Growing-up in the countryside: children and the rural idyll

Hugh Matthews*, Mark Taylor, Kenneth Sherwood, Faith Tucker, Melanie Limb

Centre for Children and Youth, University College Northampton, Park Campus, Northampton NN2 7AL, UK

Abstract

The recent surge of interest in the study of children and childhood has brought with it a keener recognition of the diversity of growing-up. In this emerging geography, most attention has been given to the experiences and behaviours of urban children. Few studies have explicitly focused on what it is like to grow-up in the countryside, particularly within the United Kingdom today. In this paper we begin to address this hidden geography by reporting on a study undertaken within rural Northamptonshire. We explore some of the ways in which children encounter the countryside through their own experiences, and (re)examine the ‘rural’ from their own viewpoint. We uncover an alternative geography of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Rather than being part of an ideal community many children, especially the least affluent and teenagers, felt dislocated and detached from village life. Yet socio-spatial exclusion of this kind is also typical of many childhoods away from the rural and can relate to children almost anywhere. What particularly distinguishes a rural upbringing, however, is the sharp disjunction between the symbolism and expectation of the Good Life (the emblematic) and the realities and experiences of growing-up in small, remote, poorly serviced and fractured communities (the corporeal). © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Geography of children; Childhood; Rural idyll; Northamptonshire; Socio-spatial exclusion

1. Introduction

The recent surge of interest in the study of children and childhood has brought with it a keener recognition of the diversity of growing-up. Instead of seeing children as a homogeneous cultural group, possessing a single voice defined by a set of universal laws of childhood, there is a growing sensibility to the range of children’s voices and the importance of cultures of difference. Recent work (Davis, 1998; James et al., 1998; Levin, 1994) points to a variety of childhoods that children experience, defined both by macrosocial characteristics (for example, gender, class, age and race) and by association and affiliation to different types of everyday worlds and experiences (Ritala-Koskinen, 1994). Geographers have important contributions to make to this developing discourse (for introductory reviews see Aitken, 1994; Matthews and Limb, 1999), especially in relation to how the contingency of place impacts on the nature of children’s lives. In this emerging geography, most attention has been given to the experiences and behaviours of urban children (Matthews, 1995; Matthews et al., 1998,1999; Valentine, 1996a,b,1997a,b; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Few studies have explicitly focused on what it is like to grow-up in the countryside, particularly within the United Kingdom today.

Philo (1992) highlighted such an absence in his review of Colin Ward’s (1990) The Child in the Country. Up until this time scant attention had been given by geographers to the condition(s) of rural childhood, whether in the ‘classic’ rural community studies of the 1940s and 1950s (for a review see Davies and Rees, 1960) or in the burgeoning research from the 1960s tracing the recomposition of rural populations in association with the process of counterurbanisation (see for example, Pahl, 1966; Lewis, 1989; Harper, 1991). It was as if children were invisible within the rural landscape either yet to emerge as rural youth worth reporting upon (Frankenberg, 1973) or as members of family households choosing residence in the countryside due to perceived advantages of life in the rural environment (Halfacree, 1994). Philo suggested that Ward’s work provided a seminal contribution to rural geography, in that it opened-up new possibilities for reflection and research, particularly in relation to rural ‘others’. Coining the phrase ‘neglected rural geographies’, Philo went on to argue for the need for further studies...
that both teased out and recovered the experiences of rural living ‘from within’ (p.203). Despite these observations there is still no coherent geography of children in the countryside, especially that which draws upon their disparate lifeworlds.

Some insight, however, has been attempted through vicarious analysis of various kinds. Jones (1997), for example, considers the ways that rural childhoods have been depicted by adults in literature. He identifies how cultural texts, such as Laurie Lee’s Cider with Rosie and Flora Thompson’s Lark Rise to Candleford, present powerful evocations, through recollected childhoods, that celebrate the countryside as a rural idyll. The overwhelming image is that of a glorious place where children can grow up in safety. ‘[D]eeply shaded by the legacies of Romanticism’ the rural idyll abounds with ‘the critical notions of innocence and naturalness’ (Jones, 1997, p.164). Hence, there is both a sense that the countryside is not designed for children, or even to be inhabited by them, since it is equated with human degradation and imperfect development. Re-reading by subsequent generations mobilises discourse that normalises these conceptualisations. Indeed, many of these texts are ‘stories for childhood’, written to be read by children themselves. In so doing, children and their parents are presented through their contents and messages with the mental resources that shape and mould their ensuing interpretations of the rural.

Jones attempts to unravel the extent to which the countryside as an idyll for children is simply a (mis)representation by adults or ‘whether it is an idealisation constructed by adults’ (p.175). From his review, despite prevailing notions of a romantic ideal, Jones is able to glimpse a ‘jumbled landscape’ of otherness, where children frequently comprise a group apart. Valentine (1997c, p.137), too, considers how the ‘imagining of a countryside as an ideal place in which to grow-up’ is both constructed and contradicted by rural parents. Like Little and Austin (1996), she found that parents perceived the countryside as a place which offered opportunities for a stress-free upbringing away from the dangers and spatial constraints of the city. However, at the same time, many parents went on to contest this view by recognising the vulnerability of their children to stranger-danger, traffic and ‘rural demons, such as New Age Travellers and gypsies’ (p.147). Dissonance was reconciled, however, by recognition that rural was still safer than urban and by the mobilisation of another aspect of the rural idyll, the value of belonging to a community. Couchman (1994) also challenges the idyllisation of the countryside as place for children. Through a series of ‘fact-finding’ interviews, she readily uncovers a geography of socio-spatial marginalisation and of exclusion. Although these studies provide valuable contributions to an understanding of countryside childhoods, these are studies on children not of or with children. What is missing are the voices of children themselves.

Another developing strand of studies on young people in rural areas is that which focuses on youth migration from the countryside. This work has a considerable pedigree (Hannan, 1969, 1970), but more recent research follows a life-path (Ni Laoire, 1996) or life-course (Lewis and Sherwood, 1994; Mooney, 1993; Warnes, 1992) methodology to provide a detailed trace of outward movements. Yet, these are studies of exodus and of young people in and beyond the late teenage years and, despite recent research that has related the out-migration of the young to their limited housing and employment opportunities in much of the countryside (Burrows et al., 1998; Rural Development Commission, 1998), inevitably this deflects attention away from those who are left behind and of their continuing rural experience.

Symptomatic of a continuing neglect of the geography of children in the countryside is that in a number of recent wide-ranging reviews on the state of rural geography (Halfacree, 1996; Miller, 1996; Phillips, 1998) no mention is made of young people, perpetuating an accusation that the countryside is peopled only by adults (Philo, 1993). In this paper we begin to redress this hidden geography by reporting on a study undertaken within rural Northamptonshire, within the East Midlands of the United Kingdom. Our aim is to explore some of the ways in which children encounter the countryside today, through their own experiences, and to (re)examine the ‘rural’ from the viewpoint of young people. Inevitably, the experiences that we describe are set by the social, political and economic circumstances of a particular sort of rural, that of dormitory villages, landed estates and champion agriculture. We recognise that the stories that these children tell may differ greatly from those recalled by residents of other rurals, such as those found in upland Wales, Highland Scotland and the English Lake District, let alone of those in many other parts of the world. Diversity and difference not only impacts through a variety of rural conditions, but the way children experience, perceive and interpret these situations will also vary. We are keen to suggest that there is neither one rural childhood nor one group of rural children. Throughout, attention focuses on the fourth environment (Matthews and Limb, 1999) those places beyond the home, school and playground. In essence, what we attempt to describe is a rural geography of the outdoors.
2. Methodology

The survey work was undertaken in 28 villages across rural Northamptonshire. The data were gathered by a doorstep questionnaire survey (n = 372) and through semi-structured interviews with young people hanging around together in public places (these interviews were tape-recorded for transcription). Only children aged 9–16 participated in these surveys. In all cases an attempt was made to stratify each age group by gender (Table 1) and by social class (housing tenure was used a surrogate measure). All the survey information was collected by outreach youth workers, who were familiar with each of the localities. Parental permission was sought prior to participation in the questionnaire survey and each young person met on ‘the street’ was given a letter that informed their parents of their involvement in the project and which provided an opportunity for their subsequent withdrawal from the survey. In addition, we held in-depth discussions on three occasions with two groups of young people aged 13/14 (n = 4 boys and 3 girls) and 15/16 (n = 3 boys and 3 girls) within a village secondary school and with another group aged 9/10 (n = 4 boys and 5 girls) within a village primary school. These young people volunteered to take part in the project after an initial briefing session.

In this paper, we focus upon three recurrent themes evident from an analysis of the results. We label these as: adult places/childhood (cultural) spaces; myths, stereotypes and (re)presentations of the rural childhood; and the rural ‘idyll’ and the ‘other’ countryside. Central to our discussion is a conviction that there is not a monolithic structure which can be termed the rural childhood. Equally, children who live in the countryside do not live as one cultural grouping. We repeatedly found more than one group of children’s voices and uncovered more than one set of relationships with the same set of places. What we endeavour to do in this paper, however, is to reach some part of these children’s worlds and, by so doing, draw attention to some of the issues confronting this group of young people as they grow up in the life-based experiences of the countryside.

3. Adult places/childhood (cultural) spaces

Among the perceived benefits of a rural upbringing (Rose, 1993; Little and Austin, 1996; Valentine, 1997c) is that children can grow up and develop in settings that enable a close association with nature. Indeed, there is a considerable literature which suggests that children value the outdoors (Matthews, 1992; 1995; Valentine 1997b; Ward, 1990) and there are many accounts that draw attention to how younger children (especially those aged under 10) prefer to play and meet in ‘natural spaces’ (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Kong et al., 1999; Percy-Smith, 1999). In our survey 77% of all respondents considered themselves to be an ‘outdoor person’ and more than 44% reported that they met their friends outside of their homes on two or more occasions per week. There was considerable diversity, however, in the places used as social venues. Although contingency plays a part in affording social opportunity, without exception local parks

Table 1
Age and sex composition of the sample population in frequency (and %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>19 (9)</td>
<td>17 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>19 (9)</td>
<td>19 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>30 (14)</td>
<td>15 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>27 (13)</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>27 (13)</td>
<td>27 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>33 (16)</td>
<td>29 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>25 (12)</td>
<td>14 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>30 (14)</td>
<td>17 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>210 (56)</td>
<td>162 (44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1 Few areas within the county comprise wildscape, instead the ‘rural’ here is represented by commercial farms and landed estates and by both commuter and estate villages.

2 We had intended to carry out these discussions in a youth club setting (i.e. away from the formalities of a school), but although young people were very pleased to assist us in other aspects of our project (not reported here), such as child-led environmental videos and simulated planning exercises, competing attractions within a club meant that they were less interested in giving up their leisure time for a group discussion. None the less, by holding our workshops during the school lunch break a relaxed atmosphere was generated.

3 All the quotations used are taken directly from the young people’s responses. Ellipses show breaks in the narrative. On several occasions we provide extended quotations in order to capture the feelings and emotions of young people’s accounts.

4 Jones (1997) and others (Sibley, 1991, Ritala-Koskinen, 1994; Davis, 1998) have drawn attention to the problems that adult researchers face when attempting to capture the world as seen by children. Inevitably, ‘[c]hildren will have different views of the world which are filtered through their own stocks of knowledge’ (Jones, 1997, p.176). Adults cannot hope to interpret these views in a manner that is not clouded both by ‘adultness’, a state that encompasses the life-based experiences of the researcher, and ‘academiness’, whereby understanding is ineluctably processed through a chosen meta-language defined by particular sets of values, theories, ethics and research methods. In order to get as close as possible to the daily lives of children and to ‘see the world from their points of view’, wherever possible we present extended, unedited quotations and narrative. Even then we recognise that the choice of quotation is itself not a value-free process so that the geographies we describe go only part of the way to getting close to these children’ worlds.
and recreation grounds (34%) and local ‘streets’ (42%) provided the most common stamping grounds. Few young people reported playing, either on their own or with friends, in woods and fields (3%) or near to rivers, lakes and ponds (4%), aspects of the countryside highly prized by adults (Bonner, 1997; Valentine, 1997c). Instead young people sought locations where they could be seen by others of their own age and that, at the same time, would be away from the ‘adult gaze’. Like their urban counterparts (Matthews et al., 1999), these public outdoor places were invested with considerable ‘cultural’ importance, particularly with the withdrawal of adults.

Interviewer (I): Can you please describe where you are now? Boy aged 16 (B): ‘Centre of village. Outside the Spar (a chainstore). Dead in the centre of Deanshanger basically. Outside the Spar shop car park. I: Why do you come here? It’s where everybody comes like’. Girl aged 13 (G): ‘To meet’. B: ‘It’s where everyone hangs out, sits on the walls, smokes cigarettes, chats … where you meet your mates’ I: What were you doing before I came? B: ‘Munching. Trying to figure out what our next move was going to be’. G: ‘Sitting here alright… Yeah, this is the best place to meet up with your friends’. (Mixed group of two girls, aged 13 and four boys, aged 16 and 17. (Street interview).

Interviewer (I): Where are we? Boy aged 9 (B1): ‘Hanging about outside of the library’. I: Do you spend a lot of time hanging round here? B1: ‘Yeah. Here and down by the building site’. Boy aged 11 (B2): ‘There’s about 9 of us that meet down there … They’re building loads of houses … then soon we’ll get more people coming and we can play with them’. I: Where else do you play? B1: ‘Just down there, down the bottom by the school where there’s lot of flat surfaces (for skateboarding) and down Rock Hill and outside the Co-op’ (a chainstore). (Street interview).

Facilitator (F): Where do hang out? Boy aged 16 (B1): ‘Walk around … just walk around most of the time’. Boy aged 16 (B2): ‘Down the park. The rec’. F: How many of you hang out down the park? B1: ‘… it just depends … you might just go down the park, just two, three, or four of you and you might have a game (football) with another group of people down there as well, so it could be like twelve people playing’. Girl aged 16: ‘The park’s central… where I live its too quiet, its too far away from everything … it’s just like a central place cause you’ve got all the shops and that there as well’. (Group discussion).

Results such as these suggest that for many young people rural childhoods are not necessarily distinguished by a closer affinity to nature. Within our study areas, we found little evidence of young people running freely across fields and through woods and ‘exploring distant forests and hills’ (Aitken, 1994, p.58), largely because these spaces had been ‘fenced-off’ by adults as private land. Davis and Ridge (1997) note that in many rural areas there is very little land that is not in private ownership, either farmland or, with an increasing number of affluent incomers and early retirees, personal property. ‘Paradoxically, without access to farmland, villages are likely to possess very little public land and what little there is can be fiercely defended by adults (Davis and Ridge, 1997, p. 55).

Girl aged 16 (G1): ‘I know where I used to go when I was little, the clay pit … it’s down by the brook. It’s at the park and then you go over a stile and then there’s a little brook and there’s a bridge. It’s been fenced off now’. Facilitator: Do children still play there? G1: ‘I don’t think they do as much now cause the barbed wire has been put there since we used to go there’. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 13: ‘We can’t go across the fields, because the farmer’s ploughed them all up. It’s a cow field too, too dangerous and dirty’. (Group discussion).

Boy aged 10: We’ve got this little thin road and it’s a really good access point to our football pitch. All you have to do from my house is just go straight down the road, along the path and you’re practically there. The other way you have to go round again and then round again, before coming back down…it’s ten times quicker down the path … I’ve had a farmer threaten to hit me with a cane when I’ve gone down there (the path) ‘cause I think he owns the road or something … he tries to cut off the little path. He just doesn’t let you down there’. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 10: ‘Oh I was seven and I was walking around with Holly and she was about eight. We went

---

1 The ‘street’ is used as a metaphor for a range of public outdoor places including alleyways, cul-de-sacs, shopping parades, car parks, vacant plots and derelict sites.
up through the gardens in Moreton Pinkney and we went across this bridge that goes over Westly Hill and we were standing at the top and we were throwing apples down into the brook and this man came out of a house and ... he just sort of blew up and he went bright red like a tomato and shouted: ‘GET OFF THIS BRIDGE NOW’, and the ground started shaking. So we ran down and he said: “If I see you up there once more I’m going to call the police”. (Group discussion).

Parental fears, too, limited access to the ‘natural’, especially for younger children. Ironically, parental interpretations of the Good Life rarely exceeded the immediacy of the physical fabric of the village. Younger children’s accounts reveal how their spatial movements are often contained to places within a village. For many parents the unpredictability and unsupervised nature of the countryside encourages a sharp definition of safe play space.

Boy aged 10 (B): ‘I’m on me bike or something like that and me nan always says to me “don’t go out of the village”, cause when you go down the brook and you go up this lane it goes to this bit where’s there load of stables. I’m not allowed to go up this lane cause it goes out of the village’. Facilitator: And why aren’t you allowed to go outside of the village? (B): Cause there’s a place called Fir Tree Bridge ... and there’s loads of gypsies up there and everything. I’ve been up there once ... and all the dogs chase you and everything ... Another place my mum doesn’t like me going is up Canons Ashby’s hill. It’s not a particularly big hill but you go more or less vertically down and it’s a main road. (Group discussion).

Facilitator (F): Is there anywhere else where you are not allowed to go with friends? Girl aged 10 (G): ‘There’s another place in Moreton Pinkney ... it’s the lane that goes up to the field ... there’s loads of trees, loads of mud and it comes out at a farm yard. It’s called “muddy lane” ’. F: So why are you not allowed to go down there? G: ‘Cause there’s tractors. Cause there’s supposed to be bad people there. I’ve been down there once looking for my brother. There’s a man, a farmer and he’s got a Land Rover ... and he’s going across the lane, it’s really bumpy and he’s going along there at sixty miles an hour and he’s skidding and everything’. (Group discussion).

Boy aged 10: ‘Well, I’m not allowed down the farms. There’s about five farms in Sulgrave and only one of them keeps the old farming machinery away from people ... it’s all dumped down straight in front of the driveway and old tractors they don’t use, trailers and sharp things. It’s not very safe. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 9: ‘In Eydon there’s this pond and mum says I’m not allowed down there cause once a little boy on his bike drown there. Girl aged 10 (G2): ‘There’s this other place in Moreton Pinkney called “Jessie Pits”. It’s a big field and I’m not allowed there ... There’s goats and everything’.

Facilitator: So where do you play? G2: ‘Mostly the playing fields and sometimes just round the village’. (Group discussion).

In the event of these restrictions, young people moved into places that had been left vacant by adults, especially at times when they were able to congregate together, after school and during the evening. From this evidence, like many of their urban peers (Matthews et al., 2000), the ‘social’ was more important to these young people than the ‘natural’. Indeed, it is almost as if these children were trying to occupy, even create for themselves, mini-urban spaces where they could perform a sociability akin to that which they see depicted regularly in television ‘soaps’, films and magazines.

4. Myths, stereotypes and (re)presentations of the rural childhood

Popular discourses of the rural rely on imagery that present the countryside as a place where happy, healthy lifestyles are lived and where (young) people can enjoy the benefits of trouble free environments, away from the stresses and uncertainties of the urban mayhem (Cloke et al., 1995a; Halfacre and Boyle, 1998). Such notions of an idyll harbour a sense of there being a ‘sealed-off’ rural, a countryside removed from the wider material influences of urban society in general. The onset of mass media and mass communication render such imaginings as highly implausible. The children in this study were not ‘sealed-off’ from a range of influences from elsewhere and certainly were not the ‘natural innocents’ of an isolated rural state. Yet although these constructions have been challenged by critical and feminist geographers, particularly with respect to the experiences of women (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1986,1987; Little and Austin, 1996; Valentine, 1997c) and lesbians and gays (Bell and Valentine, 1995), the lived worlds of young people have not been explored, deconstructed and problematised in a similar manner. Indeed, in a recent geographical text, Aitken (1994) perpetuates two popular assumptions of the benefits of rural living, that children do not have to share their play spaces with others, whether children or adults, and that given the relative safety of the countryside, they are free to wander extensively away from their homes.

Our survey reveals a ‘darker’ rural, where not all children are growing-up in innocence within carefree, supportive communities. Recent work undertaken by the National Youth Agency (Phillips and Skinner, 1994) and the
Children’s Society (Davis and Ridge, 1997) has drawn attention to the plight of the rural poor and the particular deprivations faced by low-income families and their children, scenarios which deserve much closer attention by geographers (for initial reviews see Cloke and Milbourne, 1994; Cloke et al., 1995b). Here we shall focus on the splinters and fractures of community life that are commonly faced by children during their daily rounds.

In their attempts to find ‘social’ places where they can meet and hang out with friends, collisions and confrontations with others, both adults and other young people, are frequently recalled. Young people’s narratives are full of stories that draw attention to how village space is frequently contested. Small scale does not necessarily lead to situations of empowerment, where young people are able to carve out their own social niches without fear of competition. Instead, the physical configuration (and containment) of many rural villages often means, that unlike urban places, there is a keen rivalry over the social ownership of space, with antagonism and displacement as inevitable outcomes.

Clashes with adults were particularly commonplace. Valentine (1997c, p.141) notes how global messages and media-induced stereotypes often distort local actions. For example, in her study of Wheldale in the Derbyshire Peak District she describes how parents used ‘national and even international cases of child murders’ to justify the restrictions imposed on their offspring. Equally, media reports of child gangs and unruly and troublesome youths mobilise fears that all groups of young people hanging around together are potentially up to no good. Within rural villages, given their containment by private land and the limited nature of public space, what little public land is available is often contested and claimed by vigilant adults. (Davis and Ridge, 1997). It would seem that many adults interpret the public domain as their own private space and that when young people congregate together their presence is often seen to be polluting and discrepant (Sibley, 1995). Many of the places where children like to meet are often highly visible and exposed, such as around local shops or in a bus shelter, particularly in small communities where social settings are limited and no public space has been sanctioned and set aside for their specific use. From their responses there was a clear sense that many children felt unwelcomed and under scrutiny when out and about. Children of all ages reported how adults frequently intervened in their social activities in order to (re)impose control and order.

Girl aged 9: ‘I was … on the green. I had all my friends there, it was one of my birthdays. We were all riding about on the green … and we got to the gate on the green and this lady said, “you’re not allowed here, stop riding on the green you will spoil the grass” and she hadn’t even bought the land’. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 10: ‘I was playing with (name) and she has some trees near to her house. There’s one with really dark red leaves and once we were climbing on it and this old lady comes and says, “Get away from that tree now and calm down. I order you off that tree”. It wasn’t even hers’. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 13 (G1): ‘Say you were standing around, hanging around there (points to nearby housing estate) people report you to the police and say “oh, they were breaking into houses”, and you get blamed for things you didn’t do. (Street interview). Interviewer (I)): Have ever been moved on from here? G1: ‘I haven’t’. I: But elsewhere in Deanshanger that might happen? ‘Yeah’. I: Has that happened to you. Girl aged 12 (G2): ‘Yeah … Down the brook … they moved us on cos they said we were wrecking the wall and that we were causing noise’. I: Who said that? ‘It was one of the residents. She took photos of the little kids’ I: And what were you doing? G2: ‘Just sitting there. We were just sitting there talking’. (Street interview).

Girl aged 16: ‘I go out with a mixed group and we just hang out by a cul-de-sac, which is where a few people live and we just have a little chat and play football and just mess about … But the people come out and complain, but it’s too wet to go down the park.

Facilitator: Who complains? Just the neighbours … but I don’t often do that anymore … we just walk about a lot and don’t stand still’. (Group discussion).

Boy aged 16: ‘This is the best place to meet up with friends (outside corner shop) … sit here talking … Yeah … that bloke puts cooking oil to stop people sitting on his wall’. (Street interview).

Boy aged 14: ‘… what you forget is that we have to go on the streets sometime … what people are trying to do is get all kids off the street and think that we are not even allowed on the streets’.

Social tensions were also evident between groups of young people. Rather than living in social harmony with all around them, for some children their daily round was fraught with anxiety and concern. More than 50% of the children interviewed recalled a range of social fears, principally fear of older children and gangs (30%) and of bullying (13%). Within many of the villages surveyed, particularly among the larger ones (population above 1000), a complex turf politics was evident, whereby ‘territory’ and social identity often went hand in hand. When places are small the claiming of autonomous space is often not a trouble-free process.

‘Girl aged 10: ‘I’m always playing out. I’m always a bit scared when teenagers go by because I don’t really
Table 2
The range behaviour of urban and rural children: furthest distance allowed to go (mean range in km)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>9/10 years</th>
<th>11/12 years</th>
<th>13/14 years</th>
<th>15/16 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range without permission, when unaccompanied</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner urban</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge-of-town council estate</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range without permission, when accompanied by a friend</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner urban</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge-of-town council estate</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range with permission, when unaccompanied</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner urban</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge-of-town council estate</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range with permission, when accompanied by a friend</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner urban</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge-of-town council estate</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boy aged 16 (B): ‘We come here to get away from that lot there. Interviewer (I): Who’s that? B: ‘That lot outside the (Spar) shop’. I: Don’t you get on with them? B: ‘Well its one or two in particular. They just don’t like me... They’re just trouble’. I: What kind of trouble? B: ‘Anything. Drinking, fighting, smashing bottles. If they see me they’ll have a go’. I: So you come here (village green, close to a primary school) to keep away from them?. B1: ‘Yes, for a quiet life. They’re stupid and we can’t be bothered with it’. I: How old are they? B2: ‘All ages. Kids 11, 12, people our age, older ones in their 20s’… I: ‘And how long’s that been going on for?’

Girl aged 15: ‘Years. Generations really… They call themselves the “Spar lot”. They’ll sit out there. You’ve got… younger generations going on and on. It just keeps going all the time… brothers and sisters’. (Street interview, with four boys and two girls).

Facilitator (F): So what is it that they worry about in the village? Boy aged 16 (B): ‘Big kids’. I: The big kids? As opposed to you who are little kids? B: ‘No you know like the gangs and that… It’s just the amount of people who come out at the same time… you can tell the people on the way they act and the way they speak to you’. I: Have you had any incidents? B: Yeah… it’s just the way they act… if you talk to them in the wrong way they cause trouble every time you go by… And they’ll class you as something else, which is quite annoying. That’s why I don’t hang around the village. I don’t see the point, just getting hassle off them lot’. (Group discussion).


The notion, too, that rural children are free to wander extensively about the countryside is a generalisation that both obscures the complexity of rural lifestyles and masks a range of common parental anxieties (see earlier discussion). Table 2 compares the range behaviour of children drawn from rural and urban places. What is evident is that, in general, children of all ages within rural villages do not roam as widely as their counterparts from edge-of-town estates and, up until the age of 15, their free range shows little distinction from urban children. These urban and suburban results are consistent with earlier studies (Andersen and Tindall, 1972; Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1989).

---

*The work reported here is part of a much larger project that considered young people’s outdoor behaviour in three locations. A questionnaire survey was undertaken in an inner urban area (n = 400), in three edge-of-town council estates (n = 320) and in 28 rural villages (n = 372). The entire project forms part of the ESRC funded programme, ‘Children 5–16: growing into the 21st century’.*
accounts that older children are abandoning the built transport system. There is little suggestion in any of their mention is constrained by the vagaries of an uneven public will travel to neighbouring villages and towns in order to

range activity. In contrast, in the rural case our results show that many younger children are encouraged to stay within the confines of the village, despite a limited range of social settings. With age, and with an increasing sense of a lack of ‘things to do’, however, some older children will travel to neighbouring villages and towns in order to socialise with friends. Unlike the suburbs though, movement is constrained by the vagaries of an uneven public transport system. There is little suggestion in any of their accounts that older children are abandoning the built environment in their quest for social autonomy.

Girl aged 15 (G1): ‘To be honest with you we’re just trying to get out of the village because we are bored. There’s nothing to do for us. Interviewer: What’s the furthest you go with friends? Girl aged 15 (G2): ‘Milton Keynes. Northampton. We normally go clubbing in Milton Keynes. Go shopping’. Girl aged 15 (G3): ‘Wootton’s even smaller (than Deanshanger) but the night life’s pretty good up there … pubs, clubs’. (Street interview in Deanshanger).

Interviewer: Are you all from the village? Boy aged 16: They are (points to three others). I’m from Yelvertoft (a neighbouring village). I come down here to see my friends. We always meet round here (local shop) … Up the village is like a square, central, but hardly anybody goes up there, so we come down here. Yelvertoft is a dump. There is nothing to do in Yelvertoft at all.’ (Street interview in Long Buckby).

Girl aged 15 (G1): ‘I’ve got a boyfriend who drives … well you can’t get around without a car. Say you wanted to go to Stony (Stony Stratford) to get some money out of the bank first, then you’d have to wait two hours to catch a bus and then wait another two hours to get the bus back. There’s only one United Counties bus that comes through Deanshanger, but with Stony you get loads of buses from Stony to Milton Keynes’. Girl aged 15 (G2): ‘That’s what we noticed when we went out and them buses run until 11 o’clock. Ours stops at twenty past six, That’s the last bus back to Deanshanger’. (Street interview in Deanshanger).

When the results are disaggregated by gender, however, an interesting disparity is evident between the range behaviour of boys and girls. Table 3 shows that when no parental permission has been sought,7 girls are bound closer to their homes than boys. These results stand in

\[\text{Table 3} \]

The range behaviour of rural boys and girls: furthest distance allowed to go (mean range in km)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>9/10 years</th>
<th>11/12 years</th>
<th>13/14 years</th>
<th>15/16 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range without permission, when unaccompanied</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range without permission, when accompanied by a friend</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range with permission, when unaccompanied</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range with permission, when accompanied by a friend</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

contrast to recent studies carried out in other settings (Valentine, 1996b,1997a,b), which have suggested that in the face of new discourses on children’s safety parents are imposing regulatory regimes that attempt to shield both boys and girls in a similar way from a range of environmental dangers. It would appear that in this rural case, despite the tight and often claustrophobic nature of village life, many parents find it difficult to let go of those myths and stereotypes that define public space as places of danger for young girls (see narratives below). When permission has been gained, like Valentine suggests, there is little difference in the distances ranged by both sexes.

5. The rural idyll and the ‘other’ countryside

For many children there are benefits to a rural lifestyle. Of those interviewed, the majority (53%) thought their village a good place in which to live. However, there is a strong variation with age. Positive views were particularly expressed by younger boys and girls (for example, 76% of 9/10 year olds). From the age of 13 onwards, there were signs of growing dissatisfaction, with only 42% positively liking their local area as a place to live. It would seem that for a significant residual of teenagers their lived experience of the countryside often contradicts the social construction of the idyll. In this section we consider some of the main complaints raised by young people about village life.

Table 4 highlights the principal dislikes of village life and how age has a bearing on the nature of discontent. For the youngest children the fear of ‘others’ (stranger-danger) and the fear of speeding traffic were important complaints. These worries are commonly expressed by young children, regardless of location, and represent a

7 These are places that children regularly visit and which are sanctioned through well-established parental guidelines.
reproduction of parental concerns. What is interesting though, is that despite the small-scale nature of village life and the perceived benefits of a rural upbringing that these (urban) fears persist (Valentine, 1997c).

Facilitator (F): Is there anywhere when you’re out and about that you are not allowed to? Girl aged 9 (G1): ‘The park’. F: Is that on your own or with a friend? G1: ‘On my own and with a friend’. F: You’re not allowed either way? G1: ‘No because someone could come and just hurt both of us’. Girl aged 9 (G2): ‘I’m not allowed to go to the shop on my own’. F: Right, why’s that? G2: ‘Cause my mum thinks that there are nasty men around’. F: When you’ve been out on your own has anything ever happened? G2: ‘No, not really’. (Group discussion).

Girl aged 10: ‘You know that I was saying that I’m not allowed to go to those four places up at Canons Ashby all alone, well two of them is because of the traffic … and the others because of gypsies and dogs’ (Group discussion).

For older children dissatisfaction centres on a strong sense of ‘nothing to do’. Although such a claim has an universal resonance for teenagers (Corrigan, 1979; James, 1986; James and Prout, 1992), given the shrinking service base of many villages, the poor public transport provision and the expense of private alternatives, rural children are often provided with few social opportunities near to home. Problems are exacerbated if a family lacks a car or if their only car is being used by another family member for another purpose, such as access to work during the school holidays. Like Davis and Ridge (1997) note, there would appear to be an age when living in the countryside can seem particularly restrictive and inhibitive. The narratives of many teenagers are full of a strong sense of restlessness and ennui.

Interviewer (I): Can you describe where you are now? Girl aged 15 (G2): ‘Outside the library between the ‘star Garage’. We’re sat on the floor aren’t we. It’s kind of a part of a mobile. I: Can you tell me why you are hanging out here? Girl aged 15 (G2): ‘We just come out for a fag … It’s somewhere where we can talk, see what’s going on’. I: What’s it like here? G2: ‘Boring. It’s pretty quiet … you need transport to get out of the village’. I: What’s transport like? G1: ‘Well there’s not a lot of buses. There’s about three buses a day … We often go out on a Friday or Saturday night and we phone up a taxi … it’s eight pounds from here to Milton Keynes but if you get a black cab … it would cost you a tenner. Too expensive … There’s no jobs like going in the village. You have to be over 16 and we’re just coming up to 16 and we got restrictions. You need transport to get out of the village to get a job’. (Four girls aged 15, street interview).

Interviewer (I): Right, I want to know why you hang out round here? Girl aged 16 (G1): ‘Cos there’s nothing really to do round Buckby’. Girl aged 15 (G2): ‘Nothing to do … in the winter it just gets so boring. It’s pathetic’. I: So while you hang around here what sort of things happen that are fun or exciting? G1: ‘It’s not exciting. It’s boring’. G2: ‘There’s nothing else to do. It’s somewhere to go. It’s better than staying in the house anyway … Sometimes there’s like discos at the rugger club and that’s quite good. It’s only like once a month … Apart from that’. (Street interview).

Fundamental to the concept of the idyll is a sense of community. Many studies have shown how both ‘locals’ and incomers (e.g. Lewis and Sherwood, 1994; Lewis, 1998; Valentine, 1997c) rely upon this conceptualisation to authenticate their experience of the rustic. Yet, only a minority of the children surveyed felt part of a community (18%). Two reasons for this profound sense of disaffection emerge from the narratives. First, given their high visibility in public space, a lack of privacy and the constancy of an adult gaze, the anti-social actions of a small minority can lead to all young people being labelled as troublemakers. Teenagers are frequently singled out for disapproval simply because they transgress the boundaries and conventions of adults within the public domain. Scapegoating of this kind can escalate into conflict with the police as the following accounts suggest.
Boy aged 15 (B1): ‘Well we can’t even … just go for a walk now without the police stopping us and asking us what we’re doing’. Girl aged 15 (G1): ‘We got stopped the other day. It was me and her and two lads and we were just going in the Spa and the police asked for our names and asked what were doing and it was only half seven’. Facilitator: Does this happen a lot? B1: ‘Yeah’. G1: Especially like at the weekends’. (Group discussion).

Boy aged 16: ‘Like we were walking down the road and this police car pulled up next to us, didn’t it. He says like, ’what are you doing walking around Deanshanger at this time of night’, and it was eight o’clock’. Facilitator: And what happened? ‘Nothing he just drove off, but all of the time there’s a police car hanging around the village’. (Group discussion).

Interviewer (I): What happens here? All (two boys and two girls): ‘Nothing. Nothing happens here, that’s why we come here’. Boy aged 16: ‘Oh yes, there’s the police cars racing through …’ Girl aged 16 (G1): ‘Yes and when they see us they come over and ask us what we are doing. That really pisses me off, it’s like, just because we’re teenagers, they think we’re doing something we shouldn’t be’. I: What kind of things? ‘Like we were just sat here, like now and this police car shot over and they asked us if we’d been breaking the lights at the primary school. Like do we look like we go round smashing lights?’ I: What happened next? G1: ‘Nothing, they just drove off’. I: Did this kind of thing happen a lot? G1: ‘Quite a lot’. (Street interview).

Secondly, many young people expressed resentment about their lack of involvement in local affairs. There was a strong sense that no-one was listening and that young people had no say in the decision making that affected their communities. When asked about whether anyone had talked to them about things they would like to see changed in the village, less than 5% responded positively. Feelings of powerlessness, exclusion and tokenism were commonplace. Particular frustrations related to the continuing withdrawal of local facilities and a lack of sensitivity about young people’s needs and aspirations.

Interviewer (I): Why do you hang out here? Boy aged 12 (B1): ‘Nowhere else to go. Apart from the tennis courts, but their busted … there’s no nets … we had swings and everything, but as you can see there’s no swings in them. We had a roundabout, but that’s gone’. I: What happened to them? B1: ‘They took ’em, the council … we had a community centre … and its supposed to be for the kids, with a youth club … but that’s gone … there’s nothing there for us, now its just for old people … they go bowling’. (Street interview).

Girl aged 12: ‘There was a meeting down at the community centre … It was quite awhile ago … Grown-ups were complaining about all the young people … Our headteacher had a go at us … because we didn’t turn up … we didn’t know about it. He comes and he started going on saying why we didn’t turn up at this meeting for young people … well if we’d known about it we would have gone’. (Street interview).

Girl aged 15: ‘We got promised loads of things would happen in the field in summer holidays. There’s nothing up there now’. Interviewer (I): Who made these promises? ‘We were down the primary school and we were all going in the pool. We weren’t supposed to but we were. And she came down, there’s two of them and we were thinking, oh we’d better make a move. And they stopped and they were asking questions like you are now … going on about what we do, how we do it and everything and they started saying that they’d be in the village and they were going to do archery and everything’. I: Where were they from? ‘I can’t remember now. That was about two years ago’. (Street interview).

Facilitator (F): Do you ever feel that you ever get consulted? Girl aged 13 (G1): ‘We have an adults council in our village for people who decide what’s going to go on in the village and I don’t think they have ever had a children’s say in it’. Girl aged 14 (G2): ‘Adults just think, ‘oh we’re adults and we don’t care what children think’. G1: ‘Yeah, why don’t the children make a council?’ Girl aged 14 (G3): ‘Yeah but remember (name), it just never works when children organises anything like that, I don’t like to say it but it’s true’. Boy aged 13 (B1): ‘Unless the government actually use their brain and think lets listen to children’ … G1: ‘Like the children come up with some good ideas and everything and so they tell the council and everything and they say that they’ll think about it and it goes on for two months and four months’. G3: ‘And they say no … the adults think that children don’t count’. B1: They think that we’re stupid’. (Group discussion).

6. Conclusion

Pratt (1996, p. 71) suggests that ‘there are many rural’ and equally, there are many ways of experiencing rural life. What we have attempted to show is how the rural impacts upon the lives of a group of children aged 9–16 years living in Northamptonshire. To do so we have listened to tales about their rural lifestyles and through extended accounts we have attempted to capture the richness of their experiences. Herein lies a conundrum, for by reproducing only a small part of their dialogue we have had to choose between the voices of different children (Davis, 1998). We have deliberately focused on
narrative that challenges the social construction of the idyll, an overwhelming viewpoint yet, in so doing, we undervalue the contradictory perspectives of another group, albeit a minority, whose rural upbringing is not clouded by a lack of mobility or by feelings of restriction and lack of autonomy. We present our results in the belief that there is not a ‘universal’ rural childhood and that (rural) children do not possess one homogeneous voice or culture. Even macrosocial constructs such as age, gender and class mask the diversity and difference of each child’s upbringing. Instead, we present these results as a contribution to a developing genre that recognises the multiple realities of children’s lives and the full range of their voices. Indeed, Ritala-Koskinen (1994) asserts that there are no authentic voices of children waiting to be discovered, only different versions of childhood. Our conclusion is written with these qualifications in mind.

In seeking to describe the nature and diversity of rural upbringing(s) we have sought to establish whether the social representation of rurality as an idyll resonates with the lives of young people in general. Characterised by mutual support, harmony and integration, the idyll suggests a fulfilling and satisfying childhood for all. However, as Little and Austin (1996) point out the rural idyll is created by adults for adults, particularly those from wealthy, white, male, heterosexual, middle-class backgrounds. Through the voices of young people themselves we have uncovered an alternative geography of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Rather than being part of an ideal community many children, especially the least affluent and teenagers, felt dislocated and detached from village life and there was a strong sense of alienation and powerlessness. There was an overall impression that their needs and aspirations were rarely being met at a local level and a lack of provision of appropriate services, particularly of adequate public transport, heightened feelings of isolation and boredom. In their day-to-day transactions, too, many rural children felt observed and censored, seldom able to find autonomous social space away from the adult gaze and only tolerated within the public domain so long as their presence did not transgress the boundaries of adult sensibilities.

Yet, socio-spatial exclusion of this kind is also typical of many childhoods away from the rural and can relate to children almost anywhere. What particularly distinguishes a rural upbringing, however, is the sharp disjunction between the symbolism and expectation of the Good Life (the emblematic) and the realities and experiences of growing-up in small, remote, poorly serviced and fractured communities (the corporeal). Feelings of not belonging and that no-one is listening become all the more discouraging in the constant flurry of imagery that presents rural places as harmonious, united and inclusive.

Lastly, we present this paper in recognition that despite Philo’s (1992) telling observations there is still relatively little known about the multiple realities of rural children and of the disparity of rural childhoods. Although there have been many studies that have focused on how rural change is affecting communities in general, particularly in relation to the parameters of advantage and disadvantage, like Davis and Ridge (1997) observe, there has been little knowledge or understanding of its impact upon children’s lives. They also suggest that ‘particularly revealing is the indication that these factors [e.g. issues of mobility, access and provision] do not have the same impact on all children’ (p.68). By listening to children we have attempted to raise awareness of their perceptions and to present the rural from their perspective. However, Murdoch and Pratt (1993,1994) have suggested that by giving voice to others does not address the causes that lead to marginalisation and neglect. For them, critical geography depends on exploring the means by which the powerful [e.g. local, adult, decision-makers] make and sustain their domination, in order that they might be persuaded ‘to produce more effective and just interventions in the world’ (Murdoch and Pratt, 1994, p.85). Similarly, Phillips (1998, p.46) argues “that rural researchers need to recognise the difference their knowledge can make and become involved in the project of establishing procedures that would put participants themselves in positions to realise concrete possibilities for better and less threatened life, on their own initiative and in accordance with their own needs and insights” (Phillips, 1994, p.118, quote from Habermas, 1989, p.69).

In the course of our project we became keenly aware that young people were provided with few opportunities to engage in discussions about their local environments. In general, participation in local planning is still conceived to be an adult activity. For example, in the recent Parish Appraisals process, in which it is estimated over 1500 villages and over 1 million people in rural England have taken part (Moseley 1996), attention has been drawn to the lack of consultation with young people. Indeed, in a study of the parish appraisal of Brixworth, Northamptonshire, in the mid-1990s, it was revealed that over 70% of children aged 11–16 had no idea that an appraisal had been conducted in the village, what it involved or that a questionnaire had been circulated to their home asking for the household’s views on the future needs of the village (Hatton, 1996). Yet evidence from our study and others (Hart, 1997; Matthews and Limb, 1998; Matthews et al., 1999) suggests that young people have the capability, competence and motivation to become keenly involved in local decision-making, especially that which affects their neighbourhoods and the provision of local services. Like the advocacy movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Bunge, 1973), we see considerable merit in (rural) geographers moving beyond the abstractions of space and getting involved in the politics of place in order...
to enable connections between those who are disenfranchised and powerful local decision brokers. In consequence, we worked with a variety of local agencies (District Council, Youth and Residential Service, ACRE, Police Authority, Education Authority, Health Authority) to establish a local youth forum in the rural south of Northamptonshire (South Northants Youth Council). We see local participation of this kind as a way towards enabling young people to become more closely integrated with their communities and as a positive means of (re)connecting them with their local environments.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the young people who took part in the survey. Thanks too, to Gemma Hartop, Sarah Morton and the youth workers of Northamptonshire Youth and Residential Services who assisted in the data collection. The project was funded by a grant from the ESRC’s ‘Children 5–16: growing into the 21st century research programme’ (Award No. L1295251031). The views and considered comments of two anonymous referees are gratefully acknowledged.

References


For further details of the constitution, nature and composition of this youth council contact the Centre for Children and Youth.
Valentine, G., 1996b. Children should be seen and not heard: the transgression of adults’ public space. Urban Geography 17, 205–220.