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The Rising Salience of the Absent: An Interactionist Analysis

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Abstract The paper uses examples from rural studies to demonstrate the relevance of symbolic interactionism for unlocking the complexity of contemporary society. It does so by making a case for a non-prescriptive theory-method dialectic. Case examples are drawn upon in support of the argumentation, including early interactionism and ethnographic work in the United Kingdom, and, in the second half of the paper, rural sociology and fieldwork. The main argument presented is that the traditional remit of interactionism should be extended to recognize how absence is increasingly influential. It concludes that interactionism is in tune with other new trajectories in the social sciences that take into consideration co-presence proximity both on and off-line.

Keywords Rural; Interactionism; Ethnography; Absence; Definition of the Situation; New Social Media

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Social life...is not particularly amenable to deep systematic analysis...Indeed I have heard it said that we should be glad to trade what we've so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer. But there's nothing in the world that we should trade for what we do have: the bent to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry and the wisdom not to look elsewhere but ourselves and our discipline for that mandate. [Goffman 1983:17]

[B]ecause theory is so obviously difficult, the theorist takes on an aura that sets her apart from others...puffing out their theoretical feathers. [Craib 1992:4-5]

The intention of this paper shares the theme of this special issue and the ambitions of its editors—to showcase the relevance of symbolic interactionism (SI) for the analysis of contemporary social life. It shares this positive disposition and argues this is best achieved by a strong theory-method dialectic while keeping an eye on new directions in sociology. Particularly and distinctively, the discussion makes the case that *absence* is increasingly important and demonstrates this through a series of empirical examples and theoretical ideas. These are drawn from a number of projects conducted by the author that have cumulatively drawn together ideas within the interactionist community and from rural studies. Although the latter is not a field with a strong history or association with interactionism, the inherent capacity, adaptability, and strength of SI bodes well for interactionist futures.

The paper is structured as follows. First, an opening discussion foregrounds the kind of approach to theory and method adopted throughout. This advocates a strong theory-method dialectical relationship and is informed by British symbolic interactionism, the emergence of the ethnographic research approach in the UK, and a case study from the sociology of education. The second main section then seeks to reveal how SI can be augmented by new theoretical developments outside its traditional focus of attention, specifically, 1) rural studies and 2) “Big Data.” These offer a new synthesis or mandate that involves the interconnection of place, absence, and both physical and online spheres. The conclusion argues that SI is a natural collaborator in this undertaking insofar as it is capable of both adaptation and fruitful synthesis. Moreover, it opens up

and exposes new sites for analysis, where meaning and the power to impose definitions are mobile and therefore demand our serious attention.

British Interactionism and the Theory-Method Dialectic in Ethnography

The relationship between theory and ethnography has something of a complicated history within British sociology. Discussions of their synergies have ebbed and flowed over the years, and at times—as Craib suggested above—not all have been made welcome. Hence, reflections on theory-method connections have not always seemed relevant or fruitful. The overarching argument here is that there is scope for a stronger dialogue because of the benefits such a relationship can yield.

Atkinson and Housley (2003) captured the fashions and fickleness of interactionism’s permeation of sociology in the United Kingdom. Concerning the emergence of ethnographic work in Britain, Burgess (1984) described how anthropology “came home” to study more local cultural contexts. What is notable for the United Kingdom context is that, in contrast to the United States, there has not been the same centrifugal force of a department or key text (such as the Green Book/bible). Since SI in the United Kingdom has always possessed less critical mass, it is not associated with key scholars located in departments.¹ A better informed history of United Kingdom SI and associated fieldwork traditions is presented by tracing the literature, rather than the people (Dingwall 2001). In addition, ethnography’s

¹ Early Chicago sociology would be one example and modern McMaster another.

development is interwoven with the emergence of interactionism (Atkinson 2015). What is clear is that the United Kingdom developed an interest in both SI and ethnography, but how they folded into one another has sometimes become blurred and now even forgotten (Atkinson 2015). Whilst Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that ethnography is now the dominant research paradigm in some sub-disciplines of sociology, the same cannot be said for interactionism.

A brief review of several sites of interactionist focus in the United Kingdom and one case example of a strong theory-method dialectic will now be outlined. This offers a way to both understand and advocate such a relationship while also providing a foundation for the second, more speculative half of this paper.

SI is often positioned on British curricula as part of the emerging canon of sociology—slipped in with microsociology in the contents of the standard sociology “cookbook” text as a reaction to structural determinism (cf. Giddens and Sutton 2009). *Empirical* interest in the micro sphere is more multi-faceted, one example being that at some institutions it emerges both from the social policy legacy of the Webb’s and from Malinowski’s anthropology in the case of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Within the past forty years, a specialist and sustained engagement with qualitative methods developed across a small, but significant number of institutions and scholars. These included, and not exclusively, the Open University, Cardiff Social Sciences, Warwick field studies, and Manchester social

anthropology.² A series of accompanying pivotal texts established the legitimacy of the ethnographic research approach (Burgess 1982; 1984; Hammersley 1989; 1992; Atkinson 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Delamont 2016). From a situation in which there was a lack of literature on ethnography, it exploded.

The emphasis within this specialist and methodologically-sophisticated body of work lay upon the ethnographic imagination and reflexivity. Its success can be judged by the mainstream acceptance of such terms today. In the broadest of senses, it acknowledged the messy, non-linear, and constructed character of fieldwork (Pole and Hillyard 2016); see also the biographies of Hammersley (2012), Atkinson (2012), and Delamont (2012). The more theoretically-minded work of those engaging with the microsphere had strong capture in several sub-disciplines, such as medical sociology and the “new” sociology of education of the early 1970s. One particular case of theory-method dialogue that drew attention within the secondary literature was the sociology of education’s differentiation-polarization theory (DPT), and lessons from DPT inform the way in which theory-method relations are advocated here.

This body of work around DPT stemmed from a research project at Manchester University in the 1960s that investigated the then tripartite compulsory school system in the United Kingdom. This tiered

² Also notable are TeamEthno with John Hughes at Lancaster; Wes Sharrock and ethnomethodology at Manchester; conversation analysts at York; and interactionists in medical sociology at Edinburgh.

pupils according to ability, with a third type for pupils with technical aptitudes. [In reality, the former two types dominated.] A series of school ethnographies emerged that addressed the top tier boys grammar (Lacey 1971); a second tier secondary modern (Hargreaves 1967); a girls grammar (Lambart 1970); and the later, inclusive comprehensive schooling system (Ball 1981). The legitimacy of selective grammar schooling continues, but it is DPT as an exercise in the capacity of ethnography to cumulate theory (dialectically) that is our concern here.

DPT stands out as a rare example of a sustained attempt to cumulatively develop theory through a series of ethnographic works. It is hard to find a more analyzed example. There is also a secondary literature in addition to the original monographs/theses that emerged from the individual schools. It is consistently found that to separate (differentiate) pupils exacerbates (further polarizes) their differences. The secondary literature immediately exposed the internecine character of the methodological debates,³ namely, the question of cumulation becomes very nuanced, very quickly—case-specific even (see: Hillyard 2010; 2011). In DPT's case, this involved questioning whether it was theory cumulation; whether the original studies were “ethnographies”; whether theory cumulation was an original intention; and so forth. Hence, any interpretation or subsequent attempt to advance this work (to appeal to one speaker at the 34th *Quals* conference in Canada in 2017) is to perhaps conclude that there are as many versions (of SI) as there are interactionists.

³ As one colleague later advised, never write a methods textbook. Both he and I have subsequently done so, albeit separately.

A number of lessons arise from DPT that inform the stance adopted here. First among these was a move away from a more technicist reading in favor of gaining insight from the periphery lessons from the fieldwork experience more broadly. In my own work, a close comparative reading of the original monographs sat alongside the firsthand experience of putting principles into “messy” practice. This involved avoiding the taint of being assumed to be a teacher (as past studies, including Burgess 1983, had done), and instead, after Epstein (1998), adopting the “least adult” role possible. This relationship with the pupils was ultimately best captured as that of a mascot rather than that of a peer (Hillyard 2001; 2003).

Adaptations in the field sat alongside a close reading of the monographs, which allowed their distinctions and individual character to come to the fore. The secondary methodological literature on DPT was of value, but it ran the risk of detracting from this original work. For instance, Ball (1981), as the later study, had been able to call upon a wider array of interactionist literature that had crossed the Atlantic. Lacey (1971) had set the school within its locale and beyond the school gates, and found that the grammar school provided an important way for middle-class families to access higher education. Collectively, these nuances foreshadow this paper's emphasis upon place and disposition towards methodological eclecticism (away from technicism). The secondary literature around seminal studies—such as Burgess' (1983) monograph—can exceed the original study itself, but, as Atkinson (2012) argued concerning the life and work of Goffman, the biography of the man should not detract from the ideas.

A final characteristic that informed the theory-method dialectic advocated here was the *zeitgeist* of the late 1990s and its more eclectic disposition. The sociology of education was influenced by post-modernism (Stronach and MacLure 1997), and it offered a very different dynamic to an analysis of DPT. When placed alongside Goffman's conceptual richness and methodological eclecticism, which were also gaining recognition at that moment (Drew and Wootton 1988; Burns 1992), they were the flip side of the coin, offering a non-conventional dialogue between theoretical ideas and ethnographic work (Stronach and Smears 2010). DPT is something of a litmus test case for emerging British interactionist and ethnographic dispositions in that it illustrates a strong theory-method dialectic that accommodated innovations. One particular legacy is pursued in the second half of the paper—Lacey's particular concern to look beyond the school gates and upon place.

The Performance of Rural Space

This section uses rural studies as a platform to explore new dimensions of theory-method dialogue, with an initial point being that the rural sociology literature in the United Kingdom was stagnant by the noughties and declined at its own hand (see: Bell and Newby 1971; Newby 2008). A number of colleagues have observed two ironies facing interactionally-minded ethnographers working in rural sociology. These were, first, the irony of doing sociology in places that lack people and, second, the irony of the decline in community studies when it had earlier been so instrumental in the establishment of ethnography. Perhaps my own first encounter with rural sociology stands in support of this, given that it was

somewhat circuitous. Following funded research of the social and cultural impact of the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic in the United Kingdom, an analysis of rural studies showed either the absence of an interactionist stance, or a fundamental misunderstanding of it (Hillyard 2007; Newby 2008). Human geography, rather than sociology, dominated, and qualitative analytical methods lacked penetration into rural domains following the decline in community studies (Hillyard 2007; Hillyard and Burrige 2012).

Crow's (2016) measured overview placed the community studies genre into its historical moment. While the *absence* of theoretical interest caught the headlines, Crow and Mah (2012) showed that a broad array of theoretical ideas featured in many studies, although a number had also neglected them. Although certain studies lacked the grounding in the ideas that underpin the emergence of ethnography that some advocated (Atkinson 2015), there were nevertheless early pockets of interactionist-informed work. Simply stated, while the sociology of education became a home for ethnographic work, the later did not find the same grip in rural studies. The obvious exception here, particularly given the lack of rural sociology generally in the United Kingdom, is Newby's (1977) Goffman-influenced early work—the deferential dialectic is capable of being read as pure Goffman (Hillyard 2007). Interestingly, there is the same emphasis upon the definition of the situation in Newby's monograph as in Burgess' (1983), with the social structure of the rural context merely transposing a comprehensive schooling system into the occupational community of rural England in the 1970s. The legacy of early rural sociology was empirical. It is this that offered

the jolt of surprise when the past contrasted with the present:

When I then went to [study] Gosforth [in the 1950s], I regarded myself as going to a foreign country, and when I got off the bus in Gosforth...there was a woman coming down the road, on a white horse, and she stopped outside the shop—Barnes’s shop—and Mr. Barnes came out and actually touched his forehead, and said, “Good Morning, Miss Keene”...I discovered that Miss Keene was actually the Rector’s daughter, and the Rector’s daughter clearly belonged to a different social class from Mr. Barnes. And I thought, “Here is the English class system in action!” [Laughs]. [Williams 2008:97-98]

Contemporary rural studies face the same challenge as Williams and Newby did decades earlier—to look beyond the white noise of normality. Studying less densely populated places is theoretically viable, as Goffman’s fieldwork in Shetland had demonstrated (Goffman 1959⁴) in spite of the difficulties he encountered—Goffman later described his time in the remoteness of Shetland as “the worst year of my life.” Crow and Mah (2012) pointed out how community studies re-orientated to explore new issues—from de-industrialization, to gentrification in both rural and urban domains. A theory-method dialectic delivers criticality by using general trends and primary fieldwork together to see beyond a “nostalgic picture [that] relies on myth rather than fact” (Rojek 2007:11).

I will now illustrate this point using a village ethnography. The discussion is a combination of prompts/jolts from the fieldwork findings alongside the

⁴ I am grateful to Greg Smith for clarifying the nuanced differences between the thesis and the book.

growing theoretical recognition of the importance of interactions outside rural spaces. The argument is made that the lessons from theory and method in dialectic can—and should—be incorporated into interactionist thought.

On Absence: Interactionism and New Rural Studies

Wolcott’s (2003) monograph described how, during his fieldwork, he became known as “the man in the principal’s office.” Such a role proved impossible in a rural ethnography of a Norfolk village in the South East of England. The primary research question had been to discover whether the school was—as policy and community rhetoric often has it—at the heart of the rural community within a context in which other rural amenities are closing.

Figure 1. Matt cartoon, with permission of the *Daily Telegraph*.



‘Since the pub and post office shut, the surveillance camera is the hub of village life’

Our core findings have been reported elsewhere (Bagley and Hillyard 2011; Hillyard and Bagley 2014; Hillyard 2015). An immediate and unexpected finding was a lack of head teachers—three different head teacher appointments were made across the year of fieldwork. Rather than Williams’ immediate encounters with significant village social actors or spending time in the principal’s office, this rural Norfolk village made finding the head a challenge. This absence, which provided a metaphor for capturing wider change, was expressed well by one acting head:

There doesn’t seem to be a hub of the village. The church doesn’t seem to feature. I don’t know if it does, but if it doesn’t have any links with the school, then a community school would still have news from the church...and regular visits from the vicar, even if he has got 27 other churches. But, there are no real strong community links. [interview, acting head teacher]

In human geography, Thrift’s (2005; 2012) analysis of capitalism and space stressed the constancy of change—indeed, that this is integral to capitalism’s survival. The very absence of a head and a hub for this Norfolk village meant that *stasis* acquired the same importance that Thrift (2012) and others associate with the dynamism of the global city. The history of this village, which had expanded rapidly post-war, unlocked this present-day stasis. Briefly stated, it had been an agrarian village since Norman times with a stable population of around 200. It then tripled within fifty years in modernity, but the former heart of the village was empty. It had only a school remaining at the center, with a store and public house on the outskirts near the main road.

Table 1. Past and present formations of the Norfolk case study village.

<i>Industry</i>	<i>History</i>	<i>Location and Sustainability</i>
PAST: Farming	Farming, some tourism (1950s+)	Norwich (1 hour by road), small market town nearby
TRANSITION: Remaining infrastructure encouraged building	Landowner sold post-war, allowing and attracting a transient small industry	Near an A-road, attracting development
NOW: “Economy” (budget) tourism/residential	Rapid expansion and variety of populations. ZONED	FUTURE: further expansion planned would ensure future viability of the school. Tourism peripheral compared to county

Source: Self-elaboration.

The combination of changing amenities and rapid expansion folded into one another. The new build environment meant that the physical core of the original, old agrarian village—the intersection of three roads, where the bakers, dairy, and blacksmith were located—declined in importance as these closed down and commuting possibilities opened up. The picturesque properties located at this old center—the Methodist Chapel, the former school teacher’s house, and flintknapped farmworker cottages—became second home properties. The new builds were further out towards the main A-road. The land sale both enabled the rapid expansion and removed

the influence of a dominant landowner/Lord of the Manor. The fieldwork thus found that new villagers outnumbered the old; the oldest parts of the village were the least populated due to second home ownership; and the village was zoned residentially towards the periphery.

More people living in this expanded village, ironically enough, did not make for more interactions or enhanced daily rounds. The lack of central amenities—that stasis or absence—meant people shopped outside the village in the supermarket at the nearby market town. This was where the village's daily round of interactions now took place:

I always say, if I walk, I might see someone I know, you see, and you got to talk to 'em, whereas in a car you just leave 'em, you know [laughs]. The wife say, you always talk to 'em she say, because she in Morrisons [supermarket], you see, well that's like a social occasion. We always go Thursday morning and then I usually see some people I know...That is a social occasion going shopping now. I told someone that was the highlight of my week and they called me a liar! [Laughs] [male villager, born and raised in the village, married, three children]

Newcomers encountering and clashing with established village mores is a significant theme in the rural literature. Thelwell's cartoons, which feature in Newby (1980), capture well the cultural dissonances that were generated. One example is the shock of the newcomer housewife discovering the village store does not stock stuffed olives. Urban studies suggest that newcomers were attracted to the *place* rather than to the people—termed elective belonging.

Yet in this village ethnography, a kind of non-elective belonging occurred over time. The place and the village imprinted upon social identities, regardless of background and original disposition:

SH: What are your own plans—to stay?

R: Yes, to the bitter end...Well, once you find a place you like, you don't really want...And we put so much in. I mean, we've doubled the size of this house. Not intentionally, but really to accommodate my parents. Which is now part of us, so. You like to see the trees grow up and the plants grow, don't you?

The new villagers, by staying so long, became the village. This was not a result of elective belonging or an initial desire to be there:

This was the only business in East Anglia that was within our—or Suffolk—that was within our price range. And the reason it was within our price range was because it was so run down. I mean, the property was just disgusting. Just running with cockroaches—horrible! [female villager, resident 6 years, business owner, married, two children]

Once you get to know the villages, there are some other villages around here that we would probably have preferred to have lived in. But, the unfortunate thing, you can't always get what you want. With property and that. I mean, some have got established village halls and those that have done that, the community is established. [male villager, resident 8 years, married, retired into the village]

This was an *inverted* “mortification of self” (after Goffman). However, when used alongside SI and

Thomas' definition of the situation, this process shows what the village was becoming. That is to say, through time and the normalization of their values, newcomers shape what is desired and valued—even authentic—in rural spaces. The past becomes an advert—evocative of a time and resonance now non-existent. One example is the atmosphere of the rural tavern:

A pint of Abbot [beer] and a packet of Burts chips [crisps] bartender said Ivan as he assumed his usual position. One huge hand enveloped his pint, another gently fingering a glowing Panatella [cigar]. He took a long swig and a deep draw. Life was good. [country pub website, Norfolk]

This ethnographic finding on rural change resonates with contemporary rural studies that have analyzed when expectations meet caricatures. For example, Edensor (2006) discusses how rural landscapes are staged and invite a certain reading of those spaces, which may be enacted by means of trig points to capture the best view. To use the example of the City of Durham, maps indicate the best picturesque views of the city's river and its castle. The council has even placed footprint markers on some bridges—echoing the stage prompts of a scripted performance.

These theoretical considerations and empirical findings are highly compatible, and both SI and Thomas' definition of the situation recognize that such spaces become real as a consequence (Thomas and Thomas 1927). This retains an interactionist emphasis upon definitional work onto space, which is to say that if spaces are defined in a partic-

ular light, that is how they come to be performed. What this rural ethnography traced and saw was that, increasingly, expectations about rural life were reached in locales *outside* the village, such as by the newcomers whom the Norfolk villagers called "the London Clique." When these new villagers enacted their version of the rural—with the passage of time and because they were the majority—this imprinted on both newcomers and village alike.

This Thomas-inspired interactionist reading has much stronger implications than the rural studies literature upon in and outward migration and who stays (Halfacree and Rivera 2012). The relativism of Thomas' theorem, even when taken somewhat out of its original context, holds that the *accuracy* of the definition is not important (see a key footnote in Murphy et al. 1998 for a full explication) *because the consequences are the same*—whether definitions are right or wrong.

The argument does not appear radical on immediate glance when applied to rural spaces because rural areas are already subject to profound change, regardless of the social actors' resident in or visiting those locales. However, when dovetailed with further developments in ethnography—namely, the advent of "Big Data"—it becomes a potential game changer in that the three issues converge and create a perfect storm. Alone, they are less remarkable. These are, in summary, the strongly temporal—and even unwitting—character of rural identity and space formation; the impact of Big Data and online identity formation; and, finally, SI and Thomas' understanding.

From Co-Location to Co-Presence

The advent of Big Data has generally been much heralded, but several commentators have been more measured in their assessments (Uprichard 2013; Hand 2014). This has generated a dilemma for ethnographers seeking to incorporate the “data shadow” or data body of social actors now inevitably enmeshed in digital worlds. Should equal weighting be granted to both online domains and traditional situations of co-presence? Or do interactionist models, such as dramaturgy, hold in both physical and virtual domains? The seminal works in gender studies by West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler (1990) have read gender identity as a performance and further incorporated Foucault. As West (1984) has also demonstrated elsewhere, gender is an accomplishment on the part of both audience *and* actor, and in this sense it is compatible with interactions made in online spheres. For example, forums such as Facebook and Twitter are audience-driven.⁵ Beaulieu (2010) captured the relevant distinctions by re-framing *co-presence* to refer to the online world and *co-location* to describe physical immediacy. In the sense of following the field or finding the field, this conceptual move is necessary for ethnography to remain relevant to the everyday lives it seeks to understand and study (Pole and Hillyard 2016). It also invites us to think about the implications concerning how these spheres overlap and how they are mediated by different circumstances and situations.

Beaulieu’s (2010) argument when applied to rural contexts reveals its profound implications, as allud-

⁵ In terms of their business model, the actor’s data shadow is more valued than the actor’s own posts.

ed to above. In rural domains, so much definitional work now takes place externally by means of co-presence that it has infiltrated the very performance of rural spaces themselves. A cartoon is useful again here. The English title *Country Life* is a well-established rural weekly magazine. Its regular cartoon strip one week showed a gentleman looking at cattle out of the window of a newly-purchased rural mansion and quipping to his guest, “I haven’t the foggiest what breed they are, Deirdre’s decorator chose them” (A. Tempest, *Tottering-by-Gently* series). The cartoon shows that the accuracy, legitimacy, and appropriateness of the rural landscape are highly mobile. No particular *accuracy* is required—merely that they look the part and meet expectations.

This has implications for activities that take place in rural spaces, but which have become subject to that very mobility of meaning. It also mirrors the interactionist disposition to explore how definitions are reached, enacted, and credited—that is, how activities have increasingly become contested by those external to or non-participating through co-location. In the case of elite sporting shooting, criticism is so highly concentrated it becomes a caricature:

Driven grouse shooting responsible for: global warming, flooding, rickets, scurvy, Chelsea FC’s poor performance and the outbreak of WWII [@Gethin-Jones123 13 Jan 2016 Twitter]

The impact upon rural areas of debates held externally to those spaces has been recognized by means of what rural MP Simon Hart (2017:7) has called “synthetic social media.” However, he misses that such co-presence debates can be very real in their

consequences—because they espouse a particular definition of rural spaces. “Big Data,” new social media, and our unavoidable engagement with them hold very real implications for contemporary rural spaces. For example, Dowling (2017) showed how we are already culturally routinized into an online world, stepping in and out of it so casually and drawing upon a myriad of online resources for our interactions with the physical environment—be it maps, reviews, or contact details (to use Dowling’s examples). This present situation has become so normalized it is extraordinarily difficult to remember the past. Village ethnography, for example, charted how services finally reached the village, from indoor toilets to broadband (source: school logs). The impact of Big Data is that it has highlighted the *absence* of those who are shaping rural definitions through online media. Its impact is further compounded when we understand how rural spaces themselves are emptying. Contrast this with Newby’s class-based deferential dialectic fifty years ago—all about face-to-face interaction—and the scale of this shift in the balance of power for rural areas becomes clearer.

The consequences of this line of logic are summarized below.

Ivan’s Abbott: The Implications of an SI Reading of Co-Presence for Rural Spaces

The implications of this shift merit careful explication. In the past, co-location had been the dominant register—Newby (1977) had identified how ideological dominance flowed through the occupational community. Here, landowners obtained the deference of their workforce through close interaction with them

in both the workplace and the village community. The landowners’ very physical visibility and interactions formed their means of controlling the definition of what constituted the smooth running of the farm.

This has been re-thought in the age of “synthetic social media”—definitions about rurality can now be reached away from those spaces (Beaulieu’s co-presence) rather than having to be grounded by face-to-face physical co-location. Moreover, these definitions or rural imaginaries are then actualized when visiting or entering those spaces. The implication is that the deferential dialectic relationship is spun round—namely, views constituted by co-presence are then actualized in co-location. Ideologies or views can be established through an online/co-presence dialectic, not necessarily close interactional contact. The rural village was a case in point—newcomers (to use their term) “tipped” the village and became the dominant voice in number and representation on the Parish Council and school governors.

This detracts from the ontological importance of co-location, but does not necessarily undermine SI principles. There is a further sting in the tail. If taken to the extreme, definitions of the situation do not even need to be expressed *in* a rural space, but can be broadcast online *and still be consequential* as the Thomas theorem holds. Elite country sports again provide an appropriate example.

An online petition was submitted to the Welsh government against the legal use of firearms, but of the approximately 13,000 signatories, only 24 people were from the country under judicial review. The pro-shooting lobby went ballistic.

Many parliaments and assemblies have reacted to on-line campaigns by creating opportunities for people to register official petitions which will be considered by elected representatives if they reach a certain threshold. A recent petition against shooting on public land in Wales has exposed exactly how false, and frankly fraudulent, many electronic petitions are. A group called Animal Aid claimed to have collected a petition of 12,700 “signatures” which it handed in to the Welsh Assembly Government. The BBC and newspapers dutifully reported that number, but when a similar petition was submitted as an official Welsh Assembly electronic petition, subject to proper public scrutiny, it received just 119 signatures with only 24 of those coming from Wales.

It is crucially important that politicians, in particular, understand that much of the campaigning that happens in the digital sphere is manufactured dissent. The mass email campaigns, the targeted social media activity and, of course, the dodgy petitions do not represent a real reflection of public attitudes and opinions. The reduction of a “12,700 signature” petition to 24 Welsh voters is absolute evidence of that. [Bonner 2018]

But, Bonner and MP Simon Hart both missed the implications of the new ontological importance of co-presences. As Thomas holds, if people define a given situation as real, it becomes real in its consequences. The definitions of the 13,000 do not need to be right; it does not matter if they are “dodgy.” Their definitions will become real if they are enacted and performed by the signatories. The implications of this for rurality are that traditional interactionist prompts and markers of status through wealth and ownership are diminished.

Elite sporting shooting has been a self-regulating activity, and its use of space has generated physical resonances, not least in Scotland, where its implications for the economy loom large. This “rarified rural interest” (Cox 2016:12) across the three country sports of hunting (deer), shooting (grouse), and fishing (salmon) has held master status in rural Scotland. Participants spend approximately £50,000 per visit, and sat alongside a vast concentration of wealth—432 people (0.008%) of the population own half of Scotland (Hunter et al. 2013)—this dominant definition of the situation had been unchallenged.⁶

By contrast, other rural resonances *have* changed the “authentic rural.” The more picturesque villages at the other end of Britain in the county of Norfolk, such as Burnham Market, have been re-branded “Chelsea-on-Sea” due to the high levels of second home ownership. Here, authenticity and value have been generated not from the flora and fauna of grouse and heather, but from the resonances of patronage after the Norman Conquest. Norman ruins and the villages established around such settlements have imprinted on the landscape and the built environment, and now far exceed the agrarian value of the prime farming land found there.

These two rural examples—McNab country sports⁷ and Norfolk picturesque villages—show the mobility of rural values and indicate that influences are shifting. Economic wealth like agriculture is beginning to decline in the interactional resonances

⁶ The Scottish parliament is currently exploring licensing for shooting, as well as individuals. This would be a significant policy shift from self-autonomy and regulation.

⁷ Grouse, deer, and salmon on the same day.

it generates. In the case of grouse shooting in Scotland, we can see this is in policy moves to impose shooting licensing. In respect to agrarian interests, the cultural consumption already outweighs the crop-yield value.

The desirability of certain forms of rural interaction has thus shifted and, as Rojek (2007) remarks, meaning is highly movable and yet often left unremarked and unnoticed.

[T]raditional British values are slippery abstractions...Often it is only when these ideals are infringed or violated that they become a cause célèbre; most of the time they are not experienced as the historical achievement of resistance and struggle but rather as the unremarkable, “given” grain of everyday life. [Rojek 2007:11]

An SI use of theory and method begins to expose these fine grain processes that Rojek notes. Ultimately, Ivan’s Abbott (in the quintessential rural pub advert above), far from being obsolete, could be well on the way to being the new rural.

Conclusion: Back to Theoretical Feathers and Our Mandate

This paper has argued that place has been and should become a staple of interactionist concern. This is more than a consideration of the staging of a situation, but rather the suggestion that spaces themselves have a kind of imprinting role. Space has the capacity to unwittingly imprint upon a social actor’s identity an inverted mortification of self that was found in the rural ethnography discussed here.

The discussion has operated on two levels. It first argued that theory and method in early decades had a fruitful dialectic. It then used rural sociology as a vehicle to see how this dialectic might progress SI ideas. This explored the significance of absence (of both community spirit and people) in rural spaces and how SI can respond to this challenge. The rural case examples discussed here suggest that, as spaces hollow out, digital worlds emerge as increasingly important for what rural spaces become. Furthermore, after Thomas, the subsequent enactment of those values determines what those spaces in fact become. In sum, digital worlds begin to foreshadow the definitional work that—in times past—would have taken place by means of co-location. Space is retained as important in both domains because that is where definitional work is done.

This argument—that co-presence and co-location are equally important—is attuned both to SI interest in definitional work and to new analyses of global capitalism that have increasingly come to stress the micro sphere and the mobility of desire for commodities beyond the purely economic. Thrift (2012) termed this an “expressive infrastructure,” but his emphasis lay upon the pace at which capitalism looks to generate new markets and desires. Here, place, those *absent*, and *stasis* are regarded as increasingly important.

The mandate now is for ethnographers and interactionists to examine how definitions regarding appropriate use emerge and proliferate through co-presence and co-location. It is only by examining the micro-level that the nuances of the fine-

grained subtleties of the interactional work taking place there are exposed. Such a move is well attuned to SI interests and the broader direction of travel found among leading, theoretically-minded social scientists. Kate Hayles in the United States has examined algorithms, as well as our very capacity to be conscious of data exposure and of where smart technologies are steering us. Celia Lury in the United Kingdom is likewise exploring how we encounter our own data shadow—which is inevitably a past snapshot of ourselves—when we are online. French geographer Mustafa Dikeç (2015) has explored space as a means to generate selfhood and democracy. While the intellectual lineages of these analytic directions are not interactional, there is convergence and—like Thrift’s theoretical ideas—they can provide a jolt of surprise to see things otherwise.

Fieldwork has remained an important foil for theory. The examples from rural studies grounded the discussion by showing how place and people both limit and enable the interactions possible. It was only through a dialectical relationship between theoretical ideas and data that this understanding was reached, although it is non-prescriptive in character. As Goffman reminded us at the opening of the paper, it is the analysis of this very power dynamic inside the subtleties of definitional work that is our mandate.

One last example by demonstration is provided by the image in Figure 2 below, which was taken early-on during the village ethnography. It shows an empty phone box that can no longer make calls using money—“coins are not accepted here.”

Figure 2. A K6 phone box in the Norfolk case study village: Mobiles eclipse coin-operated call boxes.



This does not mean that interactions have been rendered redundant, but rather that they have become very different to what they were in 1924, when Sir Giles Gilbert Scott first designed the phone box. This article has outlined, after the ambitions of the editors, a non-prescriptive theory-method dialectic of a future SI imaginary. This dialectic utilized SI to address the changes in place, time, and absence that have taken place. The conceptual distinctions made here merit further exploration beyond rural sociology, for, as certain rural campaigners have already recognized, some co-presence media are more equal than co-locational ones.

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