INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY YOUTH PLANNING: A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR COMPARING SOMERSET COUNTY, NEW JERSEY AND SOMERSET COUNTY, ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT: *This paper outlines issues and methodologies for conducting comparative research on approaches to youth planning in rural and suburban communities in the United States and England. Emerging research in the area of youth development, primarily in the UK, points to the role of young people as active agents in the construction of their identities and in turn, in the ways in which local spaces are constructed and appropriated. While traditional planning approaches tend to plan for young people, few cases exist where youth is encouraged to take an active role in planning. The authors are embarking on a comparative study of the ways in which rural and suburban youth see themselves as part of (or apart from) their communities and the extent to which these idealizations and behaviors are being incorporated into the local planning process. Of particular interest are the ways in which rural and suburban youth are negotiating the increasing annihilation of public space as communities attempt to control youth behavior by denying them places for informal recreation and socialization. How are young people responding to the ever more circumscribed uses of 'the street' imposed by the communities in which they live?*

INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the provision of open public access areas, including street corners, shopping centers, aisles and arcades, through a comparative study of the ways in which rural and suburban youth see themselves as part of (or apart from) their communities and the extent to which these idealizations and behaviors are being incorporated into the local planning process. While traditional planning approaches tend to plan *for* young people, few cases exist where youth are encouraged to take an active role in planning. Similarly, much recent geographical research has offered an uncritical treatment of informal recreation space and designing-in young people in communities.

In particular, little consideration has been given to the social significance that informal space plays in the everyday lives of rural and suburban youth who are commonly portrayed as marginalized (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2003).

Of particular interest are the ways in which rural and suburban youth are negotiating the increasing annihilation of public space as communities attempt to control youth behavior by denying them places for informal recreation and socialization. How are young people responding to the ever more circumscribed uses of 'the street' imposed by the communities in which they live? How are communities endeavoring to include young people in their future visions? This research proposes to address these issues, in part by developing innovative methodologies for conducting comparative research on approaches to youth

planning in rural and suburban communities in the United States and England.

Beyond the work of Leyshon (2002a; 2004) little is known of how and the extent to which young people become marginalized within rural or suburban communities and in particular what motivational factors or material practices generate a sense of social exclusion, or indeed who is excluding whom. Contemporary studies on young people's experiences of economic restructuring, poverty and social exclusion (cf. Marsden, 1998; Shucksmith, 2000) have shown the extent of social differentiation in rural and suburban communities and suggest that "our need to understand the form and nature of uneven processes and outcomes in a changing ... arena remains a compelling one" (McGrath, 2002: 481). As Panelli (2002) argues, to address the issue of youth marginalization we need to understand how young people construct and negotiate a sense of self through their knowledge of place and experiences of social relations. Current research on rural and suburban youth illustrates that they are paradoxically situated within their communities. In a study of rural youth, Valentine (1997) discovered that parents living in the countryside believe that their children belong and that the countryside protects them, to a certain degree, against urban vice. However, others such as Davies and Ridge (1997), Tucker and Matthews (2001) and Leyshon and Little (1998; 2003) have highlighted that a considerable number of young people feel disenfranchised and marginalized within their communities and that local spaces are contested between young people and adults, between groups of young people and between genders. Davies and Ridge (1997) also stress that age is an important mediating factor in young people's sense of marginalization. They suggest that while many younger children are happy with home life in harmony with parental attitudes, for youth a less comfortable image emerges; they find their locales particularly restrictive as they can not get out and meet more people or perhaps go to clubs. Chambers (1985) also points to youth being marginalized from contemporary popular culture as they are unable to gain access to the city or town and therefore they are somehow missing out on an important part of their identity formation. Are local community planning processes addressing or exacerbating this marginalization?

DEFINING YOUTH

Before moving on to discuss the implications of our research it is first necessary to say something about the problems of defining youth[2]. Youth as a category is understood to be the gap between being a child and an adult, but this deceptively simple statement hides quite a complex debate about whether youth 'starts' at a certain age. The Children's Society, for example, suggest that youths are people between the ages of 13 and 25 (cf. Adams and Ingham, 1998) while tourism studies tend to extend the age band a little wider, taking the upper limit to 30 (Sellars, 1998). This effort to order youth into a specific age bracket only works if it is based on the understanding that there is a condition between childhood and adulthood, a liminal period of transition, from innocence and immaturity to awareness and maturity.

The recognition of a condition between childhood and adulthood also, paradoxically, *frustrates* attempts to decide on an age-bracket, for it is virtually impossible to know when an individual has 'arrived' at adulthood. Further, the credibility of an age bracket becomes questionable when everyone clearly does not 'arrive' at adulthood at the same time. Perhaps more seriously, if we define youth as a period of decreasing innocence and growing responsibility we overlook all those young people who are denied this existence – for example, those who are abused or have to take care of an ill or disabled parent (Valentine, 1996). In the past, it might have been possible to combine the age category with other factors to produce a definition of youth: for example, youth might be defined in part by an interest in certain patterns of consumption. However, if this was ever a very meaningful way of defining youth, it is even less useful now since people of every age now enjoy so-called youthful experiences such as extreme sports, clubbing, music, fashion and so on (cf. Cloke and Perkins, 1998). Youth culture is no longer the preserve of people of a certain age.

Our research reflects these current debates on the definitions of youth as we adopt a flexible

view of the age-group we wish to work with. Setting prescriptive boundaries around the age of research volunteers seems at best counterproductive for three reasons. First, as we access young people through youth projects, for example 4H (New Jersey) and the Somerset Rural Youth Project (England), the staff often have a lenient view of who can be included in their activities. While on paper youth agencies mostly work with 13-19 year olds, in practice they often work with people as young as 9 and as old as 25. Second, and in part because of the flexible views of youth projects, setting specific age limits for our research may serve to include some young people but exclude their friends and peers. Third, setting an age limit will contradict the theoretical tenets of our research, which are that identity formation is constant and ongoing; youth does not end with the biological or legal arrival at adulthood.

IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNITY PLANNING FOR YOUTH

Identifying the processes through which youths become actively engaged in the production of space is important because the community planning process has broad implications for young people and their ability to formulate identities. Indeed, the youthful ages represent the first period in which young people will have interactions with their communities apart from parental or other adult supervision. Thus, the ways in which community planning processes include and perceive youth will have lasting impacts on how young people view their communities and their place within them. In current times, rural and suburban youth are coming under pressure in particular from two trends within community planning—the desire to preserve public order and safety and the drive to concentrate development and foster economic regeneration in suburban and rural centers.

At the heart of increasing constraints on the ability of young people to assert their autonomy within their communities is a paradoxical view on the part of adults. On the one hand, fear *for* young people's safety has grown with the relentless media hype around 'stranger danger' and the belief that abduction, molestation, and abuse of youth is

increasing at an alarming rate. Paradoxically, there is a also a salient fear *of* young people, as adults react to conceptions of youth as drug-addled gang members without conscience or self-control. Parents often resolve this paradox by dividing young people into their own and the *others* (Aitken, 2000). Thus, parents strive to limit their children's interaction with other young people.

The impact on youth's access to, and ability to use, public space has been considerable. Beyond parents limiting their own children's movements outside the home, curfews, anti-loitering ordinances, 24-hour automated surveillance and stricter policing are obstacles that young people increasingly must negotiate in their use of public space (Owens, 1997; Valentine, 1996). In the name of protecting their youth (and protecting the rest of the community from other youth) communities have adopted approaches that fundamentally inhibit the identity formation process. The 'street', traditionally a site for young people to congregate and talk, has increasingly become a contested space between adults and young people. Watt and Stenson (1998) have argued that young people's presence in the street is in decline, as they are withdrawing to private-sites such as the home (McNamee, 1998; Valentine et al., 2000) or spaces out of the view of adult surveillance (Lieberg, 1995). In addition, the increased involvement of business and the use of corporate models in the development and management of certain public spaces, such as in pedestrian malls onto which shops front, and public recreation areas which are managed by corporatised bodies, means that finding space in which to 'hang out' has therefore become more difficult for young people.

Spaces such as parks, bus shelters and street corners, which once may have been seen as having peripheral value, are increasingly identified by young people as a key social resource (Wulff, 1995). Emerging work in the area of geographies of young people has begun to show how informal recreation spaces are critical locations in the development of young people's sense of self and citizenship (Leyshon and Little, 2003). Simply being with other young people enables young people to construct their identities and in turn, reflects the ways in which local spaces are constructed and appropriated. Residents living adjacent to a public park may feel that this is 'their' park, and see peace and quiet, the view, and improved property value as worth fighting for. The

outcome can often be that young people's access to space is made secondary to other interests.

Planning policy and guidelines propagated at various spatial scales and designed to assist communities with development issues also have implications for young people's use of space. In New Jersey, the guidelines in the State Plan and in anti-sprawl measures encourage the formation of village centers where there are none or more intensive development of such centers where they exist (New Jersey State Planning Commission, 2001). As communities struggle with creating viable centers, they often adopt a view of 'Main Street' that conflicts with ability of young people to 'hang out' or pursue recreational activity. As communities spend big bucks on decorative planters and period lampposts, the idea of young people sitting or leaning on these 'improvements' is viewed with alarm. Concerns are raised about the ability of adult consumers to shop unhindered by the sight of teenagers smoking on the corner or the ability of corporate employees to grab their afternoon latte without being hit-up by young people for spare change for the video arcade.

This is coupled with the increasing popularity of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), whose taxation and land-use powers are increasingly sanctioned by state law. The formation of BIDs, designed to provide local business owners with more power and responsibility for neighborhood appearance and safety, further prioritizes the needs of the consumer over the needs of young people. Thus, the practice of village center development being encouraged by the state creates a landscape in which young people, ideally, are made to disappear.

Another popular strategy to limit suburban sprawl and help force development in village centers is open space preservation. This strategy has been embraced in New Jersey at all levels—local, county and state. Such programs use taxpayer money to buy undeveloped land and keep it from being built upon in perpetuity. The problems for young people is that such land—although publicly owned—does not provide unsupervised space for youth recreation or socialization. Open space tracts are either converted into parks that close at dusk, or policed heavily as spaces to look at (preserving the rural idyll) but not to touch.

Our assertion is that, rather than providing an opportunity to bring young people into the discussion over the future shape of their communities, the current focus on public order and development (or redevelopment) has accelerated the marginalization of young people. This is not the way it has to be. The rapid pace of development in the countryside and concurrent need of communities to redefine themselves and their futures should offer a chance to institute novel approaches leading to greater inclusion of the views of young people and to a more holistic community—one that balances the needs of residents, workers, and business owners. In conducting this research, we hope to uncover better ways of understanding what young people need from and have to offer to their communities and how, by using a more inclusive approach to development planning, the community as a whole can benefit.

TWO SOMERSETS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES

This research focuses on identifying and learning from the experiences of two regions, both with many similarities and some differences. These two regions are ones in which the researchers have previously conducted research and with which they have more than a passing familiarity. Both Somerset County, England and Somerset County, New Jersey have experienced a recent influx of new inhabitants that is putting strains on the behaviors and practices of 'native' young people. In addition, this rapid population growth is also contributing to suburban sprawl and a redefinition of rural in both regions. Our goal in comparing these two regions is not to find two perfectly matched case studies, rather our objective is to follow an inductive comparative approach that will highlight the similarities as well as the differences and place them in relation to differences in landscape, culture, and public sector intervention.

Somerset, New Jersey

Between the 1990 and 2000 census years, the population of once mostly rural Somerset County, New Jersey increased by almost 23.8% (a total of 297,490) as compared to 8.9% for the state of New Jersey as a whole. According to census figures, most of this growth has occurred as the result of new

housing units occupied by families with children under the age of 18. Ethnic minorities accounted for about 20% of the county's population, while 18% of residents are foreign born (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) The county has also witnessed a substantial increase in the number of senior households over the same period, as 'active adult living' communities proliferate. As a result, an ever-shrinking amount of developable land is being increasingly contested among the needs of an increasing youth population and an increasing senior population.

In many ways, Somerset, New Jersey is on the front lines of the battle against suburban sprawl. Agricultural and mining activity has declined from 1.1% in 1990 to 0.4% in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). While the county has seen an explosive increase in suburban tract development, it has also been the focus of many of the village redevelopment initiatives discussed above. In particular Somerville, the county seat, has set out on a path of main street development with mixed-use residential/commercial investments. Similar programs are being carried out in other village centers in Bound Brook, Manville and Raritan.

There is little evidence of planning bodies actively engaging youth in the planning process. This lack of inclusion is mirrored at the state level, which does not mention young people in its guidelines for village center redevelopment nor in its vision of collaborative planning (New Jersey State Planning Commission, 2001). The challenges of planning with young people in Somerset, New Jersey are also exacerbated by the diverse nature of the population, with village centers increasingly becoming attractive destinations for Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Somerset, England

A similar situation has emerged in Somerset County, United Kingdom. As a consequence of shifts in the rural economy to a post-productivist countryside, Somerset has undergone a process of restructuring. Agriculture currently accounts for only 2.5% of the county's gross domestic product (South West Observatory Core Unit, 2003), this is relatively modest compared with, for example tourism, which accounts for 10% of GDP. Between 1981 and 2001 the county increased its population by 12% (7%

above the national average) to 498,093 (ethnic minorities represent only 2.7% of the population and are mainly clustered in Taunton (County Town)). The greatest increase occurred in the west of the county (9%) in and near to the Exmoor National Park. This increase can be attributed to net inward migration, largely of people under the age of 55 (Rural Development Agency, 2003). Despite this the South West has the oldest population profile of all the English regions, a trend that is particularly pronounced in the rural areas. Over the period 1981 to 2001 the county's rural population grew considerably faster than its urban equivalent (17% compared to 8%), this follows the trend towards counterurbanization that has been observed in all parts of the South West region.

With the exception of a few 'new' villages being constructed, for example at Cotesford St. Lukes, Somerset and Poundsbury, Dorset, most development in the countryside has been small scale infilling within village envelopes or the conversion of former agricultural buildings, usually for high end earners. The structure of the rural economy has therefore become polarized between the influx of mid- to high-income earners and relatively low-income long-term residents. Good transport links to Bristol and Exeter have led to an increase in people commuting from the countryside to work, with the consequent decline in rural service provision. The decline in public transport and shops in the rural economy serves to marginalize those without access to personal transport. These concerns have led the Rural Development Agency and the Countryside Agency to pursue a strategy for sustainable villages, founded on inclusive communities and shared service provision. This policy is still in its infancy.

Comparative Approach

We recognize the pattern of settlement in England and New Jersey varies greatly. While in Somerset County, England new residents have largely concentrated in older village centers, migrants to Somerset County, New Jersey have moved to recently created subdivisions and 'MacMansions'. This presents a challenge in finding areas that are comparable in population density and landscape. While England has much more numerous, smaller centers and a sparsely populated countryside, New Jersey has fewer, larger centers and a more densely

populated countryside. Our intention is to make comparisons along structurally delineated groupings, e.g., town/village centers, suburban developments, and rural areas. Although the relative shares and population densities within each of these groupings might differ in each case, the issues that confront young people in each of these landscapes are expected to be surprisingly similar.

Our approach is to engage in some comparisons at various spatial scales. Thus, we are comparing policy, practice and the experience of young people at the county level, town center, suburb and rural hinterland. We are pursuing a few case studies consisting of centers and their surrounding areas. In England, we are considering areas focused on the towns of Wellington, Wiveliscombe, and Minehead, while in New Jersey, we are considering Manville, Somerville, and Raritan.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Much current research on the lives of young people (Valentine, 1997; Jones, 2000; Matthews et al., 2000) has been informed by theoretical, ethical and methodological debates that attempt to expose the power of the researcher over those being researched. While this research provides valuable ethical *guidelines* for researchers, little consideration, beyond Leyshon (2002b), is given to how methodological issues are actually *played out* in practice. In part the aim of this project is to begin to fill these gaps. We deliberately emphasize that we will be researching *with* young people, youth agencies, and planning authorities to indicate that research is a shared process of knowledge creation between all those participating in the project in whatever capacity. We acknowledge that the research process is imbued with power-relations, particularly the adult-youth relationship, and will attempt to collaborate with young people and not exploit them.

In order to build a co-operative relationship with young people and adults we intend to develop a raft of quantitative and qualitative research techniques that enable individuals to participate in ways they find culturally credible. Both regions have embarked on a participatory planning process that

involves several segments of the community. We will work with county and municipal planners as well as representatives from community groups that provide advocacy and services for young people. Our research will consist of structured and informal interviews as well as analysis of any data sets they are willing to share. We will also rely on these agencies to some extent as entry points for access to the participation of young people in our study, though this is not without potential pitfalls.

One challenge with qualitative fieldwork is the involvement of the researcher with other people, particularly 'gatekeepers' who will facilitate and determine the context of the research (Lee, 1993; Hughes et al., 2000). We have made a deliberate decision not to contact young research volunteers through schools but rather approach them in their communities. We have taken this decision as we want the young people to *opt into* the research and share in the research process. Recruiting them within their home communities is problematic for two reasons. First is the challenge posed by power relations inherent in adult researchers approaching young people and asking them if they want to participate in a study. Second, young people's temporal use of public space is fleeting and determined partially by weather and school attendance. One way of overcoming these problems without recourse to schools is to gain access through youth organizations, as in research on urban youth by Halpern et al. (2000), Ngai and Cheung (1997) and rural/suburban youth by Leyshon (2002b) and Skelton (2000). The crucial difference for researchers exploring the lives of rural/suburban youth is that they rarely have access to large youth clubs or centers in fixed locations meeting at regular times. Contact can be improvised through organizations that occasionally work in these areas like the Children's Society or youth services in the United Kingdom and through organizations such as 4H and YMCAs in the United States. We intend to establish links with such agencies to facilitate contact with young people. The main benefits of working with youth agencies are that they will help to locate young people sometimes in sparsely populated areas and legitimate our presence in communities to both the young people and their parents.

This research will use a range of innovative interpretative methods, each of which allows the young people and adults interviewed to express

themselves in different ways. We will try to understand the lives of young people through a bespoke process. First through getting to know them via agencies and building trust so that second we can engage with them through a variety of techniques that they find culturally credible and that enables them to talk freely about their lives and how they situate themselves within arrays of other narratives. As part of the familiarization phase of the research we will implement a short questionnaire to collect information on young people's socio-economic profiles, their daily leisure activities and attitudes towards living in the countryside. The information gathered will provide the basis of questions for the in-depth discussion groups and one to one interviews. The young people will also be encouraged to think of their own themes as we believe this free-form approach will foster an invigorating and engaging context at meetings. Some methods will be quite private and individual to young people, for example using self-directed photography, personal and video diaries, and one to one interviews. Other techniques such as in-depth discussion groups, group filmmaking and auto-photography with young people will open up spaces for discussion. Placing young people at the centre of the research elicits complex and detailed micro-geographies and richly textured accounts of growing up, but such work depends in part on mutual trust between researcher and research volunteers and a willingness to engage with young people on their own terms and in their own spaces.

PROSPECTS FOR TRANSNATIONAL COMPARISONS

Comparing the experiences of youth in the community planning process in the US and the UK can provide important insights into the role of young people in the production of space. Our study focuses on three sets of research aims. The first set of goals concerns the linkages between youth identity formation and the community. We want to identify and contextualize the ways in which young people actively engage in the construction of local places. Previous work has highlighted the importance of access to unstructured, unsupervised public space in the formation of youth identity. Our work will

further our understanding of the interaction between the use of space and identity formation, as well as detail the ways in which young people view their communities in opposition to, or outside of, the views of adults. Given the increasingly global nature of 'youth culture', we might expect that the experiences of non-urban young people in New Jersey and England in this regard would be quite similar. Nevertheless, the potential for local variation exists and a transnational comparison can provide an important *caveat* to the assumed globalization of youth experience.

The focus of our second set of research aims is to identify and detail the extent to which the existing planning apparatus—both in New Jersey and in England—includes young people in the planning process. Despite decades of scholarly and media focus on the problems that 'troubled' youth pose for the community, it is our assertion that planning jurisdictions have made little effort to include young people in the planning process. Nevertheless, there may be differences in the ways in which American and English planning professionals view the inclusion of young people. The more recent decision by the UK government to require communities to consult young people in the planning process might indicate an increasing acceptance of youth in English community planning. More broadly, we will look for the ways in which planning professionals and other adults view the place of young people in the community. Are young people viewed as a problem to be solved or a source of community strength? Do youth represent an opportunity or impediment to economic regeneration? These perceptions undoubtedly influence behavior among planners and help understand the extent to which young people have had access to the planning process.

Finally, this research will help to develop better mechanisms for the participation of young people in local community planning. By the more effective inclusion of youth, we believe communities can move from a process of planning *for* young people to planning *with* young people. Young people have much to offer in support of vibrant and sustainable communities. In particular, the more effective inclusion of youth in planning can result in the provision of public space that benefits both young people and the wider community. In an era of increasingly privatized, policed, and consumption-oriented spaces, focusing on the needs of young

people can offer a way to preserve a more democratic idea of public space.

Comparing the experience of young people in community planning process in New Jersey and England is a daunting proposition, but one which will provide much needed insights into the social construction of community and effective land-use planning. While we understand the limitations in comparing two regions with somewhat different cultures, landscapes, and governance structures, we believe that the end result will be worthwhile. In many ways, the experience of both Somersets is so similar—pressures from in-migration, increasing senior populations, decreasing availability of useable public space—that our study will provide useful insights for both jurisdiction and for the greater scholarly audience.

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[1] In contemporary youth studies there has been considerable debate on how to refer to people aged between 13-25 (cf. Wyn and White, 1997; Skelton and Valentine, 1998). The terms 'child', 'teenager', and 'adolescent' are now perceived to be inappropriate referents, the latter because of its association with deviance and the former two as they are believed to be demeaning. In accordance with these considerations we have choosen to refer to the research volunteers in this study as young people.