



Social and economic effects of spatial distribution in island communities: Comparing the Isles of Scilly and Isle of Wight, UK



Adam Grydehøj ^{a,*}, Philip Hayward ^{b,1}

^a *Island Dynamics, Lergravsvej 53, 3. sal, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark*

^b *Southern Cross University, Military Road, Lismore, Australia*

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Abstract There has been increasing awareness that communities based on islands are subject to particular island-related factors (the so-called ‘island effect’). This paper sheds empirical light on how the island effect differs in different kinds of island communities, specifically solitary islands on the one hand and archipelagos on the other. It does so by comparing two subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) in England: the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight. By analysing census statistics, we show how the spatial distribution in the Isles of Scilly (an archipelago) and the Isle of Wight (a solitary island) is interrelated with patterns of population and employment. Although the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight are both tourism economies, the data indicates that, in social and economic terms, the Isles of Scilly benefits while the Isle of Wight suffers as a result of their different patterns of spatial distribution. We conclude that an island community’s spatial distribution has a significant influence on its societal development and that the island effect differs among islands with different patterns of spatial distribution.

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Introduction: island spaces

Islands hold special prominence in studies of the role that space plays in societal development. So fundamental is ‘the

island’ to our understanding of societal relationships that we create symbolic and metaphorical islands where no physical islands exist. The popular consciousness even tends to reflect this symbolic sense of ‘insularity’, ‘isolation’, and ‘peripherality’ back upon physical islands, despite ample evidence that actual island communities are usually thoroughly integrated into the outside world (Eriksen, 1993; Christensen and Mertz, 2010). The precise manner in which the attribute of islandness affects islands – the so-called ‘island effect’ – is very much under debate (Leimgruber, 2013).

Nevertheless, as the research field of island studies has shown, island communities possess a range of general characteristics resulting from their spatial distinctiveness and bound- edness. To say that insularity, isolation, and peripherality are

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 53401982.

E-mail addresses: agrydehoj@islanddynamics.org (A. Grydehøj), phayward2010@gmail.com (P. Hayward).

¹ Tel.: +61 266282453.

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relative (Biagini and Hoyle, 1999) is not to say they are illusory. Even within the geographical category of ‘islands’, however, differing spatial factors are significant. This is true not only in the obvious sense that some islands are very large (for instance, Greenland and Madagascar) while others are very small. It is also true in that some ‘island communities’ are, in fact, located on an archipelago (i.e. made up of populations living on multiple islands) while others are located on a solitary island.

This diversity of islands results in a diversity of island ways of life. For instance, tourism planning and practice tend to take place very differently in strongly archipelagic communities than on solitary islands or in archipelagos that are overwhelmingly dominated by one of their constituent islands (Baldacchino and Ferreira, 2013). Similarly, the isolation of island communities – in the sense of their distance from other communities – is not only highly variable but also multifaceted (Spilanis et al., 2012). Physical archipelagos are not always conceived of as archipelagos (Suwa, 2012), and solitary islands are not always thought of as islands (Bożętko, 2013).

These findings are being considered in light of island studies’ increasing theoretical sophistication. Within island studies, the emerging explication that islands tend to be intimately related with one another and with various mainlands (Stratford, 2013) represents a reconfirmation – rather than a denial – that islandness matters. Many islands – such as Malta and Malé – are arguably simultaneously highly urbanised, highly isolated, and highly interconnected with the surrounding world. This has tended to complicate discussion of how the island effect – whatever it may be – might relate to oft-cited ‘active ingredients of islandness’ such as insularity, isolation, and peripherality. Pete Hay (2013: 12) has nevertheless argued that:

The current ‘party line’ within island studies is to emphasize connectivity as the antonym of a bounded sensibility and in the process the ocean is lost, reduced to one of two inadequate and opposed stereotypes: hard barrier, or highway to somewhere else.

Hay’s phenomenological remedy is to focus on “the bounded sensibility of island engagement” (Hay, 2013: 227), to look at psychologies of islandness. This is a welcome perspective inasmuch as its focus on identity construction on islands permits examination of an area that, as Hay (2013: 214) notes, makes life on islands “qualitatively distinct.” In other words, considering things from the islanders’ point of view has the advantage of turning such island attributes as insularity, isolation, and peripherality into cultural and emotional truths rather than forcing us to regard them as geographic relativities that require nuancing in the form of discussions of island-mainland interaction.

In recent years, then, the field has produced a rich literature of theoretical correctives to itself. It has, however, been rather poorer at implementing these correctives in studies of actual islands. Instead, theories of the island effect have remained marooned largely in the realm of anecdote even as island studies researchers continue producing excellent comparative studies of actual islands. Exceptions do exist, and some authors have indeed produced research that contributes both to a specific and a general understanding of islands: On the quantitative side of the research spectrum, Pons and Rullan (2013) have shown that island and coastal urbanisation is

associated with complex spatial factors, and on the qualitative side, Pugh (2013: 10) has engaged with the concept of the archipelago by calling for a ‘denaturalisation’ of space, “so that space is more than the mere backcloth for political or ethical debate.”

There remains, however, a further need for grounding concepts from island studies theory in the real world. Without such a grounding, any examination of the island effect will necessarily be superficial.

In the present article, we seek to fill a particular gap in this regard by shedding empirical light on the distinction between different kinds of islands (specifically between solitary islands and archipelagos), a distinction that sometimes risks being overlooked in debates concerning ‘the island’ in abstract. We do so through a comparison of two subnational island jurisdictions (hereafter, SNIJs) in England: 1) a relatively large solitary island (Isle of Wight) in close vicinity to a major population centre and 2) a small archipelago (Isles of Scilly) that is relatively distant from any major population centre. By comparing these two SNIJs, with reference to other European island communities, we can consider how the island effect differs on solitary islands and archipelagos. We will argue not that one type of island is more island-like or insular than another but, rather, that the different kinds of islands result in different kinds of island effects. Although other areas are worthy of research as well, we focus here on how patterns of island spatial distribution relate to patterns of employment and mobility.

Methodology

In this article, we consider the association between spatial distribution (both within an SNIJ and between an SNIJ and neighbouring landmasses) and some of the factors that are often noted as active ingredients of the island effect, namely insularity, isolation, and peripherality. This association will be analysed primarily through a comparison of various quantitative measures of social and economic health and robustness from the Isle of Wight (hereafter, IOW) and the Isles of Scilly (hereafter, Scilly). The data, presented in Section 5 below, has been considered with reference to individual islands and island districts within IOW and Scilly as well as to England as a whole. The types of data presented concern:

- Table 1. Age of population.
- Table 2. Distance travelled to work.
- Table 3. Method of travel to work.
- Table 4. Types of employment (percentage unemployed, full-time, part-time, etc.).
- Table 5. Level of education of population.

Key to our approach is an understanding that these types of data represent only indirect measures of social and economic health and robustness inasmuch as there can be no ‘ideal’ figures when regarded in isolation. For instance, the percentage of a population within the 20–29 year age cohort is of very different societal significance for an isolated small island community than it is for an urban community contiguous with other urban communities. Such, at any rate, is the anecdotal, common sense proposition that one would derive from the island studies theory discussed above. However, by looking

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