Rural Community Narratives of Self-worth: The Moral Value of Gender and Class

by

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TASA Conference

December 2008
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Abstract

The interrelationship between gender and class in rural spaces has received little attention. While rural scholars have focused on the implications for class of gentrification, and agricultural and rural restructuring, these analyses have remained largely ungendered. Similarly, feminist rural studies have rarely explored subjectivity as gendered and classed.

In this paper, written from our research into the moral value of gender and class in rural communities, we draw on the work of contemporary feminist class theorists and qualitative data from two studies of Australian farming families to explore class as gendered and inscribed through personal memory; community narrative; everyday values and interactions associated with work, leisure and family; and intersections of gender, class and rurality. We conclude that class is more than a ranking on an income and occupational scale, property ownership, degree of engagement in consumption or social location; it is emotionally inscribed in gendered, economic and moral ways, and represented through symbolic signifiers and cultural narratives. We also recommend that more research is needed into how class may intersect with gender to either open up or limit opportunities for resistance and change.

Abstract: 185 words; Key words: class, gender, rurality, self-worth, moral value
Introduction

In rural studies the notion of class has often been conflated with concepts such as poverty, property ownership, occupational ranking and social location, or referred to obliquely through these concepts. Consequently, we know little about how class is lived and experienced in rural settings. More recent theorizations of class have argued for the importance of its cultural and symbolic dimensions, as well as material ones: ‘class is not a position on a scale’ but a ‘symbolic reference, a multiple-layered sign whose meaning is encapsulated in encounters and significant tastes and attributes’ (Abram 1998: 372). This is not to deny the multiple inequalities that may be associated with a particular class position. However, it is important to understand that class, in both material and cultural forms, is made or inscribed over the course of an individual’s life, and it ‘cannot be made alone’ (Skeggs 2004: 3).

Gender, like class, is intricately embedded in social structures and power relations. Gender and class are simultaneously experienced and performed across spaces. Yet few studies of class and rurality have theorized gender, limiting our knowledge about its intersections or co-existence with class in rural communities. In trying to understand the interrelationships between class and gender in rural spaces, we explore empirical studies of gender and class in Australian rural communities. We also discuss questions of moral value and worth given to long-established farming families, and the gendered nature and implications of assignations of value and worth.
Overview of feminist literature about gender, rurality and class

The first development in knowledge about gender, rurality and class to emerge from the feminist rural literature of the 1980s and 1990s was influential in changing the unit of analysis from the male farmer to the household, acknowledging women’s economic and social contributions to farming and rural communities (e.g., Alston 1995; Kada 1980; Shortall 1999; Whatmore 1991). This body of work also highlighted women’s limited access to farm capital through inheritance and family partnership.

In a second development feminist scholars drew attention to gender divisions within rural labour markets. Lower proportions of women to men had permanent and skilled positions (e.g., Little 1994; Little 1997; Little and Austin 1996). Consideration was also given to the gendered nature of occupational identities in rural workplaces (Little 1994; Tigges et al. 1998).

A third development occurred as a result of studies of pluriactivity. These identified the complexities associated with the reasons for engaging in pluriactivity, and examined how it may challenge occupational and gender identities in farming (e.g., Bryant 1999). This work revealed that pluriactivity has the potential to change class and gender positions by increasing or decreasing finance and property ownership and social status in the community.

Work on rural communities was the final critical development in the rural feminist literature integral to growing knowledge about gender and class. This literature
emphasized the intersections of gender and class (e.g. Dempsey 1992; Gibson-Graham 1996; Poiner 1990; Williams 1981). Drawing on dialectical systems of patriarchy and capital, Poiner (1991) demonstrated that gender divisions of labour and men’s access to, and control over resources underpin the material basis of class and gender in farming and the rural labour market. Her work highlights the complexity of gender and capital in rural communities, and how these work in cohort with ideologies of community to reproduce power relations.

Gibson-Graham (1996: 209) indicated somewhat different ideologies at work in the way academics constitute mining families as clearly classed, without showing gender as significant in shaping social relations. They depicted working class men as politically aware and strident, and their wives as either excluded from political life or as unpredictable political subjects. Men and women were distinguished by domestic class struggles around gender divisions of labour, domestic finances and children’s needs (see also Williams 1981).

**Inscribing class: Feminist perspectives**

Beck and Willms (2004: 107) asserted that ‘society can no longer look in the mirror and see classes. The mirror has been smashed and all we have left are the individualized fragments’. Scholars concerned with gender and class maintain that class remains critical, although class-consciousness and collectivity may be less virulent (e.g. Reay 1997; Savage, et al. 2001; Skeggs 1997). They assert that the nomenclature of class may not be commonly engaged in lay narratives. However, this does not indicate the demise of class. Indeed, Reay (1997: 230) has suggested that
‘notions of classlessness, no less than identification of their working or middle class, inform us about how class is both lived in contemporary society and regulated by discursive orthodoxies’. Empirical work on gender and class has verified this claim. Reay (1997), drawing from her study of mothers’ engagement with their children’s primary schools, found that whilst women were unable to define class in the context of their own class position, their narratives indicated a class identity and class tension in their interactions with the education system. A similar resistance to class labels occurs as individuals refrain from claiming a class identity they may see as undervalued (e.g. Savage, et al. 2001; Skeggs 1997).

Beverley Skeggs (2005: 969) revealed how class is inscribed: how it is made, perceived and practised in, and through cultural values ‘premised on morality, embodied in personhood and realized (or not) as a property value in symbolic systems of exchange.’ In this respect, Skeggs (2004: 3) wrote that ‘there are strong and intimate parallels between the generation of classifications of social class and the production of sexuality and gender’. Just as Foucault (1979) argued that specific discourses have come together at particular historical moments to produce sexuality, discourses made over time and inscribed on the body produce gendered and classed subjects. For example, media portrayals of white working class women typically portray them as brassy, loud, tough and displaying an excessive heterosexuality (Skeggs 2005). Importantly, Skeggs (2005) demonstrated that value is attributed in the process of ‘making’ working class women, as their moral worth is questioned because their personhood is deemed lacking against media portrayals of middle class standards.
Key class theorists such as Savage (2000) and Sayer (2005) also made morality and worth implicit in their analyses of class. They have shown that emotions such as pride, respect, envy, passion and resentment are evaluative judgements and ‘loaded moral signifier[s]’ of class (Savage et al. 2001: 889). Shame has been shown to be a particularly critical emotion related to class: ‘the person who through no fault of their own has a despised body shape or who cannot afford fashionable clothing, has done nothing shameful, but might still feel shame’ (Sayer 2005: 954). The counter to shame is a sense of self-worth and value of one’s self and one’s life. Our study of women and men farmers begins an analysis of how gender and class intersect with, blur or meld in the rural, and individual and community emotions about self-worth – the moral value of gender and class.

**Methodology**

Data were gathered from two Australian studies. The first examined young married farming couples’ understandings of community expectations of farming and participation in their local communities. It included beef and sheep properties in the Rockhampton region of Queensland, viticultural properties in the Wagga Wagga region of New South Wales, mixed beef/sheep and cropping properties in the upper south-east region of South Australia, and horticultural and viticultural properties from the Riverland of South Australia. The total sample consisted of 40 couples aged between 18 and 30, with and without children. Ten couples from each area were interviewed. Eighty face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held, with women and men interviewed separately to allow each partner to describe and discuss their
own experiences and expectations. As there were no official or direct means of reaching younger farming couples, the initial sample was drawn via advertisements in print and radio media, and farming organizations. It consisted of couples who volunteered for interview. Snowballing techniques were used to build the sample size. The sample population was ethnically homogenous. The majority of participants held Anglo-Australian heritage.

The second study explored community involvement and leadership, and in particular the factors that facilitated or constrained participation. It focused on a rural Queensland town with a population of approximately 10,000. The town provided a rich environment for investigation due to its diverse farming base (vegetable, wool, cattle, and wine), a comparatively recent mining economy and a developing tourism industry. The growing mining and tourism industries had led to in-migration and the availability of seasonal casual farm work also meant the town hosted an itinerant population for part of the year. In total, 50 interviews of approximately one hour each were recorded. The sample included men and women, long-term residents and recent arrivals, younger and older members of the community, and representatives from different industry and service sectors. The town’s population was less ethnically diverse than the broader Queensland population and had no Indigenous component. Only 14.5 per cent of people in the community were overseas-born compared with 24.8 per cent state wide. The majority of those 14.5 per cent born overseas came from the United Kingdom and New Zealand.
In both studies interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in full. A process of coding and indexing themes that emerged from the data was used but we returned to the full transcripts throughout the analytic process to ensure the integrity of the narrative whole (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). While both studies focused explicitly on gender, this was not the case for class, which emerged as an important theme in the narratives in men and women’s descriptions of participation in agricultural, service and sporting organizations; in their discussions of the history of their families in the districts; and in their experiences of paid and unpaid work in their rural communities.

The value of the qualitative approach used in this study of gender and class is that it raises the potential to identify economic, moral, symbolic and cultural narratives of self and others, and to explore questions of belonging in rural communities. It is the emotive aspects of belonging that have received little attention in rural studies.

Analysis

Rural community narratives of self-worth: The moral value of gender and class

Farming is a central social signifier for rural communities. Moral value has been associated with what it is to be a ‘good farmer’ and a ‘good community member’ (e.g. Bryant 1999; Chavez 2005). Time is an important dimension to gendered and classed moral values in rural communities. The data show dominant community narratives in the interviews built around male farmers, their fathers and grandfathers, while women and their contributions are either obscured or ignored.
In the first study, young men’s expression of pride in their fathers’ and grandfathers’ achievements in the community and on the family farm was a key recurring feature of class and its relation to both social location and belonging in rural communities. The word ‘respect’ was frequently used when referring to patriarchal history. Participants repeatedly expressed how their family name encapsulated worth, thereby providing opportunities for community engagement that might not exist for others:

Tom: History certainly comes into it. I think more often than not it would be viewed as ‘The Fisher Family’. So when you deal with local business or with agricultural networks they see it as the Fishers, for sure. (Study 1)

Having a family history and a recognized name contributes to the social reproduction of male hierarchy because it gives access to spaces that may be classed, such as agri-political networks, finance and agribusinesses. At the same time these spaces are gendered due to patriarchal lineage and the succession of farming properties that occurs across industrialized agriculture (Shortall 1999).

Women, like men, recognized the importance of their husband’s family name. They also used the word ‘respect’ when discussing community narratives of their husbands’ acceptance as community members and farmers. Critical to this respect is length of time in the district. Again, this is gendered simply because, like the majority of farming women, those in our studies had come to farming through marriage, often moving from an urban locale (Pini 2007). Thus, women were typically not ‘locals’. The importance of longevity in an area and the gendered nature of this as an indicator of value is emphasized in the following quotation:
Julie: It’s been a lifetime for my husband, he was born here, he’s been raised here, he’s lived here, people do respect his views ’cause they know that he’s got the knowledge of his father that’s been passed on after generations. I think some new people, um yeah, I don’t know whether it’s such an age thing, probably more if you are a first timer or not. (Study 1)

For Julie, respect was accorded due to her husband’s family history. She was a relatively recent migrant to the district, having moved nine years ago when she married. Julie informed us that she was neither a business partner in the farm nor a co-owner of any of the farming land owned by her husband and his parents. She was involved in physical work on the farm on a daily basis and did the book-keeping for the farm business, drawing on her expertise as a trained financial advisor. Julie explained why she worked on the farm even though she was neither paid nor owned land:

Julie: I’m prepared to do it as a contribution to the property as I can see the benefits in future years. Obviously I’ll benefit from my husband’s inheritance so that’s my way of contributing, and, um yeah, it’s stacking up this year. Obviously I keep track of the time I’ve been doing it and the money I’ve saved them in the last 12 months has been quite substantial with all the work I do. (Study 1)

Traditional notions of class are inscribed on Julie through marriage, even though she does not own land and has her own occupational role and identity as a trained financial advisor. However, Julie is very aware of the inscription of worth on her
husband through property ownership and family history. At the same time she understands that the values attributed to succession and history will provide future rewards for herself and her children. Interestingly, Julie also recognizes that the moral worth, and in particular knowledge of being a farmer is ascribed through background rather than practice:

*Julie:* I know a … [family] that moved here when they were in their late thirties and brought a property and worked the property and I think what my husband has on him, well what he [the new property owner] needs is a little bit more knowledge, a little bit more background knowledge … I think once you hit 25 you generally gave a reasonable level of respect in the farming community as long as you’ve got that background generation, it’s expected that you’ve got a good knowledge of it all. (Study 1)

Another example of respect accorded because of family background comes from Jane’s comments about her husband:

*Jane:* I think they expect him to be like his father. John is very well respected I know in terms that he works hard and he produces good produce um, and he’s straight down the line you know. If he doesn’t like what you’re doing he’ll tell you … I think they expect all of the boys to be like that and I think that’s one of their strengths because they are like that. (Study 1)

Jane, like Julie, married into farming, moved to the district when married, has professional qualifications and is not a financial partner in the farm business.
However, she does not see herself as having value in the community similar to her husband, even through marriage:

*Jane*: This community doesn’t include people who aren’t locals very well and by locals I mean people that have been living here for longer than say 15–20 years. They don’t consider me a local even though I live here and I will be here for the rest of my life … You can easily be invisible here I guess if you don’t have much to do with anybody else and ’cause you’re so far away they can’t actually physically see you. (Study 1)

Thus, for male farmers, class is inscribed by moral worth *because* they are male farmers, epitomizing the moral dimensions of worth: hard work; honesty; forthrightness; longevity in the community; and generational knowledge of agriculture.

A male participant in the second study articulated the distinction between the value ascribed to the occupation of farmer and other occupations common in rural communities. Asked what he thought would be the experience of someone new to the community, he replied:

*George*: You’ll find that the fellows that move into new properties, they’re more accepted into the town than a new mining family moving in simply because the thinking is ‘you mining guys just get paid to turn up’. But you know that people on properties are much more hard working and so because of that they get more accepted. They’re more down to earth. (Study 2)
George was engaging in what Sayer (2005: 952) refers to as ‘moral boundary drawing’. He made an implicit distinction between old and new farming families, and an explicit distinction between farming families and mining families. As he did so he indicated moral differences between each category, highlighting a hierarchy of acceptance between the three groups. The keys to the hierarchy and the boundaries of worth are two-fold. The first is longevity in the district and generational history; the second is merely being a farmer. This occupational identity is associated with the notion of hard work, which correlates with the understanding of farm families as self-employed. Employees are considered lacking in the virtue of industry because they are waged workers. The moral significance given to hard work makes it the vehicle for acceptance in this rural community, and with acceptance comes the attribution of other value-laden qualities such as being honest and down-to-earth. Once again, it becomes apparent how class is inscribed and socially reproduced through community narratives that give prestige to farming.

Farming women told similar stories of community narratives giving prominence to farming families in rural communities. Women explained that their acceptance and expectations for participation in the community and farming were informed by the moral worth attached to their husband’s family name:

*Rosie:* We both play tennis and I think I’ve got big shoes to fill because now I’m a Smith. All the Smith women were good tennis players, so I think the community might think maybe I have to be as well. They hold Jeff and his father in very high regard in the community. They’re quite well respected. And
it’s them that’s got that far, not me, so I think I’m just Jeff’s wife when it comes to it. (Study 1)

Rosie lives in a wealthy grazing district in South Australia. As graziers her husband’s family are attributed moral worth and are an established part of specific classed social activities. As a young woman, Rosie acknowledges the expectations the community may have of her as a Smith and expresses some anxiety about living up to the family name: ‘I think I have to do better or try harder or something to get respect like they’ve already got.’

Rosie met her husband at agricultural college where they both completed degrees. She moved to the district upon her marriage three years ago. While Jeff is automatically afforded respect in the community due to his background, Rosie is aware that she has to become visible in the community. As she notes, ‘a lot of people wouldn’t know much about me or anything.’ Rosie, like other farming women interviewed in both studies, sees gaining respect as contingent on her performance of a particular middle class femininity.

Another farming woman noted that she was the ‘first grazier’s wife in the district to go out to work’ and this had led to questioning by her peers because her behaviour unsettled common gendered and classed norms. Such questioning suggests an anxiety in the grazing community, as her behaviour may be interpreted as devaluing and undermining versions of middle class femininity:
Laura: There’s all that stuff where you should help your husband in the sheep yard or get your satisfaction from having dinner parties and that sort of stuff.

I’m constantly having to explain … I don’t ever talk about my work and I don’t ever get asked about my work. (Study 2)

Despite her resistance to prescriptive norms and being called to account, Laura still retained acceptance within the grazing community. Further, her behavioural deviation did not appear to have a negative effect on the status or respect afforded to her husband who holds a number of leadership positions in the community and is spoken of as a person of knowledge, authority and influence. Importantly, Laura’s husband is one of the largest property holders in the area and can trace his lineage in the district back over a century. The privileged class position obviously gives Laura and her husband currency, so that Laura’s involvement in outside paid work is accommodated and they retain acceptance within the grazing community.

The women’s comments in both studies indicate that while some women may be ascribed similar status to their husbands by marriage, others have to engage actively in the community to construct and reconstruct a positive narrative about worth and community participation to obtain value within the community.

Conclusion

This exploration exposes how community memory sustains emotive descriptors of farming families. It is not land in and of itself as a marker of wealth which mobilizes class relations in a rural community. There are more abstract and affective dynamics
at work mediated by gendered and classed community narratives. One of the most
dominant of these, focused on the value and worth of farming, particularly over
generations, affords respect to farming men. Farming women, however, must actively
engage in the construction and reconstruction of their self in the community to gain
respect. They are cognizant of the community narrative that requires them to become
visible through involvement in social activities or volunteer work; to perform a
version of femininity to be afforded moral worth and respect. While it is possible for
women to challenge this community narrative, as exemplified by Laura, the growing
and compelling literature on shifting femininities in rural communities and the agency
of farm and rural women has not extended to an analysis of how class may intersect
with gender to either open up or limit opportunities for resistance and change. This is
an area that needs greater research.

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**Notes**

1 What is interesting in George’s narrative is the absence of other self-employed people in his rural community, despite his own background as a small business person.