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BOOK REVIEW: Cuervo, H., & Wyn, J. (2012). *Young People Making it Work: Continuity and Change in Rural Places*. Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press. 208 pages, ill., ISBN: 9780522860979.

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Abstract

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Keywords

rural education, rural youth, college attendance, rural urban differences, higher education, rural economics, young adults, social justice

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In this dynamic and lengthy study of the trajectories of young people in rural Australia, Cuervo and Wyn examine how youth make meaning of their lives in relation to rural places. Through an extensive look at the choices young people make regarding education, employment, family, and location, Cuervo and Wyn uncover a startling reality. Contrary to current discourses about rural “brain drain” and education used as a way to leave rural places (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), the authors capture youth navigating complex pathways in order to obtain further and higher education – as a way to remain in rural.

In *Young People Making it Work*, Cuervo and Wyn wrestle with the intersections of education, work, family, and place in regard to the paths young people take. Several themes guide the analysis. First, they seek to understand the relationship between age, biography, and location by studying young people’s life choices as they interact with their spatial context over time. They pay close attention to how “youth” is constructed in the literature in order to demonstrate the relevance of cultural understandings of “youth” to this study. Additionally, the authors identify belonging, social justice, and generational characteristics as key themes in their analysis. It is important to note that the chapters in this text are written to stand apart so they can be downloaded separately by the reader, but together they contribute to a consistent message.

In chapter one, Cuervo and Wyn frame their exploration of rural youths’ trajectories, by outlining the social, political, and economic challenges facing all youth, but particularly rural youth. Specifically, the rise of neoliberalism in

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Australian politics, the changing labor market, and demographic population shifts in rural areas are some of the forces that shape the biographies of rural youth. They also put forth a useful explanation of how rural spaces are used today in Australia; mainly for production, consumption, and protection. They set a solid context through which to understand the challenges facing rural youth.

The methods used in this study capture a significant representation of youths' experiences in Australia (p. 11). Cuervo and Wyn, both of whom are associated with the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne benefit from use of the Life Patterns research program, a data set collected over 20 years. The program is a longitudinal panel study that began in 1991 and includes two cohorts of participants. The first cohort, born in 1973, is referred to as generation X, while the second cohort, born in 1988-1989, is referred to as generation Y. Participants from the generation X cohort participated in surveys beginning in 1992, and in 1996 the cohort size was demographically tailored and reduced to better reflect the demographic characteristics of the population. Since 1996, this group participated in surveys every two years and approximately 50-100 participants participated in in-depth interviews. In 2011, 19 individuals from this cohort who self-identified as rural were selected to participate in in-depth interviews, from which the qualitative data in this book is drawn (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). The participants from generation Y were first surveyed in 2005 and then surveyed again in 2007, 2008, and 2010.

In addition to the breadth of information the researchers were able to gather about the participants, there are many benefits to a study conducted over such a long period of time. The participants from generation X were in their late thirties at the time of the in-depth interviews. Following participants over the course of 20 years allowed the researchers to capture the whole story, rather than just a snapshot of the participants' decisions about education, work, and family. The opportunity to examine participants' life courses from high school graduation to almost middle age also allowed for observations to be made not only about the choices they made, but also the choices that are actually available to rural youth because of their location.

It is important to note that the overall findings in this study did not pertain only to rural youth. The surveys were administered to youth in rural, urban, and regional areas over a 20-year period, enabling the authors to make comparisons about youth from different locations. In general, all respondents expressed the belief that traditional pathways to adult success that had been available to their parents and previous generations would not be available to them. Meaning that in an increasingly global and knowledge based economy, these youth would have to obtain further and higher education in order to be successful. As a result, education is used more pragmatically by these generations.

In chapter five, Cuervo and Wyn consider “belonging” as a factor in the educational decision making process of rural youth. Decisions about further and higher education are impacted by the participants’ feelings about belonging in their home community. This argument centers on theoretical perspectives found in the literature about belonging, but pays particular attention to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. According to Bourdieu, habitus consists of “practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and regular without in anyway being the product of rules...collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (as cited in Buchli, 2004, p. 107). Cuervo and Wyn conceptualize habitus as “the process of personhood and being that are an outcome of interactions between individuals and their environments” (p. 127). The authors put forth, for their purposes, a workable conceptualization of habitus that corresponds with how they understand rural youths’ perceptions of their relationship to their home community. They effectively use this concept to explain the dilemma their participants face in pursuing higher education. For these participants, this dilemma manifests itself in the perceived risk they face in leaving rural spaces to pursue further education and the potential consequences that this decision could have on participants’ rural identities and the sense of belonging they experience with their home communities.

The authors also present rural youths’ beliefs about the meaning and availability of work in rural spaces. Cuervo and Wyn, observed that youth in rural areas were more likely to pursue employment immediately after completing secondary education and that rural youth in general place a great deal of importance on work. In rural areas, work opportunities tend to be strongly gendered and males were typically more continuously employed than females. Rural youths’ choices about work and education shaped choices about family life and other traditional adult rites of passages, such as moving out of one’s parents’ house, marriage, or buying a house.

In chapter six, titled “Working the Land,” Cuervo and Wyn expand on their analysis of employment patterns by taking on a typical discourse found in literature on rural spaces: farming. The particular salience of this chapter is that Cuervo and Wyn explain an overarching phenomenon of rural places; that while farming is almost synonymous with “rurality,” the decline of small farming is widespread. The participants spoke of decreased opportunities for the intergenerational transfer of family farms as well as an increased need for advanced vocational and technical skills in order to be successful in farming and other production jobs. Surprisingly, both men and women identified education as a way to remain in their rural communities, by pursuing programs of study that would enable them to find jobs in their home communities in areas such as

nursing, teaching, management, and vocational professions. Ultimately, through interviews with rural participants about their educational and vocational trajectories, it is revealed that education is used not only as a way out of rural communities, but also as a way to stay.

Perhaps what will be most useful to researchers in rural education is the author's discussion of what "rural" means (p. 10) and how rural spaces have evolved since the 1980s (Chapter 1). In defining rural, the authors reflect on a variety of beliefs held about the concept, including several perspectives that define rural and urban as dichotomous spaces. The rural and urban dichotomy often portrays rural spaces as primarily places where little change takes place and where life is idyllic; whereas urban spaces are full of progress, vivacity and constant renewal. Cuervo and Wyn however adopt Bourke and Lockie's view of rural as "a 'multidimensional concept, symbolically constructed and both historically and culturally contingent'" (as cited in Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 11). Cuervo and Wyn's conceptualization of rural spaces as both diverse and dynamic allows the reader to see what these spaces may mean historically and in their current cultural context.

In chapter four, we learn about the challenges faced by rural youth on the path to higher education. The interviews revealed that the necessity of pursuing higher education poses additional challenges to rural youth who, for the most part, have to leave their home communities in order to obtain higher educational credentials. *Young People Making it Work* reveals that rural youth use "complex pathways" in their pursuit of education. Almost all of the rural youth in this study recognized that education was vital for obtaining employment and undertook some kind of further or higher educational study at some point in the 20-year period after high school. However, for these participants, the path to education was not a linear one. These rural participants balanced families, job changes, and other aspects of life while pursuing further and higher education. Understanding that rural youth may not follow the traditional pathways of college attendance might aid in the creation of better policies concerning access and financial aid for students of all ages who come from rural areas.

From the very beginning of *Young People Making it Work*, you get the sense that the authors are trying to say something new about rural youths' life chances and their relationship to their spatial context. In doing so, Cuervo and Wyn demonstrate that this is a distinctive generation of young people who have had to navigate adult life paths in increasingly complex economic and political times. Their relationships to place, and in turn their strong relationships with their families, have provided them with the support they need to do so.

Young People Making it Work contributes to literature that uses place as a lens through which to analyze how young people make decisions about their lives.

It also provides a broader context for understanding not only youth from rural spaces, but the distinctiveness of an entire generation of youth and what they face politically, economically, and socially as they transition to adult roles. This book also contributes to literature on rural education by demonstrating the risks rural youth take in pursuing higher education; and the pressure that one's habitus creates for rural students as they leave their home communities. Those youth who did leave their communities to pursue higher education spoke of finding students with similar backgrounds while on campus as a means of support. In light of these findings, further study may be warranted at an international level on how college students from rural areas adjust to campus life. Having a better understanding of the support mechanisms used as well as the support services needed by rural youth may help them persist in college. Would rural youths' pathways to higher education be less complex if more was done to facilitate their transitions away from their home communities?

This book provides insight into how rural communities not only benefit from youth returning to their communities, but also prompts us to think about how we might better facilitate the "staying" of youth rather than the leaving. A closer examination of rural economies and labor opportunities, as well as the accessibility of further and higher educational opportunities might facilitate more youth "staying" rural. Further research might also consider how the rise of online degree programs, free massive open online courses (MOOCs), and increased internet access may impact rural youths' ability to stay in their communities.

Cuervo and Wyn leave very little to critique about their methods but the substance of the book leaves a few questions unanswered. From this reader's perspective, it would have been useful to include a map of the Australian region referenced in this study in order to better understand the proximity of regions and cities mentioned by the participants. A brief explanation of the structure of the compulsory education system in Australia and an overview of the further and higher education opportunities available to Australian youth would also have been useful. This information would be used to better understand how the educational opportunities available to rural youth in Australia compare to those of other countries in order to view the findings from this book through other contexts. Lastly, the authors could have pursued a more comparative approach to this analysis. While other countries, including the United States, were mentioned here and there throughout the book, it would have been worthwhile to include a chapter that offers comparisons between rural youth's educational paths and opportunities in other countries in order to better determine the universality of these results. Still, this work serves as a starting point for research on the educational trajectories of rural youth in many other countries.

This book adds depth to the literature that focuses on the complexity of the challenges facing rural youth, while also presenting a less common perspective on the educational choices made by rural youth. While the dominant discourse on rural youth emphasizes education as a means for leaving rural spaces, Cuervo and Wyn demonstrate participants' use of education as a way to stay rural. The authors' overall emphasis on the importance of place and age in the construction of habitus provide future researchers with a contextually specific theoretical framework through which to conduct more comparative studies on rural youths' educational trajectories. In addition to the power of the findings, the authors' discussion and examination of how the field of educational research, specifically the field of research in rural education, conceptualizes the term "rural" becomes another useful model for future research. Their efforts to frame what rural means move the field away from a dichotomous representation of rural as anything non-urban, to a more diverse understanding of rural places. Removing the negative stigma attached to the experiences of rural youth and rural places is a fruitful starting point for future policy and research.

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