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Survival narratives: Constructing an intersectional masculinity through stories of the rural/urban divide

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ABSTRACT

This paper extends research emphasizing gender and gendered inequalities in rural communities are influenced by goods, jobs, and people moving between rural and urban contexts. Drawing from over 1,800 hours of participant observation in a rural community in the central United States, I analyze men's narratives about their trips to nearby cities to illustrate how they constructed and achieved an intersectional ideal of rural masculinity complicated by race, class, and sexuality. Through this analysis I stress the need to consider how multiple, intersecting dimensions of difference and inequality inform constructions of masculinities in rural contexts as rural communities are increasingly linked with cities. Second, and related, I illustrate perceived divisions between rural and urban spaces inform constructions of intersectional masculinities and inequalities even as rural and urban places are increasingly linked, materially, through political-economic processes such as labor markets and immigration.

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1. Introduction

In line with a broader interdisciplinary focus on the gendered dynamics and consequences of political-economic transformations in rural contexts (e.g. Brandth, 1995; Sherman, 2009; Scott, 2010; Leibert and Wiest, 2016), a growing number of scholars have stressed masculinities in rural communities around the globe have been influenced by immigration and labor markets that link rural and urban places (e.g. Broughton, 2008; Morris, 2008; Groes-Green, 2009; Wierenga, 2011; Aure and Munkejord, 2016). As significant as these contributions are, they have often obscured how masculinities and associated inequalities are informed by (1) intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as (2) divergent meanings applied to rural and urban spaces. I utilize data from over 1,800 hours of participant observation in a rural community in the central United States to illustrate how men constructed intersectional masculinities complicated by race, class, and sexuality by telling narratives about their trips to and from cities in the surrounding region.

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¹ I did not try to disguise Sumner for two primary reasons. Its unique history was important to my broader research project, so the community could have easily been deduced through my analysis of this history in other publications. It was also very important to the residents of Sumner that I was creating tangible records of their community.

While I was conducting fieldwork in Sumner, Missouri¹ from 2013 to 2015 I consistently heard men tell what I call *survival narratives* during their casual conversations with each other and myself. Men described their trips to and from cities as if they were the heroes of adventure plots that involved escapes from people of color, con artists, and homosexuals who supposedly made urban spaces perilous. Because narrative portrayals of the past are a key way through which men do masculinities complicated by race, class, and sexuality (Mason-Schrock, 1996; Bucholtz, 1999; Grazian, 2011; Carlson, 2015), by telling these stories men effectively built, policed the boundaries of, and at least partially obtained what they considered to be an ideal white, working to middle class, heterosexual masculinity that was supposedly particular to and characteristic of rural men. Put more simply, these narratives defined an intersectional ideal of what it meant to be a rural man worthy of respect, and by telling these stories men positioned themselves as achieving this ideal.

This analysis both incorporates and expands recent considerations of masculinities in rural contexts. First, researchers have often focused on how class intersects with gender to inform how men of differing classes construct masculinities in response to political-economic transformations in rural contexts (e.g. Groes-Green, 2009; Wierenga, 2011). When race/ethnicity or sexuality are incorporated into analyses they are often alluded to instead of being explicitly acknowledged (e.g. Filteau, 2014, 2015). Such analyses are sexuality and color-blind approaches to intersectionality

(Carbado, 2013), which makes it difficult to consider how dominant sexualities and races complicate masculinities and inform inequalities because these analyses allow dominant sexuality and racial statuses to remain unmarked and invisible (see Brekhus, 1996, 1998; Lewis, 2004). By illustrating how an ideal masculinity associated with whiteness, working to middle class occupations, and heterosexuality was constructed in a community that was overwhelmingly white and heterosexual, I emphasize the need to approach masculinities with an intersectional lens explicitly attuned to the simultaneous significance of gender, race, class, and sexuality even when analyzing rural communities with relatively homogenous populations.

Second, a wealth of research emphasizes divergent meanings associated with rural and urban contexts inform how individuals do gender (Campbell and Bell, 2000; Brekhus, 2003; Connell, 2006; Desmond, 2007), but aside from Timár and Velkey (2016) recent analyses have focused on the significance of material connections across urban and rural spaces while obscuring the significance of perceived divisions between these spaces (e.g. Filteau, 2015; Leibert, 2016). This obscures how meanings associated with rural and urban contexts are often integrally important to rural communities and their inhabitants (see Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Cloke and Little, 1997). By focusing on how men effectively built an intersectional masculinity through stories that drove a representational wedge between rural and urban spaces, I stress the need to consider the divergent meanings applied to rural and urban contexts in addition to the material links across these spaces. This is important given research emphasizing rural and urban spaces are being connected, materially, through technologies (sub)urban sprawl, immigration, and trade (see Woods, 2009; Lichter and Brown, 2011). These material links across rural and urban contexts are undoubtedly significant for masculinities, but we must also consider how these contexts are split in conception and then assigned particular meanings in everyday practice (Halfacree, 2006; Bell, 2007).

These points emphasize masculinities in rural contexts will be informed by intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as discursive divisions between rural and urban places as rural communities are increasingly linked, materially, with cities. This highlights the complexities of masculinities in what might seem like relatively simple, homogenous communities, which is particularly timely because such rural communities face a number of emerging challenges. Men in a majority of rural communities face downward economic pressures that complicate their abilities to construct respectable masculinities (Filteau, 2015). Further, the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of rural communities in the United States is increasing because of links between rural and urban places (see Brown and Swanson, 2003; Lichter and Brown, 2011; Lichter, 2012). This paper stresses we must (1) consider more than just intersections of gender and class as well as (2) material links across and perceived differences between rural and urban contexts if we are to understand how rural men reproduce or even rearrange their masculinities amidst such socioeconomic transformations.

My analysis is arranged in the following manner. First, the literature on masculinity, space, and narrative is reviewed. Then background information on Sumner and a detailed synopsis of my methods are provided. Next I focus on survival narratives to illustrate how men constructed and achieved an intersectional ideal of masculinity through these stories. General theoretical implications of this analysis are then developed in the discussion and conclusion before avenues for future research are suggested.

2. Intersectionality, space, and narrative

Gender is done for others through mundane acts informed by

institutionally legitimated ways of being men and/or women (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). Men and women never just do masculinities and/or femininities though. Masculinities and femininities are infused with race, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference such as ability status. Gender, in other words, is intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins 2009; Choo and Ferree, 2010). This necessitates doing away with dichotomous understandings of gender that erase differences and inequalities among men and women, respectively (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Davis, 2008). Beyond drawing attention to how devalued statuses such as person of color and woman intersect with and transform one another, conceptualizing gender as intersectional draws attention to how normative, institutionally dominant statuses such as male, white, and heterosexual are transformed through their interconnections (Carbado, 2013).

This corresponds to works following Carrigan et al. (1985) that emphasize there are multiple masculinities, or ways of being men, and that these masculinities are arranged hierarchically. A dominant masculinity is practiced and/or celebrated by a majority of men and women in a particular context, while subordinated masculinities are the other masculinities that do not conform to the dominant ideal because of men's behaviors and/or because their race, class, and/or sexuality are marginalized (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Beasley, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2008; Filteau, 2014, 2015). Many authors have either explicitly or implicitly incorporated Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of the "geography of masculinities" to emphasize material and discursive connections across local, regional, and global spatial scales inform dominant/subordinate masculinities as well as the resources and opportunities that can be accessed through such masculinities (e.g. Broughton, 2008; Filteau, 2014, 2015; Aure and Munkejord, 2016). Morris (2008), for example, illustrated masculinities constructed through face-to-face interactions in a rural high school were informed by economic decline and the cultural construct of "redneck" that were both operating on regional spatial scales. The tough guy, rebellious masculinity often espoused by men in this high school was dominant and afforded them respect on the local level, but it also facilitated their subordination at the regional level because this masculinity made it harder for them to get jobs in the regional economy.

In addition to stressing linkages across spatial scales inform masculinities, scholars have also emphasized perceived divisions between spaces inform gender (e.g. Rose, 1993). Specifically, perceived divisions between rural and urban contexts inform masculinities (Woodward, 2000; Little, 2002; Timár and Velkey, 2016) even though a clear material dichotomy between urban and rural places (Friedland, 1982; Cronon, 1991; Murdoch and Pratt, 1997; Foster 1999; Lichter and Brown, 2011) and masculinities does not exist in practice (Campbell and Bell, 2000). Divergent meanings and understandings applied to rural and urban spaces also inform the production of intersectional masculinities (Brekhus, 2003; Little, 2003; Scott, 2010; Voyles 2015). Reminiscent of Said's (1978) work that stressed representations of the Orient were key to how Europeans understood themselves, masculinities in rural contexts often become associated with particular classes, races, and sexualities through their juxtapositions to urban masculinities (Desmond, 2007; Hogan and Pursell, 2008). Kimmel and Ferber (2000), for example, highlight militia movements in the United States feminized and racialized urban men to infuse whiteness into rural masculinity.

In line with the general insight that presentations of self are constructed through representational accounts of the past (Scott and Lyman, 1968), telling stories about prior experiences is a key way through which individuals do masculinities and femininities complicated by multiple forms of difference (Mason-Schrock, 1996;

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