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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Social Psychological Perspectives on Islandness: Identities, Vulnerabilities and Precarities

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Although there are many widely perceived attractions to living on a small island, island life is not without its challenges. The physical aspects of these are well rehearsed. The psychological ones, less so. Drawing on social psychological theories, we analyse the experience of living on small islands, with a focus on two small British islands. Data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork, involving observations and interviews with small island inhabitants. We found a range of factors impacting them psychologically, including several that suggest identity and social identity theories may provide a useful psychological lens for understanding these communities. There were also other psychological features identified that suggest a self-perception of vulnerability. These were reflected in concerns around the precarity of employment, but also evident in islanders' discourses around health (both physical and mental). These findings echo previous authors' assertions concerning the existence of an 'island psychology' evident in the experiences of island residents, but also contribute to discussions around its origins and mechanisms of influence - which we argue have been hitherto, relatively atheoretical. Importantly, a better understanding of island experience, and the relevant theoretical frameworks, can assist in supporting the wellbeing of islanders and the sustainability of their communities.

Introduction

There are specific conditions of island living that may be significant in their psychological impact on individual islanders and the group psychology of island communities (Baldacchino, 2020a; Conkling, 2007). By applying a social psychological lens to the experience of small island life, and drawing on related theoretical frameworks, we attempt to examine *how* the island environment may psychologically impact the individual island resident and their interpersonal relationships. A key rationale for asking this question is to understand what if any implications there may be for maintaining the sustainability of small islands in terms of democratic, social and societal functioning - as well as for the psychological wellbeing of islanders.

If, as some islanders maintain, there is something particular about islands and islanders, this inevitably prompts the social scientist to ask what this 'islandness' is? From a specifically psychological perspective, we might also ask whether it exerts cognitive and behavioural influence, and how? To some extent

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the work of Putz (1984) and Conkling (2007) provide a partial description of the 'what' in their descriptions of 'islandness'. However, they stop short of describing theoretical models accounting for its emergence or influence. Furthermore, Conkling (2007) acknowledges that 'islandness' is a "construct of the mind" (p. 192) but omits to articulate precisely what psychological architecture or theoretical models might be relevant to explaining the construction (or its influence). In perhaps the most recent articulation of the 'psychology of islandness' Baldacchino (2020a) explains that islandness can "contour and nudge behaviours and systems" (p. 8). However, despite progressing the discussion significantly beyond the work of Putz and Conkling, the constructs, mechanisms, and theoretical underpinnings of Baldacchino's 'behavioural nudges' remain open to speculation and debate. Drawing on the foundations provided by the aforementioned authors, we began by asking whether an 'island mentality' might be empirically identifiable in the discourse and behaviour of islanders. Furthermore, if such a mindset were discernible within these discourses and behaviours, might it provide clues as to the genesis of 'islandness' and any theoretical mechanisms by which it exerts psychological influence?

The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in two British island locations in 2019, and was initially conceived to investigate the long-term viability of communities on (very) small islands (i.e., less than 5000 permanent residents). The fieldwork grew from the initial brief to encapsulate a range of potential concerns amongst islanders, including an exploration of health and mental wellbeing in small island communities, but also islanders' response to the challenges of small island living, and identifying the resources available to them. Our initial thesis was that several social psychological models might prove to be relevant and usefully applied to island communities, including identity theory (Burke, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2000) and social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979). While the application of these models is not necessarily a unique or novel academic perspective on island living (Mohamad & Hamzah, 2015), its application as a lens through which to explore the phenomenological account of islanders' response to challenges (and particularly in the small island context) does represent an extension of the existing literature. Furthermore, it offers a useful lens through which to view island community sustainability.

A key premise of the work reported herein, is that there is no reason to assume that the psychological processes set out by identity and social identity theory (SIT) should not be readily and appropriately applied to small island populations. Indeed, if as others have previously observed (e.g., Conkling, 2007), community affiliations are particularly strong on islands, then this prompts us to ask whether associated activation of islander identity, might occur even more readily on smaller islands. In other words, are there features of the small island context which may be particularly potent activators of both intra- and interpersonal psychological dynamics? The rationale for this question is also informed by a social psychological theoretical assertion that social dynamics and identity are influenced by the size and composition of

groups, but also the environment (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Place identity is conceptualised as "a sub structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives" (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59). Although Proshansky wrote specifically about the idea of an urban identity, we see no reason why the same processes should not correlate to a non-urban environment. Indeed, the varied topographical features of island living and the extent to which they impact on the day-to-day experience of islanders seems ripe for linking to self and social identity. This is likely to be particularly the case on very small islands, where the combined factors of littorality, boundedness and remoteness (Kelman, 2018) impact on every facet of life.

Every island setting is, of course, unique. Each will have its own history, environment and social and cultural traditions. Spatial factors impact on this and indeed in an island context, both the space on the island and its relative distance from other islands/mainlands (Baldacchino, 2020b) has considerable bearing. We make no assumption that there is likely to be a universality of island experience, social dynamic or identity. That said, there do seem to be similarities in the formation of island identity that are worthy of greater scrutiny (Conkling, 2007), and several questions remain concerning its emergence, and the influence it exerts. The social psychological lens offered by the theoretical frameworks outlined above can help to make sense of intra- and interpersonal stress and tensions. However, they can also account for the social affiliations and identity that can provide social capital and protective factors against individual and community hardships e.g., in the case of emergencies (Drury et al., 2009; Ntontis et al., 2018, 2021). With that in mind, we might expect social identity processes to offer as many benefits to island communities as they do risks (albeit costs and benefits may be magnified). Indeed, identity might serve to promote resilience in response to hardship, but any hardships collectively experienced by islanders, might also further strengthen identity (Ntontis et al., 2018). The current study specifically sought to explore a broad range of psychological experience of island life.

In summary, several previous authors have proposed a psychological and/ or behavioural profile of islanders (sometimes referred to as 'islandness'). However, there are a number of questions arising concerning how we might account for the emergence of this 'islandness', or what its implications might be. Potentially useful theoretical perspectives in response to these questions are offered by social psychology, which suggest that island environments might activate identities and social affiliations that are relatively unique and contribute to the formation of this construct of 'islandness'. If this were the case, and islander identity is a component of islandness, then we would expect it to provide a source of both social capital and resource, but also potentially highly visible stress and division within and between groups. Importantly, an understanding of both benefits and costs associated with island identity have implications for our understanding of resilience and risks to the sustainability of island communities. With that in mind, the authors set out to explore how

the island mindset or 'islandness' described by previous authors might manifest in thought and behaviour, and how this manifestation might illuminate its origins and influence when viewed through a social psychological theoretical lens.

Methods

Study Sites

As we have discussed elsewhere (Matheson et al., 2020), we chose to anonymise our islands, although the islands are termed 'A' and 'B' for clarity. Like many rural communities, small island communities can serve to incubate talk and speculation in a way that can be damaging to those wishing to speak openly or to challenge orthodoxies. Attempts by other researchers (Taylor & Land, 2014; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011) to anonymise participants individually or communities in part have not always been successful, and so, although there are disadvantages to this approach, we have opted not to disclose the islands on which we conducted our research (Burholt et al., 2013). That said, a degree of context is useful in situating the research. We do not wish to contend that all islands are comparable or that even all the islands off the coast of Britain share the same interests and issues. However, the islands which we visited have a number of similarities. They were well situated in the realm of the *very* small, both with populations of less than 5000. They have varied populations of both resident islanders and seasonal visitors, and economies that are very much dependent on tourism. A particular reason for the desire for anonymity amongst our participants was the nature of the tourist industry on the islands, with the effect that they are, to an extent, run as 'company towns', where one or a small number of people/companies manage accommodation, food, shops and employment, as well as transport to and from the island. As such, participants were concerned that either painting a less than idyllic picture of the island would negatively impact on tourist numbers, or, more tangibly, that it could lose them their jobs.

In terms of access, the islands are 'onshore' in that they are easily accessed from the mainland. However, they are variously accessed at different times of year, and this presents a number of logistical issues, as well as psychological ones, for island residents. Whereas the summer months see access via boats, which are cheap, frequent and allow for carrying more baggage, the winter/off tourist season months see access primarily by air which is considerably more expensive, less frequent and more restrictive. For reasons of expedience, we accessed the islands by air on our research visits. However, the research team had previous experience of travelling to one of the islands by boat, and so we were able to reflect on this difference.

The islands both trade on a bucolic view of island living, which, given the beauty of their natural environments, is broadly justified. They present an idea of an unchanged, traditional destination, without many of the pressures of the day to day experienced by mainland communities. They promote a slower pace of life, a greater engagement with nature, and a freedom from the interference of traffic, noise and pollution, both as a tourist destination and as a way of

life. Whilst inequality clearly exists it does not fit with the island narrative of an idyll, and this presents a number of problems for those adversely affected, as well as potentially limiting the tourist offer to appeal to those who conform to, or appreciate the view of, an old fashioned, monocultural Britain. It also causes problems for residents with a scarcity of housing stock, as much housing is used for the holiday rental market – a situation exacerbated by the nature of local land ownership, where few (or one) landowners hold much of the property.

A differing range of services are available on the islands. One has very little provision (really just a shop and a pub); the other is quite well resourced, including schools, medical provision and a range of mainstream public sector services. However, these are not all-encompassing, so for example there is a lack of specialist medical care or dentistry, no tertiary education and limited scope for employment. Needless to say, the gaps in key provisions impact some residents more than others, and at particular life stages (for example, during pregnancy). Connectivity to the mainland is also problematic, with slow internet access, and the potential for services to be cut off completely during storms.

Data Collection

Using an immersive, qualitative approach we set out to explore the psychological impact of living on very small islands, whether there was an alleged island 'mindset', and to what extent island factors impacted on this. As with much research (Bates et al., 2019), we started with desk-based work, reading up on our island locations, for example by reviewing local authority plans for them, and their own community consultations to ensure the areas we were concerned with were also pertinent to residents. We also conducted telephone conversations with contacts from small island communities which allowed us to refine our questions and approaches.

We visited two islands off the British coast. Island A was visited for two separate weeks in the spring of 2019 and then a two week follow up in the summer of 2019. Island B was visited for a week in the spring of 2019. One of the researchers had already spent a considerable time on island A and knew it well, as well as being well known to a number of the residents. The other researcher was new to both island locations.

Our research took an immersive approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Robson, 2002) where we based ourselves on the islands, engaging as much as possible in island living, as well as organising interviews with participants. This had a number of benefits. It enabled us to see the ebb and flow of 'island time' and the way in which that dovetails with different transport options, presenting a slightly different rhythm of life to that in a well-connected mainland community. It also enabled us to experience the all-encompassing, visceral nature of island living where landscape (Nimführ & Otto, 2020) and elements (Souhami, 2022) are so integral to life. Crucially, it also supported us to forge connections with residents, to talk to them informally about their work (and ours) and to build trust so that they would see benefit in

participating in our research through interviews. In some instances, this meant joining in with activities, whether helping repair a wall, changing sheets in a rental property, sea swimming, or clearing breakfast in a bed and breakfast. There is often an invisible wall (Everett, 2008) separating tourist/visitor activity from resident activity; so, our willingness to join in with some menial or routine tasks granted us the privilege of momentarily bridging the gap between tourist space and the residential one (Angrosino, 2008).

In the two periods of field work, we interviewed over 20 participants, each of whom had a range of island experience, from being newer residents, frequent visitors or long-standing residents. As is reflected in the results, below, some of our participants had also lived for varying periods of time on other islands. None of our participants were born on the islands we researched (partly due to the lack of any current 'native' born residents on Island A). However, some were married to native islanders, had had their own children there, or had lived there for decades. We also interviewed several people who had previously lived on one of the two islands.

Each interview started with an introduction of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and appropriate formalities, and then generally covered what had brought the participant to the island in the first place, how long they had been there and what their role (or roles) were. Whilst this was useful for pleasantries and for setting the participants at ease, it still yielded important data for us about the often life changing decisions that had brought participants to their current island home. Interview questions explored ideas of islandness, what makes people stay (or leave), the functioning of the community and way in which people come together. We also asked about landscape/island-scape factors, the particularity of the environment, and push/pull factors from the island/mainland. When conducted indoors and wherever practicable, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Some interviews were undertaken at participants' request during limited opportunities to accompany them while they worked. On these occasions, recording was not possible and field notes were collected. Field diaries were also used, and where two researchers were present, findings were discussed daily through walking debriefs (Edensor, 2000; Ingold, 2004), and, more conventionally, dinner.

Finally, we would like to note as part of our methodology, our positionality in relation to this research. As has previously been noted by other island studies scholars, the non-islander researcher inhabits a difficult space. Baldacchino (2008) articulated the issue very clearly when he observed that island studies are frequently "not by, with or for islanders but of them" (p. 37). This challenges the non-islander researcher to reflect on our abilities and responsibilities when researching those living on islands – particularly when we ourselves are not islanders. In response, we explicitly acknowledge our subjectivity, but also responsibility, as non-islander researchers. However, we do assert that we have sought to act as 'affiliates and allies' (Stratford, 2015) who have remained engaged with our own position in relation to the researched (Grydehøj, 2017).

Indeed, this positionality, and our allyship with our participants played a significant part in our decision to anonymise the islands and islanders we worked with.

Data Analysis

On returning from the fieldwork, we transcribed our recorded interviews and used the NVIVO software package to analyse them using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was specifically chosen as it offers researchers a flexible and pragmatic approach to coding and analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This analysis resulted in themes and data that are accessible to a wide range of audiences. Data were approached inductively, considering each interviewee's perspective individually as well as considering the context within which each perspective developed. This was achieved via a process of data familiarisation and systematic coding of each transcript in turn. The analysis then shifted to looking to identify themes across the corpus of data. Given that psychological experience was a focus of the enquiry, semantic coding and then subsequently latent coding was undertaken. A follow up period of fieldwork on Island A allowed for discussions with participants, and a sense checking of both semantic and latent codes. After the generation of initial themes an iterative process of reviewing transcripts again, and triangulating with field notes, commenced. This provided an opportunity to identify the presence of some themes across multiple interviews and sources of data, and then refine and name them as a research team. During these discussions we were able to test their coherence, and consider the quotes which best illustrated them, in readiness for reporting.

Analysis & Discussion

Having covered a variety of topics in our interviews, inevitably our initial themes were themselves wide ranging and encompassed a number of areas that are well rehearsed in the island studies literature. These included, resource scarcity, tensions within the community, crossing from the mainland to the island, and the 'islandscape' (Nimführ & Otto, 2020). In this paper, we particularly wanted to focus on the psychological aspects of island living and their impact, which we found to be represented frequently in the corpus of data. We focus on three specific themes that were particularly pertinent to the psychological experience of our participants, and these are presented and discussed below.

Theme 1: Newcomers: The Psychological Strain of their Arrival but also Departure

Island communities are made up of a number of different groups of people. These might include those born on the island (native islanders), long standing residents (who may be lucky enough to be termed 'islanders' by virtue of length of residence, or because they are married to a native islander), newer residents (incomers), visitors, and tourists/day trippers. Our analysis found evidence that, participants referred to those with whom they interacted according to a

form of taxonomy, as might be predicted by SIT. Furthermore, and equally predictably, the differing interests of these groups had the potential to be a source of tension within the community.

In keeping with social identity theory, the regular arrival of new people (as was found to be common on both Island A and B), is likely to precipitate a process of defining and re-defining the 'in-group' and 'out-group'. Social identity theory predicts that the cues created by regular new arrivals will, particularly in small communities, trigger increasing levels of ethnocentrism resulting in the development of criteria which are then deployed to categorise, include or exclude people (Guy et al., 2000). This was evident in our data, which identified islanders' tendency to appraise newcomers according to criteria that, to them, signalled their ability to integrate into the community. Key to that was the perception about 'doing a winter', which was seen as something which marked you out as a committed (new) islander, as was an enthusiasm for 'getting involved' and contributing to the community. We found evidence that newcomers were very aware of these criteria and a process by which they were being appraised. As two of our participants explained:

> Kirsty: [You're accepted] as long as you're prepared to be a part of the community.
>
> Dave: [emphatic] yes!
>
> K: I think there's more resentment to the second home owners, people who don't live here, don't contribute to the community. But obviously we've only been here a few months.
>
> Researcher: and what ways do you, do people, find to contribute to the community?
>
> D: Goodness, what am I not involved in now?
>
> K: I mean D has always been the one out of the two of us who'll get involved. Like you enjoy sport coaching. Here he does rugby, and he helps the running club.
>
> [Kirsty and Dave, Island B]

In the context of appraisal criteria which valued contribution and community engagement, this may ironically be particularly challenging to live up to for newer arrivals to small islands. We found that a number of newer residents on our study islands, especially those moving for work (rather than for retirement or lifestyle reasons) were inherently mobile and accustomed to transient ways of living. Amongst our participants on both islands we found evidence that the move to the island was part of a relatively transient view of residence, or a more 'nomadic' mindset. This was illustrated by a pattern of

regular moves, and spur of the moment decisions we found regularly amongst our participants. For these residents, an ongoing engagement in the community was not necessarily an important factor in their relocation.

> It's a total wildcard, romantic story, but I'm pretty impulsive. I moved my whole life to a little island after 8 days here. I married someone after a year of chatting [in the Harbour]. I just get that feeling when something is right, I just do it.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]

There were also implications for those who stayed when other people, especially professionals, moved on - making partnership working an ongoing challenge. One possible factor driving the appraisal system and need for newcomers to evidence their commitment to community engagement that we observed was the psychological effect of transience on those longer-term residents. Affective and pragmatic costs to those who stay as others come and go may instil a form of psychological self-protection, and inevitably create a higher bar of appraisal for newcomers to meet on a small island.

> It's a nightmare because you're constantly rebuilding your professional relationships. So, since I've been here in 4 years we've had 4 head teachers, 3 police sergeants, 6 police constables, 3 GPs, 2 midwives. So, you're constantly rebuilding that partnership working.
>
> [Nicola, Island B]

Perhaps in contrast to traditional social identity perspectives, we found that it was not always islanders seeking to defend their island life against the 'out group' visitors. Instead, longer standing members of island communities were frequently observed to be more progressive than newcomers. What we found was a tension whereby a lot of newer residents had moved from mainland environments in search of 'traditional' community, and brought with them some quite fixed views as to what that might look like. More established, and 'native' islanders were often keener to embrace progress and change, perhaps having been more sensitised to the link between long-term viability of the island enmeshed and its ability to evolve to meet the times. By the very nature of their arrival, incomers had the effect of diluting the very community that they were aiming to join, despite yearning for what they perceived as 'island life'.

Another observed tension around group dynamics arose because the economic viability of the islands depends, to an extent, on the arrival of newcomers. Particularly on Island B the viability of the island was dependent on the ability of newcomers to start and sustain businesses, although this can then impact on the capacity of native islanders to do so where incomes are low and property prices are high. The threat to group affiliation posed by this points to the likelihood of such tensions arising in this context when viewed

through the lens of SIT, but also Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1958). We argue that is perhaps particularly likely in environments such as small islands, where resources e.g. property or a client base are finite. This is summarised by Kirsty, who had moved recently to island B to run a B&B:

> The reality is, the Island wouldn't survive without people coming in. Many people who were born here are on relatively low incomes, so they find it difficult to get on the property ladder. So, for example a property like this [a Bed and Breakfast], without someone coming in from the mainland, there would be a very small pool of people who were Island born who would be able to afford to buy a business like this and take it over.
>
> [Kirsty, Island B]

Whilst the islands under consideration also depend economically on an 'out group' (their visitors), the visitors were in some cases seen as a source of some of the problems. For example, around the 'performance' of island identity and the need to be 'on' the whole time:

> There's a lot of bitching and back biting that goes on in the island community that you don't see when you're here on holiday. Everybody is nice to tourists, and it's all very chilled and relaxed, but actually, you've got quite a fragile community under that. And totally dependent on tourists. And some of them quite forget that they are dependent on tourists. They can be a bit grumpy, and you have to remind them that without the tourists, you wouldn't have a community here.
>
> [Nicola, Island B]

Again, in keeping with social identity theory, these negative appraisals of tourists (as 'outsiders') are inevitable, and are likely to be a source of negative affect (Key & Pillai, 2006). This is also picked up below (in Island A) as a source of stress and anxiety for island residents. However, there were also tensions apparent on the islands during the quieter winter months, when the islands are essentially 'closed' to visitors. In these instances, it seems that visitors momentarily diversify the resident community, providing both distraction through work, and further options for socialising. As Mitch (a resident of Island A) says about the winter months: "Sometimes it's 'I can't wait 'til winter' but after the first week 'I can't wait until the visitors are back again'. It's different times."

Despite often having a reputation as very static (indeed, insular) communities, island communities are made up of those who have come from afar, whether recently or several generations ago. This gives a degree of contradiction to some of the identity claims made by a number of residents as 'true' islanders. As Lisa says:

> I was really struck actually how, for a small place, how pleased people were to see you, whereas I've been to lots of small rural communities, and I've noticed in some places, you go into the pub and you get looks. And I think a lot of that is to do with sea faring. You know, just getting people washing up randomly, from all over the place.
>
> [Lisa, Island B]

This makes an important distinction between island and other rural communities, where the population may have been more static. However, some islanders may take a more robust approach to the maintenance of the status quo:

> ...and that can manifest itself in many different ways. You can get quite reactionary people, the traditionalists, like the Stone Kicking Society, who go around kicking over the stone towers that tourists make because it's taken millions of years for the stones to be arranged where they are and blah blah blah and they get quite militant.
>
> [Ben and Sam, Island B]

As such, we found that there was a complicated relationship between traditional identity, and the transient visitors needed for island communities to develop and flourish. This is very much borne out by the literature (King, 2009), which demonstrates the ways in which islands have been way points throughout their existence, offering temporary haven to those from afar. However, for their long-term viability, island communities need to find ways to sustain and govern themselves and for residents to put down roots, especially in communities with shrinking populations, for example certain islands in Scotland (Grydehøj, 2008) A response to this can be found through social identity theory, whereby island identity is quickly and quite neatly formed by those residents who pass over from visitor/tourist to resident/islander. Social identity theories suggest that membership of the group is a necessary and sufficient condition for social identity to establish itself within self-concept (Turner, 2010). The very act of becoming an islander is, then, sufficient for new islanders to consider themselves thus, especially in contrast to mainlanders.

Theme 2: Dependencies, Vulnerabilities, Precarities and their Associated Psychological Costs

There is a well-worn trope in island studies that islanders are 'resilient' and adept at turning their hands to anything (Hay, 2013). Putz referred to this as 'handiness' in his description of islandness (Putz, 1984). This is in part, of course, necessity. When shops, professionals or other resources are a boat or plane ride away, making do or learning how are often the best options. However, as with the best tropes, the reality is less straightforward. While in

places our data reflected this independent and resilient perception of self and identity, our participants also spoke of a sensitisation to their own dependence on external support, and an associated sense of vulnerability that this provoked. As presented below, the contribution of this to island identity may provide a psychological response that suggests a potential for hyper-sensitisation and an associated over-assessment of risk – arguably indicative of a potential lack of psychological resilience.

Although islanders might often be viewed in literature, media and the mind of the infrequent tourist visitor as independent and resilient, there is also often a considerable infrastructure underpinning this. We found our participants to be acutely aware of their dependence on this infrastructure in a way that mainlanders rarely have cause to consider. This was arguably exposed during the recent Coronavirus pandemic (Scholz et al., 2022). For example, on Island B, a resident commented that they had never lived anywhere so dependent on public services, for example, through the considerable public subsidy for the water supply.

> I think it's over-stated here. I think locals, people, talk about the resilience and the self-reliance, but I think that's the same anywhere. Shaun the electrician will say we're more reliant on the national infrastructure than anywhere else in Britain. We're not in any way independent or in any way self-sufficient. We're utterly reliant
>
> [Ben, Island B]

Island living presents reminders and realities of dependence, for example as we found during our fieldwork when water supplies run low, or electricity is deliberately switched off for pre-planned periods every 24 hours for weeks, and sometimes months.

> I think it's a narrative that visitors want to project [about resilience]. There's a romantic notion, that this is how the island has evolved. But what you do have, especially in the winter, there are some really extreme sacrifices that you choose to make to live here.
>
> [Sam, Island B]

These quotes provide insights into a sense of vulnerability to physical challenges, but islanders are also renowned for a degree of mental resilience, and an ability to weather storms both literal, but also metaphorical. This seems very bound up with the idea of an old fashioned, no-nonsense approach to life which is perhaps a direct attack on new-fangled political correctness, from which people seek refuge on islands that hark back to a simpler time (Grydehøj & Hayward, 2011). However, as we have seen above, this does not necessarily represent the lived experience of many islanders, for a variety of reasons. Jilly (a resident of Island B) illustrated this in her reflection that: "people here

don't have a great deal of resilience, and they make small things really big, quite quickly." Jilly goes on to talk about the degree of 'catastrophising' that goes on, particularly amongst parents, and their ability to lose perspective, for example, when a social services referral was made about a teenager who had chosen not to wear their coat to school. If Jilly's perception of limited resilience and increased catastrophisation were found to be objectively representative of smaller island communities, then this may arguably be a product of the reduced reference points relative to most mainland communities. With reduced populations and less contact with the world of the mainland, comes less exposure to incidents of real risk, and therefore a response that may be calibrated differently to the larger communities of the mainland. A number of theorists have pointed to the impact of narrower cultural contexts on identity and the resulting appraisal of, and responses to, risk (e.g., Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983).

Beyond participants' perceived vulnerabilities associated with social and physical aspects of island life and their associated psychological response, islanders also pointed to perceived economic precarities associated with employment. Whilst many communities experience precarity around work (Cooke & Petersen, 2019), and especially in rural and/or tourist areas with its seasonality, this is particularly acute in island communities where a slightly longer commute is just not possible. This leads to a variety of factors that seem to create acute stress in a number of participants who do several jobs, many of which are menial or low skilled, and none of which is enough, alone, to provide a viable income. This is compounded by the short and intense tourist season, so that the year's income often needs to be earned in six months – and which can lead to periods of concern and anxiety over work, punctuated by periods of high stress.

> It's much busier, and there's a lot of strain on people to make a living for that short period of time. And you see that people are very busy. Most people have more than one job. And you can see people getting more stressed for that period of time.
>
> [Nicola, Island B]
>
> Yes, everyone works, and almost everyone is in the tourist industry. And this time of year, everyone is flat out doing 2 or 3 jobs, because come October it'll all ease off.
>
> [David, Island B]

A similar, but slightly different issue is that, because of a lack of professionals, people who are recruited to do one job often end up taking on roles that would not normally fall within their remit. As George says:

> I think the realities of living on an island, both economic and kind of socially can be quite difficult, quite challenging. And especially if you have a job like mine, my job has progressed over

> time, the longer I've been here the more I've taken on, the more responsibilities, partly because of austerity measures, they've had to cut back on staff, but it's also partly because of the longer you're here, you know the more capable you are, the more gets chucked your way. It seems to be there's a pattern.
>
> [George, Island B]

In contrast with George's experience on Island B, the pressures on residents of Island A tended not to involve taking on multiple roles in the same way. This was perhaps due to its less formal infrastructure. However, there were still considerable demands on their time, and periods of high stress with associated deleterious consequences:

> I think the structure in the summer is really full on. It's really challenging. And at the start, everyone is really excited about it, and you can see people getting more and more worn down as it goes on, and I think that's a bit of a problem.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]

There is also the issue of under-employment on Island A, and the difficulty of finding roles for both halves of a couple. As such, one person may come to take up a skilled role (such as a chef), leaving the partner to take on unskilled work (such as bar work or housekeeping) for which they are over qualified and do not find rewarding (notes from fieldwork diary). For some people, this is a price they are willing to pay to 'live where I used to come on holiday' (Phil, Island A), but for other couples it can become a source of stress in itself.

> I don't think they should come if they're like that. Because then their life is on hold while they're here. Unless you're like a warden or something, and you're continuing your career, your life is on hold. If you're working in the kitchen and you've got a degree, you're getting nowhere.
>
> [Alice, Island A]

Several of our participants echoed Phil's sentiment and reported choosing to move to an island to capture some of the health promotion and stress amelioration they had experienced on their island holidays. However, they found that often the stresses from the mainland came too; and that the dependencies, vulnerabilities and precarities of island life provide new sources of stress and catalysed the emergence of health problems. This is the focus of the final theme discussed below,

Theme 3: Island Living and Health

A frequently occurring code in the analysis of our data referred to health, and anxieties around managing health. To a mainlander, a trip to an island could well be taken for the perceived health benefits of a change of routine,

and perhaps the removal of temptation. Coastal walks, sea breezes and fewer stressors associated with the mainland make islands seem the perfect location for some constructive and wholesome rest and recuperation. Indeed, some of our participants had made the decision to move to their islands following a health-related trip there. Timmy's first trip to Island A, for example, was taken as a mental health break from her job:

> I was pushed to my physical limits and that was partly why the idea of coming to an island by myself to stay in a lighthouse for my birthday was a bit of like 'let's have a restock about what I want to do' so it was the perfect answer really.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]

However, our participants found that the transition from tourist or visitor to island resident was not necessarily so conducive to health, either mental or physical. There were several reasons for this. One key reason was that people, of course, 'take their demons with them'. A number of our participants felt that, by moving to an island, their issues or those of people known to them would be left behind on the mainland. What they acknowledged less was that often the problem was within them:

> We've all come here to find something, either an answer, or peace from what was on the mainland. But people bring it with them.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]
>
> People come here for a fresh start, to be invisible, to repair their marriage ... but if you want to repair your marriage, this is about the worst place you could possibly come to [due to lack of privacy]!
>
> [Nicola, Island B]

As a consequence, islands, which often have fewer resources than mainland communities, may find that they have a concentration of people experiencing some degree of anxiety or existing mental distress, and there are limitations to the support that can be provided on-island due to the basic nature of health care provision. Even for those who arrive on islands physically and mentally healthy, the lack of accessible healthcare can create a significant source of psychological stress. This works in two ways: in terms of not being able to access care for oneself, or to quickly be with a family member when they are taken ill.

> Everyone says the islands are beautiful and all those sorts of things and it is, but you don't see the beauty in being stuck here in November when there's something going wrong with your family on the mainland and not being able to get a flight off because it's foggy. So, there's much more of a sense of isolation,

> which is fine when you want isolation, but when you don't want isolation and you need to get back to something more quickly, then it's a pain in the neck.
>
> [Nicola, Island B]

Access to health care is, of course, problematic in a number of communities, and our island communities were not necessarily dissimilar from other remote, rural communities in their inaccessibility to health care. Although Island B had some health care, it was very basic on Island A. However, the presence of water creates a very real additional barrier, which has a psychological as well as a physical component.

> Those miles of sea make a massive difference: you can only get flown off if it's a matter of life or death. I think it bothers some people, and that's often the reason people make the decision to leave. I've got some friends over here at the minute who aren't very well, and I think that has been something of a deciding factor in them leaving. Even though if you have a heart attack, you've got more chance of getting to [the local hospital] quicker than if you lived [in a rural mainland location].
>
> [Nicola, Island B]

The lack of healthcare in close proximity seemed to impact on people in two distinct ways. For some of the younger residents, this meant that they took a very proactive approach to managing their own health. We heard accounts of very health-conscious approaches:

> The body heals itself a lot of the time, and I don't think people allow for that, they haven't been taught how to look after themselves properly whereas here, there's a lot of healthy people, there's a lot of vegetarians, a lot of us here that actually appreciate what we put in our bodies.
>
> [Alice, Island A]

However, often the older islanders (or longer standing residents) displayed behaviours that were interpreted as either ignoring or wilfully avoiding the confrontation of their poor health:

> Especially with the older population. They struggle more, and I don't know if it's an island thing or an [Island A] thing that some people don't want to leave. Like it becomes so engrained and you see that in some of the elder (sic) ones ... they're almost sacrificing their health because they so don't want to leave and I think that does affect people here, definitely.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]

While obstacles to healthcare have the potential to exacerbate health issues and health anxiety, we also identified island living factors that potentially *cause* health problems. Like many rural British communities, life revolves around the pub, and although Island B had some social areas that were not pubs, the social lives of both islands were very much centred on alcohol. Some older residents managed to find a way to address isolation, but voiced concerns for younger residents.

> You go to work in the dark and you come back in the dark and the only thing left is the pub. And they [younger residents] don't quite get that you can be in the pub, but you don't have to drink.
>
> [Alice, Island A]

Whilst there are obviously physical health problems related to excessive drinking (although these might not be revealed in an ostensibly healthy, younger population until many years later), the more pressing issues are perhaps those related to mental wellbeing:

> And for me a big problem is the pub. I mean I like coming in here, but the drinking gets out of control. And people get very cliquey with their drinking groups and gossipy and I don't like that.
>
> [Timmy, Island A]

For Timmy, it is not necessarily the drinking itself that is problematic, but the associated behaviour whereby people settled into factions with the upsetting result that some people feel excluded. In social identity terms, this exclusion then has ramifications for the mental wellbeing of the outgroup, eroding their ability to feel accepted as part of the island community if they don't participate in the drinking culture.

A number of participants also expressed ideas about the need for emotional self-sufficiency, so that people coming to the island had interests that could sustain them without the distractions of mainland life or recourse to drinking. It was widely felt that those people who did have an interest or hobby that they could do within the parameters of island living would be better suited to life on a small island.

> And if you say to someone 'do you do anything' and they say 'not really, well I go on the internet a lot', you think 'hmmm that's not going to go well' and they last a season and that's it.
>
> [Alice, Island A]
>
> I started getting up and going out with a telescope early in the morning [to birdwatch] after I'd finished my bar shifts so that gave me a hobby to keep me excited in the island and get me out

> in the island rather than spend all my time in the pub.
>
> [Mitch, Island A]

Having these kinds of outside interests allows for residents to participate in the wider life of the island, forming communities of interest and providing activities less detrimental to health than 'just' drinking.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated and discussed the experience of islanders living on small islands from a social psychological perspective. This includes exploring the ways in which the experience of island living, both in terms of the physical and social environment, can psychologically impact islanders. This enquiry emerged from a concern about the wellbeing and sustainability of island communities, but also a paucity of psychological theoretical foundation for a construct that has frequently been described in psychological terms – namely 'islandness'. We have particularly focused on how social psychological theories concerning identity might help us to understand how 'islandness' might manifest psychologically, and how it develops.

Firstly, we found a number of features of psychological experience that were highly consistent with features outlined by existing social psychological theory. This included evidence of cognitive and behavioural manifestations that are consistent with social dynamics and outcomes predicted by social identity theory. Indeed, the contents of the first theme align with SIT in such a way that one might suggest that island identity might well be, or at least be a significant constituent of, 'islandness'. These included evidence of categorisation of those that islanders interacted with, and particularly newcomers. Expressions of ethnocentrism oriented around perceptions of newcomers' commitment to the island and its ways of life. However, we also found challenges to this that suggest that any assumptions about a mainlander or newcomer 'outgroup' for islanders should be cautioned against. For example, where 'outsiders' in the form of tourists might be essential to island viability, any social identity processes positioning mainlander (outgroup) vs islander (in-group) were far from universal. Furthermore, for many islanders the frequent transience and departure of newcomers was often as much a psychological cost as was the experience of adapting to their arrival.

In stark contrast to the perception held and promoted by some outsiders, we found that the physical environment of small islands led islanders to question their own resilience. Specifically, our data suggested that our participants were acutely aware of their dependencies, and the vulnerability inherent in this. We also heard examples of how this perception might give rise to hyper-sensitisation to risk and potentially exaggerated cognitive and behavioural responses. Participants also frequently cited the stressful economic precarities of island life. The economic precarity of many island communities is well documented in the literature (e.g. Bates et al., 2019). However, there is considerably less acknowledgment of the impact this can have on islander

self-identity and mental wellbeing. These dependencies, vulnerabilities and precarities were referenced by participants as evidence of a potential lack of physical and psychological resilience – and also cited as a trigger for anxiety and behaviours that might put their health and wellbeing at risk.

Finally, a very prominent and potent vulnerability identified by our participants related to healthcare. The distance to healthcare, and particularly emergency care, had a profound psychological impact on islanders. A significant health condition, or even health scare, was a source of considerable distress for many islanders and perhaps the most important trigger for islanders to leave and return to mainland life. In the years since this research was conducted, it is important to note that the world has become a very different place due to coronavirus. Communities that in 2019 seemed cut off from services and provisions became their own, protective ecosystems with natural quarantine measures and significant social distancing (Matheson, 2022). Where being a number of miles offshore meant being far from help, Covid-19 re-situated islands as being far from infection and contagion. However, this also reflects some of the larger tensions reported by islanders with regard to their health concerns. There are further, and not-insignificant, impacts on mental wellbeing of being at a distance from medical care, or from family and friends undergoing their own medical problems. Isolation, darkness and weather factors also had an impact on people's mental wellbeing, as well as the ability to become established in the community. Although as we described above, island communities can be welcoming to outsiders, there is perhaps then an additional pressure on those who feel that they have not been accepted. Again, social psychological theories relating to self, social and place identity provide useful theoretical frameworks and are likely to be useful in future research exploring these issues.

In closing, our research is not without its shortcomings, and whilst some of these are potentially unavoidable, there are also aspects that we would be keen to learn from in the pursuit of further studies. The two islands we visited are not representative of all British islands, let alone all islands globally. Further, the choice to anonymise these islands could lead to the accusation of a lack of transparency, which we have discussed elsewhere (Matheson et al., 2020). Our interviews and experiences were specific to the time and the place and enabled (or perhaps disadvantaged) by our different identities, and the contacts that we already had on the islands and made serendipitously. Nevertheless, we believe the research, at the very least, provides a potential contribution to a much needed theorisation of the psychology of islands and islanders. Importantly, it highlights a number of key considerations that are important to supporting the wellbeing and sustainability of islanders and their communities.

Prior to commencing the research, we asked whether social psychological theories may provide a useful lens through which to view the island experience and 'islandness'. We also posed questions concerning whether the small island context and physical environment might provide particularly potent activators of intra- and interpersonal psychological dynamics. Our research has enabled

us to identify a number of ways in which islanders' identities are shaped by factors inherent to island life – and which in turn shape islander psychology. More specifically, the impact of transience, narrower cultural 'boundaries, and infrastructure limitations all influenced islanders' appraisals of self, relationships, community and risk. While these appraisals can influence identities in ways that forge strength and resilience, they can also negatively impact wellbeing, weaken communities, and therefore exacerbate vulnerability. It is important that the specificity of these are recognised, and we hope this paper further highlights the ways in which 'islandness' might manifest behaviourally. However, we argue that in order to support the wellbeing of islanders and the sustainability of communities then a better understanding of underlying mechanisms is also required. Furthermore, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to apply a more theoretical framework than has hitherto been evident. We believe that the data reported and discussed herein, suggest that social psychological models are likely to provide a useful contribution.

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