

# Researching underwater: a submerged study

*Susie Scott*

## Abstract

This chapter explores the unknown territory of a lost project: an ethnography of a public swimming pool. The discussion is contextualised within my broader sociological theory of ‘nothing’, as a category of unmarked, negative social phenomena, including no-things, no-bodies, no-wheres, non-events and non-identities. These meaningful symbolic objects are constituted through social interaction, which can take two forms: acts of commission and acts of omission. I tell the story of how this project did not happen, through the things I did not do or that did not materialise, and how I consequently did not become a certain type of researcher. I identify three types of negative phenomena that I did not observe and document – invisible figures, silent voices and empty vessels – and, consequently, the knowledge I did not acquire. However, nothing is also productive, generating new symbolic objects as substitutes, alternatives and replacements: the somethings, somebodies and somewheres that are done or made instead. Thus finally, I reflect on how not doing this project led me to pursue others, cultivating a different research identity that would not otherwise have existed.

## Introduction

The research I didn’t do followed from another project that also nearly didn’t happen. In 2007, I finally succumbed to a nagging urge to analyse a sporting activity in which I had been participating for several years, namely lane swimming. Until that point, I had managed to resist the temptation to theorise my personal experiences, anticipating – correctly, as it would turn out - that studying something I enjoyed precisely because it belonged to the world outside of work, would ‘take the fun out of it’ (Rossing & Scott 2016). Eventually, however, I could no longer ignore the clamour of voices, images and meanings in this unique social world, and my curiosity won out.

I conducted a modest and small-scale, retrospective autoethnography (Scott 2009a, 2010), based upon biographical opportunism (Anderson 2006). Drawing on my own experiences over ten years, I recollected past memories and recorded new observations at one site, a public swimming pool in the UK. My data took the form of impressionistic fieldnotes describing the visual scene, conversations held and overheard with fellow swimmers, and interactions with the lifeguards, managers, receptionists and other staff. These were recorded in an ad hoc manner, not as systematic records of objective facts, but as more open-ended “*mullings, questions, comments, quirky notes, and diary-type entries*” (DeMunck and Sobo, 1998: 45). Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969, Goffman 1959), I focused on micro-social patterns of behaviour, such as the regulation of bodies in space, normative rules of lane etiquette, embarrassment about near-nudity and attributions of rudeness (Scott 2009a, 2010). Recognising myself as an insider to the setting, who shared with my participants tacit knowledge and lived experiences (Hodkinson 2005), I embraced the subjectivity and bias of these interpretations, using my own evocative descriptions as a springboard for theorising wider social phenomena (Finlay 2002).

This preliminary study was illuminating, revealing some fascinating processes of self-conscious identity work. I learned about how swimmers display and manage their embodied vulnerability in ‘unfocused encounters’ (Goffman 1967) with strangers in circumstantial co-presence (Scott 2010). I also gained insight into the normative patterns of rules and resources that create the appearance of interaction order (Goffman 1983) in this local social world, as well as how these meanings are negotiated, challenged and repaired (Scott 2009). This once mundane, familiar setting now seemed strange and extraordinary: the scene was vividly colourful, alive with meaning and bursting with material to document.

Consequently, I had the idea of conducting a follow-up study over a three-month period of sabbatical leave. This would have taken the form of a traditional ethnography, involving prolonged immersion in the field, multiple qualitative methods and ‘thick description’ of the scene (Geertz 1973, Atkinson 2015). I was keen to explore the swimming pool as an organisational culture, by interviewing staff in all roles and levels, and observing the ways in which they interpreted, applied and ‘fudged’ institutional rules through the processes of negotiated order (Strauss 1979). I planned this research design, negotiated access with the appropriate ‘gatekeeper’, the manager of my local pool, and successfully applied for ethical approval from my university’s institutional review board. I responded to a call from the editors of a forthcoming book series (Vannini and Waskul’s *Advances in Interactionism*), and informally negotiated a potential contract.

However, the dream second project never happened, for various reasons. The municipal swimming pool, which had been publicly run by the local council, got privatised. Its management changed, along with many staff, and I lost the personal contacts I had built up. Some of the long-serving lifeguards, with whom I was on friendly terms, left and were replaced by casual employees on temporary contracts, who had a very different attitude to their jobs. My position within the field changed, as I became increasingly detached from the institution as a social network; my insider status faded, and I was less able to call upon personal favours. I realised I would have to negotiate access all over again with the new management, and as this was now a private company, I suspected they would not be so amenable to the study. All of this created a time delay, until the window for sabbatical leave passed, and I lacked a sufficiently long stretch of time to immerse myself in the field. Regretfully, I filed the idea away in the ‘maybe one day’ folder, and turned my attention to other research.

Aptly, however, one of these alternative projects that I have subsequently developed is ‘the sociology of nothing’ (Scott 2018, 2019). This is an ongoing programme of research exploring negative social phenomena - things that people do *not* do, have, say, know or feel – and how these things affect our lives. Despite their ostensible non-existence, I argue that negative social phenomena have a reality and ontological status, which can be inferred through its indirect effects. We can trace and document the ‘social life of nothing’ as a relational, emergent process, following its trajectory from origins to consequences. Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, I seek to understand how nothing is collectively accomplished, through meanings that are dynamically defined and negotiated with others. While this process unfolds situationally, as a series of contemporary moments in everyday life, it can also be reflected on and reconstructed with hindsight.

This means that nothing can be formative in shaping biographical selfhood. Ricoeur (1984) suggested that life is lived forwards but remembered backwards, but the same

principle applies to the narrative construction of our *unlived* lives. We tend to author our identities with reference to positive phenomena – who we are, what we have done, what we know – but turning over the mirror, we find an inverse, parallel collection of experiences *not* had, which can be equally significant and meaningful. Our storied lives are haunted by the shadows of these negative phenomena, such as ghostly figures, roads not taken and missed experiences (Gordon 2008). Reflecting on these absent forms, we perform reverse identity work upon our undone selves, imagining the worlds they might inhabit.

With this in mind, I tell the story of my lost ethnography as a negative symbolic social object: a ‘no-thing’ with a traceable social life. Despite its objective non-existence in the empirical realm of data, books and papers, this project has an ontological and pragmatic status within my subjective lifeworld (Schütz 1972). The project represents a series of events that did not happen, actions I did not take and knowledge I did not acquire - the cumulative absence of which has influenced my academic research career. In the following sections, I explore three questions: what forms of nothing were accomplished, how did this process happen through social interaction, and what effects were produced instead? First, however, I set out my approach and analytical framework: how and why should we research nothing?

### **Knowing nothing: beyond the marked mundane**

Most social research investigates phenomena that manifestly exist. While this may sound obvious – true to the point of truism - it is merely a conventional truth, an axiomatic assumption so taken-for-granted as to seem beyond question. Sociology is traditionally defined as the study of ‘things’ – structures, processes, actions – that are present in society and have empirically observable effects (Durkheim 1895). Yet we can also infer an inverse, parallel set of ‘no-things’, which are less tangibly apparent and tend to go unnoticed.

Brekhus (1998) suggests that researchers give a disproportionate amount of attention to the former, ‘marked’ phenomena, particularly those that are deviant, extreme or extraordinary. However, he argues, what is actually more prevalent in social life is the latter set of *unmarked* phenomena. These are objects and experiences that we regard as ordinary, regular and normal (Misztal 2015), if we notice them at all. Unmarked phenomena are grey and nebulous, spread across a vast, expansive landscape. This creates an epistemological blindspot in social research, a methodological bias towards figures above ground (Brekhus, *ibid.*). So focused are we on the animated objects and activities unfolding ‘where the action is’ (Goffman 1967) that we neglect to examine the surrounding background spaces from which these ‘things’ stand out.

This is different from the argument that we need to study ordinary things. The sociology of everyday life has done much to address that shortfall of previous research, by examining the mundane, taken-for-granted rituals and routines that are normally ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Garfinkel 1967, Moran 2005, Scott 2009b). By studying the habitual daily practices through which situated realities are built, we recognise what people say and do in quotidian settings, alongside more liminal ‘non-places’ (Augé 1992), such as airports, stations and waiting rooms. Meanwhile, the sociologies of knowledge, science and technology (STS) have pointed to the kinds of research studies that do not get funded, carried out or ethically approved (Hedgecoe 2008, Hess 2009, Frickel et al 2010), as well

as the very *unscientific* social interaction context in which such decisions take place (Gilbert & Mulkey 1984). Yet the focus here remains on positive phenomena: *somebings*, *somebodies* and *somenwheres* as latent forms that do exist, if only we could see them. Researchers in these fields examine why and how ‘things’ come to be ignored, denied or overlooked (McGoey 2012).

I want to go further than this, by shifting the focus to a second type of unmarked phenomena: the *nothings*, *nobodies* and *nowheres* that do not exist, or never came to be. In my call for a ‘sociology of nothing’ (Scott 2018), I put forward the argument that such negative social phenomena still have an ontological reality, albeit only indirectly knowable, and are significant by virtue of *not* being there. They are relationally defined as the absence of positive phenomena (things, bodies and places) that are expected, noticed and marked. While their hypothetical shapes may be imaginable, as inverted representations of extant specifics, or known unknowns, often they take a more nebulous form, as unknown unknowns. However, this raises some difficult questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology: what exactly are phenomena that don’t exist, and how can we study “*things that aren’t there*” (Croissant 2014: 4)?

### **The social ontology of nothing**

If nothing exists and is ontologically real, this logically implies a process by which it came into being. Nothing (in the sense I am using it) cannot come from nothing (in the conventional sense); nor can it lead simply to nothing. It is an inherently relational construct, defined in contrast to another, inferred presence. Linguistically, we designate nothing by the lack or absence of a signified object: something/someone/somewhere, or everything/everyone/everywhere. Thus Green (2011) makes a distinction between ‘nothingness’ as the absence of *something*, and ‘nothing’ as the absence of *everything*.

This is applied in the research domains of other disciplines. Nothingness is studied in mathematics, where the zero symbol denotes a specific quantity ‘none’, and in physics, where vacuums are filled with invisible energy, such as gravitational waves or magnetic fields. Meanwhile, in astronomy, cosmology and existential philosophy, nothing is conceived as an immense and infinite universe, which may be a source of awe and wonder (the night sky) or angst and terror (the realisation of our arbitrary insignificance as beings thrown into the world, who must confront the prospect of non-being) (Heidegger 1927, Sartre 1943). In social research, the equivalents of nothingness and nothing would be, respectively, specific topics we decide not to study, versus everything else we hypothetically might have done.

The mutual constitution of these paired concepts reflects their relative value. Often this relationship is hierarchical, whereby marked phenomena are culturally dominant and preferred over their unmarked counterparts (Brekhus 1998), and the latter may be excluded from powerful domains of knowledge. Social forms of nothing are defined in relation to things that are more highly valued and whose absence denotes a problem. For example, asexuality is defined in a deficiency model, as a lack of ‘normal’ sexual desire and/or attraction (Scott et al 2016). By studying the unmarked, we can reverse this patterned ignorance, treating the *neglect* of nothing as epistemologically problematic.

This affects both conditions and effects: nothing is socially produced, but also socially productive. Firstly, negative social phenomena have positive origins, emerging from

something or being produced by someone. They are created by what people do not do or allow to be. We can trace the process of negative formation through which what *is* affects what is *not*, limiting or precluding the things that cannot be. Secondly, nothing is positively productive. It creates the conditions of possibility for something else to exist, and adds a layer of interpretive meaning. This is what Hall (1993) calls the ‘constitutive outside’. Just as the background to a visual scene shapes our perception of it, so too can the no-things in our lives shape our apprehension of the some-things. Absent forms cast new light on their positively present counterparts, helping us to appreciate how these came to be, could have been otherwise, or might not have been at all.

Telling stories about nothing, meanwhile, means imagining it in time as well as space. Non-done social research, as a type of undone science (Frickel et al 2010), can be narrated in this manner, as a series of events that didn’t happen. Yet this refracted process of ‘unbecoming’ (Scott et al 2016) is still rooted in the social world, unfolding through dissuasive influences that foreclosed potential happenings. We can imagine a temporal arc over which nothing extends, and through which it recurrently interacts with positive symbolic objects, especially people. Nothing’s relational form develops as a series of I-Thou encounters (Buber 1923) whereby its socialness may precede its individual essence. Doing, having or being nothing implies an ethical relationship of transcendent alterity, or infinite responsibility towards others (Levinas 1974). In this respect, we can compare stories of lost or never-done research to the existing genre of ‘confessional tales’ about mistakes made in the field (Van Maanen 1988). Whereas the latter purge the soul by recounting the series of events through which something went wrong, the former perform a similarly ethical function of imagining how nothing could have gone right.

This is a telescopic process, which collapses into itself. Memories and musings on the great undone haunt our lives from one direction, while wistful wonderings approach from the other. The temporal moments at which nothing happens exist in not only the present but also the past and the future, as logically, if not chronologically, contemporaneous points. Existentially, the fate of the transitory *Dasein* (being here, now) is wrapped up with its former and current states (Heidegger 1927). Metaphysically, nothing has an ‘eternal recurrence’ beyond its current moment, radiating, resonating and reverberating in all directions and occurring at all times simultaneously (Nietzsche 1891). Thus we can trace the ways in which nothing ‘returns’ (Nietzsche, *ibid.*) pervasively throughout our lives by following its trajectory. Social research provides the tools for doing this: examining how nothing comes into being and fades away, through relationships, encounters and social interaction. But how accessible is this process to the researcher’s gaze?

### **Bracketed backgrounds, unseen scenes**

Phenomenologically, undone research can be theorised as ‘nothing’ in Green’s (2011) sense, to describe *the absence of everything subjectively meaningful*. It represents an expansive background of things that we could have attended to but didn’t, because they did not announce themselves to us as viable objects of study (Husserl 1913). Affordance theory in psychology (Gibson 1966) teaches that certain phenomena attract our attention because they resonate with our values or motivations, suggesting to the perceiving mind how we might engage with them. This reflects the pragmatist philosophy of perception as a relational and goal-directed process, focused towards objects as tools that promise to

be instrumentally useful (Peirce 1877, James 1890). These positively regarded objects 'shine forth' as being worthy of study, while everything else recedes into the background (Heidegger 1927). In the social world, the researcher's gaze is attracted by those topics that resonate with their subjective lifeworld (Schütz 1972), and distracted away from everything else that lacks this meaning. The second order constructs (Schütz, *ibid.*) they generate to interpret marked phenomena perform the same work as lay participants' first order constructs, in making sense of an otherwise undifferentiated stream of consciousness. To impose categorical order upon subjective experience, we must pragmatically attend to some things and bracket out everything else (Husserl 1913).

Nothing is therefore an occasioned attribution of irrelevance. It is applied pragmatically to ideas and objects that currently *don't* matter, and consequently *aren't* matter. Such definitions are only matters of provisional truth: valid until they cease to be useful and effective. No-things we have hitherto ignored or not thought about suddenly appear if they prevent us from doing what we intended to, or alter our perception of what we have done. Dormant ideas are awakened and jolted into life. Suddenly, irrelevant objects become relevant, tools turn into obstacles, and meaningless ideas are redefined as meaningful. This occurs in academia, as now, when researchers reflect back upon their careers and contemplate the projects that they could have done. Sociological biographies have been reviewed collectively and historically (Platt 2004) but can also be rewritten individually, through diarised reflections (Back 2016).

Unmarked social reality, as an alternative domain of study, therefore exists not in an entirely different realm, but rather alongside marked reality. It hovers in the background as an area of negative space, surrounding the phenomena we selectively recognise and engage with. It forms the mirror image of Merleau-Ponty's (1945) 'world of perception', or subjectively embodied lived experiences, suggesting instead a container of unlimited potential: *unlived* experiences. These contents, the no-things, are infinite and uncountable, just as the borders of their terrain are unboundaried. They can be apprehended only by negative relational contrast to the finite and bounded world of the social research that *is* done. Within the constraints of our employment conditions, time, financial resources and embodied capacity as human beings with limited lifespans, there is only so much work we can do. On the other hand, there is an infinite amount of work that we do not do, material we do not study, and projects we cannot take on. Thus the phenomenological world of undone social research is a residual category of what is left behind after 'everything else' has been accounted for. This implies a social process of (de-)selection, through which certain matters come to count, while others disappear.

### **Accomplishing nothing: two courses of meaningful social action**

Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, I suggest that nothing is an emergent product of social interaction, whose meaning is defined and negotiated between reflexive social actors (Scott 2017). Following Mead (1934), I argue that people *act* in relation to symbolic social objects, which they apprehend as negative phenomena: things that they reject, refuse, ignore, avoid or simply do not see. These attitudes of irrelevance, ignorance or wilful disregard suggest that such objects may hold different symbolic meanings (Blumer 1969). As Sartre (1943) argued, consciousness must take an object: the subject is conscious *of* something, even if that something is unknown or intangible. It is only by someone not doing, having or being something positive that something else

negative, a no-thing, can come into existence. Meadian acts imply intentionality by self-reflexive agents, involving four stages of perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation. In the context of social research, this would apply to the projects that we do not do (as objects) and the ways in which we do not do them (as sequences of action).

Insofar as these actions unfold in situated encounters with others, are pragmatically coordinated and verbally or non-verbally communicative, they are not simply individual acts but social, or joint actions (Blumer 1969). They fit the Weber's (1904) criteria of social action, being both meaningful to the actor and oriented towards other people. This process involves definitions and negotiations of meaning between social actors (Strauss 1978, Thomas and Thomas 1928) who interpret each other's symbolic gestures, for example when asked to give accounts of what we have not done and why. As Mullaney (2006) argues, when non-doings form the basis of identity display, they must be witnessed and ratified by an audience in order to be successful. The self that does not do something is relationally co-constructed through this performative narrative. In this respect, I argue that nothing is *socially accomplished*, through practices of interaction in everyday life.

Nothing can be accomplished through two kinds of social action (Scott 2018). *Acts of commission* occur when we consciously choose to avoid doing, being or having something positive, motivated by attitudes of refusal, rejection or repudiation. In everyday life, this would include practices like taking strike action, being voluntarily childfree, or disavowing a gender assignment. In social research, it could mean deciding not to do a planned project, failing to secure funding, or redesigning methodology so radically that a new project is born. I call this form of action 'doing nothing', because it involves a deliberate, consciously intentional movement away from something, in order to cultivate something else. It is performative and demonstrable, insofar as that other, undone thing is communicatively displayed to others.

*Acts of omission* occur when we more passively neglect or fail to act, ending up in another position by default rather than conscious intention. Actors do not feel strongly disinclined towards one option so much as drawn towards another, which holds more meaning. In everyday life, this might include agnosticism (not developing a religious faith), not getting involved in a leisure activity or not pursuing a career opportunity. In social research, the equivalent would be neglecting to study something that we hypothetically could have done, because it was less interesting or relevant than something else. These lost projects do not hover saliently enough upon our horizons of meaning to stand out as phenomena; they fade into the background as an undifferentiated mass. I call this form of action 'non-doing', to emphasise its lack of contrived performativity and reverse directionality.

My undone study of the swimming pool involved both these forms of social action. Viewed from the final endpoint, the overall outcome of its non-happening suggests a process of passive omission: I did not consciously 'decide not to' do the project, but rather it 'just didn't happen'. This was mainly due to factors beyond my control, which seemed to happen *to* me, or external circumstances in which I found myself. These included the privatisation and new management of the pool, which changed its organisational culture, the lack of funding, and the passing of time, which closed the window of pragmatic opportunity. I also became more interested in other research ideas, which distracted and redirected my attention. On the other hand, I was not entirely passive in this process, and conducted certain acts of commission that made me partially

responsible for the outcome. My changing relationships with the staff and gradual withdrawal from their social network were processes in which I played a part: coordinated moves within a dance of joint action. Through tacit negotiation, we mutually recognised that it was no longer viable for me to hang around in the field, and that to do so would have been a breach of situational proprieties (Goffman 1963). There were additional things I could have done but didn't, which might have allowed the project to happen after all. I could have more proactively sought to build relationships with the new management and personnel, and renegotiated access; the fact that I didn't was a choice I made, even if subconsciously. Letting the time slip by until the opportunity had passed could be seen as an act of Sartrean 'bad faith' (Sartre 1943), through which I failed to acknowledge my free will and take personal responsibility. Even if I couldn't have prevented some of the external events that took place, I could have taken a different attitude to my situation (Frankl 1979), examining my conscience rather than blaming fate (Solzhenitsyn 1973). Instead of shrugging my shoulders and thinking, "Oh well, it wasn't meant to be", I could have recognised that "Thus, I willed it" (Nietzsche 1891).

In the next section, I unpack this complex process by which something didn't happen, while nothing clearly did. How did this project come to not-be, and what processes of joint social action were involved in creating this outcome? What negative symbolic objects does this indicate, whose existence may be imaginatively inferred if not directly apprehended? Unmarked social phenomena in the background of the research scene include knowledges not gained, events not seen or heard, and voices left undocumented. Yet these negative symbolic objects have a ghostly, absent presence, which agentially affected subsequent events. Thus we can trace how these non-doings, non-beings and non-havings led me to do, be and have other things instead. Undone research, like other forms of nothing, is productive: no-things create new some-things, as positive symbolic objects that would not otherwise have existed.

### **Diving down: objects in deep water**

The things I did not find out are lost, and like the project itself, remain lurking at the bottom of the swimming pool. Occluded by the swirling waters of time, their already nebulous forms become blurrier and indistinct as they sink down into the deep unknown. Yet these drowned objects have an absent presence, as latent potential in the form of information, images and ideas that constitute hidden data. Agnotology, the study of unknown things (Smithson 1989), reverse-marks science's normative conventions by abandoning the quest for absolute, objective knowledge in favour of a more tentative exploration. The great unknown suggests an infinitely large collection of negative objects suspended in an expansive territory, like buried treasures on the ocean floor.

Together, these objects form a realm of knowledge, which has been conceptualised as nescience (Frickel et al, 2010), meta-ignorance (Smithson 1989), and the ignorance of ignorance, or ignorance squared (Ravetz 1993). This implies a prior process of production, involving social acts of commission or omission. Hence Beck (1999) identifies two types of *nichtwissen*, or non-knowledge: that which one does not want or need to know, and that which cannot be known (Gross 2007). Frickel (2014) similarly distinguishes between knowledge that is *relatively* absent (once present but subsequently lost) and that which is *absolutely* absent (has never existed). This in turn implies commissive or omissive attitudes of the researcher, who, for different reasons, may neglect unmarked phenomena. Croissant (2014) contrasts *stupidity*, a state of false belief



with *ignorance*, as the mere absence of relevant or useful knowledge. McGoey (2012) goes further in suggesting that ignorance, too, can be commissively produced by wilful blindness: a determination not to see. The constitution of such negative objects as 'strategic unknowns', in turn, redraws the boundaries around what can and can't be understood, cultivating the limitations of knowledge (McGoey, *ibid.*).

The methodological recovery of these objects involves twin perceptual processes, as outlined by Husserl (1913). Some negative phenomena exist but go unnoticed, fading into the background of a scene. These can be illuminated and brought into the foreground by revelatory acts of 'presentation'. Other negative phenomena are absent empirically but exist hypothetically, as unreal objects of phantasy. These can be made present in the realm of imagination, through creative acts of 'presentification'.

Using these techniques, and donning swimming cap and goggles, let us dive down to examine what is lurking at the bottom of the pool. Beneath these murky waters, I discover an array of negative symbolic objects, retrievable from three realms of social nothingness: invisibility, silence and emptiness.

### *Invisible figures*

The things I did not see in this lost project include people, objects and events that would have existed in the field. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of social life as theatre allows us to imagine these, respectively, as actors, material prop objects and interactional encounters, which together constitute a performed scene. Goffman describes the public spaces in which these plays unfold as the 'frontstage' region, which consists of both the background 'setting and scenery', which is fixed in place, and the 'personal front' that actors carry around with them, displayed through their appearance, talk and manner. The roles they play are expressed through such items of personal front, including costume, props and demeanour: symbolic gestures (Blumer 1969) whose meaning is interpreted by the watching audience.

At the swimming pool, these actors include the patrons and the staff, who perform before each other. Using Husserlian presentation, I would have drawn attention to some subtle but important aspects of their behaviour, such as how swimmers manage the public presentation of their bodies, particularly in dealing with the embarrassing predicament of being nearly naked before an audience of strangers. I would have taken fieldnotes about the techniques of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman 1959) that they used towards this end. These might include Goffman's (1959, 1963) concepts of civil inattention (averted gaze, pretended ignorance of one another), auto-involvements (conspicuously overplayed gestures of self-absorption, such as swimming with regime training cards, or vigorous soaping in the showers) and dramaturgical circumspection (being careful to control when, where and to which audiences one is exposed, such as attending 'Women Only' sessions).

When observing the staff, I wanted to observe strategies of role distance (Goffman 1961), whereby actors display a disdainful attitude, symbolically detaching their 'real' selves from the roles that they are currently playing. Role distance helps actors to convey that they are more than just their characters, and have a cynical attitude towards them. Lifeguards engage in acts of horseplay while on duty, for example chatting on the poolside or fooling around with the cleaning hose in the changing rooms. They also

modify their uniform in ironic ways to ridicule the structural hierarchy of authority, for example by rolling up their T-shirts or wearing name badges upside down.

In terms of missed encounters between actors, I wanted to learn more about the pattern of negotiated order (Strauss 1978), whereby team-mates cooperate to stage a scene of unremarkable calmness. Goffman (1971) wrote of the importance of upholding 'normal appearances' to avoid 'causing a scene', as well as the reparative work that team-mates do to restore interaction order after a disruption. Using Husserlian presentification, I can imagine occasions of rule-breaking that I might have observed, along with the social reactions they would have evoked. These would include instances of 'lane rage' whereby one swimmer confronts another for swimming too fast, too slow or in the wrong expressive manner. Deviant acts like these are collectively managed by reparative interchanges (Goffman 1971), such as the four-stage apology sequence of challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks.

### *Silent voices*

Next, we can consider aural data that I failed to hear. These would have included recorded conversations between swimmers, particularly friends who attend the pool together. Through such forms of ritual talk (Goffman 1981), actors mark their transition from one status to another: in this case from civilians to swimmers. Entry to or exit from the swimmer role takes place in backstage regions on the margins of the main scene, such as the leisure centre car park, foyer and changing room. The cubicles within the latter zone are particularly important as sites in which costume changes take place, quite literally, as masks are put on and taken off.

Overheard conversations would be an invaluable source of data for understanding how actors manage this procedure. As Crossley (2006) found in his ethnography of fitness gyms, patrons often engage in 'post-workout reflections' as they discuss the success or failure of their progress towards goals. Similarly, I have often heard friends asking each other, "How was your swim?", which starts a conversation not about the technical activity per se, but rather about how they feel about this part of their identity and its place within their lives. These practices are Reflexive Body Techniques (Crossley 2005), through which people act in orientation to their own bodies as expressions of social selfhood. Such data could be directly observable through Husserl's technique of presentation.

Equally, silence can be important when ceremoniously observed. Patrons get changed into their costumes more quietly than changing out of them, as if focusing in on the approaching performance. Lifeguards on the poolside are expected not to speak, as this would detract from their responsibility to watch the scene. They sometimes use the technique of dramatic realisation (Goffman 1959), emphasising or exaggerating a role to convey the seriousness with which they take it. For example, they will make a show of standing silently, gazing intently to express dutiful concentration. Swimmers use silence tactfully to disattend to the embarrassing predicament of their near-nudity, colluding in upholding the polite fiction that this is a 'decent' situation (cf. Weinberg 1965). Husserl's technique of presentification lets us imagine how such things that are not actually said can still be vitally important.

Likewise, it is important to listen out for voices that are not normally heard at all. Goffman (1959) refers to the 'non-person' as a discrepant role, positioned in the frontstage region but outside of the performer-audience encounter. Domestic servants, janitors and bus drivers are examples of these roles, as ghostly figures in the background of the scene. The non-person is ignored: they are regarded as socially absent despite their physical presence, because their views are deemed irrelevant to the execution of the main scene. However, like Simmel's (1908) stranger archetype, non-persons occupy a privileged position on the margins, from which they may critically observe the main performers' action. Thus I would have liked to interview such service personnel as contracted cleaners and receptionists, who would no doubt have had different versions of the pool story to tell.

### *Empty vessels*

Contemplating the depth dimension of a social setting, we can think about the empty spaces that surround positive symbolic objects, or from which they have been extracted. Like fossils, shells or ransacked boxes, empty phenomena acquire their meaning as containers of nothing, carrying their residue. They are the empty vessels whose contents have been spilled. Holes are wholly: filled with negative space. Just as in art, this background gives definition to the positive objects in its midst, defining its borders, shapes and contours. Marked figures stand out more against a plunging chasm, elevated from its depths.

Taxonomically, I identify five different types of emptiness (Scott 2019), each of which could have been found in my research field. *The void* is a vast expanse of unbounded space that plunges infinitely down into the distant underground. It is totally empty of substantive matter, yet may be pregnant with latent meaning. Swimmers' collusive silence about their near-nudity is one example, looming large like the proverbial elephant in the room. Bracketing out an alternative definition of the situation that poses a potential face threat (Brown and Levinson 1978) helps to turn 'something' potentially disruptive of interaction order into 'nothing' worth remarking upon (cf. Emerson 1970). What wealth of meanings were communicated by being left unsaid?

*The vacuum* is a space left behind when everything else has been sucked out; it represents a complete depletion of energy and matter. This applies to how the swimming pool exists after hours, when everything has stopped and everyone has gone home. An eerie, darkened space containing nothing, this imaginary scene is reminiscent of Edward Hopper's (1942) painting *Nighthawks*, which depicts three lonely figures in an otherwise deserted urban diner. The gauzy daytime colours of the interior are dimmed and subdued by the lack of social animation: no one is there and nothing is going on. I could not have observed this directly, of course, but merely imagined it through presentification.

*The black hole* is the opposite: a field exerting such a force that it sucks everything into its depths, until they disappear from view. This might describe the experience of long-standing staff, who feel exhausted, stressed and burned out. I would have liked to interview such employees about their changing attitudes to work over the course of their careers, particularly since the shift in organisational culture.

The *nuclear hole* is the centre of an object formation, a core from which something significant has been removed. This loss occurs through acts of commission, such as the

death or destruction of something that once was there. The presence of this object is grieved and sorely missed, haunting the future of its survivor. Here, I would have liked to interview ex-professional swimmers who had given up on their careers. The local culture of the swimming club, once omnipresent in their lives through daily training sessions, would now be absent, and a core part of their identity missing. Sparkes and Smith (2008) write about the chaotic biographical disruption experienced by injured sports players, who must adjust to living without part of themselves. Similarly, I would have explored how previous pool regulars managed their process of role exit and negotiated a new 'ex-identity' (Ebaugh 1988).

Finally, there is *the gap*, a space in between other bounded territories. Like rivers, lakes and oceans, their form is defined by its edges and borders with these other lands: the banks and shores from which they have been sculpted. The nothingness filling a gap may serve as an important medium of transmission, allowing movement between one place and another. Here, I would have liked to observe patrons' behaviour in the aforementioned liminal zones (Turner 1967) of the car park, foyer and changing rooms, as they moved in and out of the swimmer role-identity.

### **Lessons learned through non-lives lost**

Finally, I consider the effects of this non-project on my academic identity. Who *didn't* I become through what I didn't learn, and who did I become instead? Elsewhere (Scott et al 2016), I have introduced the concept of 'non-becoming', as an interactionally mediated career trajectory. Mirroring the established process of 'becoming' a positive identity through progressive commitments (Becker 1963), I posit an inverted sequence of stages through which we do *not* pursue potential versions of ourselves. Above, I outlined a series of omissive actions I did not take, scenes I did not witness, data left undocumented and relationships I did not build. These missed social encounters meant that I was unable to become a certain version of myself - 'the swimming pool researcher', perhaps, or a more generic 'sports ethnographer' – and be recognised as such by others.

Just as nothing produces something, not becoming someone allows the possibility for becoming someone else. A void opens up, which we are quick to fill with different things that matter. New symbolic social objects come into being as substitutes, replacements and alternatives, which would not otherwise have existed if the non-doing had not been done (Scott 2018). As I pursued other projects, these 'things done instead' acquired significance as markers along different pathways to an academic identity. By not committing myself to becoming 'the swimming pool researcher', I was free to study more diverse and disparate topics (total institutions, stage fright, asexuality) under the broad umbrella of symbolic interactionist theory. Ultimately, I came to develop this new research area, the sociology of nothing, finding a niche that promises to become home.

Wryly, one could say that I have learned nothing from this experience. What this actually means, however, is that I have discovered the paradox that nothing is something: a meaningful and fascinating conceptual phenomenon. This begs the question of whether I would still do the swimming pool ethnography now, given the chance. From my perspective of inverse dualism, seeing both positive actions and their negative mirror images, I can only contemplate this as a thought experiment about alternative realities. The lost ethnography hovers like Schrödinger's Project in quantum superposition: simultaneously researched and not researched, with equal possibility. I could still do the

study, and perhaps I will one day, but for now I think I am content not to know. My suspicion is that this idea is best left in the box, untouched, where its limited reality is hidden and its latent potential remains perfect.

## References

- Anderson, L. (2006) "Analytic autoethnography." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35 (4): 373-395.
- Atkinson, P. (2015) *For Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Augé, M. (1992) *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Back, L. (2016) *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters*. London: Goldsmiths Press.
- Beck, U. (1999) *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Becker, H.S. (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Brekhus, W. (1998) "A sociology of the unmarked: redirecting our focus." *Sociological Theory* 16 (1): 34-51.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1978) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buber, M. (2010 [1923]) *I and Thou*. Masnfield, CT: Martino.
- Croissant, J. (2014) "Agnology: ignorance and absence, or towards a sociology of things that aren't there." *Social Epistemology*, 28 (1): 4-25.
- Crossley, N. (2005) "Mapping Reflexive Body Techniques: on body modification and maintenance." *Body and Society*, 11 (1): 1-35.
- Crossley, N. (2006) "In the gym: motives, meanings and moral careers." *Body and Society*, 12 (3): 23-50.
- DeMunck, V.C. and Sobo, E.J. (eds) (1998) *Using Methods in the Field: a Practical Introduction and Casebook*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1895) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Free Press.
- Ebaugh, H.R.F. (1988) *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Emerson, J.P. (1970) "Nothing unusual is happening." In T. Sibutani (ed.) *Human Nature and Collective Behavior: Papers in Honor of Herbert Blumer*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. pp. 208-222
- Finlay, L. (2002) "'Outing the researcher': the provenance, process and practice of reflexivity." *Qualitative Health Research* 12 (4): 531-545.
- Frankl, V. (2004 [1959]) *Man's Search for Meaning*. London: Rider.
- Frickel, S., Gibbon, S., Howard, J., Kempner, J., Ottinger, G. and Hess, D.J. (2010) "Undone science: charting social movement and civil society challenges to research agenda setting." *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 35 (4): 444-473.
- Frickel, S. (2014) "Absences: methodological note about nothing, in particular." *Social Epistemology*, 28 (1): 86-95.
- Garfinkel H (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Hutchinson.
- Gibson, J.J. (1966) *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Gilbert, G.N. & Mulkay, M.J. (1984) *Opening Pandora's Box: An Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Goffman, E. (1961) "Role distance." In his *Encounters. Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill. pp. 73-134.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Behavior in Public Places*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1967) *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Pantheon
- Goffman, E. (1971) *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goffman, E. (1983) "The interaction order." *American Sociological Review*, 48: 1-17.
- Gordon, A. (2008) *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Green, R. (2011) *Nothing Matters*. Alresford: Iff Books.
- Gross, M. (2007) "The unknown in process: dynamic connections of ignorance, non-knowledge and related concepts." *Current Sociology*, 55 (5): 742-759.
- Hall, S. (1996) "Who needs identity?" In S. Hall & P. du Gay (eds) (1996) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Sage: London. pp. 1-17.
- Hedgecoe, A.M. (2008) "Research ethics review and the sociological research relationship." *Sociology*, 42 (5): 873-886.
- Heidegger, M. (1996 [1927]) *Being and Time*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Hess, D. (2009) "The potentials and limitations of civil society research: getting undone science done." *Sociological Inquiry* 79 (3): 306-327.
- Hodkinson, P. (2005) "'Insider research' in the study of youth cultures." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8 (2): 131-149.
- Husserl, E. (2012 [1913]) *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- James, W. (1983 [1890]) *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1991 [1974]) *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. New York: Springer.
- McGoey, L. (2012) "Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance." *Economy and Society*, 41 (1): 1-16.
- Mead, G.H. (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013 [1945]) *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.
- Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Misztal, B. (2015) *Multiple Normalities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Mullaney, J.L. (2006) *Everyone is NOT Doing It: Abstinence and Personal Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moran J. (2005) *Reading the Everyday*. London: Routledge.
- Nietzsche, F. (1997 [1891]) *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Ware: Wordsworth.
- Peirce, C.S. (1877) "The Fixation of Belief." *Popular Science Monthly*, 12: 1-15.
- Platt, J. (2004) "Women's and men's careers in British sociology." *British Journal of Sociology*, 55 (2): 187-210
- Ravetz, J.R. (1993) "The sin of science: ignorance of ignorance." *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 15 (2): 157-65.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rossing, H. and Scott, S. (2016) "Taking the fun out of it: the spoiling effects of researching something you love." *Qualitative Research*, 16 (6): 615-629.
- Sartre, J.P. (1984 [1943]) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Scott, S. (2009a) "Re-clothing the emperor: the swimming pool as a negotiated order." *Symbolic Interaction*, 32 (2): 123-145.
- Scott, S. (2009b) *Making Sense of Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Scott, S. (2010) "How to look good (nearly) naked: The performative regulation of the swimmer's body." *Body & Society* 16 (2): 143-168.

- Scott, S. (2018) "A sociology of nothing: understanding the unmarked." *Sociology* 52 (1): 3-19.
- Scott, S. (2019) *The Sociology of Nothing: Silence, Invisibility and Emptiness in Social Life*. London: Routledge (forthcoming).
- Scott, S. McDonnell, L. and Dawson, M. (2016) "Stories of non-becoming: non-issues, non-events and non-identities in asexual lives." *Symbolic Interaction*, 39 (2): 268-286.
- Schütz, A. (1972) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. London: Heinemann, London.
- Simmel, G. (1908) "The Stranger". In K.H. Wolff (trans. & ed.) (1950) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. London: Free Press. pp. 402-408.
- Smithson, M. (1989) *Ignorance and Uncertainty: Emerging Paradigms*. New York: Springer.
- Solzhenitsyn, A.I. (1973) *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Smith, B. & Sparkes, A.C. (2008) "Changing bodies, changing narratives and the consequences of tellability: a case study of becoming disabled through sport." *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 30 (2): 217-236.
- Strauss, A. L. (1978). *Negotiations: Varieties, Contexts, Processes and Social Order*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas, W.I. and Thomas, D.S. (1970 [1928]) "Situations defined as real are real in their consequences." In G. Stone and H Farberman (Eds) *Social Psychology Through Interaction*. Waltham, MA: Ginn-Blaisidell, pp. 154-155.
- Turner, V. (1967) "Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage". in his *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 93-111.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, M. (1949 [1904]) "'Objectivity' in social science and social policy." In his *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press.
- Weinberg, M.S. (1965) "Sexual modesty, social meanings, and the nudist camp." *Social Problems*, 12 (3): 311-318.