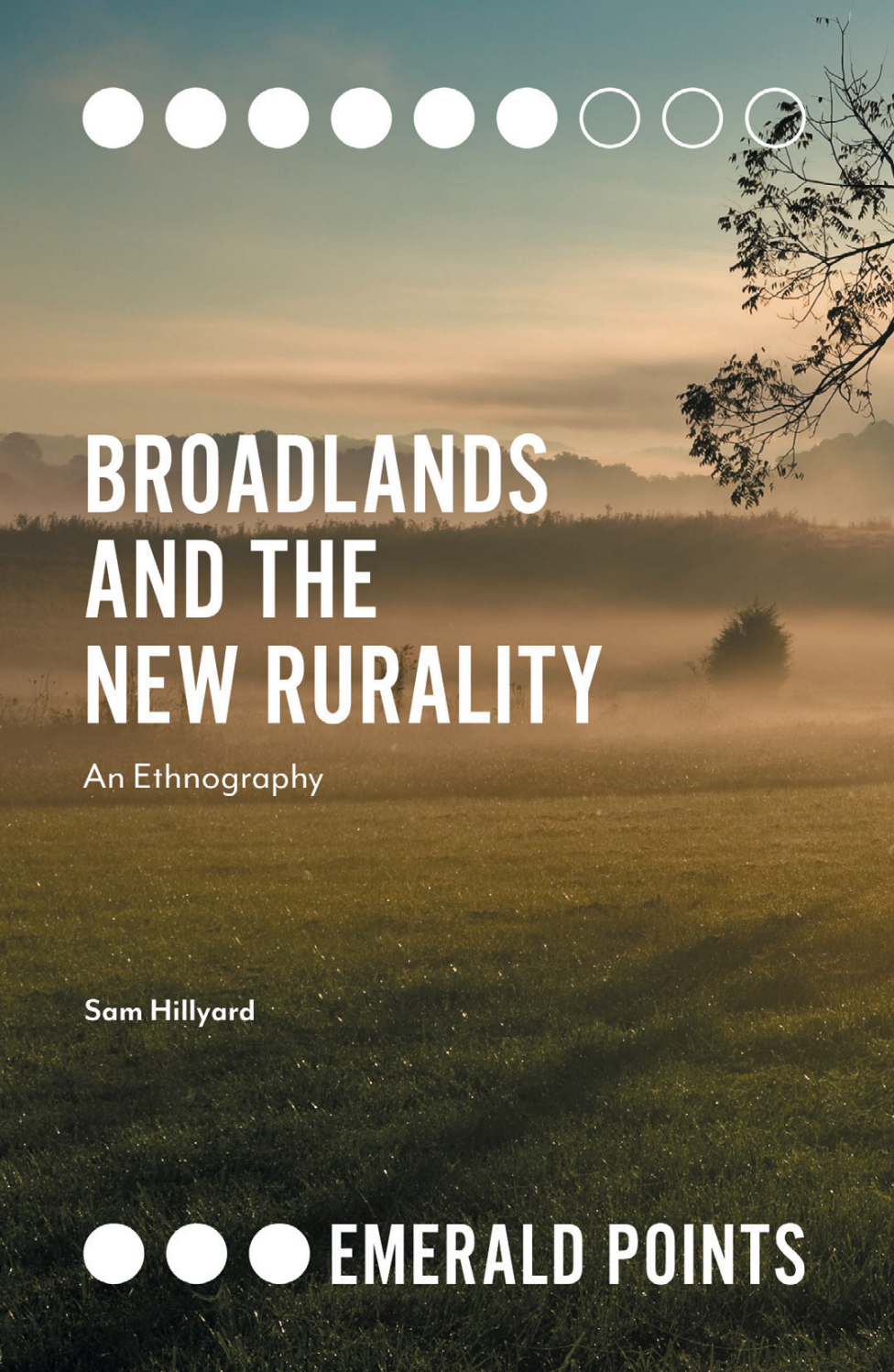

BROADLANDS AND THE NEW RURALITY

An Ethnography

Sam Hillyard

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An Ethnography

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Chris

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The most readily accessible characteristics of a phenomenon are not necessarily the most sociologically interesting ones (Crow & Takeda, 2011, p. 6).

In all interaction a basic underlying theme is the desire of each participant to guide and control the response made by the others present (Goffman, 1956, p. 2).

Why would you want to study this village? (*Fieldnotes*, Broadlands village).

I'm going into Tow Law
For what I need (Mark Knopfler, 'Hill Farmer's Blues').

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My thanks to all of the villagers and surrounding residents of Broadlands for their time, patience and participation.

This book is an ethnography and as such is dedicated to my original Field Studies tutor and subsequent doctoral supervisor – Chris Pole. Any errors or omissions, as he would only be too happy to point out, remain my own.

SHH, Weardale, August 2019.

INTRODUCTION

The book is a commentary of life in one English village based upon ethnographic fieldwork. The main case study – one village – is small, but the themes are universal. Appealing to ideas in sociology and using an inclusive ethnographic research approach, the book establishes a distinctive picture of everyday rural life in the twenty-first century. In doing so, the case is made for the enduring and even omnipresent quality of the term 'rural'. It remains an outlying, but stickily-determined concept. The long history of definitional problems (because what is 'rural' means many things to many people) are red herrings. Whilst it can very quickly become meaningless in any hard science explanatory sense (*inter alia* Bell & Newby, 1971; Pahl, 1968; Scase, 1971), the solution to this problem used throughout this book is to focus upon *the rural in action*. That is, the way people make it happen through their actions, ideas and values. This appeals to sociology's dramaturgical approach that celebrates how people actually make sense of their social world and respond to it in turn. Sociological dramaturgy – like Shakespeare – compares social life to a drama on a stage. That is, if you think the rural has certain qualities, you react on the basis of that view of the world (to paraphrase Chicago sociologist W.I. Thomas). We can act differently on the front (public) stage to more private moments (back stage) and we actively reflect upon

both personas (as an almost sub-conscious internal conversation). Great store is therefore set upon what people say and then how they act, but also the reception of the audience and the staging of performances. So, for the rural it means exploring how people understand and enact their meaning of the rural, how performances are received and how the rural stage may hold sway, too (see Thomas and Thomas (1927) on the definition of the situation). Dramaturgy is used to unlock the everyday life in an English village.

Contemporary village life, like cities and suburbs, has changed considerably in recent decades and will be very different to the rural village of the late 1970s and early 1980s in which I grew up. In the pre-digital era, interactions were about physically meeting people, whereas now the rural is also shaped by knowledge and understandings gained outside and virtually. Hence, rural villages are as much exposed to global trends and the disinformation ecosystem (what we might call 'fake news') as any modern metropolis. The book explores this change and how rural spaces mediate what the rural is now. It offers an ethnography that describes the actions and interpretations of change primarily inside one, Norfolk village. This is supplemented by comparisons with ethnographic data on two further and contrasting villages also conducted by the author. By appealing across three ethnographies, the book is more than the sum of its parts. Its comparative technique exposes broader patterns of change. So, the title 'Broadlands' is both a nod towards the elite rural estate of Broadlands in Hampshire, UK, and a play on the famous wildlife haven of the Norfolk Broads (mentioned by Bowie in *Life on Mars*) – here we see the rural in the bigger picture of modernity and from the smaller frame of everyday culture.

A final introductory comment is merited. The cachet of the rural is on the rise. The commodity value of land has risen by

over 200% in the past 10 years (Bates, 2015). What people do, feel and encounter in rural domains and how global relations flow through such locales do hence merit sustained and serious attention. Put simply, power is shifting and it is not a level playing field. This is the contribution of the book, to take the pulse of the contemporary village with reference to its past and to think on what future consequences might be anticipated.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

An introductory chapter necessarily fleshes out the book's main theoretical approach – the principles of dramaturgy and also rural studies scholarship – that provide a toolkit put into practice across the chapters that follow. The stress is upon what people think of as rural – the rural imaginary or idyll – and the pace of rural life (contrasted with an urban analytical emphasis upon speed). Here, by contrast, careful thought is given to stasis. Lastly, whereas early dramaturgy stressed formal organisations in shaping roles and identity, this is expanded to include informal and more transient organisations and associations. Sociologist Erving Goffman's version of dramaturgy that emphasised opportunities and conformity is maintained and extended to focus upon endurance and a resulting stickiness. Collectively and ultimately, the book proposes a new model for grasping the complexity of the rural. It is a re-calibrated dramaturgy 2.0. Somewhat unusually, each chapter may be read independently.

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1

THINKING ABOUT RURALITY

'The fly always follows the dead meat' is the phrase used by Floki, the Viking shipbuilder, in a recent TV drama series, *The Vikings*. He described – somewhat unflatteringly – how much social life is routinised and unconscious. Any study trying to see social life with fresh eyes faces the self-same challenge to move beyond the white noise of normality in order to unravel and explain/understand why we do what we do. The focus and task here are the challenge to describe and capture change in one English village and the everyday actions and lifestyles performed there.

Unlike Floki's fly, a *modus operandi* throughout is an emphasis on the importance of what people get up to – the book holds that social actors are purposeful in their behaviour. They want to shape and inform what comes next and have opinions about what is worthwhile and what is not – there is a plotline and they have a hand in how it unfolds. This is a dramaturgical approach – analogising social life to a drama – and has been popular and influential within the social sciences before World War II. Theoretical ideas, such as dramaturgy, will feature progressively across the book as a

means to help see village life with fresh eyes. One of the most established – Goffmanian dramaturgy – is introduced first.

GOFFMAN, DRAMATURGY AND POWER

One of the best-known, but not the first, proponents of dramaturgy was sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82). In the best-selling Penguin book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (PSIEL), he used an in-depth ethnographic study of rural Scotland in the 1940s to argue that individuals' actions are vital to the production of society.[1] The PSIEL argues social life is like a drama (stages, performances, teams and regions) and also reflects upon where things go wrong (discrepant roles, impression management). Goffman was part of the *zeitgeist* of mid-20th- century sociology that explored the micro-level 'universes of appearance' (after Gregory Stone and philosopher Alfred Whitehead). Dramaturgy is concerned with *how* people do appearances and the codes of conduct at that moment of performance (the situation). Goffmanian dramaturgy advanced the earlier Burkeian pentad (of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose) by stressing *purpose*. That is, unlike the fly and the dead meat, situations do not define themselves.

Goffman drew together two directions of thought. An interest in rituals and social norms were derived from Emile Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and British social anthropology (Williams, 2000). Goffman also sat alongside the emergence of micro-level analysis as a legitimate field of sociology. Chicago University-trained, he was influenced by

1 The book's 40k+ citations show its impact. Goffman's engagement with dramaturgy having eclipsed the title's play on Freud's (1901) *Psychopathology of Everyday life*.

the early micro-theorists such as German sociologist Georg Simmel (Goffman has been called a 'little Simmel') and philosopher G.H. Mead. (Mead had lectured at Chicago and instructors such as Robert Park had themselves been taught by Simmel.[2]) Combined, Goffman's dramaturgy offers a coherent *weltanschauung* or model (Williams, 1986). The pentad is synthesised with anthropology to stress the negotiations *inside* encounters – and this is where Goffman added his own analytical trademark. The focus was on the social actor and the situation (when people meet other people) – and their negotiated reciprocity. This led to an emphasis on the *management* or wish to control encounters (power in situations). Goffman's dramaturgy seeks to unlock how *power* relations operate in interaction. Interaction is in that sense ordered and purposeful, and the situation is vital – even possessing its own rules and structures. The tension is what Williams (1986, p. 351) called the brokering of 'symbolic cloaks' where the self and the encounter are mutually influencing. It merits serious exploration, for instance, into how rituals sit alongside identity and how personhood emerges/is worked upon in conversation. For example, how people 'come on' in conversation and what is legitimate/institutionalised. This is the take on Goffmanian dramaturgy (there is some disagreement) used here. Furthermore, the book explores how villages 'come on' and shift, too (and who has a say in that).

A key influence and resource for Goffman was his fieldwork. He drew heavily upon his residential and qualitative empirical research in remote Shetland – his style was rich and essayistic – to explain dramaturgy. There is something of an irony that a model of human interaction was derived from

2 Williams (1986) holds that later influences upon Goffman (and his 1974 work *Frame Analysis*) included William James, Alfred Schutz and W.I. Thomas.

spending time in a place with such a small populace, but when he wrote up his thesis (an early version of the PSEIL) in 1950s Paris, he could not have anticipated how (1) popular dramaturgy would prove to be as a theoretical idea nor (2) how much of everyday life would take place virtually. Dramaturgy therefore needs adapting for use in the modern era and in part because of the very success of PSEIL. The drama-like quality of interaction now appreciated by the general public and that necessarily changes how we see interaction (Brittan, 1977). Most recently, interaction now takes place in a digital era; as Kate Hayles observed, there are now more smartphones on the planet than people. Netography (online ethnographies) has shown that online encounters, representations and expectations (tacit knowledge) mediate our social relations far more. Simply put, it is no longer just in physical co-location that definitional work gets done.

A second assumption of early dramaturgy that needs to be recalibrated for the digital age is akin to the fly always following the dead meat – that action is habituated. Now 'being in the moment' happens via different props and devices. So 'where the action is' (a very Goffmanian and indeed anthropological preoccupation) has shifted and needs to be accommodated. In remote areas, online networks may take on greater significance. Dramaturgy is capable of such adjustments and this demonstrates the model's strength and enduring relevance – it continues to help expose the processual definitional work of encounters across mediums.

THE STICKINESS OF ENCOUNTERS

One of the most debated issues in sociology is the relationship between self, identity and society. Namely, is the individual free to act under their own will or constrained by their