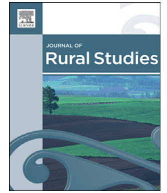
ARTICLE IN PRESS

Journal of Rural Studies xxx (2014) 1–9

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud



Strange and stranger ruralities: Social constructions of rural crime in Australia

John Scott*, Russell Hogg

The School of Justice, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Rural crime
Social construction
Established-outsider relations
Fear of crime
Social disorganization

ABSTRACT

Rural crime has largely been understood through social disorganization theory. The dominance of this perspective has meant that most research into rural crime has tried to resolve perceived strains in communities, rather than analyze how social problems are constituted in rural places. Using Elias and Scotson's (1994) account of established-outsider relations, the paper examines how the organizational capacity of specific social groups is significant in determining the quality of crime-talk and responses to crime in isolated and rural settings. In particular social 'oldness' and notions of what constitutes 'community' are significant in determining what activities and individuals or groups are marked as features of crime-talk in these settings.

Crown Copyright © 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

> Crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them. We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk of the event and to wax indignant in common (Erikson, 1966:4).

Kai T. Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* (1966) is a significant text which reconfigured sociological approaches to the study of deviance and crime. Drawing on Durkheim, Erikson presented deviant forms of behavior as a valuable resource in the community, providing clarity to the extant social order. He had earlier commented on this process in terms of 'boundary maintenance', highlighting the social production of deviance rather than its causes (Erikson, 1962). Erikson's work is a curious blend of functionalist and symbolic interactionist thought, examining not only who was defined as deviant, but highlighting the social processes involved in labeling people deviant. Whilst not completely forgotten, his work in the sociology of deviance is not much referred to today, not least of all perhaps because of its marriage of these divergent theoretical traditions. Indeed, both approaches were to fall from favor during the 1970s, with the dominance of more radical approaches to the study of crime and deviance, such as Marxism.

The recent upsurge of interest in rural crime prompts another look at Erikson's classic, one reason being that the place Erikson describes in such detail, Puritan Massachusetts during the seventeenth century, has some features in common with the places which have captured the interest of rural criminologists. A noted feature of these places is their relatively tightly integrated and static social networks. They are high in what is now often referred to in the literature as social capital (Putnam, 2000). Much of what has passed as rural criminology has been content to look at these networks in terms of their social control effects, the idea being that tighter social integration in rural places helps to prevent crime. Indeed, for a very long time it could be said that insofar as criminology focused on rural crime at all it was not to explain crime in rural settings, but rather to offer rural social order as an explanation for the relative absence of crime. And it was more an article of faith than the subject of concerted research (Bottoms, 1994: 648). It was also frequently depicted as the common experience of advanced urban, industrial societies. Although derived from a European sociological tradition, in which the rural was treated as approximating Tonnies' *gemeinschaft* – communities rooted in close primary social bonds, smallness and permanence – it was generalized to other 'western' or European 'fragment' societies (settler societies like those of North America and Australasia) which have very different histories (cf Hartz, 1964; Connell, 2007).

* Corresponding author. Tel.:+61 2 6773 2116.
E-mail address: jscott6@une.edu.au (J. Scott).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.11.010
0743-0167/Crown Copyright © 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Scott, J., Hogg, R., Strange and stranger ruralities: Social constructions of rural crime in Australia, Journal of Rural Studies (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.11.010

ARTICLE IN PRESS

Erikson's analysis offers a departure point from such forms of generalization in that he was concerned with how differentiation is achieved and difference produced in social networks, his work highlighting how deviance makes social organization possible. This also suggests we should expect to find very significant differences in the nature of such processes depending upon national, regional and local context. In this paper, we also want to analyze how difference and differentiation are achieved in small scale social settings by examining the social construction of crime in rural places, with particular although not exclusive reference to Australia. In this way, the paper will depart from the social disorganization frameworks which have dominated rural criminology, being less concerned with problem solving than it is with the analysis of how social problems are constituted in rural places as integral to the processes through which their rural identity is itself constituted. As such, a major focus of the paper is the definitional activities of social groups in rural places in terms of their claim-making activities associated with crime problems (Schnieder, 1985).

The denser social networks which social disorganization theorists have described in some rural places are only achieved through a clear articulation of both social order *and* social disorder, with much social activity devoted to demarcating who and what resides within and outside the boundaries of these 'communities'. Far from being primarily a formal legal and policing function, much of this activity is conducted through informal channels, embedded social relations, family and communal networks, gossip and the like. Crime in rural Australia has recently attracted attention amid concern over youth suicide, Indigenous crime and disorder, hate crimes, and domestic violence.

While rural communities tend to have a strong sense of identity, defined in part through geography, the problem exists: who is defined as belonging to the community (and to the rural as such) in terms of residing in it and contributing to its prosperity? For example, racial and ethnic discrimination have been reported to be common in many rural areas (Coorey, 1990; Cunneen, 1992), at the same time as rural communities are celebrated for their hospitable and cohesive character. So, in this paper we want to do two things to broaden the terrain of rural crime research beyond the 'problem solving' concerns of the social disorganization corpus:

1. Examine how differentiation occurs in rural settings and how difference is articulated with respect to crime and deviance.
2. And, in doing this, examine also how the organizational capacity of groups in rural places influences interpretations and reactions to crime.

To illustrate these processes, examples of difference and differentiation will be provided, largely drawn from our own and others' research in the Australian context. To extend Erikson's analysis of deviant making activities we will later draw on Elias and Scotson's (1994) account of established-outsider relations which helps to highlight how power relations between social groups, not necessarily reducible to economic circumstances, may assist in understanding reactions to perceived crime and other social problems in rural places. First however it is necessary to consider the question of defining the rural.

2. Defining the rural

Longstanding debate within the social sciences as to how to define 'the rural' has not yielded consensus (Halfacree, 1993; Lockie and Bourke, 2001: 5–9), some doubting even whether it is a useful question to ask (Pahl, 1968; Gans, 1968). Differences of view no doubt arise at least in part because different disciplines approach the question with very different purposes. So, rather than venture any sort of answer here, we offer a few observations relevant to our own concerns in this article (see Hogg and Carrington, 2006: 1–7).

We suggest that in key respects rural communities are, like nations, imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). Indeed their enduring significance is often connected to their storied role in evoking vital elements of national culture: the iconic image of the English village, small-town American values or the egalitarian mateship ethos of the Australian bush. The point, essential to the analysis that follows, is that the rural must be understood as more (and also less) than a mere tangible physical space or environment: it comprises also mental spaces or 'symbolic landscapes' which condition everyday thought and action (Crang, 1998). The cultural theorist Raymond Williams observed in the opening pages of his magisterial *The City and the Country* (1975: 1) that although the real histories (and it might be added the spatial, social, economic and cultural character) of urban and rural settlements are 'astonishingly varied', this has not prevented 'powerful feelings' from gathering and being 'generalized' around each category.

'Country' and 'countryside' are frequently used interchangeably with 'rural', as Williams tends to do. 'Agrarian' is also often employed as a descriptor. In Australia 'regional' is commonly used as a catch-all to refer to areas outside the major cities. However, depending on context, such terms rarely carry quite the same powerful cultural connotations as references to *rural* life or *rural* communities. That is to say, whilst there is a common tendency in everyday usage to use rural as a form of shorthand encompassing all spaces outside cities, this fails to account for the specificities of the rural as symbolic landscape. The point has a particular salience to Australia, and probably also other settler societies. Australia, unlike Europe, has no feudal or neo-feudal past in which the putative national territory was over many centuries closely settled by agrarian communities which only declined in economic, demographic and political significance with the industrial revolution and the progressive migration of population to the cities. This history fosters nostalgic images of the English (and European) rural landscape as the vestige of an older, simpler, more innocent and stable way of life. The historical distortion involved (given the role of forced social change in the making of English and European landscapes), does not necessarily detract from its cultural resonance. However, it is an image much harder to sustain in Australia and other settler societies that were, in a sense, 'born modern' and lack a pre-capitalist agrarian past (Hartz, 1964).

Australia at the time of British colonization was (in part) for this reason regarded (erroneously) as uninhabited and unsettled, a vacant wilderness that was yet to be populated and domesticated. Rural communities had to be created. They were made, not born, and they were forcibly made in the teeth of resistance by Indigenous peoples who had occupied the continent for tens of millennia. And given that the interior is mostly arid and semi-arid, and the north tropical, taming the wilderness has proved to be a difficult and incomplete endeavor. Despite early ambitions – evoked in slogans like 'a million farms for a million farmers' – the idea that large parts of the continent were uninhabitable came to be accepted in the settler culture (although, ironically, not in the social ecology of Indigenous Australia). This has not prevented concerted efforts to imagine and construct rural ways of life in Australia in the image of the *gemeinschaft* community: centered on place and face-to-face relationships, closely tied to nature and rooted in affective bonds of great depth and long standing (Hogg and Carrington, 2006: 19–26). But these efforts have had to constantly contend with *other* rurals, with unruly spaces, environments and ways of life. This is perhaps what one author meant when she said that Australia is 'a land that exceeds its settlement.' This is the source of some of the critical forms of differentiation that characterize the everyday life of many rural Australian communities. As recently as

Please cite this article in press as: Scott, J., Hogg, R., Strange and stranger ruralities: Social constructions of rural crime in Australia, Journal of Rural Studies (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.11.010

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545666

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/6545666

Daneshyari.com