



Realities or mythologies: England's village pubs and counterurbanisation

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ABSTRACT

The countryside is again becoming a 'popular' destination for many as they seek to find residence away from the urban. Within this narrative of counterurbanisation village services, and interactions within them are often seen as being attractive and integral to the 'dream' of rural living. Yet the realities are often very different, as can be seen through the village pub. Whilst the village pub for many represents a space which goes beyond the consumption of alcohol and offers economic, social, and cultural importance, it can also be a space of difference and inequality. However, there remains a gap in our knowledge regarding the different narratives ascribed to the village pub from those who have moved or want to move to the rural. And how these narratives are often interwoven with the 'rural idyll' leading to inaccurate representations and unrealistic expectations of the village pub. The importance of this paper resides addressing some of the above gaps by looking at the village pub, its meaning and importance to individuals and communities in the context of counterurbanisation. By looking at the village pub through, an English rural county, and a cultural lens this paper highlights that the village pub is seen and experienced as adding value of different kinds – economic, social, and cultural, and that different groups attach different levels of importance to these kinds of value. Through drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capitals to explore these values it is shown that the different kinds of value attached to village pubs can work in the Bourdieusian interpretation as capital and be self-expanding and inter-convertible but can also work to undermine one another. Thus, impacting on how village pubs are seen and experienced within the context of counterurbanisation.

1. Introduction

The village pub for many represents a space which offers much more than a public place to purchase and imbibe alcohol (Markham, 2014). Thus, it can be described as more than a drinking place. This can be seen both historically and today. Historically, village pubs have played a varied role in society ranging from helping to facilitate the country's transport network through to providing spaces for networking and formal business of justices and coroners (Jennings, 1995, 2007). Whilst some of these functions have ceased, as wider social changes have occurred, the village pub has continued to hold a diverse position within rural communities. From providing a social space for residents, offering access to community services, and acting as a community hub through to helping local economies. Additionally, village pubs, like many pubs across England, offer links to the geographical locality as well as to local and national history and thus have a heritage importance (Brandon, 2010; Markham, 2014). Despite this diverse and important position there remain gaps in our knowledge regarding the different narratives ascribed to the village pub; and how these narratives are often interwoven with the 'rural idyll' leading to inaccurate representations and unrealistic expectations of the village pub.

The importance of this paper resides in addressing the above gaps by looking at the village pub, its meaning and importance to individuals and communities, particularly from the perspective of those moving into

the rural. To do this it will explore, using empirical data and secondary literature, changing perceptions and experiences of the village pub through looking first, at the interplay between rurality, rural living, and the village pub. And second, the movement between people's ideals of what the village pub is and the realities. Consequently, it will look, *inter alia*, at the changing social demographics of rural living, and the rural idyll to explore changing ideas of rurality, community, and the role the village pub plays in rural living. Thus, highlighting the often inaccurate assumption that village pubs, in contrast to their urban counterparts, equate to green beer gardens, and tranquil indoor settings with predominantly aging customers. By looking at the village pub through, the rural county of Lincolnshire which is in Eastern England, and a cultural class lens this paper will highlight that the village pub is seen and experienced as adding value of different kinds – economic, social, and cultural, and that different groups attach different levels of importance to these kinds of value. In the context of this paper adding value is taken to mean importance or beneficial. The paper will draw theoretically on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capitals to explore these values. For Bourdieu (1986) capital is accumulated labour which can take different but interdependent forms, this capital can range from economic through to material capital. In this context capital is seen as convertible and as self-expanding. Thus, social capital in the form of having strong social networks may be converted into economic capital through the accessing of, for example, additional employment opportunities, and benefits. In

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this context, it is the interactions between humans in capitalist society that become reduced to relations of commercial exchange. This commercial exchange can take many forms not just those of monetary value (Markham, 2014).

Through drawing on Bourdieu (1986) ideas on capital, this paper will highlight that the different kinds of value attached to village pubs can work in the Bourdieusian (1986) interpretation as capital and be self-expanding and inter-convertible but that they can also work to undermine one another. Thus, impacting on how village pubs are seen and experienced by different groups including those who have migrated to the countryside. The paper allows the cultural position of the pub to be foregrounded in a manner which allows for a deeper understanding of how it is perceived and experienced and in doing so offers an indirect focus on counterurbanisation, and the allurements to the countryside. As such, this paper is organised as follows. A clear literature review section which explores the themes of rurality, counterurbanisation, the rural idyll and the village pub. This will be followed by a succinct methods section before going on to explore the findings. Here the different values attached by various groups to village pubs will be explored before going onto look at how such perceptions and experiences have led to often-inaccurate assumptions regarding the imagery and usage of village pubs by those who have migrated to the countryside. The discussion section brings together the main findings and links them back to the theoretical framework. Finally, the paper offers some conclusions around village pubs and their indirect links to counterurbanisation.

2. Literature review

Research from a variety of disciplines, has shown the complexity that exists when discussing the rural (Francis et al., 2001; Halfacree, 2007; Woods, 2005). This complexity ranges from the subjectivity of what is meant by the term rural, through to discussions around rural idylls, and how romanticised narratives are being imposed onto rural spaces in terms of how they should look and how their communities should function. Therefore, when considering the rural it is important to outline what is meant by the term in the context it is being discussed. For this paper a rural village will be taken to mean settlements within England, and which, in line with the standard UK Government definition of rural, has a population of less than 10,000 people (Gov.UK, 2023). Following this definition any public drinking space licensed to sell alcohol in said settlement will be considered a village pub.

2.1. Rurality

The study of rurality and rural communities, whilst gaining traction in recent decades, has not been a core priority of much academic research and scholarship. Thus, there remains a limited knowledge not only around the logistical and material challenges and opportunities facing these areas in contemporary society. But also, on how narratives of rural living are developed, imposed, accepted, or challenged. Within the rural research that does exist it is possible to identify three different research 'turns'. Within each of these different 'turns', which have not occurred in a linear manner, there has been a progressive shift in the core focus to understand rurality and rural communities (Markham, 2014). Early work that focussed attention on the rural such as that of Williams (1963) and (Stacey, 1960) often used the lens of geographical locality to help frame their work and study the impact of changing economies and demographics to rural areas. This first turn thus tended to focus on the materiality of the rural to explore these spaces. Following on from this, there became much more of an emphasis on the social. This is seen in the works of Pahl (1968) and Newby (1977, 1985) who studied the rural through the lenses of class, and social relations. Here, some of the social divisions and power hierarchy within rural spaces were explored, highlighting the negative realities, for some, of residing in these areas including poverty, and exclusion (Hillyard, 2007). The lens of social class is one which offers a narrative through which to explore

the rural from the lived experience as in the case of Newby's work (1985) but also through how particular ideas and notions have been ascribed to the rural by 'outsiders'. As the work of Willett (2016, 2021, 2023) highlights the rural has often been misunderstood because of unequal power relations, in which the urban middle to higher classes have imposed narratives of rural living onto society which are misrepresentations. The literature pertaining to rurality and class is important as it offers a lens through which to explore the distinctions being made within this paper.

During the material and social 'turns' of rural research there were evident omissions within the analysis including a lack of diversity with some demographics including women being overlooked (Hillyard, 2007). Although this has been partially addressed through the cultural turn, and in works by, for example, Hunt and Satterlee (1986b, 1987); Leyshon (2005, 2008b) Key (2013) there continues to be gaps in knowledge particularly around the role local services such as pubs play in reinforcing inequalities, and rural idylls, as well as influencing counterurbanisation narratives. In recent decades both the material and social 'turns' in rural research have been somewhat displaced by a deeper focus on the cultural through the lens of the rural idyll. It is to counterurbanisation and to the rural idyll which attention is now turned.

2.2. Counterurbanisation

When looking at the rural it is important to acknowledge that it is dynamic, and that rural settlements have in recent decades gone through significant restructuring and demographic changes. One aspect of this has been the desire to and movement of people from urban localities to the countryside, known more widely as counterurbanisation a term coined by Berry (1976) to describe such a phenomenon occurring in the United States in the 1970s. Since its incarnation counterurbanisation has been a focus of research and scholarship for many including Champion, 1998; Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023, Halfacree, 2009). Much of the focus for the counterurbanisation literature has been Europe (Willett, 2023). In the UK, which was part of Europe until 2020, counterurbanisation has been a feature of the landscape and attracted scholarly attention both historically and in present times (see Dean et al., 1984; Willett, 2023).

Within many counterurbanisation narratives across Europe and the UK, there has tended to exist an idyllic framing in which people migrate to the countryside as they imagine it to be peaceful, and community orientated and thus will enhance their wellbeing and overall quality of life (Barcus and Halfacree, 2010; Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). Whilst some scholars have gone onto critique such framing and/or explore counterurbanisation from differing perspectives (Halfacree, 2009; Hansen and Aner, 2017; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Stockdale, 2016). There remains a narrative around in-migration and class within the counterurbanisation literature (Eimermann, et al, 2012; Goodwin-Hawkins & DafyddJones, 2022). Here, counterurbanisation is often explored through the lens of class and affluence to highlight how those seeking entry to middle class rural ideals use their careers, finances, and status to help them achieve their aspirations (Goodwin-Hawkins & DafyddJones, 2022; Primdahl, 2014). Whilst this is clearly an important aspect of counterurbanisation it is important to recognise that there exists other, and sometimes interconnected, reasons as to why people migrate to the rural. This is seen in the work of Scott et al. (2017) where it is shown that factors such as strengthening existing networks are noted as one the core attractions for some to migrate to the rural. Such understandings remain under explored within the literature but are central to recognise when looking at motivations around counterurbanisation.

Additionally, there remains an argument that little is known in relation to the capitals, other than economic, that those who migrate to the rural bring to the areas and the communities that they inhabit (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012). This contrasts with the social and cultural benefits in-migrants can absorb, which has been explored more extensively (Heley, 2008; Markham, 2014) albeit not directly from a

counterurbanisation perspective. Thus, it becomes clear there is further work needed to fully understand counterurbanisation. This can be seen further when looking at how counterurbanisation has been somewhat narrowly explored. For example, most of the literature focuses on counterurbanisation from the stance of urban to rural migration with little scholarly attention being paid to either suburban to rural or rural to rural migration. Whilst there have been some attempts to address such omissions (see [Stockdale, 2016](#)) overall there remains scope for more to further illuminate the counterurbanisation literature.

Recently, and in part, due to the covid-19 pandemic and its impact on working patterns, counterurbanisation narratives have seen a global resurgence resulting in renewed academic traction from scholars worldwide (see, for example, [Halfacree, 2023](#); [McManus, 2022](#), [Willets, 2023](#)), this also includes the global south ([Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023](#)). It is this renewed traction which provides the ideal backdrop for this paper. For example, despite this renewed focus there remains research and thus knowledge ‘gaps’, as shown above. One such omission, surrounds service decline, especially in relation to rural pubs and how it is impacting on perceptions and experiences of rural living across different groups including in-migrants.

2.3. The rural idyll and the village pub

Within the works of [Bell \(2006\)](#), [Clope \(1994\)](#), [Heley \(2008\)](#) and [Short \(2006\)](#) cultural representations of the rural are critiqued and unpacked to help explore, interpret, and understand rurality and rural living. Integral to this research turn, named the cultural ‘turn’ is the concept and critique of the ‘rural idyll’ which can be described as a view of rurality and rural living which is based on imagination and ideals, rather than realities, on how the rural should look and how its communities should function ([Bell, 2006](#); [Woods, 2011](#)). Through the lens of the rural idyll social issues such as poverty, isolation, and exclusion are neglected as they are incompatible with and thus spoil this ‘perfected’ construction of rurality ([Clope, 1994](#)). It has been argued that rural idylls are formulated, developed, and propelled by those with affluence and/or power ([Clope, 1994](#); [Bell, 2006](#)). Tourist and marketing literature, for example, of English rural areas often exudes the rural idyll to ‘sell’ the rural as a retreat from the stresses of everyday life. To this end, credibility is afforded to such portrayals leading to narratives being imposed onto rural areas and their communities rather than showing the all-encompassing opportunities and challenges facing rural areas and their communities.

Within constructions of rurality, underpinned by the rural idyll, the village pub is often placed as being a key component ([Clope, 2003](#); [Maye et al., 2005](#)). Here, there are expectations around how a village pub should look and how it should ‘fit’ within its local community (*ibid*). These expectations, however, are often influenced by perfected ideals, underpinned by affluence, which are somewhat, unattainable. Consequently, in some instances leading to differences and contradictions between people’s ideals of what the village pub is and the realities experienced when frequenting ([Markham, 2014](#)). This however does not dissuade some groups from absorbing different capitals to meet their own expectations and aspirations. This can be seen in the work of [Heley \(2008:315\)](#) who examines the ‘New Squirearchy’ defined as [those who make] “apparent efforts to recreate the perceived roles and lifestyle of the archetypal English county gentleman”. For [Heley \(2008\)](#) the village pub provides an open and public space where members of the ‘New Squirearchy’ can use aesthetical props and cultural practices to help them form and sustain their social identity and networks. In this context the village pub acts, for this group, in line with [Bourdieu’s \(1986\)](#) interpretation of capital whereby the social and cultural value of the pub can facilitate further social and cultural capital.

The work of [Heley \(2008\)](#) is important, as it highlights the various ways in which the village pub provides a space where middle class residents, who aspire to live out the perceived lifestyle of the rural gentry, can play out, and develop attachments to various visions

contained with the rural idyll. It therefore becomes possible to see that for those from the middle classes, the village pub can act as a signifier of rurality and enable them to feel like they are able to play out their rural ideals, in which they are integrated and embedded in the rural community. A similar idea is seen within the works of [Hunt and Satterlee \(1986b\)](#), and [Hunt \(1991\)](#) which showed that the village pub, in their study, was used as a space by the middle class to springboard friendships and networks which could then be developed and honed within more intimate settings such as the home.

When looking at pub literature there exists several recent pieces ([Jesudason, 2023](#); [Thurnell-Read, 2020](#); [Singh et al., 2024](#)) however much of this is focussed on pubs within urban or suburban localities. The research that does exist on the village pub tends to be rather dated but illuminating for example, it has shown that these spaces are ones in which women continue to be marginalised in these spaces and that when they do frequent, they need to engage in conservative practices to ensure they are accepted and not scrutinised ([Hunt & Satterlee, 1987](#); [Jennings, 2010](#); [Leyshon, 2005, 2008a, 2008b](#); [Valentine et al. 2008](#); [Whitehead, 1976](#)). Similarly, research by [Hunt and Satterlee \(1986b\)](#) highlighted that age, class and length of residency inequalities and divisions were prevalent within village pubs. Whilst some of these areas such as age have, to a degree, been revisited in recent years ([Fenton, et al., 2022](#)) there has been, with the exception of [Heley \(2008\)](#) and [Markham \(2014\)](#) little contemporary scholarly attention paid to village pubs, in terms of class and/or length of residency. Thus, it becomes clear there remain gaps and thus understanding around village pubs within rural, and counterurbanisation literature.

Whilst there has been little contemporary work specifically on the village pub in England, except for [Markham \(2013, 2014\)](#) in terms of its social and cultural structure and importance the economic importance has continued to be explored. This can be seen within the work of [Bosworth \(2010\)](#), [Markham and Bosworth \(2016\)](#), [Cabras et al. \(2020, p. pp163\)](#) who highlight that village pubs can contribute to local and national economies through a variety of means including employment, commercial transactions, and house prices. This area of research is welcomed since the village pub has traditionally been a neglected aspect of academic attention. However, it can be argued that the continued focus on the economic, has been at the expense of our understanding towards the social and cultural importance of the village pub. Thus, whilst knowledge has developed around village pubs in England it has been rather one sided and focussed on how the village pub is perceived and experienced through an economic and business orientated lens.

2.4. Research focus

From the above review it is clear there remains gaps in knowledge around village pubs, ranging from how it may further inequalities and divisions through to service decline, and how this is impacting on perceptions and experiences of rural living across different groups including in-migrants. This paper goes some way to addressing these gaps through exploring the ways in which the village pub is perceived and experienced through the lens of two groups of residents – longstanding and newcomers. In doing this it explores.

- i) How and why the village pub can reinforce class inequalities.
- ii) How and why the village pub can reinforce and propel rural idylls.
- iii) How and why the village pub can influence and propel counterurbanisation narratives.

3. Research methods

The following analysis and discussions are informed by empirical data collected as part of a grounded theory study which explored how various actors perceive and experience the village pub in rural Lincolnshire ([Markham, 2014](#)). Between 2010 and 2013, 66 in-depth semi

structured interviews took place across 25 different villages within the rural County of Lincolnshire. These interviews were conducted with rural residents as well as with publicans and other local service providers. Participants and villages were selected through theoretical¹ and snowball sampling. Out of the 66 participants 46 were village residents, 6 were local business owners (also village residents but not counted in the 46), 12 were former or at the time of data collection current publicans, one was a CAMRA representative, and one was a representative from a local brewery.

In terms of participant demographics 29 (44%) were female and 37 (56%) were male. 39 self-identified as being longstanding residents whilst 24 described themselves as newcomers. In relation to age many participants (73%) were then aged between 20 and 60. On the demographic of age, it is important to note that Lincolnshire has been witness to an in-migration of older people (especially the coastal areas) and an out-migration of younger people; however, it has tended to have stable population in the age banding 20–64. Linked to this, Lincolnshire has historically been an agricultural county with employment in agriculture and horticulture being key areas of the local economy (Lincolnshire Research Observatory, 2009). As a result, residents have tended to live and work within the local area. In relation to the publicans 6 had experience with freehold pubs, and 6 with leased pubs (either brewery or Pubco). No data was collected regarding the type of pub ownership that existed within the 25 villages where data collection took place, apart from the 12 publicans. During the interviews participants were asked about representations, perceptions and experiences of the village pub and the impact of its decline, in terms of number, on rural communities. The interviews took place in a variety of settings ranging from the participants home through to local village pubs and coffee shops.

In line with a grounded theory approach data collection was guided by the emerging theory (Birks & Mills, 2011) and the study made use of the Glaser (1992), Glaser (1978) approach to data analysis. This involved a process of coding, and constant comparison. The author made use of open, substantive, and theoretical coding. At each stage of coding, the data was constantly compared to identify categories and connections leading to the emergence of a theory. During this process it became clear that there were different groups of residents in terms of length of residency in rural spaces. The different groups of residents were, i) long standing residents; defined as those who self-identified themselves as having a long-standing relationship with the village and/or have integrated into village life. And ii) newcomer residents, defined as residents who self-identified themselves as being new to the village and/or acclimatising to rural life at the time of data collection (see Markham, 2014). Since, this paper is drawing on the data and findings of the original study it is adopting the same definitions in relation to the different groups of residents. However, it must be acknowledged that whilst some of the newcomers will evidently be counterurbanisers in the 'traditional' sense others may not be. For example, it is possible that some newcomer residents may have self-identified themselves as being new to a village but may have previous lived experience of rurality. Here it could be questioned if such residents are counterurbanisers in the 'traditional' sense. Nonetheless, as the data and findings which inform this paper did recognise core distinctions between longstanding and newcomers, of which are central to this paper it is reasonable to adopt the same definitions in relation to the different groups of residents but with recognition of noted issue around self-identification.

The research upon which this paper is based was exploratory in nature, thus it did not aim to claim representativeness, as a result nor does this paper. The novel value of this paper is that it pays closer attention to longstanding residents and newcomers through the lens of class and counterurbanisation. Thus, offering some deeper reflections

than what was previously articulated within the PhD thesis. Since a decade has passed following data collection, it is important to acknowledge that the findings are fitted to this moment in time as opposed to the present moment. As such it can be described as a reflective historical piece, which offers scope for further research to be carried out considering the wider social, political changes that have occurred in recent years such as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Research findings

In this section, the author moves beyond the literature to explore the diverse ways in which the village pub is perceived and experienced by those 'connected' to the countryside. In so doing, it will highlight the different the values society attaches to the village pub and the fluidity of these values. Broadly speaking it can be argued that there are 3 main ways in which the village pub 'adds value' to rural areas and their communities – economically, socially, and culturally (Markham, 2014). These values, however, are not universal in their levels of importance. For example, service providers and different groups of residents attach different levels of importance to each type of value, as will be explored now. For the purposes of this paper more in-depth attention will be paid to the social and cultural values ascribed to village pubs.

4.1. The village pub seen and experienced as 'adding value'

One type of value that village pubs have been recognised as adding, is economic. When it comes to this type of value there also exists a notion, amongst some of service providers and residents interviewed for the research underpinning this paper, that one type of value can be converted into another. In other words, offering and facilitating a high level of social activity can equate to an expansion in economic importance. The reality, however, is not as simple, as the following quote highlights:

"You have to understand a pub isn't just an economic venture, it's also a social one ... pubs by their very nature can enhance residents' social lives and I feel I have a responsibility to adopt some practices such as a book club which result in a higher social return for residents over an economic return for me" (former publican, Heckington, 2010).

The village pub, in part, due to how it has been represented in various mediums including film, television and literature, has become synonymous with social engagement and networking. To this end, it is unsurprising that the village pub has been perceived and experienced by different groups of residents as adding social to villages and their communities (Markham, 2014). In specific relation to the social value attached to the village pub, by residents, there are two broad ways in which this is conceived and conveyed – the lived and the imagined. The former of these tends to equate to the perceptions and experiences of long-standing residents while the latter to those who have migrated to the rural (ibid). The lived experience of the village pub, depending on who you talk to, can provide a realistic picture, a rose-tinted picture, or a mix of both when it comes to the sociability of village pubs. For example, some interviewees who classed themselves as being long standing residents simultaneously acknowledged that whilst they do not use the village pub, they recognise that it can be social lifeline but also exclusionary.

"I don't use the pub very often but some of my friends do; if it was at risk of closure, I would do all I could to help it remain open to ensure my friends and the rest of the pub community didn't lose a social lifeline" (village resident, Thorpe Latimer 2010).

Whilst others spoke about their own experiences of the village pub, and in doing so recognised some of the negative facets that exist or change that has taken place but decided to gloss over these to convey a particular image of the village pub, as is shown with the following

¹ A form of sampling linked to grounded theory in which the emerging themes help guide further data collection.

quotation:

“I tended to sit with the same group of people ... I enjoyed myself ... I still go to the same pub and sometimes I find myself imagining and recreating [in my mind] the experience [of the pub] I had 40 years ago ... The reality [in terms of appearance and ambience] of my local is now very different to how it was back then but let's not talk about that” (village resident, Billingham, 2010).

From this quotation it becomes possible to see that some long-standing residents can hold nostalgic memories of how their pub used to be which may be different to how it *was* or how it *is* today. This is not entirely surprising since memory can work in a complex way. It is not uncommon, for example, for people when they are re-telling events or stories to focus on select aspects of the narrative leading to omissions or a narrowed focussed (Holland & Kensinger, 2010).

The ways in which long standing residents view the social value that village pubs add to villages and their communities can be seen to differ, somewhat, from that of newcomers. Many newcomers tend to base their perceptions and experiences of the village pub and rural living on ideals, which they come to imagine through representations they have come across during their lives through audio, visual and textual means. In this context the village pub acts as a component in helping to construct, cement and propel notions of various versions of the rural idyll, namely socialisation and community togetherness (Short, 2006). Through buying into what can best be described as allegories of rurality newcomers can have heightened expectations around village pubs which they do not go onto to experience as the following quotation highlights:

“When I first moved to this village, I imagined that most residents would use the pub and know everyone else but they don't. It's not the place that I thought it would be” (village resident, Billingham, 2010).

This quotation is important as it becomes possible to see that newcomers can have an image of the village pub and rural living that links closely to the rural idyll, and which can contradict how the village pub is subsequently experienced. This is not to say that the village pub does not contribute to social and community networking. As the work of Thurnell-Read (2020) and Markham (2013; 2014) shows it clearly does but it serves to highlight the types of representations of the village pub that have become linked to the rural idyll.

Irrespective of the different ways the two groups of residents come to equate the village pub with adding social value to villages and their communities there are some similarities between them. Both the nostalgic lived experience and the imagined experience, for example, tend to gloss over or ignore some of the negative social realities of engaging with village pubs and rural living. Whilst acknowledging the village pub has historically been a male space, many interview respondents, noted they see today's village pub as an inclusionary space for all. The reality, however, is different, as is shown in the literature review, and highlighted with the following interview quote:

“I would say there has always been a division [between newcomers and long-standing residents], it just wasn't as obvious as the toff and peasant divide ... When I first moved to the village in the 70s it took a long time to be accepted by and fully embraced into the local pub clan” (village resident, South Kyme, 2011).

Despite such social realities and inequalities there, overall, continues to be a positive narrative ascribed to the village pub by various residents around its social value in terms of its ability to act as a social hub and aid social interaction (Markham, 2014). However, from this discussion it becomes possible to see, that whilst this can be the case, differences and contradictions do exist between the nostalgic lived experience, the imagined experience, and the realities of frequenting village pubs.

Cultural value is another type of importance which has been ascribed to the village pub and is closely linked to the notion that village pubs add social value (Markham, 2014). Here, once again, it is possible to identify

differences between the lived and imagined experience. The lived experience, as the quotation below shows, often places importance on personal connections and how the materiality and aesthetics of the village pub can help develop or enhance these.

“I love the fact that this place holds so much history within its walls, the furniture is so old, it's no different to when my grandfather came here but that's what makes it special knowing that my ancestors sat in the same chairs ...” (village resident, Billingham, 2010).

Reflecting on this quotation it is possible to see that the village pub is seen and experienced by this group of residents as adding cultural value to personal history and memories. This is different to those who have migrated to the rural and identify themselves as being newcomers. For this group, the village pub is often seen as adding cultural value to the idealised rural that they may have brought into. Whilst this romanticism can, in some instances, be experienced the actual village pub experiences for this group of residents, often, does not correspond to how they imagined the village pub to be before moving into the countryside. This is epitomised in the following:

“Very few [village] pubs I've visited since I moved here in 2004 are like I imagined ... rather than the majority of village residents visiting them there has only been a select few and the pubs well they're more dull and uninviting than I thought they would be, I honestly thought all village pubs would have an open fire place and last orders bell but they don't” (village resident, Navenby, 2011).

Despite this romanticism of the village pub not being met, there often remains a deep attachment, amongst newcomers, to the rural ideals they have accrued. This deep attachment itself can also act as a motivator to further develop and drive the romanticised rural idyll.

“Village life has always been an enduring fondness of mine ... When I decided to move to the countryside I looked on the web for my ideal village: small, serene and surrounded by greenery. Eventually I came across it but then I saw its pub was up for sale, I didn't want to move to a village which didn't have one, it wouldn't have been right ... so I decided to come out of retirement, buy, renovate and restore it [the pub] helping to bring the village back to life with services” (former service provider, 2010).

From this quotation it is possible to see that the village pub can stimulate potential or existing newcomers to invest in their local to help ‘change’ it so that it corresponds more closely to their ideals.

For example, the values can also work to undermine one another and thus contribute to the village pub being experienced negatively as can be seen in the following quotation:

“When the pub was commercialised [constantly being rebranded] to reflect the in fashion of the day I stopped going. It lost its local character and personality and rather than being a local it became a corporate identity where villagers could buy a drink from” (village resident, Great Hale, 2010).

Reflecting on this it becomes possible to see that the pursuit, by the service provider, of achieving a higher economic value led to a decline, at least for this resident, in the social and culture value that they attached to the village pub impacting on their decision to frequent. This type of sentiment was shared by several interviewees some of whom noted that changes in their local ranging from name and aesthetic change through to constant tenant/owner change led them to stop frequenting (Markham, 2014). This in turn could impact on the economic sustainability of village pubs and the economic value they add to local economies. Thus, here it becomes evident that the ascribed values to village pubs are fluid and can work both in and against the Bourdieusian (1986) interpretation of capital.

This section has shown that village pubs are seen and experienced by different groups as adding economic, social, and cultural value to villages and their communities. It has also shown however, that different

groups attach different levels of importance to each of the identified values, and that these values are not linear. Rather they are dynamic, and constantly evolving. Consequently, both lived and imagined experiences of the village pub can impact on each other, helping to reinforce, somewhat rather, inaccurate representations. And leading to disparities between ascribed narratives and realities of the village pub and how it fits within villages and their communities. This is important as it allows for an unpacking of how these perceptions and experiences of ‘adding value’ have led to often-inaccurate assumptions regarding the imagery and usage village pubs, which has, in the context of the wider rural idyll, aided counterurbanisation.

4.2. Village pub mythologies, idealised rural living, and potential links to counterurbanisation

The complex nature of disentangling lived and imagined experiences means that is difficult to separate fact from fiction when it comes to the village pub. But it is possible to identify how and why some of the values ascribed to village pubs have helped to propel often inaccurate ideals and unrealistic expectations of the village pub. One such idea is the notion that the village pub, and more broadly the rural, in contrast to the urban, equates to a sedate, tranquil setting exhibiting community togetherness, predominantly amongst ageing customers and residents. This representation is one that has appeared in numerous forms from print and audio through to television and film (see [Buckton, 2005](#); [Porter, 1992](#); [Seymour, 1991](#)). Linked to the ‘rural idyll’ this representation has become synonymous with rural living, but as this problematic, not least when looking at the village pub.

There are clear distinctions to be made between long-standing residents and newcomers when talking about the village pub. The latter group, as the below quotation shows, tend to see the village pub as a place to play out and cement their own ideals around rurality and rural living.

“We specifically chose to live in this village because it had the pub, we hardly use it but it’s nice to see every time we ... leave the village ... I don’t want it [the pub] to close but if it did, I would [want the building] to look like a pub ... We wouldn’t have chosen to live in a village which didn’t have a pub or shop, it’s a sign that the village is in decay ...” (village resident, Heckington, 2010).

In this context the village pub can be seen as reinforcing various representations of the rural idyll including the romantic visions in which village services, community togetherness and harmony predominate, and are seen as vital components of rural living.² Here, the village pub offers newcomers reassurance that the village is a ‘proper’ village as well as a space where their ideas around community togetherness can be played out. This in turn helps to further propel the rural idyll and thus inaccuracies around the village pub, and rural living.

From this it is possible to see how and why newcomers tend to perceive and want to experience the village pub as adding social and cultural value; for example, it enables them to extend their own social and cultural capitals around rurality and rural living. This idea can be seen further with the following quotation:

“When we [husband and wife] go to the [village] pub we tend to mingle with others who, like us, are fresh to the village ... I tend to go off and play a game of darts with men and my wife sits and enjoys a glass of vino with the ladies” (village resident, North Kyme, 2011).

The reality of rural living is, however, as highlighted throughout this paper is much more complex than this. Implicitly this quote, along with the work of [Hunt and Satterlee \(1986a\)](#) and [Bell \(1994\)](#), further highlights that within rural pub spaces social divides exist and residents tend

to socialise with others who they identify with in terms of class, gender, and length of residency. Whilst newcomers, as in the above quote, can subconsciously allude to some of these social divisions within the village pub, and more broadly rural spaces they tend to overlook them or exaggerate the positives of rural living to their friends ([Markham, 2014](#)). As such this group are invertedly helping to reinforce the rural idyll. And in doing so are helping to propel imageries around village pubs and rural living. Many of which are not experienced either by themselves or by others when they move into the rural. Thus, impacting on how the village pub can be perceived and experienced for this group of residents.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reflections

When reflecting on the above findings and in particular a few of the interview quotations there are several issues that deserve some further analytical attention. For example, longstanding residents and why they do not want to talk about the differences between their experiences of the village pub over time. Whilst this could be that they do not like the changes made to their local pub or village in response to wider economic, and social changes it could also be linked to residents wanting to hold onto their memories and/or their own versions of the rural idyll. Longstanding residents whilst having a nostalgic view to the village pub can also be influenced by rural idylls and as a result develop their own narratives which inadvertently differ from the realities of village pub going. In other words, the experiences of longstanding residents can be influenced by their own experiences and past versions of the rural idyll, which can then further rural idylls, and impact further on the lived experience. Building on this, questions can be raised in relation to inclusion and exclusion of village pub spaces in terms of residency.

Historically, and as outlined in the literature review, pubs have been shown to be places of both in and exclusion. And it could be argued that this exclusion has been extended to the demographic of length of residency. For example, it maybe that the renovations of village pubs over the past half century, as result of wider economic and political changes including ownership, have led to the memories and past versions of rural idylls for longstanding residents being eroded leading them to frequent less often. Linked to this, research has shown that villages which have more than one pub have tended to see longstanding residents migrate to one of the pubs and newcomers to the other ([Hunt & Satterlee, 1986a; 1986b](#)). Since there has been a decline in the number of pubs in villages, including those within the villages featured in [Markham’s \(2014\)](#) research it could be proposed that this decline in number has led to more residents frequenting the one or two remaining pubs in their village. This may help offer some indications of context for some of the above quotes. For example, it may be that longstanding residents do not want to frequent the village pub they once viewed as the newcomers pub. Similarly, it may take time for newcomers to become embedded into a village pub where longstanding residents have overwhelmingly frequented. Here, it may be that they do not want to invest the time and energy needed to become embedded. For as the work of [Leyshon \(2008a\)](#) and [Heley \(2008\)](#) shows there is process in which residents partake to be accepted into village pub spaces.

Reflecting on the quotations when specifically considering class and the middle class gaze it becomes apparent, that there is a disconnect between the imagined and realities of the village pub. However, the extent of this disconnect can be questioned. For example, there has been a decline in the number and the usage of village pubs over time, and it could be argued that this is linked to exclusion, in which newcomers have displaced longstanding residents. The work of [Heley \(2008\)](#) can once again be drawn upon here. Within his work it is shown how the middle class make use of the village pub to help them develop, sustain, or propel their aspirations to live out the perceived lifestyle of the rural gentry (*ibid*). Thus, it could be argued that less affluent longstanding residents may not have the means to engage in such activities, and as a

² For further discussions around rural idylls and their representations see [Somerville and Bosworth \(2013\)](#).

result have chosen not to frequent or feel they cannot frequent due to lack of materiality.

The middle-class gaze of the rural and the role the village pub plays in this rural ideal offers a further way to explore the often, contradictory nature of the rural idyll. For example, one of the participant quotations indicated that whilst they hardly use their local village pub, they did not want to see the village decay aesthetically, which included the closure of the pub. This itself is rather enlightening. For example, it highlights they do not want to see their village decline as it would spoil their ideals around rural living. But they themselves maybe contributing to such a decline, for example, by hardly using the village pub. This is important as it highlights not only the power of the rural idyll but also the contradictions that often exist amongst those who migrate to the rural with aspirations influenced by inaccurate representations.

It is important to note that not all newcomers will be affluent or aspire to the idealised narratives of rural living. Those who have migrated from other rural areas, or to be closer to existing friends and family, for example, may have a different interpretation of rural living. This could be informed by their own past experiences or their social class. This is an area that has yet to be fully explored but is important as it offers a further way to explore and develop existing counterurbanisation literature.

5.2. Application and relevance of the theoretical framework

The thesis upon which this paper is based, and this paper through its exploration of a more critical reflection on the interviews in terms of class and counterurbanisation has highlighted that the social and cultural values discussed in relation to the village pub can 'work' in a manner like that of the Bourdieusian (1986) interpretation of capital. In this manner economic, social and/or cultural value can lead to further social and cultural value for those migrating to the rural. However, as shown in the original thesis, and furthered by this paper that the values discussed can also work in the opposite manner when it comes to the village pub. In other words, the social and cultural value of the village pub for longstanding residents may be curtailed because of newcomer's ideals and behaviours. This is important as it shows the values are not one directional and may result in furthering inequalities in rural spaces, including the village pub. Additionally, it highlights that such a theoretical framework offers a way in which to explore how the social and cultural capital of those who migrate to the rural comes to bear on the areas and communities they inhabit. Thus, offering a way to address an identified gap outlined within the counterurbanisation section of this paper's literature review.

6. Conclusions

This paper has moved beyond looking at the village pub simply as a social space by using a cultural lens to unpack how the village pub is perceived and experienced by different groups of residents. Thus, it has explored some of the ways in which these perceptions and experiences are conceived, cemented, and re-told. Through drawing on empirical data this paper has shown that the village pub is seen and experienced as adding value of different kinds and that different groups namely long-standing and newcomer residents, attach different levels of importance to these kinds of value. Whilst these values can work in a similar manner to Bourdieu's interpretation as capital, they can also work to undermine one another. Thus, impacting on how village pubs are seen and experienced by both those with lived experience of the rural, and those who have migrated to the countryside.

The village pub, in contrast, to the rural idyll can be a place of isolation and exclusion. Yet, both the nostalgic lived and the imagined experience, albeit in different ways, fail to fully acknowledge this. As such some residents, when discussing the village pub, can and do feed into versions of the rural idyll, and in doing so help propel inaccuracies around how the village pub is perceived and experienced by different

groups.

The ways in which the village pub is perceived and experienced across different groups is complex. Broadly speaking this paper has shown that different groups of residents namely long-standing residents and newcomers see and experience the village pub based on their interpretation of how it should look and function. These interpretations, however, do not always match the realities of either the past or the present. As such some of the realities of the village pub in terms of its aesthetics and community role along with the negatives around frequenting the village pub are ignored or glossed over. This helps to propel inaccurate representations and unrealistic expectations of the village pub. In turn such images become ingrained within various versions of the rural idyll and in doing so help to further propel inaccuracies leading to misrepresentations of the village pub, and more broadly rural living. This is not to say that the village pub does not play an important role across the lives of different rural residents; it very clearly does. But what this paper also highlights that the importance of the village pub goes beyond being part of the rural idyll. To the extent that it acts for some as a signifier and something they actively reflect on when they are considering migrating to the countryside. Thus, it becomes clear that the village pub plays a much wider role culturally in society than is often depicted. It also offers a different lens when exploring and discussing counterurbanisation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Claire Markham: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None

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