Bourdieu details many subcategories of capital which operate within particular fields such as ‘linguistic’, ‘academic’, ‘intellectual’, ‘information’ and ‘artistic’ capital. One characteristic that unifies these forms of capital is that they are all at play within Bourdieu’s own field, within his social world of players with high volumes of institutionalized cultural capital. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Bourdieu and Reflexivity

Thus far I have concentrated on the different forms of capital, which operate within particular fields. Equally significant in Bourdieu’s approach is the reflexive rigour with which he approaches social theory (Jenkins 1992). Loic Wacquant remarks

For Bourdieu, the sociology of intellectuals is not one speciality among others but an indispensable component of the sociological method…This points to the single most distinctive feature of Bourdieu’s social theory, namely, its obsessive insistence on reflexivity’ (1998:225 emphasis in original).
Bourdieu's analysis rests upon 'a self analysis of the sociologist as cultural producer and a reflection on the sociohistorical conditions of possibility of a science of society' (Wacquant 1989:36).

Bourdieu is of course not the first to use the idea of reflexivity in sociology. He is being neither radical nor original. As Jenkins (1992:59) notes 'The last twenty years have witnessed an increasingly sophisticated debate within sociology and anthropology about how it is possible to understand the social world and the role and importance of reflexivity in doing so'. Reflexivity has been a major concern for qualitative researchers in their anxiety to produce 'valid' and 'reliable' research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, Punch 1998:258) and reduce, if not eradicate, the effects of personal and procedural bias. The realization that the values of the researcher cannot be eradicated and that the positivistic ideals of a value free social science cannot be achieved resulted in the notion of a reflexive sociology (Gouldner 1970). This required that the researcher's experience of the world be made explicit.

Insofar as social reality is seen as contingent in part on the effort, the character, and the position of the knower, the search for knowledge about social worlds is also contingent upon the knower's self-awareness. To know others he cannot simply study them, but must also listen to and confront himself (sic). (Gouldner 1970:493)

However, and as Linstead (1994:1325) points out, 'As laudable a pursuit as self-knowledge might be it nevertheless fails to improve the quality of our social knowledge'. According to Linstead there are three reasons for this. First because the 'confessional' aspect creates a debatable sense of trust. 'If a person is honest about their failings we might trust them, they may have reformed; if they avoid imparting information, or they lie, their work may be considered invalid'. Second because '...
form of self-declaration can only be partial, as complete self-knowledge is unattainable'. Third and most significantly, ‘the notion of “reflexive” sociology...implicitly follows the positivist line in treating the observer as passive, and social life as an object, even though admitting technical inadequacy’ (1994:1325).

‘Bias’ is an inherent phenomenon of human perception. However, the methods of ‘reflexive sociology’ impel us to behave as though bias ceases to be a concern for those evaluating the research. Reflexive sociology assumes that a positivistic style of evaluation is possible. As Barnaby (1997:23) points out ‘There is therefore an internal conflict; whilst on the one hand reflexive techniques acknowledge individual subjectivity on the other they seek to deny it by conforming to the criteria of positivistic science. This is not to argue that the researcher should ignore the implications of the inter-subjective nature of the research process, but that personal disclosure should not be presented as a “confession” merely to gain confidence and give a less partial view’ (Barnaby 1997:23). Nor should the presentation of a ‘confession’ be used as an attempt to underestimate bias, or to counter criticisms of the suitability or unreliability of a research instrument. Rather it should be presented as ‘a phenomenology of the possible origins of the researcher’s interest’ (Linstead 1994:1336; Barnaby 1997:23). However, as Moi (1985:44) has argued, we are not able to ‘fully grasp our own “horizon” of understanding: there will always be unstated blindspots, fundamental presuppositions and “pre-understandings” of which we are unaware’. Furthermore, the notion of psychoanalysis informs us that the most powerful motivations on our psyche often turn out to be those we have most deeply repressed. It is therefore difficult to believe that we can ever be fully aware of our own perspective. The prejudices one is able to formulate consciously are precisely for that reason likely to be the least important ones (Moi 1985:44 emphasis in original).
So reflexivity refers to the need continually to turn the instruments of social science back upon the sociologist in an effort better to control the distortions introduced in the construction of the object. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Wacquant 1998) there are three factors involved here. The first and most obvious is the personal identity of the researcher: her gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, education, and so on. Although as I have argued above, the certainty of fully grasping our own ‘horizon’ is necessarily difficult. The second is her location in the intellectual field, as distinct from social space at large; it calls for critical dissection of the concepts, methods, and problematics she inherits as well as for vigilance towards the censorship exercised by disciplinary and institutional attachments (Wacquant 1998:225-6; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:36-46).

Yet, the more corrupting source of bias in Bourdieu’s (1990, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Wacquant 1998) view is the fact that, to study society, the sociologist necessarily assumes a ‘scholastic’ stance that causes her to (mis)understand ‘the social world as an interpretive mystery to be resolved, rather than a web of practical tasks to be accomplished in real time and space, which is after all what it is for social agents’ (Wacquant 1998:226). Here Bourdieu is referring to the differing logics of the practical world and the theoretical world. The former is based on the ‘fuzzy’ logic of strategic vagueness and improvisory practice whilst the latter is based on an abstract logic of intellectual reason. This ‘scholastic fallacy’ leads to a distorting of the situational, adaptive, ‘fuzzy logic’ of practice. Bourdieu (1997) argues ‘that this “scholastic bias” is at the root of grievous errors not only in matters of epistemology but also in aesthetics and ethics’ (Wacquant 1998:226). Assuming the point of view of the “impartial spectator”, standing above the world rather than being
immerses it, creates systematic distortions in our conceptions of knowledge, beauty, and morality that reinforce each other and have every chance of going unnoticed inasmuch as those who produce and consume these conceptions share the same scholastic posture' (Wacquant 1998:226).

As Barnard notes:

Reflexivity is not achieved by the use of the first person or by the expedient of constructing a text which situates the observer in the act of observation. Rather it is achieved by subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand. (1990:75 emphasis in original)

Thus it is 'intellectual bias' which fails to appreciate the presuppositions upon which thinking about the world is based. Presuppositions are built into the concepts, instruments of analysis—observation, questionnaires, interview techniques—and practical operations of research (such as coding routines, “data cleaning” procedures, or rule of thumb in fieldwork). ‘...reflexivity calls less for intellectual introspection than for the permanent sociological analysis and control of sociological practice’ (Champagne 1989 cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:40). Bourdieu makes it clear that:

Whenever we fail to subject to systematic critique the presuppositions inscribed in the fact of the thinking world, of retiring from the world and from action in the world in order to think that action, we risk collapsing practical logic into theoretical logic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:39).

Reflexivity therefore requires more than personal self-reflection, it requires permanent sociological analysis and control of sociological practice, the systematic exploration of the ‘unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:40). The process of objectification of the objectification achieves this. As Barnaby (1997:24) points out
'The first objectification is that of the act of observation which is inherent in the act of research but it is in the objectification of the act of observation, in the objectification of the research assumptions – from the initial construction of the object of the research to the techniques of the method used – that epistemic reflexivity is employed to achieve what Bourdieu argues is a genuine science of human practice'.

Conclusion

The work of Bourdieu has a number of particular strengths which relate to this thesis. Firstly, in terms of ‘reflexive modernity’, looking at different forms of capital employed in the routine day to day involvement in LETS, will give some idea of the powers of social actors in regard to structure. Secondly, it will give some idea of the reflexive process involved with regard to the creation of the LETS boundaries. In relation to this it will capture the vitality of the culture within these boundaries. In short, using the concepts provided by Bourdieu allowed me to illuminate the process involved in the creation of the ‘LETS community’.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

Community is a word that continues to resonate through our everyday lives. However, the way in which community is created in contemporary society, in particular through LETS involvement, has not been adequately investigated. If the meaning in contemporary 'reflexive communities' is already there, as Lash (1994:163) has argued, then the only way to solve this problem is to become actively involved in the community itself. The best way to go about this is to become immersed in the world of LETS and its members. For this reason a 'cheerful promiscuity of method' has been adopted (Jenkins 1992:55). This chapter provides details of how the research was designed.

The Research Project: Case study research design

In Chapter One I provided an overview of empirical work completed in the area of LETS. I argued that apart from North (1997) and Purdue et al. (1997) the focus of most research into LETS was directed towards the economic and structural aspects of LETS. Moreover, they all appeared to me to be flawed for one reason or another. Dauncey (1988), Dobson (1993) and Lang (1994) present uncritical, polemic description. Of and Heinze (1992) and Thorne (1993) provide research, which was conducted at a relatively early stage in the development of LETS and thus reported on optimistic expectation rather than experience. Thorne (1993), Lee (1996), North (1997), Seyfang (1994) and Williams' (1995 a,b,c,d) research was flawed for the simple reason that they
relied either on interviews with activists who claimed too much for LETS, or on surveys. While they provided a useful starting point, much more detailed work was needed.

I also noted that it was interesting that community or community-building had been documented as a motivation for joining LETS in all the studies detailed above. Empirical studies completed by Williams (1995a,b,c,d), Seyfang (1994), Barnes, North and Walker (1996), Lee (1996), and North (1997) all refer to community or community-building even if this was not the main focus of their work. While it had been described as a motivation, none of the studies had unpacked what it really meant. In other words, it had merely been found that community or community-building was a rationale for joining LETS and left at that. No attempt had been made to find out in any detail what community actually signified, nor what it actually meant to members. Thus, very little sociological research had focused on the social worlds of LETS members. Consequently the field of LETS as community, and its relationship to membership, was and remains an under-researched area. What I became more interested in, as the study evolved, was how members subjectively felt about the concept, what did it mean to them, and how did this ‘community’ work in practice? Who were the organisers? What were the dynamics of the Core Group? Did they meet with any problems in the running of the LETS? How did they solve problems? Did they always agree? How did a group, which previously did not exist, come to be, in their words, a ‘LETS community’? An interest in these issues prompted this research project to investigate whether and how the active creation of community occurred through LETS involvement.

Having defined the research questions a case study was considered the best research strategy. This strategy enabled me to focus on the ‘concrete processes and actions
which only the case study with its attention to empirical detail can provide' (Stoecker 1991:94). As Yin (1984:18) points out “How” and “why” questions are likely to favour the use of case studies...as the preferred research strategies’.

A case study research design was adopted for a number of more specific reasons. Firstly it allowed an in-depth study of particular LETS in order to generate further knowledge about LETS within its real life context. This was especially important given that the boundary between the phenomenon and the context were not clearly evident (Yin 1994:13). At the start of the study there was little published research in the UK on LETS participants, nor of the meanings behind their attachment to LETS. While a wider survey would have elicited more information about all LETS members, there was a need for more depth which would address more specifically the way in which membership of LETS enhances community cohesion and how this relates to a sense of feeling part of a community. As Becker (1966) argues, what the case study does best is study process. Stoecker further points out that:

‘Process’ is both historical and idiosyncratic, and statistical analysis is unable to capture either of those. In fact, it is the case study’s ability to explain the idiosyncrasies which make up the ‘unexplained variance’ which is the source of its strength. (1991:94)

This process would not be easy to access from a survey alone.

Secondly a case study approach allowed me to focus on a sub-sample. In other words it allowed me to select particular LETS for particular reasons. It was the ‘ordinary everyday ideas’ and motivations that were of interest to me. I was looking for evidence of relations, which could be said to facilitate community building. Thus, I was not looking at those LETS which had a ‘top down’ strategy or those started from ‘above’
by community development workers as a distinct anti-poverty strategy. Instead I
wanted to look at those that had started at the grassroots level.

One criticism of the case study research design is that it suffers from a lack of rigour
and an excess of bias (Yin 1984). For this reason Becker (1968), Skocpol (1979),
George (1979), and Platt (1988) have advocated case comparison, even if of only a few
cases, within a single case study (Stoecker 1991:92). Consequently the research was
extended to more than one setting. However, the scope was limited to two to retain
‘depth’. I did not want to destroy the integrity of the cases by turning them into isolated
and unconnected pieces of data (Platt n.d.).

Two case studies facilitated comparison in geographically distinct, yet similar settings.
It would be interesting to chart the progress, growth and development of each. Two
similar case studies allowed comparison of members’ views, expectations, motivations
and ambitions for LETS, while allowing the research to retain an in-depth analysis.
Why were the schemes started? Were there any similarities or differences between
LETS members’ social characteristics in different geographical areas, yet whose LETS
share similar starting points (for example length of time in operation, parity with the
pound, size, rural location etc.)? What were members’ expectations and experiences of
LETS and did these vary between schemes? A similar starting point for the two LETS
would give some idea as to whether they follow a similar path over time, or whether
they start to diverge in any way. For example would they become more involved with
mainstream economics or did they start to link up with other economic development
initiatives, for example credit unions? A multi-case study had the advantage of
acknowledging the importance of local variation, which cannot be explored unless
cases are compared. Hence, one reason for using more than one case study was to get some idea of the range of variability of LETS members and strengthen internal validity.

Another way in which internal validity was built into the research design was through triangulating methods (Denzin 1978). As Yin (1994:8) points out ‘The case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence’. I favoured qualitative ethnographic methods for two reasons: first ‘the use of close-up, detailed observation of the natural world; second the attempt to avoid prior commitment to any theoretical model’ (Yin 1994:14). I also favoured in-depth interviewing to get at the subjective meanings of actors. But as well as asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions I also wanted to ask ‘who’ questions – who were the members and what were their characteristics? Thus a questionnaire was also favoured. Very often textbooks tend to locate the case study strategy with ‘qualitative research’. Yet, as Yin (1994:14) clearly points out case studies can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Triangulation in effect strengthened internal validity. ‘When we find the same results through different methods, we can be much more confident of our results’ (Stoecker 1991:106).

Given the demands of ethnographic, interview and survey methods, I required two LETS that would allow me access to study over an extended period of time. Time and access for fieldwork are almost always limited (McNeill 1990:124; Yin 1994; Nachmias and Nachmias 1992). Cases were picked which were easy to get at and which were amenable to the inquiry. It must be remembered that the case study approach is not sampling research. The first obligation is to understanding the one case, or here the two cases, selected for study (Stake 1995:4). As Hakim (1987:61) quite rightly points out a ‘case study is the social research equivalent of the spotlight or the
microscope.' While one case study would provide 'a richly detailed portrait' of this particular social phenomenon, the two-case design permitted some comparison.

I also reflected on the methods chosen for the case study research for the simple reason that there is 'a moral obligation to focus enough of our attention on the case to inform those who are living it' (Stoecker 1991:100). As Stoecker argues 'The moral obligation results from the nuisance we make of ourselves and the time we take up asking questions and interviewing'. It is my firm belief that we ought to provide something in return. By applying effective case study technique, we also cannot help having an impact on those who live the case. It is therefore necessary for us to make that impact conscious and helpful (Stoecker 1991:106).

The final crucial test of validity was to turn to myself and the participants of the research to judge the validity of my analysis. As I argued in the previous chapter, reflexivity is an indispensable component of the sociological method. Only when we reflect on our personal involvement, and our respondents' personal involvement in the research process, do we understand how our feelings and perceptions affect our analysis (Stoecker 1991:106). Feminists have long stressed the need for embeddedness, collaboration, and experience in the research process. Rigorous, accurate research, then, not only requires the involvement of the people being researched, it requires the self-conscious involvement of the researcher (Stoecker 1991:106). Both Oakley (1981) and Stanley and Wise (1983) found that their own personal involvement was central to the research process. 'The less we know of the experience of a situation, the less we are able to tell whether our explanation works' (Stoecker 1991:106). However, as Bourdieu has already clearly shown, we need to reflect upon more than mere personal identity,
we need to continually turn the instruments of social science back upon the sociologist to better control the distortions introduced in the construction of the object.

Another important validity check can come from the respondents themselves (Stoecker 1991:106). I decided to assess the accuracy and elicit more information by discussing the issues directly with the respondents before deciding on the final form of this thesis. I had already asked many questions. Asking the group also to comment upon the research findings was a rather large request. I was very grateful to receive the following comment from a Kingsbridge Core Group member:

I think you've been very honest, open and objective. I believe it portrays LETS very fairly and favourably in that it offers a valuable tool for reviving community. Hopefully it will act as yeast in the dough of the waning community spirit.

Choice of Research Sites

Possible case studies were initially identified through the use of Letslink UK's 1994 'Contacts' leaflet which listed all known LETS schemes. There were at the start of the study nearly 250 LETS up and running/prospective new groups listed in the Letslink leaflet. However, the list compiled by Letslink very quickly became outdated, and as stated in the Letslink magazine, by 1995 there were 400 schemes in the UK. This rapid increase was further supported by media reports.

At the time of the study the most widespread growth of LETS appeared to be in the South West. More detailed information was gained through discussions with existing members, for example at the South West Regional Area meetings, about the number
and 'success' of LETS starting in the South West area. It was therefore decided that the research would focus attention on particular LETS in that area. However, 'success' means very different things to different people – some indicated that success depended on business involvement, others on the size of the network, others still on the number of exchanges that occurred within LETS. Various members of particular LETS, at the South West Regional Area meetings, indicated that their LETS were particularly successful on one or other of these criteria. However, given that some members were actively trying to promote their LETS, it appeared that some exaggeration was taking place. This needed to be checked. A number of LETS were invited to participate.

However, it soon became evident that there were a number of problems. For example one was suffering from internal wrangling and the members were going in different directions. Another was run on a very ad hoc basis – it was specifically set up to help people suffering from mental health problems. One more, it was later discovered, had a very stagnant membership. Although these examples do have implications for the significance of LETS generally, such groups were not considered the best choice for this research given that I wanted to look at the background practices that contribute to notions of community in contemporary society.

Case Study One: Kingsbridge LETS

Kingsbridge LETS was chosen simply because the opportunity presented itself. It would be intellectually dishonest to say that this was otherwise. It was self-selected due to the fact that I was a member of this LETS myself. Negotiating access proved less difficult than I initially thought. The Core Group of Kingsbridge LETS readily and enthusiastically affirmed that they would like to become actively involved in the study. Further discussion of the nature of the research and the form that it would take took
place at one of the Core Group meetings. It was unanimously agreed that the group would take part and support the study.

Kingsbridge LETS has a large semi-rural spread. It covers a wide rural radius of around twelve miles. Founder members described how Kingsbridge LETS was, in the beginning, set up by a group of therapists. Initially they got together with the intention of exchanging therapies. However, during the first meeting, the concept of LETS as a means of exchange was also brought up by one therapist who was a member of Totnes LETS. During discussion, it transpired that most thought that LETS was the better idea as it facilitated a wider range of skill and goods exchange. Kingsbridge LETS was thus conceived. A first public meeting in January 1995, advertised in the local newspaper, attracted me and thirty-five other people. A presentation was given by members of Totnes LETS. Here the concept of LETS and its workings, in theory and in practice, were explained. The majority of people attending this first meeting joined immediately. Initially there were thirty members. It grew in size to ninety members over a period of three years. Kingsbridge members named their currency ‘bridge’, which was historically and geographically defined in terms of local community.

Case Study Two: Yeovil LETS

Access negotiation to Yeovil LETS was slightly different. I attended a South West Area meeting. Here I was asked to explain in very general terms the nature of my research. It was here, after listening to me speak and having seen the LETS questionnaire I had constructed, that I was approached by various LETS members asking if they could take part in the research I was conducting. A Core Group member from Yeovil LETS was one of those who approached me. After listening to their
description of Yeovil LETS it appeared to me to be a viable second case study. Yeovil LETS had similar features to Kingsbridge LETS although it was located in a geographically different area in the South West: it was started at a grassroots level, it had been in operation for a similar length of time, and it was situated in a semi-rural area. Further discussion took place via the telephone once the Core Group had been consulted. As with Kingsbridge LETS, participation was finalised after the nature and form of the research had been discussed.

The Yeovil LETS was started in September 1995. Members described how the group got off to a very good start. An initial evening meeting was organised in Yeovil. The meeting hall was filled almost to overflowing. Some eighty folders containing all the necessary paper work, for example joining forms and literature describing how LETS work, were sold. The initiators of Yeovil LETS appeared to be slightly different to those of Kingsbridge. Several of the people who launched the Yeovil scheme were described as being 'practical people'. Consequently it appeared that the group started off with a mix of practical skills, rather than being a homogeneous group of therapists, as was the case at Kingsbridge.

At the time of the study there were sixty-three Yeovil LETS accounts although some accounts represented more than one person. One of these accounts was with South Somerset LETS. This was to enable 'inter-trade' to take place between members from Yeovil and members from South Somerset. Another account was for leavers' balances. One member of the Yeovil Core Group indicated that ten people had also left the scheme: three had moved away, one had resigned because 'he thought we were a dating agency', three did no trade, a further two belonged to both Yeovil and South Somerset LETS and decided to leave Yeovil as they had not done any trading, and a further
member left because they were ‘disappointed in the social life!’ Yeovil named its currency ‘jack’, which was again historically and geographically defined in terms of local community – jack was a local messenger boy who ran to and from Yeovil carrying messages.

**Summary of the Two Case Studies Selected**

In summary, a number of LETS were identified as possible case studies and some were invited to participate. In the event they were either suffering from internal wrangling; were run on a very *ad hoc* basis; or had a very stagnant membership. The two chosen appeared to be relatively dynamic, did not appear to be stagnant, and on the surface level at least appeared to have some form of ‘community cohesion’.

Kingsbridge LETS grew from the seeds sewn by a homogenous group of people who had therapy in common. Yeovil LETS, on the other hand, started from a more differentiated group of people with a more practical mix of skills. So although the areas of Kingsbridge and Yeovil were relatively similar, a slightly different kind of people initiated each LETS scheme. This raised interesting questions. For example had this had any effect on group identity and group dynamics? Had it affected the progress of each LETS scheme in any way? Had it influenced membership participation (meaning the type of person who joins LETS)? The initial formation of any one LETS scheme could have some effect on any one or all these areas. Both had historically and geographically named their currency in terms of local community. The following sections discuss the research methods in more detail. Yet before I do this, I would like to document the general opposition to research on LETS, and reflect on the access
Reflections on Access Negotiation

I was somewhat surprised that access negotiation was so straightforward. At the time of the study there was on-going debate within the wider ‘LETS community’ about why there was a need for research into LETS. In different ways it had been pointed out that researchers were ‘hitting’ this particular sector because it was a new growth area, and one which was potentially subversive, and were then ‘running’. For example, this type of discussion regularly reared its head on the econ-lets discussion group. As Paul Glover from Ithaca Hours wrote:

This online discussion is another example of the frustration I have felt with academics who dissect social experiments from the comfort of air conditioned offices, travel from conference to conference, receive stable salaries and professional stature, with honoraria and book contracts, while those of us who sweat in the streets and take the risks of failure are mere specimens under the lens (http://econ-lets@mailbase.ac.uk 9.5.97).

In a later e-mail he further stated that:

Intellectual labor is narrowly associated with universities, conferring prestige and influence without blisters. Academics tend to trade citations rather than to take risks. Scholarly knowledge becomes often ingrown, with less and less reference to air, water, life and death, or the urgency of change (http://econ-lets@mailbase.ac.uk 10.5.97)

This links in with other arguments regarding academics and their input into the world of LETS. Research was also a sore point during the 1995 conference organised by Letslink, where Harry Turner very vocally criticised researchers of LETS. Mr Turner also criticised researchers at a South West Area meeting I attended. Here I had a heated
discussion with Mr Turner on the nature and motives of researchers - both myself and in general.

Therefore, the implication of many was that some researchers were exploiting LETS and its members in order to benefit their own careers. Consequently there was some opposition in general to research of this kind. As a result some members were not particularly keen to have research disrupting the smooth running of their groups. Nor were they enthusiastic at the thought of researchers benefiting their careers at their expense. It was primarily my role as an ‘insider’ that gave me privileged access to the group I wanted to study. My status and reputation as a member were of crucial importance. Word spreads very quickly through the LETS community. As we shall see later, a bad reputation is one of the mechanisms that regulates the problem of ‘free-riders’. Thus ‘insider’ status, understanding of, and sympathy with LETS members’ aspirations – both in terms of economic exchange with alternative currency and with the aim of building community - enhanced the access negotiating stage. Reassurance was given that members’ welfare was to be safeguarded. To this end I assured Core Group members that I was not trying to disrupt the smooth running of LETS, rather I was hoping to contribute to knowledge of LETS. As Finch (1984) points out

Siding with the people one researches inevitably means an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to promoting their interests. How else can one justify having taken from them the very private information which many have given so readily.

It is not possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies (Becker 1967:239).
Methods Employed

The merits of a multi-methods (Denzin 1978; Flick 1992:175-97; Janesick 1998:46-47; Flick 1998:229) approach were obvious. The decision to use both qualitative and quantitative methods was determined here by the appropriateness of the method to the issue under study and the research questions (Flick 1998:258). The almost complete lack of any sociologically relevant data made it desirable to conduct a wider membership survey. In effect the survey, the interviews and participant observation came to complement each other (Jick 1983). Insights gained from participant observation were checked against survey data. On the other hand, many of these data only became meaningful through the experiences gained from being a participating member of LETS and through gaining first-hand knowledge about LETS practices. Although different methods do remain autonomous, operating side by side, their meeting point is the issue under study (Flick 1998:259), the issue here being LETS.

The Survey

It was intended that the questionnaires would be designed to provide a ‘snapshot’ view of the social characteristics of LETS members, and an exploration of the importance of certain themes which could be followed through in more detail at the later stage of interviewing. The questionnaire (see appendix one) was designed in sections, focusing on issues such as: members’ involvement in LETS; the organisation of their LETS; the economic and social effects of membership; members’ own perception of LETS; members’ views’ of community and local economy; their hopes and aspirations for LETS; and finally demographic questions. These categories were chosen after
consulting questionnaires used by other researchers of LETS, such as those used by Williams\(^2\) (1996) and Letslink\(^3\) (1996). It was felt that the majority of LETS members' exchange activities could be operationalised within these categories. The aim was that the survey data should indicate initial themes of importance to members, exchange trends, social characteristics of members and variations in responses, across the two case studies. It was also to complement data gained through participant observation and interviewing.

The questionnaire was designed with mainly closed questions, which were pre-coded. A structured approach would make it easier for every respondent to understand and answer (Nachmias and Nachmias 1992). A number of open questions were included, however, to enable members to respond in their own words. For example one question was directed towards the things that members would like to see offered through their LETS scheme. Another was to access their reasons for joining, while one more specifically addressed the social events and the aspects they enjoyed/did not enjoy. One question was left open, which invited members to discuss any other aspect of their involvement in LETS that had not been covered in the questionnaire. This was included for the simple reason that I may have omitted something of major importance. The final two questions would give me some indication of how well the questionnaire was received. The first of these was an open question, seeking the respondents' views on the questionnaire. The second asked respondents if they would be prepared to take part in an interview with the researcher at a later date. I deliberately did not give any indication that they were under no obligation to give their name to facilitate follow up\(^4\), however, confidentiality was assured.
A cover letter (see appendix two) was sent with the questionnaire. This was an important consideration, because if done well it could have the effect of increasing the response rate (and conversely decreasing the response rate if done badly) (Nachmias and Nachmias 1992). This is a point seldom discussed in methods texts. The cover letter must succeed in convincing the respondents to fill out the questionnaire and mail it back. I identified myself as a LETS member as well as a researcher and proceeded to explain the purpose of the exercise. Three reasons were identified as to why it was important for them to fill out the questionnaire. Firstly, each member was promised a copy of the results, hopefully they would find these interesting. Secondly, their initiative was to be documented; nobody knows what will happen to LETS in the future – it may fizzle out or it may be the start of something bigger. Furthermore, future generations would be able to see what was going on at the end of the twentieth century in their particular location. Thirdly, it would help me with my studies and I would be very grateful for their help.

I realised that not all members would be interested in reading the cover letter. While it would perhaps motivate some into filling in the questionnaire, in contemporary society there is somewhat of a problem with ‘questionnaire overload’. I felt that in order to be successful, I needed something that would immediately grab their attention, and also something that would go down well with the type of people I was surveying. I came up with the idea of a very bright yellow flier. A skeleton outline of the information in the cover letter was produced on the flier. Prior to this outline, I invited members to ‘have a cup of tea on me’, and while drinking their tea, suggested that they may like to fill in my questionnaire. Attached to the top right hand corner was a tea bag (see appendix three).
One of the main problems in the design of a questionnaire is with the wording of questions (Nachmias and Nachmias 1992; McNeill 1990:27). It was assumed at the start of the study that there was going to be a large age and social class range. For this reason language and instructions had to be clearly understood by all LETS members. I tended to use language of lay people, which I had regularly heard used within the LETS groups themselves, for example, ‘self-worth’, ‘group solidarity’ and ‘purposelessness’. ‘Parity with the pound’ was another concept that not all people may understand, I therefore added, ‘by which I mean one unit is roughly equal to one pound’. In this way I hoped to get over some of the problems of wording. Wording was tested at the pilot stage. No major problems were indicated. Further discussion of the pilot stage now follows.

*The Pilot Study*

Prior to the questionnaire being sent to all Kingsbridge and Yeovil members, the Core Group members of each were asked to comment on the questionnaire. Core Group members formed an important part of the pilot study. If they were unable or unmotivated to answer the questions, then so would the wider LETS population under study. Overall, the questionnaire was received well. A few points were made mainly with regard to some of the things that would be of interest to the LETS members themselves. For example, one Core Group member wrote at the end of the questionnaire:

Personally, as co-founder and co-ordinator I’d be interested to know more about the impact (or otherwise!) of the socials which for the core group seem to be such an essential element in the system. And what the members themselves consider to be the most popular, for instance. (K6a)
As a result, this question was included. The social side of LETS turned out to be a very interesting and central aspect of becoming involved in LETS in the first place, and one of the main reasons for further maintaining membership. The social aspects ended up forming one of the key research themes. This reflexive approach to the project, both on the part of myself and on the part of members, was crucial to any understanding of the meaning and usefulness of LETS in practice.

As well as asking Core Group members to comment on the questionnaire, it was taken to a South West Area meeting in Exeter. Here I was invited to explain the general nature of the research to a group of twenty LETS members all from different LETS within the South West. Various comments were received, most of them complimentary. It was suggested that the main problem was going to be the response rate. Questionnaires to LETS members had been attempted in the past, however, very poor response rates had been gained. It was at this stage that I realised that I had to think of some way of motivating members. The flier and the tea bag were the result. Further discussion revolved around the best way to distribute and collect the questionnaire. Issues of anonymity were thought to be important. This kind of support and comment proved particularly useful and worthwhile regarding the testing of the questionnaire, as well as in the process of administration. In general terms, it gave me some indication of the way in which respondents may receive the questionnaire, and how interesting and easy the questions were to answer. It was hoped that the questionnaire would be a useful instrument, and would fulfil the purpose for which it was intended.
The Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaires were sent directly to the home address of each Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS member. Along with the questionnaire, cover letter and flier, a return pre-paid envelope with the name and address of the University was also enclosed. The questionnaire was to be returned directly to the University. This was done in order to ensure anonymity. So, although I knew the name and address to which the questionnaire went, I would not know who, in fact, sent them back. I received the names and addresses of fifty five members belonging to Kingsbridge LETS. Questionnaires were sent out to these members on 4th April 1996. I waited with trepidation for the response. Given the poor response rates of other surveys, I felt sure nobody would send them back. The first questionnaires started to come back within a few days. By the end of the third week the response rate had reached 76%. The design of the questionnaire, the cover letter and flier along with the tea bag, had the desired effect. It also had the effect of motivating members to take part in the follow up interviews. Of the forty two members who returned the completed questionnaires, twenty six (61.9%) gave their name and address and a contact number in order to arrange the interview.

The Yeovil survey took the same format. Sixty-three members’ names and addresses were received from the Core Group. Questionnaires went out on 12th May 1996. A slightly less enthusiastic response rate was gained, however, this still amounted to 52%. Again, the number of respondents volunteering to take part in a further interview was high. Of the thirty-three members who returned the completed questionnaire, fourteen (43.8%) agreed to take part.
The data provided on the questionnaires was entered on to a computer and set up for statistical analysis using SPSS. The main findings from this data are the subject of Chapter Five.

There are of course always problems associated with any research. I wrongly made the assumption that members would know that the pre-paid envelopes needed no stamps. I really needed to be more explicit. One member sent back the questionnaire (fully completed), however complained quite strongly that they had to purchase postage stamps. Others also put stamps on the envelopes. Realising this, I amended the flier sent to members of Yeovil LETS, and more clearly stated that there was no need to purchase stamps as the envelope was pre-paid.

A second problem concerned joint membership. Should I send one or two questionnaires? A decision was made to send out two if there were joint names on the lists received. However, in some circumstances, respondents made it clear that the questionnaire had been filled in jointly. This may have affected the response rate.

A related problem was with the lists that had been provided. At one of the Core Group meetings at a later date, it became obvious that membership had declined. Questionnaires may have been sent to people who were no longer members or who may have moved away from the area. This again may have affected the response rate. This may mean that I had a higher response rate than that recorded.

A final problem was that of the length of the questionnaire. Some respondents clearly stated that it was too long. Others hinted that it was, through comments such as 'it took far longer than a cup of tea to fill in', while another stated that 'my cup of tea was cold
by the time I had finished'. In hindsight the questionnaire could have been much shorter. The open questions provided much more of a clue as to the real sense of attachment to LETS. It was these reflexive comments that further guided me towards the importance of 'community' to members, the source of which appeared to be the social events. The open questions and the demographic questions were mainly the only responses that were needed. However, given that the questionnaire was largely exploratory, this could not have been known prior to the survey.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation was another method chosen. As a founder member of Kingsbridge LETS I wanted to share the experience and knowledge I had gained within the research. However, being a member prior to the study, I was immediately faced by a major dilemma. Was I, in fact, already studying LETS in a covert way? By way of acknowledging this, I felt I had to be up front and declare my interest as a researcher. The choice was one of either suspending my membership of LETS, or of carrying on as a member but making explicit my position as a researcher. As the group needed all the support it could get, the latter option was chosen. Because of my participation, I sometimes became privy to information in situations where my presence did not stem from intentional research activities. I have decided it is not intellectually honest to ignore the information I came upon, however accidentally. On the other hand, I do not regard the ethics of sociological research to permit extended and intentional study of social action without the knowledge of participants. Having said this, one cannot remind the participants at the start of each and every conversation that one's role is that of a researcher. This would make for a very boring relationship. Likewise, asking
participants whether it would be okay to use part of a conversation in my study may have resulted in careful consideration of what they said to me. I did not want participants to start avoiding me. Therefore, I reminded them – usually through regular updates of my research progress at meetings and through the course of general conversation – that I was a researcher of LETS and the people that participate in LETS. At the South West Area meetings I was always invited to feed back on my research, which was a reminder in itself. But beyond this no repetitious ‘warnings’ were given.

Core Group meetings provided a general insight into the problems, socio-economic benefits and the bureaucracy involved in the set up and running of a LETS scheme. It also provided an insight into the interaction between Core Group members. What participant observation allowed me to do, is to understand the motivations behind the organisation of the LETS. In other words, it permitted me access to the ‘front’ and ‘back stage’ (Goffman 1955) regions of LETS. Who were the organisers? What were the dynamics of the Core Group? Did they get anything from LETS that other members did not? Did they meet with any problems in the running of the LETS? How did they solve problems? Did they always agree?

It could be argued that the information I obtained through fieldwork has fundamental and multiply skewed biases. My data from participant observation was not acquired from standardized interactional situations. Consequently, it could be argued that that my perspective at Yeovil LETS, for example, as a stranger, could not produce information which corresponds with that derived from a completely different perspective, for example as an insider at Kingsbridge LETS. The point is, however, that I was not limited to any one single role. I could learn about LETS involvement from different points of view. As Hall (1978:249) quite rightly points out ‘I could develop an
empathy for people in a situation I experienced as an outsider simply because I had “walked the other side of the street” in participating in a similar situation as an insider'.

As Hall (1978:249) further states:

Anyone who seeks to understand social life as it occurs is faced with a dilemma: either the researcher employs a consistent method of interaction which is intentionally insensitive to nuances of specific situations beyond dimensions of measurement, or, on the other hand, such a person employs a flexible method which yields a situationally circumscribed subjectivity.

In the former approach, comparison of information is promised, but with no guarantee that the information reflects the relevant aspects of the situation for either the participants or the sociological theorist. In the latter more flexible approach, information is inevitably embedded in unique intersubjective webs of meaning in a situation, but there is no assurance that the complex knowledge obtained bears any comparison to other situations (Hall 1978:249-250).

In the present study, I have attempted to understand how participants in LETS schemes composed meaningful shared social worlds. The bases for comparison between different LETS groups is therefore not derived from standardized measurement, but rather, from the exposition of alternative ways in which social action was constituted as meaningful. To temper the inherent subjective biases of this approach I have resorted to Bourdieu’s notion of epistemic reflexivity.

According to Bourdieu, both objectivism and subjectivism are too biased to describe adequately the social world. On their own, neither approach can come to grips with the double nature of social reality. On the one hand, social life is determined by material conditions but, on the other, these conditions affect behaviour through the intercession
of beliefs and tastes (Thornton 1995:106). However, this presents a methodological contradiction for as Thornton (1995:105-6) points out:

One complication of my fieldwork resulted from the fact that the two methods that make up ethnography – participant and observation – are not necessarily complementary. In fact, they often conflict. As a participating insider, one adopts the group's views of its social world by privileging what it says. As an observing outsider, one gives credence to what one sees. In this case, the results of the two methods contrasted dramatically (emphasis in original).

The problems of research based on participant observation are particularly bound up in the issue of validity. How do I know whether what I experienced is actually what happened? How can I be sure that the experience is real, instead of just a production for my benefit? As a member of a LETS scheme myself, I knew from the start that members do have the ability to spin a reality around outsiders simply by selectively revealing aspects of their world. Outsiders can as easily come to certain conclusions on the basis of their own selective attention, even when no attempt is being made by others to be selective. For example, I shared with other members some amusement at outsiders' views of who we were and how and why LETS members created an alternative currency and exchanged together. I was thus aware of the possibility that an 'act' was taking place when I visited the LETS group of which I was not a member. I therefore paid little attention to events which seemed to involve 'impression management' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:78) on others' parts. If I was successfully fooled, the reader will have to bear the consequences with me, for we will never know for sure.

In participant observation research, validity of information depends in large part on rapport established between the researcher and participants (Hall 1978:250). Because I
am a LETS member myself, I have a continual interest with regard to communal exchange. Although I was a total outsider at Yeovil LETS, I often felt an immediate empathy with the members I encountered. Several times members made statements to the effect that 'they were grateful to have someone they could talk to about their LETS involvement'. It seemed that members trusted me enough for my discretion and motives enough to be willing to 'open up' in my presence. It became apparent that LETS members do not mind someone trying to learn about their motives and reasons for joining LETS, as long as they believe the effort to be a sincere and sympathetic one. In general I think relations of rapport were sustained. While others and I did not always 'see things in the same way', I seldom sensed any misunderstanding. Considering that I was able to follow the themes of concern invoked by others, the information I obtained affirms a validity which originates not from its representation of something else, but quite simply as a record of what was happening at that particular time.

Participant observation may suffer from ambiguities of validity bound up in a humanistic method of research. For this reason a reflexive approach has been attempted in order to temper the inherent subjective biases of this approach. It is also partly for this reason that other methods have been adopted. Yet participant observation, I firmly believe, has been more of an asset than a detriment to the study.

The Interviews

Yet, participant observation was not considered the best single method for such a study. Trading was known to be sporadic, not particularly predictable and often quite low. When trading does take place, it is usually arranged in private. How would it be
possible to observe the actual trading short of sitting by the telephone and waiting for members to let me know when a trade was about to take place? This did not appear to be a sensible option. The only open trading that does take place is that such as at Bazaars in for example the town hall or village hall. However, from experience I knew that this only happened occasionally, and some LETS were known not to have any open trading. There were meetings that could be attended, for example the core group meetings and the South West Regional Area meetings. Yet, this would only give a picture of the people who attended the meetings. It was decided that this would lead to a bias towards the study of LETS organisers, and not the 'ordinary' people who join such schemes. In other words, LETS was not an organisation where one could go to watch natural behaviour in a natural setting for a set period of time. It was thus decided that in addition to the survey and participant observation, a number of in-depth interviews would be arranged. Original core group members could provide rich historical data regarding the reasons for starting the LETS and their aspirations for LETS. Interviewing members would also provide a deeper analysis. Why did people join LETS? Was the social side more important than the economic side? What were their aspirations for LETS? Only in-depth and semi-structured interviewing could provide the response to such questions. Interpretative methods were thus considered imperative for this study.

As detailed in the previous section, forty members in total indicated that they would like to participate further in the follow up interviews. Although this was a relatively large number for a single researcher, I decided to interview all based on assumptions that: some of the respondents were partners or married therefore they would probably want to be interviewed together; some of the respondents may have been willing to be interviewed at the time the questionnaire was sent out but may have subsequently
changed their minds; some may be unwilling to participate due to changed circumstances i.e. ill health, employment changes, holidays etc.; some may have relinquished membership or may have moved from the area. I began by contacting all those who had provided their name and telephone number on the questionnaire and re-introduced myself. I then made appointments to interview those who were still willing in their homes at a pre-arranged time. The total number of interviews that actually took place was thirty-three. Nineteen of these were with members belonging to Kingsbridge LETS, and fourteen with members from Yeovil LETS.

All interviews were tape-recorded, none requested otherwise. Recording the interviews meant that I was able to concentrate on the topic and the dynamics of the interview (Kvale 1996:160). The words, tone, pauses, and so on, were recorded in a permanent form so that I was able to return to them again and again for re-listening. All the interviews were in fact successfully recorded. Some were of a better quality than others. For example one female member very kindly made me lunch, however she had set the table outside in her garden. Natural noise from the wind distorted some of what she said. Another interview was held in the living room of one member. The numerous clocks in the room ticked and made ‘ding-dong’ noises, which created some distraction. One member made me a cup of tea, unfortunately the boiling of the kettle created noise distorting his words as he started to tell me about his experiences of being a LETS member. But overall the tape recordings were of a better quality than expected.

The purpose of the interviews was to clarify and explore the meaning of the interviewee’s involvement in LETS. The only way to access this type of information was to take an unstructured/semi-structured interview approach. I started the interviews by asking very general questions about their involvement in LETS. I then followed up
the subject’s answers and sought new information about and new angles on the topic (Kvale 1996:97). For example, certain themes had already been generated via the questionnaire, concepts like community, like-mindedness, friendship etc. Yet I could not clarify the meaning of these concepts from the questionnaire data. During the interviews these concepts were again commonly used to describe reasons for joining and for continued membership of LETS. Therefore when they were referred to, I asked interviewees to clarify what they meant by saying something like ‘what exactly do you mean?’, or ‘can you define like-mindedness for me?’

The interview schedule (see appendix four) was originally designed to have a similar structure to the questionnaire, in order to facilitate analysis. However, on reaching this stage of the research, it seemed quite pointless to ask very similar questions, especially given that many members had generously provided quite detailed qualitative responses to the meaning behind the tick-in-the-box answer to closed questions on the questionnaire. I therefore did not adhere too much to the interview schedule prepared prior to interviews. On reflection, the structure was probably there to cover for my lack of confidence. As the interviews went on, I became more confident. I began to let respondents open up and talk to me about their feelings and involvement in LETS. I was quite surprised how many interviewees discussed some quite private material with me in a relaxed way. Moreover, some of those interviewed were also surprised at the ease with which they were able to talk in the interview situation especially given that I tape recorded the interviews. One male told me of his feelings of loneliness and how his ‘involvement in LETS was holding [him] together’ (Y1). Finch (1993) also found this happened in ‘woman-to-woman’ interviews.

Before the interviews were held I had given some consideration to the question of
whether I should adopt the role of detached scientific researcher or that of the role of friend. I felt some compulsion to attempt the textbook, 'unbiased' style of interviewing. However, I rejected these ‘outdated’ techniques and ‘came down’ to the level of the respondents and engaged in a ‘real’ conversation with ‘give and take’ and empathic understanding (Fontana and Frey 1998:67). Following Fontana and Frey (1998:68) I believe this made the interviews more honest, morally sound, and reliable, because it treated the respondents as equals, allowed them to express personal feelings, and therefore presented a more ‘realistic’ picture than can be uncovered using traditional interview methods. My own participation in LETS therefore ‘integrate[s] a double consciousness into the research process’ (Mies 1993:68). I firmly believe that the only morally defensible way for one member to conduct research on other members of the same group is through a non-hierarchical relationship in which the researcher is prepared to invest some of her own identity.

Bourdieu makes clear that a ‘research strategy which consists largely of eliciting from informants accounts of and for their behaviour will produce a misleading picture of social life’ (Jenkins 1992:53). As Jenkins (1992:53) further notes:

The ‘of and for’ is important: the native accounts in question tend to describe the state of affairs which ought to happen because the nature of the occasion inspires them to explain (or justify) their behaviour, in addition to (or instead of) describing it. The accounts which they produce are thus ‘official accounts’ (emphasis in original).

A number of points will be made in response to this. Firstly, as an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ I had both familiarity and unfamiliarity with the social world in question. The questions being asked were therefore of a reasonably informed nature. Moreover, this approach allowed me to combine an insider’s view with the objectivity of an
outsider's viewpoint. Secondly, Bourdieu also questions whether actors have the ability to adequately reflect upon their own practice. I agree with Jenkins in this respect for as he states:

Bourdieu overstates the case massively here and at the risk of an epistemological conceit which...privileges analytical understanding of the world, in a manner which is reminiscent of structuralism itself. (Jenkins (1992:56)

Care does needs to be taken and respondents can dwell on the best and worst aspects of their social world as well as trying to impress and demonstrate a mastery of the topic in question, which is not the ongoing social situation of actors. It is possible to undertake research which, in part, relies 'on informants’ statements about what they do, without producing little more than a sociological version of ‘official accounts’ (Jenkins 1992:56).

The tape recordings were transcribed and imported into QSR NUD.IST 4, which was deemed suitable to a range of analytic approaches (Punch 1998:233). Transcribing the tapes took much longer than first expected. At this stage I had to make decisions about whether to transcribe the whole interview or whether to condense and summarize some of the parts that seemed to have little relevant information. I decided to transcribe verbatim and word by word. How could I possibly know what was relevant information at this stage? I also decided to include pauses, emphases in intonation, and emotional expressions like laughter and sighing. Transcribing the interviews from an oral to a written mode structured the interview conversations in a form that was amenable for closer analysis. Structuring the material into texts facilitated an overview and was itself the beginning of analysis (Kvale 1996:168).
Reflections

Reflexivity is the continual consideration of the ways in which the researchers own social identity and values affect the research process (Reay 1996:60). The result will affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994:127) argue that:

By treating coming to conclusions as a social process, we can show that interpretation is a political, contested and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the researched. Interpretation needs somehow to unite a passion for ‘truth’ with explicit rules of research method that can make some conclusions stronger than others.

As Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993:228) also note ‘recognition of who the researcher is, in terms of their sex, race, class and sexuality, affects what they “find”.’ This is true for all research. I have attempted to provide a reflexive account throughout this thesis. This section provides a more explicit account. By means of locating my position within the research process, a number of points need to be made about my life experiences, the methods adopted and my intellectual positioning.

These issues are particularly important given that I am an ‘insider’. I am a member of one of the groups under study. I am all too aware of my own complex positioning and its effects on the research process. Prior to the interviews, I wrote in my research diary:

One of my main worries, I think, is whether my subjectivity as a middle class, educated, female member of LETS will prevent me from embracing a wider perspective than my own class, ‘race’ and gender bound bias. The only possible way out of the situation, that I can see, is to use the research process to question my own view of the knowledge I am creating. (22.8.97)
I hold very strong views about inequality. This is probably one of the main reasons for joining LETS in the first place. I therefore already had pre-conceived ideas about how LETS ought to perform. Indeed, and following many other academics, I believed that LETS could provide a solution to the problem of social exclusion. I suppose this was one of the reasons I had for choosing to study LETS in the first place. Any attempt to provide some kind of alternative network that people can fall back on when needed ought to be of value. As I reflect on my journey this was one of my unconscious assumptions at the start of this project. This section provides further reflection of the methods adopted in an attempt to tease out any additional personal and/or theoretical biases.

As we saw in Chapter Three Bourdieu (1998:132) alerts us to what he calls the 'scholastic fallacy' (emphasis in original). On reflection the questionnaires may have been constructed a little too hastily and without contemplation of the social context in which they were constructed. Through the questionnaires perhaps I was asking respondents to be their own sociologist, particularly when asking LETS members ideological questions regarding the currency and when putting forward statements like 'LETS is part of the Green movement' and asking members to agree or disagree. I failed to question the questionnaire. But more than this, I failed to question the situation of myself as the 'questionnaire designer who had the leisure or privilege to tear [myself] away from the evidences of doxa to raise questions' (Bourdieu 1998:132)\textsuperscript{10}. Perhaps worse I asked questions which 'ordinary' LETS members did not raise and could not ask themselves unless they were predisposed and prepared by the social conditions of existence to take up a 'scholastic point of view' on the social world and on their own practice. The questionnaire was produced in a scholastic situation and as such reproduced the presuppositions inscribed in the social conditions of their
construction. Indeed it could be argued that I pictured all social agents in the image of a scientist and thereby distorted the 'fuzzy logic of practice'. As a scientist I created a model to account for practices and placed this model into the consciousness of agents, which I assumed were the main determinants and the actual cause of practices. This reflexive self-criticism meant that I drew less on the questionnaire data than that of the interviews and participant observation.

Bourdieu also argues that a research strategy consisting largely of eliciting from informants' accounts of and for their behaviour will produce a misleading picture of social life. I have made comment earlier regarding this. But I do think some further reflection on interviewing is necessary. The interviews were necessary and allowed further exploration of themes of interest which had arisen from the questionnaire. But how did I as interviewer affect the data being collected? Again, I think it is worthwhile considering two issues here: theoretical bias and personal bias.

It was LETS members who drew particular attention to the concept of community through the open questions on the questionnaire. At the start of the study I did have some idea that community was being drawn upon by LETS members due to my prior involvement. However, I had no idea that it would become the main focus of the study. In fact, during the interviews I was often asked what I was interested in as a researcher. This often made me feel quite uncomfortable; at the interviewing stage I had no ready made answers. I therefore vaguely talked about being interested in documenting the LETS initiative. Thus rather than starting with a theoretical bias towards LETS as a community the importance of the concept arose from the questionnaire and themes around this further arose through observation and dialogue between myself and LETS.
members rather than through any pre-determined idea about community. More specific themes were only generated when exploring the data at a later stage.

Having said this I was confronted by one member who turned the questioning back at me, which did to some extent force me to think about and give some kind of response. Regarding this interview I wrote in my research diary:

Started off quite formal – Dave thought about what he was saying and responded in quite a rational way – I think he was genuinely trying to be helpful but his focus was explicitly on the economics of LETS. Because of the economic focus he was making LETS look like an inefficient alternative to the conventional currency.

Half way through Dave asked what I was trying to do with my study. Although a number of people have asked, I don’t really feel that I have answered, but most seemed not to pursue this. Dave however did. He wanted a sincere answer. I realised that I must give something of my own thoughts and feelings about what I was doing or trying to do – even if this left me feeling open and na"ive/vulnerable/silly etc., - even though I was still formulating my own thoughts.

I started talking about how I thought that focusing on the economic side of LETS perhaps missed the point. Trust and community building seemed also to be a very important part of LETS for some. Dave started nodding his head vigorously. At this stage he fully opened up and said this was the reason for his involvement in LETS. The interview continued in a more relaxed manner.

I opened up to Dave and by doing so he did too. If I had been objective and not involved my feelings – then neither would he. I felt that by giving part of me and taking the risk of being laughed at, that I have got a better picture of what is going on. I feel that I have dug beneath the surface to get at the real reason of why LETS are continuing even though many are not trading. (1.9.97)

In terms of personal bias the interviews were conducted by myself, a researcher and a member of LETS. I was well aware that my own social identity was going to affect the data gathered and consequently the picture of the social world produced. The ‘LETS community’ was a scene I felt familiar with. Much of my time spent in the field was
caught up in an attempt to reconcile my own involvement in LETS with other LETS members.

On reflection I felt generally more comfortable with the female interviewees about the same age as myself. Some, especially those with children, were at a crossroads in their lives. I felt that in this situation they opened up more fully during the interviews about their personal reasons for joining LETS. There seemed to be more mutual trust - we had more in common. Having said this being a member of LETS myself seemed to encourage trust generally, which in turn encouraged both male and female members to open up about their involvement with LETS.

At Yeovil I was a ‘stranger’ to most of the members. Just before setting off to do these interviews I wrote in my research diary:

Set off from Kingsbridge at 8-00am. I feel very anxious. I’m going to interview fourteen people, only one of whom I have met before. How will they greet me? They might be very middle class people who could put on ‘airs and graces’ and not give me very much information. I wonder if they’ll want to get rid of me quickly, but what if I can’t get away from them, and end up running late? What if they have all forgotten the appointments I made, it was some time ago? What if I can’t find the places? It might get really difficult if they don’t talk – I haven’t really got any questions to ask. Of course I have, there are two interview schedules in my bag. They may feel awkward me being a stranger – why would someone open up to someone they have never met before? At least with Kingsbridge I am part of LETS and live in the same area. (31.8.97)

Only one person forgot that I was coming. Even they were happy for me to interview them whilst preparing and then eating dinner. During the interviews both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil I did not have to work at establishing rapport. This was apparent from the hospitality I received. I was offered tea and coffee and sometimes
meals with members. I was therefore welcomed in to the interviewee’s home as a guest, rather than merely being tolerated as an inquisitor (Finch 1993:167).

Overall I think it is fair to say that ‘data derived from interviews are not simply “accurate” or “distorted” pieces of information’ (May 1993:109). Rather the interviews provided me with a means of analysing the ways in which people consider events and relationships and the reasons they offer for doing so (May 1993:109).

A fuller understanding was achieved by witnessing the context of the event or circumstances to which people refer (May 1993:109). I have already reflected upon the method of participant observation earlier where it seemed sensible to cover most of the key issues involved. What I have not adequately reflected upon thus far is how these data presented were arrived at. This leads me to ask a vital question: how does the researcher arrive at their personal interpretation of meaning and action? Raey (1996:62) quite neatly summarises two problems: firstly, how does one select the data to use, and secondly, how are these data to be interpreted? The common accusation is that the researcher's conceptions are used to explain and interpret the reality of other people.

Data analysis and interpretation were approached in a very tentative way. Throughout the research process I felt progressive confusion since I had to confront a ‘paradoxical tension’ (Raey 1996:62). As an inside member of LETS I chose to do research which was quite central to my own experience. However, my apprehension of misinterpreting the frequently similar experiences of the members whom I interviewed produced a persistent feeling of insecurity, which in turn highlighted my power as interpreter. Here the dangers of proximity are evident. As Barbara Du Bois (1983:105) has outlined:
The closer our subject matter to our own life and experience, the more we can probably expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work – to influence the very questions we pose, our conception of how to approach those questions, and the interpretations we generate from our findings.

I became buried under a growing mountain of field notes, transcripts, newspaper clippings and tape recordings. I needed help in handling the rich, complex and messy data. In other words I needed some kind of assistance to manage the ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973:26) which had amassed. Analysis was very time-consuming and complex. Hitherto I have said very little of the way in which I analysed the qualitative data, short of saying that I used the Nudist computer package. Nudist provided me with a way of managing the data. It allowed me to reflect on and explore the data.

I began by reading and re-reading field notes and transcriptions and eventually started to hand label passages of the data according to what they were about. This led to the generation of very general and broad categories, for example motivations for joining LETS, economic aspects, and social aspects. It was only at this stage that I turned to Nudist. This program had multiple text management uses, including coding, locating, and retrieving key materials, phrases and words. What the Nudist package allowed me to do was refine the categories and sub-group categories underneath the broader categories. Here I experimented with possible links. I continually asked myself how do different concepts link together? How can I understand the text? The Nudist software package gave me a way of handling the data and helped with the development of growing interpretations. The process would have taken much longer had I continued to do this by hand. I was aware at this stage that it was important not to let the software package determine the form and content of interpretative activity and make sure that
situational and contextual factors were also taken into account. It would be all too easy to distort the rich records and dilute the ‘thick descriptions’. I mainly used Nudist for coding and retrieval; it was a useful tool by which to make ideas, link concepts, understand the text and help in the development of growing interpretations. This is how I reflectively constructed a story for and from the data (Richards and Richards 1998:218).

It was also at this stage that Bourdieu’s concepts came in to play. Here again the different types of capital gave me a way of handling my data. It was not a pre-determined framework but rather was more fluid. I was not fitting LETS members’ actions in to a pre-determined framework of community. Rather I used Bourdieu’s concepts to explain a process that was going on among LETS members, which they called ‘community’. Bourdieu provided me with the conceptual apparatus for the study of the LETS world. Yet it is important to emphasise that the concepts I have borrowed are flexible and must be examined in the empirical setting rather than being seen as a set of categorical boxes to which the data must conform.

To conclude this section, insider knowledge has both strengths and weaknesses. One of the key strengths must be that insider knowledge of alternative grassroots culture has rarely informed academic writing. My experience of joining the group differed from some of the members I interviewed and met with, in terms of ethnicity, gender or geography. However, the contribution of shared understandings, of shared views of the world and our place in it was a very valuable resource in the research process. I found I still shared more with younger female members using LETS in a practical economic way, in spite of the focus on community.
Would a researcher with a different social background and a different theoretical stance interpret the data in the same way? I think not. Interpretation remains an imperfect and incomplete process. From where I am socially and intellectually positioned specific aspects of the data are a great deal more prominent than others are. I have struggled with the dilemma of whether this indicates an undesirable bias or whether it can lead to a genuine reflexivity. Can we ever escape the history of the concepts we incorporate into our theories or uncover all the presuppositions arising from our social and intellectual unconscious? I think this is questionable; 'the social knower cannot be totally ruptured from the social knowledge' (Barnaby 1995:185). Nevertheless, I have aspired to approach the difference my difference makes by locating my analysis in reflexive understandings of what LETS members share, as well as focusing on the differences between them. This has meant persistent untangling of what belonging signifies for members.

All these issues gave me an enormous amount of power during the research and are filters through which one makes sense of the social world. Consequently, critical reflection and a questioning of one's own assumptions is needed not just at the research stage but throughout analysis and the writing up stage.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the methods employed in studying Local Exchange and Trading Schemes. The discussion has not merely focused on the methods employed, but on the overall strategy employed in producing knowledge about community exchange groups. The research issues were framed after an in-depth review of existing
LETS literature and through fieldwork. A case study strategy enabled an in depth focus on the concrete processes and actions of members from two LETS.

From the outset a multi-methods approach was felt to be the most appropriate as it provided a more holistic picture. Consequently, quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire survey. A considerable amount of demographic information about LETS members was gained, thus facilitating comparison between members and across two geographically separated case studies. The interviews provided the opportunity to explore more deeply the meanings and perceptions LETS members had of their personal and social lives. Participant observation also permitted a deeper analysis of the LETS community where I was able to study life events as they were experienced and understood by LETS members. The data from the questionnaire was made more meaningful through the experiences gained from being a participating member and through gaining first-hand knowledge of LETS in action. The following three chapters present the findings of the study.

Notes

1 Harry Turner as far as I understand was Liz Shephard's partner, Liz being the promoter of LETS through Letslink - the development agency described in Chapter One.
2 A questionnaire constructed by Williams was sent to Totnes LETS members in February 1995 and resulted in a publication in the Journal of Public Policy in 1996.
3 Letslink UK sent a copy of 'The National LETS Survey, 1996' to Kingsbridge LETS in the summer of 1996.
4 If emphasis had been placed on respondents' right to refuse, or of not taking part, it may have resulted in a very poor response rate.
5 It was here that the second case study was identified.
6 Williams, for example has conducted a number of surveys. In October 1994 he sent a postal questionnaire to all 120 members of Calderdale LETS, 46 responded, a 38% response rate. A questionnaire was also sent to all Totnes LETS members (250) in February 1995, 63 responded which represented a 25.2% response rate. In May 1995 a postal questionnaire was sent to all LETS in the UK, 90 responded which represented a 32.7% response rate. In June 1995 Williams sent a postal survey to all 500 members of Manchester LETS, 109 responded a 21.8% response rate.
7 Twenty six from Kingsbridge LETS and fourteen from Yeovil LETS.
I constantly feared that I had not turned the tape on or that the batteries had run out or that the tape had stuck for some reason.

A. Oakley (1981) has very effectively exposed this for the sham it always was.

When using the word doxa Bourdieu is referring to ‘a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view...’ (Bourdieu 1998:57).

It was the open questions, which I believe, were more useful and questions about social characteristics.
CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LETS MEMBERS AND INITIAL GENERATION OF THEMES

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from a survey of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members. The purpose of the survey was largely to paint a broad picture. First, it explores the characteristics of LETS members. What kind of people join? Second, it examines the reasons given for initial involvement and the perceived benefits accruing from participation. The aim of this chapter therefore is to build up a profile of the membership of LETS, compare their social characteristics and motivations, and detail how 'community' emerged as a pervasive, enduring and persistent theme from the survey. Themes identified in this chapter are the subject of more detailed analysis in Chapters Six and Seven and discussion in Chapter Eight.

Social Characteristics of LETS Members

Table 1: Sex of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12 (28.6)</td>
<td>11 (34.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30 (71.4)</td>
<td>21 (65.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data indicate that both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS are dominated by female members. This is consistent with findings from most other empirical studies (Williams 1996; Seyfang 1994, 1998).

The most noticeable difference between Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS is exhibited in the age range of members. Table Two clearly shows that Kingsbridge LETS consists of a significantly older group of people than Yeovil LETS. In fact, no members were under the age of thirty-six in Kingsbridge. Members were slightly younger in Yeovil, however, we can still see a skew towards the older age range. Only one member was under the age of twenty-five, and only a quarter were under the age of thirty-six. LETS therefore appear to be more attractive to the older age groups.

Table 2: Age of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>7 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>12 (28.6)</td>
<td>10 (31.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>11 (26.2)</td>
<td>6 (18.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>9 (21.4)</td>
<td>5 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>8 (19.0)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76+</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Three gives some indication of the employment status of members. With regard to employment, the question in the questionnaire was asked in such a way that a reasonably detailed breakdown could be provided. The data thus revealed more about
the type of employment undertaken by Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members. This in turn gives some indication of the amount of disposable time available to them.

Table 3: Employment status of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of members who were:</th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working full-time (over 30 hours per week)</td>
<td>8 (19.0)</td>
<td>9 (28.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part-time (10-30 hours per week)</td>
<td>7 (16.7)</td>
<td>8 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part-time (under 10 hours per week)</td>
<td>9 (21.4)</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and seeking work</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to work for health reasons</td>
<td>13 (31.0)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>5 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife/househusband</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In full-time education</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of remarks can be made here. First, and quite surprisingly, only one member was unemployed. In fact, no Kingsbridge members responded that they were unemployed. This is in contrast to the findings of most studies of LETS, which have found much higher percentages of unemployed (Williams 1996 a,b,c). This may in part have something to do with how LETS members define employment in the first place. For example, in a survey of Calderdale LETS, Williams (1996a:357) found that some members were in receipt of benefits but defined their employment status as self-
employed. This reflected their perceived contribution to society rather than their job status. It may also link in to a second interesting skew - a high percentage of members from Kingsbridge were unable to work for health reasons. Seyfang (1998:130) found that KwinLETS tended to attract members who were not engaged in traditional full-time employment. This was consistent with the findings from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS. Only 19.0% of Kingsbridge members and 28.1% of Yeovil members worked over 30 hours a week. Also, if we group the latter five categories in Table Three together, we can see that quite a high percentage of Kingsbridge (40.5%) and Yeovil members (31.2%) were not in paid employment for some reason. These data give some indication that relatively high proportions of members are likely to have available time to devote to LETS involvement.

The above data raise a further question. If unemployed people did not dominate membership, but many work on a part-time basis, or were not in paid employment, what were the earnings of members? Are members, as suggested by other studies (Williams 1996 a,b,c), predominantly from low-income households?

The data from the questionnaire are difficult to compare directly with other empirical studies. This is because different categories of earnings were included in different questionnaires. However, one remark can be made. The findings indicate that, as far as household income is concerned, a wide cross-section of people earning varying amounts join LETS, rather than it merely being the preserve of low income groups. In Kingsbridge nearly a half of the membership (47.6%) earned less than £700 net per month while thirteen of the thirty two members from Yeovil (40.7%) did. More interestingly, we can see that members of Yeovil LETS were more polarised with regard to earnings than in Kingsbridge where we can see a steady gradation.
Table 4: *Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members monthly net income by household*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count (%)</td>
<td>Count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£150 - £300</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>8 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£301 - £500</td>
<td>6 (14.3)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£501 - £700</td>
<td>10 (23.8)</td>
<td>3 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£701 - £900</td>
<td>6 (14.3)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£900 - £1100</td>
<td>5 (11.9)</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1101 - £1500</td>
<td>5 (11.9)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1501 - £2000+</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>11 (34.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data suggest that LETS members are not homogeneous in terms of earnings. It would therefore be misleading to assert that LETS are merely the preserve of low-income people. The attraction to LETS appears to be more complex.

The table below indicates that members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil exhibited high levels of cultural capital in terms of qualifications gained. This is consistent with findings from West Glasgow LETS (Pacione 1997a:1192) and Manchester LETS (Williams 1996b). Table Five provides a more detailed breakdown of qualifications gained.
Table 5: Qualifications of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree/higher/or equivalent</td>
<td>16 (38.1)</td>
<td>10 (31.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching qualification</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing qualification</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A level</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>6 (18.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O level</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>3 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School certificate</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (9.5)</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No qualification</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high proportion (52.3%) of LETS members in Kingsbridge had a degree or higher, teaching or nursing qualification. Similarly, in Yeovil 46.9% had these kinds of qualifications. It is interesting that other studies have also found high levels of cultural capital. It also raises interesting questions. For example, did cultural capital contribute to the day-to-day running of LETS? Did members gain further cultural capital through their involvement in LETS? Answers to such questions were difficult to access from the questionnaire.

LETS have been heralded as a vehicle for ‘incomers’ who are ‘unlikely to have robust social networks and informal sources of support beyond the LETS’ (Williams 1996 b,c). For this reason I asked members in the questionnaire about the length of time they had resided in the area, and about kinship ties.
Table 6: Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members length of residence in the area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 years</td>
<td>11 (26.2)</td>
<td>10 (31.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 years</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>8 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>25 (59.5)</td>
<td>11 (34.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was born here</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>42 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>32 (100)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quite a high proportion of members from both Kingsbridge (31%) and Yeovil LETS (34.4%) had resided in the area for five years or less. This may indicate that their support networks/social networks may be relatively weak. However, 66.6% of the membership from Kingsbridge and 40.7% of those from Yeovil had lived in the area for more than ten years or were born there. Although a direct comparison with other empirical studies was not possible, again due to the categories asked about in different questionnaires, similar findings were produced by Seyfang (1998:131) where 53% of members of KwinLETS had lived in the area for more than 15 years, while only 15% had lived there for less than 5 years. As Seyfang (1998:131) states of KwinLETS members, ‘This represents a much more stable population of long term residents than is commonly found in other schemes’. A study conducted by Pacione (1997b:422) found that 30% of LETS members in Skye had been living there for less than 5 years, while only 23% had been resident for over 15 years. Data from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS suggest that there were a reasonably large stable long-term population, but that around a third of the membership were relatively new to the area. Did members have kinship ties within the local area?
Table 7: Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members who had relatives living in the area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>3 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>12 (28.6)</td>
<td>7 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers/sisters</td>
<td>8 (19.0)</td>
<td>6 (18.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>19 (45.2)</td>
<td>16 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts/uncles</td>
<td>3 (7.1)</td>
<td>2 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>6 (14.3)</td>
<td>3 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This was a multiple response question.

While these data indicate a more stable population of long-term residents, they also revealed that many members do not have extensive kinship ties within the local area. Few had grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles or cousins living in the area. While around half of members had children living in the area, only around a quarter had parents in the locality.

Summary of LETS Members' Social Characteristics

Thus, we can say that the average LETS member: is female, over the age of thirty-six, and has been educated to degree level. She is not unemployed but neither is she in traditional full-time employment, thus has some disposable time available to her. She has resided in the area for a relatively long time although she has few kinship ties in the area. I turn now to examine what it was that sparked off members' initial interest and then move on to explore the main reasons given in the questionnaire for joining LETS.
Table 8: Sources of initial interest in LETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>count  (%)</td>
<td>count  (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>18 (42.8)</td>
<td>7 (21.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local shop</td>
<td>2 (4.7)</td>
<td>7 (21.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>21 (50.0)</td>
<td>17 (53.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (2.3)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table we can clearly see that word of mouth is important in initiating interest. Seyfang (1998:128) argues that the consequence of this is that 'membership base tends to be self-selecting by growing organically over existing social networks, and can be slow to embrace other social groups'. My results are consistent with findings from KwinLETS which indicate that growing media attention to LETS has further encouraged or contributed to membership expansion. Thus dissemination of information to a wider cross-section of society may have the effect of 'favouring a less homogenous membership' (Seyfang 1998:129). This raises an interesting question, are the memberships homogeneous, or are they becoming more heterogeneous? Findings have already suggested that in terms of earnings, members were not particularly similar, but were more similar in terms of educational qualifications. This also raises a further question, namely whether there are there any mechanisms of exclusion at work within LETS. These are interesting questions which are followed through in more detail in Chapters Six and Seven.

It was relatively straightforward to secure answers and categorize the above-cited social characteristics from the questionnaire. However, it proved more difficult to untangle
'reasons for joining'. The second question on the questionnaire asked 'What were your reasons for joining LETS?' This was an open-ended question with space left for respondents to answer in their own words. Many members cited several reasons in one sentence. Seyfang (1998:141) has attempted to categorize motivations and identified three types of reason. These were 'economic' (60%), 'fostering social contacts and community building' (40%) and, 'motivations relating to environmental concerns' (13%). A small number (4%) also cited a commitment to 'social equity' as a reason for joining. Given that these percentages add up to 117% she also found that they were not discrete groups. Reasons for joining were complex and it was not possible therefore to indicate in any simple way the relevance of, for example, the percentage replying 'economic' or the percentage responding 'community' etc. My analysis therefore is based on a frequency count of responses cited. This analysis is rough and ready, yet it allows a presentation of the data which is more in line with the rest of the data in this chapter.

Table 9: Reasons cited for joining Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency count</th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community/social contact</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea/principle/interest</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social equity/personal empowerment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green/ethical issues</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see from the above table, the main concept referred to was that of community and the fostering of social contacts. The following quotations are examples. Members wrote 'Attracted to the community-building aspect', 'Curiosity and getting to know more people in the Community'. Yet for many, it was not just to meet other
people, it was also to make friends - 'To become involved in the community and make new friends'. More specifically members wanted to meet a certain type of person 'To meet like-minded people'.

People who were new to the area were very keen to make social contact with people in the local area as the following quotations illustrate: 'A good way to get to know people in a new town', 'To find like minded friends in a new town and become part of the community', 'Because I was new to the area, the idea of trading appealed to me and it would help me to integrate in to the Community'.

Economic reasons were the second most cited reason for joining LETS. Again the following quotations serve as examples 'On benefits [government] and needing [financial] help', 'I thought it would be a good way of experiencing things I could not otherwise afford'. However, while some referred purely to economic reasons others combined economic, community and social contact - 'Joined when first moved to Manchester – same reasons as here – to make contact with like-minded people and to create community and to move away from conventional money currency and because I’m poor! (in money terms!)'.

Even when economic aspects were referred to, they were often not the main reason for joining as one person illustrated by prioritising his reasons 'Mainly to communicate with local people. Secondly to trade. Thirdly to be able to get my bike fixed and possibly get guitar lessons'. Others suggested that their initial motivation was economic, however, the social/community aspects soon after joining were just as important 'At first to trade without using sterling. But quite soon afterwards the Social Community aspect is just as valid'.
A high proportion of both memberships supported the idea or principle behind LETS. This reason was cited 16 times by Kingsbridge members as a reason for joining and 10 times by Yeovil members. For example members wrote - ‘Really liked the whole concept’, ‘General interest in the principle’, ‘It seemed an excellent idea in every way’, ‘I support it as an empowering alternative to the deadly money system’.

It was interesting that some of those who cited economic reasons for joining, did not specifically say it was to help themselves, rather it was to benefit others in the community that needed it. For example members wrote: ‘Helping those you know need financial benefits’, ‘Thought it was an excellent way of helping live economically, especially benefiting the poor’, thus social equity reasons, as the data in the above table document, were referred to by a small number of members (but nowhere near as high as those reported by Williams whose empirical findings indicated that 17% of Manchester and 18% of Calderdale LETS members, responded that they had joined for social equity reasons). Others still identified the bottom-up strategy as being an important aspect. Examples in members own words include - ‘Believe changes in society must come from the grassroots’, ‘A feeling that I was able to make a difference’. The importance of voluntary self-help may suggest some kind of, or sense of individual empowerment. Indeed 69% of members from Kingsbridge and 61.3% of members from Yeovil thought that LETS was a tool for empowerment.

Only a very small number referred to environmental motivations. In fact, only one Kingsbridge member cited this as a reason for joining LETS - ‘To trade locally in a more sensible fashion – away from the big, commercial, anonymous organisations’. Environmental motivations were also only cited by two Yeovil members. For example
one wrote '...helped found it to put “green” ideas into practice', and the other cited 'Promotion of locally focused activities as a necessity for a sustainable future'.

The above quotations and the frequency count give some indication of the reasons given for joining LETS in the first instance. Members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil cited very similar reasons. The key motivations appear to be community, the pursuit of friendship with like-minded people, economic, a commitment to the principle of LETS and to a very small extent environmental. Both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members appeared less motivated by economic objectives than in Williams's study (1996a) of Calderdale (87%) and Manchester LETS (1996b) (82%) than the anticipation of creating, or wanting to belong to, some kind of community. These motivations were given at the start of the questionnaire through an open question and thus allowed members to bring up themes and motivations themselves and in their own words. Later in the questionnaire, more direct questions were asked about each of these concepts. Questions about economic trading appeared obvious given that LETS are ostensibly designed as trading schemes. Literature, observation and discussion with LETS members drove questions relating to community. It is to each of these that I now turn.
Table 10: The accrual of economic/employment benefits through membership of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all/not a lot</td>
<td>Quite a lot/a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped gain access to essentials</td>
<td>35 (83.3)</td>
<td>7 (16.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped gain access to luxuries</td>
<td>29 (69.0)</td>
<td>13 (30.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved economic situation</td>
<td>31 (73.8)</td>
<td>11 (26.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved lack of employment</td>
<td>35 (83.3)</td>
<td>7 (16.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One member from Yeovil had only just joined and felt unable to answer any of these questions. The percentages are therefore based on a sample of 31 Yeovil members.

The data indicate that respondents feel little has been gained either economically or in terms of improved employment. Perhaps this could have been expected given that many other studies of LETS have also revealed only a small amount of trading actually does take place. However, it was interesting that there was quite a large difference between Kingsbridge and Yeovil in terms of 'help gained in access to essentials and luxuries'. A very small percentage (16.7%) of members from Kingsbridge responded that it had helped them gain access to essentials, whereas in Yeovil just over half (51.6%) responded that it had. This is interesting in terms of the disposition of founding members. It has already been detailed how the initiators of Yeovil LETS were described as more 'practical people'. Goods and services of a practical nature, considered essential to members, may be on offer through Yeovil LETS. This appears to be supported by the high percentage (74.2%) of members from Yeovil responding that LETS had not helped them gain access to luxuries. The opposite appears to be the
case in Kingsbridge. A very large percentage (83.3%) responded that LETS had not helped them to gain access to essentials but a higher percentage (30.9%) than Yeovil responded that they had gained access to luxuries. Perhaps therapy is considered a luxury.

More interestingly, similarly high percentages of members from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS thought that membership had not improved their economic situation. This raises interesting questions. If LETS are not helping members in an economic way, then why was membership not declining at a faster rate? Why did members continue to renew their membership? Why did people continue to join LETS? Why are the number of LETS continuing to grow? If, as the data suggest, the economic dimension was not as dynamic as perhaps one could expect given that LETS are trading schemes, then the anticipation and creation of community therefore becomes even more intriguing and interesting. The data has already indicated that creating community was a particularly important motivation for joining LETS. Was it also something which actually developed in practice?

The Importance of Community

The empirical studies detailed in Chapter One, as well as observation, discussion with LETS members, and a reading of LETS literature alerted me to the importance of community to LETS members, prior to the construction of the questionnaire. It was for these reasons that a number of questions specifically asked about ‘community’. For example I asked members to agree/disagree that ‘people desire more co-operation and
community'. I also asked 'has LETS helped generate feelings of community?' The following table presents the findings.

Table 11: Perceptions of community through membership of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'People desire more co-operation and community':</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>13 (31.7)</td>
<td>12 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>25 (61.0)</td>
<td>16 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>3 (7.3)</td>
<td>3 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>1 (3.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>*41 (100)</td>
<td>32 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'LETS generate feelings of community':</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>12 (28.6)</td>
<td>8 (25.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>21 (50.0)</td>
<td>14 (45.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>8 (19.0)</td>
<td>7 (22.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>1 (2.4)</td>
<td>2 (6.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
<td>*31 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One Kingsbridge and one Yeovil member did not respond to this question. Percentages are given for those who did answer.

The above table indicates that an overwhelming number of members who join LETS (92.7% and 87.5% respectively) do feel that people desire more co-operation and community. Moreover, the data also clearly indicate that the vast majority of members feel that LETS does, in fact, generate feelings of community. 78.6% (33 of 42) of members from Kingsbridge felt that it did, similarly, 71.0% (22 of 32) of members from Yeovil also thought so. ‘Community’ therefore was a key strand running through
the data. Yet while it became apparent that this was a key theme, what the questionnaire data did not discern was the kind of community that was evolving from LETS involvement.

Some indication was given, when stating reasons for joining LETS, that the concept of like-mindedness was important. One question in the questionnaire specifically asked whether or not LETS had ‘helped bring you into contact with like-minded people’.

Table 12: *LETS involvement brings members into contact with like-minded others*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count (%)</td>
<td>count (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>13 (31.0)</td>
<td>17 (56.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>19 (45.2)</td>
<td>9 (30.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a lot</td>
<td>8 (19.0)</td>
<td>4 (13.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>42 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>30 (100)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Two Yeovil members did not answer this question. Percentages are given for those who did answer.

Here we can see that in Kingsbridge, 45.2% (19 members) responded that LETS had helped ‘quite a lot’ to bring them into contact with like-minded people. A further 31% (13 members) replied that it had ‘a lot’. Taken together, this represents 76.2% (32 members), leaving only 4.8% (2 members) who felt that it had helped ‘not at all’ and a further 19.0% (8 members) feeling that it had helped ‘not a lot’. This was mirrored in Yeovil LETS. An even higher 86.7% thought that LETS had helped in this respect. In fact, while only four members (13.3%) thought it had not helped ‘a lot’, not one member responded that it had helped ‘not at all’.
However, 'like-mindedness' may mean very different things to different people. What kind of like-minded people were being drawn together is difficult to ascertain from the questionnaire. For this reason, this concept was investigated further during the in-depth interviewing that followed. Members were asked to define like-mindedness themselves. Consequently, the importance of like-mindedness emerged through data from the questionnaire, and is a concept further explored in Chapter Six. For the time being I continue to draw out themes such as these.

LETS differ from other community development initiatives, for example credit unions, in that organised social events are one of the attractions. Social events are one way in which community building can occur. Meeting people socially has the effect of building social capital. This was suggested by the data from the questionnaire.

Most members of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS responded that they had been to at least one social event with some attending all. Thirty-three of the forty-two members (78.6%) from Kingsbridge reported that they had attended a LETS social event, while a slightly higher percentage (81.3%), twenty-six of the thirty-two respondents from Yeovil had done so. It was difficult to determine exactly the number attended as some members included core group meetings while others defined trading days as social events. This is an interesting artefact of the data itself. The importance of such events, however, became obvious through the qualitative comments asked for in the questionnaire. One question specifically asked what aspects of the social events did they enjoy/not enjoy. One member wrote that she enjoyed:
Interacting with like-minded people in the community and the atmosphere of friendliness, openness, trust, fun, support and creativity. Don't enjoy pub-evenings. Prefer an event with a focus.

Again, this highlights the problem of trying to categorize qualitative comments. Several concepts are referred to in this one sentence. Again, rather than attempt to turn the data into percentage format I constructed a frequency table in order to demonstrate the number of times certain concepts were referred to.

Table 13: Aspects enjoyed at social events by Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency count</th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
<th>All count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting like-minded friends</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding mutual interests/developing ideas</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific events</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talents/creativity of people/entertainment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help and support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What was ascertained from the questionnaire was that meeting people was a major feature of the social events enjoyed by almost all, evidenced in the following quotations: 'Meeting the members of LETS/friends', 'Meeting and sharing', 'Meeting other members and trading', 'Doing things together. Meeting and getting to know people better', 'Meeting and interacting with the folk involved', 'Enjoyed meeting others – putting faces to numbers', 'Good to meet a wider circle than just existing friends'. As well as meeting people the concept of like-mindedness was again also referred to by many 'I always enjoy being with like-minded people', 'The contact – meeting enthusiastic and like-minded people'. Members also pointed to aspects of the
There was a difference between Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS here as the table below shows.

### Table 14: Aspects not enjoyed at social events by Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency count</th>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Yeovil LETS</th>
<th>All count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger members constrained by older members</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment with lack of support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time to attend events</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pub evenings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not child friendly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clique/strained social interaction</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core group meetings overlapping with social events</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was interesting that members from Yeovil were a little more critical of the socials than Kingsbridge members. One wrote ‘Did not enjoy the strained social interaction’.

This may be due to the ‘Arguments at meetings’ put forward by another member. Another stated that they did not like ‘Core Group arguments that go on too long without reaching a conclusion’. More often than not, however, these remarks were countered with more positive comments like ‘meeting people and interacting with them’. It became apparent that in Yeovil the Core Group meetings and the social events were often one and the same thing. Some members clearly did not like this.

Meeting people through social events by definition means that one will get to know many of the people involved. This in itself means that one will get to know the people one will trade with prior to trading with them. If the building of trust is important before trading can take place, then the social events are indeed quite crucial to the
successful development of LETS. Over half (54.8%) of the members of each case study (54.8% and 56.3% respectively) thought that trust needs to be in place before trading can take place. Only three members from each of the case studies disagreed, though not strongly.

If it is the social events that are building an element of trust among members, and perhaps creating the environment for trade, are there any community building effects of trading? In Kingsbridge a very high 88.1% of members agreed that community building was a side effect of trading. Not one member disagreed. An even higher 93.5% of members from Yeovil agreed that this was the case.

Thus we seem to have a situation where trust needs to be built before trading can take place. This appeared to be done through the social events, which further boosted trade, and which in turn created ‘community’. So trust leads to trade, which leads to trust, which leads to more trade. However, although a high number of members had been to at least one social event, most social events appeared to have been attended only by a small number who regularly attended. This was the case both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil. The implication here is that if members do not attend the social events, then trust will not develop and trade will not be boosted, thus leading to stagnation with regard to trade and community cohesion.

It appears that members perceive the social aspects and the meeting of people as a fundamental and enjoyable aspect of LETS. It has already been detailed that around a third of members both from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS were relatively new to the area. Indeed it was newcomers to the area who expressed a desire to make social contact with people living within the local area. It has also been noted that there was
also a reasonably stable long-term population, yet living in a rural area may also contribute to fragile ties as often dispersed living limits contact. Moreover, living within an area for a relatively long period is no guarantee of strong social networks. Therefore I was interested to find out whether members actually felt that they developed a wider network of people they could call on for help through LETS, and if so, did this further develop into friendship?

Table 15: Proportions of respondents agreeing with statements regarding the significance of membership of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS for the development of social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kingsbridge LETS</th>
<th>Develop a wider network of people you can call on for help</th>
<th>Develop a wider network of friends</th>
<th>Develop deeper friendships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(58.3)</td>
<td>(41.7)</td>
<td>(66.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(70.0)</td>
<td>(30.0)</td>
<td>(76.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(66.7)</td>
<td>(33.3)</td>
<td>(73.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeovil LETS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*n=30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(60.0)</td>
<td>(40.0)</td>
<td>(36.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(85.0)</td>
<td>(15.0)</td>
<td>(75.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(76.7)</td>
<td>(23.3)</td>
<td>(61.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All Kingsbridge members responded to these questions. Responses from Yeovil varied because some members were new to LETS and therefore felt unable to answer. Percentages are based on those who did respond.
What is interesting about the above table is that a very high percentage of members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil stated that LETS had helped them to develop a wider network of people they could call on for help. Just over three-quarters of Yeovil members (76.7%) and two-thirds of Kingsbridge members (66.7%) responded that it had helped in this respect. Yet having a wider network of people to call on for help is a very different concept than that of trading with them. As already evidenced most do not feel that they have benefited from LETS in an economic way. Does this indicate that insecurity is a feature of people’s lives in contemporary society? Perhaps one needs some kind of network in place to counter insecurity. It is possible that LETS do, in fact, provide this kind of ontological security.

Table Fifteen clearly shows that friendships do actually grow and deepen over time through LETS involvement. A slightly higher percentage (73.8%) of Kingsbridge members believed that they had developed a wider network of friends as a result of joining LETS. Females quite clearly tended to gain more in terms of friendship, however, quite a high level of male friendship also developed. Overall percentages are slightly lower in terms of developing deeper friendships through LETS involvement. Having said this, exactly a half (50.0%) of the membership of Kingsbridge and just less than a half (46.7%) of the membership of Yeovil answered that they had, in fact, developed deeper friendships. Both LETS were well established and had been in operation for a period of three years. The data thus suggest that through LETS involvement, friendships did grow and deepen over a period of time.
Conclusion

The social characteristics of both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS members were on the whole quite similar. In both, females dominated membership. Kingsbridge differed slightly in that membership tended to be dominated by a slightly older group of people, although there was still a skew towards an older age group at Yeovil LETS. In stark contrast to previous findings, members were not by their own definition unemployed, although in Kingsbridge higher proportions of members were unable to work for health reasons. Findings suggest that Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS tended to attract members who were not engaged in traditional full time employment. Members may therefore have a higher level of disposable time to devote to LETS involvement. Moreover, it was found that membership was not merely the preserve of low-income people. A wider cross-section of people earning varying amounts join LETS. This was particularly the case in Yeovil where members were more polarized in terms of their earnings. Interestingly high levels of cultural capital, in terms of educational qualifications, were found both among Kingsbridge and Yeovil members, which is consistent with findings from other studies. A reasonably large long-term resident population also dominated membership of both LETS schemes, although extensive kinship ties were not evidenced. Around a third of the membership of each LETS have been described as relatively new to the area.

Word of mouth was an important way in which people initially heard about LETS. This may indicate that members self-select like-minded others with pre-existing social networks. However, growing media attention may be beginning to disseminate information to a wider cross section of society, which may in turn have the effect of embracing a less homogeneous membership.
In economic terms, members appeared not to gain significantly, although many indicated that it had helped them to develop a wider network of people they could call on for help. This may indicate that membership of LETS offers members some level of security in an insecure world. Yet the economic aspect was overshadowed by another key strand which ran through the data. This was the importance to members of community and the fostering of social contacts. Findings indicate that membership of LETS does generate feelings of community. More specifically, it brings people of like mind together and helps to create friendships. The creation of community and the fostering of social contacts through the social events appeared instrumental in building social capital among members. So, although we now have a broader picture of the kind of people that join LETS and their reasons for doing so, a more detailed account is now needed of the ways in which community building occurs in practice. Community is rooted in the shared meanings and routine background practices of members, which are the focus of the following two chapters.
CHAPTER SIX: THE MAKINGS OF LETS AS COMMUNITY

Introduction

In Chapter Five, an exploration of the social characteristics of LETS members was undertaken. A profile of the LETS membership was produced. In addition themes deserving more detailed investigation were identified. This chapter presents the findings of the observation and in-depth interviewing stages of the research. The chapter begins by highlighting members' perceptions of rapid social change. The response to this perception is one motivation for joining a grassroots initiative such as LETS. I then provide an in-depth account of the day-to-day running of a LETS. The analysis focuses on three LETS activities. First it focuses on LETS as a grassroots response to community building. This aspect was crucial inasmuch as the kind of 'community' that was evolving originated from the creativity of members; they reflectively created their own 'LETS community' in an attempt to create personal autonomy. Second I concentrate on the creation and maintenance of communal group identity. The survey identified that people of 'like-mind' came together. However, the notion of like-mindedness needs further definition before it is possible to see how it contributes to communal group identity. Finally I investigate the creation and maintenance of community boundaries. It is crucial to look at the routine way in which this process operated. Everyday practices generated shared meaning which contributed to, and maintained the 'LETS community'. However, as we shall see, there are different levels of involvement in the shared rituals and social practices which, in effect, create different community boundaries within LETS. The reflexive and symbolic importance of this to members is crucial to any understanding of how the creation of community occurs through LETS involvement.
Perceptions of Social Change

One reason that people appear to have for joining LETS is that it is their response to what they perceive as a period of rapid social change. I was first alerted to this issue by those who remarked on it explicitly. As one Kingsbridge member pointed out:

That's the only certainty isn't it change really. (K14a)

Another female member pointed out that it 'was the rate of change that was the problem [not] the change itself'. Yet another from Yeovil stated that:

There's just kind of the flavour at the moment of complete change. And I think when you've got those times of that kind of feeling, then new things can come in. (K7)

This evidence suggests that LETS represent one attempt to reassert the local boundary as wider physical and structural boundaries become blurred (Cohen 1985).

Many other members spoke about social change implicitly. This provided some indication that LETS are a response to social change affecting patterns of family life which links in with Purdue et al.'s. (1997) discussion of 'global anomie'. Interestingly, or perhaps as could be expected, it was the divorced or separated female members who talked explicitly about a breakdown of the nuclear family. As one divorced mother said 'With families dispersing, people need to ask for help'. Another divorced member indicated that:

... because of the lack of the nuclear family and everything else, I think something like LETS or community building is more important for people these days. Social support. (K5)
This same member stated that because of the:

breakdown of the extended family people are forming and finding a need to form social groups different [from the extended family]. (K5)

Two remarks can be made here. First, the divorce rate has increased dramatically since 1961. LETS in theory could provide social support as family bonds weaken. LETS in theory could also provide a means of 're-embedding' as people migrate and thus 'dis-embed' from established social networks.

While divorced female members talked about LETS as a response to changes occurring in family structures, others referred to social change emanating from national and local politics. For example, both male and female members from Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, spoke of the damaging effects the Conservative government had had on 'community' over the previous decade. One male member from Kingsbridge directly associated community and family breakdown with the Conservative government:

Maggie Thatcher [said] get on yer bike and everything. She just split actual families up never mind communities, she’s split it right down. She’s split everything up. Even like council houses, estates where you had er, you know there was a community on a council estate and you know, when I used to live on one there was anyway, but you know, once people start buying their houses, and everything else, I think that a lot of community disappears. (K1)

This was a theme that ran through many of the interviews. Another spoke of the 'destruction of everything of value' directly linking it with the Conservative government.
Some members, particularly in Kingsbridge, also referred to social change at the level of the local geographical community. Here, events in local politics had the effect of creating feelings of powerlessness:

...the post office as you know closed a little while ago and none of the natives were consulted about it. They [also] propose to move the Health Centre from the logical place where it is now to an illogical place, simply because the doctors want it, and various pacts have been manipulated to argue in that direction. And the people of Kingsbridge have been up in arms about it, but in neither instance have they had enough power to actually say no, we want our post office where it was, we want the surgery to stay where it is, because so far, the powers that be, in inverted commas don’t want, are still doing what they like. That really ought to change. (K8)

This has implications in terms of LETS as a grassroots organization. The significance of LETS as a grassroots initiative, and the attempt to create some kind of personal autonomy is beginning to become apparent. This is an issue dealt with in more detail in the next section.

Paid employment was another area where changes were perceived as taking place. The following quotation specifically links a discontent with national politics, change in the structure of employment, and LETS as a means of self-help at the level of locality as a way of dealing with this kind of change.

[LET'S] are setting up and it’s encouraging people to help themselves. Which is what the government really want people to do anyway. But they [meaning the government] want to do it in a particular way. They won’t think laterally. They want to go on doing it the same way. You know jobs, it has to be a job, there are good jobs for people. There is more to life than jobs for people. We are a changing society. There are not jobs for everybody. There are not full time jobs for everybody, that’s the reality. (K12)

In addition to a perceived shortage of full time jobs, this same member further pointed out her perception of the contemporary employment scene.
We’ve got those that are in full time jobs working double time in order to keep their jobs and they’re stressed out going off sick and those that haven’t got a job. It’s madness. We need to start looking at whole new systems. (K12)

Obviously time is related to social change (Sztompka 1993:41). Certainly, members who were in full time employment found that a lack of time was increasingly a problem. One member who had three different jobs stated that:

Well, basically it’s finding the time because I do work full time, I work in the evenings as well, and it’s actually finding the time to fit this in [meaning LETS] that’s the problem. (K1)

Another stated that ‘It’s working well for lots of people, for me it isn’t, but then that’s my fault because I work full time’. Yet another had her own business where she:

was stuck in the shop mostly. I even work on Sunday. I work seven days a week. So I don’t get a lot of time. (K11)

This raises the question of why people with a lot of paid employment would want to get involved with LETS. Perhaps again it may have something to do with perceived levels of security. The changing nature of formal paid employment can lead to feelings of insecurity. It can also change the nature of social contacts. The following quotation refers specifically to new types of working arrangements as one source of insecurity.

...most threatened people are the ones who are employed on short term contracts, they have no stability...and no security. I mean these people are not giving the best to their jobs. They’re watching their backs all the time. It creates fear, and fear is very destructive. Keeping people watching all the time, they’re working extra hours in order, thinking well if I don’t work extra hours they won’t keep me on next time. It’s wrong, it’s crazy. It’s absolutely crazy. (K14a)

On the other hand, the majority of LETS members were not in traditional full time employment. It was suggested in Chapter Five that this was some indication that a
relatively high proportion of members were likely to have time available to devote to LETS involvement. As one Yeovil member pointed out ‘it’s the middle class and retired that have the time, the energy and the motivation to do a lot of these things’ (meaning involvement with LETS).

Some members also indicated that they were in receipt of government benefits. At the time of writing Liz Shephard from Letslink was making efforts to change the social security regulations regarding LETS and benefit entitlements. In an e-mail dated 18th May 1998 she wrote that Frank Field MP had said:

...his concern about LETS was that it could be a kind of ‘ghetto’ (enabling people to remain on the dole rather than find work) and that welfare must be an engine for self and community improvement leading people into mainstream work. I pointed out that LETS had a high profile of health care and community and personal development which was building new capacity for work. But he was more interested in seeing examples of regeneration using LETS.

In response Colin Williams, an academic, further argued:

What we have to remember is that the whole philosophy for the Labour Government is that Social Inclusion equals getting people into employment. They don’t seem to recognise that there never has been full employment so how can we return to it.

While this is a very interesting debate, which has many implications for LETS and its members, it is not one that is pursued in detail here. Members from both LETS schemes under study were not particularly interested in taking part in this debate. The general consensus among Core Group members was that it was better to draw as little attention to this issue as possible, as it could, in fact, have unforeseen consequences for their particular LETS scheme and for LETS in general. But what I think it does highlight, however, is that in reality the present Labour Government is more likely to be
interested in LETS as a way of reducing the unemployment count, rather than take any real interest in personal development. But LETS are not primarily about advancing employment opportunities. It became evident as this study progressed that LETS were more about facilitating personal development within the local geographical community.

The changing location of the workplace in contemporary society was also thought by some to be a troublesome trend. One Kingsbridge member thought that commuting particularly damaged social ties. He believed that this had consequences for community. As he said:

Kingsbridge [in the past] ... was reasonably self-contained ... whereas now, wherever you live tends to be a dormitory for people who work somewhere else, and they buy something here which was made somewhere else. So you know nothing of your neighbours and you know nothing of what they do or why they do it and so on and so on. (K8)

This raises the question of whether LETS are more to do with re-creating 'lost' social ties which several members felt were absent. If paid employment has become 'dis-embedded' from locality, perhaps LETS are a way of 're-embedding' people in to the local community (Giddens 1991).

Some members, in particular female members with children, described how friends, especially female friends, were now too busy working in paid employment to feel comfortable in asking them for a hand:

And it is more difficult to ask people, or I've always found it difficult to ask people to help me anyway. Even just friends, you know I find it very difficult to ask somebody to come in and put up a shelf for me or whatever, because you know how busy people are nowadays and er, I don't know, even like women friends, it's even more difficult to ask them to help look after the children because a lot of them work more
perhaps than in my mother's day, or whatever. So if you feel that you are paying people in a way it's better. (K5)

A perception of a 'loss of community' in modern society was evident. Members spoke of how certain everyday activities, particularly for women, had changed over the last generation. These changes clearly had some impact, both negative and positive, upon members' social contact/ties within the geographical communities. As one female member from Yeovil LETS very clearly pointed out:

Because I mean we don't sort of all meet at the local shops any more...we all hop in our cars and travel out. And not so many years ago I remember with my mother, we used to walk to the market on a Friday and we would see people there and we would walk down to school and we'd all meet at the school gates. I drive to the school and pick up the children and I drive to the shops and do the shopping and you don't see people in the same way...my mum used to struggle back with a weeks shopping in about four carrier bags. And I wouldn't dream of doing that. I will openly admit that I wouldn't dream of it. And yet, I mean the first thing is you think you've got lazy, but I wouldn't call myself lazy, I do a hundred and one things my mother would never have done. It's just different. I think we expend our energy in different places at different times and it has a different focus...My mum would never go out until she had hoovered, dusted and polished the entire house...my routine compared to my mothers is completely different, I think our lives have changed. I think for the better in a lot of ways, I think we do more of maybe what we want to do rather than do what we feel we ought to do. I think we are less bound by tradition if you like. But I think the price of that is that we don't necessarily, I mean you may not see your neighbours. I think you know, yes if you're walking to the shops every day for your bread or whatever, you're going to see your neighbours. You know I come out of my front door and ten steps away I get in to my car, you know I could never see my neighbours, if I didn't want to. So you've lost that sort of social contact straight away. (Y7)

I particularly felt empathy with this member. I remember going shopping with my mother to the market every week. Usually we had to walk about three miles with heavy shopping bags. I now shop at the local supermarket, and travel twenty-five miles to work. I know very few of my neighbours. This is a very different situation than that of my mother's, and one which most definitely can have an effect on social ties between
people. However, and as the above quotation suggests, it is a matter of change but not necessarily a ‘loss of community’. However, some other members did perceive this type of change more ominously as a ‘loss of community’.

Some members had a nostalgic picture of the past, to which they longed to return, echoing much of the flavour of the ‘loss of community’ literature. As the following quotation highlights:

Well, it’s [meaning LETS] a way of getting back to more like a village culture of the past where everybody helped each other and you know you didn’t have to tot up points for everything in those days. (K11)

A related way in which some members perceived social change was in the social nature of relationships, and a perceived decline over time, leading to instability.

Well it’s [meaning LETS] giving them some of the stability which society must have had, for the sake of argument, a hundred years ago. It must have been dramatically more stable. It was obviously dramatically smaller and everybody knew everything about everybody, which all right we could argue was claustrophobic, which clearly is a disadvantage, but it did help to keep the place stable. (K8)

Another Yeovil member who felt strongly that LETS was a community-builder described why he felt the need to re-build community.

...because it is an important point about LETS because the whole social fabric of society is so sort of broken down really and people feel so much more isolated. They don’t travel together, they don’t entertain themselves together, you know everybody is locked away in their own little homes, and travel round in a little extension of their homes and don’t necessarily see other people. In a way these rural communities are no longer communities at all. (Y1)

Another Kingsbridge member referred to community decline in the wider sense of the visible reduction of ‘thriving’ shops in the high street. She described that:
Kingsbridge is quite a poor town now. Every other shop is empty. My husband had a shop and it happened to us. We see shops come and go and there isn’t the work there any more.

This section has detailed how people’s perceptions of social change emerged as one motivation for joining LETS. The next section looks at the explicit attempts by such people to reconstruct community from the bottom up.

LETS: A grassroots response for community building

LETS are grassroots initiatives. This fact is of crucial importance. The major point here is that the ‘shape’ of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS ‘communities’ were not imposed from ‘above’. Rather they were built from the creativity of people coming together voluntarily. In other words, the framework of each ‘LETS community’ was defined by the people who became involved. They were produced directly from thoughts and actions of members’ themselves. This in effect created a sense of autonomy and contributed to shared meaning. The following quotation affirms the importance of a grassroots strategy.

Well it’s just that it [LETS] brings people into touch with each other where they wouldn’t normally meet and it enables people to interreact, it gives them a way of interreacting. You see community building, it’s well known isn’t it, that superimposing community building from the top does not work, it has to come from the bottom and that’s where I think it’s [LETS] brilliant. Now I don’t think that it matters that they splinter up and some rise and some fall and they flow, it does not matter. It’s like the Greenham Common you know, my friend was involved with that, there was never an organisation. Nobody organised it, there was no committee, there was no council there was nobody. It was the women, it was the females consciousness way of doing things. It was a forerunner of, a very good example, of how the new future is going to be, I hope. (K2)
This is interesting in that it compares Greenham Common with LETS. Both are good examples of grassroots activity. Moral principles are also a feature of both. Here LETS share a common thread with eco-feminism: ‘a shared view of the need for a human centred, equitable, sustainable and healthy lifestyle’ (Cox 1992:283). Yet LETS allows not just women, but men too, to explore their own views and philosophies. Moral values are reflexively explored by members’ themselves which in turn creates both individual and communal shared meaning.

One of the ways in which LETS has the potential to create greater equality is through the valuing of people in the locality, and the skills those people possess. As several members pointed out LETS emphasizes ‘the fact that everybody has skills whether or not they are recognized in the mainstream’ (Y10). One member stated ‘...it isn’t just a matter of here are things that you need and you can’t afford otherwise, but is also a matter of saying you are useful, you may be out of work, nobody wants you, but somebody does’ (K4b). Most members were in agreement with this principle, however, there was some disagreement regarding the hourly value of peoples’ skills. For example, one Kingsbridge member spoke about her feelings in respect to the valuing of both people and skills in the following way:

Someone’s cleaning to me, as a cleaner is as valuable as two hours counselling is to somebody else. So I was all for valuing things at the same value rather than as they are valued by society, twenty pounds an hour as a counsellor and two pounds fifty an hour as a cleaner. Can you hear what I am saying? Say if I was a counsellor, to me that two hours cleaning would be just as valuable as my child’s counselling with someone else. And I was very much for that, and I was also very much for not introducing money into it, unless and I did accept the fact that if you did have to go out and buy goods, buy petrol for example, that was fine, but I personally did not like this half bridges, half money. That’s how I perceive it. Because if you want to make it work, everybody should be of equal value. That’s my own personal assumption, because I think people have to be valued for what they can do. (K12)
Two issues are raised here. First, the question of 'equal value', and second, the appropriateness of the introduction of money into LETS trade. These are complex issues, which perhaps need a little more explanation. In the conventional economy people's skills are not of equal value. To use the above example, a professional counsellor usually attracts a higher rate of pay than a cleaner. A counsellor also usually attracts a higher status. In LETS, however, this need not be the case. LETS members can choose to value both of these skills equally in terms of pay and status. This is the reason why some LETS choose not to peg their currency to the pound and why some choose a standard rate of pay. For example Frome LETS is:

committed to the principle of equal value for work as expressed in 'standard rate' trading (econ-lets discussion group 29.10.96).

This raises all kinds of issues which need to be explored by members' themselves.

Richard Kay responded (e-con lets 4.11.96) by stating:

Even in an ideal economy (if this were possible) various factors will result in different hourly rates such as:

a. anti-social hours.
b. Work requiring very rare individual gifts in high demand
c. Work requiring very lengthy and costly training before competence is achieved
d. Work which is usually unpleasant or dangerous

Equally controversial, and related to this, is the appropriateness of introducing money into LETS trade. For example some members charge quite high amounts of cash rather than LETS currency for work which does not involve lengthy and costly training. Another example is where someone provides transport and then charges more than the cost of petrol in conventional currency and a small amount of LETS currency.
These issues were a bone of contention within both LETS groups. Many times they surfaced at the Core Group meetings in Kingsbridge. Quite obviously there were differences of opinion, even a wide gulf between members, on either one, or both, of these issues. While these points surfaced at Core Group meetings, and although discussion took place, these issues were never really resolved. During fieldwork I noted that 'Potentially, this has the makings of breaking up the group' (13.8.97). At Yeovil LETS too, skill valuation and the valuation of the Jack had been 'quite a subject of debate within the group when we first set it up and we were deciding what the 'Jacks' were going to be worth' (Y5b). They are very complex issues, which are underpinned by individual politics and morals. The crucial point here is that reflexive discussion of this kind demanded that members explore their own philosophies and ideas. Decisions were made at the grassroots level through healthy and reflexive debate. In this process members defined the shape of their own new and original 'LETS communities'. These background practices contributed to the creation and re-creation of each 'LETS community'. These data confirm the importance of 'reflexive community' outlined in Chapter Two.

As a consequence feelings of empathy, between members, were generated. The full force of this came out during interviewing and through observation. The power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings was absolutely fundamental to participation in LETS. As one Yeovil member in a reflexive moment said:

I think it's almost a leap into sort of creative thinking that some people can't do. (Y7)
A wish for autonomy (freedom to determine one’s own actions) was clearly an important motivation for joining LETS. One Kingsbridge member struggled to understand why there was a need for such a bottom up strategy. Again, a feminist strand threaded through the conversation and revealed interesting insights:

Maybe that’s what it is that we’re groping our way towards, a new way of interreacting, in goods, in society from the bottom up and we’re still confused because of our upbringing and expectations about old and masculine stuff, I don’t mean men but the masculine way of doing things, where you had recognizable people with responsibility da, da, da, and maybe, maybe that’s why it feels a bit funny, and you don’t quite know what it’s for, and it’s actually not for anything. It’s not actually for anything, it’s just a way of groups of people getting together who find it useful to do so. And we’re learning how to structure that. We’re actually learning. That’s what we’re doing. (K2)

Thus LETS, as a grassroots strategy, was quite definitely for some a learning experience. It was an on-going reflexive process of re-thinking and re-positioning. LETS members consciously posed themselves the problem of their own creation and invention far more than traditional communities.

One of the ways in which LETS as a grassroots strategy was important was the way it challenged the notion of conventional skills. For example, the every day, taken for granted skills involved in living day to day routine life, are seldom questioned by people in general, nor are they always easily available to purchase. Skills that are little valued in conventional society were often offered through LETS as one member highlighted:

You can offer things, very basic, simple things that people take for granted in life, like taking your dogs for a walk, or going shopping for somebody or anything like that. These little things could be of immense help to somebody really, you never really think that that would be the case. (K1)
Certainly, one can take things for granted until one is unable to do the everyday routine tasks demanded as a matter of course when one is fit and healthy. Another member pointed out a somewhat extreme example of a personal service that one could not easily go out and buy off the shelf, but something which was an obvious worry to her as the following quotation highlights:

Say your mother’s just died, just for example, you’re a very skilled person on what to do. You actually know what forms you’ve got to fill in, where to get them from, who to speak to etc., and that could be of immense value to someone else. I mean like my mother bless her, you know one of these days soon she’s going to die, well I don’t know what the hell to do. I mean you know, it would help me enormously if someone was prepared to help. (K2)

Perhaps this is ‘a very gloomy’ example, but it does highlight that there is an obvious skill involved in handling this kind of situation.

Furthermore members described how women’s skills were recognised and acknowledged through LETS. As one member from Yeovil LETS stated:

Women that have been at home with young families don’t realise that they have got brilliant time management skills, the ability to juggle several priorities at once and switch from one to the other at a few seconds notice, I mean all the sorts of things that are really valued in the workplace. (Y5a)

Another Kingsbridge member described how after having children she felt like she was:

...just little old Gill you know, cooking, cleaning, and that’s just about the limit of it. Whereas with an organisation such as LETS you suddenly find the most extraordinary things are WORTH something. Things that you never even thought about LIKE your cooking are suddenly worth far more than you thought they were. And it really builds your confidence, without building your ego. Because there are lots of other
people around you that have got extraordinary talents as well. And so you feel that you are part of a group and that you MATTER. And that’s something that we have lost today isn’t it, this sense that you matter. (K13)

Time, patience and reliability were also valuable skills, which could be offered locally through LETS. These are skills which are not always recognized nor rewarded particularly well in society at large. For example ‘little things like addressing a whole stack of envelopes if somebody’s got a lot of newsletters to send out...You know it’s very boring, it’s low level skill, but you’ve got to concentrate to do it well, and I think some people haven’t got time to do it when it needs to be done quickly...People who are able to offer time to do that are very valuable, aren’t they?’ (K4b)

LETS therefore promotes the identification of the availability of skills within the locality, skills which are often unrecognized or at least unacknowledged publicly in wider society. LETS members questioned the importance attached to conventional skills. The key point here, I think, is that members defined their own wants and needs, at a grassroots level. This was a reflexive process of re-thinking and re-positioning.

The value of LETS to the local geographical area was also an important motivational force. Again, this relates to the fact that LETS happen within the locality, or within a geographically defined area - in other words at a grassroots level. For example one member pointed out the importance to her in that:

...we must never lose that sense of it [LETS currency] being money for the area...I wouldn’t like to see LETS totally interchangeable. Because you’d go back to where we are with the money, and it would seep out of the area. And I think that that is the most important thing of all of LETS, it is not just that it helps you, but that you are putting into your community here. We use to have this saying IN THIS CORNER OF THE VINEYARD, and you know you had a sense of the world, you know as being a vineyard and your corner of it, and the idea of it was
that you were doing your bit in your corner, and I'm very much a bit in my corner sort of person. I can think globally in one sense, but when you really want to put all your effort and time to something it's got to be for your area because that's where you can really help most. (K13)

Both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS started as a result of people meeting together in the local geographical area. However, in Kingsbridge inter-trading had started to occur. The nearest city of Plymouth some twenty-five miles away and Totnes some twelve miles away had opened accounts to facilitate wider trade. In addition, an account had been opened for trade to take place between members in Kingsbridge and members of LETS in Brittany, France. Inter-trading was also possible for members belonging to Yeovil LETS who were able to trade with members from South Somerset LETS. This raises questions about the concept of community. Perhaps this suggests that the notion means different things to different members (Cohen 1982, 1985). It may also reveal that 'LETS communities' change over time and across space (Lash 1994) as the LETS progressively grow older.

Do members of LETS as a grassroots organisation also tend to be involved in other grassroots groups? Certainly several members in Kingsbridge were involved in other community-based groups. For example, in the survey the most commonly cited ones were Local Agenda 21, the newly set up Credit Union and a garden project at the local community college. Moreover, in the course of conversation with members of both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, it became evident that most supported such initiatives even if they did not actually belong to them. All of the initiatives mentioned by members were linked to grassroots environmental concerns and thus contributed to feelings of like-mindedness, a concept of considerable importance to members as previously established through the questionnaire survey.
It is interesting that people active in one grassroots group do tend to be associated with other local initiatives. Perhaps this is because people who have a sense of self-efficacy are more apt to be involved in a number of such groups. This could be related to the possession of cultural capital gained through education, upbringing and background, and the confidence and knowledge that stems from such privilege.

The above data suggest policy implications in terms of using LETS as a tool toward local economic development. As one member from Yeovil stated:

Well it’s got to be infinitely adaptable hasn’t it because everywhere you go it’s a different set up completely. You know it’s a different infrastructure I suppose would be the word, the population is spread differently, the services that are available through traditional means would be different, peoples needs are different, and just individual members are different, so it’s going to be infinitely variable. (Y7)

This reflexive understanding acknowledges the importance of local variation. LETS members define their own wants and needs. They are not defined from ‘above’. Consequently a grassroots strategy is of immense importance. The implication here is that each LETS will be different in some way or another depending on the wants and needs of its members. It also has implications for policy.

A grassroots strategy was of crucial importance for community building. The ‘LETS communities’ were reflexively created by members in an attempt to create some kind of personal autonomy. Members constantly posed themselves the problem of their own creation and invention far more than traditional communities. This in turn began to create a distinctive identity. I turn now and look in more depth at the ways in which communal group identity was further developed.
The Creation of Communal Group Identity

The survey respondents frequently spoke of 'people of like-mind coming together'. This was further stressed in many of the interviews. However, the notion of like-mindedness needs further definition before it is possible to see how this contributes to the creation of communal group identity. One couple from Yeovil LETS stated that they 'had just recently moved to the area and it was a good way to meet like-minded people' (Y5a). I further asked 'What do you mean by like-minded people?' They defined like-mindedness in the following ways:

"Usually people who are in a LETS group aren’t particularly concerned about money, but they’re usually quite interested in environmental and green issues and they have political views that go along with that. (Y5b)

"Yes, and they tend to be, I can’t think of a way to express it, it’s easier to say what they tend not to be. They tend not to be aggressive in your face raving bread heads basically, and whatever the opposite of that is that’s LETS people. (Y5a)

"They’re generally sort of quite concerned with community and environmental issues, their politics are similar to ours. (Y5b)

"Politics with a small p I would say. (Y5a)

"And a large one generally. You don’t get many raving Conservatives in LETS groups. (Y5b)

"You don’t know. (Y5a)

"They’ve generally got quite a good sense of humour, and generally they have got quite a positive outlook on life and they’re the sort of people who think there is hope for the future because the people who have a negative outlook on life don’t bother joining basically. And they also tend to be the sort of people who are fairly active, they’re into doing things and interacting with other people. They don’t lob out in front of the t.v. or watch the video or play computer games all weekend. They’re into actually getting things done and helping each other not because there is money in it but because it builds community. (Y5b)"
These comments are interesting in that they encapsulate several things that were referred to by other members. As the above narrative indicates, ideas about the things that mattered to members, as well as attitudes towards money and the economy, were important in forming a LETS member’s identity. These remarks also suggest a moral and political strand within this identity. The following quotation serves to highlight the moral aspect more clearly. One Kingsbridge member pointed out that equality, for him, was an important principle for joining and further developing LETS:

…it’s this small group of individuals that actually make an awful lot out of it [the money economy] at the expense of everybody else which is the popularity of the monetary system itself. A small percentage of people who get rich off the backs of everybody else basically. That can’t happen in LETS so I suppose there is a sense of equality really, not to get political about it but it does have a social, political justification really. (K14a)

Another Core Group member from Yeovil LETS was less persuaded about the political dimension. She was actively seeking support from the local council because:

It makes people who might think otherwise that it [LETS] is legitimate, they’re not some terrible left wing organisation. And you see we had somebody at the beginning who did our newsletter who was very keen on things like the road protesting and things. And I support that sort of stuff, but you put it in the newsletter and you put a lot of people’s backs up and who then wonder why they’ve joined. You know he was just enthusiastic and I agree with everything he supports, but that isn’t what LETS is about. I don’t think that those things should be actually in newsletters. I mean if individuals want to support them absolutely fine, but LETS is about trading and getting a sense of community. And you know, once it starts getting political in any sense, then people drop out because they think it’s left wing and we’re trying to make it balanced. I think most of us if we had to put a cross would be left wing, but I mean it’s not obvious. (Y10)

The above quotation suggests that Yeovil LETS was characterized more by people with left wing views. This left wing skew was not as apparent in Kingsbridge LETS. In fact, observation and interviewing confirmed a balance of left and right wing political views
among members⁴. Moreover, Anthony Steen the local Conservative MP had recently joined Kingsbridge LETS⁵. It would be wrong therefore to characterize all LETS members and therefore all LETS as being left wing organizations. As the above quotation makes clear LETS is not ideological or political for many, rather it is about trading, and also ‘getting a sense of community’.

Another member highlighted a further moral justification. This was the moral responsibility towards others. As Bauman (1990:69) argues ‘A human relationship is moral in so far as it stems from the feeling of responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the other person’. Moral responsibility subsequently served to define group identity:

Well its all sort of like-minded people who have something in common to start with. Before you even get to know them you know that they think the same as you do about proper things. (K11)

What do you mean the economy or alternative ways of doing things? (JB)

Well yes, sort of responsibility towards other people. I mean you wouldn’t go into it if you were just thinking about making a profit would you. So obviously you must be that sort of person that is keen to do things without thinking about money. I mean some people start their own business and they’re just out to make money basically without thinking about the people involved. (K11)

Responsibility towards others was a moral concern as were environmental concerns. One Kingsbridge member pointed out that LETS members were interested in:

new ways of looking and being and doing things basically rather than all the things from the past which are not working now or are beginning to break down, and it’s people with new ideas to offer to help make things work again really. I think that’s what the like-mindedness is about, those who are interested in preventing pollution or doing something about it and bringing in new ways of looking at things. (K6b)
This description was typical of the responses offered throughout the interviews with members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS. It also further indicates that members of LETS, as the definition earlier suggested, had a positive outlook and indeed were looking to the future. This links to evidence presented earlier in this chapter which suggested a widespread perception of rapid social change among members. The evidence suggests that LETS are a practical and positive response to this perception. Different attitudes and openness to alternative or different ways of doing things were also referred to by many:

Different attitudes. People who are open to that because a lot of people are just really closed, they don’t want to know, you know, this side they feel safe where they are even though things aren’t working they still feel safer than going into the unknown where things may or may not work as far as they are concerned. They’re not willing to change their views on things. (K7)

Indeed LETS members actually did something which was of a practical nature. It was the actual ‘doing’ something about things that was important rather than mere armchair theorizing or just ‘thinking’ about things. This affirms the importance of a major distinction between ‘symbolic’ and ‘reflexive’ community described in Chapter Two. It highlights not just praxis but reflexive thought.

I think people question what they’re doing much more nowadays. With all the global issues that have become so important and I think a lot of people are questioning what we’re doing with our lives and what we’re messing up for future generations. So, you know, anything that helps you take a fresh look at life is good isn’t it really. (Y7)

Reflexivity was a theme that emerged from the interviews. It is a theme that threads itself throughout the data.
Group identity is now beginning to take on a distinctive form. It appears that certain people are attracted to LETS; attitudes towards money and the economy, environmental concerns, and community issues, are all important in forming a LETS member's identity. Evidence also suggests a moral and political strand within this identity. This connects with literature presented in Chapter Two relating to the notion of culture within the boundary. The reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically making it a resource for and a referent of their identity.

Another characteristic of LETS 'like-mindedness' was an openness to alternative healthcare or therapy, as the following quotation from one Kingsbridge member indicated:

I have found that er, this group likes, the essence of it is that there are loads of therapists of one kind or another, er Michael and Helen, because he started it, so he has his personal contacts so, the work that he and Helen do had attracted him to a certain kind of people and they're the hard, you know those on the first page, most of them have continued. (K2)

However, while alternative health care was a feature of Kingsbridge LETS, it appeared to be less so in Yeovil LETS. As described earlier, at Yeovil there appeared to be a more even balance of therapy and practical skills on offer. As one Yeovil member stated:

You can get just about anything done on Yeovil LETS. It's got a lot of practical skills. Well it's got the therapies in there as well, but it's not awash with them. (Y10)
So although there were slight differences between Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS in terms of communal group identity, each was thought by members to be built on the basis of trust between themselves. One member from Yeovil stated that:

The whole basis of a LETS is trust, it wouldn't work without it. And I think on the whole the sort of people who join LETS are people who are trustworthy. Because people who are actually out to get something for nothing, there would be nothing for them on the system [LETS] as such. It's just basically based on trust. And most of the people I think in the system [LETS] are more ethically orientated than the average person. But yea, I think a certain kind of people join LETS, and that's one of the positive benefits. (Y5b)

Another from Kingsbridge commented that:

I just trust, yes trust, if they're in the directory they're that sort of person that is a like-minded person. (K6a)

Yet another remarked:

I don't know whether the system [LETS] is building up trust, I think you tend to get people that, people join that are more that way inclined in the first place. I mean it may help build up the trust thing but, looking at the sort of people who have joined or the people who are a bit suspicious and don't join, I think it's the people who are more likely to trust who join in the first place. (K6b)

This section has served to outline the beginnings of communal group identity. The symbolic construction of communal identity is the boundary where a sense of belonging is apparent. The next section further develops the theme of community boundaries. It also provides evidence of 'boundaries' within the 'LETS boundary'.
LETS: Community boundaries

The actual start up of any LETS scheme is evidence of the energy and time invested in such a venture. Actually getting people together let alone motivating and getting people to act is in itself quite a demanding task. Volunteers who actually got together and decided that they wanted to start a LETS scheme shouldered this task. These volunteers formed the Core Group. In order to cut down on the responsibility shouldered by any one member a division of labour was considered necessary. For example, a directory had to be produced in order to publicise the goods, skills and services on offer; publicity needed to attract membership; accounts had to be collated and printed; social events had to be organized and advertised; and newsletters had to be printed in an interesting and motivating fashion. Each Core Group member had individual responsibility for each of these tasks.

Core Group members therefore needed a diverse range of skills prior to group formation. In addition to these skills members exhibited an articulate and confident manner. For example, advertising either publicly to the wider community, or within the group, involved negotiation with significant others. Social events, newsletters and the directory had to be of interest to the existing membership and had to motivate potential members. Minuting, agenda setting and chairing Core Group meetings – held on a monthly basis - all involved prior knowledge and skills. The existence of cultural capital among core group members thus contributed to the successful formation of each group.

One aspect of particular interest in the observation of Kingsbridge Core Group was the way in which Core Group members further developed new skills. Hence, not only did...
they have a background which was rich in cultural capital, some quite visibly experienced further personal growth in cultural capital, as the following snip of conversation highlights:

I enjoy using my computer skills. I needed to learn to use the computer and desktop publishing. (K.2)

I suppose joining the Core Group forced you into doing that? (JB)

It did, it did. There’s nothing like having something you’ve got to do to a deadline. I’ve learnt such a lot because I’ve had to produce the news update to some sort of deadline. I didn’t have to actually, but I felt as though I had to. It’s helped me to actually learn to use the computer a lot. I suppose that phase is over now, I’ve mastered the computer. (K.2)

Meanwhile this same member had just discovered the econ-LETS discussion group on the Internet. I therefore asked whether she ‘would have learnt how to use the Internet without having learnt the computer skills first?’ Her reply was a very definite:

Oh no, oh no. I mean it’s opened up a whole load of stuff, I mean, and I said initially that when Michael asked me [to take on the news letter] I said well look here, I’ve got a reason now to learn to use these skills. It’s quite hard to just educate yourself just in itself, unless you’ve got a creative drive coming from inside you. But if you haven’t got that and you just want to learn you need a practical thing. So it’s been wonderful for that. I suppose that’s why I am going over to the accounts side and the data base side. Because that’s moving onto something else on the computer. (K.2)

As the above quotation indicates, this same member was about to move on to the position of accountant within the LETS - a role she had not played before. This is a very good example of the way in which members of the Core Group were seen to develop and expand existing cultural capital. Through LETS cultural capital is further consolidated, new skills are directly developed which at the same time further increases cultural capital.
The initial Core Groups of volunteers were very important. Without them neither scheme would have got off the ground. While many people may like the idea of joining something, unless it is established, this is all it manifests itself as - a group that one may like to join if only one were there. This position was reiterated by one of the Kingsbridge Core Group members:

Because for eighteen months or two years, even possibly before Kingsbridge LETS was considered, we'd seen it on the telly. And we thought what a wonderful idea, wouldn’t it be nice to start one. But until Helen and Michael actually got the group together and said well we were actually thinking about it [starting a LETS], and then there was a whole group of people who were saying yes, lets do it. And then it became a reality. We wouldn’t have done it on our own. (K14a)

The husband of this member went on to clarify that the LETS group started as a result of another group meeting.

What actually happened Michael and Helen invited a whole group of people to get together, really to exchange ideas about therapies, that was the original idea. The LETS idea was a secondary possibility, a suggestion, and in fact, that became the more popular thing at the meeting really. One or two people were interested in trading therapies, but most people were interested in starting a LETS scheme. (K14b)

One can see from this, that in Kingsbridge LETS, group identity evolved from the initial therapy group. This may explain why there are so many therapists involved in this particular group, although, and as evidenced earlier, this appears to be a feature of many LETS groups.

Yeovil LETS differed slightly in that there were more practical skills available. Yet still, there were ‘the therapies in there as well, but it’s not awash with them. There’s a lot of practical people in there, where you can get your car done.’ (Y5a) And as one member commented:
Yes, the skill mix in Yeovil LETS is very, very good. I mean some LETS groups are awash with therapists and practitioners and you can't get a plug changed. People get fed up with it because those with practical skills are in constant demand. But we were quite lucky in that several of the people who initiated the group were quite practical and they had mixed with other practical people and drew more practical people in, so we started off with a fairly practical skill mix. (Y5b)

Yeovil LETS thus evolved from a mix of a practical group of people as well as therapists. It appeared that in both schemes, like was attracting like. This consequently raises further questions as to the original reason for getting together and starting a LETS. Is it the like-mindedness that promotes successful group dynamics? Is it the meaning, the background practices and cultural distinctions that contribute to the generation of sentiment underlying 'reflexive community'? In other words, is it to do with the 'alternativeness' or the 'practicalness' of the initiators? Group formation and the ensuing dynamics has implications in terms of any discussion of the notion of 'community' in contemporary society.

The pre-existing formation circle, in both LETS schemes, represented an already existing web of friendship and acquaintance. These core groups then had the entrepreneurial task of attracting others to the idea of the LETS project. The number of people in each circle grew as word spread of the possible scheme. At this stage, an ongoing discussion of the group's projected ethos took place.

Effective leadership proved essential in both LETS schemes. In each there was a central figure, which initially got the group started and further continued to organize and help inspire both Core Group members and individual members. One member from Yeovil described how he had:
...never heard about LETS and I read something in one of the local papers about a lady in Wiltshire somewhere, and I wrote for details and she said would I start one up. And I said oh no, I'm a follower not a leader. But I was just intrigued, and I said would you let me know if one day one is formed in Yeovil. And then just over a year ago I saw that there was going to be a meeting in Yeovil that evening. It poured and poured and poured. I didn't think anybody would come but the room we had was filled almost to overflowing. And I think they sold eighty folders, all the paper work and things, on that first evening. (Y7)

One Yeovil member informed me of the importance of a dynamic leader:

Meeting Clare was quite important because she is so dynamic, she is gorgeous, she's lovely. Clare has actually done a hard sell on my skills to several people who have since then said Clare has recommended you. But she's so brimming full of enthusiasm that you can't help but catch it. She also flattered me terribly the first time she came round here so I sort of warmed to her instantly. She was the best ego massage I've had in years, so that was great. (Y7)

Leadership skills were also fostered among Core Group members who in effect contributed to successful group dynamics. Individual members were encouraged to join the Core Group and in this way the Core Group members tended to foster a sharing and inclusive atmosphere.

Having said this, my involvement with Kingsbridge LETS over a three-year period gave me access to Core Group dynamics in practice. This was the backstage face of LETS. Members of the Core Group may have had similar views on certain issues, however, debates at Core Group meetings suggested contrary views on other issues. During one Core Group meeting I wrote:

Attitudes toward the value attached to LETS currency and the value of members’ time generated heated debate. One Core Group member in particular argued that some skills were worth more than others, while
another argued in favour of equalizing this discrepancy over time, as 
was intended when the group started. (9.7.97)

Now while these debates did in fact generate discussion, they also contributed to 
successful group dynamics. Discussion involved thinking and problem solving which 
had the effect of empowering and further clarifying the meanings involved for 
individuals and the group as a whole. This was also the case at Yeovil LETS.

The Core Group of both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS also had the task of dealing 
with practical issues which arose. For example the Core Group were informed of any 
member who had the potential to harm either individuals or the group as a whole. In 
Kingsbridge, for instance, one member had appeared in the local weekly paper accused 
of the possession of cannabis. This was brought to the attention of the Core Group and 
discussed at one of the meetings. While cannabis use was of concern to some members, 
the newspaper article further went on to describe how this was a second offence, giving 
no indication of the nature of the first offence. It was this aspect, the unknown character 
of the first offence, that caused more concern for the Core Group. The Core Group 
decided that word of mouth would be effective in communicating knowledge of this.

Social control was also a feature of Yeovil LETS. For example, one particular 
individual had applied to join Yeovil LETS and other members were not happy with 
the offers and wants stated on his application form which were of a sexual nature. The 
Core Group:

...had got worries about him about a whole range of things. We went 
round to visit him to interview him to see if we were going to let him 
join. (Y5a)
...it was the tone of his application to join the LETS group and there were certain things in there that had thrown, particularly some of the members of the Core Group who are single women, it had thrown them into panic. And again it was a real learning experience because it had never crossed our poor naïve idealistic minds that that sort of thing would crop up in the LETS group. (Y5b)

So, it was very interesting and we had a lot of soul searching debates about what to do about this particular individual and what to do for the situation in general as regards the constitution and the way the LETS group was run, to reassure single women in particular in the LETS group, but also to protect them against anything potentially dodgy in the future happening. And also again, you know like the insurance over practical skills going on and whatever, how could we actually protect the LETS group, against being thrown into disrepute by something going disastrously wrong. So it was quite a meaty little number to sort of have to deal with. (Y5a)

The practical aspects of running a LETS do throw up interesting issues which need resolving in some way. This is the solution they came up with and which was eventually included in the membership agreement:

All in the best possible taste. As you all know we are a new group and still evolving our ways of doing things. Over the last few weeks the Core Group has been wrestling with how to deal with offers and requests of a sexual nature, and we would like your comments. It maybe that this problem will crop up from time to time because the guidelines as to what is and is not acceptable are not stated clearly enough in our rules of membership. So the proposal is that we amend these to include the following. Offers or requests for the exchange of sexual services or pornographic material are not acceptable as part of the LETS scheme and shall be grounds for refusal or termination of membership. Members should respect other members right to privacy and their right to set limits on any exchange for goods or services with another member. Anyone who harasses or pesters another member to take up an offer or service will be liable to termination of membership. Basically folks, we think if sex plays a big part in your life that’s fine, but the LETS scheme is not the place to seek that kind of gratification. (Y5a)

Again, discussion of issues, such as those outlined above, and the solving of day-to-day problems as they arose, further clarified the meaning of LETS to those involved and defined the shape of the LETS.
While there was an element of social control in LETS, many members indicated that a sharing and inclusive atmosphere was generated by the Core Group. New members in Kingsbridge were often invited for a meal with one of the Core Group members, and encouraged to join in with the social events. The LETS scheme was explained and new members were invited to think about the skills they could offer. In Yeovil a membership liaison person was appointed ‘to make sure that they [new members] got introduced around and welcomed in to the group’ (Y2). The sharing and inclusive philosophy underlying LETS spilled over to attitudes, which again contributed to the concept of like-mindedness. As one member succinctly put it:

Because it’s a different approach to how you look at life. You don’t look at life in a materialistic way. You’re looking at it as a giving and taking and sharing and passing round, aren’t you, I feel rather than the go out and grab the best all the time. It’s a way of getting to know people and trusting people, and you know, there’s a whole lot of stuff mixed up in it really, isn’t there. (K7)

Now while the forging of group identity links specifically with group dynamics, it emerged that this may have the effect of producing one particular unintended consequence - group closure. Closure, however, was not a deliberate strategy at boundary drawing rather it was a process that occurred over a period of time. Closure also operated at many different levels, which in effect, created boundaries within LETS. This contributed to different notions of ‘community’.

It was interesting that many members who took part in the interviews asked why more people did not join. As one Kingsbridge member opened the interview in the following way:
What I'm not clear on, is about the whole business about the LETS group, is why it stays such a small number, when it’s such an enthusiastic community-spirited thing to do. (K15)

This same member went on to remark:

The thing I was thinking was that there are so many people who could perhaps benefit from it, it could have an input, because there must be people on the edges, who from the point of view of their financial status, who would benefit from it. Because it’s not just a community thing for community’s sake is it, it’s to help people who have financial difficulties, I would have thought. (K15)

This appears to beg the question of what LETS is for, and why they have been set up. Is it for those who have financial difficulties, or is it more to do with the creation and therefore maintenance of ‘community’?

Some evidence of the reason for the limited membership came from the members themselves during the interviews. For example one member commented as follows:

Unfortunately, the people it would benefit a lot are not interested. The people that are on the poverty line. I’m not saying that, I’m sure there are people in LETS that are. But a lot of us in LETS are quite affluent, the very people that it would really benefit are those that can’t get jobs. The people who belong are those that can grow things in the garden, but you need the confidence and the initiative to do it. And, a lot of the people we are talking about have lost that. And have lost the power to take control of their own lives. (K12)

A number of suggestions about LETS members are being made here. Firstly, many members are affluent. Affluence here appears to be defined by employment status and earnings. Certainly, the survey revealed that of both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS only one member (from Yeovil LETS) responded that they were unemployed. Perhaps this is because unemployment removes people from social networks (Morris 1995)\textsuperscript{8}. The survey also revealed that members’ conventional currency earnings were variable.
Secondly, the quotation suggests that members have the confidence and initiative to do things for themselves. Affluence, confidence and initiative can be associated with a middle class upbringing. This middle class feeling within LETS was more clearly expounded by another member who stated that:

The only thing that worries me in the LETS group is that we are all, well it is a fairly middle class organization at the moment.. but the people who really need it, erm don't seem to be joining and that worries me and I don't know why. Well I don't mean it, that all of us who are in it don't need it, I mean some of us do. But there are a lot more out there that need it that aren't joining. (K4a)

One member who stated that LETS was a rather 'middle class thing' went on to suggest that ‘...it comes back to who are the members? Maybe there aren’t enough members who are in economic terms desperate enough to use LETS to the full’ (K4b). Perhaps once one is desperate one loses the capital to look for exchange opportunities. It was interesting that one Yeovil member described how, when she first joined LETS, her ex-partner thought that LETS ‘was just for dossers basically. And well it’s not really, there are a lot of sort of retired and middle class people or whatever there, you know, but he just thought it was for down and outs basically. And he was really stuck up about it. You know they’re scroungers he said’. (Y4)

Alternative health care evidenced in the therapies on offer, in particular in Kingsbridge, may also serve to limit wider membership.

...some of the activities that are offered...the kind of impression might be given that there are a lot of slightly weird things here like alternative health care. But you don’t, you’ve got to say to people you don’t have to buy them, you know they are only people offering them, you don’t have to use them. And so I think this is it, it needs a good range on offer and that there’s an understanding that when you join you’re not committing yourself to any of these things that you might not be certain about. But as when you’re in a shop you pick and choose. (K4b)
Indeed, LETS are exchange schemes after all. An overabundance of therapies could have the effect of drawing therapy to therapy (or capital to capital). As one member from Kingsbridge LETS noted, one of the dangers of the high percentage of alternative health care on offer is that ‘If there’s too many alternative therapies, they end up giving it to each other and not much is achieved really’ (K3). This is an interesting point, for as Durkheim (1893) points out, a wide diversity of people are required for the organic division of labour to yield its full benefits. This was also a ‘potential danger’ in Yeovil where there was a ‘tendency to just trade with the same people that you’ve got to know and that you’re comfortable with’ (Y5a).

Several members also commented upon the size of the group. Members thought that size would affect group dynamics. On the one hand, some indicated that it needed to be kept relatively small. One Kingsbridge member felt that:

...it can’t get too big because of human dynamics because you’re going to get too energetic people with very different views about what it’s all about... (K2)

Interestingly, this same member went on to suggest that LETS are perhaps trying to replace something that has been lost which again echoes much of the flavour of the community study literature.

...maybe it’s replacing, er, gradually replacing something old that was a capacity that society actually made it possible for people to know each other within a humane context of the numbers. People don’t function well when there are big numbers. It’s got to be a smaller number one can extend to, family, a small village, because as human beings we can’t cope. As soon as there are bigger numbers we don’t want to know, we are threatened. Actually totally threatened by that... (K8)

This would appear to suggest the limitations of LETS, at least in terms of exchange if not in terms of increasing cohesive community. A relatively small membership was felt
to be important to enable members to meet and get to know each other more closely.

Another member also suggested that when numbers increase one has to start putting barriers up:

...you see, because...one individual can relate to a certain number of people, I mean obviously individuals are different, but there is a maximum number of people you can relate to, and when it gets beyond that, you’ve got to start putting up barrier, it’s the only way you can survive as it were. (K2)

On the other hand, several members referred to the ‘problem’ of the size of the group in terms of membership numbers. Certainly this could effect group identity and group dynamics. The size of the LETS is likely to have an effect on the interactions that take place between members. Here it is pertinent to revisit the question of what LETS are about and why they are set up in the first place. This is a very interesting question and one of which was answered by one member who enquired why LETS did not grow in size, and why did they not help more of those who could possibly benefit most from them.

The only question I have is the reason for the Kingsbridge group staying fairly small, but then maybe the efficiency, I think I’ve answered it myself really, because maybe it’s the efficiency angle which would be increased for the people who don’t seem to be included in our group and maybe that’s not really what it should be about. Because if we’re into the community angle, size is not really relevant is it. It’s the community feeling that is important, and that will affect everybody in the area anyway, because I am a firm believer that each person who works in community it affects all their, so that it has a knock on effect. Consciousness is what it is about isn’t it. As each person changes their consciousness it will affect the people around them. The nearer you are to it the more you are affected. (K15)

Again we return to the concept of community. LETS, according to the discourse of members, are more to do with creating community rather than becoming larger in size or more efficient in the exchange of goods and services. This emerged as key to both
Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS and raises some very interesting questions in terms of community creation as a reflexive process. It emerged that both LETS under study were not just about shared interests or shared properties, but were rather beginning to take on a reality of shared meanings and practices. The negotiated value of the currency and of people's skills, the on-going reflexive process of re-thinking and re-positioning themselves created both individual and collective identity, which contributed to a 'like-mindedness' even if differences were observed. Core Group meetings, social control and group closure also demonstrate the practices involved where shared meanings was generated. This, in effect, created the 'LETS community' boundary. If people who join LETS believe they themselves are creating a 'community', then dynamics in terms of exchange may well be a very poor indicator of 'success'.

Another factor emerged which also affected group dynamics. This was evidenced in terms of individual members' involvement either in trading or in the social side of LETS. Location appeared to have some effect here.

From the interviews and from observation, it became apparent that not all members were as involved in the group as were others. It appeared that some members were actively exchanging both goods and services, and through LETS developing more fully their social life. Other members did very little while others nothing at all in either or both areas. Members appeared to be aware of this as one Kingsbridge member commented:

...the way I see it is that there's a group of us. I don't know maybe a dozen of us, I don't know how many it is, for whom it is really working well, we're doing lots of trading, we're meeting up with each others at the socials and all the rest of it. It's fantastic as far as that group is concerned and I count myself as a member of that group and then I feel there's an outer group who are doing, you know, a little bit here and
there just sort of ticking over and it's OK for them, and then there's a sort of third tier or outer group which includes people like Bina, and includes people who have dropped out after the last directory, for whom, for whatever reason, it just wasn't working. And what bothered me quite a bit was that the people on that outer tier, we heard, we got reports back saying LETS isn't working in Kingsbridge. Because those people on the outer tier had said how it wasn't working for them. But then that gives the impression that it's not working for anybody, and I feel that there is this kind of three tier system. And we need to be looking at drawing the middle tier in somehow, drawing the middle tier in if possible, but maybe it's always like that, maybe it's got to be like that. (K6a)

It became apparent that this was also the case in the Yeovil LETS scheme. As one member recounted:

I noticed on the last lot of accounts, a lot of members hardly seem to trade at all. There's several, particularly the Core Group who seem to trade a really significant amount, and then there's people like me who seem to trade a moderate amount, and then there are people who I don't really know why they're members, they don't seem to have done anything about it. (Y7)

Location appeared to play an important role. The South West is mainly a rural area. Some members, both in Kingsbridge and in Yeovil, lived in the heart of the town, while others lived some distance away. The spread of members from the town, in both LETS schemes, was in all directions. Transport in a rural area was repeatedly referred to as a problem especially in Yeovil. As one retired member pointed out 'I don’t have transport except for a push bike. So where we meet has to be fairly near. I mean somewhere that I can cycle to. It [Yeovil LETS] covers quite a big area. I'm always surprised how much the residential part has built out round a fairly small town' (Y3).

Transport problems in a rural area according to members, affected both social meetings and exchange patterns.

…it always tends to be the same people going to the meetings rather a lot...In our system it’s so widespread some people have to travel quite
wide distances to get to...I’m not sure that it works terribly well as widely spread as we are, but in an area like this I don’t see any other way round it, because it’s got to have a sufficient number in the system [LETS] to be viable...It’s unfortunate that people on our system [LETS] have to be able to travel, they have to have use of a car really. Public transport is extremely bad in Somerset. (Y1)

Again this suggests a level of closure. The ‘inner group’ in Kingsbridge tended to have more contact. In fact, the majority of Core Group members lived in the town. As one core group member stated:

This [Kingsbridge] is the hub of it. There is twenty five percent, or originally there was twenty five percent from Kingsbridge and seventy five percent from the Hams. That was the breakdown I did a year or so ago, so I wonder whether the core is part of that twenty five percent in Kingsbridge. (K6b)

The majority of those that had not rejoined Kingsbridge LETS had, in fact, lived in some of these outer locations. Certainly, interviews with those whose location was not in the town, revealed how this affected group dynamics.

I mean I’m a little bit out in the sticks here. I mean if I lived in Kingsbridge I could use people who are offering produce more easily, but I don’t go into Kingsbridge more often than I can possibly help. (K13)

For one Kingsbridge member location was of particular concern:

I think really that in some ways the area is too large, so that people’s paths don’t cross...now I’ve got tomatoes, surplus tomatoes and peppers and things, and I’ll have a lot of apples, but how do I contact people who want, you know I see people in the circular and they want fresh fruit and this sort of thing. (K9)

A focal point in the town was a solution put forward by many. Others suggested a regular market place. Their ambition was to find somewhere where they could buy and sell goods and services and meet each other on a regular basis.
One couple from Yeovil LETS could be described as being on the ‘outer tier’ of LETS. They had done virtually no trading and described how they had joined LETS because they ‘liked the idea’ (Y9a). During interviewing a number of points were referred to which may explain why they had made little use of the scheme. ‘...in terms of the services we offer nobody has actually contacted us’ (Y9a). They had no regular contact with any other LETS members. Both were busy working in full time employment. Therefore they were ‘in a position where they could probably afford to go out and pay someone else to do it...’ (Y9b). They also had three children and a ‘hectic social life’ (Y9a). A few Jacks had been earned but they felt that they were unable to spend them. In addition they felt that they had little to offer in the way of skills (especially what they termed ‘practical skills’ Y9b). They also had a large established network of people and relatives to call on for help when needed. Yet it was interesting that they intended to continue membership and were quite happy with the way things were. The LETS community for them was not ‘fictitious’ as such because they knew that a group existed. However, it was an ‘imagined community’ in that they had an idea of what the LETS group was about. Therefore this suggests that the meaning of LETS as ‘community’ for those in the ‘outer group’ was something very different to those who felt part of the ‘inner group’.

Conclusion

Some members retained a nostalgic picture of the past, a past which was sometimes longed for in light of contemporary instability. LETS are therefore one response to perceptions of rapid social change, and thus being firmly rooted in locality, are an
attempt to reassert the local boundary. In other words, LETS are a means of re-embedding people into the local community.

Inasmuch as LETS are a grassroots initiative, members were able to define their own wants and needs. Further discussion of issues such as value attached to currency and skills also encouraged members to explore their own philosophies and ideas which again had the effect of further shaping and defining LETS affinity. This was an ongoing process that created and re-created meaning at the level of locality. However, in terms of progression, both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS had moved on to inter-trade with LETS in other geographical areas. In terms of LETS as simply local trading schemes, another dimension is added.

Communal group identity is bound up with the notion of like-mindedness. Like-mindedness towards the environment, the economy, alternative ways of living etc, has moral underpinnings. LETS in effect attract a certain type of person – like attracts like. Although LETS are located within a geographical area, could they also be described as ‘communities of like-mindedness’ built upon trusting dispositions? Yet, and as indicated, there were also different outlooks within and between members of both LETS groups. LETS members are thus not a homogeneous group with necessarily matching worldviews.

Both Core Groups provided an important foundation in terms of group dynamics in action. The Core Groups consisted of volunteers who had cultural capital prior to group formation, and who further experienced personal growth in cultural capital. The initial Core Groups consisted of an existing web of friendship who then had the entrepreneurial task of attracting others. Effective and dynamic leadership was
therefore essential. Each Core Group represented the backstage face of LETS where differences of opinion were negotiated. Members, however, were brought together to deal with practical issues arising from every day activity. Social control was identified as a feature of both LETS which further served to define the ‘LETS community’.

The forging of group identity also had the unintended consequence of creating group closure which, in effect, created the LETS boundary. Closure also operated at many different levels within LETS creating boundaries within boundaries. An ‘inner group’ was identified which obviously include Core Group members. There also existed an ‘outer group’ who took no active part. This raises questions of whether LETS are characterized more as ‘reflexive community’ or whether community is merely ‘symbolic’. If there are not enough shared meanings and practices does it simply become an imagined community? Findings suggest that there are several different ‘communities’ within LETS. The emotional and affectionate involvement with the ‘tools’ is not just material but also appears to be abstract and cultural. Thus any discussion of the process involved in the creation of ‘community’ must address this issue. One way of capturing this process is to investigate in more depth the ways in which different forms of capital contribute to the creation and further maintenance of community for LETS members. It is to this that I now turn.

Notes

1 In Britain, the divorce rate per thousand married people rose from 2.1 in 1961 to 13.4 in 1991 (CSO Social Trends 1994).
2 Liz Shephard wrote in an e-mail dated 18th May 1998 ‘We had a Parliamentary Bill read on March 25th, which prompted Field to meet me and the sponsoring MPs. The Bill asks for a total disregard of LETS credits for benefits calculations, while maintaining the existing qualifications (e.g. the 16 hour rule) for getting benefit in the first place. A second reading of the Bill takes place on 3rd June’.
3. Letslink can be described as a social movement in that it was trying to effect change. Individual LETS schemes are better described as grassroots activism which is related to the more general and inclusive concept of social movements which often originate at the local level. However, social movements subsequently continue at higher or more central levels of power, where established organizations of more professional activists work, here being Letslink and associated academics, on the same issue (Eyerman & Jamieson 1991).

4. Gill Seyfang (1994) and Pete North (1997) also found a range of different political views at Diss LETS and Manchester LETS respectively.

5. If I am reflective it was at this point that I began to feel uneasy at Kingsbridge LETS. I was asked to attend a meeting where Anthony Steen was to give a talk. However, I declined as I felt that drawing politicians to LETS, in particular Conservative politicians, would greatly deter 'ordinary' people who perhaps could gain economically and socially from LETS involvement. I felt at this stage that it was taking on a distinctive 'identity' which I did not feel comfortable with given that I was more left wing in my political views.

6. See appendix Five for notes written in my research diary later that day.

7. Originally I had a footnote which read 'Although of course this is also one way of 'vetting' new members'. However, I argued in Chapter Four that one validity check must come from respondents themselves. Having asked the group to comment upon the research findings, a written comment here read 'It might be viewed as such but it was never in our intentions to use it thus - often we met them after they'd joined. The real intention was to (a) welcome them personally (b) to assess their understanding of how LETS works and if necessary help them grasp the process'.

8. On features associated with social exclusion see also Golding (1986); Brown and Crompton (1994); Roan (1995).
CHAPTER SEVEN: CAPITAL – CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND SYMBOLIC

Introduction

Chapter Five provided a description of the characteristics of LETS members, and identified the theme of community as deserving of more detailed investigation. Chapter Six provided a more detailed account of the way in which LETS as ‘community’ was formed and shaped from the bottom up, a process which contributed to the LETS group identity and group dynamics. The focus of this chapter is on four forms of capital at work within LETS: cultural capital, economic capital, social capital and, symbolic capital. ‘A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognized as economic must endeavor to grasp capital, that “energy of social physics” (Bourdieu 1990:122), ‘in all its different forms, and to uncover the laws that regulate their conversion from one to the other’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:118). The aim here is to examine how these additional forms of capital interact in practice. The interaction of these different forms of capital highlights how each contributes to the active creation of community for members of LETS.

Cultural Capital

The existence of cultural capital within the group is a theme that has reared its head in the previous two chapters. Chapter Five clearly confirmed that members tended to possess relatively high levels of cultural capital in terms of educational qualifications. Chapter Six also provided evidence of the ways in which cultural capital contributed
to, and was acquired through, LETS involvement. Evidence suggested that members had a tendency to support other local community initiatives, and thus indicated a sense of self-efficacy. This clearly links in with the possession of cultural capital gained through education, upbringing and background, and the confidence and knowledge that stems from such privilege. Chapter Six also provided evidence of the way in which cultural capital contributed to the successful formation of each group. Core Group members developed and expanded cultural capital through involvement on the Core Group; prior skills were developed and new skills acquired. It was also revealed that leadership skills among Core Group members were an essential ingredient to the successful creation and maintenance of each LETS group. Moreover, the practical aspects of running a LETS also raised interesting issues which needed resolving; discussion and problem solving were routine day-to-day activities where meanings were clarified and which in turn defined the shape of the ‘LETS communities’. This is a short summary of the way in which LETS members made cultural distinctions; it clarifies further the relationship between identity boundaries and the culture of the people inside the boundary. I turn now to look in more depth at the ways in which other forms of capital contributed to the process of creating the ‘LETS community’.

Alternative Economic Capital: A narrow definition of success

One interesting aspect of LETS currency is its similarity to conventional currency. LETS exchange is not barter. Barter exchange is where face-to-face transactions take place without any time delays. LETS work in a very similar fashion to the conventional economy, as one Core Group member from Kingsbridge very strongly stressed:
I think the whole thing just rests on the monetary system doesn’t it, the system is identical in many ways. But I think that a lot of people when they think of barter they think they have to trade one to one. But that’s the great thing about LETS, just having a cheque book, you can just buy and sell anything, trade just about whatever, but I’m sure some people just hear the word barter and they think it’s just one to one. They don’t realize that it is the same as the conventional system, as money. I know when I first started hearing about LETS, if somebody had said trade or barter to me, what it would have conjured up in my mind is like a direct swap almost. You can’t visualize it. I mean I could never have visualized it working exactly the same as the monetary system, without having the monetary value. (K14b)

This was seen as one of the valuable attributes of LETS. Members do not have to trade on a one to one basis. As another member pointed out ‘One of the values of LETS is that you don’t have to exchange with individuals, do you? Like if you come to me for eggs I don’t have to say what can you do, what can you offer me? That’s not the point, somebody else can offer’ (K4a).

In theory this is the way LETS works. In practice it was not always so. For as many of the interviewees, from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS pointed out, a lot of the time they dealt with the same people. As one Kingsbridge member described:

...I’ve always been interested in this way of working, it’s like bartering but not quite is it, because it’s not one to one. Although it is interesting because it does happen like that for me, which is really interesting. I mean I know I don’t say to Joyce I want a pint of milk here is a pot of marmalade, we don’t work like that. But the thing is that mainly, I work with her. (K15)

This possibly had something to do with ‘the disparity between wants and needs’, which was emphasised by many members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil, even though there were more practical skills/services on offer in Yeovil. The quotation is also interesting for two reasons. Firstly it suggests that in practice members do tend to trade with the same people. Secondly it may highlight the similarity between gift exchange
and LETS exchange in that it creates obligations between members. It obliges one to reciprocate.

One notable difference between money and LETS currency was continually referred to as being a problem. Prior to the interviews one council had withdrawn housing benefit from a member of LETS in Dorset because they insisted on taking their LETS earnings into consideration when working out their benefit entitlement. As a direct result the LETS folded. Members, from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, were justifiably worried about possible repercussions for their LETS. The feelings generated by this action were anger and disbelief. This certainly highlights the unequal power relations between LETS members and this particular council. On the one hand the council had the power to recognize LETS currency as currency, on the other they totally disregarded LETS currency as payment. It was this aspect that members were particularly angry about. In relation to this one member stated:

It's a bit like this housing benefit problem. What I just can't understand is that if they (Dorset council) wish to accept LETS currency as being valuable, then surely, they should be happy for the person to pay their rent in the LETS currency. Well if they recognize it and deduct it, they should recognize it to receive as well. They should be allowed to pay their rent in that currency as well. I can't see how you can recognize it as income on the one hand and not accept it as payment on the other. That is not fair, it's just a one sided coin isn't it. It doesn't make any sense. (K14b)

LETS currency also differed from conventional currency because it can only be spent on a limited number of goods and services. As one member said 'I would be delighted if I could pay some of my rent with Bridges, but you can't' (K13). She further expressed the limited usability of the currency 'And it isn't money, they won't let me pay my telephone bill with it or anything else, so it's just not fair to say, oh well, this is
money, because it isn’t’ (K13). In this respect LETS currency is very different from money.

While there are some comparisons with the conventional economy, members indicated that for them trading through LETS differed in a number of ways. For example one of the ways in which it differed was in terms of the personal feelings members experienced. As one member described:

...if you go into a shop and buy something the person either, you just go in there and buy it, you buy it and you come out, you’re either in a queue so you can’t talk to anybody or anything, or in the other case there’s somebody trying to sell you something and sort of pressurizing you into buying something, whereas with LETS it’s not like that. It’s done very slowly and casual, rather than having it forced on you or a necessity sort of thing, you know by going to Woolies or somewhere, you know, it’s very impersonal. (K1)

Here we can see that LETS trading is more intimate; one gets the chance to talk with the other trader. Secondly it is slower and more casual, which makes one feel less pressurized. Thirdly, it is more personal. Yet one could equally relate each of these points to trading or shopping in a local corner shop or a local village shop. This personal feeling created through LETS trading, however, was important to many of the members interviewed. As one put it:

I think people feel more confident if they know each other. Because it’s not as business like as just picking someone out of the phone book to do a job, it’s a more friendly thing isn’t it. It’s not a just sort of business arrangement that you would have with just money. It’s the community spirit thing isn’t it. It’s the trusting of people that goes with it. (K1)

As we can see from the above quotation, from the personal feeling came feelings of trust and confidence. Again these feelings could equally be experienced in a visit to the local corner shop, which combines a social call with the practicalities of shopping.
However, where this did appear to differ was in terms of the feelings of generosity generated which were very different from the impersonal feelings often experienced by members when dealing with conventional currency - money. Several members mentioned feelings of generosity. In the interview I asked the member quoted above ‘Why is it more trusting?’ The reply was:

Because, well my feeling generally is that people feel that anything where money is involved, people become very selfish. And the selfishness doesn’t seem to happen in Bridges. And that’s the only time I’ve known people, and I’ve done it myself, people say oh you owe me seven bridges, and invariably they say, oh no, that’s not enough, I’ll give you nine, or something like that. You know people want to give more than they’re asked for very often. (K11)

This was an interview with both the husband and wife who were both LETS members, her husband went on to say:

You do a job for somebody and ask them for ten pounds, they don’t say oh, here’s fifteen (he laughs). Very unusually does that happen to me. (K14b)

Another key difference between the conventional economy and LETS is in terms of the concept of debt. I described in Chapter One how LETS is a debt driven system. LETS currency cannot be created until one goes into debt. While most members recognized this was how the system worked, many felt uneasy at the thought of personally going in to debt. The problem with the concept of debt became apparent at both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS.

Some members felt that going into debt did not come naturally, they felt that it was somehow wrong, and this presented itself as a problem. The following quotation summarized many members’ feelings on this:
...I suppose it is difficult for almost everybody to feel that if you are going into debt, I mean you do feel that you are doing something wrong, so you know it does need a lot of, I expect with a lot of people they need to be convinced that is the way that it works. It doesn't come natural, I don't think. (K1)

Another member worried about how she might earn LETS credits if she were to make use of some of the services on offer. She had just moved house and one of the things she wanted to do was to decorate her new house.

Part of me thinks that I should get somebody from the LETS to do the decorating, but having said that, how am I going to earn the bridges? (K12)

I prompted that 'There may be a time in your life when you've got everything done and you might be able to repay', but she replied:

I know, I know, but still, because you're left with this hangover of debt aren't you, you can't. And I need to contribute in life as well as to receive. (K12)

Another member suggested that 'The thing I haven't yet learnt, which is silly really, is to spend them all [LETS credits] and go overdrawn' (K13). I further asked 'Does it still worry you about going into debt?' She gave quite a lengthy reply, but it was an interesting reply in that it highlights feelings associated with the notion of debt as well as introducing a moral stance towards interest payments, which was consistent with several other members accounts:

Yes, oddly enough, not consciously, it's an unconscious thing, because I'm so money orientated, we all are, and I think that worries people. Then you feel, it comes back to this, of owing something, and again, a lot of us have been brought up in this era that we must NEVER OWE ANYBODY ANYTHING [this is whispered as though she did not want anybody to hear her]. I mean big business people don't care if they've got two million overdrawn when they're worth on paper fifty million, you know it's that kind of thing. But for ordinary people who have had to be careful I think it's harder to think of being able to go overdrawn
and you're not actually IN DEBT [again whispers these words]. Because there’s the thing, you’ve got to pay interest on things. I think it’s wrong, I still think it’s wrong. Because when you read the Testament they’re forbidden to do it. I didn’t realize that in mediaeval times that the Catholic Church refused to allow interest being paid, because you weren’t allowed to do it. But now it's, it is immoral when you think about it. Now it's considered the thing that everybody does, you know that nobody is ashamed of having this huge overdraft and having to pay a vast amount back for the right to do it. (K13)

As suggested by the member in the above quotation, the problem with debt manifested itself as 'generationally specific'. This was referred to several times by other members’ during interviewing. ‘I don’t like to get too low, you know I like to keep a balance if I can. Well I like to keep in credit if I can, like I do with the bank. I hate being, can’t bear to be in the red, not even a pound’ (K7). I further prompted ‘But it doesn’t really matter with LETS’, to which she replied:

Bridges. No, I know it doesn’t, but it’s a thing, it’s a my generation thing. We never ever borrowed money, you know we never borrowed anything. We saved up and then we bought what we wanted. The only thing we ever borrowed money for was buying a house and we really didn’t like that, you know I paid the mortgage off as quickly as I could and it isn’t sensible at all. It isn’t really. (K7)

Related to the notion of debt is the notion of obligation. Obligation is an interesting concept, especially in terms of how obligation contributes to the notion of community.

One member described how she had been ‘brought up with a mother who doesn’t like to be obliged to anybody’. She further went on to describe the difficulty she used to have with this feeling of obligation:

If somebody gives you something you feel you have to give something back. And I like to do that, it does feel nice, I mean even if its something that’s not worth an awful lot, you feel that you’ve helped each other, you’re not feeling that you’re getting CHARITY (whispers this word). But if you’re helping other people, you’re giving back, which is what society is about isn’t it. It’s not about sort of giving a lot or getting a lot of, it’s giving and getting. And Nick [her husband] would never do it when I first married him, he wouldn’t dream of taking anything. He
would have to pay for absolutely everything, otherwise you’re obliged to them. (K13)

Certainly, this highlights how giving is one such way of exercising power by enforcing obligations. The above quotation refers more to the conventional economy rather than to LETS. Interestingly, this same member went on to point out the difference in the concept of obligation as it related to LETS exchange:

And in LETS you are obliged, you are obliged to put something back in. But it’s a different kind of obligation. You’ve taken and if you go overdrawn it doesn’t matter, I mean the only obligation you’ve got is that if somebody wants something that you’ve got then you give it. So it’s not being all a giver or all a taker, you’re learning to give and take with each other. That’s something we’ve lost in this society isn’t it really, the give and take. (K13)

Is LETS then a project for enhancing social solidarity? It does appear from the above quotation that debt binds the ‘LETS community’ together. However, as the discussion of debt earlier revealed, most members like to think of their accounts being either in credit or more or less balanced. As one member who was heavily in credit at the time of the interview said, had she not been in credit ‘I would have felt obliged to keep my account more or less in balance’. In fact surplus was a bigger problem than deficit.

Several members (mainly the younger ones), on the other hand, indicated that the notion of debt, of being overdrawn, did not present itself as a problem. However, if they were to leave the area, it would become a problem. How would they be able to settle their account? This had in fact happened. Participant observation alerted me to this issue. A number of Kingsbridge members had moved out of the area leaving their accounts in debit. This topic had been brought to the attention of the Core Group during the course of this study and was discussed several times during Core Group meetings. It appeared, however, that rather than attempting to free ride, most members did not want
to leave owing LETS currency. It seemed that these members had used the scheme as it
was intended to be used, only to find that other members had not called on their
services. One way of overcoming this was to leave goods behind to be sold at one of
the LETS auctions. For example one member who had left the area in debit offered a
commissioned painting which was sold, to myself, for LETS currency at the LETS
auction after the Annual Members’ Meeting. Thus even when one leaves the area one
feels obliged to balance the account. It seems that LETS are more to do with moral
commitment rather than self-interest.

So far I have looked at the similarities and differences between LETS and the
conventional economy and the limitations and benefits of the notions of debt and
obligation. What then of the economic benefits and limitations of LETS to members in
practice? As pointed out by many members LETS ‘is really good because you can
create something that you can’t actually get anywhere else’ [for example] ‘you could
advertise that you can walk a dog and stuff like that. With the LETS you can CREATE
things that you can’t buy elsewhere’ (K14b).

In addition, LETS were seen to be helping people gain access to things they would not
otherwise be able to afford. As one member stated:

One young mother [at one of the LETS auctions], a single mum, was
able to buy quite a lot of things, and I thought at the time if she had to
pay for that in money she wouldn’t be able to afford it. But to pay fifteen
or thirty bridges for a thing, you can afford it because anyone can afford
it. (K4a)

Moreover, LETS had particularly helped one disabled female member. This member
was confined to a wheelchair and she spoke of the very positive benefits attached to
membership of LETS.
It's been fantastic because we've had a cleaner and a gardener and we could never have afforded that. For the benefit of your tape recorder, I am in a wheel chair. There are a lot of things I can't do now, and so [my husband] has to do them, so it's nice to get someone in to give him a break. (K14a)

Her husband went on to expand 'Yea, it certainly makes a difference. You can afford things that you wouldn't if you had to pay cash for them' (K14b). Moreover, participating in LETS had made it possible for the husband 'to go out to work' because he was 'not tied here quite so much'. His wife further remarked that:

If it carries on, ultimately we'll become independent again as we were when I wasn't in a wheel chair, but it's got to be done gradually, and it's [membership of LETS] helping us to do that. (K14a)

While LETS were spoken about by some in very positive terms, many others described negative aspects they had experienced personally. For example, many complained that there was 'not enough variety of services basically. There seems to be a lot of people offering the same thing' (K3). Many said that they would really like there to be more things like 'electricians, and motor mechanics' or things like 'builders'. While these kinds of practical skills were often what members really wanted and needed, some pointed out that they could not really see those kinds of people joining LETS because 'they are the sort of people who usually have plenty of work. They haven't time to do things for LETS' (K2).

Others were disappointed with some members who had advertised skills in the directory, only to find out that they really were not up to them. One female member who was disappointed with the lack of practical skills said:

I've been trying to find someone to do some sewing for me. I phoned one or two that said they could do sewing [in the directory], but they
didn’t seem very confident about what I wanted them to do. Quite often you find that you ask people to do something, and they say oh no I can’t, I’m not really good at that even though they have put themselves in the directory as doing it. (K11)

Others had tried to get people to do things with fruitless results. As another said ‘We have tried to get someone to help with the gardening who could share the vegetables and they say oh you’re too far out’ (K10a). Location is an issue that has already been detailed. Another was persistent in her efforts, which eventually paid off, even though she started looking for a gardener and ended up with alternative therapy.

I looked through the directory and I must admit the first five phone calls, the people said I don’t do that, or LETS, what’s LETS, what are you talking about, and they were the husbands you see. Or [they said] I don’t do that any more, and then somebody said oh I don’t really know anything about that. It was unbelievable. But if I hadn’t been really highly motivated about it, I would have given up. (K2)

Despite the economic limitations pointed to in this section the majority of members did not leave the scheme. As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, sole focus on the economics of LETS artificially limits itself to those practices that are socially recognized as economic. As Chapter Five and Chapter Six revealed, in the reflexive process of sharing their experiences of, and attachment to membership of LETS, a community rationale rather than an economic rationale was unveiled. Thus as O’Doherty et al. (1997b:7) argue ‘...LETS should never be evaluated against indicators such as volume of trade when increasingly that is not a real objective of members’.

Investigation of other types of capital at work within LETS further captures that ‘energy of social physics’ in all its different forms. It is to social capital that I now turn.
From Economic to Social Capital

Social capital, if we recall, stems not so much from what one knows as whom one knows (and who knows you). Social capital refers to the various kinds of valued relations with significant others. Connections in the form of friends, relations, associates and acquaintances, as noted in Chapter Three, can all bestow status.

All members interviewed indicated that connections had been made with others as a direct result of joining LETS. However, obviously the degree to which this occurred differed for the individual members. While the questionnaire established that friendships were cultivated, what it did not reveal was the process through which associations were formed. Interviewing and participant observation permitted a much fuller appreciation of this aspect.

Sometimes an immediate affinity between members was produced. One Kingsbridge member described her feelings towards other members:

I consider anybody who is a LETS member a friend. Not necessarily a close, regular friend, but I feel a friendship, an immediate friendship with people who are in LETS. (K7)

Why is this the case? Why does membership of LETS bring about feelings of friendship, and how does this differ from trading in the conventional economy? This same female member further revealed insights into these questions:

Well when you think of anyone else you trade with, you know, I’m not a friend of the decorator down the road because he’s decorated my house. That isn’t why you’re friends, it’s because you all think in the same way, you identify with the concept of trading amongst each other, and I think that’s what makes, forms a bond. And that’s really the whole idea of it, isn’t it. (K7)
Again, the theme of like-mindedness arises. Trading and the meaning and understanding attached to the concept of LETS create a 'bond' between members.

For one Yeovil member the economic philosophy was an important motivation. However, it was the social events that actually made the economic side work.

I think for us its [the social events] got the whole thing going. I think if we had just been presented with the directory, to actually go through and phone people up and say you know you are asking for such and such are you interested in us out of the blue, you know to take people up on their offers would have been extremely hard. I personally would have felt a lot more dubious about doing that because you really don't know what their skills really are and you know what their qualifications are and they don't know you either. But once you actually meet people and get to know them you just feel a lot better about asking people. So I think that it's helped the group as a whole. The people who actually come [to the socials/meetings] do seem to trade. (Y2)

The Core Group meetings at Yeovil were considered both as trading and social events1. Members took along goods to trade with other members. This was slightly different from Kingsbridge where Core Group meetings were kept separate from social events or even trading days like bazaars, fairs etc. The regular meetings at Yeovil tended to develop both social and economic capital for and between members who attended meetings, leaving those who did not attend on the periphery of LETS. The meetings which were held on a regular basis created and sustained, in the minds of members anyway, a 'reflexive community' where both emotional and affectionate involvement with LETS was not solely material but was also abstract and cultural. It was here that habit cultivated social capital for those members who attended social events and meetings on a regular basis, and thus contributed to the notion of the 'LETS community'.

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...there are people in our group that because of other commitments, don’t ever make it to a social. And you tend not to trade with them because you’ve never met them, which is a shame because there are some really interesting people in there...But if people don’t trade much and don’t come to the socials, I really don’t know that much about them other than what they’ve put in the directory. And what I’ve found is that hardly any of the things that I’ve got in the directory have been called upon. You know I’ve offered various skills that I thought I might like to do in my spare time, and they’re not the things that people have wanted from me. But because they have got to know me, and know what I’m into, what I do for a living, what I’m good at, they want other things, that perhaps I wouldn’t want to offer through the LETS directory. But because I know them I say well seeing it’s you yea I’ll do that. I’ll weld your car or dig up your drains or whatever it is. (Y5b)

One of the more interesting aspects of the LETS concept then is that it facilitates communication between members which results from social interaction activated at meetings and social events held on a regular basis. It almost has the feel of a mini-market where one mingles with and trades with others, and is at once both a social and a business experience. Social capital thus mingles with economic capital, each having the effect of boosting the other.

It’s very good having the regular meetings we have. That’s how we’ve got to know people and how we got to use it really, because we tend to trade with people we know because that’s just the way it works isn’t it. You know I mean and somebody says oh I need such and such doing or whatever, and we just actually take goods along and sell them at the meetings and then we tended to then trade with, you know to try to buy off those people at the meetings. (Y2)

The importance of face-to-face interaction was evident from the questionnaires, the ethnographic fieldwork and the interviews. From this face-to-face interaction immediate and direct communication evolved. Again, here emerged the building of social capital or ‘reputation’ through the meeting of people. This occurred particularly at social events.
Well you’ve got to know them I think, because we had the new people in [the directory] you see, and you see that they’re offering that and that, and you find the new people they’re offering an incredible amount of things, and you don’t quite know how good they are at it and what they’re like. I think the social events are important where you get to meet people face-to-face and talk. (K4a)

Some members found it quite difficult to do any trading without prior knowledge of people in the directory. One Kingsbridge member initially described herself as being ‘lazy’ because she had done very little trading. However, she further went on to clarify that this was not really the case; rather, it was the difficulty she experienced in having to phone somebody she did not know and ‘ring them and say I want this, you know I find that really difficult’ (K5). She had ‘made the effort’ to go to some of the social events in order to put names to faces. This same member found it easier to trade at the markets and bazaars because you get to meet directly other people that are also in LETS. This, for her, facilitated trade and was easier ‘because you’re meeting people face-to-face’ (K5). Members from Yeovil also referred to this, for as one said:

I certainly find it easier once I know people…it can be a bit daunting phoning up. You feel silly…It’s almost like you’re asking a favour of a stranger I think. (Y7)

Another member quite interestingly used the term ‘interaction’ before correcting himself with the term ‘exchange’. Again this gave a clue to the importance of face-to-face interaction in the building of social capital through trading.

…so when I did my first interaction, er well exchange, when I was building a fence for somebody, I mean I hadn’t spoken to this woman before but she lived in the same village as I did, just up the road, and er the actual job seemed very little, sort of. Getting to know her and her getting to know me and talking about family and friends and everything else and dogs and all sorts of things seemed more important than the fact that I was putting up a fence. (K1)
Female members tended to talk about the building of social capital in terms of developing confidence and self worth. As one documented:

And I think with LETS you’ve got this community spirit and you’re building people up by letting people find their talents. [LETS] will show people that you’re not just some poor little soul that’s got nothing. I think I felt a bit like that, although I’ve nursed all my life, once I had the children, although I think that bringing up children is the most important job in the world, you do feel that you are just little old Gill you know, cooking, cleaning, and that’s just about the limit of it. Whereas with an organization such as LETS you suddenly find the most extraordinary things are WORTH something. Things that you never even thought about LIKE your cooking are suddenly worth far more than you thought they were. And it really builds your confidence, without building your ego. Because there are lots of other people around you that have got extraordinary talents as well. And so you feel that you are part of a group and that you MATTER. And that’s something that we have lost today, isn’t it, this sense that you matter. (K13)

Feeling that one is part of a group certainly appeared to overcome feelings of individualism. It was ‘the friendly atmosphere’ according to some that also generated feelings of belonging. As one member said: ‘the first time I went along and had a stall at the bazaar, you know I was quite nervous really because I didn’t know anyone, and everyone was so friendly that they made me feel part of it, and that’s fine’ (K11).

Feelings of warmth and acceptance were also generated which were, in part, attributed to the originators of the ‘friendly group’ by one member who said ‘And the people who started it particularly here, they are warm and accepting right from the beginning and I think we are very suspicious of each other in this day and age’ (K13).

Feelings of fun were also generated, in particular through social events. This tended to act as a basis for friendship for many members. As one stated:

I’ve made new friends and I’ve gone to all these daft things like LETS make music and that kind of stuff. We had one the other day and we all made fools of ourselves, which was great fun because everybody else
was doing the same kind of thing. So it was good, but there were only a few of us. But yes I’ve made lots of new friends. (Y1)

Friendship or getting to know people did not just spontaneously happen. It was a process which developed over time. For as one male member from Kingsbridge LETS pointed out ‘through participating in the social events one gets to know the people involved’, moreover, he ‘got to know them [LETS members] better over a period of time...’ (K1). Another from Yeovil also pointed out that the building of social capital takes time.

I didn’t use it [LETS] very much to start with. I think it takes time to feel comfortable with it. I think it was really when people started phoning me that I sort of then felt more comfortable phoning them. Not necessarily the same people but just the fact that people have called me out of the blue. It sort of empowered me then to feel comfortable phoning someone and saying you know I’m from LETS...it’s almost like a slow thing, I’m using it more than I ever have done and I think the more comfortable I get with it the more I will continue to use it. I think again, the more people that know your name and know your face, the more likely they are to come to you. I think it just takes time. (Y7)

As previously established, not all members were as involved in LETS, either in trading or in the social side, as were others. This was not seen as a problem for one Kingsbridge member, for her there were only so many people, whether it is friends or contacts that one can relate to. Again the size of the group appeared important.

And then I think does it matter if there’s only a little group of twenty-four of us who take it seriously. I mean that to me is a huge enrichment to my life. I don’t want more friends or contacts than that. It’s quite enough, you know, I imagine for everyone else that twenty-four, it’s quite enough, we don’t have to be a hundred or two hundred or three hundred. In fact, one of the problems in the modern world is this hideous giant where everything has to be big to be wonderful. Yea, we have our little concert out of doors and twelve people turn up and everyone says what a shame and I think that’s ridiculous. It was a beautiful party, which we all enjoyed. And if you were having a party of your own you wouldn’t dream of inviting a hundred people. I mean, twelve people
would be like a big party wouldn’t it. You know, I mean that’s enough for everyone to talk to everybody else. (K2)

Without joining in with the social events, social capital could not accrue through LETS. Even though one may be a member of LETS, many stated that names in the LETS directory were anonymous, they were but numbers until one had met them.

Yes, well you know, especially when you know in person then you do feel that bit more trust, I think. But you have to see them in real life, I mean when they come to a meeting then I know who is who, but if I just look at the directory and just see a number then it doesn’t mean much. (Y8)

You see once you get to know people that helps as well, but if they’re just anonymous names, that’s why the socials are so important, if you can persuade people to come to the socials. (Y5b)

A small group of committed and serious LETS members were found both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS. Chapter Six identified an ‘inner’ group, which tended to trade and to socialise with each other. It was amongst this small group who were meeting on a regular basis at social events and/or through trading who created and re-created the essence of the ‘LETS community’. It was within these groups that the term ‘LETS community’ started systematically to repeat itself. In other words, in the practice of introducing and using the discourse of ‘LETS community’, it took on a reality of its own, that had shared meaning for the ‘inner group’ of members. This confirms the importance of ‘reflexive community’. The ‘outer group’ only imagined what the LETS community was through literature sent to them. This again provides important evidence of a ‘community’ which was just imagined ‘symbolically’.

Some members lacked social capital before joining LETS. Concrete examples were given of the building of various kinds of valued relations with others, through LETS
involvement, which increased social capital. One Core Group member from Yeovil described himself as an ‘extremely shy person’ who found it ‘difficult to make friends’.

He further stated:

South Somerset is quite an isolated area. So the LETS has been a lifeline, so the trading is quite peripheral. It’s about meeting people and creating relationships, even though some of them may be quite casual acquaintances, but it is still a social network. You know, last year I actually gave a party here and there were so many people, and I’ve never thrown a party before in my life, and without the LETS I wouldn’t have known those people actually. So to me it’s personally very valuable, but the economic side of it is essentially irrelevant. (Y1)

Another member also disclosed that she joined partly because she was lonely. She described how her ‘husband [was] out working a lot’ and she felt that prior to her LETS involvement she was ‘only a housewife’, and she was ‘a bit lonely as well’ (Y8). I asked whether they were reasons for joining LETS. Her reply was:

Yes, actually it is, because I thought if I belonged to a group of people, it would give me a chance to make some friends and bring financial benefits as well, and also social, I can socialize a bit. (Y8)

This same member had just discovered her talent for playing the piano, a hobby she was able to offer teaching of through LETS. Through this, friendship (social capital) developed and continued:

And indeed, I’ve just been invited to a party, a house warming one, just because I belong to LETS. This gentleman is a retired seaman from the Navy and he took up as a hobby the key board playing and so we agreed the night, teach for so many Jacks and so many hours and he started to come for lessons. Obviously he packed up because he moved house but he’s invited me to his house warming party, so he is probably going to take it up again. So we’ve both gained. (Y8)

The survey established that one motivation for joining LETS came from people who were new to the area. Core Group members from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil also
detailed the ‘immense value [of LETS] when moving into [a new] area’ (K6b). For example one Kingsbridge member pointed out the immediate number of social contacts one can make:

Yes, I think it’s brilliant for people who are moving into the area, like Jeremy and Jill. I think they saw an ad saying there was a LETS in the town, and they saw our [telephone] number. They telephoned us, we invited them for tea, they joined immediately, and you know, they got 50 contacts, because it can take people 2 years to really get to know that number of people on that sort of level. So I think it’s brilliant for people moving in. (K2)

While this is anecdotal evidence from a Core Group member who was very enthusiastic about LETS, other evidence from several members who had, in fact, recently moved to the area confirmed that for them this was a particular benefit. One Kingsbridge member stated:

...if you’re new, like I was to the area, it’s a wonderful way of meeting people, and they get you involved, they want you to be involved. They encourage you to do things and to get to know other people and to get some new ideas together and I like it. (K7)

This also happened in Yeovil as one couple described:

I think for both of us as well, we had just recently moved to the area and it was a good way to meet like-minded people. (Y5b)

And it’s really proved that, I would say that the majority of the friends that we now have in this area, we have met through the LETS group. (Y5a)

I would say that about eighty percent of our friends in this area we have met through LETS. (Y5b)

In addition to accrual of social contacts when moving to a new area, LETS also provided other opportunities for its members. As one Kingsbridge Core Group member pointed out:
I think this is the exciting thing about LETS, it gives one a network of people, to link with, to see if there's anything you can share. So it works beyond the LETS. Like it's linking people up to do non-LETS things as well as LETS things. (K6b)

One area where the overspill had been of direct relevance was with the start up of a local Agenda 21 group in the area. Again, we can see links with environmental concerns - one distinguishing characteristic of LETS members. One Kingsbridge member stated:

Well, we encouraged the Agenda 21 initially. We invited Lyn who was an environmental officer, she got that post last year, and she wanted to do as much as possible. We saw her in the paper and invited her along, fourteen members came along that lunchtime. She ate her lunch chatting away, and it led to the formation of a group, which is still ongoing. So that was started by the LETS group although it's not a LETS group now, so it's fascinating the way it's happening. It's happening in a very kind of subtle way. (K6b)

It thus appeared that LETS was creating a network that allowed people to meet and connect up with others within their local area. The way in which LETS was, in fact, spilling over into other things, and other groups were started or developed as a direct result, meant that LETS was successful in a way that cannot simply be measured by looking at either the economic trading that goes on in any one LETS scheme or by quantifying the number of people that attended any one social event. LETS are more complex than this. Again, this raises questions both of method and methodology. Once more, it was the 'inner group' of members who were usually involved with any diversification into other activities. It was the 'inner group' who gained in terms of developing social capital, which contributed to the notion or discourse of LETS as 'community'.
Another area into which LETS tended to spread was the local Credit Union. This was particularly referred to by members from Kingsbridge LETS where a Credit Union was being initiated at the time of the study. Many members pointed out that there was indeed a need for a Credit Union, however, they also stated the fact that setting up a Credit Union is a very complicated and lengthy process. The time one needed to devote to this process put many people off. This emerged as one of the main differences between a LETS and a credit union. One can set up a LETS very quickly, with absolutely no resources except perhaps enthusiasm and commitment. Another key difference was the social dimension, which was so crucial to the building of social capital within LETS. The perceived community feelings produced through LETS may not necessarily occur with a Credit Union, as it is more formalized and social events do not exist.

LETS as Symbolic Capital

It was interesting that some members wondered about the way in which those in the wider community perceived the LETS group. As one Kingsbridge member asked:

Are there LETS rumours going on in Kingsbridge? You know, are we as a group looked on as some kind of weird element? Are we looked on as a group who are trying to do other people's business out of business or are we looked on a something, you know, which is all very interesting but we don't particularly want to be part of it? (K6a)

It was partly for these reasons that members from both LETS groups felt that they had to maintain a relatively professional status. Council involvement was something that many LETS groups had, or were attempting to achieve, partly to gain professional status and partly to secure funds in order to further develop the LETS. There were,
however, differences of opinion on this issue within and between the two LETS schemes.

The views of members, from both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, on the role of council involvement were polarized. Some felt it was a legitimate way of attracting professional recognition, which would further the LETS, while others very strongly expressed the view that council involvement would constrain group autonomy in some way or another.

Well I think the council, if they’re getting involved in it, then that means that they’re getting more out of it than the people they’re suppose to be helping. (K1)

Another Kingsbridge member thought about it carefully and replied:

…perhaps one could get a grant but would there be strings attached? Once you get the council, the trouble is that you have to start doing things PROPERLY (long drawn-out word). And have to have things, a proper accounting, well, I mean, I know we do have a proper accounting, but at least it’s not the end of the world if we don’t get it done, or if it goes wrong. But once you involve official bodies, and you’re being given public money, NO, on balance my instinct is to feel no, I think the price you pay is too high. (K2)

Yet another, who wanted to gain the support of the local council, also made explicit that it should not be at the expense of losing autonomy.

I’d like at some stage to get the support of the council and some resources even if it’s only photocopying or printing or something like this. It would give us a face lift if we could get printing done cheaply through the council, without losing any of our autonomy, you know, without having to give anything over. (K6b)

Certainly, this highlights the tension of, on the one hand, gaining status in the eyes of others outside the group, and on the other, potentially succeeding an element of group
autonomy. Inherent in such a conception is the way in which the group may be made more accountable in an economic sense, and/or the possibility of the LETS becoming more bureaucratic.

Kingsbridge LETS had not taken the council involvement route although it had been discussed at a number of Core Group meetings. Yeovil LETS, on the other hand, actually differed in this respect. The Yeovil scheme had, in fact, explicitly made advances to the council, in order to gain their attention as well as to secure possible resources.

...this is another phase in the evolution of the group. To get council money you’ve got to have a full constitution. And this is where the group is at the moment. (Y2)

However, here problems began to arise. The Yeovil scheme had started as an informal grassroots strategy. One member suggested that Yeovil LETS was, in fact, beginning to become more formal and bureaucratic.

Already in the group it has been difficult. It started off with, nobody wanted to have it formal at all, and then they wanted a constitution and meetings and things. And now they’re just in the process of adopting a constitution, it was something to do with the council. (Y2)

I further asked this member ‘And they said you need a constitution?’ The reply was:

Well they haven’t actually said it in so many words, but LETS has been advised that they would be looked upon more favorably by the council if they had a formal kind of set up. That’s why they’ve adopted a constitution. (Y2)

Another member of the Core Group described how:
[He] got birth pains over our constitution. A year that took to come. There was such a lot of hassle over that. Finally we just beat it out in one Core Group meeting but it seems to be totally complicated getting that done. (Y1)

In all probability, Yeovil LETS would not have considered writing a formal constitution had they not had dealings with the local council. The creation of a constitution did, in fact, make Yeovil LETS more accountable to the council. The decisions arrived at and set out in the constitution obliged this LETS and its members' to work within a rigid framework. The council had the power to verify that this framework was being adhered to. For example, decision making processes, the functions of the LETS management group, the management of meetings, and the way in which accounts were dealt with, were all areas for potential council scrutiny. It also began to create a more bureaucratic framework. Collective strategies to increase symbolic capital and secure a more professional status involve symbolic costs.

The creation of a constitution also had the effect of throwing up further issues. One Yeovil member described how her whole family had become involved in LETS activity. They traded as a family. However, adopting a constitution raised issues regarding this:

And there has been debate about a family membership. That was something that came up when they were doing this constitution, because of the voting rights. Because [my husband] and I were going to business meetings and I said well we only pay one sub and really we should only have one vote. But nobody ever really takes any notice when we do both vote, but I said really we ought to consider not necessarily a double membership, but you could have like a joint membership and then a family membership, so that people have voting rights but they pay a bit more for their membership. (Y2)
LETS raise many issues in general. However, and as one can see, it begins to get more complicated the more one tries to regulate it. The above same member continued:

I mean nobody sort of minds, it's just that I feel guilty about it. And there are quite a few couples who only pay one membership and have two votes, and as long as that's written into the constitution and they're quite happy, then it wouldn't bother me. But I wouldn't like somebody coming along at a meeting where something is being discussed which is a strong issue and saying look here you two shouldn't be voting. And neither would I want to say well my husband could always vote, or for him to say well my wife could always vote, because we don't always agree. (Y2)

Yet, one Core Group member in Yeovil considered council involvement necessary for the simple and very symbolic reason that:

It makes people who might think otherwise that it is legitimate, they're not some terrible left wing organization. (Y10)

Another way in which LETS schemes could solicit a more professional status is by attracting businesses. As already documented, there has in general been little active involvement of businesses in LETS. It was thought that a proficient attitude towards the alternative currency, as well as conducting LETS in a relatively business like manner, would enhance this aspect. This was noted at Core Group meetings and at one of the early South West Area Meetings, held in Kingsbridge, where this was discussed at some length. With respect to administration work and the payment made to Core Group members for this work, the following notes were made:

One member said being paid was 'symbolically significant'. Some people need this otherwise feel taken for granted. There was general consensus (at the meeting) that people have to be willing to do the work because they want to, rather than for the payment of it. Some said it mattered little whether or not they were paid. Rather than being 'bogged down' by discussion (of payment) it just happens. It was suggested that there is some need for some level of credibility. Especially when you get bigger and when dealing with businesses. There is a need to be reasonably business like for the currency to be credible. If sterling is not
casual then LETS should not be casual. Otherwise it communicates ‘funny money’.

Communication of ‘funny money’ could affect schemes in a number of different ways.

Discussion further turned to this aspect, where again the following notes were made:

One member from Totnes put forward three points. Firstly, he said it can affect the trading system - the economics are important. Secondly, LETS is a community builder - this is more powerful and it works. Therefore what is the advantage between LETS and cash? It’s nice to have a casual attitude because it distinguishes between cash. However, being too laissez faire means that the currency has little ‘street cred’ (value). This is the least of one’s concerns when starting because you have little control. But you do need some balance. It can become a ‘hippy trading system’ if you are too laxidaisical but you cannot be too tight. ‘We know how to handle money, but LETS is different’.

This raises two interesting issues. Firstly, that payment to Core Group members in LETS currency symbolizes recognition of work done, which creates credibility within the group. Secondly, there is a need to be somewhat business like in order to be symbolically credible to others outside the group. The symbolic aspect of LETS currency thus carries considerable weight, which further serves to define group identity.

One member from Yeovil interestingly brought up another issue that may affect group status. She asked:

I mean what are the tendencies now the group is quite well established. …as time goes on is there more and more temptation to just do a straight swap rather than pay for it in Jacks? (YSa)

This was considered important for the reason that:

People who are new to the group look at how successful it is based on its figures, and if you just start swapping with people that you have met through the LETS group, it destroys part of what you are trying to show
During fieldwork it came to my attention through conversations with members that swapping between friends was a relatively common occurrence. This just highlights the interplay between economic, social and symbolic capital within LETS. Many LETS members did not see it as a problem. As one stated ‘It’s [LETS is] so multi-faceted because there are many people, you know every person must use it in the way they want to’ (Y7). Indeed, this was one of the reasons why a grassroots strategy was considered important. Moreover, it was also one reason for not seeking council involvement/approval.

**Prestige Within the Group**

Observation, in particular at Kingsbridge where a relatively lengthy period of fieldwork was undertaken, made visible the skilled proficiency that took place privately behind the scenes. Core Group meetings were always very professionally conducted which was symbolic of a group with a high level of cultural capital. Minutes were produced after each meeting and an agenda set. One Core Group member, usually a different one each month, was asked to chair the meeting. In this way prestige was handed round.

Prestige was also absorbed through the tasks assigned to each Core Group member. These tasks symbolically generated and sustained a sense of belonging. For example, each was asked to relay back their progress on their designated group roles. As well as generating discussion, this was often a time where praise was given. Members
produced evidence of, for example, positive publicity for the group, or where skills had been developed to produce well thought out leaflets to promote the group. The production of statements and the directory, without which the group could not work, also attracted much acclamation. Newsletters were also a source not just for advertising skills, goods and services, but also for motivating others regarding social events and evidencing written and computing skills. Smiles, nodding heads, and words such as 'well done', 'thanks', and 'congratulations', all communicated social prestige. This in turn created a sense of Core Group loyalty. As one Core Group member stated:

It’s because I have a natural sense, once I belong to a committee or a group, I have a natural sense of loyalty. That’s human nature, a group. So I do it for that and I do it because I have grown fond of the people, I like interrelating with them and I have got this intuition that knowledge and expertise and working as a team that we have developed could be, I don’t know what for though. (K2)

Core Group prestige at Kingsbridge LETS was also strengthened in a public display at the Annual Members’ Meeting. Here members were asked to present a summary of their allotted roles and detail their responsibilities and achievements over the past year. In this way the Core Group’s reputation for competence contributed to the group’s continuing existence by ensuring its cohesion, the effect of which increased members’ loyalty. Moreover, it further produced and re-produced shared meaning, an important ingredient in the notion of ‘reflexive community’.

Members loyally attended the Annual Members’ Meeting. It became a ritual over time endowed with symbolic meaning and importance. A birthday cake was made by one of the members, and celebration included a toast with elder flower cordial produced by another member. These background practices all contributed to the meaning, which was
inherent in belonging to LETS. It also created a sense of loyalty for members in terms of helping keep the group going.

I think you’ll get it [a job] done at the right price and I think it’s a way of trading that if people have put themselves down as electricians and plumbers and whatever then they want to be used, so you know I would use the club [LETS] first, and if it isn’t there, or I can’t get it, then I’ll have to do something else about it, but I always try the list first. That’s what it’s all about really, trading between yourselves and keeping the wheels rolling that way. (K7)

In Yeovil LETS, photographs acted as symbolic evidence of its members’ skills, which were on offer through LETS. As one Core Group member described:

...we’ve got a set of photographs of people doing tasks and doing their LETS thing, and then we had a couple of stalls in Yeovil and we’ve set up the photographs so that people can come and see what we’re offering in LETS you see. Also we had in the local library, they let us have a weeks display in their window so we used the photographs for that you see. (Y10)

Public displays of these photographs symbolized the LETS community in action. These photographs conveyed the shared emotions, information and feelings of LETS members, and therefore helped to cement social cohesion and commitment.

Members who did not take part in the Core Group were also able to gather prestige in other ways. One of the ways in which this occurred was through the skills, goods and services they were able to offer. One member spoke about the ‘special skills’ she had specifically developed as a result of LETS. She offered something, which for her was a pleasure to do, and obviously something of which she was proud.

I like making the [christening gowns], a fiddly little thing like that...so I thought I could put that down [in the LETS directory]. I don’t suppose that people would want one very often. But occasionally somebody wants something really different that’s their own. So I thought that if I
could make something like that it would give me a great deal of pleasure to do. And that’s something that I never thought I would be able to do. (K13)

One couple from Yeovil achieved renown by paying for a large part of their wedding with LETS currency.

We got married last year and we do not have a huge income. We hired a P.A. through the LETS and all the catering was done through the LETS. There were two separate groups of people involved with doing the catering. We had a sort of small-scale afternoon do that was mainly a meal and speeches and all that stuff, they were all sort of closest friends and family. And we had the ceilidh in the evening, so we had two separate lots of catering, and all that was done through the LETS scheme. And the food was absolutely stunning, brilliant. And all it cost us was the raw material, you know the food. All the labour came from the LETS. I mean no way could we have catered for people on the scale which we provided food for people. The wedding video was done on the LETS as well. And all the sort of, the stuff like getting the room ready, arranging the tables, clearing up afterwards and all of that. (Y5a)

Here we can see that the symbolic intertwined with the economic and the social. At an individual level we can see how the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability were converted into the status of being a local notable. It was also credit in the widest sense of the word in that symbolic capital was advanced by the group and granted to this couple who, through the staging of such a public event, further gave the group their best material and symbolic guarantee.

The Building of Reputation

In our search for goods and services generally, we rely on the ranking of reputations (Mistzal 1996:133). However, our final decision is often influenced by our personal impression of a person. We tend to opt for people with whom we can develop ‘an
understanding’, which encourages better communication and a common interpretation of situations.

I asked a number of interviewees ‘how do you know who to trade with? Is reputation important?’ One member replied:

Well yes, I suppose it is really. Well people you know, or people you have had work done by in the past. And that was Derek and the carpentry, I wouldn’t really have gone to anybody else because I know him and I know what he can do and I feel comfortable having him do it than if I paid him money. Whereas other people advertise carpentry but you don’t know whether they have trained or not or, I think you’ve got to find out about the people before you let they loose sort of thing. They’re probably fine, but it’s nice knowing. (K11)

Reputation was ‘crucial’ for one member. The social events gave her a way by which she could make a judgement about people in this respect.

To me it’s [reputation] crucial. And I would’ve thought it would be to other people, which is why the idea of the socials is such a good idea, because then there’s your chance to find out how you feel about people, albeit in a very innocuous way, because it could be very embarrassing for someone once to do your ironing and you think you don’t like them, and it’s a bit embarrassing not to ask them again. Whereas if you’ve met them in the first place, you know you might have got an idea. I personally find that very, very valuable. (K2)

It has already been established that social events were invaluable for building social capital. As well as offering the chance to get to know new people, they also confirmed deeper levels of friendship. In addition, and as the above quotation indicates, they were also a way of finding out about other members before any trading took place. As one member suggested, whenever new people joined:

…you see that they’re offering this and that, and you find the new people they’re offering an incredible amount of things, and you don’t quite know how good they are at it and what they’re like. I think that the
social events are important where you can get to meet people face to face and talk. (K4a)

Another member gave her thoughts on this in the following way:

Oh very, very, I mean [reputation is] very important. In fact, it’s the whole thing for me. After all, if I’m going to have someone’s cakes or stuff I’ve bought, you know, I want to know what they’re like. (K2)

Often, however, there was little choice within LETS with regard to goods and services available.

I don’t know whether it’s come up really, lots of members offering the same thing, or not things we’ve been looking for, where we’ve thought, oh well, we’d prefer to have him because of his reputation. I mean there’s only been like, he’s the only one doing it, therefore, he’s the one we will ask. (K6b)

Thus, one had to accept that the person offering was going to be able to deliver in a way that was acceptable. A large element of trust and risk was therefore involved.

Often it was a dynamic Core Group leader that recommended the skills, goods and services of members.

Clare, [a Core Group member] was also my first customer. She’s recommended me to other people and they’ve come...Clare has actually done a hard sell on my skills to several people who have since then said Clare has recommended you. (Y7)
Conclusion

This chapter has focused specifically on capital and the way in which different forms of capital interact in practice within LETS. This focus contributes to knowledge of how the active creation of community in LETS involves much more than a movement of economic capital. It also involves interchange of cultural, social and symbolic capital.

Alternative economic exchange tended to intensify personal feelings between members, which in turn created mutual feelings of trust. Interestingly, going into debt was problematic for many members even though LETS is a debt driven system. This raises questions of the notion of obligation in LETS and thus suggests different levels of economic commitment within the LETS boundary. Often people with little knowledge of LETS ask about the problem of ‘free riders’. Yet leavers of the schemes who were in debit, it seemed, were not attempting to ‘free ride’. This implies some kind of moral commitment rather than self-interest. LETS have helped some in an economic sense, however, negative aspects were also referred to, for instance an overabundance of therapy and a lack of more practical skills. There was also a tendency for members to trade with the same people which further suggests another level of closure within the LETS boundary. Yet while economic limitations have been outlined, the majority did not leave LETS. Investigation of other types of capital further captured LETS energy in all its different forms.

Social events appeared far-reaching in connecting friends, contacts or acquaintances. Belonging to a group and the feelings created through social events formed the basis of friendship, and although an immediate affinity between members often occurred, the development of affinity into friendship was a process which happened over a period of
time. Face-to-face interaction resulted in communication where reputation was often established. But again, it was the small ‘inner group’ of committed members, who met on a regular basis, which formed the essence of the ‘LETS community’. It was here, amongst these members that ‘LETS community’ discourse started systematically to repeat itself. It took on a reality of its own where shared meaning became routine background practice. Yet even here, different things were going on at different levels. The reflexive discussions at Core Group meetings were one such level. Members who reflexively committed themselves to trading and social activities were another level. Those who met on a regular basis cultivated economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.

Members on the periphery of LETS did not develop the same kind of social capital and remained only members of an imagined community. However, even people who do nothing in terms of trading or socializing have done something – they have actively and voluntarily chosen to join LETS. This was a reflexive choice. Even the anonymous membership number defines the member as ‘one of us’, a LETS insider. This, in effect, draws a boundary. No membership means no inclusion in trading or socializing. The space has been reserved for a ‘special kind of people’ (Bauman 1990:186). The members of the Core Group act as gatekeepers and safeguard the boundary where the gates are guarded.

Symbolic capital was also an important ingredient in creating and maintaining the ‘LETS communities’. Symbolic capital was sought by attempting to make the currency credible both within the group and to ‘outsiders’. Symbolic capital again had the effect of creating the LETS boundary. Only Yeovil LETS sought symbolic capital in an attempt to involve the local council. Council involvement was seen as a legitimate way
of attracting a professional recognition. The Core Groups were symbolic of a group with high levels of cultural capital. Activities and rituals endowed with symbolic meaning gave Core Group members a reputation for competence. This in effect sustained and reinforced the group’s reality by ensuring its cohesion which in turn increased members’ loyalty. The interaction of different forms of capital occurred at many different levels. Some members gave the group their best material and symbolic guarantees. In turn the group was able to advance symbolic capital to individual members. Symbolic capital was the glue that held the LETS together.

Notes

1 If we remember, the survey indicated that some members were not happy mixing Core Group meetings with social events.

2 The need for a shift towards sustainable development was recognized by 160 governments at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. A key part of the Earth Summit was the production of Agenda 21. This was a programme of action towards global sustainable development. Agenda 21 sets out many of the necessary actions. It was widely recognized that action based on these policies relies heavily on local partnerships involving the local government, business and voluntary sectors.

3 Notes were taken at a South West Area Meeting in case study area one on 21.1.96. Twelve members attended from Totnes, Kingsbridge, Exeter, Ashburton, Salcombe, St. Ives, Exmouth, Bristol, Falmouth and Redruth. The meeting started at 10.30am and went on till 4.00pm.
CHAPTER EIGHT: THE NEW ECONOMICS OF COMMUNITY: LOCAL EXCHANGE TRADING SCHEMES

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify and pull together themes/issues drawn from the data and discuss how they relate to the literature presented in Chapters One, Two and Three. The chapter begins by establishing the limitations of an economic focus. It further argues that the significance of LETS is in the active creation of 'community'. As we have seen the creation of a LETS is one response to perceptions of rapid social change; the need to re-assert the local community boundary is an important feature.

The chapter then examines the symbolic nature of community which is constantly maintained through local social practices. However, while LETS members reflexively 'threw themselves' into the communal world of LETS culture, there were different levels of belonging. Only by examining routinized background practices, and by exploring different forms of capital at work within LETS, can this fully be understood.

The role of the core group in facilitating the creation of 'community' through the establishment of routine background practices is of particular importance. 'Trust', as we shall see, is a major theme running through this discussion. The final section of this chapter re-visits the concepts of LETS scheme and LETSystem. The choice of which model to adopt will have a bearing on relations between members and thus will impact on the ways in which different forms of capital work at creating the 'LETS communities'.
The Economics of LETS

In Chapter One I outlined some earlier experiments with alternative currencies. The main focus was explicitly in terms of economic benefits. It was interesting to note that LETS did appear to share some structural problems with these earlier experiments, which have led some to read LETS as being 'inefficient'. Firstly, findings indicate that it was difficult to balance supply with demand as regards the type of goods and services on offer through LETS. As we have seen, therapies often prevail while therapists themselves seek practical services and foodstuffs in exchange for their services. In practice there were no market smoothing mechanisms in LETS to counter any disequilibrium in the market. Consequently, one cannot assume that if a gap in supply appears one only needs to call on the producers of that good in demand and the problem is solved.

In relation to this Purdue et al. (1997:658) state that LETS 'claims to empower individuals by acknowledging their skills'. However, findings indicate that those with highly valued skills in the conventional economy were in demand and those with skills lowly valued in the conventional economy were similarly undervalued on the LETS. Inequality in the conventional economy was thus transferred into LETS. A second and related point is the fact that revaluation of goods and services was difficult, complicated and by no means just. Skills were often valued at the same rate as in the conventional economy. Indeed, this was an ongoing bone of contention for members of Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS schemes.

In terms of exchange, trust (social capital) among LETS members did appear, to some extent, to enhance community cohesion, and this did relate to feeling part of a
community. Trust seems to play a significant role in any exchange where each partner has clear expectations of the other, and where, in particular, there is a time lapse between the exchange of goods or services. Thus, only the type of exchange based on mutual expectations (obligations) and involving a time lapse is underpinned by trust as an instrument of social organization (Misztal 1996:17). Credit, gift giving and LETS exchange can be included in this category.

The analysis put forward by Purdue et al. (1997:656), and outlined in Chapter One, moved beyond purely economic ideology to argue that LETS were ‘a project for enhancing social solidarity’. Mauss (1990) referred to the gift economy in pre-modern societies, where gifts were exchanged as webs of obligation that link members of the community and distribute honour and status between members. Yet perhaps this line of reasoning could be taken a little further by drawing on the work of Bourdieu. It is important to note here that honour-related behaviour was not rule bound. It was an ongoing process of the maintenance, accumulation or loss of public honour. In other words there was a ‘diffuse and generalised “sense of honour”’ (Jenkins 1992:40), which, in the context of LETS culture, produced the logic of transactions between LETS members. The ‘sense of honour’, furthermore, only made sense ‘when chains of transactions [were] viewed over time: interval, pause and timing [were] crucial elements in the improvisory practice that [was] the foundation of interactional competence’ (Jenkins 1992:40). Honour, then, in the LETS community, did ‘not appear to be a fixed or definite value, equivalent to a jurally-defined status’ (Jenkins 1992:40). It was as Bourdieu suggests, best understood as, for each individual, ‘an ongoing practical accomplishment, socially constructed in the to-ing and fro-ing of transaction and exchange’ (Jenkins 1992:40).
It was also interesting that so many members insisted on keeping their accounts in balance and had problems with the notion of debt. To be in debit, even though it is just a 'promise' or a 'commitment' to pay back at some future time, creates feelings of obligation. In Chapter One it was noted that Purdue et al. (1997:657) argued that substituting 'the term “debt” with the term “commitment” was indicative of the gift cycle...[and] ‘Having accepted the gift of a good or a service the ‘committed’ LETS member is obligated to the others. However, rather than using an individual’s debt as a lever for extracting money from him or her in the form of interest, it is used to bind the LETS community together. Yet, and as Purdue et al. (1997:657) found ‘surplus [was] a bigger problem than deficit’.

Viewed from a sociological perspective, money is a ‘promise’ that exchange will be honoured. Money functions best when people trust in it strongly, and cannot function at all without people trusting in the economic system. Thus, as Simmel (1978:178-9) clearly points out ‘cash transactions cannot occur without a twofold trust: public confidence in the issuing government as well as confidence in the ability of the economic community to ensure the value of accepted money’ (cited in Misztal 1996:51). Thus, economic credit involves some element of trust or a confident belief that ‘the community will assure the validity of the tokens for which we have exchanged the products of our labour in exchange against material goods...the feeling of personal security that the possession of money gives is perhaps the most concentrated and pointed form and manifestation of confidence in the socio-political organization and order’ (Simmel 1978:179 cited in Misztal 19996:52).

However, LETS currency is not money, at least not in this sense. Findings suggest a number of differences, the main one is that LETS currency cannot be exchanged for
just *any* material goods or services, only those on offer through LETS. Yet, it was interesting to note that in theory there also appear to be two main types of trust in LETS exchange. First, trust that *any* exchange will actually take place through membership of LETS. And second, trust in the currency, in other words that other members believe it will be worth something – that ‘bridges’ and ‘jacks’ have value and will be accepted by other members. Two points can be made here. Firstly, members cannot have trust or confidence in the issuing institution, as with money, for the simple reason that there is no institution. There is a core group but it does not issue the currency. The only way to issue LETS currency is for members to issue and thereby create the currency themselves. Secondly, there is no way to ensure that a ‘bridge’ or a ‘jack’ will be worth anything at all at any given time; one simply has to trust or have the confidence that it will. Members did not question this kind of trust during their routine day-to-day involvement in LETS. Concerns of these kind were seldom, if at all, voiced. This may indicate why trading levels in LETS schemes are so low. There are high levels of trust because there is not much economically at stake. LETS systems, described in Chapter One, could guarantee trust and confidence in an economic way, and they could maintain a viable economic system. However, they do not create loyalty of an organic kind in the way a LETS scheme does. Trust is a fundamental part of belonging to LETS. Trust acted as background noise and further enhanced community cohesion within the LETS, but without building an effective economic system.

Keeping the focus on the economics of LETS, I wish to establish the limitations of a purely economic focus. Some early research (Williams 1996 a,b,c,d) tended to suggest that LETS were an economic policy tool, and as such they could offer a solution to low income and social exclusion. As trading schemes LETS do have this potential.

However, this thesis is more concerned with stating what LETS *are* through empirical
findings as opposed to what they can potentially be used for. Findings presented have shown that unemployed people did not dominate membership of LETS, even if many were not in traditional full time employment. Nor was membership merely the preserve of low-income people. This is consistent with previously reported findings set out in Chapter One. Seyfang (1994:63), for example, also found that 'Diss LETS' members were in paid employment and therefore had an ‘adequate cash income’ and that members were attracted to LETS due to ‘beliefs rather than for the economic benefits of the system [LETS]’. Therefore academic writing suggesting ways in which LETS can ‘operate more effectively as a means by which the unemployed can mitigate their circumstances’ (Williams 1996:17) is, at best partial. My findings are more in line with Thorne (1996:1371) who cautions ‘…against reading the systems [LETS] simply as a vehicle for local economic growth and development’. This same caution was also advised by Purdue et al. (1997).

In terms of trading on LETS all the existing empirical research to-date has demonstrated that typically low levels of trading take place (Seyfang 1994, 1998; O’Doherty; Barnes et al. 1996; Williams 1996a,b,c,d; Purdue et al. 1997; Pacione 1997a,b). It also became apparent that for the majority of LETS members at Kingsbridge and Yeovil relatively little trading had occurred. Perhaps this does demonstrate the limitations of LETS as a viable alternative to the conventional economy. It was for this reason – the typically low levels of trade - that there had been some discussion of ways in which LETS could increase trade by introducing the concept of ‘demurrage’¹. This discussion took place on the e-con LETS discussion group on the Internet, and was conducted mainly by academics on an abstract theoretical level, far away from the actual practice of ‘ordinary’ LETS members. As Bourdieu makes clear the ‘risk here is of collapsing practical logic into theoretical
logic' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:40). Harker et al. (1990:x) note 'Armchair non-empirical critiques spectacularly miss the point'. As Bourdieu further argues 'they cross the borders with empty suitcases – they have nothing to declare' (Schwibs 1985 cited in Harker et al. 1990:x).

In addition to this Bourdieu's epistemic reflexivity draws attention to the 'scholastic' stance that causes social scientists to misunderstand the social world which is 'a web of practical tasks to be accomplished in real time and space, which is after all what it is for social agents' (Wacquant 1998:226). 'Scholastic fallacy' distorts the situational, adaptive, 'fuzzy logic' of practice. Assuming the point of view of the 'impartial spectator', standing above the world rather than being immersed in it, creates systematic distortions in our conceptions of knowledge, and goes unnoticed inasmuch as those who produce and consume these conceptions share the same scholastic posture (Wacquant 1998:226).

For the above reasons, this thesis argues that exclusively focusing on measurement of trading neglects any value of personal identification with the LETS (O’Doherty et al. 1997). Data derived from an almost exclusive focus on the extent to which members call upon the assistance of other members to get their work done is partial. Although LETS are trading schemes, a second objective was also made explicit in the literature provided by Letslink UK. This second objective was to 'develop and encourage the experience of community in the locality through the establishment of a local exchange trading system' (Letslink UK 1994). Although most studies of LETS have acknowledged community or community-building as a rationale for joining LETS, most have provided virtually no information about 'communal sociability' at all. This discrepancy between patterns of mutual aid and sociability also indicates the dangers of
concentrating on only one aspect of relations between members. Thus an exploration of a wider range of factors which have a bearing on relations between members sits alongside the main thesis here about the central importance of different types of capital at work within LETS.

A Sense of Community

In this context a major concern of this thesis is whether and how the active creation of community occurs through LETS involvement. As we have seen the community study literature outlines how the 'experience of local belonging is a key dimension of any definition of locality and local community' (Purdue et al. 1997:659). The confines or boundary of a LETS is often defined as the 'local community'. Indeed, both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS schemes were centred on particular neighbourhoods. LETS are thus local geographical communities. In addition to this, the name of the currency was also often one of the ways in which local community was symbolically imagined (Purdue et al. 1997:660). Bridges and jacks were both geographically and historically defined in terms of local community. While LETS are clearly a shared community of like-minded people, 'they also claim a geography and therefore a construction of locale' (Purdue et al. 1997:660; O'Doherty et al. 1997:12).

Consequently, LETS produce a new sense of locality, bringing together new sets of opportunities and obligations, which are conceived and accomplished at the local level. 'Cultural flows are turned into matters of personal concern, action and aesthetic innovation' (Purdue et al. 1997:663), using local discourse to re-construct local community. Consequently, it can be said that LETS do not de-couple a sense of
community from a sense of place. But just why this local dimension is so important needs further discussion.

LETS: A response to social and economic change

My interpretation was that old certainties had disappeared for members and that the future was perceived as somehow threatening. A collapse of traditional categories around issues such as family, work, the decline of class identities, the weakening of the welfare state, all contributed to feelings of perceived change. At the same time, the process of globalization, by lowering the state’s capacity to steer its economy in the face of increasingly mobile financial capital, appeared to create a new condition for framing identities and loyalties. Indeed the speculations put forward by Cohen (1985) in Chapter Two appear quite well founded. Communities can indeed respond assertively to encroachment upon their boundaries. Perhaps the creation of a ‘LETS community’ is one response to encroachment upon its boundary. As outside capital trespassed on the community’s social space, members’ own sense of self was somehow lost. When the physical and structural boundaries, which previously divided the community from the rest of the world, become increasingly blurred, the sense of self was increasingly questioned. The sense of self was thus perceived as under threat and consequently was a ready means of mobilizing collectivity. Members regarded the prospect of change ominously, as if change meant loss, and therefore looked for more reliable bases for social solidarity, co-operation and consensus.

Having said this, it is difficult empirically to demonstrate any correlation between rapid social change and the rise of LETS. Although there are reasonably reliable figures
concerning the growth and membership of LETS, it is much more difficult to determine whether or not any particular period is undergoing rapid social/cultural change. Yet if, and as the findings suggest, LETS members perceived themselves to be going through a period of rapid social change - which I have interpreted in terms of general community decline - then perceived risk and uncertainty can result in lower levels of perceived trust among people. It could therefore be argued that the 'localness' of LETS is, in part, a response to a perception of increased risk and uncertainty. LETS provide increased feelings of trust/security by redefining and articulating new collective meanings and aspirations within the local geographically defined community.

Having identified the importance of locality, it is necessary to examine the contradiction between geographic locality and wider links which is raised by the issue of inter-trading, by which I mean trade between different LETS. Inter-trading, as highlighted earlier, was a feature of both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS. Inter-trading was the natural progression for both LETS schemes. This had the effect of blurring the distinction between geographical proximity and like-mindedness. Consequently, the LETS definition of local community is porous; it is more like a tea bag than a balloon, adding another dimension to local community. Thus it could be said that LETS are widely spread over 'abstract' space. However, very little trade or social contact had, in fact, taken place between members from different LETS schemes. Thus rather than fall into the trap of reporting what LETS can be potentially, rather than what they are empirically, this thesis has paid little attention to inter-trading. However, it would be interesting to chart the progress of LETS over a longer period of time to see whether and how inter-trading develops further as the LETS progressively grow older. Perhaps what we can say more generally about alternative currencies is that they are rooted in
history – for as we have seen, there have been many instances, albeit in different forms, of alternative currency experimentation.

LETS: ‘Symbolic community’

The symbolic nature of community at the level of locality requires constant maintenance through local social practices (Appadurai 1995). Purdue et al. (1997:659) suggest that this occurs through ‘trading on the LETS’. However, while trading clearly is an important local social practice, it is not the key one. The contradiction is clearly identified by Purdue et al. (1997:659), for as they earlier state ‘trading is fairly light and unevenly distributed across members’ – a key finding of most research on LETS (Seyfang 1997; North 1997; Williams 1996 a,b,c,d). This clearly suggests that other local social practices are also involved. My findings indicate that the social dimension was key here. Core Group meetings and social events as well as trading days and bazaars, were face-to-face local social practices which occurred within the geographically defined LETS area. It was here, in these local social practices, that the symbolic nature of community was maintained.

The symbolic nature of LETS involvement is a theme that deserves more attention. In Chapter Two I looked at the work of Anthony Cohen (1985) and his notions of the ‘symbolic construction’ of communal and other collective identities. According to Cohen the boundary is where the sense of belonging becomes most apparent. This point is useful for the simple reason that it alerts us to the notions of similarity and difference – ‘we’ who are members of LETS and ‘they’ those who are not. Indeed, collective
social forms – such as LETS culture – were produced by the local sense of difference at the boundary (Cohen 1982:2-3).

Community membership also ‘depends upon the symbolic construction and signification of a mask of similarity which all can wear, an umbrella of solidarity under which all can shelter’ (Jenkins 1996:105). Indeed, the majority of LETS members specifically talked of their ‘like-mindedness’. ‘The similarity of communal membership is thus imagined; inasmuch as it is a potent symbolic presence in people’s lives, however, it is not imaginary’ (Jenkins 1996:105).

Cohen (1985) maintains that symbols generate a sense of shared belonging. As we have seen, membership of LETS did inspire loyalty from, and thus united, all or most of its members. Over a period of time membership came to symbolise the community to its members and outsiders. Shared rituals – the annual members’ meeting or rituals explicitly focused on the community itself, such as bazaars or social outings/events, – also acted for the community as symbols of the ‘LETS community’.

Cohen (1985) also argues that community membership means sharing with other community members a similar ‘sense of things’, participation in a common symbolic domain. But this does not entail a local consensus of values or conformity in behaviour. “‘Community’, for example covers a range of meanings and means different things to different community members. A similarly wide range of meanings can be expressed through it. So too with symbols of community’ (Jenkins 1996:107). Indeed this is a major point. LETS are and will be experienced and understood differently by a founder member whose political allegiance is to a particular political party and say a female member with young children who has recently come to live in the local area. Similarly
an unemployed member may also understand LETS in a different way. The point here is that all see themselves as supporting LETS. To each of them the LETS will in some way represent the ‘LETS community’. The point here is ‘not that people see or understand things in the same ways, or that they see and understand things in the ways which differ from other communities, but that their shared symbols allow them to believe that they do’ (Jenkins 1996:107 emphasis in original).

On the surface LETS appear to be relatively homogeneous. However, this apparent sense of homogeneity or uniformity within LETS communities is just that: ‘apparent, and every inch a social – and symbolic – construct’ (Jenkins 1996:108). Cohen (1985:20) quite rightly argues that ‘what is actually held in common is not very substantial, being form rather than content. Content differs widely among members’. For example, this study has identified differences of opinion, such as to the value of the currency, or to the worth of members’ skills, and different political views among and between members of the same LETS community. Other researchers (Seyfang 1994; North 1997) have also documented political differences within LETS schemes. These differences are normal and even inevitable. As Jenkins (1996:108) points out ‘...differences are obscured by the appearance of agreement and convergence generated by shared communal symbols, and participation in a common symbolic discourse of community membership’. This has the effect of constructing and emphasising the boundary between LETS members and non-members. Thus LETS members can present a reasonably consistent face to the outside world, because they share the symbol, yet, the meanings they attach to the symbol very often differ.

Cohen’s analysis is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is helpful in terms of explaining the ‘relationship between identity boundaries and their “contents” – the
culture of the people inside the boundary – which still emphasises flexibility and variability (Jenkins 1996:111). His focus on ‘culture’ within the boundary emphasises symbolisation rather than values. Collective identities are not ‘internally’ homogeneous or consensual. As Jenkins (1996:111) quite rightly points out:

They can and do change; they can and do vary from person to person; and yet they can and do persist. Without emphasising the symbolic dimensions of identification – in addition to the transactional and interactional – this cannot be fully understood.

Secondly, ‘Cohen is saying, most convincingly, that the similarity emphasised by collective identities is a social construction, an ongoing historical contrivance, reminiscent perhaps of Bourdieu’s “cultural arbitrary”’ (Jenkins 1996:111). It arises from the minimal sharing of a symbolic repertoire. Nevertheless, and as Jenkins further points out, ‘the people concerned believe in it – in the sense of organising their lives with reference to it – it is not only socially “real”, it is consequential’ (Jenkins 1996:111). Indeed, a ‘bridge’ or a ‘jack’ may only be a symbol of LETS unity, but this thesis has provided too many concrete examples of individuals physically involved in exchanging goods and services for alternative local currency as well as meeting people socially, to take LETS anything but seriously. There is no such thing as just a symbol. Nor can a community ever be imaginary. The LETS community is not imaginary, but it can be imagined.

Yet Cohen’s emphasis on community as a mental construct does present some difficulties. The contrast between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ which runs through his analysis is the major problem (Jenkins 1981, Jenkins 1996). Cohen’s focus upon people’s ‘private thoughts’ is actually difficult to maintain in light of this study. The empirical data supporting this thesis are, over and over again, accounts of people doing
things: members saying this or that, participating in rituals, coming together at social
events, trading and so on. Consequently Jenkins quite rightly argues that ‘it is in and
out of what people do that a shared sense of things and a shared symbolic universe
emerge. It is in talking together about “community” – which is, after all, a public doing
– that its symbolic value is produced and reproduced’ (1996:109).

LETS: ‘Reflexive community’

Perhaps then the work of Lash (1993, 1994) provides more insight. Lash, like Cohen
(1985), recognises the importance of symbols. However, where Cohen finds the
symbolization of community in the ‘thinking’, Lash moves beyond to argue for the
significance of the ‘doing’ in ‘reflexive community’. As we saw in Chapter Two, he
does this by drawing on the work of Bourdieu ‘in an attempt to throw some light on the
shifting ontological foundations of [the] recurrent phenomenon of community in late
modernity’ (Lash 1994:111 emphasis in original). ‘Community’, for Lash is rooted in
shared meanings and routine background practices (1994:157). Predispositions and
habits are background practices, they are themselves routine activities. Lash assumes a
“thrownness” into a web of already existing practices and meanings’ (Lash 1994:156).
In this light, how could LETS be described as ‘reflexive communities’?

LETS can be described as ‘reflexive communities’ for two reasons. Firstly, because
members were ‘aware of the symbols central to the creation of the new identities’ (Lash
1993:205). As we have seen in discussion of Cohen’s work, annual members’
meetings, bazaars, social events, the naming of the currency ‘bridges’ and ‘jacks’, the
preference for alternative health care as well as moral principles were symbolic of
identity. Even the LETS practical form, for example the organization of the Core Group, was symbolic of communal identity. Yet, and as argued above, these activities were not merely mental activities, rather they were all instances of members doing things. Although, and as we have seen, it was a small group of committed members who actively became involved in these activities.

Secondly, LETS can be described as reflexive because these new communities are actually chosen. LETS are not a return to traditional local communities. As Lash (1994) points out, reflexive communities are ‘new communities’, for the simple reason that they are not simply obligatory and ascribed. Rather, and this is a major point, they are voluntary and achieved. Membership of LETS was ‘a matter of choice and entailed risk at the level of identity’ (Lash 1993:205 emphasis in original). Traditional Gemeinschaften were not chosen. Reflexive action was not possible in traditional action, structured by unreflexive convention. The new LETS communities are present as alternatives. ‘Aesthetic reflexivity is the basis of such post-traditional Gemeinschaft’ (Lash 1993:206). The medium of reflection is language and consciousness. LETS members reflexively ‘threw themselves’ into the communal world of LETS culture, as they decided to become involved in them or even with others came to have a hand in creating them (Lash 1994:147). In practice how did the shared meaning and routine background practices that contributed to the notion of the ‘LETS community’ occur?

Individual members meeting socially and trading through LETS on a regular basis began to be in their own words a ‘LETS community’. It is the regularity, or the routine basis, which is particularly important here. This was where all the ‘characteristics of community – the shared meanings and practices, the affectionate involvement with the “tools” and product, the internal generation of standards, telos and ends, the felt
obligations, the guidance by Sitten, the characteristic habitus of the field' (Lash 1994:161) were found. It was when similar preferences, towards conventional economics, alternative exchange, the environment, alternative health care etc., came together that perhaps we could start to talk about LETS as 'reflexive communities'. Moreover, when similar terms like 'the LETS community', and the name of alternative currencies such as 'bridges' and 'jacks', start systematically to recur it may be justifiable to speak in terms of 'post traditional communalization' (Lash 1994:160).

Predispositions and habits, as we have seen, are background practices. Habit refers to repetitive behaviour towards others, or in connection with others, and thus plays an important social function. It holds the potential for drawing boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown, or them and us. The way in which people become habits for one another defines the boundaries of individuals' social worlds. By the established routine of social contact, for example LETS social and trading events, people accomplish and confirm their relationships with friends - that is the main group among whom the individual moves every day and with whom he or she establishes various types of relationships and shares various types of activities. While routinized practices are not the exclusive way of preserving social closure, the differentiation of the group from its environment is often accomplished by the implementation of various exclusionary habitual practices. For instance LETS can set up various means of preserving their distinction by reinforcing their shared habits of offering alternative health care, through presenting themselves as 'green' or 'vegetarian', through core group meetings and through 'middle class' cultural social events.

Trust as we have seen was 'background noise'. This included routinized behaviour, background assumptions and rituals (Misztal 1996:98). In order to cultivate trust there
was a need for communication to be open and founded on trust. Trust is both the fruit of good communication and its necessary precondition (Vickers 1987:119-23 cited in Misztal 1996:206). Thus, the existence of mutual trust requires that the level of communication be sustained. Open communication and dialogue among autonomous trustworthy, yet heterogeneous people, are built up through acts of trust. Trust permits consensus and disagreement to occur, without endangering co-operation on matters of common concern. So if trust was background noise, how can we further capture the fluid and ‘fuzzy’ process involved in the creation of a new community?

**Bourdieu and the Forms of Capital**

In Chapter Three I argued that one of the many advantages of Bourdieu’s project was that it moved away from a fixed vertical model of the social structure. Bourdieu positions social groups in a highly complex multi-dimensional space rather than on a linear scale. His theoretical framework incorporates four categories of capital: economic, social, symbolic and cultural. Findings indicate that symbolic capital was an advance which the group alone granted to those who gave it their best material and symbolic guarantees. It was the ‘inner circle’ of members, both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS, who traded and socialized on a regular basis, and consequently cultivated economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. It was this group that provided the best guarantees. Social capital was displayed in the way that members placed significant importance on the various kinds of valued and trusting relations with significant others. Connections in the form of friends and acquaintances were very frequently cited as reasons for joining and for continuing membership. The acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability were
exhibited as symbolic capital. Reputation was, in fact, a very important aspect of belonging to LETS. Word of mouth very quickly made known a poor reputation whether this was in terms of levels of credit/debit, or in terms of quality of work. Participants’ conduct was therefore subjected to the collective witnessing of peers, and a community of like-minded individuals was maintained.

However, empirical findings presented in this thesis also identified members of LETS who tended to do very little or even no trading, and who similarly did not take part in LETS social events. As suggested earlier, there were different levels and different boundaries within the ‘LETS community’. This group who have been described as being on the ‘outer tier’ of LETS, share only an imagined community. There were nowhere near enough shared meanings and practices for this ‘outer group’ to be a community. To belong to a community, which takes on the reality of reflexive community, entails shared meanings, practices and obligations. For those in the ‘outer group’, membership and a place in the directory had more of a symbolic importance (Cohen 1985) than the practicalities of frequent trading (Purdue et al. 1997:659), or socializing. Hence, the appeal of LETS goes beyond the actual contacts that constitute reflexive community, to a community in which shared symbols link members, who may never make direct contact, but who enjoy a sense of collective identity and local belonging⁵ (Purdue et al. 1997:659). Thus LETS attracts an imagined – but not an imaginary⁶ - community (Anderson 1983).

Belonging to an imagined community, however, should not diminish the symbolic significance of membership of LETS. Finch and Mason (1993) have conducted research on kinship in Britain which indicates that believing kin will rally round in a crisis gives people a sense of security despite the fact that the same people make very
selective use of their kinship network often going to considerable lengths to avoid asking for help. Similarly, membership of LETS may provide members with a sense of security despite little or no contact. At this stage in the discussion I want to turn to the significance of a ‘LETS scheme’ or a ‘LETSystem’. There are notable differences which have implications in terms of community creation and maintenance.

A Reflexive Observation: LETS scheme and LETSystem

I noted in Chapter One the distinction between a ‘LETS scheme’ and a ‘LETSystem’ (North 1997:19-21). I return to this distinction as I believe it to be an important one, and one which has implications for the future of LETS in general. Both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS have been described as ‘schemes’ for a number of reasons. Firstly, because LETS members themselves had total freedom to choose whether or not to link the value of the local unit to national currency. Although both Kingsbridge and Yeovil LETS schemes had ‘loosely’ pegged their currency to the pound, there was no compulsion to do so as there was with the design of Linton’s system. Other schemes have chosen not to peg their currency to the pound mainly for egalitarian reasons. Schemes are free to change at any time as circumstances and membership shift rather than having a fixed and prescriptive rule, such as that set by Linton, which pegs currency to the pound.

Secondly, members of schemes were also free to adopt quirky names for the currency often historically and geographically rooted in locality. As we have seen, Kingsbridge LETS named their currency ‘bridges’ and Yeovil adopted the name ‘jack’. Under Linton’s scheme only the neutral name of ‘the Green Dollar’ is claimed for the
currency. Linton did this for the reason that he envisaged more business involvement. Yet, business involvement in LETS was particularly low, although it is doubted whether the name of the currency had much to do with this. Rather the lack of profit in monetary terms is a more likely reason, as well as business members not being able to spend the alternative currency due to the limited range of goods and services available through LETS. Rather the importance of these freedoms in LETS schemes was fundamental in relation to community-building. Members explored ideas and philosophies and actually created a group based on collective decisions, for example the value of the local currency, the naming of the currency and further problem solving on a day-to-day basis. This in effect created cohesion between members; it was their creation rather than a ‘blueprint’ handed down from above. It therefore took on a particular ‘shape’, or perhaps a particular ‘personality’. This creation of something from nothing was symbolic of individual and communal group identity. This was an important ingredient in the creation of the ‘LETS community’.

North (1997) also points out a third difference, LETSystems are not necessarily locally based and may serve a community of interest rather than a geographical community. However, the importance of the face-to-face social and trading practices within the LETS geographically defined area should not be underestimated. It was here in these local social practices, that the shared meanings were found which were characteristic of community. It was here that levels of trust and trustworthiness came together and were consolidated. This has implications in terms of LETS being based in a locality and may explain to some extent the reason why LETS schemes are the preferred path in the UK.

Yet, the most important difference between a scheme and system is that schemes are run by core groups which meet on a regular basis and which see their role as one of
actively fostering the LETS scheme as well as building up trading. A trustee, on the other hand, runs LETSystems, and no meetings are held. The findings from this study clearly show that the Core Groups both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil were crucial to the origin, development and for the future of each LETS. The dynamics of each Core Group contributed to the successful start-up and continuance of the LETS schemes. Without these Core Groups there would be no social events, which, as I have argued play a crucial role in creating and further building trust (social capital) between members. The divisions of labour between Core Group members means that, contrary to what Linton says about core group burn out, responsibility was handed around. Moreover, it was in the ongoing reflexive discussion and the re-positioning of members of the Core Group that created, maintained and re-created the 'LETS community'. Granted this may not be the case for all LETS schemes and I do not intend to generalise this to all LETS and their respective core groups. But given that this was the case both at Kingsbridge and Yeovil it does demonstrate that a dynamic core group can and does produce trust (social capital) among members, which enhances community cohesion thus generating feelings of community.

Linton also suggests that a registry is more suitable in order to keep up with high levels of economic activity. However, and as we have seen, typically low levels of trading take place in LETS. Linton’s whole philosophy is focused on the potential of alternative currencies rather than on what they are in practice. It does appear that there is some kind of struggle taking place here. Language is part of a group’s way of life. 'Just as groups acquire power from being named, so individuals acquire power from being allowed to do the naming. A group exists when it is named; the namer is important when recognised as the representative of the group' (Snook 1990:177). Individual LETS groups have been forced to make a decision as to whether to adopt the
name LETS scheme or LETSystem. LETS schemes are the focus of this study and appear to be the more popular form taken in the United Kingdom. Although LETS schemes are voluntary and achieved core groups are equally capable of being oppressive and authoritarian. Having said this they are much more democratic and are less oppressive than the notion of a LETSystem. Core Group members are in the end accountable to their members.

Notes

1 Demurrage is a kind of tax on positive and or negative balances. Gesell’s theory of ‘rusting’ money outlined in Chapter One is also an example of demurrage.
2 The notion of ‘scholastic fallacy’ is elaborated at length in The Logic of Practice (Bourdieu 1990: book 1) and in ‘The Scholastic Point of View’ (Bourdieu 1990:384)
3 For further discussion of his work see R. Jenkins 1996 pp104-118
4 And yet, it must be noted that they are equally capable of being oppressive and authoritarian.
5 Purdue et al. (1997) were the first to point this out. However, where I use the term ‘community’ they use the term ‘milieu’, and where I use the term ‘symbols’ they use the term ‘values’. The term ‘milieu is used because ‘community’, they argue, ‘has no widely accepted definition’, nevertheless, they go on to head a section on page 10 ‘The LETS Community’. Throughout their paper they use the terms community and milieu interchangeably which I find problematic. In addition I think Cohen’s analysis is more useful because it focuses on culture within the boundary which emphasises symbolization rather than values. As I have already made clear there were differences within and between LETS members.
6 Purdue et al. argue that LETS thus ‘invokes an ‘imaginary community’, however, again I think this is the wrong term. Imaginary implies that LETS are somehow ‘unreal’ or ‘illusory’. The LETS communities were ‘real’, even if only in the minds of their members, thus the term imagined, which means ‘to form a mental image of’, is a more accurate term.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the nature of involvement in two Local Exchange and Trading Schemes. Three main conclusions can be drawn from this research. The first conclusion concerns the focus of earlier research. The academic study of LETS has been largely dominated by economists, geographers and political analysts and relatively neglected by sociologists. As a result early research into local non-monetary trading schemes has focused almost exclusively on the structural features of LETS and LETS as an economic system at the expense of 'communal sociability'. In short, this thesis has argued that LETS is not primarily an economic phenomenon; low levels of trade have been well documented. Rather LETS is a social phenomenon especially in terms of the relationships it involves. Connections between LETS members, as well as personal relationships, were open to individual choice. Regular and routine relations were necessary for sustaining the LETS. Linked activities, sustained over a period of time, united members. This process was necessary for the development, maintenance and reproduction of the LETS community. Certain activities were involved in this process, the key one being the cultural social events.

Nor can LETS be used as specific economic policy tools with specific attainable goals. Focus of this kind tends to portray what LETS might be potentially. What LETS is empirically is determined by its members and therefore LETS can not be transferred as a policy tool. Moreover, an economic analysis of LETS artificially limits itself to practices which are merely socially recognised as economic and therefore does not capture the visible social world of LETS practice. Suffice to say that LETS members' views of conventional currency, and their expectations, motivations and ambitions for LETS were much more complex than a purely economic analysis allows.
The perception of the vitality of LETS culture created the LETS boundary. LETS members constructed community symbolically making it a resource for and a referent of their identity. Certain people were attracted to LETS. Attitudes towards money and the economy, environmental concerns and community issues were all important in forming a LETS member's identity. Evidence also suggested a moral and political strand within this identity. A common symbolic domain is constructed in which shared symbols allow members to believe that they differ from other communities even though the meanings attached to the LETS symbol often differ. The LETS community is symbolically constructed. Having created the LETS cultural boundary, on-going discussion and day-to-day problem solving, further clarified the cultural meanings involved for individuals and the LETS groups as a whole.

The second conclusion concerns the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. The ways in which different types of capital – economic, social, symbolic and cultural – interact in practice and contribute to the notions of community have also been investigated. This has allowed us to make visible the non-economic profits both contributed and acquired by LETS members. Investigation of different forms of capital at work within LETS further advanced knowledge of the energy of the social character of LETS in all its different forms. Bourdieu’s framework captured the fluid and practical nature of LETS members’ actions without forcing them into a pre-determined framework of community. Bourdieu’s concepts allowed me to explain a process that was going on among LETS members which they themselves called ‘community’. It must be emphasised, however, that the concepts I have borrowed from Bourdieu are flexible and must be examined in the context of the empirical setting rather than being seen as a set of categorical boxes to which the data must conform.
The active creation of community, I conclude, is part of an on-going process of social, cultural, economic and symbolic reproduction. Cultural capital quite clearly contributes to the successful formation of a LETS. Cultural capital further contributes to the maintenance of a LETS community. Through LETS, members were also able to contribute, and exchange non-economic forms of capital. Membership facilitated the conversion of different forms of capital; cultural capital was converted into economic, social and symbolic capital and vice versa. Core Group members and those who were actively involved in the various social events formed a reflexive ‘inner group’ which in effect created and maintained the cultural boundary which in turn defined inclusion or exclusion. However, there were different levels of involvement in the shared rituals and social practices which, in effect, created different community boundaries within LETS. Internal boundaries defined the reflexivity of the group. The ‘inner group’ actively became involved in the trading, shared rituals and social practices. This group further consolidated and cultivated capital through the ‘doing’ of community; capital attracted capital. Membership remained more of symbolic importance for the ‘outer group’, those on the periphery of LETS, who did no trading and who similarly did not take part in the social events. However, simply joining LETS means doing something. Thus one has reflexively chosen to define oneself as a member of the LETS cultural community. Belonging signifies inclusion even if no exchange of capital occurred.

Capital, however, operates within a wider ‘field’. A field is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources, or stakes, and access to them. A field is a structured system of social positions the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. This could be an interesting line of future enquiry. In this thesis I have referred to the wider LETS movement. An analysis of the way in which
Letslink UK influence the nature of LETS would be fruitful. I have already identified differences between LETS schemes and LETSystems. LETS in the UK have particularly developed with help from Letslink UK. It has provided literature and support which has motivated and guided many into starting a LETS. More recently (1997) Letslink has become a ‘Not for Profit Limited Company’ with a board of directors. In 1997 it won a National Lotteries grant of £90,000 spread over two years to continue its information and liaison role, and develop research and parliamentary lobbying. In Chapter Six I highlighted the efforts made by Liz Shepard of Letslink UK to change the social security regulations regarding LETS and benefit entitlements. This may have an effect on individual grassroots LETS. As a social movement Letslink are driving the concept of LETS in a particular direction, but we know very little of what individual LETS members or LETS groups think about this lobbying. Perhaps this indicates the need for further research into the concerns of members. It would also be interesting to document how political involvement affects the future of LETS. Letslink appear to be steering LETS in one particular direction. What will the outcome of this be? A historical analysis of Letslink as a social movement would usefully provide a more holistic picture of the LETS scene. It would also provide empirical evidence of the LETS social arena and the struggles which take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them.

The nature of the concept of community remains problematic. This thesis has argued that LETS involvement is primarily about ‘communal sociability’, and consequently has devoted its attention to the ways in which community was created and maintained. The need to create community is, in part, a response to perceived social change and perceived risk and uncertainty, for example in areas such as the collapse of traditional standards and the global flight of capital. This in effect created the perceived need to re-
assert the boundaries of 'the local'. Community, however, was not achieved overnight; rather it was a reflexive process that occurred over a period of time. Many community studies look at communities from a particular angle, for example a local geographically defined area. By taking a less rigid approach I have identified several different notions of community – symbolic, reflexive, geographical – all existing within one 'community'. Community, as we have seen, meant different things to different LETS members. This thesis, through empirical research, has consequently identified a number of distinct social constructions of community. LETS I conclude are, therefore, 'communities' through which these different constructions are played out. It would be interesting to look at the type of people who become actively involved in the LETS Core Groups and the members who do not. It was not possible to examine in detail the class, economic background, employment experience etc. of Core Group members because the questionnaire was anonymous. Perhaps this indicates one direction for future research.

Do the above findings indicate that sociology would be better discarding its concerns with community issues and community studies? I think not. Certainly one can conclude that no standard definition is about to come forth, nor are the methodological dilemmas going to be resolved to everybody's satisfaction. There clearly is no such single thing as community. Community has many meanings and involves different sets of experiences for different people. Community is never experienced in identical ways by everybody involved. As Crow and Allan (1994:183) argue, 'any conceptualisation which fails to recognise this is bound to be, at best, partial'.
APPENDIX 1:

THE QUESTIONNAIRE
KINGSBRIDGE LETS SURVEY 1997

The answers you give to these questions are confidential. Nobody that you know, or who knows you, will see the questionnaire.

Section 1

I would like to begin by asking you some questions about your involvement in LETS

Q1. How did you first hear about LETS?

Q2. What were your reasons for joining LETS?

Q3. What goods and services do you offer?

Q4. What kinds of goods and services do you buy?
Q5. Are there any kinds of goods and services not offered in your directory that you would like to see offered? Please state:

Q6. During the past year, what is the total value of the goods and services (in LETS currency) you have: (if none please state none)

- sold ..........................................

- bought ..........................................

Q7. Have you bought anything you wouldn't have bought without LETS? please state:

Q8. How do you usually go about arranging a trade in LETS?
(Please circle as many numbers as required)

Phone someone up to arrange an exchange..................1
Through face-to-face interaction.........................2
Trade in markets and bazaars..............................3
I haven't traded before..................................4

other please state................................................................

...........................................................................
Q9. Many people on first hearing about LETS say “but I haven’t got anything to offer”. Some have also said “what is my skill worth? ” I would like to know how easy or difficult you have found it to: (please circle one number for each)

a. put a value on goods/services you offer?
   - easy .................................................. 1
   - quite easy ............................................. 2
   - neither difficult nor easy ........................ 3
   - quite difficult ....................................... 4
   - very difficult ....................................... 5

b. identify your own skills?
   - easy .................................................. 1
   - quite easy ............................................. 2
   - neither difficult nor easy ........................ 3
   - quite difficult ....................................... 4
   - very difficult ....................................... 5

Section 2

Now, some LETS have Core Groups and I would like to find out a little more about how your LETS is organised.

Q10. Please tick yes or no for each one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your LETScheme have a Core Group? (if no go to Q 13)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the members of your Core Group have specific roles within the LETS?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are your Core Group members elected?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a clear idea of what the Core Group does?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that LETS benefit from having a Core Group?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your Core Group motivate you to trade?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your Core Group motivate you to socialise?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that your Core Group represents all members views equally?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q11. Do you attend core group meetings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q12. Would you like to attend Core Group meetings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q13. Does your currency have parity with the £ by which I mean is one unit roughly equal to the pound?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 3

Q14. Now I would like to turn to questions about the economic and social effects of LETS. I am going to list a number of economic and social benefits that have been associated with LETS. From this list could you tell me how much LETS has:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not a lot</th>
<th>Quite a lot</th>
<th>A lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>helped you gain access to essential things you couldn't afford in cash</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped you gain access to ‘luxuries’ you couldn’t normally afford</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>given you more variety in work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped improve your economic situation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped you to keep/develop skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped creative opportunities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped to improve lack of employment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped you to test out a new business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>given support for a new business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped your existing business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q15. What about social benefits - has LETS helped:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not a lot</th>
<th>Quite a lot</th>
<th>A lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>develop a wider network of people you can call on for help</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop a wider network of friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop deeper friendships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generate feelings of community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boost your self-confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you to pursue an interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raise your self-satisfaction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>create feelings of equality between members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to bring you into contact with like-minded people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q16. Have you attended any LETS social events? (If no please go to Q20)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q17. How many social events have you attended? ..................................................

Q18. What were the social event(s)? (please describe)

........................................................................................................................................

........................................................................................................................................

Q19. What aspects of the social event(s) did you enjoy/not enjoy?

........................................................................................................................................

........................................................................................................................................
Q20. What kind of social event would you be likely to attend in the future? (If none please state none)

Section 4

I would now like to find out what you think about LETS.

Q21. Please tell me how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LETS currency should have parity with the pound</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>payment should be based on how long it takes to do a job</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all work should be equal in value no matter what the particular task is</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the level of skill involved in doing a job should be reflected in the price charged</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a mix of LETS currency and conventional currency is OK when paying/charging for work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS currency should be kept separate from conventional currency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q22. Please say whether you agree/disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LETS is part of the Green Movement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is meeting the needs of those in poverty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is a tool for empowerment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is a major source of job creation or economic development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is a practical response to economic inequality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is support for the local economy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS is helping the environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 5

Q23. There are now over 400 LETS in this country. Below are a number of possible explanations for this success. Please tell me how strongly you agree/disagree with the following by ticking one box for each.

LETS are successful because:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>there is a shortage of traditional/conventional work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technology has destroyed jobs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people’s self-worth is not being recognised</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people feel like isolated individuals rather than part of a group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people feel exploited by the money economy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people desire more co-operation and community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS helps overcome feelings of purposelessness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 6

Now a few questions about community and trust.

Q24. Please tell me how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements by ticking one box for each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime has generally destroyed trust</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETS allows traders to know in advance who is coming to trade rather than dealing with strangers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in a community needs to be in place before trading can take place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community building is a side effect of active trading</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of face-to-face communication is declining</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know a lot of people in my community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now a few questions about your local economy

Q25. Again, please tell me how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements by ticking one box for each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local shopping has become more impersonal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local produce is increasingly less available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money is being sucked out of the local economy by big businesses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of shops has declined in this area</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small shops are disappearing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities are losing control over their local economy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q26. I am interested in whether you have family ties locally.

Do the following live in Kingsbridge or the surrounding local area?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All of them</th>
<th>Some of them</th>
<th>None of them</th>
<th>Not relevant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers and Sisters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts &amp; Uncles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q27. How long have you lived in this area:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>less than one year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - 3 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - 5 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than ten years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was born here</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 7

I would now like to ask some questions about your hopes and aspirations for LETS.

Q28. Do you believe that more people will come to see the benefit of LETS currency in the future?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q29. Do you think that one day LETS currency will be seen to be the “norm”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q30. Do you think that the number of LETS will increase in the future?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q31. On a scale of 1 - 5, could you tell me how ambitious you are for LETS in general to succeed? (please circle one)

- Not at all ambitious .......................................................... 1
- Not very ambitious .......................................................... 2
- Neither ambitious nor unambitious ....................................... 3
- Quite ambitious ............................................................... 4
- Very ambitious ............................................................... 5
- Don’t know ................................................................. 6

Q32. Again, on a scale of 1 - 5, could you tell me how often you expect to be involved in your LETS over the next year? (please circle)

- Never ........................................................................... 1
- Seldom ............................................................................ 2
- Quite often ....................................................................... 3
- Very often ......................................................................... 4
- Don’t know ........................................................................ 5

Section 9
And finally, some questions about you.

Q33. Do you support or belong to any other groups?

please state ...............................................................................

Q34. Are you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q35. Age:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 35</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 - 45</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 - 55</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 - 65</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 - 75</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76+</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q36. Are you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single (never married)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting/Married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q37. Do you have any dependent children:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q38. Are you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working full-time (over 30 hours per week)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part-time (10-30 hours per week)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part-time (under 10 hours per week)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and seeking work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to work for health reasons</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife/Househusband</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q39. What is your current occupation?

(Please state all if more than one)

If currently not in employment, please state your last occupation
Q40. What is your household’s net (i.e. before tax) monthly income on average?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£150 - £300</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£301 - £500</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£501 - £700</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£701 - £900</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£901 - £1100</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1101 - £1500</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£1501 - £2000 +</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q41. What is your highest educational or professional qualification?

Q42. Does your household own your accommodation or rent it?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent from council</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately rented</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please state)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other please state...

Q43. What is your religion?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of England</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian (e.g. Methodist)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no religion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please state below)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q44. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your involvement in LETS? If so, please write it here:
Q45. What are your views on this questionnaire?
   Please tell me:

Q46. Later this year, I would like to talk to some LETS members in more detail about their involvement in LETS. If you would be prepared to participate further, please write your name and contact number here.

Name........................................................................................................

Address.....................................................................................................

........................................................................................................

........................................................................................................

Telephone number....................................................................................

(Please note: not everyone who gives their name will be interviewed. Any information given will be confidential, for the researcher’s use only. Your name will not be used in my report. Your personal details will be destroyed when no longer needed).

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP

Please check that you have answered each question correctly
APPENDIX 2:

THE COVER LETTER
4 April 1996

Dear Kingsbridge LETS member,

Why not go and make yourself a cup of tea now. While you are drinking your tea please take the time to fill in my questionnaire. It will take no longer than the time it takes to drink your tea. You may wonder why I want you to fill this in. I believe there are four very good reasons.

Firstly, I hope you will find the results interesting. I intend to put the answers to the questions together and produce a report which will then be sent to all Kingsbridge LETS members. Do the economic benefits outweigh the social benefits or vice versa? How, or are, LETS a benefit to the community? Do LETS help to build social networks? I think it will be interesting to find out who joins LETS and for what reasons. I hope that you will too.

Secondly, I hope that it will help LETS to develop and grow stronger both locally and nationally. Answering the questions will allow me to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your particular LETS. We can then build on strengths and overcome weaknesses.

Thirdly, filling in this questionnaire will help me personally. Through my prior involvement with Kingsbridge LETS (I got the accounts up and running right at the beginning), I decided that I would focus my PhD on alternative local currencies. This questionnaire is sent to you as part of my study. If you have any further suggestions or comments about how it may be improved, or any interesting questions that you think I may have missed, please do feel free to tell me.

This leads me to my final, but by no means least, reason. I hope that you will agree with me that the LETS initiative needs documenting. It is a grassroots initiative which highlights the fact that people have not lost the ability to do things for themselves. This is happening in Kingsbridge, LETS record it so that future generations can see what was going on in Kingsbridge at one particular time in history. Nobody knows what will happen to LETS in the future. It may fizzle out and disappear, or it may be the start of something much bigger (I know which scenario I would like to see happen).
A final word, I would like to assure you that the information you provide will remain confidential. A stamped addressed FREEPOST envelope is provided so that all the filled in questionnaires can be sent back to me anonymously. On the final page of the questionnaire you will see that I am asking to speak to some LETS members in more detail at a later date. This really is so that we can get together to talk a little more about our LETS involvement. You never know, we may find that we can swap some good ideas at the same time. I am a very friendly person, please do not be afraid to talk to me. If you have any queries regarding any aspect of my research please phone or write to me.

Please, do take the few minutes it will take to fill in this questionnaire. And please do enjoy your cup of tea at the same time. I look forward to receiving your questionnaire. I hope you look forward to the report I will be producing.

Thank you in anticipation,

Jo Brayford
Kingsbridge LETS member
(01752) 233225
HAVE A CUP OF TEA ON ME. WHILE YOU ARE DRINKING YOUR TEA PLEASE FILL IN MY QUESTIONNAIRE.

Earn your self a FREE Bridge at the same time !!!!!!!!!!!!

4 good reasons why you should:

• You will be helping me enormously with my Ph.D. Without your answers I cannot gain the information I need.

• I hope you will find it interesting

• It will help LETS to develop.

• The LETS initiative needs documenting.

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YES, I would like to claim my FREE Bridge for filling in the Kingsbridge LETS questionnaire.

Please credit account number..........................................................................................

Name.................................................................................................................................
APPENDIX 4:

THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 1997

Notes to Researcher

1. Introduce myself (member of Kingsbridge LETS).
2. Explain the purpose of the research.
3. Explain how the information will be used.
4. Stress complete anonymity and confidentiality.
   (i.e. No names will be used).
5. Ask for consent to tape the interview.
   (Explain the role of the tape recorder as a note taker).
6. Probe as necessary.
7. Explain structure and that there are no right/wrong answers, I am just interested in
   their experiences.

Experience of LETS

How long have you been a member of LETS?

What motivated you to join in the first place?

When you first joined what did you expect to get out of LETS?

What about the trading side of LETS, has that been successful?

Has the social side been more successful?

In the questionnaire the majority said they think LETS benefits from having a core
   group - why do you think this is the case?

LETS are grassroots initiatives - do you think that councils should be involved?

Exchange - what and with whom?

What do you understand by the term exchange? Is it economic and/or social exchange?
In other words is it about interaction or is it just about self-interest?

How does LETS exchange differ from the mainstream economy? Does it mean more to
   you to exchange things through LETS? Why does it mean more?
How do you know who to trade with? Is reputation important?

Is it important to you to know the people you are trading with? Does LETS allow you to know this information?

Does it worry you that some people may take advantage of the scheme and get lots of work done and then move on (free rider problem)?

What do you give to LETS and what do you expect in return?

When you have bought something using LETS currency do you feel obligated to return something?

Social Network

Do you usually trade with people you know, within your circle?

Has belonging to a social network given you any other benefits, perhaps indirect contact with others - heard about jobs in mainstream economy?

Do you feel LETS to be clique or is it a cosy network?

Community

In the questionnaire, the majority of members indicated that LETS is about building community, what do you think? (probe about how LETS builds community)

Does the size of the group matter? Small groups tend to know each other, if the LETS got much bigger do you think that you would lose something?

What does it mean to you to belong to the LETS community?

Does belonging to LETS give you more freedom to express your own personal identity?

Does LETS give you a feeling of ‘belonging’?

Trust/friendship/family

What about the risk of exchanging in LETS. For example in the mainstream economy you know what a £ is worth and that it is not going to lose that value - well not overnight anyway. But in LETS it is just debits and credits on a computer that don’t really have any value. What is it that makes you confident about LETS currency/exchange? Trust/risk.
Many people indicated that they join LETS to make new friends - has this happened for you?

Have these friendships happened immediately or have they developed over a period of time?

If so, are they in a similar situation to you and do they have the same characteristics for e.g. age, sex, occupation, socio-economic position?

Do you have different friends for different occasions?

In the questionnaire the majority of members responded that LETS was a way of getting to know like-minded people - is this your experience?

What do you mean by like-minded people?

Some people have said that friendships play an important role at certain times of our lives when we are searching for identity or a new social role e.g. retirement, divorce, moving to a new area etc., - do you think that LETS are particularly helpful during these times?

In the past family was an important source of identity, material support and assistance? Does LETS fulfil the role that close family used to play?

**Aspirations and ambitions for LETS**

In the questionnaire the majority said they think that more people will come to see the benefits of LETS and that LETS will increase in number. However, fewer believe that LETS will come to be the 'Norm' - what do you think and why?

LETS have grown in number enormously over the last few years - why do you think this is the case?

Why do you think that LETS have become so successful and why now?

**Strengths/weaknesses**

What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of LETS?

**Anything else**

Are there any questions that you thought I would ask that I haven’t?
Is there anything else that you would like to say about your involvement and/or experience of LETS?
I feel there is a definite right/left split between the Core Group members. Somewhere along the line this is going to come out. I think this would have happened whether I had been there or not. However, I feel my presence attenuates this. They know that I know. This rift has produced some quite volatile discussions already. I try and be neutral but I know where my loyalty lies – with the one member who appears to be arguing from the left. When asked directly what I think I try to be supportive of all views, but I am finding they are asking more and more of me. My answers are becoming a little more direct and honest. Not sure what this will do for the group but Tanya is a sole voice and is right in my view on many issues that would otherwise be swept under the carpet. I also feel that discussion is healthy for the group – the dynamics are very good. I think this is one of the reasons for the success of Kingsbridge LETS. It really does make the Core Group members think about things. It also gives them the opportunity to solve some of the practical problems involved.

(9.7.97)
REFERENCES


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