Gender, Place and Culture, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 281–289, September 2003 Carfax Publishing Taylor & Francis Group

Gender Research in Rural Geography

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ABSTRACT *This review examines the development of research on gender within the broad arena of rural studies. It does so through four main themes: community, work, environment and sexuality. Drawing on work from a range of Western countries, the review shows how an early reluctance to engage with feminist research and work on gender more broadly has given way to a highly active, diverse and rich research direction in rural studies. The review selectively charts key phases in the development of rural gender studies and shows how research has moved from conceptualising rurality as 'container' for the creation, performance and contestation of gender roles to seeing the rural as integral to the actual construction of gender identities and to the ways they are performed and negotiated. As well as highlighting past research areas, the review suggests some directions for the future development of rural gender studies.*

Introduction

Gender analyses of rural societies and economies have an increasingly flourishing existence. While early mention of differences between men and women existed in geographies of individual communities (as in selected anthropological and sociological studies), an explicit focus on gender developed from the 1970s as feminist scholarship and activism coincided to highlight gender difference and inequality. In rural studies, the work of Davidoff *et al.* (1976) was crucial for identifying rural Western societies in terms of a dominant ideology that positioned men at the head of a 'natural hierarchy' and women as the domestic, subservient sustainers of life and social formations (e.g. family, community, village). Since then, a raft of theoretical currents has stimulated a range of studies and academic thought. Initially, gender role theory described (fairly uncritically) the expectations and contributions of men and women, while later socialist feminists concentrated on gender relations theory to critique the inequalities occurring in agriculture through the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recently, post-structural and postmodern theory in gender studies and rural geographies more broadly have been employed to read and deconstruct how gender identities and performances are constructed, contested and sometimes reinvented. While a review of this size cannot address the range of scholarship in any detail, we do canvas the key outcomes resulting from these contrasting theoretical currents while highlighting some of the fields in which scholars have approached rural women and men, namely: community, work, environment and sexuality. Across these four themes we also note the enduring foci that have remained on place and space and the personal/political nature of gender. We should at the outset make clear that our review is restricted to the rural geographies of developed

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ISSN 0966-369X print/ISSN 1360-0524 online/03/030281-09 © 2003 Taylor & Francis Ltd

DOI 10.1080/0966369032000114046

countries. We recognise that this is to ignore a major area of work on gender in the context of rural development and to downplay debates that have influenced, in particular, the eco-feminist theoretical tradition, but we believe that including (and doing justice to) such work would have been impossible within the constraints of the current review.

Gender and the Rural Community

Geographies of gender and community formed an important starting point for feminist scholars who wished to challenge 'the rural community' as a long accepted unit of social analysis. While conceptually it fell out of favour somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s (see Harper [1989] and Wright [1992], for instance), 'the community' was a field of intellectual inquiry and empiric focus in which scholars could hardly ignore patterns and questions of gender. Consequently, early feminist critiques of community were invaluable for documenting the uneven 'roles' men and women played in rural communities. Stebbing (1984, p. 207), for instance, documented the 'traditional view of women as being primarily home-centred, nurturant and subordinante to the male breadwinner', while Dempsey (1987) showed how divisions in gender roles translated into real economic inequalities in terms of employment and income.

Later, as feminist critiques of agriculture developed (see the section on 'Gender and Work' that follows), studies of community were invigorated by critical analyses of how unequal patriarchal gender relations and divisions of labour affected not only farms but whole rural communities. Researchers noted that men experienced substantial authority and control in communities, while women were expected to engage in activities and behaviours that would nurture, service and maintain traditional values, practices and relations within the community (Dempsey, 1990, 1992; Poiner, 1990).

As an acceptance of post-structural theory developed through the 1990s, community-based analyses in rural studies adopted the 'cultural turn' to investigate how uneven gender relations and beliefs were produced, maintained (and sometimes contested) in community settings. For example, Macklin (1995, p. 302) showed how Australian rural media constructed women in traditional and constraining positions:

> [t]he consumption of images of women as traditional and as concerned with the trivial sets an agenda that perpetuates their subordination. Constructions of community in terms of solidarity and mutual benefit mask the consequences of a patriarchal social structure. Such images not only contribute to gender inequality, but deny women the opportunities to set an agenda for change in the rural community.

Little and Austin (1996, p. 110) document a similar situation in the UK, where they argue that notions of a rural idyll support gender inequalities and promote limitations for women:

> the rural idyll operate[s] in support of traditional gender relations, prioritising women's mothering role and fostering their centrality within the rural community. Those aspects of the rural way of life most valued by women appear to be those that offer them least opportunity to make choices (for example, about employment or domestic responsibilities).

In a complementary fashion, Campbell and Phillips (1995) show how key community spaces and practices involve gendered cultural practices that often reinforce hegemonic masculinist beliefs and behaviours. Their account of gender performance in rural pubs,

rural sports clubs and country (Bachelor and Spinster) balls demonstrates how male dominance and supremacy are displayed through symbolic leisure activities as well as more severe manifestations of control (sometimes violent). In the face of these masculinist contexts other authors have concentrated on the implications for women in communities. For instance, Hughes (1997a, 1997b) has shown that a traditional culture of 'domestic rural womanhood' is often expected and perpetuated in English communities. She notes (1997b, pp. 182–183) the expectation that women are the 'backbone of the village community' and that this involves both material and cultural constructions of community and gender in that 'women's lives … are influenced by, and negotiated through, not only material space but also their understandings of the symbolic meanings underlying rural places' (see also Liepins, 2000a; Little, 2002).

Overall, while studies of rural community have moved from structural analyses of social formations to more cultural interrogations and critiques of the meanings and practices of community (see Wright, 1992; Liepins, 2000b), they have paralleled and supported a growing awareness of the way gender is situated within material and symbolic settings that result in real inequalities as well as uneven political and social implications.

Gender and Work

In a similar way analyses of gender and rural work have shifted from examining the structures and relations that have underpinned rural gender inequality to exploring the cultures, values and meanings underpinning gender identities. Questions of 'work', in particular what constitutes work and the relationship between paid employment and unpaid domestic labour, have long occupied feminist geographers. Such questions have been at the forefront of the development of feminist research and writing in rural geography, not least because of the somewhat unique position of women within family farms. The 'farm wife' became a focus for early gender analyses of work. The debates emanating from discussions about the role of women on farms, and the patriarchal relations within which their contributions were situated, were central to both the theoretical and empirical development of feminist rural geography and beyond (see Gasson, 1992; James, 1982; Sachs, 1983; Symes & Marsden, 1983; Williams 1992).

Inspired by Marxian critiques of notions of petty commodity production, feminist scholars drew attention to the work of 'farmers' wives' and to how conventional analyses of the farm business failed to acknowledge the value of their contributions. They argued this was a function of the conceptualisation of 'work' and of the separation of productive and reproductive activity. Feminist analyses sought to demonstrate the vital nature of women's domestic work to the survival of the family farm business and to identify how that work extended to include agricultural labour on both an emergency and routine basis. As Whatmore (1990, p. 6) argued, 'an analysis of women's labour as farm wives brings to the fore those dimensions of the farm labour process previously neglected by the narrow focus on agricultural production'. Research in the UK, the USA, Europe, and Australia and New Zealand documented the totality of tasks carried out by women on farms, showing how these adapted to the changing circumstances of agriculture and to the needs of the farm business (Bouquet, 1982; Deseran & Simpkins, 1991; Evans & Ilbery, 1996). As work developed, and in common with other research on gender in feminist geography more generally, studies moved from a focus on recording the work done by farm women to explaining the patriarchal gender relations behind the division of labour on the farm and within the farm household (Whatmore, 1990; Shortall, 1992).

Although feminist research on rural work and employment has broadened out from this initial focus on farm women, there is a continuing interest in gender relations in agriculture and, as noted below, on the construction and negotiation of farming gender identities (see Bennett, 2001).

During the late 1980s and 1990s the issue of work has been explored in the context of rural women more generally in the investigation of their position in the labour market. Rural geographers began to examine the spatiality of both the participation of women in paid work and the constraints operating on their involvement (Little, 1991; Rural Development Commission, 1991). It was argued that rurality itself influenced women's involvement in employment, not only through the practical barriers (of, for example, access to and a lack of childcare and other services) but also through the social and cultural expectations surrounding women's roles. Research showed how the traditional ideas of femininity, particularly women's roles as mothers, that were central to the dominant cultural constructions of rurality, served to restrict women's opportunities within the rural labour market. Rural women, it was claimed, were seen first as mothers, and their paid work, and critically, their career aspirations, were expected to take a secondary role (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1997).

Research on rural women's work has developed more recently to incorporate notions of gender identity (see Little, 1997). In doing so it has followed feminist approaches in other areas of geography in highlighting the diversity of women's experiences. Work on women's involvement in the rural labour market in the UK, for example, has shown significant variations in the experiences of women based on place, class and age (Morris & Little, forthcoming). Such work has stressed the dangers of assuming common gender identities amongst women and men in rural communities. Similarly, research on gender and agriculture has noted the variation in the gender division of labour between different sorts of farming (see Bryant, 1999; Peter *et al.*, 2000).

In confronting the diversity and fluidity of gender identities in the context of work, feminist rural geography has started to investigate the relationship between constructions of masculinity and femininity and employment (Liepins, 2000b; Morris & Evans, 2001; Ni Laoire, 2002). This is particularly evident in the case of agriculture and forestry, where changes in the nature of the work (as a result, for example, of the adoption of modern technology or of sustainable practices) have been linked to shifts in masculinity and femininity (Brandth, 1995; Brandth & Haugen, 2000; Saugeres, 2002).

Gender and the Rural Environment

Consideration of gender identities in different work settings resonates with another broad research direction in rural gender studies—namely, the way gender is affected by, and negotiated via, different forms of environment. In particular, the placing of gender within rural scholarship has involved many researchers in identifying how concepts of nature, landscape and space are implicated in the uneven and dynamic expression of gender. In part, this has been informed by critiques of nature (Whatmore, 1999) and associated with the wider feminist critique of geography, where nature/culture distinctions are argued to maintain 'gender power relations and the subordination of women' (Little, 2002, p. 49; see also Rose 1993). Associating femininity with nature and rural landscapes has resulted in the perpetuation of the male gaze and the notions of male husbandry, dominance and control of rural and wilderness settings (Monk, 1992; Rose, 1993; Nash, 1994, 1996;). Male bravery and control (even conquering) of landscapes has also been an emerging theme in the literature (Phillips, 1995; Cloke & Perkins, 1998; Woodward, 1998; Morin

et al., 2001). More recently, encompassed within such work have been critiques of masculinity in agricultural spaces—on and beyond the farm—and recognition of the limited opportunities rural women have to be involved in environmental management and politics (Brandth 1995; Bryant 1999; Liepins 1998a, 1998b).

Along with foci on nature, landscapes and agricultural spaces, gendered rural geographies have also begun to highlight how rural spaces and environments (their biophysical, material and sociocultural dimensions) are also implicated in men's and women's health and well-being. For instance, gender analyses of rural workspaces show how men's and women's occupation and uneven power relations affect their health in different primary industries (Panelli & Gallagher, 2003), and Joseph and Hallam (1998) have noted how the physical impact of distance intersects with gender when rural men and women face choices about the care of their elderly relatives. In contrast, other studies are beginning to document how the variety of rural settings can affect men's and women's well-being in terms of their experiences of safety, fear and crime (Saltiel *et al.*, 1992; Halfacree 1995; Pain 2000; Panelli *et al.*, forthcoming).

Overall, considerations of gender and rural environments highlight the intersection between the construction and control of spaces and the politics of gender. Whether this involves a study of gendered landscape, work sites or crime locations, such material also raises (implicitly or otherwise) the intersections between gender and sexuality—our fourth theme.

Gender and Sexuality

As research on rural gender has developed to embrace notions of culture and identity, so interest in sexuality has become more central. Sexual identity was raised initially in the context of rural marginality or otherness when it was argued that gays and lesbians were excluded from dominant constructions of rurality (see Bell & Valentine, 1995; Kramer, 1995; Valentine, 1997). An absence of services and information for gays and lesbians within the rural environment was seen to be reinforced by a culture of rurality that emphasised the conventional nuclear family as the 'natural' form of social organisation and saw homosexuality as out of place. Since originally drawing attention to the marginality of gays and lesbians, rural geographers have started to explore the differing experiences and representations of homosexuality within different sorts of rural area and to question the identification of a common and discrete *rural* gay experience (see Bell, 2000). The recognition of marginalised homosexual identities has led more recently to attempts to unpack rural masculinities and femininities more generally and to focus additionally on the construction and performance of more mainstream heterosexual identities.

Discussions of rural heterosexuality have initially focused on the relationship between what are seen as highly traditional constructions of masculinity and the rural environment. Representations of rural masculinity emphasise physical strength and fitness and suggest that 'real men' (particularly in the case of outdoor occupations) are identified by their ability to tame or control the environment (Liepins, 2000b; Woodward, 2000). This is clearly evident in representations within the farming press as described by Liepins (2000b, p. 615): '[p]hotographs … build a sense of active (often batting) masculinity articulated by men who exhibit "roughness" and strength'. Similarly, Woodward (1998, p. 287) shows how such representations also characterise masculinity in the context of military training. As she writes:

> The emphasis … is on physical fitness, determination and pitting oneself against the elements. Publications and television programmes celebrating the work of the Special Forces identify outdoors survival as a key test of one's manhood.

Theoretical discussions within this work have argued that such constructions of masculinity resonate with the dualisms of Western philosophical thought in which 'nature' is equated with femininity and with emotions, and set in binary opposition to masculinity, science and rationality. Emerging from this focus on representations of rural sexuality is a developing interest in the construction of rural heterosexuality in which it is argued that rural communities constitute spaces of highly conventional sexual performance (Little, forthcoming; Little & Leyshon, 2003). Such work has also argued that any attempt to understand the significance of rural heterosexuality must look at the ways in which sexuality is embodied in everyday practices. In so doing there has been a move away from a focus on representation in the examination of the performance of sexual identity and the contention that masculinity and femininity can best be understood as part of a set of iterative processes in which they are constructed as they are played out.

Conclusion

In writing a review of this nature the problem shifts very quickly from 'what to include' to 'what to leave out'. As we note at the outset, gender studies in rural geography have, after a rather slow start, begun to flourish. With the increase in volume has come a confidence to develop in new theoretical and conceptual areas, adopting ideas from feminist theory as applied in other areas of geography and developing these as they relate specifically to the rural context. As work has progressed so those engaged in feminist rural geography have shown how the rural itself can stimulate new perspectives (and not simply be seen as a focus for the application of existing theory/ideas). The meanings associated with rural places and cultures provide new insights into the study of sexual identity, for example, and the relationship between gender identity and the body.

A further indication of the interest in work on gender by rural geographers has come in the wider acceptance given to what have been broadly seen as 'feminist' research methods. There has been insufficient space in this review for a detailed discussion of methodologies but it should be noted that the development of qualitative approaches, the adoption of ethnographic methods, and reflections that attend to the positionality of the researchers and the politics of researching gender with women and men (in quite often conservative settings) is related in part at least to feminist approaches. A sensitivity to the power relations encapsulated within the research process, a responsiveness to the value of both formal and informal methods of data collection and a commitment to sharing research findings with research subjects have all become more evident in rural geography. Such developments, while not necessarily a direct result of the increasing profile associated with work on gender, have certainly been related to it.

Finally, it is important to recognise the dynamic nature of gender studies in rural geography. Rural areas of contemporary Western capitalist countries are in a state of economic transformation (some would say crisis) that has impacted strongly on the social and cultural composition of rural societies. In such conditions new patterns and divisions have emerged in the gendered lifestyles, experiences, expectations and opportunities within rural areas. Such shifts have opened up new areas for research and prompted new insights into the operation of rural communities. Scholars of gender are well positioned

to produce new geographies highlighting how negotiations (even struggles) over gender, power and space are implicated in changing notions of the countryside, new configurations of community and work, and the politics of environment and sexuality in rural settings. If the progress demonstrated over the last 10 years is maintained then such work is set to make an important contribution to the research agenda not only in rural geography but in the discipline as a whole.

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