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A house of one's own – The *Eigenheim* within rural women's biographies☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper has taken a first look at the processes of house-building in women's life courses and the 'co-evolution' of the family and their domicile. The building of a house of their own is an important episode within the courses of women's lives and, in many cases, marks the transition between an employment and urban-oriented lifestyle towards a family- and village-oriented lifestyle. I employ a practice-theory perspective on the German notion of the Eigenheim, the house of one's own, as a materialization of gendered rural culture. Thus, the co-constituent processes of placed female identities are revealed. Drawing on research from women's life courses (standardized questionnaire and 32 in-depth interviews) in four villages in Germany, I show how aspects of identity are connected with a rural-urban distinction and how this influences the practices of housebuilding and family formation. Thereby, a specific rurality centered on family life and house ownership is 'done' and materialized. The practice- and materiality-perspective employed in this article allows for two conclusions: First, rurality is more than an 'imaginary' or 'ideational' category. To re-value the material dimensions of rurality calls for a careful account of rural diversity and local specificities. Second, with regard to rural gender issues, concepts of male hegemony have to give way to more dynamic and complex gender relations when the agency of artefacts is take into consideration.

1. "A house of one's own"[1] – Introduction

A house serves much more than the simple human need for shelter and housing. Other than a rented place or an apartment, a house is connected with a socially constructed and collectively shared idealized lifestyle. It is a symbol, not so much for wealth but also for a down-to-earth and canny lifestyle. At least in Germany, in everyday discourse a house is referred to as a savings-box and a pension plan. Bourdieu and his colleagues (Bourdieu et al., 2002) point to another characteristic of the family house: it is a bet on the future. Building or buying a house for a family renders visible the trust in and the wish for a durable family life. In Germany, house-owners barely change their domicile over the course of their lives. Most single-family houses are predominantly built as shelter for the owners' family and are not meant for trading. Here, where the owner-occupier rate is one of the lowest across Europe – the *Eigenheim* is a goal shared by many families (Szypulski, 2008).

As this goal is most often achieved within rural communities, the house can be seen as a nexus of the ideational and the material rural (Heley and Jones, 2012; Bell, 2007; Halfacree, 2006) in its quality to materialize and manifest an idealized rural family life. For example, the prevalence of single household housing even features in a recent typology of the rural (Küpper, 2016) alongside the conventional indicators of settlement structure and population density (OECD, 2011). These physical properties serve to distinguish between urban and rural living and between degrees of rurality alike, making very visible how space is socially constructed *beyond* the discursive and ideational realm. Nevertheless, little attention has yet been given to the cultural meaning and practices around the artefact *Eigenheim*.

The *Eigenheim,* as the most widespread form of rural living, furthermore poses a good example for a practice-oriented approach to the situation of women in rural areas because it is a materialization of the gendered organization of everyday life. Although gender issues feature prominently in rural studies, a practice- and materiality-focused approach to gender arrangements in rural areas is still wanting and can enhance our understanding both of the persistence of traditional gender relations as well as their spontaneous transformations. This is because 'New Materialism' gender theorists such as Karen Barad or Anne Fausto-Sterling highlight an agency of matter and the body which is intentionally beyond and outside human limits. This way, they are challenging classical concepts of power and hierarchy within gender relations. Although they recognize the discursive inscription of power within the body and the materializations of hierarchy, they ask for an "acknowledgement of the forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies with which bodies, organisms, and material objects act both

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[1] In revealing one's intentions and desires, the House of one's own works quite differently from Virginia Woolf's "Room of one's own" (1927).

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independently of and in response to discursive provocations and constraints." (Frost, 2011:70).

Against this background, I propose to follow the development of the artefact "house" as it is embedded in the biography of individuals and families and to look into the co-evolution of the house with the individual or the family who builds it (cf. Clapham, 2002 for a call for more research into 'housing pathways'). Through this process I shed light on the following question: How is the house embedded in the course of life and in what ways is this gendered and spatialized?

The following section discusses the dominant perspective on gender and rurality so far, and how a focus on practices and materiality could enrich our knowledge about gender relations outside the city. The paper proceeds with some background information on housing in Germany in Section Three; data and methods are presented in Section Four. Subsequently, the presentation of results in Section Five is structured along the questions laid out above. Section Six provides a discussion and Section Seven concludes the paper.

2. Rural femininities - between discourse and materiality

I approach the *Eigenheim* as a nexus of gender relations and conceptions of the rural. Both gender and rurality are categories that are in analytical tension between a social, mostly text-based construction, and a 'natural' and thus self-evident entity. A practice-perspective, which accounts both for the conversion of social categories into artefacts and for the agency of matter, can bridge these perspectives.

Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) thinking on the origin of sex and gender led from physical or biological sources of difference towards discourse, text and symbols, in short: meaning. This perspective was also widely applied to concepts of rurality (Halfacree, 1993, 1995), most prominently to the study of the rural idyll (Bell, 2006; Short, 2006).

Gender and gender relations have been a cornerstone in rural sociological research. In this research a constructionist perspective was widely applied. Studies have revealed the family- and domesticity-based social construct of the rural, a hegemonic discursive pattern of rural femininity, and its implication for the life of women and families ascribing women to the role of caregivers (Hughes, 1997; Watkins, 1997; Little and Austin, 1996). This idea also informs the reading of the rural gendered body as a place of materialized social concepts: "Attitudes towards the body reflect, and are part of the production of, circulated meanings and beliefs about the way gender works in rural communities, and thus the study of embodiment is essential to an understanding of how gender relations are played out in rural space." (Little and Leyshon, 2003: 265). In the study of rurality and gender this tends to be the able body (Bryant and Pini, 2011), be it male or female, in which the specificity of rurality is inscribed in terms of health and strength, fertility and a sexuality which is coy and inoffensive (Little and Leyshon, 2003). Only recently has the scope of research on the situation of women in rural areas changed to encompass their multi-layered and malleable identities, revealing women's diversity and their agency, even within traditional gender arrangements (Pini et al., 2015).

Although the out-migration of young women from rural areas is a European phenomenon (for many: Leibert and Wiest, 2016), the wish for a traditional lifestyle and family arrangement can also motivate women in later life stages to move to, return to or stay in remote rural areas. Johansson (2016) points to the age-specific migration pattern of women in the remote Swedish area of Västernorrland, indicating that family-oriented return migration even exceeds employment-oriented out-migration. Grimsrud (2011) and Wilbur (2014) show how rural areas with traditional gender arrangements across Europe are sought after by a specific group of women. Norman and Power (2015) focus on the situation of young women from remote rural communities in Newfoundland. While out-migration is common among adolescents, some women however report that returning to these communities is a viable option for an envisaged family-life. Thus, *temporary* migration to an urban center is a rite of passage. Baylina et al. (2016) show how well-educated professional women migrate into (accessible) rural areas of Spain to fulfil their concept of rural living. In these accounts of rural femininities the focus lies on everyday practices and materialities - such as car dependency and car ownership (Noack, 2011) or decorative artefacts which symbolize and evoke ideas of a traditional and idealized rurality (Wright and Annes, 2014). Through their migration decision and everyday lives, in-migrating women actively and intentionally stabilize or create a traditional gender regime and a place-based gendered identity. I therefore argue that it is important to recognize their practices of place-making beyond discourse. As I will lay out below, to include the material dimension of these practices is thus a valuable expansion to the text- and discourse based analysis of the narrative of the good rural family life.

The most pronounced criticism of discourse-based concepts of "the social" is probably vested in Latour who points to the tremendous costs and the limited reach and durability of social structures which are indeed merely enacted or performed in word and deed (Latour, 2005: 63). Instead the material or 'objective' world of non-human actors has to be taken into account much more thoroughly, as is proposed in Actor-Network Theory. Under a Post-Human perspective, the natural and material realm, and their entangling in a dense net of social interaction, define 'the social' and the conglomerate of people and objects bring forth practices. This key idea of overcoming the Descartian body/mind or human/nature dualism is further developed under a New Materialism (e.g., Coole and Frost, 2010) or agential realism (Barad, 1998, 2007) perspective. Here, matter itself must be understood more broadly and its power must be accounted for. Thus, it is not just how cultural or social concepts are represented by or materialized within the body or in objects. Rather, nature, the body, or artefacts themselves can sabotage, transgress or reconfigure social concepts, as 'Post-Human' perspectives on animals, technologies or the environment show. Although the human-centeredness of social research can probably never be fully overcome (Murdoch, 1997), non-human elements, which are so taken for granted, play a constitutive role in human live. Consequently, our understanding of causality, human intentionality and thus agency are altered if we encompass the post-human, and our analyses must leave room for the unruly and uncontrollable dimensions of the physical world. While this perspective and especially ANT met with some interest throughout the study of rurality (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016; Rudy, 2005; Murdoch, 1995, 1997; Enticott, 2001), it has not yet been applied to the study of rural gender issues.

Against this background I argue that approaches which take the material structures of cultural practices into account can provide valuable insights into the production of differences in terms of gender and spatial relations, because they take into account the visible, perceivable and thus 'objective' and objectified measures of distinction, and the 'specific' rural configuration of the social. In this way, I show how the *Eigenheim* is embedded in the course of life and how it impacts upon further life course decisions.

3. House ownership in Germany

Before I proceed to the results of my empirical analyses I want to give a short overview about housing patterns in Germany and in rural areas specifically.

For a long time after the Second World War, apartment buildings were given priority as a fast remedy to the extensive housing shortage in post-war Germany. Finally in the 1980s, more subsidies were directed to the construction of owner-occupied houses (Wagner and Mulder, 2000). Nevertheless owner rates are comparably low. In 2013, 46% of all West German households and 43% of all households in East Germany were owned by the occupant (or apartment) (Braun and Holler, 2013a: 1). Owning a house is strongly connected to family life. A total of 74% of households with children below 18 years in West Germany and 64% in East Germany (Braun and Holler, 2013a: 5) own