



## (Un)caring communities: Processes of marginalisation and access to formal and informal care and assistance in rural Russia

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### A B S T R A C T

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The marginality of rural life, understood in structural, economic, political and geographic terms, has been an underlying theme in both historical and contemporary studies of the Russian countryside. Much less attention has been paid to marginality as relational and the moral discourses of (un) belonging and (un)deservingness through which moral centres and peripheries are constructed within rural Russian contexts. This paper explores the ways in which both fixed, structural and constructed, personalised explanations of hardship are employed by rural people and how these relate to processes of integration into or exclusion from 'caring' and 'moral' communities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Burla village, western Siberia, in 2008–10, and focusing primarily on the activities of the Centre for Social Assistance to Families and Children located there, the paper discusses the ways in which affiliation with the 'moral centre' facilitates access to both formal and informal forms of care and assistance from which those at the 'moral periphery' are more often excluded.

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### 1. Introduction

The 'marginality' of rural life has been an underlying theme in many historical and contemporary studies of the Russian countryside (Shubin, 2006). Neither Soviet nor post-Soviet economic policies prioritised agricultural production, investments in rural infrastructure or provision of services. As a result, rural people have suffered disadvantages in both present living standards and future opportunities (Donahue, 2002). The severing of ties between state and agriculture, the disintegration of infrastructure, including transport links, and the withdrawal of funding for cultural and social provision in the period since 1991, have been interpreted as increasing the physical, economic and social distance between rural and urban populations, exacerbating the marginality of rural life (Lindner, 2007). Marginality has thus been approached in much of the academic literature on rural Russia as a structural phenomenon, explained in terms of geographic, economic and political centres and peripheries, and referring to rural populations more or less as a single homogenous mass. Much less attention has been paid to the 'relational nature of

marginality' (Cloke and Little, 1997, 275) or to processes of marginalisation *within* rural places as these interact with socially constructed notions of 'self' and 'other' and the production of 'moral' centres and peripheries, based on distinctions between those who 'fulfill' and those who 'transgress' local moral norms of lifestyle, behaviour and social interaction.

Issues of social inequality and poverty in rural Russia have been studied primarily through large-scale, longitudinal surveys (Wegren et al., 2003, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2004). Whilst such studies provide important insight into the extent of rural poverty and offer explanations of its causes and consequences relating to household behaviours and strategies of adaptation, survey methods cannot uncover deeper, locally-inflected meanings, explanations and lived experiences of inequality, poverty and social transformation. By contrast, ethnographic studies have offered insight into various aspects of rural life in the post-socialist field (Miller, 2001; Hivon, 1998; Shubin, 2003; Hann, 2003; Shanin et al., 2002). 'Subjective' experiences of change and the ways in which these interact with the norms and values associated with village life have been explored in many of these studies (Hann, 2003). A preference for collective forms of production, the value of labour and an imperative to work the land (Hivon, 1998), as well as the importance of networks of kin, neighbours and friends in mitigating against poverty, by pooling and exchanging material resources and labour have been noted (Shubin, 2007; Miller and

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Heady, 2003). Moral disapproval of those whose relative affluence allows them to withdraw from or monetise their input into networks of mutual assistance (Hivon, 1998, p. 48; Miller and Heady, 2003, p. 283–4), as well as the danger of exclusion faced by those whose poverty is too great to allow them to participate in required levels of reciprocity (Shteinberg, 2002, p. 280), have been discussed, pointing to inequalities within village societies. Yet, whilst the emotional and ‘moral’ benefits of and prerequisites for ‘belonging’ are alluded to in general terms (Shteinberg, 2002, p. 281–282; Miller and Heady, 2003, p. 278 & 288), they are not usually explored in depth, nor have intersections between formal provisions of social support and informal networks or communities of care been considered in detail.

This paper explores processes of marginalisation in a particular rural context: Burla village, western Siberia. It discusses the ways in which structural and individualised explanations of disadvantage are selectively employed by local people to emphasise the virtues of the moral centre, including a virtue of caring community, and to justify disengagement from and lack of care for, the ‘other’. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at the Burla District Centre for Social Assistance (CSA), the paper discusses the interlinking of formal and informal networks of care and social support and the ways in which affiliation with the ‘moral’ centre facilitates access to both, whilst processes of ‘othering’ legitimate multiple exclusions of those at the moral periphery.

The following section explores more fully the theoretical frameworks on which the arguments outlined above are based. In Section 3 the reader is introduced to Burla village and the fieldwork methods are explained in light of the realities and constraints facing western ethnographers working in rural Russia. Section 4 provides an overview of the work of the CSA, its ‘target groups’ and activities. The remainder of the paper explores the relationship between processes of marginalisation and incorporation into or exclusion from ‘communities of care’. This is achieved primarily through an analysis of the discourses of moral belonging employed by the ‘included’ to distinguish themselves from the ‘others’ of the moral periphery. These constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ contribute to interpretations of ‘deservingness’ and ‘need’ which, it is argued, offer those able to claim affiliation with the ‘moral centre’ considerable advantages in terms of access to intersecting formal and informal provisions of care and emotional as well as practical support. Section 5 explores the structural explanations of marginality which are applied to the village as a whole, constructing rural life as ‘harder’ but also ‘more human’ than its urban equivalents. The ‘moral’ virtues associated with life in this context and claimed by those at the ‘moral centre’ include self-sufficiency, hard work and reciprocal care. By contrast, as discussed in Section 6, the hardships and suffering of those who are unable to cope is more often constructed as a result of individual failings and pathologies. Constructed as ‘other’, these people are relegated to a ‘moral periphery’. Formal assessments of their needs entitle them to forms of monetary and practical assistance, but their incorporation into those caring communities which are dominated by the ‘moral centre’ is far more problematic. Finally, Section 7 returns to the CSA and discusses the advantages and opportunities available to those who are included in such caring communities, particularly with regard to their overlapping access to informal and formal resources and forms of care.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks: care, moral community and the marginalised ‘other’

The arguments and empirical evidence presented here draw on a wider research project investigating social security and care

in Burla.<sup>1</sup> The project is framed by anthropological theorisations of social security, defined as encompassing the complex range of ways in which people mitigate risk and produce securities (social, economic, personal and cultural) by drawing on public and private resources, formal and informal networks, and state and non-state structures (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000). This approach to the concept of social security is helpful in highlighting the ways in which access to a wide variety of resources and forms of assistance are intertwined such that forms of inclusion or exclusion can be multiple and mutually reinforcing across formal and informal contexts. Feelings of trust and emotional forms of security are understood as equally significant as material forms of assistance in people’s experiences of security or vulnerability and their abilities to deal with difficult circumstances (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000, p. 7). Thelen and Read have argued that care needs to be considered explicitly as a ‘dimension of social security’ (Thelen and Read, 2007, p. 7).

Analysing the practices and relationships through which care is performed and the discursive constructions of morality, community and deservingness on which these are based, can help to highlight the ways in which certain needs and relationships are validated and supported, whilst others are viewed as blameworthy and deserving of punitive or controlling, rather than supportive responses. As feminist scholars of care have pointed out the relationships, structures and policies which provide and facilitate caring activities are never value-free or morally neutral (Ungerson, 2005; Kittay and Feder, 2002). In Tronto’s theorisation of the phases of care, for example, the first phase, ‘caring about’, involves making an assessment of need and taking morally defined decisions about which needs should be met (Tronto, 1993, p. 106).

Socially and culturally situated notions of mutual obligation, rights and responsibilities, dependency and self-sufficiency create categories of deserving and undeserving need, and determine whether ‘caring’ or ‘punitive’ responses are considered appropriate (Fraser and Gordon, 2002). Categories of need and deservingness are all-too-easily mapped to socially constructed identities and representations of the ‘respectable’ citizen and the ‘unworthy’, and potentially threatening, ‘other’. As such their implications can be understood through theories of marginality as discursively constructed, fluid and relative (Tsing, 1994). As Cloke and Little explain, ‘marginality is not simply about the possession or lack of certain essential characteristics ... but rather ... is dependent upon deeper processes relating to the construction of identities and the positionality of the self and the other’ (Cloke and Little, 1997, 273). Whilst rigid and static definitions of centre and periphery may be critiqued (Perlman, 1976; Gonzalez de la Rocha et al., 2004), locally meaningful distinctions and relationships of power, nonetheless create strong binary divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The moral divisions implied in this process help to construct what Rose has termed ‘moral communities’ bound by shared allegiances and values and within which forms of care and mutual assistance circulate. These moral communities strengthen and ‘re-

<sup>1</sup> This research project, ‘Social Security, Care and the ‘Withdrawing State’ in Rural Russia: a case study from Altai Krai’ is funded by the British Academy Small Research Grant Programme, (Grant number 50447/1). I have considered changing the name of the village in order to protect the anonymity of respondents. However, discussions during fieldwork made clear that people were bemused and, if anything, rather insulted by such a suggestion. As they impressed upon me, one of their motivations for participating in my research was that it would tell the story of *their* village. As one woman put it, ‘We might not be able to read English or understand your academic arguments, but at least we will be able to find our own names in whatever you publish’. Anne White reports a similar experience in her work in small-town Russia (A. White, 2004, 10). I have therefore opted to use real place names and first names for respondents.

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