Social nothingness: A phenomenological investigation

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Abstract
This article identifies and explores the realm of ‘social nothingness’: objects, people, events and places that do not empirically exist, yet are experienced as subjectively meaningful. Taking a phenomenological approach, I investigate how people perceive, imagine and reflect upon the meanings of unlived experience: whatever is significantly not present, never appeared or cannot happen to them. These ‘negative symbolic social objects’ include no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places: for example, rejected roles, unpursued careers or absent people. Reversing some key concepts from phenomenology, I examine the process of ‘negative noesis’ (subject-object relations) in three aspects. ‘Negative intentionality’ describes people’s motivational stance towards absent things, such as feelings of missing, wishing, haunting, avoidance or surrender. ‘Negative embodiment’ is the corporeal grounding of negational acts, through experiences of impairment, incapacity, severance, disturbance and decline. ‘Negative temporality’ describes the recognition of past or future impossible selves and their place within biographical identity stories.

Keywords
Embodiment, intentionality, narrative, phenomenology, self-identity, social nothingness, temporality

The realm of lost experience
This article sets out a theoretical framework with which to understand the subjective experience of ‘social nothingness’. Before introducing that concept, let us contextualise it within a broader definition. ‘Nothing’ describes the lack or absence of substantive...
matter, whether this be physical, material, ideal or symbolic. It is constituted through negative relational contrast to other discernable things, such as missing content, surrounding borders or substitutive replacements. Metaphysically, nothing represents one half of a binary, paired with positive quantities of something, anything and everything (Scott, 2019), or spaces of infinity and eternity (Levinas, 1961). The term is further disambiguated by Green (2011) into two distinctive forms: ‘nothingness’ is the absence of something specific, while ‘nothing’ is the total absence of everything.

The concept of nothing has been studied in other disciplines, but often in rather abstract, depersonalised ways that ignore or underestimate its wider social context. Mathematics uses zero to denote a null or missing value (Green, 2011). Physics recognises vacuums and cosmological black holes (Barrow, 2000). The cultural performing arts of music, comedy and drama play subversively with silence and display negative space (Green, 2011). Philosophy has considered nothing in relation to existential consciousness (Heidegger, 1927/1996; Sartre, 1943), logical object properties (Mumford, 2019) and epistemological uncertainty (Geer, 2019).

Sociology has almost done the opposite, by exploring anything but nothing. Traditionally, our discipline has been more interested in deviant, extreme or unusual ‘somethingness’, although there are some notable exceptions. Proximal concepts to nothing, such as normality, mundanity, taken-for-grantedness and the unmarked (Brekhus, 1998), are recognised by the sociologies of everyday life (Scott, 2009), cultural cognition (Brekhus & Ignatow, 2019; Zerubavel, 2018), scientific knowledge (Frickel, 2014; Friedman, 2015) and strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2014). Ritzer (2007) observes the ‘nullity’ technologies supporting global information systems. Nevertheless, all of these fields remain ultimately concerned with positive social phenomena – things that really happen or exist, albeit tacitly and out of sight.

By developing the sociology of nothing (Scott, 2018, 2019, 2020), I sought to study an entirely different domain. This is the realm of negative social phenomena: objects and experiences that do not exist are empirically unreal, but yet can be significant and hold subjective meaning. Negative social phenomena can take various forms, as reverse mirror images of their positive counterparts. Thus, hidden behind things, bodies, events and places, we find no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places.

The focus of this article is on how individuals subjectively experience their own, unique and personalised arrays of negative social phenomena. Social nothingness is the term I introduce to describe the sum total of these private symbolic universes, each of which contains the range of lost, unlived experiences of which the person is aware. This qualification is important in defining the scope of the investigation. Following Green’s (2011) nothing/nothingness distinction, social nothingness does not include the infinite expanse of everything that could possibly have happened, but rather the limited array of what, from an internal perspective, conspicuously did not.

This individual, subjective awareness of social nothingness may be direct and immediate or latent and delayed. It occurs when individuals notice something that they have not done, has not happened or is missing from their lives. Examples include unpursued career paths, unformed relationships, unborn children, unspoken words, damaged bodies, surrendered roles and abandoned routines. Other people also play a role in defining lost experience, whether as figures in the foreground of choices and decisions or as
background populations in a circumstantial landscape. Their reactions may even be what makes nothing apparent, drawing the attention of an individual who would not otherwise be concerned.

Previously, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, I explored how nothing happens at the micro-social level, through a snapshot empirical picture of situations, moments and encounters (cf. Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1983; Rock, 1979; Scott, 2019). Methodologically, this project was based on a qualitative study of 28 written personal stories gathered from participants online (Scott, 2019). These data revealed that nothing happens socially in relation to five themes: lost opportunities, silence, invisibility, emptiness and stillness. I argued that nothing is a meaningful form of social action, according to Weber’s (1922/1947) criteria, in being subjectively meaningful, oriented towards others and taking their views into account. It has a performative dimension, involving communicative acts and symbolic gestures (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Social nothingness is interactively accomplished in two different ways (Scott, 2019). Acts of commission involve consciously not doing, having or being something specific. When performed by the self, this reflects motives of resistance, avoidance, refusal and rebellion. Examples include turning down a job offer, disavowing an unwanted identity (e.g. a sex/gender assignation) and opting out of mainstream lifestyle practices (e.g. freeganism as an alternative to consumer capitalism). When performed by others or imposed by fate, commissive acts enforce states of loss or removal: for example, incarceration or bereavement. Acts of omission occur by passive default rather than conscious intentionality: instead of something being negated, there isn’t anything at all. Omissive acts are framed in terms of lack, deficiency and unrealised potential, which may be cared about or not. This produces states of being without or unformed social bonds. Examples include agnosticism, involuntary infertility, unchosen career paths and loneliness (Scott, 2019). Broadly speaking, the commission/omission distinction corresponds to a conventionally recognised contrast between negative value (lost, reduced or damaged substance) and formless neutrality (zero or absence).

In this article, I take another theoretical perspective to explore some different questions. Phenomenology promises to offer a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of social nothingness. How do individuals think, feel and talk about the contents that are missing from their lives? Through personal accounts, we can examine how negative social phenomena appear to imagination, memory and counterfactual phantasy, and what significant meanings they hold. How do people apprehend the objects, events, people and places that they have come to live without? What relevance do these phenomena assume in individual lifeworlds, and what role do they play in shaping self-identity? If the meaning of social nothingness shifts over time, what kinds of stories might people tell about their alternate selves from different vantage points?

In the following section, I outline some key concepts and principles of phenomenology imagined in reverse, to demonstrate how this perspective can be applied to the study of negative social phenomena. Then, in the main body of the article, I discuss in detail three processes of ‘negative noesis’ through which subjects relate to their non-existent objects. These are negative intentionality – how people hold motivational attitudes towards the negative social phenomena they perceive; negative embodiment – the material grounding of negational social acts as agentic capacity, or modes of being-in-the-
world; and **negative temporality** – the storytelling processes by which individuals make biographical sense of what is absent from their lives. Finally, I consider how these processes fit together within an overall framework, mapping out the theoretical architecture of social nothingness.

**Phenomenology reversed**

Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that has influenced interpretivist social theory (Inglis, 2018). It has two main strands: Husserl’s pure or transcendental approach and Sartre and Heidegger’s existential approach. This twin legacy can be traced through social phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Schutz, 1972), cognitive sociology (Zerubavel, 1983, 2015, 2018) and existential sociology (Douglas & Johnson, 1977; Kotarba & Fontana, 1987). All of these approaches aim to understand how people subjectively perceive, interpret and experience their own view of reality.

Husserl (1913/2012) began with the Kantian notion that we cannot have direct knowledge of objective reality, for human perception is always mediated by interpretive frames of reference. The mind apprehends phenomena rather than noumena, and these are subjective constructions. Husserl advised bracketing the natural attitude, which presumes that things can be known for what they really are, and instead adopting the phenomenological attitude, which questions how things manifest in awareness and come to appear real. Objects symbolically announce themselves to the conscious mind through modes of givenness, including attention, perception, imagination and memory. The totality of these contents at any moment in time constitutes the individual’s ‘lifeworld’ or subjective reality (Husserl, 1913/2012; Schutz, 1962). I suggest that the same applies to negative social phenomena, as we notice objects that disappear, fail to emerge or are conspicuously absent. Paradoxically, this creates a lifeworld of apparent non-appearance.

Subjectivity is materially grounded, embedded and embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013). Phenomenologists used pragmatist ideas (Dilthey, 1907/1954; James, 1890/2000) to explain how we encounter a world of perceptual objects in terms of their meaning, use or purpose. These properties are defined relative to our aims to perform goal-directed action; this directional stance is called intentionality (Husserl, 1913/2012). We notice those objects that are relevant and ignore everything else that is not. Reversing this, I propose the concept of **negative intentionality**: subjects can also relate purposefully to absent or missing objects, insofar as they can be imagined to be meaningful and relevant.

Objects are interconnected, gaining contextual meaning from the horizons in which they are embedded (Husserl, 1913/2012). Inner horizons are different sides, views or perspectives of an object that help us see it differently. Outer horizons are the contours of separate, other objects that provide contextual, relational meaning. Applied to social nothingness, inner horizons would include alternate versions of ourselves – the person whom I used to be, refuse to be or might one day become (Scott, 2020) – while outer horizons would include significant other people (Blumer, 1969) who influence or respond to an individual’s negational act.

Describing how subjects apprehend positive phenomena, Husserl (1913/2012) distinguished between **noema** (the object of perception) and **noesis** (the process or act of perception). These key concepts can be inverted to understand social nothingness, as follows.
Negative noema

Reversing Blumer’s (1969) concept of (positive, real) symbolic social objects, I suggest that the noema under investigation here are negative symbolic social objects. This is a subset of the wider category of negative social phenomena; I am using it here to emphasise the role of personally significant associative meanings. Negative symbolic social objects can manifest in different forms, including no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places. Let us examine one of these in some detail.

Two important kinds of no-body are the non-self and non-other. The first negatively inverts the reflexive social self as an experiencing ‘I’ (Husserl, 1913/2012; James, 1890/2000) and objectified ‘Me’ (Cooley, 1902/1992; Mead, 1934). We can imagine alternate versions of ourselves based on unperformed actions and unformed identities, viewing these objects (non-selves) from an external perspective. Reversing the concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), we find impossible selves: unrealised potential versions whom I did not or cannot become. For example, ex-identities are based on giving up a previously central role (Ebaugh, 1988), and never-identities are based on abstinent refusal (Mullaney, 2006).

The non-self is different from the Buddhist no-self that is unboundaried and spiritually transcendent (Immergut & Kaufman, 2014), for it retains a sense of substance, unity and individual coherence. Just as self-identity may be a convenient illusion that turns subjectivity into subjecthood (Hume, 1739/2011), so too does non-selfhood afford a sense of biographical agency. We compose stories of unrealised identity from the perspective of a thinking subject: ‘I’ did not become this or that ‘Me’ because of things that never happened (Scott, 2020). As we shall see later, these objects can be viewed by retention (no longer) or protention (not yet) (Husserl, 1913/2012).

Non-others are ghostly figures representing absent, non-emergent or missing people, to whom we feel connected through continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996). This builds on the idea of relational selfhood (Harré & Secord, 1972; Mead, 1934; Shotter & Gergen, 1989) which is used in the sociology of personal lives (May, 2017; Smart, 2007). It also corresponds to the existentialist notion of being-for-others (Sartre, 1943), which carries the risk of engulfment, entanglement or petrification (Laing, 1960). Perhaps we can non-be for others, or be for non-others, moving between mirrored worlds.

Spinelli (2005) explains that other people appear not as they really are but as objects of intentional action or motivated feeling. Non-others, too, are viewed in contingent ways, depending on the subject’s perspectival stance. Non-others emerge in relational dialogue with the non-self: populating the outer horizons of the lifeworld, they shape the appearance of the inner scene. The non-self/non-other duality reminds us again of reflexive social selfhood, echoing concepts like the looking glass self (Cooley, 1902/1992), reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902/1992) and taking the view of the other (Mead, 1934). Following the above-mentioned point, I might imagine unreal non-others who appear in my world (a child I never bore, a friend I failed to support) or an unreal non-self who appears in someone else’s world (the schoolteacher who discouraged my ambition, the date who turned me down).
**Negative noesis**

Negative noesis combines two perceptual processes: presentification (Husserl, 1913/2012) and deprestation (Fink, 1930). Whereas presentation is the recognition of empirically real, directly manifest objects, presentification is the imaginary invocation, or ‘making present’, of things that are not empirically there (Husserl, 1913/2012). Hence, conventionally studied positive social phenomena are produced by presentation, whereas the mirror world of negative social phenomena is produced by presentification (Scott, 2019). Husserl’s presentifying acts include memory, hope and expectation (invoking objects that exist elsewhere in temporal consciousness), empathy (inferring an object’s existence in other minds) and imagination or phantasy (creating unreal objects that do not exist at all).

Depresentation (Fink, 1930) is a stage prior to presentification, whereby we apprehend the negative empty space from which objects could potentially emerge. To remember, we must first forget. To mourn, we must first grieve. Depresentation characterises ‘worldless’ states of mind, such as wondering, dreaming and nostalgia (Fink, 1930). Negative symbolic social objects are seen against a background of relational contrast: nothing implies an existence that is lost, wanted or away. This is reflected in personal tales through allusions to invisibility and emptiness. For example, a migrant remembered the city she had left, imagining how it might now be with her still in it (Scott, 2019).

Epistemologically, negative noesis raises a problem. We are attempting to examine a domain of reality whose existence is already contingent—the social world of ‘things that aren’t there’ (Croissant, 2014, p. 4), and furthermore, to do so via verbal self-reports of subjective process. This leaves us two steps removed from the originally underlying object that we seek to understand. In Schutz’s (1972) methodology, it blends first and second order constructs: lay understandings of reality versus theoretical interpretations of those ideas. If all we can access are representations of representations, is it even possible to research social nothingness as the pure ‘thing itself’ (Husserl, 1913/2012)?

My answer to this is to bracket the question as a sideways step into the natural attitude. Phenomenologically, our aim is not to find out what social things objectively do not exist but rather to understand how people subjectively perceive their non-existence. While there may be a gap between direct experience and reported accounts, some methodologies are more effective than others at reducing this. My own project (Scott, 2019) invited participants to write personal stories as first-hand accounts rather than respond to the performative interaction dynamics of a face-to-face interview (cf. Denzin, 1970).

The following sections explore three aspects of negative noesis, reversing some key phenomenological concepts. **Negative intentionality** concerns how people adopt motivational feelings and attitudes towards negative social phenomena. **Negative embodiment** describes the material grounding of negational social acts as agentic capacity, or modes of being-in-the-world. **Negative temporality** considers how people make biographical sense of their unlived experiences and use them to tell stories of self-identity.
**Negative intentionality**

The principle of intentionality describes the noetic relation between subject and object in terms of expected modes of engagement and action potential. Existential phenomenology maintains that consciousness is nothing in itself but rather always takes an object: we must be conscious of something (Sartre, 1943). This implies a thinking subject, who has agency and will towards their ‘things’ (Nietzsche, 1882/2018). The human condition of freedom condemns us to making choices in relation to objects (Sartre, 1943), whether by purposeful decisions to act or by changing one’s attitudinal stance (Frankl, 1959/2004).

Existential sociology meets with symbolic interactionism in translating these ideas to the social world (Kotarba & Fontana, 1987). People orient themselves pragmatically towards symbolic social objects (Blumer, 1969), perceiving them according to the use or relevance they offer and designing conscious motives. These objects include not only material artefacts but also other people, different selves and options for decision. Although sociology has theorised the attributed qualities of (positive) symbolic social objects, Borer (2019) argues that we have not paid enough attention to the processes of self-object relation.

As noted earlier, I suggest we explore the noetic relations between the self and its negative symbolic social objects. Performing negational acts involves holding a motivational stance of attitudes and feelings towards absent things. This relation may occur by commission (rejection, refusal, detachment and removal) or omission (irrelevance, neglect, waste and lack). This suggests the mirror image of Mead’s (1934) four-stage act: perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation. Negative symbolic social objects can also be noticed, (un)wanted, pursued/avoided and recognised as complete. For example, a transgender person views with distaste the assigned category they rejected, while an only child imagines the siblings she could have had (Scott, 2019).

Negative intentionality can be directed both forwards and back: it tends towards lost or missing objects by a felt sense of meaningful connection but also implies retroactive movement away from foreclosed paths. We find this in studies of space and place as sites of negated identity. Borer (2008, 2010) showed how Boston local residents formed collective images of belonging to their neighbourhood: they remembered a beloved baseball park and anticipated the redevelopment of a derelict firehouse. Similarly, Milligan (2003) reports how former university students nostalgically remembered a campus coffee shop as having shaped their golden years.

Through commissive negative intentionality, once-known objects appear conspicuously gone. Some-thing or some-body specific that previously existed (materially or symbolically) is surrendered, removed or destroyed. An obvious example of this is bereavement, when significant others are taken away. Unreal, ghostly figures manifest through memory traces, leaving a ‘comet tail’ (Husserl, 1913/2012) of retrograde connection. *Haunting*, then, is a first noetic process, through which subjects relate to no-bodies as missing figures (Gordon, 2008). Objects of the inner world may directly represent the dead or more subtly express our needs for them in phantasy (Klein, 1937). The mourning subject understands themselves as relational residue (Roseneil, 2009): the leftover, remaining matter of a now one-sided bond. Haunting also applies to living...
Longing and yearning relate subjects to no-things that appear out of reach. These might include damaged material objects (my old car or young body) or abandoned physical places (my homeland or junior school). Cooley (1902/1992) argued that selfhood is defined by what is ‘me’ or ‘mine’, and so logically, the same must apply to what is not: objects of non-possession that are ‘not-mine’ (Scott, 2020). These might be past potential options that a person once turned down: job offers declined, travel destinations unvisited, consumer goods not bought. When such no-things are highly valued, their non-possession evokes negative emotions, such as regret (wishing you had chosen yes instead of no), envy (resenting those who do have the thing you want) or nostalgia (yearning to reclaim an idealised former state).

Estrangement occurs when objects alter beyond recognition, forcing subjects to relate to them anew. Changing forms create a discomforting sense of alienation (Heidegger, 1927/1996) as reality manifests in a strange, unfamiliar way. Encounters with the uncanny occur sporadically in everyday life, punctuating the mundane (Waskul & Waskul, 2016). This can result from bodily illness and injury, discussed in the next section. It can also occur at the hands of others, when social reactions and judgements challenge relational bonds. An object’s status may be rendered ambiguous, disputed or crudely redefined when others fail to see it from the subject’s own perspective. For example, studies of pregnancy loss reveal how parents suffer disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) when their ‘some-body’ significant is dismissed as ‘no-body’ by brisk clinical staff (Cacciatore, 2010).

Reconnection is a process of relating to what is left behind after an object disappears. This may be an empty space, marking the spot where something used to be. The constitutive outside (Hall, 1996) of contours and borders defines the shape of an absent form or the lack of a substantive filling. For example, Hogben (2006) describes how families of missing persons keep their bedrooms physically intact, using furniture, possessions and clothing to hold the space ready in case they should return. Negative symbolic social objects can thus appear as containers of nothing: shells, boxes and vessels from which matter is extracted (Scott, 2019). Empty no-where places can also be reimagined as symbolic portals, bridging one world with another. For example, family members revisit a café their grandmother used to frequent, using it to re-encounter her (Berns, 2019).

Substitute, relic and replacement objects also invite reconnection: new artefacts that fill the space where something used to be. Stigma objects (Goffman, 1963) such as prosthetic limbs and walking sticks perform substitutive work. Battle scars from surgery tell tales of survival (Hopkins, 2003) and help the body ‘keep the score’ (Van der Kolk, 2015). Patients relate to their wheelchairs, wigs and hospital rooms with ambivalent attitudes of pride and creative ownership (Dua, 2011; Warin, 2010). We look at photographs of loved ones, tend graves, build ghost bikes and roadside memorials (Santino, 2005) as negatively intentional acts towards tangible stand-ins for someone who isn’t there.

Through omissive negative intentionality, subjects relate to objects that have failed to materialise. ‘Any-things’ that remain unformed, nebulous or hazy to discern can still be significant and meaningful. These negative symbolic social objects become apparent
through the recognition that something expected or wanted has not emerged. In the depresented (Fink, 1930) space from which a figure might have formed, we find nothing – a blankness and deficiency of anything at all. This evokes feelings of disappointment, a ‘retroactive crossing out’ of what we had assumed could happen (Husserl, 1913/2012). For example, women who experience involuntary childlessness wistfully imagine their unborn (Letherby, 2015), single household residents feel lonely for the company they miss (Jamieson & Simpson, 2015), and shyness makes us feel self-conscious about not having anything to say (Scott, 2007).

In such omissive cases, the non-event or situation is unintentional in origin, as no-one consciously designed its void. However, negative intentionality occurs at the point of recognition. Through the relational act of missing, subjects consider what has failed to emerge, observing (dis-)advantage in the state of being without. For example, we wistfully romanticise the ‘road not taken’ (Frost, 1916) by imagining discarded options to be better than the real: unchosen career paths or jilted lovers appear retrospectively perfect, and the grass always looks greener on the other side of choice. This often leads to a third omissive noetic stance of wishing, the passive precursor of wanting and will (May, 1969). Other people’s attitudes can also create omissive relevance, when their alternative perspective marks an absence as significant. For example, an asexual person may not identify with that term until others question their lack of sexual desire (Scott et al., 2016).

**Negative embodiment**

Phenomenology recognises the lived body as a mode of being-in-the-world (Husserl, 1913/2012). Embodied practices of sensation, movement and expression help subjects to navigate the material realm. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2013), the body is a ‘constant here’, a familiar home base from which to encounter the world, as well as an affective background against which figures stand out. The habit body (1945/2013) is a repertoire of ‘I can’ capabilities and action potentials, a range of possibilities for doing with effect.

In parallel ways, we embody lost, unlived experiences. Sometimes, bodies are directly implicated in acts of doing nothing or absorbing its effects. Other times, more subtly, the sensory affective background affects how people perceive nothing to have happened or imagine the things they did not do. We touch, move and interact with negative social phenomena, as objects we feel close to yet cannot reach. Through curtailed gestures of extension, we lose hold of things that fall out of our possession (dropping, rejecting or surrendering) or sever connections with people whom we miss (bereavement, separation and breakups). Bodies respond emotionally towards nothing and bear socially affective moods (cf. Heidegger, 1927/1996).

Commissive negative embodiment occurs through acute illness and injuries that damage or limit the body. These events occur on a specific occasion, with a known cause and immediate effect upon one particular structure or function. The individual is suddenly thrown into awareness of their new physical state: being incapable, less able, restricted or confined. The body becomes an obstacle to doing rather than a resource towards action – an ‘I can’t’ rather than ‘I can’. This suggests a shift from the natural to the phenomenological attitude. We usually know the habit body as a coherent, integrated unit (Spinelli, 2005) that behaves according to our will. When one part goes wrong, these
expectations are disappointed (Husserl, 1913/2012) and the familiar seems strange. The
some-body through which I understood myself is replaced by no-body I know.

Traumatic impairment can deeply affect personal identity, particularly for those
whose sense of self is bound up with physical fitness (Altheide & Pfuhl, 1980). Athletes
face radical biographical disruption (Bury, 1982) when forced to rethink their future
plans. Smith and Sparkes (2008) interviewed Jamie, a young man whose spinal cord
injury abruptly ended his rugby-playing career. Alienated and bewildered, he said, ‘[t]he
body I had was lost. Now what?’ (2008, p. 222). Similarly, my participant Hanna
described how a knee injury forced her to give up running, creating multiple forms of
embodied loss (Scott, 2019). Her physical body lost its hard-won fitness, her habit body
lost the routine daily practice and leaving the running club deprived her social body
of a circle of friends. Colleagues asked her whether she had run to work; explaining
that she could not was a ‘re-opening of the wound’ (Scott, 2019, p. 36). Consequently,
Hanna suffered a crisis of identity: ‘If I was no longer a runner, who was I? ... The
hole in my life was gaping’ (Scott, 2019, pp. 35–36).

Other forms of bodily change lead to omissive negative embodiment. Rather than the
sudden and violent removal of one specific part, there may be a more gradual decline into
degeneration or deficiency (Scott, 2019). This can occur with chronic illness and dis-
ability, when slowly emerging incapacity progressively encroaches upon everyday rou-
tines (Charmaz, 1993). Movement and coordination can no longer be executed
unreflexively and must be consciously relearned. The person’s outer horizons may also
be affected, as significant others (Blumer, 1969) surround fading no-bodies. Family
members caring for dementia patients report feeling as if the individual has already died
and been replaced by a stranger who merely resembles them (Gillies, 2011; Sweeting &
Gilhooly, 1997). Not being able to hold, touch and care for a loved one may alter these
others’ embodiment, through a felt sense of being without.

Omissive negative embodiment also arises from the perception of empty space. Through
the process of depresentation (Fink, 1930), subjects apprehend a vast chasm, deep hole or expanse in which resides nothing at all. The surrounding shape of this emptiness indicates expected contents, but there is not anything inside. Paradoxically,
the conspicuous absence of matter may be felt more noticeably than its habitual presence
would have been. This is shown in studies of phantom limb, the sensation reported by
amputees that their lost body part remains attached (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013; Miller,
1978). Similar ideas apply to body dysmorphia, where shapes retract kaleidoscopically,
and anorexia nervosa, where absence is sought. Hornbacher (1998) recalls how she
measured her weight loss inversely: not by the disappearance of flesh but by the growth
of empty space. Triumphantly, she held aloft her no-body as a reinvented self.

When empty body spaces form through omissive unintention, subjects may respond in
distress. People with alopecia areata report that hair loss dramatically alters their facial
appearance and threatens their known self-identity (cf. Martindale, 2019; West, 2010).
They may suffer an existential crisis of fractured integrity (cf. Erikson, 1959; Riley,
2009) or ontological disintegration (Laing, 1960). One research participant told Dua
(2011, p. 92) that she had a ‘feeling of being imperfect ... an internal brokenness which
I can’t fix’. Embodied emptiness manifests in everyday life, through a series of adjust-
ments to daily routines and practices (Charmaz, 1993). For example, participants report
the bleak sadness of vacuuming up shed hair from their carpets and pillows (Hilton et al., 2008).

Finally, negative embodiment can be pursued commissively to repair, rebuild and reconnect with lost aspects of the self. The slow movement (Honoré, 2004) emerged in reaction to the contemporary western culture of speed (Tomlinson, 2007), sparking a growing interest in lifestyle practices of stillness and slowing down (Scott, 2019). Mindfulness and meditation encourage deliberate non-doing and a refocus on the inner world (Stone, 2013). Embodied yoga (Walsh, 2019) teaches still poses that suggest intentional action potential: for example, The Archer holds a bow and arrow, aimed towards a target. As May (1981) remarked, moments of stillness, pause and reflection anticipate the potential for movement and our freedom to choose. When nothing is happening, anything is possible and something vital could emerge.

**Negative temporality**

Time provides a frame of reference through which reality appears. Social time is organised through coordinated action (Adam, 2004) and reified constructions, such as clocks, calendars and schedules (Zerubavel, 1981). As a feature of historical imagination, time allows whole societies to transcend linearity, project themselves forward and back and recognise transformative events (Abbott, 1991; Sewell, 1996). This can be negatively inverted: for example, in Skocpol’s (1979) identification of politically turbulent states where social revolutions never happened, and Bernstein’s (1994) historical sideshadowing, which describes strategically forgotten mass trauma.

Here, however, I want to focus on narrative temporality: the ways in which individuals experience their lived and unlived lives as unfolding in parallel over time. As Husserl (1913/2012) said, we view ourselves by looking down ‘indicative lines’ in both directions, forward and back. Located on these inner horizons, we face alternate figures in the folgewelt (past or former worlds) and vorwelt (possible, imagined worlds) (Schutz, 1962). Although we live life forwards, we review it backwards (Ricoeur, 1984/1990) and can move between different perspectives. Thus, the current self relates to its history and future across a temporal arc, stretching over the life-course (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

From the standpoint of the present, we relate not only to ‘real’ past or future identities (Steedman, 1986) but also to those that are unreal, imaginary or impossible. No-body figures manifest as alternative versions of ‘Me’ that have disappeared, been denied or failed to develop. Non-selves stretch out for biographical review, extending to the past through negative retention (selves whom I have not become) and the future through negative protention (selves whom I cannot/will not become) (cf. Husserl, 1913/2012). Identity is thus mirrored by its own negative self-image. Behind the performed arc of narrative progression, parallel trajectories unfold through regressive undoing or unbecoming.

**Negative protention: Trails of impossibility**

Projecting forwards, subjects make present hypothetical selves whose futures are foreclosed. Aside from mortality awareness, whereby we (rarely) contemplate the prospect of our permanent non-being (Becker, 1973), there are smaller ways to meet an ego death
(Jung, 1961). This often happens through reflection on significant moments of deciding against or being unable to pursue a potential role-identity. A pivotal turning point moment (Strauss, 1969) may stand out as a landmark on the inner horizon: for example, commissively declining a job offer or omissively not being offered one.

The existential crossroads metaphor describes the dilemma of facing a number of options and feeling the burden of choice (Cooper, 2015; Wollheim, 1984). Similar images are Heidegger’s (1927/1996) forest clearing or Levinas’s (1961) opening: an empty space in which any-thing is possible, and any-body could emerge. In these situations, the subject must take a leap into faith (Kierkegaard, 1843/2005) without knowing what kind of self they will become. While we often agonise over the vertigo of possibility (Sartre, 1943) by anticipating the positively real, we can also wonder how discarded, unmade selves might have turned out (Phillips, 2012; Scott, 2020). For example, a man who did not dare to ask out a woman he liked later ‘kicked himself’ for missing out on their becoming a couple (Scott, 2020, p. 156).

This implies a commissive negational act of choosing against. Making a positive choice towards something demands a negative turn away from something else. Being aware of different possibilities, at the time or afterwards, means that unpursued options appear on the horizon as negative symbolic social objects. Although these are unreal and unknowable, they are perceptually relevant (Husserl, 1913/2012) through their meaningful contrast with the real. Impossible futures gain poignancy by virtue of the very fact of their negation: when time is limited, it seems more precious (Yalom, 1980) and when lost, it becomes tragic. Yalom suggests that choices demand sacrifice: ‘Alternatives exclude... for every yes there must be a no’ (1989/2000, pp. 10–11). The absoluteness and irreversibility of this is soberingly death-like and evokes a form of grief. There is a pain in letting go and never being able to find out what could have been.

Reflecting on this makes us question whether life might have been better lived a different way or by a different self (Phillips, 2012). It is easy to idealise the unknown path and indulge rose-tinted fantasies about the world behind the mirror (Scott, 2020). Existential guilt (Rank, 1936) accompanies the fear that we may have made the wrong decisions, taken dead-end paths and let good things slip away (Scott, 2020). Have we made mistakes, betrayed ourselves, neglected our potential? For example, my participant Madeleine reflected on her decision not to become a pianist, like the other members of her family. ‘It would have been a good thing to have had in common. I could have made them proud. My main feeling is of regret and shame that I let my parents down’ (Scott, 2019, p. 33).

Comparing real and unreal lives evokes counterfactual emotions: feelings about lost alternatives and questions of ‘what if?’ Negative counterfactuals may point either upwards or downwards (Markman et al., 1993) depending on whether the unpursued option appears better or worse than the actualised reality. Emotional negative protention can occur in both directions. Prospectively, it happens in anticipation of mistakes; this explains the tendency to non-decision-making, procrastination or activity inertia (Anderson, 2003). Retrospectively, it happens when the current ‘I’ looks back upon its former incarnation, whose actions have foreclosed a future ‘Me’.
Regret, sadness, anger and envy are the most common counterfactual feelings, as in Madeleine’s example, but there may also be positive reactions of pride, relief and happiness (Scott, 2020). One might gladly have chosen not to have children, ended a bad relationship or escaped a dreadful fate. Deciding not to take the subway on the day of a terrorist attack would certainly make the grass appear greener on this side.

Positive counterfactual feeling can also accompany acts of omission. A substitutive, consolatory plan B option may be reappraised in the light of how it could have held less value had we been able to pursue plan A (i.e. not had to experience the non-doing). For example, we may end up having pets instead of children or taking a second-choice career. With hindsight, these might turn out to have been the best things all along, but we would never have realised that without the loss of plan A. So now, instead of resigned acceptance or bittersweet sour grapes, we might feel sobered, humble gratitude or delighted pain relief.

**Negative retention: Reverse biographical identity work**

Projecting backwards, we review nothing’s role in our lives. Storytelling is a universal human tendency, by which we impose order, structure and meaning on personal experience (Bruner, 1991; Plummer, 2019). Arranging episodes into linear sequences, connected by characters, motives and thematic plotlines, provides a sense of coherence and purpose (McAdams, 1993/1997; Polkinghorne, 1988). This biographical identity work (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995/2000) tends to focus on positive, lived experience: narrating the life story as a series of events that I did or that happened to me. However, surely the same principle applies to the appraisal of negative, unlived experience? We can perform reverse biographical identity work (Scott, 2020) by connecting non-events and non-selves in a coherent script.

Bad faith narratives (cf. Craib, 1994; Sartre, 1943) are stories we tell ourselves to evade responsibility. Rather than owning undone acts of commission or omission, it is easier to reason that other people, fate or circumstance prevented us from doing otherwise. Nostalgia is the bittersweet imagination of places or times to which one cannot return (May, 2017). It is a story of displacement, of belonging elsewhere, which locates our best, unrealised selves safely there-and-then instead of here-and-now (Wilson, 2015). Nostalgic scripts make a plea for continuity (Davis, 1979) across the temporal arc, to resolve identity uncertainty (Davis, 1979). Bad faith narratives can also be used dramaturgically, to perform non-accountability. Van den Scott et al. (2015) observed the ‘eulogy work’ of speeches by contestants who were eliminated from reality TV shows. As excommunication threatened a symbolic death, the contestants saved face by blaming their rivals or the TV producers.

Good faith narratives are formed when actors recognise their social nothingness and take ownership of its meaning. I call this negative responsibility assumption. Reverse biographical identity work then involves making sense of how nothing has happened, what it personally means and how it has shaped one’s self-identity. Lost experiences from the past or future can be faced, appraised and learned from rather than distorted or denied. Like sewing rogue, odd-looking patches into a home-made quilt, negative imperfections can be woven into the fabric of identity. Life stories are fuller and more balanced when they incorporate unlived experience.
Negative responsibility assumption involves challenging one’s own rehearsed scripts – a self-transgressive act (Scott, 2020). Rewriting the past can risk ‘awakening’ a secret or hidden truth (DeGloma, 2014), such as acknowledging a failed relationship or regretting unspoken words. Rewriting the future can mean grieving ‘project loss’: hopes, dreams and ambitions for promised selves that now lie abandoned to perish (Yalom, 1989/2000). For example, the death of a child not only erases the vision of whom she/he could have become but also closes identity paths for the parent (Lovell, 2001). Even voluntary role surrender may evoke wistful reflections on being without, and forward nostalgia (Wilson, 2020) for impossible selves.

Retelling negative narratives may result in neither happy escape tales nor sad and sorry scripts, but somewhere greyer, in-between. Ambivalent but more realistic feelings arise from facing compromise: coming to terms with the disappointment (Craib, 1994) of a mixed blessing or humbly appreciating a silver-lined cloud. This reminds us that the non-self is an illusion, just like the consciously lived self. It is provisional, unfinished: a fragile strand that glues identity together (Jackson, 2010) but that easily can break. If narrative selfhood is a capacity, a process of crafting one’s tale (Spinelli, 2005, p. 79), the same can be said of its shadow, the negative narrator who re-authors lost experience.

**Mapping the architecture of unlived experience**

This article has explored the uncharted terrain of a lost phenomenological world. The realm of *social nothingness* hides behind the mirror of personal life, offering reversed alternatives to the known and familiar. A component of the subjective lifeworld, this realm contains the unique set of *negative social phenomena* that each individual apprehends as being significantly non-existent. These personalised arrays of *negative symbolic social objects* appear in stories of identity and can be biographically meaningful.

Subjects perceive and orient themselves towards various types of negative symbolic social object: no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places. Following Husserl (1913/2012), I conceptualise this as a relational process of *negative noesis* towards *negative noema*. While social interaction accomplishes the original production of negative noema, through acts of commission or omission, this discussion has focused on the subsequent, self-reflexive acts through which individuals recognise their absent things. Negative noesis involves two perceptual techniques of depresentation (clearing background space) and presentification (making objects present), which allow subjects to imagine, think and feel about the personally unreal.

I have explored three aspects of negative noesis, inverting key phenomenological concepts. *Negative intentionality* describes the motivated attitudinal stance subjects take towards their negative symbolic social objects. The commissive variant of this concerns specific objects of rejection, refusal, detachment or removal, in relation to which subjects experience haunting, longing and yearning, estrangement or reconnection. The omissive variant concerns more nebulous objects of non-emergence, deficiency, lack or waste, which subjects recognise often with disappointment, missing or wishing, but sometimes with bemused indifference.

*Negative embodiment* describes the material grounding of negational social acts as agentic capacity or modes of being-in-the-world. Commissively, this may involve losing
hold of objects of corporeal connection, through separation, severance, impairment, incapacity or restriction; in response, subjects experience feelings of disruption, disturbance and disappointment. Omissively, bodies may decline or degenerate, leading to the depresentified awareness of empty space; this often evokes feelings of distressing defamiliarisation, but it can allow triumphant pride.

Negative temporality refers to the perception of negated past and future selves, stretching out for biographical review. Through negative protention, subjects see impossible future identities, which they may have commissively chosen against or omissively found foreclosed. This evokes counterfactual feelings about alternate ways of being and undiscovered lives. Through negative retention, subjects reflect back upon lost or former worlds; good or bad faith narratives serve as storytelling devices for making sense of unmade selves. Reverse biographical identity work can be constructively adaptive, when individuals engage in negative responsibility assumption and embark on quests for meaning.

Although these three noetic aspects are analytically distinct, empirically they could intersect. We have seen this at various points in the foregoing discussion and can imagine other combinations. For example, negative embodiment and negative temporality converged in Hanna’s case when sudden injury curtailed her athletic plans and in Hornbachener’s account of paradoxical weight loss. Negative intentionality meets negative embodiment in the examples of slowness and pause, as well as other situations like imprisonment, where physical confinement and restricted movement deprive inmates of their liberty. Negative temporality shapes negative intentionality when the subjective meaning of an unlived experience changes over time. For example, Madeleine reimagined her commissive decision not to become a pianist as an omissive waste of potential. A negational act may thus become more or less salient at different stages of the life course. Something I indifferently neglected to do when I was young may come to haunt me now that it is too late, while something else I used to miss may fade as I let go.

Viewing this realm in its entirety, social nothingness appears in two ways. On the one hand, it seems to be processual, unfolding in a linear form through a traceable trajectory. The social life of nothing (Scott, 2019) begins with interactional encounters that accomplish negational acts, moves through ripples and waves of relational impact and has productive consequences that change self-identity. On the other hand, we see a continuous cycle of spirals and loops that remains perpetually unfinished. Negative noema change form and manifest differently, counterfactual emotions ebb and flow, and recomposed stories never reach definitive conclusions. Nothingness comes out of but also produces somethingness, through these recursive iterations between the positive and negative, real and unreal and lived and unlived. Sitting with contingency, in the space between these worlds, we apprehend the nothingness in everything that matters.

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