‘They don’t like girls hanging around there’:conflicts over recreational space in rural Northamptonshire

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This paper provides new insights into girls’ use of recreational spaces within rural areas. We draw upon data from in-depth discussion work with 10–14 year old girls undertaken in rural Northamptonshire to show how conflict between adults and children, rival groups of children, and boys and girls influences the social ownership of recreational spaces. In contrast to the rural childhood myth, we disclose geographies of anxiety, tension and disharmony.

Introduction

The recent surge of interest in the study of children and childhood within geography (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Matthews and Limb 1999; Skelton and Valentine 1998) has brought with it a keener recognition of the diversity of children’s experiences of growing up (Matthews *et al.* 2000). Despite this burgeoning interest, few studies have examined the contemporary experience of childhood in the countryside. Although Philo (1992) drew attention to this neglected rural geography almost a decade ago, children continue to be ‘invisible’ in most rural studies. The lived worlds of rural young people have yet to be systematically explored, deconstructed and problematized (Matthews *et al.* 1999).

In childhood research little work has been under-taken on how girls make use of outdoor environments, especially beyond urban settings (McRobbie 1991; Pearce 1996; Wulff 1995). Teenage girls, who are at an in-between age—not really children any- more and yet not adult women—have rarely been studied outside of the context of home spaces and domestic relations (Skelton 2000). The rural outdoor geographies of teenage girls are doubly ‘hidden’, with both girls and the rural outdoors neglected.

This paper sets out to provide new insights into these neglected geographies. We focus upon young girls’ use of space within and views of the country- side. In particular, we examine the conflict that arises between various user groups over the social owner-ship of recreational spaces.[1] We begin to uncover some of the multiple realities of girls’ use of play spaces and their coping strategies for dealing with conflict and collision.

The rural childhood myth

There is a multiplicity of meanings which are bound up with the concept of 'the rural'. However, in the United Kingdom there exists a popular 'myth' within which particular landscapes, occupations, social structures and ways of life are perceived as rural (Bunce 1994; Halfacree 1995). This rural 'myth' (or rural idyll) equates with tranquility, communion with nature and 'authentic' community life. An integral aspect of the rural idyll is the rural childhood 'myth' - the idealized countryside is commonly understood to be the optimal setting for the innocence that is childhood (Jones 1999).

Country childhoods are understood in terms of:

a synthesis of innocence, wildness, play, adventure, the companionship of other children, contact with nature, agricultural spaces and practices, healthiness, *spatial freedom, and freedom from adult surveillance.* (Jones 1997, 162, emphasis added)

Country children are perceived as being free to run across fields and through woods, able to explore distant hills and forests (Aitken 1994) and develop a close association with the 'natural' environment in which they live (Jones 1997; Valentine 1997). According to the rural childhood 'myth' children are able to use spaces apart from the ordered adult world (Maxey 1999) and they '*do not usually have to share their play spaces* with other groups of children or adults' (Aitken 1994, 58, emphasis added). The countryside is seen to provide spaces and materials for play. Country children are perceived to have a greater freedom than their urban counterparts.

Research into women's experiences of rural life has unpacked the concept of the rural idyll, exploring the ways in which the attributes and qualities deemed central to the idyll impact upon and vary between (adult) groups and individuals (Little 1997; Little and Austin 1996; Middleton 1986). Girls in their early teenage years occupy an ambiguous position whereby they are both children in full-time compulsory education, and young women searching for 'style' and identity (Ganetz 1995), yet the ways in which teenage girls act out these roles in their everyday lives, and the influence of the rural idyll upon this, have been largely ignored.

Exploring the rural childhood myth

This paper draws upon in-depth discussion data, collected as part of a three-year project on children's experiences of growing up in rural Northampton-shire. The Countryside Agency classifies 'the rural' as any area with a population of less than 10 000; all settlements in the study area have a population below this figure and so may be classified as rural. Northamptonshire, in the East Midlands

of the United Kingdom, is an area of commercial farms and landed estates, and both commuter and estate villages. The study area comprises a small market town - Towcester (population approximately 8000)—and a number of villages (with populations ranging from 50 to 1500).

In-depth discussions were conducted with girls aged between 10 and 14 years. The discussions were carried out with friendship groups, usually of three or four girls, and these took place in the girls' own homes. The groups met on three occasions - the first meeting comprised a semi-structured interview; the second was centered around child-taken photographs; the third consisted of a child-led video tour of the home settlement. The first and second meetings lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The video tour took between one and three hours to complete. Parental permission was obtained for the girls to participate in the research project.

Although emphasis is given here to girls' experiences, we recognize that a commonality of positioning faces all children. It is axiomatic that young girls, like young boys, are non-adults, and so form part of a uniquely uninfluential sector of the population. Accordingly, some of the transactions that make up the worlds of girls are age-related and constitute experiences that are folded into the ways in which children, as a group apart, encounter place and space.

In order to convey the lived experiences of the participants we draw extensively on their own words. To guarantee confidentiality the names of all participants have been changed (the participants chose their own pseudonyms). As adults we recognize that we are limited in how close we can get to understanding what it means to these young girls to be growing up in a rural area; we can only offer glimpses into their worlds (Aitken and Wingate 1993). This work is grounded upon a conviction that growing up is a varied experience comprising multiple realities of difference and diversity. We are not trying to provide generalizations relating to all rural children. Through analysis of the words of young girls we identify some commonality in their recreational experiences (whilst acknowledging that these have different impacts upon and implications for different children). Within the rural environment the recreational space of girls appears to be contested in three ways:

1 through conflict with adults;
2 through conflict between rival groups of young people; and
3 through conflict between girls and boys.

Conflict with adults

Gemma: Mr M tells people off for making too much noise. (Age 11, Whittlebury)

Jodie: You're told to move on. You don't have a choice. They say 'you can't hang around here no more… so go somewhere else.[1] (Age 13, Towcester)

Jessica: If you scream [whilst playing in the park] these old people go 'shut up'. (Age 12, Tiffield)

One of the consequences of a lack of public space in rural areas, particularly play space such as recreation grounds, is that children, both girls and boys, can become highly visible and subject to adult scrutiny (Davis and Ridge 1997). Contrary to the rural child-hood myth and the notion of freedom from surveil-lance, a number of girls in our study reported that they were often victims of the adult gaze. These children voiced the opinion that adults viewed them as a problem when they played in public spaces such as on residential streets. Many instances were recounted of where young girls were told off by adults, who were not family members, for 'making too much noise', disturbing local (adult) sensibilities.

Jodie: We get moved on from [outside a super- market]. We hang out there … because my friends live near there. And we're always getting moved on and getting blamed for damage. (Age 13, Towcester)

Rebecca: It's like that at [another supermarket]. (Age 14, Towcester)

Hazel: Everyone used to go swimming or hang about outside [the leisure centre], until we all got moved on. (Age 13, Towcester)

Interviewer: Why did you get moved on?

Hazel: Because they [leisure centre staff] think that we're too rowdy. And we're not. There's just a great big group of us outside the leisure centre so they think that we are going to do something. And we're just sitting around talking. (Age 13, Towcester)

A number of girls reported feeling unwelcome in the very spaces set aside by adults for their use - namely recreation grounds, playing fields and parks. Age appears to be an important determinant in this reaction. Sibley (1995) notes how teenagers who congregate in these recreational spaces in the early evening or after dark, when adults are no longer commonly around, are perceived as discrepant and 'out-of-place'. Their presence is no longer

acceptable and grates against the sensibilities of vigilant adults. In our study, older girls, particularly those aged 13 and 14, report a number of incidents of being ordered to move out of parks and playgrounds.

> *Rebecca*: People [older teenagers] come here [the shelter at the edge of the recreation ground] to smoke and drink and to take drugs as well. Everyone knows that they come down here to take drugs... The police come round here regularly 'cos this is a known place... where things happen, like break-ins and blowing up cars and things like that... You do get moved on from here as well if they [adults] see you hanging around here [at a different time of day when the older group of children do not use the site]. (Age 14, Towcester)

These findings, which contradict the expectations of the rural idyll, replicate those commonly reported within urban settings, where boys and girls repeatedly complain about the unreasonable intervention of adults in their social worlds (Corrigan 1979; Matthews *et al.* 1999; Percy-Smith 1999). Skelton (2000, 80) argues that teenage girls in the Rhondda valleys of South Wales can be conceptualized as occupying the ambiguous position of 'being the ''wrong'' gender and being in the ''wrong'' place'. The conflicts reported above suggest that girls in rural Northamptonshire occupy a similar position. Despite the tight-knit communities and nature of village life, many adults find it difficult to let go of those myths and stereotypes that define public space as places of danger for young girls (Matthews *et al.* 2000). Where girls occupy public spaces they may be seen by adults as being the 'wrong' gender in the 'wrong' place, being exposed to risks in such 'unsafe' spaces.

Katz (1998, 135) acknowledges that increasingly children are faced with lessening choice and fewer opportunities of where they can go, without adult interference. She describes an eroding ecology of childhood (and youth), an outcome of the 'pernicious effects created by the decay and outright elimination of public environments for outdoor play' or 'hanging out'. Valentine (1996) too suggests that increasingly adults are defining all aspects of the public realm as part of their private domain, a critical issue given the scarce opportunities afforded by many village settings. What we are suggesting is that, whether in rural or urban places, where it is acceptable to be is determined by adults such that teenagers' occupancy of particular public places creates zones of tension and discontinuity. Places, such as parks after dark, define territories where neither children nor adults retain complete social ownership. For adults, the experience of moving children on provides a sense of recovery, the cleansing of a polluting presence, whereas children's continual movement into these spaces, in the face of such harassment, represents the (re)claiming of social space.

Surveillance by adults also extends into indoor spaces.[2] In settings where consumption is perceived by adults to be the norm, such as leisure centres, coffee shops and restaurants, children's poor spending power is often regarded as unacceptable, giving rise to frequent requests to move on.

Jodie: If you're not doing anything there [the leisure centre], if you're just going up there to hang about, then sometimes they just chuck you out. They say 'if you're not using the facilities, go away'. (Age 13, Towcester)

Rebecca: It's quite usual that you get moved on if you stand here [leisure centre foyer] too long. They give you an ultimatum—either go in and swim or get out. (Age 14, Towcester)

Hope: The [supermarket] staff come up to you, 'are you buying anything?' and if you say 'no, we're just meeting a friend' they go 'can you go and wait outside?' (Age 13, Towcester)

Yet young girls particularly favour commercial environments of this kind. Their regular use of these spaces in defiance of such requests may signify other dimensions to how girls perceive public places. Unlike the anarchy of the rural outdoors, where real dangers may lurk, commercial environments provide safe, delimited, overseen spaces where young girls can mix and socialize with their peers in safety. From this perspective, the presence of adults provides these young girls with the opportunities to express individuality, develop identity and even to carry out limited acts of social rebellion, but always without having to confront the more unpredictable threats of the street.

Rebecca: They [leisure centre staff] say 'well you're either swimming or you just get away from the leisure centre'. And you then just find lots of people hanging around the back [of the leisure centre]. (Age 14, Towcester)

Interviewer: Do they move you on if you stand around the back?

Jodie: They don't usually come around the back, but if they do they just say 'can you leave'. But there's nowhere else for us to go. (Age 13, Towcester)

Natalie: We haven't actually had any trouble with them [supermarket staff], if you're in the cafe and you're having a drink. But if you are wandering around 'cos there is quite a few people that do steal things, and obviously they presume everyone's like that. (Age 13, Towcester)

Conflict between rival groups of young people

The lack of facilities in many rural villages—many boast nothing more than

a church and a bus stop—means that rival groups of young people often compete for access to particular resources (Davis and Ridge 1997). In the settlements of this study, young girls drew attention to the conflict between rival groups that often occurred over the social ownership of micro-spaces—the bus shelter, the steps of the Church Hall, the climbing frame in the park. In this section we explore rivalries between the mainly all-girl friendship groups of the participants and mixed sex groups of older teenagers.

> *Eleanor*: There's three or four different [mixed sex] gangs around the village… There's an older gang on the other side of the road by the statue… And there's the Year 10s [age 14–15 years] and Year 11s [age 15–16] at the bus shelter. And then there's older kids [age 17–18] in the graveyard. (Age 11, Silverstone)

Rivalry between groups is often—although not exclusively—based on age differences, with younger children excluded from play spaces by the presence or actions of their elders. The inevitable outcomes of keen rivalry over the social ownership of such spaces are antagonism and displacement. Rivalry between groups of children is complex. The majority of girls who participated in this study are members of single sex friendship groups. These girls reported that mixed sex groups are often dominant users of public spaces, with all-girl groups finding it difficult to obtain autonomous social space. Subtly different geogra- phies were articulated by the participants, with some groups of girls keen to find ways to share spaces, and others retreating from spaces of conflict.

> Perhaps through a mirroring of parental attitudes, there is a perception amongst some of the girls that those who hang out in mixed gangs are not 'proper' girls. Terms like 'tarty', 'mature' and 'rough' are used as negative labels to symbolize a social distancing. By immersing themselves in acts and behaviours that provide credence to the masculinity of boys, these girls are seen as socially undesirable and 'cheap'.

> *Shannon*: There's not just boys [on the village green], I suppose … Some of the girls go there. (Age 10, Greens Norton)

> *Anna*: But they're really older girls which are really… (Age 11, Greens Norton)

> *Shannon*: They're more mature. (Age 10, Greens Norton)

> *Anna*: They're MUCH more mature. (Age 11, Greens Norton)

Natalie: Some girls go there [the recreation ground]. (Age 13, Towcester)

Justine: They are all like . . . (Age 13, Towcester)

Natalie: Tarty. Normally quite rough girls. (Age 13, Towcester)

Many of the girls expressing such views were young (10–13 years) and belonged only to single sex friendship groups outside the school environment. Yet for those older girls (14 years and older) who are part of these mixed gangs, there is nothing sordid or unusual in mixing with boys. To them, hanging out on the sidelines, 'watching the talent' (Amy 14, Towcester) is a natural part of growing-up. Also, by sharing spaces in this way social opportunities are opened up in places where the presence of girls alone would not be sanctioned.

Samantha: Some of the boys who hang around have got cars, so they'll take us to the cinema and stuff. (Age 14, Silverstone)

Lisa: We can just sit down and socialise and have fun [at the recreation ground]… And we play football or basketball with the boys. (Age14, Towcester)

Groups of children appear to mark out their recreational space territories in two ways - through their physical presence at the location and through leaving evidence of their activities there.

Hope: They [a group of older teenagers] hang around the park… and they stand outside the shops. And you think 'I'm not going past them'. Or if you do they shout rude comments. (Age 13, Towcester)

Interviewer: Do other people hang out there, or is it usually just your group of friends?

Jodie: It's usually just us [a mixed sex friendship group]. But normally people don't want to sit there when we are there, 'cos we're like quite rough people. (Age 13, Towcester)

Helen: I don't like walking past the bus shelter… All the people [boys and girls aged 14–16] shout at you. (Age 11, Silverstone)

The presence of a rival group of children can some- times prevent other groups from using that location (Harden 2000), creating what Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) describe as 'tyrannical geographies'. The group that has claimed the territory may exclude others through acts, looks and gestures. Children may verbally threaten those children trying to 'invade' their space or warn them off by making it clear through their conversations that the newcomer is not an 'insider' and so does not belong there. The behaviour of a group may

also prevent others using a play space. Many girls mentioned gangs of (older) children smoking or taking drugs and reported avoid- ing those places where such groups were found in order not to be associated with children perceived to be 'trouble-makers'.

> *Nicola*: There's a gang of people [older teenagers] there [the park] smoking and that. (Age 11, Whittlebury)
>
> *Interviewer*: Do you avoid going to the park if they're there?
>
> *Nicola*: Yes! (Age 11, Whittlebury)

Remnants of another group's activities - empty beer bottles, graffiti, litter -can be likened to acts of social 'scenting', whereby powerful messages are left behind as to the social ownership of place. As Eleanor's comment makes clear, evidence of another group using a particular space even at a different time can preclude the original group from that space.

> *Eleanor*: Me and my friend used to have a den [in the park], but we don't use it anymore. We went back one day and [there were]… all these smashed beer bottles and everything, so we just left it because they'd ruined it. They [a group of older teenagers] were going to come in there again. (Age 11, Silverstone)

Vandalism and damage to play equipment prevents others from using such facilities. By removing the reason for other groups to go to a particular play space - twisting the swings to the top of the frame, tearing down basketball nets, putting paint on the slide - one group can prevent another from using the same site.

> *Joy*: My brother and my mum went down to the park and my brother wanted to have a go on the swing, but there were some teenagers our age down there, spinning it around so it was really high up and my brother couldn't even get on it… which was really bad. (Age 13, Towcester)

Clearly, where there is a lack of sanctioned space for children to play and congregate some groups become 'excluded' as rival groups claim territory. The girls offered two solutions to this problem. First, to impose age limits on the use of certain facilities. Many, however, believed that this would be difficult to enforce. The second solution was generally seen to be more effective, namely to improve play space and transport provision to give all children more choice over where and how they spend their leisure time.

Conflict between girls and boys

Recreational space is also is contested because of the rival demands of boys and girls. The conflicts reported in this section relate to those occurring between all-girl groups and all-boy groups. Like many urban settings, rural spaces are frequently gendered to the disadvantage of girls. In our survey, girls often reported that their use of space was governed, and to some extent regulated, by the presence of boys. Particular parts of the landscape, such as playing fields and recreation grounds, were commonly described as 'boy places'. Here groups of teenage boys would congregate, to play football and chat. When these boys were around, girls regarded these spaces as unsafe and undesirable.

> *Sophie*: They [boys] don't like girls hanging around there [the tree house]. They tell them to go away. (Age 13, Tiffield)

> *Hope*: The rec.'s [recreation ground] not that safe really is it? (Age 13, Towcester)

> *Natalie*: I'm not allowed to go there. (Age 13, Towcester)
>
> *Justine*: And normally all the boys hang around there. (Age 13, Towcester)

> *Sophie*: No one goes into the fort [wooden play building] any more 'cos the boys used to go to the loo in there… It's too gross. Some of the kids like to play in there but it stinks. You get out pretty quickly. (Age 13, Tiffield)

Girls describe a variety of strategies that they use to avoid conflict with groups of boys. These include avoiding areas where groups of boys gather, taking different routes around the village according to where gangs congregate, and choosing certain times of day to visit locations when they know that the groups of boys will not be there (Valentine 1989; 1992).

> *Anna*: [Boys] hang around the village green. Sometimes you can get scared to walk to the shop… because you know they're there. (Age 11, Greens Norton)

> *Shannon*: If you're on your own… then you get really scared. (Age 10, Greens Norton)

> *Anna*: You don't even want to walk past. When the boys they start to leave, they all live in different places around the village so you can see them heading off in different directions. It's like 'shall I go that way? shall I go that way?' so I can avoid them. (Age 11, Greens Norton)

Jones (1999) argues that connections between child- hood, nature and the countryside in popular dis- courses of rural childhood leave little space for girl children to adopt female identities. In constructions of perfect country childhoods (where childhood activities are associated with nature and the outdoors, such as tree climbing, getting dirty and the like), girls have to become nominal boys— tomboys—to take part. Such notions of masculinity and femininity were evident in our study, with girls explaining that boys had tree houses and dens, and that girls stayed in cleaner environments nearer the home. Some girls do visit dens and tree houses made by groups of boys, but few of the girls in this study created such environments for themselves.

> *Sophie*: The girls don't really have a hang out place like the boys do [the boys have a tree house]. They just go to each other's houses… You never see them out unless they are walking to each other's houses. (Age 13, Tiffield)

> *Chloe*: ['Boy places' are] the dens across the road. (Age 11, Litchborough)

> *Interviewer*: Do the boys not allow girls to go there, or do the girls choose not to go there?

> *Chloe*: Sometimes, when they're not there, we go in. And when they're there we don't go in, because the boys will just fight with us and tell us to get out. (Age 11, Litchborough)

> *Interviewer*: Are there any places where just girls hang out?

> *Chloe*: No. Just on the path, they like sitting on the path. (Age 11, Litchborough)

None of the girls identified any 'girl places'. From these findings it appears that where boys gain social control over play space, many girls feel compelled to stay outside these 'boundaries'. Instead of actively contesting their right of presence, many girls prefer to spend their 'outdoor' time on the move, choosing to 'walk around the village' rather than staying in one place. There is a contradiction here between the dynamic nature of girls' outdoor behaviour and the wishes of their parents to 'know exactly where they are'.

Conclusion

We suggest that in contrast to common myths, rural places are not necessarily settings in which children, whether girls or boys, can grow up in innocence, free from conflict and disharmony. Nor are rural places universal

'idylls' where children can wander and roam freely. In this paper we have shown that in three scenarios some young girls' experiences of place are contradictory to the notions of the rural childhood 'myth'. First, girls, like most children, are often victims of the adult gaze, with vigilant adults often viewing their use of recreational space as a problem. In consequence, there are few places where young girls can 'hang out' without adult intervention. Secondly, the lack of recreational space in rural areas often creates a keen rivalry between groups over place use. We draw attention to the conflict that frequently arises between mixed sex groups and groups of young girls over the social ownership of these micro-spaces. We show that rural villages are often zones of social tension. Thirdly, girls experience particular problems when attempting to socialize within the narrow confines of a village. The ways in which the rural landscape is gendered combine to exclude girls from particular opportunities. Girls are often marginalized, compelled to stay outside the 'boundaries' of 'boys places'. When girls actively contest their right of presence they risk being labelled as socially undesirable and 'cheap'. Lastly, we present this paper in recognition that, despite Philo's (1992) telling observations, there is still relatively little known about the multiple realities of rural children and of the disparity of rural childhoods. We suggest that there is a compelling need for further investigation in order to unravel the diversity of the rural experience.

Notes

1 Valentine and McKendrick (1997, 219) define play as ''a means through which children's physical, mental and creative capabilities are developed''. Although the girls participating in the research do not often use the word 'play', we interpret their leisure time experiences as incorporating play. We define play/recreational spaces as not just those provided by adults in terms of recreation grounds, playgrounds etc., but also bus shelters, the village green, steps of the Church Hall etc.

2 We use the term 'indoor' to refer to those leisure opportunities (outside the home) which have been privatized by adults in the form of leisure centres, coffee shops etc.

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