



Circuits of education, rural gentrification, and family migration from the global city

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A B S T R A C T

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Although there is recurring empirical evidence of gentrifier families with young children, the importance of education-related factors in the migration and residential decision-making of rural gentrifiers have yet to be fully examined. Using the case study of Cranbrook, Kent, processes of education-led rural gentrification are revealed that are dominated by 'counter-Londonising' in-migrants paying premium property prices to buy into exclusive rural school catchment areas. A rural expression of circuits of education is identified, which, to date, are represented as urban-specific strands of gentrification. Conceptually, the paper sheds light on links between education-led urban and rural gentrification; illuminating counter-urban population movements tied to the prioritisation of familial relations and domesticity in perceived child-friendly rural environments.

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1. Introduction

Studies of rural gentrification often expose the in-migration of affluent families with children, or couples relocating to rural places in conjunction with the onset of childrearing (Champion and Atkins, 2000). These lifecourse-specific movements into rural places are exemplified by Phillips' (1993) pioneering study of rural gentrification in the Gower, Wales, which reveals: 'many of the 'gentrifiers' moved into the area at a time when they were starting, or had just started, a family' (p.137). Similarly, Little and Austin's (1996) investigation of social restructuring in rural Avon, England, identifies: 'Many households had moved to the village at key stages in their lifecycle – on or just before the birth of children or as children reached school age' (p.105).

In such accounts of rural change, perceived child-friendly virtues of rural places are integral to the migration decision-making processes of counterurbanising families with children (Matthews et al., 2000). Family-based appeals of rural places for the well-being of children often hinge on inter-related idyllic representations of rurality, for example perceptions of child safety and sense of community and neighbourliness, and healthy children via daily outdoor exercise, interactions and encounters with nature and natural environments with relatively low levels of air pollution (i.e. abundance of 'fresh air') (Halfacree, 1995; Bushin, 2005, 2009); although Little and Austin (1996) point to a disjuncture between the perceptions and realities of the rural idyll.

Another considerable, and growing, influence on the (in-) migration decision-making processes of rural gentrifier families with young children is the quality and provision of education and schools in the place of destination, increasingly in light of the penetration and marketisation of school catchment areas and performance league tables within British society (Walker and Clark, 2010). Overall, and to date, this dimension of rural gentrification has yet to be fully examined; the main concern of this paper.

Using the case study of Cranbrook, Kent, this paper therefore explores a process of rural gentrification that hinges on the provision of high-quality education, and which, in turn, is integral to the restructuring of the local rural population and spatial patterns of family geographies. The paper is divided into 4 sections. In the next section, we describe how understandings of urban gentrification have been advanced by studies of circuits of education, noting similar emerging trends in some rural locations. Section 3 outlines the case study and presents empirical findings from four methods: content analyses; interviews with estate agents; analyses of GB census data, and; a questionnaire survey with rural in-migrants. Section 4 explores the overlaps between rural and urban gentrification, circuits of education, and migration; taking forward Phillips' (1993) view that understanding rural gentrification does not simply entail 'the application of an urban theory of gentrification' (p.138).

2. Rural expressions of circuits of education?

Over the last decade, knowledge of gentrification in urban contexts has been advanced by studies of where, how and why middle-class families pay premium property prices to acquire

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residence in exclusive urban school catchment areas (i.e. Butler and Robson, 2003; Butler et al., 2007; Butler and Hamnett, 2007). Building upon education studies (Ball et al., 1995), this geographic scholarship highlights how the attendance of children at reputable high-quality schools, which excel in school league tables and are graded outstanding by Ofsted reports, is fundamental to the residential decision-making of some middle-class parents (Dobson and Stillwell, 2000). These residential practices are coupled to education strategies whereby middle-class parents 'actively choose' schools and plan 'individualised' long-term academic careers for their children.

Within the wider temporal context, primary schools are viewed as a form of 'preparatory education' that facilitate access to appropriate circuits of secondary education and beyond. Buying into a suitable school catchment area is therefore a prerequisite of middle-class residential decision-making, to fulfil the long-term trajectory of a child's school career (Gorard et al., 2002).

Given the extent of these social practices, Butler and Robson (2003) conclude that: 'Education markets are now rivalling those in housing and employment as determinants of the nature, extent and stability of middle-class gentrification in inner London' (p.24), and this process is 'a critical aspect of recent patterns of middle-class settlement in inner London' (p.16). It is highly plausible that the residential geographies of middle-class education-led practices are not London-specific, or confined to urban places.

In an update, Butler et al. (2007: p.7) examine the impacts of the saturation of education and housing markets, and of 'a perception of a crisis in education in London'. Although their findings show affluent families are staying-put in London and side-stepping oversubscribed prized schools by sending children to private schools, Butler et al. identify demographic instability in distinct neighbourhoods as some families 'move out of London altogether' (p.10) in search of high-quality education for their children.

Similar migratory trends are identified by Bridge (2006), in a study of gentrifiers with children in Bristol. Specifically, Bridge points to a tension between the predilection of gentrifiers to display cultural capital via the gentrification aesthetic within inner-urban neighbourhoods, and the desire for their children to attend high-performing schools. The absence of such schools in many gentrified inner-urban neighbourhoods mean that there is often 'the possibility of the loss of the gentrification aesthetic to satisfy the need for schooling' (p.1976). This mismatch between residential and educational aspirations results in gentrifier households with children being 'forced back into more traditional suburban and semirural trajectories' (p.1977), or 'out of the city altogether' (p.1976), to secure 'good' schooling for their children. Bridge concludes: 'In the trade-off between aesthetics and education, education wins' (p.1965). These urban to (semi-)rural movements of affluent families are giving rise to more diffuse geographies of gentrification, and demonstrate how processes of urban and rural gentrification are closely inter-linked; a theme which, to date, has not been widely studied.

However, despite these connections, attention has mostly focussed on the effects of education-led population movements in urban places. Butler and Robson (2003) contend, for example, that such processes are 'transforming the social ecology of the city in ways which are redrawing the social class geography' (p.7). How rural socio-demographics are reconfigured by education-led migration flows of (ex-urban) affluent families is not well understood (Milbourne, 2007; Smith, 2007). As Walker and Clark (2010, p.241) note: 'the effect the [education] market is having on rural primary schools and their parent consumers is under researched'.

Indeed, Walker and Clark's study of parental choice and rural primary schools is important for identifying similar class-specific education strategies (i.e. circuits of education) by middle-class

families in rural places; although the remit of their study did not include a focus on education strategies and wider processes of rural change such as gentrification:

'it is the dominant middle-class parents who have the most **spatial power** to operationalise the mechanism of parental choice... this is played out in the rural, primary school market place by those who can afford the cost and the time of the daily commute or by the parents who can afford to **move houses** so that the 'right' school became their local school (**emphases added**)' (p.247).

Of course, the outcomes of exercising such 'spatial power' to move into school catchment areas may be varied, and may have differential impacts on connections between rural population change and the provision of rural education. For instance, some families with children may move specifically into a rural place and send their children to a (private) school in another location, irrespective of the quality of education in the new place of residence (see Phillips, 2002). In this way, such processes may underpin or consolidate the closure of rural schools in the place of residence. This is in line with the impacts of other expressions of rural gentrification that reduce rural child populations such as retirement-led gentrification (Stockdale, 2006, 2010). Similarly, the number of children retained on school rolls will be depleted by the proliferation of second-home gentrification and the production of holiday cottages (Gallent, 2009).

Conversely, processes of rural gentrification may replenish rural child populations. The demand for places in schools may be sustained, and, possibly increased, by in-migrant families lured to a rural place by a high-performing school. Of course, such processes will unfold in rural places with the most prized schools; thus becoming the preserve of affluent in-migrant families. This will have serious implications for the quality of education of children from low-income families, possibly marginalised by rural gentrification (see Ni Laoire et al. (2010) for discussion of childhood mobilities). What these crude distinctions serve to demonstrate is the importance of education-related factors in understanding processes of gentrification in some rural contexts.

3. Rural gentrification in Cranbrook, Kent

Cranbrook is a small rural market town in the North Weald of Kent, with a total population of approximately 6000. The town is 43 miles south of London, and connected by rail service (journey time of 50–55 min from Staplehurst station, 4 miles from Cranbrook). Since the mid-1980s the locality has been gentrified, with affluent (pre-)retiree migrant households from London inflating property prices above regional and national means and inducing the displacement of low-income local families (Higley, 2008). Cranbrook is also synonymous with high-quality education, and, from the mid-2000s, processes of gentrification have intensified with the influx of affluent families with children attracted by high-performing rural schools. As noted in the *Financial Times* (27/12/03), the location is: "a 'place of pilgrimage' for people in search of a good education and a timber-framed dream" (p.10). The emergence of this new expression of gentrification is captured in the following quote from an estate agent:

I've worked here for 18 years and I think it's always been very wealthy people... predominantly the retired all those years ago... things have changed though in the last five or six years, because when I started 17, 18 years ago Cranbrook weren't half as popular with families, but now with the [school] catchments.... Schooling that's more of a pull ... so that's a marked change I think ... when I started, it was more retired

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