'No One Cares In The City': How Young People's Gendered Perceptions Of The Country And The City Shape Their Educational Decision Making

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of a group of young rural men's and women's understandings of 'the city' and 'the country', and the relationship between this and their educational decision making. The analysis adds to a growing body of literature on young rural people's experiences and the emerging research on education in a rural context. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with a group of Grade 10 students in a rural Tasmanian high school, I argue that the everyday life of the young respondents is characterised by a high degree of ambivalence towards urban living which sits at the heart of their educational choices. They depicted living in a small rural town as involving a daily trade-off between a welcome familiarity and a problematic lack of privacy. Their perception of the city was that this relationship would be reversed, and that while they might be free from the constraint of everyone knowing your business, they would struggle to negotiate the alien environment. Using Simmel's (1950) ideas on how rural and urban environments produce different worldviews as well as Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, this analysis captures this ambivalence and the sense of risk involved in exchanging the known difficulties of the town for the unknown risks of the city. This sense of the city as 'too risky' informed many of the participants' decisions to 'not make a choice' and remain in their familiar environment rather than moving to the city to continue their education and risk failure. The analysis also draws on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity to emphasise that although the young people shared common experiences, these were mediated by aspects of cultural knowledge and gender relations.

Keywords: educational choice, rural youth, gender, masculinity, socio-economic status, early school leaving, identity, habitus

Introduction and background

"There is something about Tasmania that gets under your skin; that makes you want to understand more, to feel the stories of the past, its joys and anguish." These sentiments from Julianne Schultz' introduction 'Oscillating Wildly' in *Tasmania: The Tipping Point* (Griffith Review, 2013, p. 7) indicate how ambivalent experiences and feelings pervade many of the stories in the journal. The title of the introduction, 'Oscillating Wildly', connects with the conversations I have had with young people in a small town in rural Tasmania as part of my research on young people's educational choices. 'Oscillating wildly' is precisely what the young participants did when we spoke about staying on at school or leaving the education system, and like Schultz, I felt compelled to understand their contradictory stories. It seems that many of the authors in *Tasmania: The Tipping Point* and the participants in my research share a sense of ambiguity. Tasmania, because of its isolated location and low population density, has retained some elements of a traditional way of life. At the same time, globalisation has led to dramatic

economic, social and cultural changes. The fracturing of traditional pathways from school to work have been severe, with young Tasmanians experiencing high levels of unemployment (Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 2016). In this paper, I try to understand how young people living in a small town in rural Tasmania negotiate this ambiguity, along with others, and how it shapes their educational choices.

Early school leaving in late modernity is associated with significant disadvantage, as young people enter a competitive labour market without the qualifications necessary to succeed in it. The link between higher levels of educational attainment and better-quality life chances (Marks & McMillan, 2001; Taylor & Allen, 2013) has been a key factor driving educational policies seeking to expand the education system. Cuervo and Wyn (2012, p. 41) argue that the role of education in contemporary society is so pervasive it has become "a naturalised discourse." Yet it is estimated that around three in ten 15-19 year-olds are not fully engaged in work, school or training in Australia (Fildes et al., 2014). This group is growing (Foundation for Young Australians [FYA], 2012), with young people living in rural areas characterised by especially low Year 12 completion patterns (Curtis and McMillan, 2008). Young people in rural Tasmania are amongst the most likely groups to leave school early, with 47 per cent of young men and 58 per cent of young women from metropolitan zones completing Year 12 compared to 34 per cent of young men and 43 per cent of young women from remote zones (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013).

Although these data demonstrate the role of place in shaping young rural people's educational decisions, it has been argued that identity in late modernity has been disembedded; lifted out of context and freed from powerful social constraints such as class, gender, ethnicity and place (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). According to Giddens (1991, p. 18-19), place has become 'phantasmagorical' as people foster "relations with 'absent' others." McLeod (2009, p. 280) argues that for young people such "discourses of mobility, translocality, and hybridity can create a utopian sense of open possibilities, generating new kinds of romantic constructions of youth and neglecting the materiality of lives." In response to such statements which highlight the emphasis on individualisation in late modernity, there has been a renewed focus on the role of structures such as class and gender in creating difference and inequality. However, research on rurality and subjectivities has been much slower to advance, although a spatialised youth sociology focusing on the emplaced nature of young people's experiences is emerging (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Farrugia, 2014). Similarly, there have been calls to move beyond the metrocentric approaches of the sociology of education to investigate how place and biography interact to shape young people's educational choices (Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Wierenga, 2009).

Australian and international literature on young people's educational choices in a rural context sometimes centre on access to resources and processes of exclusion (Alloway et al., 2009; Alston & Kent, 2009). Bourdieu's (1990) concept of social capital, a person's social networks, is also frequently used to explain how young people's strong feelings of attachment to their local communities shape decisions to leave the education system rather than continue schooling away from home (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Fabianson, 2006; Wierenga, 2009; Wierenga, 2011). This relationship between attachment to local community and early school leaving is highlighted in a 2016 ACER report which found 'high anxiety around transitions between Year 10 and Year 11 by some students, especially among those living outside of the larger cities' (p. 19) in Tasmania. According to this body of literature the educational decisions of young people living in rural areas are shaped not only by access to resources but also by particular interpretations of the social and cultural differences between the city and the country.

Other research draws more extensively on Bourdieu's (1990) notion of cultural capital, a person's knowledges, skills and tastes, to explain school non-completion in rural areas. In Australia, Wierenga's (2009) longitudinal study of young people living in a small rural town in southern Tasmania highlights how broader worldviews are linked with decisions to continue in education, whereas local worldviews are linked with choices to leave school early. Corbett, in his study of young Canadian people, links a form of 'localized capital' to choices to leave school early and 'mobility capital' to decisions to continue in education. He observes an 'uneven distribution of mobility opportunities' (2013, p. 275) in the local community and argues that the possession of 'mobility capital' is a key indicator of success in the post-industrial labour market. Cuervo & Wyn (2017) similarly see mobility as essential for accessing education and work, and apply the concept of motilities, the potential to be mobile, to their analysis of data from the Life Patterns Study and interviews with rural young people. They argue that "both mobility and motility generate different individual biographies, as well as different processes of social inclusion and exclusion" (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017, p. 8).

The role of mobility in generating division and difference is especially relevant for young rural men. Wierenga, for example, observes that "to stay on at school – out of town – stands between these respondents and all of the things that are most meaningful" (2011, p. 278). This indicates how local worldviews shape the identity of the young men in Wierenga's study and how a placed based form of identity can be linked to choices to not continue in education. Corbett similarly highlights how many of his participants aspired to stay in their local town because of the centrality of 'localized capital' to their sense of masculinity (Corbett, 2007). He also notes that economic restructuring had made the young men aware of the pressure to move out of the area for work (Corbett, 2013), replacing the sense of security they associated with living in their local town with a sense of risk. These observations indicate a tension between traditional masculinities, associated with characteristics such as physical strength, toughness and emplaced experiences (Connell, 2005), and more flexible and mobile forms of masculinities which are compatible with participation in the new economy. In their study, Cuervo & Wyn (2012) describe how some young men had successfully engaged with alternative forms of masculinities to make a life for themselves and their families in the country, whilst McLeod & Yates (2006) found that a group of young men in their study saw no need to engage with new forms of masculinities. These different responses to social change highlight the diversity of rural places and the need to investigate the link between locality, biography and educational choice in various settings.

The link between rural masculinities and limited mobility connects with the dominance of masculinities in rural communities. Tucker (2003) highlights the gendered nature of adult surveillance of young rural people and observes that adults viewed girls' participation in leisure activities, such as drinking, as a problem. Dunkley (2004) expands on this in a study of rural youth in North America and highlights the common community understanding that boys needed space to be boys and young women needed to be protected from it. Tucker & Matthews (2001, p. 166) further point out that the young women in their study were marginalised and regulated by the young men through the use and non-use of public leisure spaces which were seen as 'boy's places'. These insights suggest that participation in rural leisure spaces may reinforce the sense of belonging to the local community for young rural men, but it may also have an alienating effect on young women. This may form part of the explanation for young men's choices to stay in their local communities and the choices of young women to continue their education in the city (Corbett, 2007; Corbett, 2013; Wierenga, 2009; Wierenga, 2011).

The literature examined here suggests that a sense of ambiguity underpins young people's educational decisions in a rural context. Young rural people simultaneously feel a strong sense of belonging to their local communities, yet many also feel they should leave. It is this notion of

ambiguity and its connection with educational choice, I seek to capture in this paper. To highlight the complexities involved in making educational choices in rural areas, this paper explores both young people's views on the country to which they feel they belong and the city to which they must relocate to continue their education. In exploring this form of place-based ambiguity and its connection to educational decision making, this paper responds to calls to move beyond the metrocentric focus in youth and educational research, and contributes to the emergent literature on how young people make their educational decisions in rural areas (Corbett, 2007; Corbett, 2013; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Farrugia, 2014; Wierenga 2009; Wierenga 2011). In the analysis presented in this paper, I argue that a deep sense of ambiguity sits at the heart of many of the participants' choices to leave school early because, unlike their urban counterparts, their educational decisions involve negotiating the risks of exchanging the known difficulties of the local town for the unknown risks of the city. Whilst a sense of ambivalence permeated the lives of all the participants, young people making the decision to leave school early were characterised by being deeply embedded in local networks and knowledges, including a highly physical form of masculinity.

Theoretical framework

In attempting to understand the emplaced nature of the young people's experiences and the connection with their educational choices, this analysis draws on Bourdieu's (1977/1990) concepts of social and cultural capital and habitus, as well as Connell's theory of the gender order, especially hegemonic masculinity (2005). Bourdieu's concepts provide a lens through which to explore how the young people's sense of place differ according to their cultural knowledges and practices, and how these knowledges are mediated by their social networks. Bourdieu's concepts have been critiqued for inadequately dealing with structures other than class (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Schippers, 2007), and this analysis employs Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, a culturally idealised form of masculinity characterised by physical strength, competitiveness, aggressiveness and heterosexuality, to understand the gendered nature of the young people's lifeworld. These theories are synthesised through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu's attempt to describe how objective social reality and the internalised subjective worlds of individuals are inextricably bound together. This concept provides a lens through which to analyse how structures such as class, gender and rurality intersect through the habitus to shape educational choices.

This analysis also draws on Simmel's (1903/1950) distinction between rural and urban lifestyles to theorise rurality as a part of habitus. Simmel's aim to understand how rapid social change forges new social relationships is relevant to late modernity with its constant economic, social and technological transformations and changing forms of cultural representations. Simmel focuses more intensely on the features of a metropolitan lifestyle than on the characteristics of a rural lifestyle. His theory therefore provides a starting point for theorising a rural habitus as a counterpoint to a metropolitan lifestyle, and describing how this rural habitus is implicated in educational decision making.

Simmel argues that the "tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life" of the metropolis compels individuals to "react with their head, not their heart" (1950, p. 410). The metropolitan individual must appear strikingly characteristic because of the brief and impersonal nature of their interactions. In contrast, the rural individual relies on long-lasting and deeply felt relationships in expressing an "unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other" (1950, p. 421); a stable form of identity developed through prolonged exposure to common norms and values. For Simmel, the calculated and punctual attitudes that characterise metropolitan

intellectualism lie at the heart of the blasé attitude possessed by the metropolitan individual. With its fast economic and social life, the city sets up a sharp contrast to the slow pace of rural life and its 'uninterrupted habituations', and Simmel observes that individuals from small rural towns are overwhelmed in the meeting with the metropolis because of the "the swift and uninterrupted change of stimuli" (1950, p. 410).

Simmel's ideas resonate with young Tasmanian people's "high anxieties in relation to moving to the city" for their education (ACER, 2016). However, his fixed rural-urban categories do not adequately capture young people's experiences in late modernity where technological improvements contribute to the blurring of rural-urban boundaries. Therefore, this analysis draws on work on place by Cuervo & Wyn (2012), Farrugia (2014), Farrugia, Smyth & Harrison (2014) and Massey (1991) which argue for a need to move beyond the rural-urban dichotomy. Massey (1991), for example, argues for an extraverted conceptualisation of place, and highlights how a global sense of place is at the heart of contemporary place-based identity. Simmel's framework is used in conjunction with contemporary theories of place to capture the ambiguity that characterise the educational choices of the young rural people in this study.

Methods and context

This paper is based on research undertaken in a mixed gender, non-streamed public high school in rural Tasmania at the end of 2007 to 2008. The school was given the fictitious name of Hillsville High. It catered for a predominantly working class clientele, with a sprinkling of students from more affluent backgrounds. An even number of male and female Grade 10 students aged between 15 and 16 years old participated in this study (N = 44). Ten weeks of participant observation was undertaken at the school, followed by interviews with students (N = 33), teachers (N = 9), parents (N = 8) and policy makers (N = 7) and these data were analysed thematically. This project received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania Network) and the Tasmanian Department of Education.

Participant observation was chosen as a key data collection technique because it offers a way to gain an insider's perspective of how young people make their educational choices. The need to unearth the layered meanings and understandings underlying young people's views on the country and the city seem particularly reliant on an insider account (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The emphasis on the multifaceted nature of everyday micro-interactions and meaning making processes of participant observation lends itself to an investigation of how young people's educational decisions are tied to their everyday experiences and social relationships (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

The community in which the young people lived is an ethnically homogenous community with few residents identifying as having a background other than Anglo-Saxon. Measured by the SEIFA index, Hillsville is consistently listed as disadvantaged on a number of socio-economic and educational characteristics employed by this index (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] ABS, 2011). Although a high proportion of Hillsville's residents are welfare recipients, this coexists with a high concentration of wealth amongst a small group of people. Opportunities for manual labour are reflected in the relatively low unemployment rate, yet around ten per cent of young people aged 15-19 are unemployed. Organised leisure activities mainly consist of sport, and football is the dominant sporting activity. Hillsville High is an essential part of the community, which is located in an area of low education retention. Although there are some opportunities for post-compulsory education in the area, students wishing to undertake pre-tertiary studies are required to study in the nearest regional town. The high levels of social inequality, welfare

dependence and fracturing of traditional pathways into relatively secure manual employment for young people paint a picture of a community in which the economic restructuring of the 1980s has had enduring effects.[1]

Everyday life in a small town in rural Tasmania

The profile of Hillsville captures the pervasive ambiguity which characterises the town and operates on multiple dimensions. The community is at once a paradise and severely disadvantaged; it is stunningly beautiful, yet dirty and industrial; isolated but rich in social capital; wealthy but poor. This ambiguity was a key theme running through the accounts of the young people's feelings about Hillsville where deep attachment to place was compromised by a sense of stigma and isolation.

Similar to young people living in other rural areas, Hillsville's young people expressed deep appreciation of their community and their strong bonds with other community members (Bourke & Geldens, 2007; Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Leyshon, 2008; Wierenga, 2009). They described it as a relaxed little town free from the 'hustle and bustle of the city' and consistently spoke of 'knowing everyone' as one of the best things about their town. One young woman, Maggie, sums up the view of many young people, "I like it here because it's not a big place...when we finish high school we'll probably all still know each other." These accounts highlight Simmel's idea of an unambiguous form of identity and indicate that a sense of stability through the permanence of social relations is central to the participants' sense of self. This suggests that a high level of social capital through close relationships with other community members forms part of the young people's rural habitus and influence choices to remain in the local community rather than moving to the city to continue in education.

The young people's connection to the natural habitat was also integral to their sense of self. Anna, Anita and Nina describe how embodied childhood experiences of "swimming in the river" and "motorbike racing over the paddocks" characterise their love of the area. Nigel's descriptions of his rally track reveal similar, embodied connections with the land. Nigel explains that "I cut down the trees myself [for the rally track]. I drive around all the paddocks at home and then into the track." The young people's stories connect with other accounts of young people's embedded experiences in their local environment (Wierenga, 2009; Wierenga, 2011; Corbett, 2007; Corbett 2013; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). In the case of Hillsville, life habitually lived is a life bound up with nature. The internalisation of the natural environment through the habitus happens in subtle ways, such as the daily ride on the school bus through the green hills or through planned activities such as camping. There is a suggestion in these accounts that a deep immersion in nature brings about "a response from the heart [not the head]." The young people's relationships with the natural world around them demand immediate attention to sensory experiences and brings a degree of slowness and authenticity to life that is not easily found in the city with its "the swift and uninterrupted change of stimuli."

The following extract from a field trip to a local business demonstrates how the young people's relationship with country was mediated by social capital:

> As we drive out of town Ben says 'my aunty lives there. The driver slows down to turn left but the students tell him 'go straight ahead'. Anne and Anita say to me 'that's Nina's house. Bob points to another road at the end of which his uncle and aunt live. Someone points out

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[1] Sources have been omitted to protect the identity of the community and the participants.

his mother's old house and someone else tells me the house to the left used to be the old shop when his grandmother was alive. I have already lost track of whose relatives and friends live where (Field notes).

Unlike the driver who is navigating the area in a rational manner using maps and street names, the young people know the rural landscape by heart and they can read it. Their ability to name specific places and important landmarks testify to their celebration of a kind of uninterrupted habitation and deep sense of connectedness to and knowledge of the area developed through social contacts and internalised through the rural habitus.

Despite the high value placed on social capital in Hillsville, the young people also experienced close social relationships as having a downside (Leyshon, 2008; Wierenga, 2009). A standard comment was "everyone knows my name here", a concept which all the participants nominated as a negative aspect of living in a small rural town. Wendy and Susan sum up the common theme of how this oppressive quality of social capital was linked to difficulties in expressing one's individuality in their discussion of "how you couldn't wear outgoing stuff like different clothes" because "if you get a reputation it usually sticks, even if it's not true." In Hillsville, social capital also worked as a form of social control and was associated with social surveillance and conformity (Leyshon, 2008; Tucker, 2003; Tucker & Matthews, 2001). The tendency for personal affairs to become public rather than remain private had the potential to be socially intrusive and limit the young people's ability to express themselves in ways which were considered different to common community norms and values, especially for young women.

The social and cultural capital associated with sport was seen as especially important because it facilitated social interaction through key sporting events. At the same time, many young people experienced it as problematic. Participation in sport especially reinforced a sense of inclusion with the community for young men. John's comment that "all your mates play sport…we just muck around and have a good time" points to sport as integral to the young men's geographical and social worlds. Despite the general acceptance of sport as the superior leisure activity in the town, many young people did not share this view. Tina explains that "It's life and death for them. They are so rough and we sometimes get hurt. I just spend most of my time on my own." Tina's story confirms findings from other studies that rural leisure spaces are masculine spaces (Dunkley, 2004; Tucker, 2003; Tucker & Matthews, 2001). Tina especially describes how the emphasis on physicality, strength and a degree of aggression often was excluding of women. Many young men did not feel at home in this space either. Stanley explains that "if you don't like sport then you don't really do a lot here. I'm not very competitive. I spend most of my time at home… maybe playing computer games." Many young people in this study found it challenging to participate in the social and cultural life of the town because the key social outlet was sport, and they associated playing sport with a highly physical form of masculinity which they saw as incompatible with their own sense of self. The choice to not be involved with sport was even riskier as it was associated with significant social isolation.

Hillsville's geographic isolation intensified experiences of exclusion and social control because there were limited ways in which to escape the restrictions placed on social life. Almost every participant spoke of having "nothing to do" and being excluded from activities such as "going to the cinema." Views on the city as providing opportunities not available in rural towns are common in other studies on young people in rural areas (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Leyshon, 2008; Wierenga, 2009), but this study qualifies this in the finding that most of the participants had only limited experience of major population centres. Only four out of the 33 young people who participated in an interview reported participating in city life together with friends or relatives

living in the city. Whilst many participants sometimes visited larger towns for shopping or going to the cinema, this did not include meaningful interaction with people living in the city.

The participants' stories of life in Hillsville highlight some features of a distinctive rural habitus. Key characteristics include: a high level of social capital through close relationships with other community members, deep immersion in the local, natural environment and the dominance of a form of hegemonic masculinity, grounded in the town's working class environment and sport. This localised form of masculinity was characterised by physical strength, competitiveness and a degree of verbal and physical aggression. The concept of the rural habitus helps to explain the young people's experiences through an emphasis on how the objective social reality of rural life, and the internalised subjective worlds of individuals are inextricably bound together to produce particular experiences which shape educational choices.

Views on the city

Although the participants identified Hillsville as 'boring' compared to the excitement of the city they described the cityscape as unfamiliar. This perception of the city was linked to aspects of the rural habitus such as a high level of social capital and embedded experiences in the local area. Maggie's comment that "… when we finish high school we'll probably all still keep in contact and that's just a lot easier" begins to elucidate the differences in the young people's views on the city and the country. Nigel confirms the perception of rural life as easier in his comment, "I drove all over the farm when I was 12. Many people in the city think it's hard to drive. It's hard work living in the city I reckon." This construction of rural life as 'easy' and the city as 'hard work' highlights how aspects of habitus, such as the importance of tight-knit social relations, are constructed against perceptions of the city, indicating the porousness of place (Farrugia, 2014).

One common view on the city was a fear of its high population density. One parent (Mr Potter) reflects on the importance of space and social connectedness for his and his family's wellbeing:

> *I never had any attraction to big cities. I just love all the space and I'm not good in big crowds and that's been passed on to my eldest daughter and she gets claustrophobic. Here we have the tight knit community. There are strong family ties, great opportunities to build friendships with your neighbours, and the few times I have been to the city you can tell that people just don't know their neighbours.*

Mr. Potter's comments elucidate the contrast between high social connectedness in low population density areas and low social connectedness in high population density areas. This *gemeinshaft–gesellschaft* distinction (Tönnies, 1957) was difficult for many participants to negotiate, with many describing the city as having a hazy, maze-like quality, expressed in both physical, social and cultural terms, in contrast to the rural landscape they could readily read. The participants in this study found their rural habitus, based on a deep knowledge of their local area and close and personal associations, challenged in fleeting meetings with seemingly indifferent and impersonal city people displaying a blasé attitude. The fear and dislike of the city is here portrayed as a social norm in the community, transmitted from parents to children to reinforce the deep rooted nature of the rural habitus.

One teacher, Ms. Willis, provides a vivid account of how specific characteristics of the rural habitus become particularly visible in the meeting with the city:

> *Once we took 30 Grade 10 students to the Gold Coast and they would go 'oh man I just saw this bloke who had ear piercings all the way up here'. Another teacher from Hillsville High took the kids on a trip to Brisbane and she had to say to the kids 'you're gonna see things you never see at home. Make sure you DON'T STARE', and she said that 'cause she was worried they might get into trouble (Ms Willis).*

Ms. Willis's story highlights how a lack of familiarity with the social and cultural practices of the city forms part of the rural habitus. The young people's reactions to the city, the staring and exclamations when observing unfamiliar cultural norms present as the opposite to the calculated reactions of cosmopolitan citizens who 'react with their head, not their heart'. It is both the young people's lack of familiarity with the blasé attitude that characterises city people and the absence of valued features of rural life in the city that contribute to their ambiguous feelings towards city life.

The young people's ambivalent feelings towards the area beyond Hillsville were also influenced by processes of labelling and stigmatisation:

> *Anne: People think 'Oh, you live in Hicksville'. But tell them you live in Beachside [other local town] and they like you.*
> *Anita: I don't care. I'm proud to live in Hillsville. It's better than half the places up there.*
> *Anne: Yeah, I wouldn't live up there. I couldn't live in the city, it's really dirty, too many scummies.*
> *Anne: And the bigger towns are just too busy. After one day in the city shopping, I feel really stressed out and uncomfortable.*

This conversation sums up how most of the young people experienced being labelled as inferior, and how the stigmatisation attached to living in Hillsville shaped the young peoples' image of themselves. However, the shared response of the town's young people to being ridiculed was not only feelings of inferiority but also the perception of their town as safe and superior to the outside world. Processes of stigmatisation and labelling were therefore mutual, highlighting how the young people's identities are shaped in interaction with places outside Hillsville (Massey, 1991) and how this interaction shaped their understandings of the city as a place they would not move to for further education.

Young women more commonly had positive views on the city than young men because of the perception of the city as a place where personal freedom could be obtained. Susan, Rose and Trudy explain that they feel more "comfortable and confident" in bigger towns or cities. Reflecting on an episode where they spoke to a group of young men in Sydney, they commented "we would never have done that in Hillsville," indicating the dominance of masculinity in work and leisure in the town (Leyshon, 2008; Tucker, 2003; Wierenga, 2009). Some young men had also formed positive relationships with the city. Stanley explains that "I sometimes go to Springfield to see my aunty. I like the city. I would rather live in a city. I like the noise. I love it." Stanley's thoughts illustrate a connection with the city, but also an ability to enjoy the "pulse of the city" and its liberating quality. These dynamics indicate a link between experiences of marginalisation, a desire for personal autonomy and choices to relocate to the city for education.

Staying or leaving? Rural habitus and educational choice

Conversations with the young people revealed that they were knowledgeable about the importance of education and the contemporary labour market and that they saw education as a

tool to construct interesting identities and exciting careers. The young people in this study had clearly naturalised the idea that education is fundamental to full participation in society (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). However, for some, a deeply embedded sense of place in combination with a fear of the city worked against a desire to continue their education.

Although a high level of ambiguity characterised all of the participants' views on the country and the city, the perception of risk which accompanied these ambiguities was mediated by aspects of cultural knowledge and gender relations to influence the young people's educational decisions. One young local man, Shaun, decided against continuing his education because "it is not safe anywhere else these days." Another young man, Paul, made a similar choice because "I am born and bred here, never been out of the state." Paul also thinks "it's actually really boring here" but would never want to leave because "all my family is here." In the simultaneous construction of Hillsville as boring and the only place to be, Paul's comments highlight the sense of ambiguity which characterised many participants' choices to leave school early. Anita, in an interview with herself and her parents, elaborates on this and highlights the feelings and emotions experienced by many participants. Her question to her parents, "I don't think I will like leaving here to go to college. What will happen if I don't like it? What if I make the wrong choice? I just don't want to make a choice", reflects Anita's rural habitus and her fears about the city. It also reflects the expectation to young people to profit from the endless possibilities available to them (McLeod, 2009), even if they lack the mobility capital to engage with this project (Corbett, 2007). Rather than making the risky decision to move to the city and risk failure, Anita makes the choice to not continue in education to minimise risks to the self by staying in the local community.

The rural habitus shaped the decision to leave school early for both young men and women but more young men than women were making the choice to leave. What distinguished the group of young men who were deciding to leave school early were their tight local networks, attachment to place and adherence to a physical form of masculinity:

> Gary: I'm getting a job at the factory. I'll buy a car and a motorbike. That's all I want. Dad works there so that's why I can get a job there. I can get a lift with him to work, I save petrol. I actually never wanted to get a job there. I never heard of it until dad started working there.
> Phillip: I'll go to Year 11 in Hillsville next year. I'll see how far I can take that. I spoke to dad and my grandma and stuff. She wants to know everything. Grandma wants me to do Biology, but I don't have brains for that. She wants to know about everything. I visit her in Hobart sometimes.
> MS: Did you talk to anyone about your choice, Gary?
> Gary: Yeah, I talked to mum, dad.
> MS: What did they say?
> Gary: Yeah, do it.

Gary's choice to leave is situated within a localised form of social and cultural capital, and his parents either support his choice or are unable to assist him in making a different choice. Practices associated with a physical form of masculinity are important to Gary. He values being able to develop his 'localised capital' (Corbett, 2007), engage with the technical skills and knowledge of driving cars and motorbikes and work in collaboration with family members rather than continuing his education in a foreign environment on his own. Yet there is also a sense of disappointment in his statement that "I actually never wanted a job there…" which reflects Gary's knowledge of the changing dynamics on the labour market and the need to be a skilled and mobile worker (Corbett, 2013; Kenway, Kraack & Hickey-Moody, 2006).

Similar to Wierenga's (2009) finding that broader networks and worldviews are linked with choices to continue in education, the young people in Hillsville who had internalised family practices of relating to the city through their habitus were more likely to make the decision to continue their education. Lauren's account of often visiting her "family, Nan and Pop and my other Pop and some friends...there are always some of them I can stay with", encapsulates how familiarity with the city was linked to her choice to continue in education. Similarly, Neville's accounts of visiting family members around Australia and "travelling to the mainland to decide which University I should go to", show how experiences of rurality and perceptions of the city differed according to the nature of the young men's and women's social and cultural capital. The mobility capital (Corbett, 2007) some young people were able to accrue through their experiences with the city was a key resources shaping their choice to continue education.

This study qualifies the finding that broader social and cultural networks (Wierenga, 2009) and a form of mobility capital (Corbett, 2007) are associated with decisions to continue in education with the observation that even sporadic exposure to the area beyond Hillsville provided a form of protection against early school leaving. For example, Phillip's choice to enrol in college in the nearest regional town is linked to his relationship with this grandmother who lives in this town. Although Phillip does not leave Hillsville often, his close relationship with his grandmother and limited knowledge of a bigger town indicates that even some exposure to the city can support young people in their educational decisions. The account of Stanley, who enjoys "the pulse of the city", also confirms this point as he is planning to continue his education because he can stay with his aunt whom he sometimes visits.

Young women's more positive relationships with the city often translated into choices to relocate to the city to continue their education. Emily's observation that "there's not much to do here" and her desire to "get out of here to see what the rest of the world looks like" connects with her experiences of marginalisation in relation to community sports, as well as her frequent visits to family members in Hobart. Emily sees the option of staying in Hillsville with all its constraints as a more risky choice than not participating in the opportunities offered by the city because of her more extensive social and cultural capital. Paul, in contrast, proudly states that "I am born and bred here." His deep attachment to the area through tight-knit social and cultural networks ultimately means that he perceives the boredom of Hillsville as less risky compared to the unfamiliarity of the area beyond Hillsville.

The literature on young people and early school leaving indicates that many young rural men associate the choice to leave school early with a sense of failure because they understand that global economic restructuring has led to a decline in local jobs (Corbett, 2013; Kenway, Kraack & Hickey-Moody, 2006; Wierenga, 2011). In Hillsville this was true for both young men and women, with individuals commenting that their choice to not continue in education was associated with an insecure future: "I have made things worse for myself" (Ralph); "I have to make the best of the situation now" (Ryan); "leaving might not be so good for me" (Anne); and "I should choose something but I don't know what" (Anita). These accounts relate to claims that young people in late modernity are expected to capitalise on opportunity and choice and if they fail to do so their choices are constructed as personal failures (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, McLeod, 2009). Young people in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to experiences of failure because they depend on a form of mobility capital (Corbett, 2007; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012) to access resources outside their local towns.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to understand why the participants in my study 'oscillated wildly' when considering their educational options. I have argued that a sense of ambiguity in relation to both the city and the country sits at the heart of the young people's educational choices because, unlike their urban counterparts, their educational decisions involved negotiating the risks of exchanging the known difficulties of the local town for the unknown risks of the city. Negotiating this ambiguity increased the sense of risk in their lives and led to some individuals choosing 'not to make a choice' to minimise risk. Using the concept of habitus to capture how aspects of rural life are internalised and manifested in the young people's views on the country and the city, this paper makes a number of contributions to the emergent literature on young people's educational decisions in rural areas.

The rural habitus, with its close-knit social relations, deeply embedded experiences in the local environment and an emphasis on a physical form of masculinity was a key factor shaping the young participants' choices. For many young people, there was a dissonance between the cognitive understanding that minimising risk meant continuing in education and embodied emotions of attachment, belonging and fear, which meant that leaving home to continue education was seen as more risky than leaving education. Although the young participants had internalised the idea of education as 'a naturalised discourse' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012), a deeply embedded sense of place worked against a desire to embrace the formal requirements necessary to prepare for this.

It is partly through the use of Simmel's (1950) theory that the strength of the rural habitus in shaping the young people's educational decisions is revealed because it is constructed against the norms and lifestyles of the city (Farrugia, 2014; Massey, 1991). The participants in this study found their rural identity, based on a deep knowledge of their local area and close and personal associations, challenged by the idea of impersonal city people. Their reactions to the city, 'feeling stressed out', 'uncomfortable' and 'claustrophobic', present as the opposite to the metropolitan individual who 'react with their head, not their heart'. The lack of these urban characteristics helps to explain the young people's ambivalent relationships to Hillsville and the city. On the one hand they celebrated rural life as a superior culture untouched by the ills of modern city life and bemoaned the absence of rural characteristics in the city. On the other hand, their experiences included a deep sense of exclusion because they felt unable to particulate in urban practices. Negotiating these ambiguities led to choices 'not to make a choice' and decisions to leave school early.

The dominance of a form of hegemonic masculinity in the local community, through male orientated work and leisure activities, worked to anchor the habitus of young males more solidly in place than young females. The role of local networks and knowledges in shaping young men's decisions to leave school early in rural areas has been illustrated elsewhere, for example in Corbett's (2007, 2013) concept of 'localised capital' and Wierenga's (2009) notion of 'local networks'. However, this study also provides insights into how this form of masculinity influences young women's educational choices. In Hillsville, the dominance of a highly physical form of masculinity worked to marginalise many young women, and some men, in community life through the valorisation of highly physical and sometimes aggressive behaviours. These experiences of marginalisation contributed to the decision of some young women to leave Hillsville to continue their education in an environment that was perceived to be less oppressive.

Other research has emphasised how global forms of social and cultural capital, mobility capital and motilities work to protect young rural people against early school leaving (Corbett 2007;

Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Wierenga, 2009). In this study, even limited connections to the city and its people empowered some individuals to make the choice to continue their education away from home. Although programs and initiatives designed to increase the 'mobility capital' of young rural people through visits to larger regional towns or cities already exist, visits are often brief and infrequent and the programs themselves depend on short term funding. The findings of this study emphasise the importance of facilitating meaningful and sustained interaction with individuals in larger regional centres in supporting young rural people's transition to Years 11, 12 and beyond.

The qualitative nature of this research means that findings are not generalisable. However, the findings may be useful for theory building. The rural habitus, as a site for the intersection of place, gender and class, has provided important insights into how a group of young rural people in one particular Tasmanian town negotiate their educational choices. There is significant scope to develop the concept of a rural habitus to understand young people's educational decisions in other rural places. Areas of further research include: investigations of the embedded experiences of rural life, the nuances and complexities of rural masculinities and femininities, and the role of sport in shaping social cohesion and division.

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