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Farm, place and identity construction among Irish farm youth who migrate



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ABSTRACT

While studies of rural young people's relationship to place continue to provide illuminating insights into experiences of belonging and identity construction, this paper specifically focuses on farm youth to explore the connection between involvement in the farm and its influence on their relationship and connection with their local community. The paper is based on qualitative narrative research with a group of thirty university students who grew up on the farm but are highly unlikely to pursue farming as a career or return to the farm. Their farm experiences reflect different levels of farming engagement since their childhood. The paper outlines how the nature of roles and farm involvement inform wider social recognition and identifications, which significantly shape their connections with the places they were 'born and bred'. Early farm role allocations into 'worker/'helper' positions are shown to influence interactions with the wider locality and farming community and have a distinct impact on how young people build their identities. The findings of this research show that the kinds of gendered work roles and farm involvement while growing up influenced their wider social recognition and identifications, which significantly shaped and continues to shape their feelings of connection to where they were 'born and bred'. Despite having moved to urban locations – and relatively varied 'internal' relationships with farm/rural community culture – a more abstract 'rural' identification persists in opposition to a negatively imagined external urban 'other'. A key conclusion from this is that young people from this background, who are socially and spatially mobile, continue to affirm farm identities as they build a life away from their homeplace and local community.

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1. Introduction

Most young people born into farming families in Ireland do not continue farming as an occupation but typically migrate to urban locations in pursuit of educational and career opportunities. In farming succession arrangements such as Ireland's – where the norm is for one family member to succeed and operate the holding – this mobility for other family members is not unusual. However, this arrangement has repercussions for non-succeeding family members' sense of connection to farming and the rural communities in which they grew up. The distinct social, cultural and practical organisation of family farming imprints on the biographies of all family members. A farm upbringing usually requires the involvement of all members in the running of the farm

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and household and invokes different gendered roles, identities, performances and succession stakes and expectations (see e.g. Brandth, 1995; Little, 2006; Silvasti, 2003). As a distinct 'lifescape' (Convery et al., 2005) or 'domain' the farm can also be considered a multiple 'place' where young people's emotions, knowledge and discourses are framed within a combination of home, work, land and nature. While studies of rural young people's relationships to place continue to provide illuminating insights into experiences of belonging and identity construction (e.g. Wiborg, 2004; Leyshon, 2008, 2011), a specific focus on farm youth is warranted given the particularities in which they are socialised that distinguish them from other rural youth.

This paper seeks to address a significant research gap by focussing on Irish farm youth who have migrated to the city in pursuit of third level education. While the study reflects the experiences of young Irish adults, the findings are likely to resonate with other countries sharing similar family farm cultures such as Finland (Silvasti, 2003) and the UK (Gray, 1998; Riley, 2009). As a group who have experienced both life on and away from the farm, it

offers a distinct opportunity to explore to what extent past experiences of farm and rural community life influence present identities and perspectives. The findings of this research show that the kinds of gendered work roles and farm involvement while growing up influenced their wider social recognition and identifications, which significantly shaped and continues to shape their feelings of connection to where they were 'born and bred'. Despite having moved to urban locations – and relatively varied 'internal' relationships with farm/rural community culture – a more abstract 'rural' identification persists in opposition to a negatively imagined external urban 'other'. These aspects of recognition and identification are examined among a group of thirty young adult university students who recounted different aspects of farm involvement and social recognition within their family and at local community level.

The paper first explores literature on recognition and identification within farming and rural communities focussing on the influence of succession norms and status differentiation in rural communities. It then outlines the details of the research study with young farm adults in third level education. The findings section explores and describes the division of on-farm roles into 'workers' and 'helpers'. It then looks at how this influences identity recognition within the community and how the community can act as a source of attachment or detachment for individuals. Subsequently, attention shifts to the concept of 'othering' and how this is used by participants to affirm their farm identities even as they build a life away from their geographical and cultural background.

2. Identifications and recognition within farming and rural places

The main concern of this paper is to explore how the nature of involvement with the farm and farming – through its defined roles, statuses, performances and forms of interaction – shape the social connections and attachments that young people establish while growing up. The analysis takes as its starting point the active nature of farm involvement (its performance) as the lens through which to understand how wider social connections and attachments are established. In developing these connections, the analysis places particular emphasis on a critical dimension in understanding identity formation; social and self 'identification'. Identification can be described as a process of 'knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are etc.,' (Jenkins, 2008, p.12). 'Identification' has key implications for how people are assigned roles and responsibilities as well as accorded status by others. The terms of farm involvement are intrinsically associated with forms of family identification and social recognition. The nature of this recognition and identification bears on how young people subsequently identify themselves. For as Leyshon (2008, p.21) argues: '[identity is] not fixed or immutable but ... always a subjective reinterpretation of the self in an ongoing daily process'. At the same time, in constructing and managing identities, actors seek to convey an impression of stability and coherence as they make sense of themselves and others.

Children and youth growing up on the farm play an active, albeit variable, role in the farm and household operation from an early age. However, this has often received little emphasis in many studies of European farming, which take as their main focus the farm owner/operator (e.g. Saugeres, 2002; Brandth, 2002; Dessein and Nevens, 2007; Price and Evans, 2009; Brandth and Overrein, 2013) or farm wife/partner (see O'Hara, 1998; Shortall, 1999; Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Price, 2010). Existing research concerning farm offspring in such countries as the UK (Riley, 2009) and Canada (Leckie, 1996) shows that there are particular forms of socialisation surrounding the kinds of work they should engage in, reflecting differences in future succession stakes in the farm holding and

control over its operation. The identification of the farm successor has been particularly gendered with one son typically socialised into taking a more defined farming role in the belief that this will produce a natural successor, while other siblings, especially sisters, are encouraged to invest in their education instead (O'Hara, 1998; Silvasti, 2003). In succeeding to the farm the individual must take on board more than just the ownership of the farm but also the values attached to this status (Daugstad, 2010, cited in Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). In her work on Finnish farming 'cultural scripts', Silvasti (2003) highlights succession as the most significant of all norms. This model of male succession – which has strong resonances in the Irish case – is closely linked to the way labour is organised and roles allocated on the farm during childhood. The dynamic surrounding farm life becomes a vital element of the succession process as it involves interactions and socialisation between parents and children as well as other considerations such as local and social attachments (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). Economic difficulties, lack of affordable non-family labour and the blurring of divisions between business and personal life means that 'non-successor' children are often required to work in various capacities on the farm and in the household while growing up (Wallace et al., 1994; Elder and Conger, 2000). In the UK, Riley (2009) found that children are a vital element of the family's workforce particularly at peak times such as harvesting. His work also highlights the early socialisation of children into gendered roles, where boys' participation is seen a rite of passage in the path to manhood while girls are more likely to view their work as merely 'giving a hand' (Riley, 2009). The affiliative ties between the family and the farm ensure that even where children are highly unlikely to take over the farm they are still willing to help out. While young people play an active and critical role in farming, it has long been 'performed' in a very gendered way, giving rise to different degrees of social recognition and status (Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Brandth, 1995). Many of the activities the recognised farmer has control over have been privileged and described as 'real' farming whereas other tasks, typically carried out by women or children, are seen as ancillary and unskilled. This cultural norm in many European countries which has long dominated the farming and rural landscape is linked to, for example, controlling and mastering the physical environment (Bryant, 1999; Saugeres, 2002; Coldwell, 2007). As a result, women and young people occupy a secondary position in the private and public recognition of farming roles.

If young people occupy quite differentiated roles and engage in different types of farm performance, the question then becomes whether and how these farm roles might influence their place connections, attachments and affiliations with local community life. 'Place' is central to studies of socio-spatial identities and rural youth and the multiple ways identities are embodied, negotiated and stabilised (Leyshon, 2008, 2011; Haukanes, 2013). As Farrugia (2014, p.295) notes 'identity construction takes place in and through the making of *places*', which means that social divisions, hierarchies and distinctions should also be viewed as 'emplaced'. As much scholarship on place shows, attachment to and belonging within place is not a uniform concept but rather is strongly tied to the individual's social position and status within a location, and infused with differential access to power (Dahlström, 1996; Wiborg, 2004; Leyshon, 2011; Gustafson, 2013). How young people feel about their homeplace can often be a mix of "conflicting feelings of belonging, longing, ambivalence and abhorrence" (Leyshon, 2008, p.2).

Farming occupies a distinct 'domain' (Peace, 2001) within rural life and farm livelihoods create a wider set of norms, expectations, economic connections and social opportunities beyond the farm gate for those involved. Engagement in farming is therefore 'emplaced' in the sense that there are social and cultural aspects of

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