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10 The Country’s Not
What It Used to Be
Research Participants’
Understandings of Space, Place,
and Identity in Rural Victoria

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INTRODUCTION

In both Australian and international literature, it is generally accepted that rural areas have more difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified professional staff (Ballou & Podgursky 1998; Chenoweth, 2004; Halsey, 2005; Lonne &Cheers, 2000; Martin, 1994; McEwan, 1999; Sharplin, 2002; Roberts, 2004). The social and economic costs of frequent professional turnover and the inadequate preparation of graduates for rural communities are significant. According to Hudson and Hudson (2008), “There are particular contexts for teaching and learning in rural schools that make it significantly different from non-rural teaching” (p. 68). An aim of my research was to examine and analyze learning in places where access, isolation, attraction, and retention are increasingly becoming issues. A key outcome of these two research projects was to begin to discuss ways in which research participants themselves understand not only their own narratives, but also more broadly those of rural place and space. Place in particular is seen to be “a productive framework because it creates a space between grounded physical reality and the metaphysical space of representation” (Somerville, 2007, p. 150).

The notion of rural or a sense of “rurality” is not a new one. Specifically, as stated previously, the underrepresentation and underparticipation of students from rural backgrounds have increasingly become a significant issue in higher education in Australia as well as internationally. Alongside underrepresentation and participation (sometimes referred to as aspiration) are the practicalities and dilemmas of attraction and retention of workers to rural areas. As a higher education researcher who has worked in both Queensland and Victorian rural/regional campuses, this issue is of significance to the author. Not only do I choose to work in these spaces, but also I was also raised and educated with/in these spaces. More importantly, however, both research projects I have been involved in over the last two years have highlighted the complexity of these spaces for all of the participants (including the researchers), hence the title of the paper, “The Country’s Not
The Country's Not What It Used to Be.” Watching the Australian “reality” television program *The Farmer Wants a Wife*, you would be forgiven for thinking that the stereotypical views held by “others” of country people are alive and well and that those perceptions are not always positive ones. For example, the farmers are predominantly male, and the stereotype is that they are slow (in movement, thought, and speech), socially awkward and naïve, isolated, uncultured, and inexperienced. According to Reid et al. (2010–2011), “In the social world of education and schooling, rural schools and communities are clearly both ‘insulted’ and ‘officially named’ by the metropolitan mainstream as deficient, backward and socially undesirable” (p. 265).

This chapter will examine the various ways in which this image of rurality needs to be extended, enhanced, and problematized if we are going to be able to reimagine ways in which to understand rural places and spaces in the 21st century. According to Somerville (2007) this imagining is linked to the concept of place literacy constructed on narrative or journal writing “based on the experience of the sensing body-in-place. What does this place smell like, sound like, look like, feel like when I move through it?” (p. 153). As stated previously, not only do I live and work in rural spaces, but also the other researchers I work with are committed to quality education in rural areas that begins to deny and/or defy the deficit notion of the “problem” of the rural that needs to be fixed and/or is lesser in some way. In order to do this we needed to go to and experience the various rural places/spaces we were researching but then create a complex sense of place identity from the stories told by the research participants from the interviews. According to Figueiredo (2008) “rurality is no longer a synonym for a condition of opposition or marginalization relative to the modernization process, but is rather a synonym of a notion referring to modernity (or postmodernity) expressed through the discovery and valorization of the differences, of the *authentic* and of the *genuine*” (p. 161). Rurality therefore is something that is seen as being a valuable commodity and is to be celebrated and understood in more complex ways.

THE RESEARCH PROJECTS

The primary aim of both projects that this chapter draws upon was to explore ways to improve the relevance and meaningfulness of the educational experiences of university students from rural backgrounds by understanding the university “experience” through their and others’ eyes. An associated aim was to understand how to better enhance the aspirations of students from rural schools to aspire to undertake university study, as well as to attract others to teach in rural spaces on completion of their teaching qualification.

The first research project was interested in strengthening work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences for rural teacher education students by exploring the concept of community-based partnerships. A total of 22 interviews were
completed and draft case studies of the six rural sites undertaken, which included statistical and interview analysis. Interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including supervising teachers, deputy principals, education advisors, preservice teachers, university mentors/staff, academics, and various community members. The five researchers were from two Victorian universities that were considered to be either a rural/regional institution and/or have a rural campus. The six research sites were chosen for their significance to the universities in attracting and supporting students from these areas. They were relevant sites for study in that these communities supported the university students while on their teaching placements.

The second project rationale was based on the notion that universities are likely to be alien environments to students from rural backgrounds. It was argued that it was possible that there had often been little exposure or aspiration to attend university through family or peer groups (Bradley, 2008). The methodological approach that was employed helped develop a portrait of approaches to life among rural university students by inviting and assisting them to produce portraits or narratives of their biography and journey into and through their university studies. The impediments, challenges, and obstacles along the way (financial and relocation), how these were confronted and overcome (or not), the tensions still being managed and lived with, and what might feasibly be changed to improve the relevance and meaning of their university educational pathway were discussed. A narrative is being developed to capture key/recurring themes and issues that arise for the participants. The two researchers in this project (of which I was one) engaged around 10 students from rural backgrounds with predominantly a first-in-family university profile. The interviews and conversations with these students were intended to help recast university culture in ways that may allow a more complex understanding of students from rural backgrounds than is currently held.

RURAL SPACE/S, PLACE/S, AND IDENTITIES IN A POST-LITERATE WORLD

The conceptual frameworks for both projects are built around notions of place, space, and identity in various ways. Broadly speaking, these concepts are used to analyze the data gathered to begin to understand the various realities of the participants and how their views and perspectives help to shape their perceptions of their lived rural spaces. As Atkin (2003) states, “‘Rural’ and ‘community’ are both interesting words in that they have no real universal meaning, yet there can hardly be anyone who does not have a mental picture of what they mean to them” (p. 507). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the notion of rural or rurality is often considered via a deficit or a generalized model where a stereotype of one kind of rural is outlined. Theobald and Wood (2010) state, “Somewhere along the way,
rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—an educational deficiency in particular" (p. 17). Rural space refers to the geography in which the person is situated, whereas rural is primarily concerned with rurality in terms of understandings, accounts, and interactions with rural community. Developing understanding of rurality is a key to preparing preservice teachers for a successful career in rural locations (Lock et al., 2009).

The argument in this chapter is that the complexity of rural spaces cannot be underestimated. There is no more one rural space than there is one urban space, one gendered space, or one generational space. When trying to deconstruct the notion of rural space in order to explore rural identities, it helps to pose questions such as, what does it mean to be rural? In what ways are we rural? Is there one rural? Can we be rural, etc.? What both projects required of the participants (including the researchers) was to reflect on these ideas and to begin to articulate their position/s with/in these spaces, hence the framing of this chapter from a postmodern perspective. Postmodern ideologies move away from a notion of providing signifiers that lead to a complete definition of complex terms (Blake, 1996), so therefore a difficulty for any study on rural identities, spaces, and places will need to engage with the “deferred and free-floating . . . nature of postmodern discourse” (Carmichael, 1991, p. 319) while providing frameworks for the topics under investigation. As Strinati (1995) identified:

It [postmodernism] tries to come to terms with, and understand, a media-saturated society . . . Society has become subsumed within the mass media. It is no longer even a question of distortion, since the term implies that there is a reality, outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and this is precisely what is at issue according to postmodern theory. (p. 224)

The concept of postmodernism is linked to this decentering of self and problematizing of notions of reality (Lyotard, 1989), which raises key questions concerning the multiple ways in which we as a society construct understandings of rurality and how individuals then construct and/or make sense of their own rural identities with/in these frames. The way in which I talk about how the participants make sense I argue as Davies (2004) did that “the way that sense is made,” they are not attempting to reveal something about the sense maker (the subject) her- or himself, about his or her motives or intentions but about the possibilities of sense making available within the discourses within a particular sense-making community” (pp. 4–5).

I am arguing therefore that we need an approach to the whole concept of rurality that embraces rurality as complex and not easily understood, in order to move beyond stereotypical generalizations that bind and constrain it as deficit and/or as part of a deficient way of understanding rural
identities. I argue that the term post-Literacy helps us begin to re-conceptualize, re-construct and disrupt the meta-narratives of rural spaces, places and identity that has close ties to postmodernism. Post-Literate understanding among other things "celebrates the diversity and differences inherent in individuals and how they construct their understandings... accepts, comprehends and insists that the experiences of a person, whether those experiences be through gender, ethnicity, class, location or generation, help to frame these understandings; embraces multiple entries and exits of understanding" (Walker-Gibbs, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d). What this means, therefore, is that within each of the participants' stories, reflections and articulations are multiple rural spaces that are being valued and understood.

Post-Literacy suggests that the way in which we establish how we understand or become literate in rurality is fleeting, ever changing, and evolving. What post-Literacy also suggests is that there is no time in which we can truly define rurality but people may be able to develop a kind of rural literacy that engages them in an analysis of their present and prepares them for the difference they may experience in their future.

As post-Literacy is attached to postmodern theory, there is the notion that it moves beyond the referents and signifiers and so could descend into chaos and the more nihilistic versions of postmodernism. Although McLaren and Leonardo (1998) would argue that "[w]hereas values are to a large degree internal to an individual, subjects experience their consciousness in various ways, some critical and others complacent" (p. 219). What this means therefore is that within each of the participants' stories; reflections and articulations are multiple rural spaces that are being valued or understood at any moment in time. However, I recognize that, if it is to be used or embraced in any strategic way, then post-Literacy will need to be strategic in how it attaches itself to the more established notions of the rural that will be discussed throughout this chapter.

Connected to post-Literacy is the concept of habitus, which, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), can be seen as "a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (p. 18). Applying this to notions of rurality means it can be seen as a social construct that sees the participant woven within this rural matrix in order to achieve a complex construction of rural "habitus." For example, when interviewing a rural council member for the first project, a large percentage of time was spent discussing the vibrancy of the rural community in which she worked and what a wonderful place it was. Additional investigation, however, revealed that this person (along with others she identified) did not actually live in this place but further away. An excerpt from the interview with "Mary" reveals the interplay of rural identities being experienced by her. Her response to the question about her role in her community was as follows:
I'm the group manager for community development for the council and that means really I'm a third line manager. I report directly to the CEO and my role is working with council and CEO and the coordinators of the relative departments or units that report to me and they include things like arts and culture, library, children's services—we've got a child care center and a family services hub, we've got recreation services, so they're all the parks, gardens, recreational facilities. We've got rural access, which is disabilities, we've got youth services as well, we've got a youth development officer and also aged and disability services, so all the home and community care workers.

Q: So I'd guess you'd have a fairly broad knowledge and I'm assuming that you live here.
A: No, actually I live in (a two-hour commute away).

Mary then continued:

Well I love the . . . community because it is eclectic and rather vibrant and broad and you have a real mix of people. It’s sort of a bit of an edgy place in terms of a culture here. We’ve got a really good community of artists here as well as that. We’ve got a lot of diversity in terms of we’ve got a high proportion of Indigenous population here. We’ve got people who are quite well off and we’ve got people who really aren’t quite so well off and a broad diverse range of people in between. We don’t have a high LOTE community and that’s unfortunate but it’s still a good community . . . that diversity, that eclectic mix of people being by the sea of course it’s fantastic and I enjoy working for this particular council because of the whole range of things that we do, which is above and beyond any other council of its size in Victoria.

Mary’s response reflects a trend in rural communities (particularly mining communities) where there is increasingly a development of “fly-in, fly-out cultures,” where the majority of professionals and workers do not reside in the rural community in which they work. According to Isaac Regional Council mayor Cedric Marshall, “The cities are overcrowded now. We need people out of our cities living where the jobs are; we need workers living with their families. We want to see as much residential accommodation as we can get to keep our towns viable” (Marriner, 2011).

Mary’s interview contrasts with the interview with Jeremy when he was describing his journey to a rural university:

Okay, well, I come from a small town called [name of rural Victorian town], it’s got about two thousand people in there, I’ve been there all my life, I was born there and I went to the local schools there, I did both my primary and secondary education there. After secondary
school I wasn’t exactly sure where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. I always had a bit of a feeling that I would get into teaching but I probably wasn’t an overly confident sort of a kid growing up and probably at that age wasn’t quite ready to make a move to somewhere like... university or somewhere like that. I don’t think it would have been successful if I’d gone straight after school because I’m a mature age student, so I guess the first thing I did was, probably because [name of rural Victorian town] was all I knew, I sort of wanted to stay close so I found jobs there. I did some labouring jobs in the local area with different people, some part-time work, and then I ended up working at the meat processing plant... for about three to four years, where some education was needed, they put me through a TAFE course, which had to do with meat operations.

Jeremy’s identity and understanding of rural space were that it provided him with a sense of who he was and where he was going to be:

It was just so convenient for me because it was only 25 minutes and because the year that I decided to go to uni there were so many actually from [name of rural Victorian town], such a small rural area. There’s only 2,000 people and there were eight to ten all in the same course travelling down, so it became a convenience thing, it became a financial thing because we have to drive down once a week maybe, once every two weeks and you take turns driving, you’d all work together and I think that helped build a connection between the few of us because we’re pretty close. It set up a really good support group so if you had trouble with any assignments and a lot of uni conversation actually took place in the car rides up and back. A lot of ideas for assignments were shared, so it probably was a really good study group with being a study group.

This to me reflects what Corbett (2007) was arguing when he stated, “It is understood that higher education involves leaving home and venturing into unknown spaces; therefore, differential understandings of geography and space are educationally very important” (p. 776). Although Jeremy left home it was not very far away. He has had a variety of rural experiences and feels a sense of anxiety when he is removed from these spaces. However, upon meeting Jeremy he projected as a very confident, friendly, and collegial young man who has been observed to have a strong social network. Both of these participants have articulated how they conceptualize not only their own sense of rurality but also how or why they came to live (or not) in their particular rural communities. In a paper about a study that investigates conceptions of “rural community” as a “social construct and a reality in rural England” Chris Atkin notes that whereas neither word has “real universal meaning” both readily conjure subjective mental
pictures. He proposes as a “key aspect of rurality—or rather its human capital development” the “notion of shared social space,” which he associates with greater potential risk for those who “step outside” this than for urban counterparts (2003). This also highlights the potential impact of the fly-in, fly-out communities where the people involved do not necessarily “step inside” the community in order to construct a rural identity.

To illustrate this sense of what it means “to be rural” from the perspective of the participants, I turn to the following response from Paddy. When asked if he felt there were differences between rural and city students, “Paddy” responded in the following way:

Well, I think with people who’ve come from rural areas they probably find it harder to join groups. They just stand back whereas you see a lot of the people who’ve come from Melbourne down to here they’re really gung-ho. . . . I think the cities probably just better prepare them with that sort of lifestyle, everything is go, go, go. You can tell who’s from Melbourne and who’s from the country at uni. . . . Just their laid-back nature from country kids and the Melbourne people are just go, go, and go.

This reflection reinforces the notion that the binary of urban and rural exists in some way that is considered “real” and tangible. The country is relaxed and slow whereas the city is busy and stressed and fast-paced. According to Howley and Howley (2010), “Community and society represent two critical and different contexts for shaping identity . . . because humans in our contemporary world are simultaneously lodged, to varied degrees, in both community and society—in globalized society (an abstraction) and in localized communities (actual places)” (pp. 35–36). Although “Paddy” in the previous reflection engaged in the binary notion of country versus city he also engaged with the more global notion of the difficulty of having clear-cut binaries around education and how it is perceived more globally. “Paddy” is aware of global education trends, and this idea is not fixed or static when he states:

Yeah, I think now students are, you see a lot of students who are just really canning [desperate] to make something of themselves now they realize that when you get out into the workplace if you’ve gone to a certain uni you can get a certain job here or get a certain position. I think people are just starting to realize now that it doesn’t matter where you come from—you can do what you want to do.

This links to Gruenewald’s (2008) notions of place as “a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live, and that is connected to global development trends that impact local places” (p. 308). It is argued therefore that we need to
see rural social space as "complex, contradictory and diverse" and "multifaceted, historically and spatially situated" (Lock et al., 2009) in order to gain deeper and more complex insights into how these spaces are enacted by the various participants including the researchers.

NARRATIVE AND STORY AS SENSE OF PLACE: LIMITATION OF THE METHODOLOGY

Throughout this chapter I have interspersed selective narratives and/or vignettes from the various research participants in order to illustrate, reinforce, argue, and justify among other things my and/or their perceptions on what it means to either "be" or live in rural communities. According to Marginson (2010), "The vectors of space and time that comprise our world and structure or subjectivity lie at the core of the way we live. At any given time they seem eternal to us. They scarcely need to be articulated" (p. 118). Researchers and/or participants also construct the stories that are used to narrate who we are in these various contexts. Within a poststructural framework, "A general 'crisis' of representation is widely acknowledged, together with a loss of certainty and a failure of confidence in the 'grand narratives' that have long sustained the historical project of modernity, together with a pervasive sense of ontological insecurity" (Green, 2010, p. 463). The dilemma, therefore, when working with notions of rurality and data via narrative or story, is that the very representation and definition restrict the way in which we can discuss or interpret our experiences of the rural. As discussed earlier in this chapter the notion of rurality is as problematic as notions of gender, ethnicity, and generation, in that there is no single way to define and or talk about these complex concepts. As Mazzei (2010) has argued, "... the problem of voice in qualitative inquiry and the ways in which voice is constituted, constrained, fictionalized, or multiplied, [are done] ... in attempts to offer an authentic essence or voice that is present, stable, and self-reflective" (p. 511). As researchers we strive to construct the narrative or the problem that we are researching in order to further the cause that we are passionate about and that leads us to the research itself. The difficulty becomes how to give voice to the stories and issues of our participants but at the same time not construct a grand or metanarrative of rural around this voice that potentially constrains how they are understood.

A constant challenge for this chapter specifically and myself as a researcher generally has been trying to work through the complexities and challenges posed by a postmodern world to disrupt the grand narrative while attempting to engage with understandings of what rurality means to the various participants in the study and therefore give a voice to these understandings. This accepts the challenge of not just representing rural communities in order to discuss ways in which rural communities can be
enriched and invigorated in order to remain vital in an increasingly globalized world, but also moving away from deficit or neutralizing notions of what it means to be rural.

As a researcher who engages in narrative and poststructural methods of inquiry I am constantly reminded that “memory is problematic” (Corbett, 2007, p. 774), or of the fact that “ordinary narratives give a partial account of the suspended self” (Britzman, 2010, p. 244). Most participants in this study struggled or hesitated initially when asked what they thought it was like to live in a “rural space.” When given pause to reflect on this notion, however, there were “common” threads, such as:

“Evan” (uni student): *I think because I was in a little town I was more used to having to deal personally with people and go out there and work.*

“Rose” (uni student): *Out in the country everybody knows everybody.*

“James” (assistant principal): *I think just living in a country town is a different sort of an experience. . . . You go to the supermarket and you see your kids or you see your parents or you play sport or whatever it’s going to be, and that can be quite daunting.*

But at the same time there were responses in which the notion of “rurality” was not the way in which the participants saw themselves and their identity:

“Anne” (uni student): *I think my strength has come more from my family and their disabilities and things more than a country perspective.*

“Sarah” (teacher): *Teaching at a rural school is different than teaching in a city school, because of the community’s expectations of teachers.*

An important part of any research is the question of validity and/or trustworthiness. Traditionally, the term “validity” has been used in preference to “trustworthiness” especially when associated with the positivist paradigm. The main tenet of validity was that it was able to be proven through a quantitative analysis of statistical data (Walker-Gibbs, 2004c). As I choose to use qualitative rather than quantitative data in this chapter, the ways in which validity is established are seen to be a risky part of my research on rurality.

The concept of “truth value” when discussed in a postmodern framework is significant only in terms of ascertaining what dominant ideologies are legitimated within the various discourses. As Davies (2004) also emphasized, “Statements or descriptions reveal the ways in which sense is being made, rather than the object of the sense making. They reveal the manner of pointing to the real, of making signs about the real” (p. 4). Therefore if I was to engage with the terms “real” or “truth” it would be in relation to
uncovering the dominant discourses without the intention to come to an “understanding” of the one truth and/or value, but rather in defending my chosen methodology and the readings I conduct (Walker-Gibbs, 2004c). I cannot ensure nor do I desire for my research to be applied in identical ways to other studies on rurality.

This becomes problematic when positioned in a higher education sector that increasingly relies on funding and policy to enact change. According to MacLure (2006), however, “But to the extent that state-sponsored intolerance of difference and complexity is now part of the story of education policy and research funding in many countries, one of the main tasks of post-foundational research must be to interrupt such clarity- and closure-seeking tendencies, in the attempt to make some openings for education’s occulted Other” (p. 730). Atkin (2003) also cautions against perceiving the cultural connections that define rural habitus as being “universal” and suggests that there are common aspects of rural life that connect people in ways that he suggests policy debate does not [and most likely cannot] completely acknowledge. As Bell and Jayne (2010) argue when discussing “creative countryside” agendas, “theorists and policy makers must begin to engage more fully with the complexity and diversity of the rural creative economy in more rigorous and nuanced ways” (p. 218). Gruenewald (2008) proposes “a much needed framework for educational theory, research, policy, and practice” as necessary to challenge dominant assumptions, practices, and outcomes in dominant culture and conventional education. The main assumption Gruenewald seeks to challenge is the association of education with “individualistic and nationalistic competition in the global economy” in a dynamic that produces winners and losers. Place becomes a critical lens, Gruenewald contends, for viewing the impact of political and economic decisions.

**CONCLUSION**

The challenge outlined in this chapter has been of how to give voice to the research participants’ understandings and knowledge of rural spaces but at the same time not constructing a metanarrative from this. Acknowledgment has been given to the need to engage with these understandings from both a political and policy perspective. According to the OECD (2007), “For policy makers, the creation and sustainability of a regional innovation system implies not only creating the necessary nodes of the system but also assuring a continuous flow of ideas and facilitating the right linkages that will favour an interactive environment” (p. 25). Stories help build social capital and can provide a rich source of data by which to construct more complex understandings of rural spaces and the research participants’ voices within these spaces. Narratives also help us to move beyond the temptation to fly in and fly out and remain on the outside of rural identities.
with/in postmodern contexts. At the very least it helps us to celebrate that the “country’s not what it used to be” but is so much more.

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