'It's not a big part of me but I know it's where I come from': Farm youth and their changing relationship with the countryside.

Introduction

Research into the lives and views of those who grow up in the Irish farming community but who through circumstances or personal preferences build their life away from this are rarely examined. However, this ignores the significant impact of the relationship this group have with their background on their affiliations and identities even as they move towards an adulthood that does not necessarily appear to reflect their upbringing in the professional or dwelling choices they make. This paper seeks to remedy this situation as it explores attitudes towards the countryside and the differences that emerge in how farm youth present their internal and external relationship with the specific spatial community they grew up in and the broader idea of the rural. By internal it should be taken to mean how they view their relationship from the inside and by external how they come to regard it in relation to the urban other. While both of these aspects are underpinned by the concrete reality of their continuing belonging to their background this does not mean they are static but rather how they are interpreted over time can change depending on how they view their attachments. While some mention is made of the farm they grew up on much of this paper concentrates on examining the relationships individuals develop with the internal and external facets of their connections to the countryside and to the community they grew up in.

The paper firstly, looks at the internal relationship they develop and the contradictory attitudes the group exhibit towards their membership of their community. The second half of the paper examines their conceptualisation of this with regard to the external other. It focuses in particular on the role of labelling and self-othering as well as the construction of their childhoods within the rural idyll framework.

Background

This paper is based on PhD research carried out with a cohort of university students in NUI, Galway[1] who grew up in Irish farming families that do not intend to return to farming full-time. Instead, most will pursue professional careers potentially taking them away from the countryside on a permanent basis. The research is based on a series of thirty semi-structured interviews with students, evenly balanced between male and female participants, aged between 18-33 years of age and includes undergraduates and postgraduates from a range of farm types and a wide geographical spread. All members of the cohort had assisted on the farm growing up either as 'workers' who regularly undertook specialised tasks and were regarded as essential to the farm's everyday operations or as 'helpers' who acted as an emergency pool of labour or undertook less skilled and less valued chores. This paper is part of a wider study on the nature of belonging in the farming community and its impact on young people's transition to adulthood. The views contained in this paper are a broad representation of the cohort with quotes and illustrative stories from a number of individuals used throughout the work.

The Internal Relationship with the Community

For many individuals their internal relationship with the local spatial community they grew up in is often profoundly conflicting. This is grounded in the push-pull dynamic of their construction and perception of their social attachments whereby most grew up in the knowledge that they would have to build their lives away from the farm and were expected to go on to further education. Their attitudes often veered between a desire to escape and to remain, to embrace the anonymity of urban life and longing to return to live in the familiarity of rural Ireland. Connections are maintained by regular visits home where they experience the double-edged sword of both being known and knowing that is found in the community of their upbringing. For many there is a familiarity to their life and social networks there and, furthermore, they are also recognised as established and rooted figures by actors who they have been acquainted with since childhood. There is a sense of shared history here and of being embedded in a local narrative and timeline within which community members can trace their path from childhood onwards. However, for some individuals the sense of coming under constant scrutiny and being seen as a known quantity is a challenging element of the

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[1] Galway is the main city on the Western seaboard of Ireland.

relationship with where they grew up. Almost all of the participants remarked on being from sparsely populated areas and are members of prominent farming families, making it difficult for their actions to go unnoticed by others. One male, Donal, spoke of loving the tight-knit nature of his area but also recognised the problems this caused in how everyone assumed they knew him intimately. This must have been especially troublesome and tormenting when one takes into account his homosexuality and his attempts to come to terms with this in his youth. As a result he usually puts on a mask of conformity when he returns there and hides certain parts of his identity that he feels the community would find difficult to accept.

This conflict over the nature of their social embeddedness was also connected to the expectation that they would follow certain patterns of behaviour predicated on their surname, the actions of older siblings or previous generations. Andrew spoke about being unable to create an identity based purely on his own character or merits. In school whenever behaved in, as he described it, a too light and free kind of way he was admonished by his teachers and parents. This was because his actions jarringly clashed with his family's image, which was based on traits of quietness and steadiness. As a result, he relishes how detached and unknown he is in university since the norm of being placed[2] by other individuals is less likely to have the chance to prevail. This allows him to avoid being framed within his family's supposed dispositions or the role of the 'farmer', a label he is assiduously trying to avoid as he attempts to circumvent cultural norms around taking on the farm. These were some of his thoughts on the subject:

> I genuinely do like it more down here [in Galway]…I don't know why I like it though that I'm unknown because I'm so used to, of knowing....of walking down [the street in his local town], being known, people just left, right and centre knowing you. […] but over time...you're known as 'Kelly farmer'…certain sort of things [are attached to this] whereas here I'm just known as 'Kelly student' and the rest is blank.

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[2] Placing is where a stranger asks what a person's surname is, which allows them to work out who their family are, who they are related to, etc. Based on what is known of the family's history a calculated guess is made about the individual's character and likely personal traits. Therefore, being a member of their family symbolises something about the individual and the way they can be positioned within a community and made into the familiar. This is most strongly associated with rural Ireland where wide kinship and social networks facilitate this process.

However, his attitude was somewhat contradictory since he also said he likes to be placed as a member of his family by others and draws some comfort at being recognised as a Kelly by strangers:

> It's no problem [being known or placed] like sure everyone likes it, if you just drop a name of your older sibling or your father they'd know straight away who you are, and that's it they know who you are [so] you're sorted then.

Thus, there is both conflict and consolation in his social embeddedness and boundedness as on the one hand; its implications carry a wearying kind of constraint as he struggles to be distinguished in his own right. On the other hand, it also provides a measure of security in allowing him to interpret social interactions and actors in a relatively untroubled and knowing fashion as well as protecting against complete anonymity as he moves towards a life away from home.

There were further ambiguities to changing conceptualisation of social attachments as when participants combined a desire to escape the community they grew up in, with either an equal wish to remain embedded in it, or at the very least expressed a deep love of it. While they might dislike certain aspects such as its cultural homogeneity the symbolic power of home continues to exert a powerful hold. In fact, these emotions of love and hate can often underpin the relationship an individual has with the exact same aspect of the community. For instance, Paula abhorred her neighbourhood's atmosphere of surveillance-fed by a corrosive long-running land dispute that has poisoned relationships and her local community's narrow-mindedness. However, this stance conflicts with the sense of security she derives from the fact of being known and looked out for within this place and would contemplate retiring there in the future. From a young age, another participant, James was eager to flee and longed to break out of the confinements of his upbringing. Yet now his deep affection for where he grew up and his cultural background has begun to reassert itself and he appears to have little enthusiasm to see changes take place. This is demonstrated by his wish to see a particular gravedigging custom[3] retained and the farm preserved into the next generation of his family.

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[3] This is a tradition where a number of local farming families come together to help each other dig graves when needed. He would return home to help out with this if necessary when the time called for it.

Furthermore, he self-identifies as a 'country boy' still keen on rural pursuits and has a relatively in-depth knowledge of the state of Irish farming. James looks to retreat from the boundaries created by his membership of the community and the social attachments imposed on him by virtue of being part of a well-known farming family. Nevertheless, however unwillingly he accedes to this he does not want to entirely abandon this part of his identity or see it disappear on a wider social level.

In some situations, the idea of belonging to the general rural framework appears to clash with the practical implications of social embeddedness in a specific community. While actors might feel loyalty to this broader idea and seek to continue their attachment to it, they do not want to be fully immersed in it. Thus, while some individuals might want to re-embed themselves into the rural by moving back to this environment in the future this will not necessarily be to the place they have been deeply enmeshed in on a personal or familial level since childhood. This also links into the conflicting viewpoints expressed about the birth community mentioned in the previous paragraph. For example, in one breath James spoke with loving nostalgia about the social support available at home, and in the next referred to the area as mired in gossip and nosiness. A possible solution to the dilemma of wanting to remain connected to a cultural framework they understand and are comfortable in and, yet, be somewhat aloof from its everyday interactions and manifestations is shown in James' narrative. After his admittance into university he moved to a rural community, which is relatively similar to the one he grew up. This allows him to continue to experience what he views as the positive side of rural living whilst enjoying the anonymity and detachment from the social ties of home with its prying eyes and whispered chatter. This choice of residence symbolises a personally crafted, elective compromise between the benefits of rural and urban living-a country lifestyle with the freedom borne out of being as unknown as if he lived in an urban area. Similarly, Aisling, who is likely to inherit the farm, wants to live in rural Ireland but is unsure if this will lead to a return home. She feels too visible there and understands the consequences her embeddedness in the community would have for her adult life. This was noted in her comments:

> The area just feels I don't know, people know…like too much…I guess
> they [the neighbours] know your family and they know all [the] ins and

outs and you have experiences with some people…It does feel a bit claustrophobic whereas maybe I'm a bit like idealistic and I think the grass is greener somewhere else. But...yeah other small places…where you can start from scratch-that's what I think I like do you know that you're not going on…people's pre-conceptions of your family, or...cos I think that all influences […] how people relate to you and everything. You're kind of getting a chance to start from scratch but you have that small community feel.

However, a number of participants have a strong wish for continued social attachments to their own community with few hints at any underlying conflicts strong enough to push them away from their homeplace and towards building a long-term future elsewhere. In these scenarios social belonging to the home community has been put on hold while they attend university. This can be described as postponed embeddedness. For Jane, going to university was not viewed as proffering an opportunity to escape an intensely surveilled relationship with her background. Instead, the decision was driven by an urge to gain educational qualifications followed by a return home to live among her family and community. She firmly declared her ambition and intention to move home again as soon as possible. While Galway is enjoyable it is nothing more than a means of allowing her to establish a career and is little more than a stepping stone back to where she belongs. She described her relationship with her background as follows:

What's drawing me home is just I suppose it's the whole nostalgia of being home and kind of feeling that security of just you know not fully like breaking away in a way you know from what you're used to as a child…I wanna go home because that's where I feel I belong do you know that kind of way…I have friends like that grew up in the town, and they love where they're from, but they never want to live there like. They want to live in Dublin, and they want to be there forever, and do you know I just couldn't see myself being like that. I'd always have [in] the back of my mind coming home do you know what I mean.

Even where participants do not see themselves as living at home in the foreseeable future the strength of their social embeddedness in the community can bring a grounding sense of

inclusion. This ensures that the option of returning home remains available to them, albeit with a more indefinite period of postponement than say Jane anticipates. These actors firmly position themselves within the fabric of their home community but do not see their transition towards adulthood as immediately leading them back home. They maintain close links through sports or working on the farm or in the community but look to build fulfilling lives away from these institutions, at least for a period of time.

The Relationship with the External Other
However, while there is conflict in how participants represent their internal relationship with their community this does not extend to how they imagine their identity and belonging in terms of external social constructs especially the 'urban'. For the majority of participants the contradictory nature of their social attachments and embeddedness in their local community does not seem to impact on their continued affiliation with the idea of the rural rather than the urban. Evidence for this comes from the fact that most repeatedly self-labelled and self-othered themselves from the concept of the urban during their interviews. Differences clearly exist between how relationships are perceived and imagined internally and externally. The nuances in their internal relationship with the local and the rural were usually replaced by a stance of unity and uniformity when speaking of interactions with the external 'other', i.e. the urban. There are distinctions in the way they are differentially attached to the community as it is seen and understood from within and how it is viewed from without. In the case of the latter, they neither want to consider themselves nor be regarded by others as outsiders. Despite their spatial shift away from this background in their transition to adulthood, they continue to strongly identify with their belonging to the rural. Individuals feel this way regardless of whether they are detached from the farming side of their identity or where they yearned to discard this background. Many will not be formally acknowledged as belonging to the farming community through taking ownership of the farm or recognised as 'farmers' in a functional sense. Nevertheless, they usually still want to connect with this particular background through mechanisms such as self-labelling as a 'farmer's daughter'. This is often bolstered by a germinating aspiration to return to live in the countryside either to where they are from or to another rural location. Even where some might have problems with the continuing connections they feel have been forced upon them, for instance, where they are

under pressure to take ownership of the farm, there is a brooding sense that they cannot fully escape the influence of their birth culture and community.

This concern around identity seemed to be more important for females than males who rarely mentioned these kinds of issues in their interviews. The recognised and visible place within the home community males often have by virtue of, for example, their performative farming role could be a factor in this. From a young age many of the male participants had undertaken tasks, which were in the public eye while their female counterparts had less visible roles and, thus, fewer opportunities to identify themselves as deeply immersed and attached members of the local community. In addition, they must take into account the sometimes inexorable influence of their background and the normative gendered frameworks they are entrenched in, which create substantial pressures to stay within this community in the case of sons and to leave in the case of daughters. Male participants were concerned with how they could escape this position and forge their own futures without being influenced by their background. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that their relationship with their background will continue in some form as when Harry, who had an anguished experience on the farm growing up in being expected to work on the farm, argued that

it's not a big part of me but I know it's where I come from.

By contrast females usually do not have the same kind of visibly functional position to tie them to the community and are bounded by frameworks of expectations often leading them away from their background. Since they have fewer means of expressing their continued membership of the community, as they move towards adulthood they are at a greater risk than their male counterparts of being perceived as detached and othered from their background. If the othering process is completed, whereby their right to claim membership of this community if only in a symbolic way is dismissed by other actors, then this impacts on the depth of social belonging they feel and the construction of their primary identities. While some female participants fought to be viewed as members of the community through firmly identifying with this background some of their male counterparts tried to break away from this. However, not all women were so keen to be recognised as a member of this community

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with Joan, speaking of how much she had struggled against the influence of her farming background and the panicked conflict it had led to when it clashed with her own aspirations. Ultimately, she felt she had no choice but to come to terms with her background as she realised she would never be able to fully move away from this:

> I feel less of like a conflict now. I think it's more about living with both of them [the academic and farming aspects of her life], and you don't have to have a single defined identity, and it's more like a kind of collection of several things. It doesn't have to be in conflict, I mean they can kind of be in conflict but like not in a really kind of antagonistic way, more like it's [a] co-existent way.

The Use of Labels

The self-othering and labelling participants were eager to embrace was of not being a 'townie,'[4] or where this term was not explicitly used sentiments to that effect. There seemed to be a fear amongst female members of the cohort that through going away to university they could be transmogrified into one of these actors. To be accused of being a 'townie' would symbolise having lost awareness of the intricate knots that bind their communities together and the intangible understandings contained within this. For some female participants in particular they went farther than the self-othering of not being a 'townie' and explicitly positioned themselves as 'culchies'[5]. Both the label of 'townie' and 'culchie' are used as a means of othering the opposite, urban, community[6]. Furthermore, by ascribing specific attributes, usually unpleasant ones, to this group they are marked out as separate to and what they themselves are not. Often the term 'culchie' is used by outsiders in a sneering manner but in using the word 'culchie' to describe themselves the word is positively appropriated and used to denote belonging to and membership of this community. This was especially true where individuals are positive about their childhood experiences on the farm such as was the

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[4] 'Townie' is a label used by rural dwellers to describe individuals who they identify as urban. It is a very dismissive term denoting ignorance of appropriate ways to behave and often a lack of knowledge about farming. The use of the label almost invariably has negative connotations and would be applied, for instance, in relation to, a newcomer to an area, complaining whether rightly or wrongly about the smell from a neighbouring farm. It is used when actors feel under threat from outsiders' encroachments on their rights and/or when they are angry about the power and resource distribution balance between urban and rural areas.

[5] Culchie is usually used as a pejorative label and stereotype by urban dwellers to describe rural individuals and has derogatory connotations of being backward, old fashioned and dim-witted.

[6] This is an imagined construction since the connections and interchanges between rural and urban run deep in terms of employment, leisure, social and kin networks.

case for one female interviewee Susan. In her description of a hated job she had prior to returning to university, she used the word 'culchie' to distance herself from male co-workers from urban areas. In addition, its use reinforces where her loyalties lie and equally importantly the values she embraces and connects with. However, this term is not always deployed in a positive way but rather can be used as part of an attempt to detach from a background individuals are ill at ease with. In these situations participants apply the word 'culchie' to other individuals but not themselves. When Florence was growing up she used to joke about 'culchies' driving tractors to school-this seemed to be an attempt to put distance between herself and this group:

> certainly growing up [I] identified myself as…someone from a farm and like you know in our hometown you know there were kids that would've driven their dads' tractors to school and it would have been kind of a joke […] I would have joked [about] the 'culchies' driving their tractors to school.

Othering as Part of the (Re)Construction[7] of Childhoods

In addition to using labels to distance themselves from the urban 'other' both male and female participants (re)constructed their childhoods in opposition to this idea. It should be noted that this was not necessarily a judgemental stance since almost all spoke of being comfortable and content in their current urban surroundings. Instead, this is used as a way of positioning themselves as being different to other groups and as a means of imagining and understanding their primary sense of social belonging. However, this was not always welcomed since some resented their embeddedness and longed at times to have had a different upbringing. For others who were positive about their experiences, their childhoods were imagined in opposition to urban ones especially estate[8] upbringings, which manage to inspire quasi-horror in participants. This attitude is shown in Oisin's comments about the wasted life one of his ex-schoolmates has fashioned:

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[7] This term is used in recognition of the way participants (re) construct their childhoods in light of changing relationships with their background, for example. They cannot be said to be simply constructing their childhoods because they are open to alteration and reframing over time.

[8] These were not really defined by any of the participants but seem to involve housing estates most likely located in working class areas rather than suburbs that the participants see as less than salubrious environments to be brought up in.

> […] he's a bum like, does nothing yeah he's-ah he lives in an estate. He's
> not eh....he'd do nothing with himself like,

as if somehow his supposed failings are solely attributable to the place he grew up.

The image they have of their childhoods, which strongly reflects the rural idyll framework, is sketched as a place[9] and time of purity and innocence. By contrast individuals who grew up in towns and estates were pitied by the participants for their perceived early exposure to the perils of modern life, such as drugs or idleness. For example, Katie described her upbringing on the farm as sheltered and prolonged in comparison to the experiences of friends who grew up in towns. At the age of thirteen or fourteen when she was still paddling in streams, she claimed they were sneakily drinking alcohol behind buildings in the local town. Paula mentioned the differences in her interview as well:

> It took us longer to you know to get into alcohol, or whatever than I'd say
> …town children did. Even our secondary school was in the country,
> which was really unusual cos every other secondary school is in the
> town, and we would hear these awful stories about people getting
> completely plastered [drunk] and girls getting pregnant and we really
> didn't have that in our school; it was more protected. I think it's [the rural
> environment] just more innocent and kind of pure I suppose.

It is interesting to note that while there is an overarching idealistic narrative connected to a desire to be recognised as an insider in a community looking out at the 'other', the minutiae of the participants' own story often appears to contradict this presentation. This can be seen in the case of Rita who presented her childhood as being difficult with an overbearing and controlling mother and a harassed father and, yet, she insistently described her childhood as carefree and happy. It is as if she has chosen a version of her childhood she wants to carry forward into her adulthood and through this manages to remain positively integrated into her background. Likewise, while Jane spoke of her early years and her relationship with home in

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[9] The word place is deliberately used here because for these participants it was as much about a spatial concept as a period of time since their childhoods revolved to a large extent around their engagement with the physical surroundings of the farm.

glowing terms, she also hinted at difficulties caused by her parents' material poverty and the taunting she endured because of her father's membership of a minority religion. Another individual Katie rhapsodised about her worry-free childhood but told stories of losing a multitude of beloved pets, not to mention vividly recalling her sister's near death in a farmyard accident. While her upbringing was sheltered from the peculiarities and dangers of the outside world Katie was not protected from those located within the domain of her home. This perhaps is more indicative of conceptualisations of what a rural childhood should be, especially in comparison to the construction of an imagined urban counterpart, than any objective reality.

Furthermore, a number of actors measured themselves favourably against specific urban-based cousins, friends or vague others in their willingness and desire to work. Thus, farming life and by extension social embeddedness in this is linked into a particular moral and value framework. This is portrayed as an underpinning component of their community that is absent from the other. Some actors who begrudged the time they spent working on the farm when they were younger, nevertheless, sought to distance themselves from their off-farm counterparts. For instance, they emphasised their amazement at how those who were not from farms, who had access to money growing up did not always appreciate what they had and took their good fortune for granted. Imputed here was that they were themselves grateful for what they had because they had had to work hard and/or because they had tougher, more impecunious childhoods than their urban counterparts. Participants felt these were substantive lifestyle differences since as a group they had had to make a greater contribution to the family than other individuals they knew from different backgrounds. Some spoke of their shock at visiting 'townie' friends and cousins and seeing how little they had to contribute to the family in terms of doing their share of tasks.

However, it is not simply the case that this group construct the social dimension of their belonging in opposition to the urban ideal, instead, it is also about identifying with their own background and continuing to be part of something they are deeply familiar with. This membership provides security and satisfies a desire to belong and to still be considered an insider. This can be accompanied by a sense of defiance as demonstrated, for instance, in

Myles' interview. Although he was teased heavily in secondary school because of his farm background he is proud of who he is, and readily suggested ways he is different from 'estate' people such as their differing musical and sporting tastes. He wants to be part of his own community and feels comfortable locating himself within its boundaries and being recognised as part of this by others. In addition, Oisin referred to the divide in his university course between people from the rural community and those who come from urban areas. He finds it more difficult to develop relationships with the latter as, for example, he does not really understand their sense of humour. He claimed to be on the same wavelength as individuals from the same background as himself as they are easier to talk to and share common interests. There is a slight defensiveness here to this stance as he alludes to his urban counterparts' disdainful attitude towards him and his ilk. Regardless of the attitudes of outsiders both of these participants remain comfortable with the continued fact of their belonging to their own communities.

The 'other' again features in this notion of being part of rather than against something but this time it originates within the locality actors come from. This is not about the 'townie', but rather the unsettling stranger, who is used by participants as an oppositional means of including themselves inside the boundaries of their community irrespective of whether they want to create their life there or elsewhere. This is seen in Rita's wish to give portions of the farm she will inherit to family members to build houses on. The alternative of selling them to 'blow-ins' is vaguely horrifying since they could cause problems for locals in the future with regard to gaining planning permission for their own houses. This decision marks her out as being inside rather than outside the community and as such shows her as capable of falling into line with and contribute to the upkeep of particular cultural norms and ways of being. Joseph also alluded to this in his interview when he lamented the consequences of outsiders coming into the community:

> […] people [newcomers]…the cows'd knock a wall or something like that. The next thing-it wouldn't be anything-they could go on to the lawn or do a bit of damage and they'd be sending solicitors letters and all this kind of craic. Cos if that happened to one of ours-us-you'd be kind of like it happens, so just keep them there till the owner comes and

[…] brings them off.

Both of these participants demonstrate that even within the community they grew up in, the other, albeit usually someone who is assumed rightly or wrongly to be a 'townie' can be used as the basis of creating an identity and indicating continued membership of this group. Through marking out their behaviour in this way they highlight their own awareness of cultural norms and behaviours and the ways in which these can be supported or gone against.

Conclusion

The relationship young people develop with their background can be quite contradictory. When it is considered from within it can be loved and loathed in equal measure with many aching to pull away and build their own lives and, yet, also welcoming the tight-knit nature of their communities for the security of knowing and being known. These relationships can change over time as it seems that as they get older individuals come to terms with their backgrounds more and/or develop strategies that incorporate this identity affiliation into their sense of self in a way that causes less distress. When attention is turned to their relationship with the countryside and the communities they grew up in their reactions and attitudes becomes more uniform. It is as if they are unwilling or unable to detach themselves from this and especially to be regarded as having shifted to the status of the outsider or the urban other. If this were to occur then they would no longer be recognised as an insider and would also be in danger of being viewed as taking on the values and traits normatively associated with this status. This would alienate the individual from their own background and culture and deprive them of an essential element of their identity and sense of self. Furthermore, it is clear that they are unable to cast off this part of themselves or the influence it has had on how they view the world and their place within it.