Geographies of inequalities in an area of opportunities: ambiguous experiences among young men in the Norwegian High North

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Abstract

Research within the field 'geography of education' points to the importance of studying the relationship between social and spatial variations in educational provision and attainment. This research has mainly focused on the spatial segregation of different social groups in urban settings. There has been limited research on how geography influences youth and education in rural settings. Youth research in general is criticised for an unacknowledged 'metrocentricity', referring to the invisibility of how place and geography represent changeable and contingent conditions in young people's lives. This paper is based on interviews with young, unemployed men living in small places that can be termed the marginal edge of the northern periphery, in the northern part of Norway. By combining a geographical approach with theories on social learning, the paper discusses how changes in the local world of education and work are experienced by a group of young men, and how the changes influence their choices, and lack thereof, in specific rural communities. The overall aim of this paper is to demonstrate how place and geography matter, and how gender and place intersect, when it comes to young people's experiences of opportunities and options.

Keywords *geography of education; geographical differences; rural youth; rural masculinity; unemployment; restricted opportunities*

Introduction

Much has been written on the topic of migration trends among rural youth and the loss of youth from rural regions (Argent & Walmsley, 2007; Corbett, 2005; Davies, 2008; Easthope & Gabriel, 2008). This paper is not about out-migration, but about young men who live in small and rural places in a region that can be termed the marginal edge of the northern periphery, the northern part of Norway.

Increased economic and political integration, transnational interconnectedness and mobility influence people's daily lives wherever they live. In some ways, such changes have made the world smaller, but this does not mean that differences disappear. Global changes do not transform places equally. Some places are fuelled by progress and growth, others change in an opposite direction. There has been a growing awareness of the ways in which large-scale changes within spheres of work and the economy, technology and patterns of natural resource use affect both the forms and rates of inequality within and between nations (Briggs, 2003). Such changes have a deep impact on people's life conditions and possibilities. In contrast to sociological theories of global modernisation that emphasise deterritorialisation and disembeddedness, recent research and work in theories of geography have indicated the importance of examining how *place* represents changeable and contingent

conditions, particularly for young people (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Farrugia, 2014; Gravesen, 2013; Massey, 2005; Woodman & Wyn, 2015).

Youth research has been criticised for an unacknowledged 'metrocentricity' that has gone hand in hand with ignoring spatial processes (Farrugia, 2014): 'Urban settings are seen as ubiquitous, globalised and undifferentiated, and so place often disappears from the analysis of young people's lives in general' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p.1). The inclusion of rural youth's experiences necessitates paying closer attention to place and space, in order to enrich the field of youth research as a whole (Farrugia, 2014; Leyshon, 2015; Ní Laoire, 2001; Panelli, 2010).

Sociocultural theories of learning emphasise the importance of participation in various communities of practice. This approach corresponds with theories of place that treat practice and context as inseparable phenomena (Simonsen, 2005). Place of residence constitutes a basic context for construction of identity, for knowledge development and social action; this is because behaviours and attitudes learned in particular places, and expressed through language and lifestyle, represent a part of what Bourdieu (1989) termed embodied knowledge or habitus. Place of residence is also central to the development of habitus as possibilities for learning are embedded in different forms of practices, languages and ways of life. Taking such a perspective implies that place is not analysed as a background for social life, but as influencing and contributing to the construction of social life (Gieryn, 2000; Massey, 2005; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). This insight makes it possible to analyse how place plays an active part in the construction of difference in young people's lives.

This paper examines how changes in local contexts of education and work are experienced by a group of young men, and considers how those changes influence or constrain their choices in specific rural communities. The overall aim of the paper is to demonstrate how place and geography represent changeable and contingent conditions and to show how various circumstances in an apparently egalitarian and forward-looking Nordic country contribute to rather uneven opportunities for young people depending on where they grow up.

Method and empirical material

The main empirical basis for this paper is interviews with young, unemployed men 17 to 23 years old.[1] They live in the northernmost and largest province in Norway, Finnmark, a province larger than the whole of Denmark. Despite its size, Finnmark is the least populated province in Norway, with around 72,000 inhabitants spread across great distances.

The interviews were conducted as part of a five-year research project about young people in the Barents region—the northern part of Russia, Sweden, Finland and Norway (Bæck & Paulgaard, 2012). The northern areas in this region represent peripheries in relation to the respective national centres in each of the countries considered. Despite great differences between the nations, it is possible to find similarities; the two most obvious are climate and geography, vast areas and relatively sparsely populated regions. At the start of this research, many places in the Barents region were experiencing an economic downturn, and the unemployment rate was above each country's national average (Bæck & Paulgaard, 2012; Moilanen & Pedersen, 2012).

Different data were collected over the course of the project, among them register, survey and qualitative interview data. Interviews with 12 unemployed young men in Finnmark constitute a basis for analysis in this paper. Interviews with unemployed young men in rural places in Russia, Finland and Sweden showed that they shared many of the same experiences as the Norwegian informants (see Hiltunen, 2012; Luoma, 2012; Miljukova *et al.*, 2012).

The 12 Norwegian informants were recruited through local employment agencies and key personnel working with unemployed youth. The length of their unemployment varied according to their age; the youngest had been unemployed for a much shorter time than the oldest. Interviews were structured around questions about opportunities for education and work, family and friends, and explored how participants experienced the place they lived in, and the leisure activities in which they engaged.

Several studies have documented that out-migration from rural areas has been higher among women than men (Corbett, 2007; Waara, 1996). The migration of young people in the Barents Region, as in other rural areas, has been closely linked to opportunities for education and work. Until the 1990s, the local labour in many costal and rural places has been more open for men than for women (Heggen *et al.*, 2003). Researchers have highlighted how rural places have been gendered in conservative or patriarchal ways (McDowell, 2002; Panelli, 2004). Rural restructuring,

and changes in the world of education and work, have influenced opportunities significantly in many such places.

Globalisation, representations and manifestations

At its extreme, globalisation evokes the vision of a universal process producing unfettered mobility within unbounded space. In such an apparently borderless and open world of opportunities, it seems that place can surely not influence individual outcomes. The opposite might be a notion of places as independent, bounded entities, influencing and even determining individual behaviours and opportunities, practically isolated from the world outside and independent of social and cultural differences within the local contexts. Such a perspective tends to eliminate or hide both place and gender from the analysis.

Both the borderless and the bounded visions sketched above are said to function as images in which the world is made; that is, as 'imaginative geographies which legitimize their own production' (Massey, 2005, p.84). These visions are deeply rooted in an evolutionary assumption that functions as *doxa* for many of the discourses pertaining to the relationship between local and global processes, 'the notion that we move from the local to the global as if to a higher stage of world history' (Friedman, 2006, p.123). This notion has occupied an important position in debates about theories of global modernisation. As a consequence, 'convening … contemporaneous geographical differences into temporal sequence' transforms the increasing inequality between different geographical areas into a story of 'catching up' (Massey, 2005, p.82).

Geographical differences, coded into stages of advancement and backwardness, are present in hegemonic representations of both the rural–urban and centre–periphery divides. Representations of centre and periphery as asymmetrical counter-concepts have produced both positive and negative connotations, but the content of the dichotomies is the same; this shows how geographical differences become sources for other differences. According to Shields (1991), cultural categorisation through binary oppositions serves as the origin of economic and social differences between geographical areas. Therefore, it is possible to claim that representations have material consequences in terms of (dis)investments, regional distribution policies, shut-downs, work opportunities, myth creation, and the perpetuation and reproduction of stereotypes.

Discursive constructions of the northern regions of Scandinavia as backward and obsolete have had a significant impact on representations, power relations and material conditions between centre and periphery in the Nordic countries as well as in other parts of the world (Eriksson *et al.*, 2015; Shields, 1991). As such, both representations and material consequences play important roles in the production of cultural inferiority that provide strong rationales for young people to migrate (Easthope & Gabriel, 2008).

Massey (2005) claims that as long as differences between regions and places are read in terms of stages of advancement and backwardness, alternative stories about the production of poverty and inequality may be erased from view. She states that 'the new hegemonic tale of globalisation is told as a universal story, but the process is one which is not (and on current terms cannot be) universalised' (Massey, 2005, p.84). Massey shows how the geographical imagination of global openness ignores the structural divides, inequalities and exclusions that global changes are based on.

Visions of global openness correspond with neoliberal ideologies of increasing flexibility and mobility, concealing the fact that increased economic competition among places and regions leads to a markedly more uneven pattern of development. Some places benefit more than others in global competition. Increasing divides between rural and urban areas in many parts of the world can produce quite varied conditions for young people living in various places. Thus, research on young people in different rural areas has documented how many are facing more restricted opportunities and options, making them less mobile (Corbett, 2007; 2009; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Uncertain employment conditions, high urban living expenses and increasing demands for higher education as a key to entering labour markets and achieving economic success influence the opportunities to attain both geographical and upward social mobility for large numbers of young people today.

Education and geographical differences

Education represents the key to economic success and integration in post-industrial knowledge economies. The great concern about variations in educational standards and attrition rates among— as well as within nations—can be read with reference to neoliberal ideas of economic

competitiveness. At a societal level, education is described as one of the 'touchstones by which different areas within nation-states compare their performance and their fitness to face the future' (Butler & Hamnett, 2007, p.1162). At an individual level, education is understood as a form of protection against the risk of failing in the labour market, as formal education constitutes a valuable asset in any labour market in post-industrial societies. Education may serve as a buffer against becoming dependent on welfare benefits.

Education is one of the fields in which geographical differences are made evident in Norway. For centuries there have been significant regional differences in young people's educational careers. Education levels have been lower among populations in rural and coastal places in the North than in other areas. Tim Butler and Chris Hamnett (2007) have examined the geography of education in England. They point out that variations in educational provision and attainment are complex social phenomena in the intersection of space, social structures and social processes. Educational attainment is closely related to social class, ethnicity and gender. These factors have significant impacts on educational outcomes and are related both to geographical variations in structures of provision and eligibility rules, and to spatial variations in social composition related to the segregation of different social groups.

Several scholars have described how differences in educational careers between rural areas in northern Norway and urban areas in the south of Norway relate to opportunity structures in the labour market (Bæck, 2012a; 2012b; Edvardsen, 1992; Hoem, 1976). When place is understood in structural terms as spatial divisions of labour, it is possible to show how the 'world of work' manifests itself somewhat differently in different places (Massey, 2005). In rural places, where the structure of the labour market has had a particular class-based and gendered arrangement, masculinity has been assembled in association with work rather than schooling (Brandt & Haugen, 2005; McDowell, 2002).

Resistance to school and formal education has been characterised as an important element of culture in the rural North (Edvardsen, 1992; 2011). Such resistance has been strong, particularly among young boys. Complementing Willis's analyses of 'the Lads' in *Learning to Labour* (1977), the resistance to school authority and curricula can be viewed as an assertion of masculinity. Hard work and manual work represent particular manifestations of masculinity,

while 'soft' intellectual labour has not been valued in the same way. School commitment and pro-educational discourses could therefore be interpreted as attempts 'to subvert the economic prospects of a young man and lure him into an uncertain future where his own cultural capital has limited value' (Corbett, 2005, p.65; see also Willis, 1977).

In recent decades, many places in the northern periphery that were formerly based on single industries—such as fishing, mining, or forestry—have undergone profound economic transformations. Deindustrialisation and out-migration have caused depopulation and a dramatic decline in traditional working possibilities. Without the income and profits derived from primary industry, the demand for other small-scale supporting industries and trade declines. Consequently, even fewer jobs are available. The same is the case with education, health care and infrastructure, as national policies directly benefit some places more than others. Population decline leads to reductions in public infrastructure and fewer jobs in the private sector (Pedersen & Olsen, 2003).

The economic basis of many places in this region has been significantly transformed, and the changes have altered young men's pathways into the labour market. Today the importance of education might not be as controversial as it was for previous generations. Casual work available to young people without secondary and higher education is often insecure and poorly paid. The disadvantages for those who do not succeed in school might be more consequential than was the case with earlier generations of youth. Nevertheless, withdrawal rates from high school are significantly higher among young people in rural areas in the North than other regions in Norway, particularly among young men. Even controlling for variables such as grades in primary school and social background, geography seems to have an independent effect on those rates of withdrawal (Bæck, 2012a; 2012b; Byrhagen *et al.*, 2006). Such differences show that place matters just as much as gender when it comes to young people's actions within the educational system. Still, the way in which place matters, and the ways in which gender and place intersect, are not so evident.

Belonging and ambivalence

Even where young people grow up in the same places as their parents, the world of opportunities has undergone dramatic transformations. One of

the young men interviewed said: 'I wish I grew up when my parents were young; there was more work and more people here'. The young man lived in a place where the downsizing of work possibilities had left a distinctive mark on daily life. The unemployment rate in the region where the interviews took place has been above Norway's national average for many years (Moilanen & Pedersen, 2012). A common feature among the young men living there was the expression of contrast between belonging and familiarity on the one hand, and restricted opportunities on the other. One of them said: 'I love this place, I will never move from here'. Another young man said: 'This is a nice place to live, until you stop playing in the streets—until you start to play grown up (…)'. The experience of out-migration and living in a place with reduced opportunities in the labour market and was an ongoing theme among all our informants:

> There is very little to do here, few people, and you want to do something else. At least, that is what people say. Then there are also people who get jobs elsewhere. Those who move seem to feel comfortable where they are, not many of them return after a short period. Some say they miss this place, but there's still not much to do here. I don't think anyone will move back in the near future since there is nothing to do here.

The knowledge that people who move away get jobs and seem to feel comfortable adds weight to understandings of the home place as one lacking in opportunities. Some parents confirm such understandings: 'My father says I should get away from here', one of the young men said. When the interviewer asked if the father had any suggestions about what his son should do, he answered: My father 'wants me to go to school'. Schooling has not necessarily been historically important for integration into local labour markets in the far north, nor in Norway. Now, there seems to be overall agreement on the importance of education. Still, all of the young men in this study have low levels of education and none of them had completed post-secondary school. Recognising the overall importance of education seems to be much easier than actually obtaining more education. Looking back at his experiences in post-secondary school, one of the men described his situation as follows:

> If I thought the same way as I do now, I would have done better in school. I would have tried to be more interested in schoolwork to get better marks and stuff. When I was at school, I did not

realise the importance of education. Going to school was something to finish as soon as possible and get away from. I failed in two subjects in the final exams … so I could possibly have done much better. But when you move from home to live on your own (lodging away from home), you do not have parents who are there to push you to get up in the morning and go to school every day, so often you just stay at home, sleeping late … and it doesn't sound good, saying it that way. I should have done better. It is my fault, no one else is to blame—you have to take responsibility for what you do. I did not prioritize school. I was simply unable to.

In saying he should have done better, this young man blames himself for not having engaged enough with schoolwork to succeed at school. However, educational provision is limited in rural areas. Further education after primary school often entails out-migration. Leaving home at the age of 15, 16 or 17 to take care of oneself and one's schoolwork requires self-control and a high degree of motivation. The case described above is not an exception. Several young people growing up in small places where they have to leave home in order to attend post-secondary educational institutions have shared similar stories (Heggen *et al.*, 2003). Structural divides within the educational system lead to individual challenges, demonstrating that access to higher education is not equally distributed.

Moilanen (2012) has studied mobility patterns among young people in the High North and found that an individual's attachment to place has an impact on mobility behaviour. His results indicate that people are prone to avoiding the psychological costs of cutting their social ties by choosing commuting over migrating—at least in cases where commuting is possible. Moilanen shows that place attachment can be strong among young people, even in places with restricted opportunities for work and education. These findings are supported by Corbett's (2007) research on youth in Canadian rural societies. Familiar surroundings and networks of family and friends constitute important social knowledge. Both authors use the term 'capital' to denote the importance of local integration, belonging and knowledge—specifically 'location-specific capital' (Moilanen, 2012) and 'localised capital' (Corbett, 2007). These kinds of resources function as capital within a restricted space and might strengthen local efforts at integration and attachment, but this possibility is not without debate.

The young men interviewed are unemployed, and many of them doubt that they will ever be employed if they remain at home. Out-migration is always fuelled by opportunity elsewhere (Corbett, 2005). For those who do not have educational, social and economic forms of capital to move, it may be difficult to adapt to life in urban centres and other places. One of the young men said 'I can't afford to travel around to look for jobs in other places. I've never had the money to travel around or move to other places. I don't have the money I need to move away'.

The use of the term 'place attachment' refers mainly to mental, cultural and social aspects of life. The quotation above shows that attachment to place also has to do with opportunities for mobility. Unemployment might, in some cases, tie people to places where there are few working possibilities, causing what might be termed enforced immobility (Bauman, 1998). As one young man put it:

> It's boring to be out of work, too much free time. It's incredibly boring and not very lucrative to put it bluntly. You have fewer opportunities than those who have a job and earn money —you may know someone who has a job and they want to ask you to go out with them. I've nothing to do, because I can't afford anything. You have far fewer opportunities to have the same life as others because you do not have money. I am displeased with the way things are with me now, that I don't have many opportunities. I must try to do better. I have to do something to improve my situation.

Lack of financial resources means that unemployment also leads to fewer opportunities to take part in activities with young people who may be in better economic circumstances. As such, the financial outcome of unemployment may reduce opportunities to move to other places *and* exclude the unemployed from participating in local communal activities. The limited possibilities for both out-migration from, and participation in, local places create feelings of discomfort for the young men.

Although some of the men interviewed wanted to leave their hometowns, it was not easy to do so. They may see and desire certain opportunities, but many were illusory. A consequence of unemployment is that the anchor of traditional masculine identity, as well as the potential to provide for oneself, might be challenged (Willot & Griffin, 1996).

Structural changes and individual costs

It may be expected that the meaning of work and work ethics might be less important in defining a person's qualities in places where unemployment seems normal, or more or less a common way of life. Therefore, unemployment may not have such negative connotations in places where there are better opportunities for work; however, according to our informants this is not quite the case. Economic and structural changes have restricted opportunities for work, yet unemployment is often attributed to negative *individual* characteristics:

> Some of my friends say, "Now you must get a job, you can't just sit at home and do nothing," and stuff like that. I think they should not have said that because I'm fully aware of it. There's no use telling me such things. I've thought about those things more times than they ever can think, could imagine. They probably think that I just don't want to work; [that] I just want to stay at home and sleep. But they are wrong.

One conception about unemployed young men held by community members is that they sit around at home doing nothing, staying up late at night, and sleeping through the day while other people are at work. In short, unemployment's association with laziness, weakness, and submissiveness continues to suggest a fundamental break with traditional masculine values and capacities. Such perceptions can be devastating, because men's self-respect and reputation have been tightly connected to traditional masculine imperatives regarding earning an income through honest, hard work.

In rural societies, changes in the work-life of many young men have contributed to a shift from manual work to dependence on social benefits. An analysis of masculinity and work in rural Australia shows that local ideologies of masculinity have not been weakened, although the economic base that supports them has vanished (Kenway & Kraack, 2004). Thus, structural and cultural changes do not necessarily follow the same track. Choices that might have appeared functional and rational with regard to formal education one or more generations ago are now regarded as dysfunctional because they serve to impair further opportunities; yet, the cultural base of such choices seems intact.

As pointed out by Erikson (2010), when it comes to the decline and restructuring of traditional industries and associated employment the northern part of Norway shares some similarities with Norrland

in Sweden. Erikson shows how welfare recipients are blamed for being lazy and living off welfare. The representations correspond with images of rural areas as being inhabited by young men lacking initiative, living on benefits or depending on their parents. Bye (2009, p.278) sums it up in the following way: 'Rather than trying to seek higher education and work elsewhere, boys who have grown weary of school and learning linger on in the place where they grew up, without a permanent job and income'. Such representations ignore the structural divides and inequalities of global transformations and reify characteristics such as laziness and lack of moral standards among people living off welfare benefits.

Nordic governments have generous welfare regimes compared to those in other parts of the world. However, there is growing public opinion that the welfare system represents a threat to a local work ethic, particularly among young men in rural areas. Such opinions have been supported by television series in the rural North, where unemployed young men have been negatively stereotyped (Erikson, 2010). In Norway, as well as in other countries, there is now growing public and political support for more restrictive welfare regulation. Australian researchers have pointed to the same tendencies (Kenway *et al.*, 2006). There, the introduction of a more restrictive welfare policy has had a noticeable impact on public attitudes towards welfare recipients. The unemployed poor are blamed for the difficulties they encounter. The economic force connected with globalisation 'is not usually blamed here; it is too vast, intangible and intractable' (Kenway *et al.*, 2006, p.125).

Constructing unemployment as an individual problem resulting from a negative attitude to work negates the reconfiguration of the economies of place. Another consequence might be that those charged with managing the welfare state are absolved from any responsibility in the creation and resolution of such problems (Bauman, 1998). As such, the unequal distribution of opportunities across different geographical areas produces severe challenges for young people growing up in places that might be termed 'losers in the global competition'. In this respect, it is possible to understand how place of residence might restrict access to other fields of practice, such as education and work, at individual, cultural and social levels.

Placing distinctions and differences

This paper has demonstrated the importance of having a geographical approach to the analyses of how changes in localised dynamics of education and work are experienced by young men living in specific rural communities. The young men in this study are unemployed and they have not completed upper secondary education. They live in places with unemployment rates above the national average and where possibilities for work and education are limited. They live in places where migration is normalised and combined with upward mobility. In many respects, they are victims of economic and structural changes in the labour market and of changed demands for education. Growing unemployment and depopulation have strengthened the economic marginality of men living in rural areas in Norway's regional and national periphery.

Although traditional structural conditions for work seem to be disappearing, local ideologies of masculinity have not been weakened. Rural masculinity has been connected to work in occupations with proximity to nature, such as fishing, forestry and mining—jobs not requiring extended formal education. Contemporary scholars describe a change in attitude, accompanied by a growing emphasis on urban concentration, according to which hegemonic masculinity does not include 'the rural' but positions it as something deviant (Brandt & Haugen, 2005; Erikson, 2010; Stenbacka, 2011). Some of the young men admitted that they view themselves as failures, having been unable to get to grips with the demands of further education, secure employment or migrate. Staying in such places in turn can lead to loss of dignity and self-respect (Bæck, 2012a). Still, this is the situation for young people living in vulnerable places in rural areas.

Social differences are not simply artificial categories; they reflect real material, cultural and political divisions and inequalities (Panelli, 2004). In order to understand how inequalities are created and maintained it is important to go beyond discursive constructions and metrocentric representations that downplay the significance of geographical differences. By ignoring the structural divides, inequalities and exclusions on which global changes are based, socio-structural marginalisation is seen as an individual responsibility.

According to Bauman (2004), global modernity has given rise to growing numbers of human beings deprived of adequate means of survival—a population of redundant people: 'They are now faced with the need to seek (in vain, it seems) *local* solutions to *globally* produced problems' (Bauman, 2004, p.6). Uneven development

—between centre and periphery, and between urban and rural areas—contributes to the establishment of an uneven structure of opportunities for young people growing up in different places. Now, more than ever, marginal and peripheral places are described as 'places of great loss— of people, natural resources and often, as a result, also visions of long-term viability' (Kelly, 2009, p.2). Growing up in such places can create feelings of belonging, familiarity and comfort, but also engender experiences of ambivalence, loss, and discomfort. The need for critical analyses of how young people navigate in different places will shed light on the ways in which mobility and opportunities are classed and gendered, and embedded in both time and space in the contemporary area of opportunities.

Note

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