Community strikes back? Belonging and exclusion in rural English villages in networked

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Abstract

The paper draws upon ethnographic research of two, contrasting English primary schools and their villages to explore the themes of belonging and exclusion in contemporary rural contexts. The paper first describes the schools and the villages. A second, conceptual section explores the meaning of rurality in relation to the themes of class, belonging and exclusion. The final section of the paper then weaves these sections together through an analysis of the experiences of three incomers to the villages. Collectively the empirical data demonstrate that the rural sphere is shaped by historical and geographic circumstances, as well as the arrival of networked individuals.

Introduction

The ethnographic research reported in this paper was conducted in two English villages during 2009-11. The villages, in County Durham in North East England and in East Anglia, Norfolk, were chosen to maximise opportunities for comparison and contrast, rather than generalisablity. Their core characteristics are summarised in Table 1.[i]

Table 1: Comparison of case study sites

	North East England, County Durham	*East Anglia, Norfolk*
Year established	Early 1800s	Late nineteenth century
Number of students	Circa 160	Circa 50 (but 100+ in the 1990s)
Retention of principal/staff	Low turnover	High turnover
Population (approx.)	2,500	600
Services in/near village	Community Centre, Working Men's Club, two pubs, newsagent, bakers, pharmacy,	Pub, store (with Post Office)

	hairdressers, take away, fish and chip shop and Post Office.	
Economic industry (historical)	Coal mining (last shaft closed 1960s)	Farming (short-lived industrial 'boom' mid-20th century)
Location of school in relation to village	In oldest section of village, central	Moved to new premises on periphery of village

The key aim of the research was to explore the role of the schools within their communities. In both villages the school performed an important role in fostering interaction. However, this was much less pronounced in the Norfolk context where farming continued to dominate the local economy. In Co Durham, while the history of mining was important (Beynon and Antrim 1994), with the pit closures and the subsequent decline of the occupational community around mining, the school had become the primary institution in the community brokering associations across the village. The head explained that the role of the school was so important in this regard that there were conscious efforts to maintain the school's profile in the community; for example, holding an annual carol service for the village.

The multiple and inter-related factors that explain the different roles played by the schools in each village are embedded in notions of rurality, community and social class. They are also connected with broader issues of rural social change including the restructuring of rural communities, rural gentrification and rural in-migration. Therefore, we outline the literature on these subjects before elaborating upon the empirical data from the ethnographic case studies.

Theorising Rurality, Community, Class and Belonging

Studies of rural communities are wide ranging (see Panelli and Welsh 2005). Two significant dimensions of this literature are class and belonging/inclusion. In the past, class was conflated with occupation and land ownership (Bryant and Pini 2009). Illustrative is

Newby's (1977) seminal work in Suffolk in the late 1970s which reported that the employment hierarchy of agriculture (landowner and farmworker) was mirrored in the formation of an occupational community. Hence, his deferential thesis argued that social relations found in rural communities reflected class divisions.

More recently, the analysis of class and belonging in rural communities has been given impetus by studies of urban to rural migration, including work on the processes of rural gentrification (Phillips 2007). Early research in this vein by Cloke and Thrift (1987) argued that while the significance of agriculture was declining in rural areas, class remained an important and divisive category manifested through new *intra-class* factions increasingly expressed through consumption practices. These authors noted that class differences came to the fore when some newcomer groups elected to become deeply immersed in village life, whereas others remained peripheral. More recently, studies have questioned the longitudinal impact of pro-rural migration by asking what happens when people stay put, echoing Woods' (2011 186) differentiation between individuals *coming back* to a rural place and those coming to it anew. As a recent Guardian (2014) article noted, migratory change in rural communities raises 'difficult question(s)' for rural communities such as:

> when an area is gentrified, and the demographic and local culture changes, what happens to those who were there before and feel left behind? What happens when the local boozer becomes an expensive gastropub and the corner shop turns into a coffee shop serving flat whites for £3.80 a cup?

The consumptive aspects of rural gentrification added previously neglected cultural and symbolic dimensions to the analysis of class (Bryant and Pini 2009, Pini and Leach 2011). It has been argued that in the post-industrial era rural communities are changing, and that such change has the potential to reconstruct rural ideologies informing class (and also gender) divisions (Pini and Leach 2011). A number of empirical studies have subsequently explored

the extent to which class and gender norms are potentially destabilised and recalibrated in contemporary rural communities. For example, Heley (2010) explained that wealthy city dwellers who relocate to rural areas adopt elite country pastimes as they seek to acquire a form of classed rural habitus. While new aspirational (and other) classes may now be resident in rural communities, old allegiances and norms are not necessarily shifting. This was evident in Milbourne's (2002) exploration of the country sport of hunting, which demonstrated that even when newcomers are opposed to the activity, they subsume their opinions in favour of the prevailing stance. Similarly, Neal and Walters (2007) found that über-rural groups, such as the Women's Institute and Young Farmers' Club, enjoy certain freedoms (i.e. petty criminality such as under-age driving) that newcomers would not.

Drawing upon Skeggs' (1997; 2004; 2005) work, Bryant and Pini (2009) inject an understanding of local level power into the study of contemporary rural-class relations. Here, they appreciate the enduring significance of not only class, but also gender, and consider how these are instrumental in shaping discourses of value and moral worth. They assert that in contemporary rural communities class and gender divisions continue to be shaped by paid and unpaid work but are also inscribed upon the body via heavily classed moral signifiers. This reconfigures traditional social divisions, such as class, for the twenty-first century (Savage et al. 2013: 223) in favour of:

> a new, multi-dimensional way of registering social class differentiation. A highly influential scheme is that developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), which argues that there are three different kinds of capital, each of which conveys certain advantages. He differentiates between (1) economic capital (wealth and income), (2) cultural capital (the ability to appreciate and engage with cultural goods, and credentials institutionalised through educational success), and (3) social capital (contacts and connections which allow people to draw on their social networks). Bourdieu's point is that although these three capitals may overlap, they are also subtly different, and that it is possible to draw fine-grained distinctions between people with different stocks of each of the three capitals, to provide a much more complex model of social class than is currently used (Savage et al. 2013:223).

This 'inductive' model, like Skeggs' (1997; 2004; 2005) work, complements employment/ occupation-based understandings of class by taking into consideration the social and cultural. It too, has an empirical interest in ethnography (Pini and Leach 2011). Savage et al.'s (2013) most recent analysis of class highlights: the stretching of inequalities between the elites and precariat; their geographic concentrations; and the further diversification or fragmentation of class factions. Savage et al.'s (2005) declaration that you are where you live was based on middle-class data and, as Pahl (1989) observed, the middles classes has greater capacity for choice. Hence Crow (2010) questioned whether Savage et al.'s (2005) middle classes 'elective belonging' (valuing the place rather than the people) would hold in a more working-class area.

As the 'cultural turn' has enlivened class scholarship so too has it enriched the study of rurality. Indeed, the very question of 'what is rural' is no longer straight-forward. Halfacree (2007) has suggested a three-fold understanding of the rural as encompassing the locale, the representation and the lived experience. However, urban-rural lifestyle distinctions are blurring in mobile times (Halfacree 2009) so that it is possible to live in the countryside, but to enjoy an urban lifestyle in terms of orientation. Here, as Hillyard (2013) argues, the landowner may exert influence *in absentia* and that rural and global lifestyles are connected – even in a county such as Norfolk and its "Partridge effect" of being culturally and commercially adrift (BBC 2002)[ii]. Adding further complexity to theorising rurality is the fact that there may be tensions and contradictions in understandings of the rural. For example, Halfacree and Rivera (2012) discovered pro-rural migrants often imagine the rural in a way which is quite different from the lived reality of the rural. Conceptually, such a finding confirms the enduring resilience of the term 'rural' and reveals that, the 'rural' retains everyday cultural cache. It is, in effect, the concept that will not go away.

The meaning of rurality in the twenty-first century context vis-à-vis class, ethnicity and gender

As foreshadowed in the introduction, the two schools have different relationships with the villages of which they are part. Even after relocating to new premises on the edge of the village the Co. Durham school retains an enduring relevance in the village whereas in Norfolk, internal upheaval has disrupted the strength of the social ties between school and village. The rapid expansion of the village means that those working in or attending the school are no longer necessarily from the village originally or resident in it. The catchment of the school also draws on children from a number of surrounding villages. Village/school relations in Norfolk are also diminished through school 'choice' as middle-class parents mobilise capital (e.g. car ownership, financial resources, scholarships) to send their children to schools outside the village.

The Norfolk village has a complex and quite distinct class composition. It lacks the picturesque qualities of Heley's (2010) Bedfordshire and so has not attracted the aspirational urban-to-rural migrants which populate his study. While the Norfolk village mirrors Co. Durham in no longer being primarily reliant upon productivist industries, it has experienced a greater pace and type of transformation. In the Norfolk village, there remains a small number of long-term resident village families with ties to farming, but these are now joined by a much wider variety of village residents than the hierarchies of patronage Newby (1977) captured in his two-tier deferential model. What had been an homogenous and stable village population of two hundred for several centuries, as revealed by census data, has quickly become far more diverse. The greater diversity of village residents in the Norfolk village is a

reflection of the new built environment. Newcomers comprise a broad social mix: retirees buying executive homes off-plan, young families attracted by affordable former council housing and also those *without choice* occupying social housing. Added to this are transient residents, such as tourists, staying in the handful of catered and self-catering businesses.

In the Norfolk village there is thus an intense mix of divergent patterns of consumption, lifestyles and orientations to village life. Property prices, for instance, ranged from £100K to over £700K at the time of the research. If, after Savage et al. (2005), you are where you live, the Norfolk villagers are brought together by their common village identity, but certainly not all are 'pro-rural' in the sense Halfacree and Rivera (2012) described. Commonality of residence is undermined by the circumstances by which people have come to the village. Furthermore, the fieldwork revealed that previous animosity amongst parents from different sides of the village had affected the children. The head recounted:

> [two zones of the village] they do not get on […] in – I don't know when it was – in this term maybe, I actually had to talk to the children about […] if their parents were unhappy with neighbours or other grown ups in the village were saying things about other families, that it was not to come into school. Because we were hearing from some children – one child saying to another, my dad says that your mum's xyz derogatory, and I said you can't say that at school – my dad said I had to. So actually they were using school as a vehicle for whatever was going on. And it got very unpleasant. We had the police here. And children from one place were being accused by others of […] it's just ridiculous things (Interview, head, Norfolk school).

The evidence from the fieldwork conducted *inside* the school did not support the view that there was any culture of bullying or exclusion. In fact, data revealed an opposite narrative. Over a week we ate lunch with the children each day and noted that they described the school in overwhelmingly positive terms. However, beyond the school gates, there were few cross-village social activities in the Norfolk locale which brokered interaction between parents. As such the interactions that did occur in Norfolk seemed to be intensified. As a result, the school as one site of interaction and the Parish Council as another, were by default key symbolic indicators of village life. For example, two members of the Norfolk village Parish Council (PC) were linked to the school, one as its community member and another through having grandchildren in the school. So, in the Norfolk context to be networked into both of these was to be an important village figure and of the eight PC members, including the secretary, half had some form of connection to the school.

In the Norfolk village the diversity of classes stood in the way of a collective sense of belonging. This is not to suggest community was absent but that there was no singular sense of community. Pockets of community sociability thrived due to what a villager termed 'good old boys' lending a hand, but there was no universally shared village identity into which all new villagers are welcomed or inculcated. Thus, the generating of belonging in Norfolk is zonal. The existence of communities within communities in Norfolk is evidenced in the following exchange:

> Mr R – people help each other out in the village, particularly round here […] We're very lucky where we live here. It's just at the right spot because the neighbours are very good, aren't they?
>
> Mrs R – Yes.

SH – […] do you know the names of everyone in your street?

Mrs R – Yes. And then they moved in next door but one and we popped a card through the door, yes.

Mr R – I mean we do a bit of watering for people and we have the keys to certain houses, don't we? Yes … and alarms going off. People working all the time …

Mrs R – Moving the dustbin round …

Mr R – All that goes on. (Interview, married couple, resident eight years, retired, resident in new-build executive home)

In contrast to the Norfolk village the Co. Durham village in the post-industrial context has blended former mine workers and new commuters, but without generating the same scale of diversity and animosity *in absentia* that had occurred in the Norfolk case. The latter lacks the centrifugal force of the school to the extent that some of those born and raised in the village have little contact with the school or other village based activities. This group, what Savage et al. (2013) termed the established middle class, has effectively retreated from village life, whereas once they had acted as school governors and Parish Councillors. The transition had not been without symbolic violence. In an interview a new resident on the Parish Council (PC) described being 'ostracised' after the change while another commented that their child had been labelled a 'trouble-maker' and positioned as responsible for a range of anti-social behaviour in the town. Fieldwork also revealed instances in which new retirees had clashed with the established middle class of farmers (rubbish being thrown over the back gardens; the farm muckspreading in the holidays); newcomers in social housing clashing with the school which they argued was slipping in standards (accusations of bullying mentioned above, countered by observations in the school); and different types of leisure groups clashing with the use of space (engine noise versus a quiet holiday retreat).

The literature, analytically, in its discussions of Bourdieuvian capital, reveals variations of intensity of capital across groups. This is evident in examining relations between villagers in Norfolk. The (professional) cultural capital of the farmers – an example of showing the better quality of their land by taking a sugar beet round to their farming friends' house – would be an irrelevance to a second-home owner in the village. The economic security and educational cultural capital of young professionals with children in the school (learning the violin and grant-getting for playing-field equipment) are different from the ambitions of parents without vehicles and resources to move their children to a different school in the cluster or the independent sector. As one landowner, born and raised in the village acknowledged:

> this village has never been marvellous really. [sister village, originally larger in size] would have had a better community. Far better. But [village name], there's been too many social classes in [village name]. Too many diverse social classes, which makes it difficult for it to bond (Interview, landowner and business owner, born and raised in the village, attended the sister village school, his children attended the village school).

Traditional barriers to inclusion in rural communities such as length of residence no longer hold in the Norfolk village. However, in the much stronger former occupational community of Durham's coal-mining past they resonate and translate into more contemporary signs and symbols. For example, the head of the Co. Durham school had literally highlighted the importance of her school by having the exterior painted in a primary colour. In this sense, new criterion for seeing and translating belonging and exclusion were needed. The colour was symbolic and representational. It invites us to unpack the black box of other deliberate,

or unwitting, signs and processes happening in each village. This is the task of the next section of the paper.

Village Newcomers and Experiences of Community Belonging

In this section of the paper we profile three participants who have achieved a sense of community belonging despite being village newcomers. That is, all were, or had become, 'community glue' or good citizens. In exploring the experiences of these villagers we draw on the notions of space and ideational qualities of rurality, asking what draws people to such places and importantly, what they do when they get there (after Halfacree and Rivera 2012). This final section therefore brings together the main themes of the paper: class, space and the interactional processes through which belonging is forged. It is speculative, exploring what such signs and symbols convey about the meaning and operation of contemporary rurality. For as Atkinson (2013) argued, in paying attention to the *interaction order* (after Goffman), we should not neglect the very *situation* in which actors find themselves.

In the Norfolk village, where sociability was concentrated in pockets or zones, some villagers bridged these. These were not the wealthy, thrusting aspirational 'squires' that Heley (2010) discovered in his village ethnography, nor the long-term residents steeped in farming culture described by Bryant and Pini (2010). They were residents who relationally – both with place and people – cross-cut village divisions. It is this that rendered them distinctive and why we selected them for analysis. All happened to be women.

Villager 1 had come to the village over twenty-five years ago from outside Norfolk. Her children were not raised in the village and she had initially commuted some distance to work.

The attraction to a village was based on past experience of rural life and the peace and quiet it afforded. She and her husband had bought a property in the oldest section of the village and had extended this to accommodate her parents. She described the location of the village as being close to the attractions of Norfolk (its beaches and wildlife), but not so close that housing had become unaffordable (as in several picturesque Norfolk villages colloquially known as 'Chelsea-on-Sea'). She was positive about the fact that the move to the village had achieved the desired and anticipated peace and quiet particularly as she lived away from the more developed areas.

The spatial layout and facilities of the village shaped her initial social relations within it. With employment outside of the village and post-primary children she initially experienced difficulty in integrating into the village. She explained that, in the early years, overtures such as coffee invitations were not reciprocated. As a result she said that she initially focused upon her immediate family, but with an ambition upon retirement to use the additional space within her home to run a guesthouse and holiday-let. (She had some land and outbuildings with possibilities for further development). Some years before the fieldwork, she had become involved in a secretarial capacity in the PC. She recounted that on a village walk her father spotted an advertisement on the village noticeboard and, at his suggestion, she applied. During the fieldwork, we initially stayed in the business she had subsequently created (by then there were five guesthouses/ B&B businesses in this village, but many more in the picturesque sister village). It was evident that she knew a great many villagers, was well-known herself, and well-informed on village history. She was a close friend of a current parish councillor and had either convened or was currently convening several village-based clubs. The place had, from her influence and time there, more social opportunities (albeit of the middle-class variety) and a sustainable local business. She articulated no desire to leave

the village, so whilst she had not found the place initially welcoming, over time this changed as a result of her business and the arrival of other new socially like-minded villagers. The people, rather than the place, had fostered her sense of belonging and her desire to stay.

This villager, using the lens of Halfacree's (2007) three-fold architecture, is a mobile rural dweller. She has the experience of both city and rural living, but chose the latter. She pursued her desired form of sociability, by fostering social relations in the space in keeping with what she enjoyed, rather than what she had done in the past. In her 'retirement' she leveraged both her economic and social capitals to offer tourist accommodation. This villager disconnected from the past dominant groups of the village, which were farming-based (see Hillyard and Bagley 2013). As a business owner, she further constructed a rural experience, complete with 'hobby farm' chickens and sheep and whilst this representation did not reflect the village *en total*, her social capital influenced others around her. Whilst others with land to sell in the village had sought to influence the direction of planning, she had elected not to do so despite having some further ambitions for her own holding. She was a rural genteel amateur, high in cultural and symbolic rather than economic capital. She had not changed the place, but as the people changed, the place had accommodated her. In this respect her experience contrasts sharply with that of a villager in Co. Durham, for whom it was place which shaped people:

> I did try to go down South to work, in fact so did several of my mates from the village, but I couldn't stick it ya know. Not the same as up here ya know, not friendly like and I didn't know anybody. So think I did a couple of years in a factory down there and thought nah I'm going back to the Village. And you know what I would walk into the local pub and there are a few of my mates right back from school days who I hadn't seen for years and who had also left and I'd say to them "What yo doin back here I thought ya had gan down South?" and they would say the same as me, "ah we couldn't stick down there man" (Interview, Co. Durham villager).

Villager 2 had also come to the village in the past five years with her husband, who commuted. Her husband later joined the School Governors. They had come to Norfolk because of her husband's work and originally rented in the village. Their daughter had been a toddler when they had arrived, had come through the village pre-school and was now at the school. That they had successfully integrated – pre-school and primary – led them to stay, as did finding a house to meet their needs. What is distinct here is that Villager 2 knew a wide array of villagers including members of the older, church-connected groups, those involved in the school and pre-school networks, and the PC. This was a Bourdieuvian crossing of fields, enabled by what the place afforded her, which then created impetus around the people she met. She particularly had become integrated into the village life; for example, she was working as the PC clerk (as had Villager 1), and as an assistant in the school. So whilst Villager 2 lived in the oldest part of the village, and hence away from the new main residential areas, she was well known. She had high levels of cultural and social capital and had secured funds for new facilities on the village playing-fields, complete with monkey bars, via fund-raising and grant-getting. She was spoken of warmly and her work on behalf of the village was appreciated.

Villager 2's gender and her stage in the life-course facilitated her immersion in village activities and roles. She was the accidental networker, not by decision, but by circumstance. Her neighbourly proximity to one of the landowning families with high cultural capital in the district enabled her to cross fields other newcomers could not. Thus, spatial dynamics and her class capital had combined to afford her a favourable position in the village.

Villager 3 contrasted with Villagers 1 and 2 in the sense that she did not come to the village voluntarily – the very opposite of elective belonging – and had experienced what she felt to

be sustained clashes with the previously dominant social groups of the established middle (farming) class. As the place had changed (and the landowning established middle classes were retrenched from the PC and Governors), and enabled by her friendship with Villager 2, she became involved with the PC. She already knew the school well, as her children had attended. She lived in one of the new zones of the village that had a greater social density, and therefore her residence was not somewhat out-of-view, as was Villager 1's home. Her neighbours were, too, her friends.

She was not from Norfolk originally, but from a Service family and was hence well-travelled, including to overseas bases. She had become more settled due to having children, but had raised them as a single parent. So, after originally coming to the county through necessity to be nearer to the support of her parents, she had stayed for sixteen years and become a well-known figure. Like Villager 2, she had enhanced village amenities for young people. This included establishing a playing field association and, with a neighbour, making a social space for village youth to meet. Whilst the behaviour of young people in the village had been anti-social in the past, she had not responded by withdrawing from her roles or activities. The place itself, over time had generated less a sense of belonging than an embodied sense of familiarity:

> I can't see myself living anywhere else now. I'm getting too old for change I think. I've travelled every three years – you know, through my childhood, every three years we got moved on. Somebody said to me the other day, how would you cope if you're staying in one place now, and I said well I just move all the furniture around more now. You know, have a change […] But, I'm settled. I've got so much junk that I don't think I could ever move anyway (Interview, villager, raised children in the village who attended the school).

Collectively, these three villagers' situations reveal how rurality converges place and people. The theme of belonging – and exclusion – offers a critical lens through which to see conflict. Both villages discussed here were not classless environments, but class had not determined

what the villagers had become. The three profiles of villagers from Norfolk showed, for instance, how they had resisted the social 'pecking order', but the village situation *at that time* combined with their own capitals and habitus. The importance of stage in the life-course has proven to be significant as to *when* villagers are able to get involved. Whether it be building swings on the playing-field, hosting a coffee morning or arranging a place for young villagers to meet, these were generative inclusive activities. The school remained an important meso-level institution, between place and people.

Conclusion

Savage et al. (2005; 2013) argued that you are where you live. In this paper we have addressed this axiom as it pertains to two English rural villages and their schools. The schools differed in their relationship with the village, with one acting much more as a social glue enacting and preserving the collective village identity.

In keeping with contemporary theoretical accounts of rurality, the importance of space as a site where rurality is enacted was highlighted. For one village, the community had effectively 'struck back' to reinforce the sense of community when the dominant industry was removed. In this Co. Durham village, the continuity of the population and its primary school served to inculcate newcomers and to forge a close-knit sense of community and inclusion that had, in the past, been generated by the economic dominance of coal-mining.   The effect of modernity differed in the Norfolk village, where the school had become literally and metaphorically left behind after a period of growth had dramatically changed the spatial layout and class constitution of the village. The school here had been unable to act as a social glue, although individuals were able to network across diverse social groups. In the absence of other social focal points, the Norfolk school remained important in the sense that many key

villagers had some form of association with it; however, it did not play the central role in producing and reproducing community as did the school in Co Durham. It is therefore possible for the same social institution to fulfil very different roles within a rural village.

Halfacree's (2007) three-fold architecture of rurality stresses space, people and representations (or imaginary). In this paper the profiles of three newcomers – two by choice, one not – were used to exemplify how interactional processes of exclusion operate through this architecture. The diversity of classes Savage et al. (2013) identified was useful for seeing and analysing the different ways in which the three newcomers sought to shape the rural community in which they lived and, in turn, were shaped by that community. Whether this constitutes an example of a three-fold architecture of space, representation and the lived reality or the tricky persistence of class capital is an enduring question for future rural scholars. Regardless, ethnography offers a useful vehicle for the analysis of changing balances of power.

Notes on Contributors

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[i] The research team consisted of two fieldworkers, one in each site. The Norfolk village was researched via three residential periods of fieldwork, while the Co. Durham village fieldwork consisted of a series of site visits, given the proximity of the research team's university.

[ii] Partridge effect refers to a comedy UK character, who is from Norfolk but painfully out of synch with the modern world. Hence the opposite of global, connected countryside.