'It's the sea and the beach more than anything for me': Local surfer's and the construction of community and *communitas* in a rural Cornish seaside village

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative ethnographic study undertaken on a small rural village community in Cornwall, UK with a significant population of local surfers. It focuses on these local surfers' interactions with the wider rural community they co-exist with, and in which ways this group might contribute to the formation, maintenance and identity of that broader rural community. The analysis presented draws together a range of broadly agreed conceptual notions of community with Victor Turner's (1969) notion of spontaneous, normative and ideological communitas as dynamic emergent elements in what Whol (2015) refers to as a process of developing community sense through experiencing and communicating aesthetic judgments. Findings illustrate that notions of community were not restricted to a static and bounded geographical location. Rather, the village focused upon in this study was seen as a hub of a close and a wider de-territorialised community. Despite their obvious differences, there was a strong sense of communitas, community sense and aesthetic judgement between surfing locals and non-surfing locals, expressed through the sharing of experience of the inspired feelings of native place configured around relationships with the sea, the local beach, surf break and village life.

1. Introduction

Seaside villages are one of a number of manifestations of the rural in the English countryside often imagined as a 'picturesque place of safety and neighbourly community' (Neal and Walters, 2008:279). However, as Barth (1994:13) notes 'communities cannot be created simply through the act of imagining,' prompting questions of what is involved in constructing and maintaining rural 'community'? While such a broad question is beyond the scope of this article and the research that informs it, it has prompted us to consider the more focused question of the part played by a community of local surfers and the contribution they make in constructing and maintaining one rural community of which they are a part. Frequently described as 'non-comformist' (Usher and Kertstetter, 2015; Ford and Brown, 2006; Irwin, 1973), surfers have often been considered as living in contrast to the broader communities in which they reside 'living differently and displaying irreverence' (Booth, 2004: 16), with many studies focusing on surfer's interactions within their own surfing communities concentrating on issues of localism (Beaumont and Brown, 2016; Bennett, 2004), individualism (Beaumont and Brown, 2015; Lanagan, 2003; Usher, 2017), and gender (Booth, 2004; Brennan, 2016; Loy, 1995; Nemani and Thorpe, 2016). The focus of this paper deliberately moves beyond such concerns to

contemplate interactions with the wider rural community, and considers how this group contributes to the formation, maintenance and identity of that rural community in ways which also facilitate the extension of its sociospatial boundaries.

The emergence of the term local surfer, initially coined by Booth (2004), refers to surfers who have a sociospatial relationship with a given surf break they would typically describe as their *local* break. Connections between the local surfer and the surfing community is suggested throughout this literature on surfing subculture. For example, Booth (2004) labelled the small gatherings of local surfers at their local surf break as 'modern tribal groups' and are described by Loy (1995: 267) as providing young men with 'a sense of community'.

However, with the notable exception of Stranger (2010) the literature on the local surfer and community is very much confined to a focus on the local *surfing* community itself and little is known about the local surfers' interaction with the wider community, that is the community they live amongst in the geographical area surrounding their local surf break and which invariably contains a diverse population of non-surfers at the same time. In order to achieve this focus, it is important to qualify that this paper intentionally moves away from both the community of surfers as an entity and the rural community as whole. Rather, this paper concerns itself with this understudied aspect of the contribution a

small community of local surfers make in constructing and maintaining the broader rural community they are a part of.

Focusing on the career stages of a group of local surfers, Beaumont and Brown (2015) highlight that at the early *nurturing* stage of the local surfer career, they develop a sense of belonging, linking them to their local surfing community, and at the later *responsible* stage, local surfer's surfing activities begin to function more explicitly as a community binding/building activity - expressed through activities such as, running local businesses, promoting community events and nurturing young surfers during surf sessions. In addition, further connections to community can be made in the phenomenon of *Localism*; 'a preference for what is local … expressed through ideas, customs, attitudes and behaviours of the surfers in your local area' (Bennett, 2004: 346). In their work on Localism, Beaumont and Brown (2015:10) noted how local surfers can be protective about the liminal space that is their local break from outsider surfers because 'it is seen as part of their local community' and that it is this attachment that gives rise to *communitas*, the experiential building block of their way of life as a local surfing community which also serves as an experiential bridge to the wider rural seaside community as the shared appreciation of and attachment to -both expressed through aesthetic judgment-particular local marine spaces is also shared by many in the wider community. Therefore, this paper investigates the role the local surfer plays in the wider community, paying particular attention to how they interact with non-surfing community members and the non-surfing activities within that locality, and, importantly how their communitas, expressed through positive aesthetic judgements of beach, sea, surf break and local community values intermingle with similar values of non-surfing local residents, thereby adding a powerful impetus to this aspect of one rural community's sense of identity. In order to do this, we first revisit the notion of community with a critical gaze to establish the key elements of this concept that we have drawn on in the analysis.

2. Conceptualising community

Community acts as an appropriate theoretical lens through which to focus this paper. Since Tonies (1887) *Community and Society* identified the continuum of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft relations between people in society, notions of what community is and how it changes have been the subject of ongoing debate. More recently, Alleyne (2002: 608) reflects that community is 'quite unsurprisingly a term which is impossible to define with any precision'. Despite this inherent ambiguity and debate, there are generally considered to be three conceptual elements underpinning community research which provide a starting point for our analysis; the concentration of the residents of the community within a delimited geographical area; the social relationships and interaction and, the idea of 'common ties' (Hillery, 1955).

Out of the ninety-four definitions of community considered by Hillery, seventy agree that the presence of area is a necessary element of community (Bell and Newby, 1974). Area is considered to be a location, physical territory and geographical continuity (Gusfield, 1975). Metcalfe (1996) suggests that a condition of 'community' is having a stable, permanent settlement with MacIver and Page (1961) highlighting locality, which in one sense can refer to geographical closeness. Indeed, drawing on a discussion of the work of Etzioni (1995), Day (2006:16) takes the communitarian perspective that community formation involves, 'a slowing down in the readiness with which people will flit between places, and a new eagerness on their part to put down local roots'. However, anticipating more recent discussions of community *de-territorialisation* (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007), Sennett (1977) contends the understanding of a community being a place on the map is much too narrow and people can have experiences of community which do not depend on living *near* one another. Guilianoti and Robertson (2012: 447) extend this idea commenting:

Local identities are not tied to a specific physical or geographical place or "territory", but are instead highly mobile, as evidenced by

particular migrant communities or by "virtual" groups which rely on media or communications technologies (e.g., Facebook groups).

By drawing together these notions, this study examines the idea that rural community exists within and beyond a delimited geographical area.

Surfing is a good example of what Wohl (2015: 301) drawing on Hebdige (1979) refers to as a 'geographically dispersed' subculture. Within this, local surfers are likely to experience the juxtaposition of being local to their own break, but an outsider to another. In this way, the local surfer is simultaneously localised and deterritorialised in both meaning and practice leading to what Beaumont and Brown (2016) describe as a 'glocalised' identity. Such a perspective helps us imagine the existence of local surfers across the globe, potentially sharing little in common except their surf practice and a generic sociospatial relationship with a given surf break. Glocalised surfing identities also raises questions about surfer's relationships with and contribution to the wider local, rural communities of which they assume an active presence due to the way in which they simultaneously construct and transgress physical notions of territory and boundary. While this is happening in other spheres of rural community life, glocalised surfer identities add impetus to such transformations - a point we return to later.

Social relationships and interaction are mentioned within many definitions of community, although the context of these relationships can vary. Of Hillery's ninety-four definitions, Bell and Newby (1974) note ninety-one mention the presence of a group of people interacting. Inkeles (1964) argues that in communities, residents exhibit a substantial degree of integrated social interaction. This view is mirrored in Gusfield (1975) conceptualisation of the quality or character of human relationships, while Wellman (2001: 127) further specifies that community involves 'interpersonal ties that provide support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity.' Although Inkeles (1964) notes that a substantial degree of integrated social interaction occurs in any community, for Gusfield (1975), MacIver and Page (1961), and Wellman (2001) importance should be attached to the *type, quality, character* and *results* of this relationship rather than the *degree* of interaction. Qualities of interaction relate to the third generic component of community which Hillery refers to as 'common ties' (Bell and Newby, 1974). When Gusfield (1975) discusses social interaction, he recognises the existence of *bonds of similarity* as what unites a collectivity of people, a view supported by MacIver and Page (1961), Wellman (2001) and Sennett (1977) who each note some degree of social coherence, 'interpersonal ties' and shared action as a necessary component of a functional community.

Finally, Gusfield (1975) suggests that a homogenous culture can be a mark of community. Factors such as language, moralities and common histories can produce a particular sense of being/identity and act as a 'common tie' between people. Similarly, Metcalfe (1996:16) concluded that communities were linked with a *unifying trait or a common interest* and that 'the development of a sense of community was related to the stability and composition of the population'.

Part of the problem in defining community is that definitions tacitly co-present the problem of agency and structure, without addressing how these relate. Turner (1969: 69) forwards the Latin loanword, *communitas* rather than community 'to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an "area of common living."' Turner's notion of communitas develops the collectivist assumption contained within Tonnies (1887) idea of Gemeinschaft of a "unity of wills" (Christenson, 1984: 161) but replaces Tonnie's inherent phylogenetic assumptions with a sociogenetic and constructionist perspective. Communitas is particularly helpful in approaching the 'other dimension of "society" with which I have been concerned is less easy to define' (Turner, 1969:126), such as the unifying traits, common interests, common ties and bonds of similarity mentioned above.

Echoing the sentiments expressed above, Turner (1969: 128) eschews 'the notion that communitas has a specific territorial locus … communitas emerges where social structure is not' thus existing in a