Journal of Rural Studies 32 (2013) 275–282

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

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

I'm going to make sure I'm ready before I leave: The complexity of educational and mobility decision-making in a Canadian coastal community

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Keywords:
Rural education
Educational decision-making
Youth
Mobility
Atlantic Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on an analysis of migration from a coastal community in Atlantic Canada through the fisheries crisis of the last decade. Despite a persistent rhetoric of crisis and decline, the community remains difficult to leave for many young people. This paper examines the dimensions of this difficulty and the way that formal education sets up expectations for outmigration but few supports to families who have multi-generational linkages to local communities. Ironically the very discourse of crisis that is meant to propel youth out of the community may end up playing into a parallel discourse that has long predicted the collapse of urban economic and social structures. This in turn generates and propels a survivalism that inflects educational decision-making in ways that create deeply ambivalent and problematic conceptions of place and mobility for rural youth. This discourse in turn complicates simplistic neoliberal notions of educational choice.

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1. Mobile dreams, circumspect practices: a new spin on survivalism

> I want to travel and I want to get my education.[1] You can't do much unless you have, you know, more than just high school. But … you know, it's hard thinking about, like, living away (from home). You have to, like, do good (in postsecondary studies) or you'll come back like my sister's friend, all embarrassed. I don't want to be embarrassed so I'm goin' to make sure I'm ready before I take off (Student, Female age 18).

Young people growing up in rural villages in the West and perhaps in most parts of the world face a central problem. Shall I stay or shall I go? Actually, this decision, if it is a decision, is made within the context of family resources and networks of cultural, social and economic capital (Rye, 2011: Byun et al., 2012). It is also a decision that is made in the context of new mobilities (Urry, 2000, 2007) and increasingly mobile work engagements/deployments which send more or less temporary workers into remote areas that are often rural/remote like the fly-in/fly-out mining, and gas and oil extraction communities in the interior of Australia (Cleary, 2012) and in Canada's north-west and shield country. The general argument offered here is that while mobility is understood to be a key component of personal, social, cultural and economic capital formation, in many remote and rural contexts geographic mobility can be very difficult to enact for some young people. In rural Atlantic Canada, I have found an uneven distribution of mobility opportunities and the extended family-supported moratorium where a young adult is allowed to explore educational and occupational landscapes beyond what can be seen locally. This uneven privilege is often constructed in neoliberal discourse as choice, which is perhaps the most misunderstood and ideologically laden notion in contemporary educational discourse (Ball, 2012; Vincent and Ball, 2006). While everyone may be said to have some measure of choice, decisions about postsecondary education, which in rural places involve leaving home, are not experienced in the same way (Rao and Hossain, 2012).

For some youth staying or leaving is inevitability, a default, or a family imperative that effectively positions a young person on a mobile trajectory that involves either higher education or integration into an emerging mobile workforce. For others it is a real choice because there are options both in the rural community and elsewhere. For still others it is an apparent necessity that is rendered difficult or even impossible by the limitations of family finances, educational practices, and horizons of possibility (Crivello, 2011; Hicks, 2013; Walker, 2010). There is a great deal of hand-wringing concern in political rhetoric, rural community

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[1] The author would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting the research upon which this article is based.

0743-0167/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.07.006

discourses and in the North American rural education literature about the effects of what is called the brain drain (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). There is however, less interest it seems in examining the impediments faced by rural youth who may benefit themselves and their communities by leaving for education and experience (Stockdale, 2006). Leaving the community requires some combination of capital in the form of the social capital represented by family connections, raw economic capital that supports a young "out-migrant" setting up far from home and/or, the cultural capital represented by formal educational credentials and/or marketable skills.

There are also different knowledge sets, emotions, and judgments that accompany different alternatives. It is not "cool" to stay in the country and it has not been so for a long time (Baeck, 2004; Berry, 1977; Ching and Creed, 1996). At the same time the burgeoning and exciting urban spatial imaginaries into which rural youth often dream of escaping are fraught with real and imagined dangers often understood via cable television and the Internet. Most rural youth I have encountered in my research and in my life in rural Atlantic Canada claim to want to leave their home places for more exciting opportunities. Most of these rural youth understand the intimate connection between their formal education and their ability to leave their rural homes. Some, it must be said, are also keenly aware of personal, family and community supported place attachments and wish to remain close to home.

But this desire is haunted and ambivalent and it has been troubled and complicated by the very forces in modernity that have compressed time and space making the dream of mobility possible in the first place (Giddens, 1990). In the discourse of these times we are led to believe that we now inhabit a smaller world that is accessible to all. To some extent this is true. To live in a rural place is no longer to be cut-off and isolated from the main currents of life in other places. To go to school in a rural community is to be confronted with a complex set of discourses some of which are mutually exclusive, filled with tension, and even contradictory. For instance, rural masculinities can be associated with productivist traditions and expectations that a young man reproduce an established and valued way of life (Campbell et al., 2006; Kenway et al., 2006; Ni Laoire, 2005).

As much as rural decline "pushes" and opportunity outside the community "pulls", I have encountered a countervailing circumspect resistance to venturing out into unknown spaces. Globalization also brings with it forms of demobilization and what has been called "glocalization" as less privileged social agents both in the west, but particularly in the so-called developing world live lives that continue to be bounded by the heaviness of place and space (Bourdieu et al., 1999; Castells, 2004; Bauman, 2004). Restrictions on border crossing between Africa and Western Europe and between the United States and Latin America (particularly Mexico) serve as extreme examples. Getting out and flying about in Giddens' placeless spaces may not be as easy as it would seem.

This paper attempts to grapple with the way in which multiple forces have converged on one particular rural locale and complicated (if not impeded) the ability of many youth to realize their already ambivalent mobile dreams. To frame this analysis I invoke the term survivalism. This term is typically used to describe a more or less radical retreat from modernity that involves impending systemic collapse, self-reliance and survival skills, and sometimes, religious fundamentalism and righteous acts of violence (Bageant, 2007; Stock, 1996). The variant of this discourse that I have found is not as radical as this, but it does involve an explicit articulation of both place attachment and pride taken in being able to survive in a challenged rural community. The youth I interviewed are the children of the survivors of industrial restructuring in the fishery and they have grown up surrounded by the discourse of chronic economic instability, community decline, and outmigration. One "survives" then either by staying on as an active positive choice, by constructing a story of persistence that is like Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) "making a virtue of necessity" and justifying inevitability as choice, or by accepting their own in ability to leave. These youth have been raised in a context that tells them at every turn that they have to get out of town and so what I call the mobility imperative is powerfully written into educational and economic discourse. What is important here is that naïve neoliberal choice discourse is complicated by the way that the preferred choice promoted in formal education requires very specific supports in this rural community.

This discourse of local instability is mirrored by similar wider scale discourses of instability and fear. In recent years the disaster scenarios imagined under the ambit of climate change, terrorism, urban crime, fundamentalist revolutions, regional and global economic crises, pandemics, the dissolution of established political formations, questions of food and energy security, cultural hybridity and migrations have become common. These and other real and imagined threats all lead these rural youth to wonder if the known communities in which they were raised, and where social capital nested in kinship and friendship networks that represent what Prinsloo (2005) has called "placed resources," are actually a better bet for a modest, familiar future. One young man put it this way.

> A: I'm just a guy who is happy with a simple life really. Like a job … and I don't care if it don't pay all that good, just as long as I get by … School is hard for me and mom and dad want me to do good.
> Q: Do you think you'll go to community college or university?
> A: I don't know. I'm already sick of school and like I said, I'm not that good at it. I want to do something ya know, make some money. It's kind of scary to think about living up there.
> Q: Where?
> A: In them cities where you have to lock everything up and … you see it on the news, it's all police cars and murders. At least around here … well there's drugs around and stuff … but it ain't that bad. (Student Male Age 17)

Survivalism also takes other forms. For instance, local coastal properties have escalated in value because of the demand from wealthy (often international) summer residents who themselves are escaping what they perceive as instability in their urban home places. The rural-urban binary is prominent not only in local discourse, but also in the nature-focussed (Biro, 2005) discourse of these summer residents. In this context, survivalism also re-emerged in the form of economic and social practices which include a return to small-scale "green" agriculture, locally-controlled wild fisheries, DIY and community bartering, farmer's markets, community-shared agriculture/fisheries, and what are generally seen as sustainable practices that often require not specialization, but multiple skills. Because schools have been amongst the chief purveyors of specialization, modernism and what I have called the mobility imperative in rural communities (Corbett, 2007; Holt, 2012), their core practices have been challenged by emerging or revived localist educational narratives like place-based education (Sobel, 1995; Theobald, 1997; Gruenewald, 2003; Greenwood and Smith, 2007).

2. Learning for where?

In fact, place-based education is not a new narrative for rural schools and its contemporary echoes trace back at least to Dewey's experience-based education for rural living. Rural schools harbor an old tension between two core narratives about the purpose of

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