



# Slippery geographies of the urban and the rural: Public sector LGBT equalities work in the shadow of the ‘Gay Capital’

Nick McGlynn

University of Brighton, School of Environment & Technology, University of Brighton, Lewes Road, Brighton & Hove, BN2 4GJ, United Kingdom



## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Rural  
Urban  
LGBT  
Sexuality  
Equality  
Imaginaries  
Public sector  
Relational

## ABSTRACT

The implementation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) equalities is not uniform, but varies locally and regionally as well as nationally. Research has long focused on large metropolises, with the assumption that work to improve LGBT equalities will mostly take place in these areas. However, a growing body of geographic research attests to positive LGBT experiences in rural areas, and calls for further attention to LGBT lives and equalities in hitherto neglected towns. In this paper I detail public sector LGBT equalities work which occurred in the areas of Hastings, Rother and wider East Sussex, through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project involving a partnership of local public services, LGBT communities, activists and academics from 2010 to 2013. I aim to show that public sector LGBT equalities work is intimately connected with a relational logic of rural/urban, and that this logic can result in some areas being overlooked when it comes to public sector LGBT equalities. Bringing a burgeoning literature on geographies of LGBT equalities together with rural geographies, I advance discussions of progressive public sector equalities work beyond the urban and explore how relational geographies of ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ might come together with the discourses of public sector equalities work. Acknowledging the continued importance of discursive rural/urban binaries with regard to LGBT equalities in neglected rural areas, I also explore the slippery ways in which such imaginaries adhere and do not adhere to particular areas. These slippery geographies can result in areas being overlooked in terms of LGBT equalities work. Finally, I point out the importance of other alternative geographic imaginaries relevant to LGBT lives and communities which rural/urban binaries may render less visible. In doing so, this paper, explores the complex relational geographies of how the urban and the rural emerge through discourses of public sector LGBT equalities.

## 1. Introduction

Definitions of the rural are highly contested (Bryant and Pini, 2011; Gallent et al., 2008; Halfacree, 2004; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004; Woodward and Halfacree, 2002:74–76), to the point where when ‘the rural’ is discussed it is not always clear what is meant (Bryant and Pini, 2011). Some scholars consequently questioned the continued relevance and usefulness of ‘the rural’ as an object of analysis (see Champion and Hugo, 2004; Hoggart, 1990; Woods, 2012). This has been an abiding question in rural geography and other rural studies, but one to which writers have responded by positively asserting the importance of rurality (Halfacree, 2004; Marsden, 2006:4; Phillips and Williams, 1984:2–3). As Halfacree has argued, ‘in spite of receiving a battering from numerous commentators ... [the rural] does not simply go away. Indeed, its social and cultural significance today may be as great as it has ever been’ (Halfacree, 2004:285) and most particularly in the realm of social differences (Clope, 2006a:19). Clope’s assertion is evidenced

particularly clearly with regard to sexual and gender identities, as many studies demonstrate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people actively constructing their everyday lives through rurality and a counterposed urbanity (see for example Bell, 2000; Browne, 2011; Comerford et al., 2004; Kazyak, 2011; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001; Knopp, 1998; Soderstrom, 2010). In this paper I engage with both these scholarly contestations of the rural, and LGBT people’s associations with it, through a focus on public sector work on LGBT equalities in the UK. Underpinning this paper is a question about how geographies of the rural and the urban relate to LGBT equalities, particularly in the UK in the wake of the Equality Act 2010. In answering this question, I aim to show first that the discourses and practices of public sector LGBT equalities work are intimately connected with binary rural/urban logics, and are co-constituted via relational geographies of LGBT equalities. Arguing that these relationally-produced urbans and rurals can result in some areas being overlooked when it comes to public sector LGBT equalities, my second aim is to highlight other geographic

E-mail address: [n.mcglynn2@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:n.mcglynn2@brighton.ac.uk).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.10.008>

Received 15 July 2016; Received in revised form 26 October 2017; Accepted 29 October 2017  
0743-0167/ © 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

imaginaries which, when analysed alongside those of the rural and the urban, may allow for a fuller study of local geographies of LGBT equalities.

My engagement with the rural utilises the relational poststructural approach to space and place developed by writers such as the late Doreen Massey (2005). Massey argued in favour of a conception of spatiality 'as relative (defined in terms of the entities 'within' it), relational (as constituted through the operation of social relations, through which the 'entities' are also constituted) and integral to the constitution of the entities themselves (the entities are local time-spaces)' (Massey, 1999, 2005:262; see also Doel, 1999; Murdoch, 2005). This relational approach, then, understands rural space to be both produced (in part) by and productive (if not wholly) of material and discursive relations (Heley and Jones, 2012) through which perceived spatialities can shift and overlap with one another (Rose, 1993; Gregson and Rose, 2000). As Heley and Jones put it, relational geographies involve 'an increasing recognition of the intertwined and co-constituent production of rural space through material and discursive phenomenon, processes and practices' (Heley and Jones, 2012:209; see also Massey, 2005; Woods, 2011:265–294). Furthermore, building on Woods (2012) in acknowledging that 'the urban' and 'the rural' cannot be easily defined or fixed to specific and bounded physical areas, I incorporate a wide variety of spaces and geographies within my research. These include areas, spaces and population centres which do not fit easily or comfortably into either 'urban' or 'rural' and those which align more strongly with other geographic imaginaries relevant regarding sexuality and gender identity such as the 'small town' (Whittier, 1997), the 'seaside resort' (Hemingway, 2006) or more specific imaginaries such as the 'Gay Capital' regarding the small UK city of Brighton & Hove (Browne and Bakshi, 2013). Although common, such geographic areas and associated imaginaries are often overlooked by geographic research surrounding LGBT lives in favour of large cities (Brown, 2008). Through their inclusion I aim to simultaneously highlight and challenge the centrality and normalisation of the urban in LGBT research – Halberstam's 'metronormativity' (2005) – as well as the role of a rural/urban dynamic in contributing to their neglect in geographic research. I utilise and develop the insights of Woodward and Halfacree (2002), who argue that understanding rurality to be multiple and fluid can open up new and important ways of understanding geographic politics (ibid. 84) – a 'politics of the rural' (Woods, 2006). I highlight how 'the rural', 'the urban' and other geographic imaginaries come to be mobilised in public sector LGBT equalities work and what politics this may enable or neglect.

Much work on relational geographies, including relational rurals, explores relations between the 'local' and the 'global' (Amin, 2004; Heley and Jones, 2012; Massey, 2004, 2005; see Jones, 2009 for a critique of this approach). My work instead examines relational rurals and urbans in a much smaller context. It builds upon findings from a Participatory Action Research project called 'LGBT Equalities in Hastings, Rother & East Sussex'. This project took place in the South East region of England from 2010 to 2013 and was twinned with my PhD thesis 'In the Shadow of the Gay Capital'. The aim of this thesis was to explore how public sector LGBT equalities were being produced and implemented in East Sussex, and consequently in this paper I focus specifically on the question of how rural/urban logics relate to LGBT equalities in the contemporary UK. Using the mixed-methods data gathered as part of this project I address important developments in rural geographies and the growing field of geographies of sexualities in a number of key ways.

First, while acknowledging that binary categories of 'urban' and 'rural' are a frequently-deployed and important discursive approach through which public sector workers and LGBT people beyond the urban metropolis understand and organise LGBT equalities, I argue that public sector LGBT equalities work in East Sussex complicates easy distinctions between urban and rural. I demonstrate that within the context of the LGBT Equalities in Hastings, Rother & East Sussex

project, specific urban and rural geographies operate relationally (Massey, 2005; Heley and Jones, 2012) to construct one another through discourses of public sector LGBT equalities. Per poststructural theories of space and place (Doel, 1999; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Murdoch, 2005), these relational geographies structure the ways in which LGBT lives are understood within public sector equalities work and by LGBT people themselves (Valentine, 2002). I make this point by exploring LGBT boundary crossings within and beyond East Sussex and Brighton & Hove; and then by analysing public sector LGBT equalities discourse from meetings of the LGBT equalities project. Martin Jones has critiqued relational thinking as potentially overlooking the ongoing significance of regions, scales and places (Jones, 2009). Mindful of this critique, I argue that these slippery relational constructions may make it harder for us to recognise and engage with LGBT lives focused in areas which do not fall comfortably into either primarily 'rural' or primarily 'urban', which are often elided from research or too quickly folded into broader urban/rural categories. Therefore while the urban/rural dynamic clearly remains important for LGBT equalities, my work offers a vital critique of its unquestioned dominance. In keeping with this, the final section of my argument suggests that these other, relatively neglected geographies of LGBT lives and communities could be productively explored through (in the case of East Sussex and Brighton & Hove) other geographic imaginaries such as the 'gay capital' and the 'small town', as well as by attending to the geographic specificities and complexities of the areas in question. In this way I hope to show what careful attention to a multitude of relational geographies at the 'local' scale can offer in progressing LGBT equalities in rural areas.

## 2. Rural geographies of sexualities and LGBT equalities

DuPuis has argued that who gets to live in rural space, who is imagined to fit, and what they do there, are key ways in which the rural is constructed (DuPuis, 2006:129). This manifests through the discursive and material inclusions and exclusions of a diverse array of rural 'Others' regarding a supposedly 'gemeinschaft' rural community linked with stability and closeness (Cloke, 2006a; see also Parr et al., 2004; Philo, 1992; Roche, 2002; Sibley, 2006; Woods, 2011:173–175; Woodward and Halfacree, 2002:81). Geographers of sexualities have been increasingly critically engaged with the complexities of these inclusions and exclusions. Historically, geographical studies of sexualities have focused on metropolitan urban centres (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Brown, 2008; Gorman-Murray et al., 2012; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001:423; Lindhorst, 1997; Tongson, 2011), joined to an implicit teleology of lesbian and gay identity development through the supposedly overwhelming rural to urban migration pattern of sexual minorities (Herring, 2007:344; Weston, 1995). Indeed particularly with regard to gay men, the city itself has been said to be key to gay identity formation and community development (Bech, 1997; Aldrich, 2004). Jack Halberstam (2005) has provided a key critical intervention in LGBT geographies through his identification of an overarching 'metronormativity' in research on LGBT lives and, developing this, Gavin Brown (2008) has called for more engagement with LGBT life in 'ordinary' cities and towns beyond the urban metropolis. My own research responds to both of these points, as can be seen through the geographic scope outlined in the following Section 3.

With regard to the experiences of LGBT people in rural areas, geographers have previously explored the troubled and secretive lives of rural lesbians and gay men, in which a repressive rurality polices gender roles and sexualities and results in social difficulties for the non-heterosexual (Bell and Valentine, 1995a, 1995b; Bowen, 2005; Comerford et al., 2004; D'Augelli, 2006; Fenge and Jones, 2012; Kramer, 1995; Lindhorst, 1997; Little, 2003:373; Oswald and Culton, 2003:72; Smith, 1997), and constricts the development of a 'true' (and implicitly urban) gay/lesbian identity (Kramer, 1995; Howard, 1999). Geographic literature on sexuality regularly refers to particular features of the urban and the rural which are seen to be of significance with

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545355>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6545355>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)