

Absence and Expectation
Gwen Ottinger, Drexel University

Expectation as the Source of Absence

In his provocative article, “Absences: Methodological Note on Nothing, in Particular” (2014), Scott Frickel outlines the limitations of STS research on absences. His critique, as I understand it, is three-fold: First, researchers have overwhelmingly focused on relative absences—“things that are not here’ but were once, or have become hidden, or are somewhere else”—to the neglect of absolute absences, “things that are not there or anywhere else and probably never were” (87-88). Second, studies that approach absolute absences, in particular studies of “undone science,” study not the absences themselves but the activities of the actors that bring them to light. Third, researchers’ approach to absences, especially those that are absolute, have been insufficiently empirical, and, as such, have not brought us any closer to a generalizable understanding of what causes absences, where we can expect them to occur, or what their systemic consequences are.

Among these criticisms, the third is the most concrete and well grounded. An empirically based, explanatory model for absences would indeed be a welcome complement to the abstract theorizing that so often constitutes research on absences. And Frickel’s methodological prescriptions are clearly aimed at moving us toward that goal. The suggestions that researchers carefully situate their study of absences in social and historical context, measure the shape, density, and relations of absences, and develop comparative studies, in particular, are helpful in envisioning a research program that could yield a general understanding of absences without denying the particularities of individual cases of absence.

The first and second of his critiques, however, are more elusive. With no concrete examples of absolute absence offered, one is left to wonder what would count as something that had never been anywhere—and why it would be interesting to study it. It is similarly hard to conceive what it might mean to study undone science *itself* separate from the social organizing that accompanies it, although Frickel’s example from his research on post-Katrina environmental monitoring offers some clues.

In this response, I argue that all absences are in some sense relative: specifically, it is only meaningful to talk about absence in relation to expectations about what ought to be present. As such, the distinction between that which has somehow gone missing and that which was never there is not a methodologically useful one. What would be useful—and still fit within the methodological guidance that Frickel offers—would be to pay more explicit attention to the expectations that define our sense of absence, not only as kind of “modest reflexive awareness” (91), but as a way of modulating the focus of our studies and increasing our ability to take the measure of absences themselves.

When we identify an absence, we implicitly contrast an existing state of affairs characterized by a certain constellation of objects, people, ideas, data, and so forth, to an imagined one that includes additional members of these categories, or even additional categories. Those additional members of our imagined world are the absences from our

present one. Things that are not currently present, but that are also not present in any other world we imagine, could perhaps be considered absolute absences in Frickel's sense of never having been anywhere, but they are certainly not accessible to empirical study.

But I don't believe that this is what Frickel has in mind, at least not primarily, when he asks us to pay more attention to absolute absences. Rather, his categories of relative and absolute absence seem to me to be primarily characterized by the source of the idea that something is missing. That is, from whence comes the thought that, in some other state of affairs, something else could or should be present? In the case of relative absences, as he describes them, the expectation or imagination of that something else comes from the fact that it *used* to be there. And for that reason, I would suggest, these cases are comparatively easy to study, because the worlds we contrast when we talk about the absence have both, at some point, existed.

In research on undone science, which he positions as a type of absolute absence, expectations about what else could be present have overwhelmingly come from social movement actors, who point to things that they would like to know but don't, and to research questions that could be asked but aren't. It is, I think, because STS researchers have largely taken on their informants' definitions of absences—exploring, explaining, and highlighting them—that he charges work in this area with focusing mainly on “the social movement organizations, tactics, and discourses that identify undone science and target it as a political, social, or environmental problem” (88).

If neither of these approaches satisfies Frickel's interest in studying the absent science itself, then, are there other sources of expectation, other aids to imagining alternate worlds, that would be better suited to measuring and modeling absence in technoscience? His example from his own work suggests some possibilities. Examining the spatial distribution of soil sampling in post-Katrina New Orleans, Frickel and his colleagues find that sampling was not conducted, or not conducted to the same extent, in all of the city's neighborhoods. Their conclusion, it is worth noting, rests on the expectation that environmental monitoring after a disaster *would* be conducted evenly across the entire affected geographic area. Similarly, they note that carcinogenicity studies for 70% of the chemicals found in the sampling do not exist—a significant absence *if* we expect that the EPA would want to ensure that their risk assessments were based on comparable information about all of the chemicals that potentially posed a health risk.

What distinguishes this study from other research on absences, it seems to me, it not the absoluteness of the absences, or even the study's empiricism, but the source of the expectations against which absences are measured. Rather than finding absences in a comparison of what used to be to what is, or relying on social movement organizations to point out absences relative to their particular concerns, this study applies abstract criteria to show where something should be, but isn't. In particular, investigators expect that epistemic resources will be distributed evenly across a geographic area, and they expect regulatory agencies to demonstrate consistency in their pursuit and application of knowledge.

Expecting Strategically

Judging absence against abstract principles—fairness, consistency, completeness, coherence, to name a few—has significant advantages, both methodologically and politically. It creates the possibility of measuring absence by, in many cases, offering standards that can be quantified: e.g. are all chemicals studied? Did each neighborhood have the same number of samples? Drawing on expectations defined independent of particular case studies also enables comparison across cases in a way that proceeding from actor-defined absences cannot. Finally, studying the absences that appear when our current world is judged against the standards that we as researchers would like to hold it to, against our visions for a better world, may permit us to draw attention to absences that are not visible from the standpoint of social movement organizations but that may nonetheless be consequential for our shared political projects.

Turning to case-independent criteria to help us take the measure of absences, of course, makes the kind of “modest reflexive awareness” that Frickel describes all the more important: it is all together too easy to imagine a framework based on abstract principles rendering actors’ situated understandings of absences less visible. But studies that define absence relative to such principles need not supplant studies that define absence in relation to previously existing states of knowledge or studies that draw on the definitions of social movement groups. On the contrary, our understanding of absence seems likely to become richer if it is grounded expectations from multiple sources—at least to the extent that we acknowledge those expectations explicitly and choose them strategically.

Contact details: ottinger@drexel.edu

References

Frickel, Scott. “Absences: Methodological Note about Nothing, in Particular.” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 1 (2014): 85-95.