

**Gossip and rumour –
the dark side of the rural safe and good?
Young people's gendered narratives of rural life¹**

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Gossip and rumour – the dark side of the rural safe and good? Young people’s gendered narratives of rural life¹

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Abstract

The paper examines how young people understand the 'rural' and whether there are gender differences in their views of rural life. Based on 130 essays and six focus group interviews among college students, the rural discourse among both rural and urban youth is explored. The 'rural' is not seen as a fixed reality, but a constructed and contested concept. Both girls and boys construct the 'rural' by contrasting it with the 'urban' and they identify both positive and negative aspects of rural life. Raising children and growing up in the countryside is seen as a positive aspect, while being young in a rural area is more questionable. The impact of gender is seen in various ways. One interesting finding is that girls are more concerned than the boys with the limitation rumour and gossip put upon rural life. We examine the discourse on gossip – as the shadowed side of ‘safe and good’; which is a general representation of rural life. The analysis relates to theories of modernization processes and how individuality might be challenged in small-scale communities.

Introduction

There are several discourses on the rural. Two main narratives are commonly disclosed; one narrative highlights the positive and idyllic side of the rural, where qualities like safety, peace and quiet dominate, and the other highlights the negative side where rural communities are described as intrusive, constraining and controlling. Narratives of the rural as ‘safe and good’, but also constraining and controlling, are contrasting perspectives which help to shape how we see the countryside. These narratives, even seemingly contradictory exist side by side as equally true and accepted by ‘everyone’. Each narrative emphasizes certain values and actions and is connected to and acts upon stories of rural gossip.

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A vital part of what is considered 'safe and good' is the surveyable community, in which 'everybody knows each other'. As pointed out by Burnett (1996) this cannot be 'true', but in a rural context the perception that 'everybody knows each other' becomes a guideline for both representations and behaviours. However, in order to generate the sense of 'knowing everybody' the residents need to be kept informed and get a certain overview. One way to be kept informed and exchange information is to participate in what might be considered as small talk, or gossip. Country girls associate the rural with social control and supervision more explicitly than the boys (Haugen and Villa 2005). We will explore the phenomenon of gossip in a rural context, how gossip influence the young people's narratives about the rural, and try to explain why young women and men seem to experience this differently. In this paper we ask what effects gossip plays on young people's images of the rural. We also discuss whether gossip is an inevitable cost of the construction of the rural as 'safe and good'.

The rural as safe and good

Social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1989) identifies the concept of "peace and quiet" as a central cultural category in Norwegian culture. This cultural category, she says, is used to legitimate and act upon social behaviour. Using Gullestad's concept of a cultural category, Villa (1999) found that "safe and good" represents a cultural understanding and representation of 'the rural', in which peace and quiet are two of the components. "Safe and good" is a commonsense wisdom and image of the rural presented by rural residents of all ages, genders and life phases. It is based on people's stories of rural areas as peaceful, the feeling of safety, no need for locking doors, no stranger dangers or unwelcome visitors, a stable and surveyable community, lack of criminality, safety for children, reliable inhabitants, neighbours looking after one's children, and everyone knowing everyone (Villa 1999). Similar representations of the rural have been found in other Nordic, European and non-European countries (Berg 2002, Stenbacka 2001, Ziebarth, Prochaska-Cue and Shrewsbury 1997, Shucksmith, Chapman and Clark 1996, Halfacree 1995).

In Zygmunt Baumann's (2001) observations of the modern world's history, he reflects upon how "security always calls for the sacrifice of freedom, while freedom can only be expanded at the expense of security" (ibid: 20). Freedom and security, Baumann says, are both equally pressing and indispensable, and happen to be hard to reconcile without friction – and

considerable friction most of the time. “These two qualities are, simultaneously, complementary and incompatible; the likelihood of their falling into conflict has always been and will forever be as high as the need for their reconciliation” (ibid: 19). Bringing this to the representations of the rural in general and the lives of young rural people in particular, the safe and good metaphor might jeopardize the freedom to act and live in the way one likes. In our paper we will explore how rural gossip might challenge the rural safe and good, as they are both “pressing and indispensable”.

The rural as constraining and controlling

In narratives about the rural, the rural is compared with the urban. While the countryside is associated with values like ‘safe and good’ and close relations, but also supervision and social control, the city is associated with risks, anonymity and impersonal relations (Bjaarstad 2003, Villa and Haugen 2005). ‘Safe and good’ might necessitate a kind of social control, where certain normative beliefs and practices are more accepted than others. The social pressure to behave in certain ways in small societies is huge, according to Waara (1996: 271). This leads to individuals acting in line with the expectations, regardless of their own ambitions and interests.

Violating norms and values developed within conditions of a specific local community by acting differently might ‘threaten’ the existing state of things. Individuals challenging the socially ‘accepted’ ways of behaving (as defined at any given time) will meet sanctions like gossip, exclusion and being ridiculed. Gossip serves to create and maintain agreement about crucial values (Gluckman 1963), and helps people learn about how to live in their cultural society. According to Skjølås (2002) gossip has a purpose to maintain a society where everything and everybody has their own position and therefore knows where they belong.

Gossip as a social phenomenon

Gossip is a common element of everyday conversation among both adults and children (Baumeister et al. 2004, Bergman 1993, Fine 1977, Taylor 1977). Gossip is a social phenomenon independent of geography; still, it is very much associated with rural areas, partly as a consequence of the surveyability in small communities. There are different definitions of gossip and rumour. In general gossip refers to unverified news about personal

affairs of others, which is shared informally between individuals. Gossip might be understood as a morally questionable activity associated with hearsay, lie, slander, backbiting, aspersion, and tattle. However, gossip might have a more culturally diversified meaning. Transmission of gossip is considered important for establishing friendships (Rosnow 2001), catching attention, and providing mutual entertainment (Rosnow and Fine 1976). It might also be a means of exchanging knowledge and gaining information about individuals and cementing social bonds by enhancing solidarity of the group or social network (Suls 1977, Holtedahl 1986). Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs argue that “Gossip anecdotes communicate rules in narrative form, such as by describing how someone else came to grief by violating social norms. Gossip is thus an extension of observational learning, allowing one to learn from the triumphs and misadventures of people beyond one's immediate perceptual sphere” (Baumeister et al. 2004: 111). Gossip is potentially an efficient mean of transmitting information about rules, norms and guidelines for living in a certain culture.

Based on her study among young women in a suburb, Gullestad argues that “women’s talk when they are together may be analysed as a moral discourse about what is right and wrong” (Gullestad 1984: 220). She defines gossip as when friends and friends of friends talk about and evaluate an episode or a person who is not present. The group increases their knowledge about the incident and they also evaluate the episode. In this way gossip is an important moral discourse in a local community/ within a social group. The social anthropologist Lisbeth Holtedahl (1986) has studied everyday talk in a small Norwegian community. She questions whether one can call everyday talk gossip or whether this actually is for many people a unique source of information and exchange of news. Especially for the older people in the community it is important to know everything, which also could be a sign of caring for others.

Patricia M. Spacks (1985) classifies gossip along a continuum where “serious gossip” and “ill-natured aspersion” constitute the poles. “The “serious gossip” exists only as a function of intimacy. It takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge of one another” (ibid: 5). The opposite end of the continuum is the gossip that manifests itself as distilled malice. “It plays with reputations, circulating truths and half truths and falsehoods about activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others. Often it serves serious

(possibly unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulation of reputations can further political or social ambitions by damaging competitors or enemies” (ibid: 5).

The link between gossip and spreading rumours is not always straight-forward. In Spack’s classification spreading rumours will be on the “ill-natured aspersion” end of the continuum. Gullestad (1984:251) puts it like this: “Spreading rumours’ is both a reason for conflict and a sanction in case of conflict. There is a constant concern about controlling information and stopping rumours. Rumours are in this context always perceived as negative, as leading to a bad reputation.” In everyday language, however, the terms gossip and rumour overlap substantially, and in the frame of this paper it is not necessary to differentiate gossip from rumour.

Gossiping, a gendered phenomenon?

Men as well as women participate in gossiping and spreading rumours. The difference is, according to Gullestad (1984: 252) that “men have somewhat less access to confidence and personal information than women.” Leaper and Holiday (1995) suggest that women may be more likely than men to use and encourage gossip in same-gender friendships in order to establish solidarity and make social comparisons. Some studies (referred in Baumeister et al. 2004) have revealed that men gossip more about celebrities, sport figures, politicians, and mere acquaintances, consistent with the view that men are oriented towards the broader social and cultural sphere, whereas women’s gossip is concerned more about family members and close friends. Research on youth and socialization has found that girls are more occupied with social relations with friends in their spare time than the boys. In a rural perspective this also means that girls have been more oriented towards activities that are less dependent of local settlement than the boys (Frønes 1987). In other words, the conducting and discussing of social relations might be developed independent of locality.

Gender and rurality

Young women and men might experience the country life differently, and their feelings about rural communities might vary. A study of growing up in northern Scotland showed that identifications of the community as intrusive, constraining and controlling were felt more strongly by young women than by young men (Glendinning et al 2003).

Waara (1996) argues that the small societies do not allow a break with traditional gender roles. According to Jo Little (2002) a particular version of femininity exists within rural society. There is a belief that a traditional construction of womanhood is more appropriate to rural society (ibid: 179). The social control applies pressure to women acting in certain ways and does not challenge the traditional gender roles. Cultural norms of womanhood restrict what women can do in order to be regarded as “real women”. Other studies, like Jørgensen (1994) and Bøe (1991), found similar examples of conformity pressure especially upon young girls in small and surveyable communities. The Norwegian geographer, Nina Gunnerud Berg (2002), questions however, whether the rural culture applies more pressure to women than men. In her Norwegian study of people moving to the countryside, she shows that men challenging the traditional gender roles by choosing untraditional jobs, experience most problems.

How is the discourse among young people considering the ambiguity of the rural as both ‘safe and good’ and ‘controlling and intrusive’? In what way do the rural youth talk about gossip and rumours as a part of their own everyday life? With discourse we understand symbolic or language representations of how the world is or ought to be (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Representations are about what images we produce (Holloway and Hubbard 2001), and exists as different ways of communicating with each other; it might cover texts, films, art, advertisements, etc. A discourse includes facts, images and myths about what something is. In this paper our point of departure is discourses found in how young people write or talks about the rural (the countryside).

Data and methods

This paper is based on two data sources: 126 essays and six focus group interviews among students at comprehensive schools (18-19 years old) in five municipalities in Norway. The data collection was carried out during the winter 2002/2003 (essays) and winter 2003/summer 2004 (focus groups).

The study locations

The data sampling was conducted in five locations; comprehensive schools in two rural municipalities in central Norway and in three cities, one in the south, one in the middle and one in the north of Norway. One of the rural comprehensive schools is situated in a regional centre, in a mountain municipality (A). The other comprehensive school is situated in the administrative centre of a coastal municipality (B). The rural municipalities have respectively 5400 and 3400 inhabitants. Both are situated more than 100 km from a larger city.

Agriculture, forestry and fishing are still traditional ways of making a living in the selected rural areas, but public sector and service industries are playing an increasing role.

Both of the rural municipalities have favourable opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism, for instance salmon rivers and lakes for fishing, forests and mountain areas ideal for skiing, walking and hunting. The coastal municipality has experienced a 16 percent population decline over the last 30 years, while the mountain area has increased its population by 7 percent in the same period. The urban comprehensive schools were situated in the capital Oslo (512 000 inhabitants), in Trondheim (154 000 inhabitants) and in Tromsø (northern Norway, 60 400 inhabitants).

The respondents

We contacted Norwegian language teachers in the selected comprehensive schools and asked them whether their classes (students) would participate by writing an essay about rural life and filling in a simple questionnaire. We wanted young people in their second or third (final) year at the comprehensive schools. The majority of the respondents were between 17-18 years old. These students are in a position where they will soon have to make decisions regarding further education, work, and where to settle down. Altogether seven classes participated; four of them in their second year and three in the last year. Various streams were represented like general, academic studies and vocational training. We received 130 essays and 126 completed questionnaires. Nearly two thirds of the respondents were students at the rural comprehensive schools and one third at the urban comprehensive schools.

The essays

The students were given the following topic: 'Rural life – good sides and bad sides'. The length of the essays varies from one to fifteen pages. As the majority was hand written, all the essays were afterwards typed in Word, in order to facilitate thematic searches. In the analysis the respondents are subdivided by place of growing up and by gender. Those who grew up in

a rural area are labelled ‘rural youth’ and those growing up in an urban area are labelled ‘urban youth’. Those who grew up in the countryside but are students in an urban comprehensive school are treated as rural youth and vice versa. This counts for six students in the comprehensive school of Tromsø and four students in the rural comprehensive schools. Six students grew up in other countries. They are classified as urban/rural according to where they live today.

Table 1. *Number of youth writing essays and completing questionnaires by gender and place of growing up.*

Place of growing up	Girls	Boys	Total
Countryside	48	37	85
City	26	15	41
Total	74	52	126

Altogether 126 students wrote an essay and completed the questionnaire. Both the essay writing and the questionnaire were administered by the teachers and forwarded to us. The students were allowed to be anonymous, but we wanted to be able to link the essay and the questionnaire. The questionnaire covered general background information with respect to age, gender, branch of study, where one grew up, parents’ occupation and their parents’ background, whether rural or urban. They were also asked where they wanted to settle down and where they wanted to work after finishing their education. Those who grew up in a city were asked about their relation to the countryside; whether they have relatives living in the countryside, how many times they have visited the countryside in the last twelve months, and what was the aim of their visits.

The focus group interviews

We wanted focus groups in both an urban and a rural area, and we asked teachers in the comprehensive school to recruit participants who wanted to join voluntarily. All the focus groups were set up in the afternoons; three in a classroom at the comprehensive school, one was arranged at our work place and two took place in a meeting room at a local hotel. In the focus group meetings we brought a light meal (pizza or sandwiches). When introducing this in the beginning, it was a ‘soft’ and popular start of the focus group interviews. One of us gave a brief introduction about the broad theme we wanted them to discuss. The discussions were taped and afterwards transcribed. In two of the focus groups there were girls only, in two boys only and in two there were a mix. Altogether 36 participated; 20 girls and 16 boys (Table 2).

Table 2. *The composition of the focus groups*

Focus group no	Comprehensive school location*	Girls	Boys	Total
1	Urban	6	2	8
2	Urban	6	-	6
3	Urban	3	5	8
4	Urban	-	5	5
5	Rural	-	4	4
6	Rural	5	-	5
Total		20	16	36

* *Although the comprehensive school is located in an urban area, rural youth might be students*

Procedures

After reading through all the essays, certain themes tended to be repeated. We searched for key words and made thematic lists of the themes that most commonly were mentioned as advantages or disadvantages. Some characteristics of the rural were listed as both positive and negative by the same person. For instance the statement ‘everybody knows each other’ is regarded as both positive (creates a more close-knit and secure society) and negative (you cannot do anything anonymously). The youth could also consider some aspects of the rural as positive for other people (in other life phases), but not for themselves (the youth). We were particularly interested in whether there were differences between rural and urban youth and gender differences. When we set up the focus group interviews we could investigate more in

depth themes that were presented in the essays. In addition to the written essays, the focus group interviews consist of 193 pages of transcribed text.

We have searched for the words signifying gossip and rumours in Norwegian (slad/slarv/rykt) in the written material (essays and transcribed focus group interviews) in order to see how the theme was talked about and in which contexts the theme came up. All of the data pertaining to gossip and rumours were further analysed. Quotations used in this paper which are drawn from the essays are followed by a piece of information about the informants' place of living (countryside or city), gender and identification of essay (for instance Country girl no. A/B/O/T). Citations drawn from the focus group interviews are followed by place of living, gender, and the focus group interview number (for instance: City boy F4). In this way it is possible to trace where the informant has grown up (country or city) and gender, and whether the quotation stems from a focus group (F) interview or an essay.

Rural gossip – youth experiences of rural Norway

The gendered context

Our data indicates that there is a gendered view on the countryside. Young women and men perceive the countryside both in similar and different ways. The impact of gender is seen in various ways. One of the most interesting finding was that girls were more concerned than the boys with the limitation rumour and gossip put upon rural life. Among the essay writers, seven out of ten rural girls (69%) address gossip and spreading of rumours as a negative aspect of rurality, compared with only 14 % of the boys. 27% of the urban girls and 6% of the urban boys mention rumour and gossip as a possible negative aspect of the rural.

Although gossip is widespread and probably has existed in most societies and cultures, and both men and women participate in gossiping, among our informants gossip was to a large degree regarded as a (rural) female activity. Women who gossip are participating in the formative stage in the development of 'public opinion' over a wide range of issues. One of the urban boys in one of our focus groups told about his experiences with rural life when he did military service in the north of Norway: "If I did anything, then the girls told tales about me".

The girls told about their awareness of taking care to avoid risking their reputation. One of the country girls told: “I talk about women who do not hesitate to spreading the message that you were seen together with him – really with him! And then one feather becomes one-two-three-four – at the end five fowls. ‘I saw them together. Soon she will be fatty [slang for pregnant]’”.

Where I live now, girls cannot wear a mini- skirt without getting a reputation as ‘cheap’ and a ‘tart’. I think this is nonsense (Country girl 5 A)

Everybody knows each other so it is easy to be talked about. It is quite cool that everybody greets and knows who I am. But you need to take care about what you say and do. It is easy to get a reputation or be ridiculed. (Country girl 39 B)

One of the country girls in the focus group explained why she thinks girls are more exposed to gossip:

In a way they [the girls] do not get the freedom to do what they want to, without being talked about or having a reputation. Or there are probably also so many expectations from family and others. So I feel that one is somewhat confined, and cannot really realise what they desire.

In a focus group with country boys, they were asked whether they thought it was more negative for girls to be exposed to gossip and rumour. Here is how they answered:

Arne: What counts for them [the girls] is probably to have a good reputation. That other girls look upon them as nice. That’s probably more important for them than for us. Of course it is important for us too to be accepted.

Per: Yes, but we are accepted in other ways

Ola: We do not grieve if somebody gossips about us. But the girls, if somebody questions their reputation, it is simply more devastating for them.....

We: Does this mean that girls have less freedom of action?

Ola: Yes in a way it is so. For instance at a party, if one girl fancies two or three boys, it is negative. Then she will be looked down on, in a way. But if a boy fancies seven or eight girls, it is cool. It gives the boys status, but the girls damage their reputation. (F5)

In the essays and in the interviews, especially the women talk about having a “good reputation” as something important, and about avoiding a “bad reputation”. Using a contextual and relational understanding of the concepts of “identity”, women's talk about gossip and the possible effect on their reputation could be seen as a part of their construction of gender identity in the eyes of “others”. It is especially gossip about moral issues like number of partners, sex, and drugs that could hurt women’s reputation.

Women (old ladies, grandmothers, aunts and mothers) were more explicitly pointed out as those who participated in gossip: “I know some old ladies, not very old, but in their forties, they do gossip” one of the girls claimed. Another told:

My grandmother lives near by the road, and if they [the grandparents] see people walking down the road they fetch the binoculars and then: ‘today, Peder is early..’ If my aunts come on a visit, then they start to talk about what has happened with whom, who has been out with whom, and they have seen this and that. (Country girl, F1)

The countryside versus the city

The countryside consists of overlapping social spaces with their own logic, institutions, and networks of actors. The attractiveness of the countryside lies in what the urban life cannot give. When the youth talk about their images and experiences with the rural they contrast it, implicitly or explicitly, with how they imagine the urban. The countryside represents values such as security and close relations which are seen as positive. However, no other theme but the caring, but also ‘controlling’ countryside was talked about in such an ambivalent manner among the young.

It is good to grow up in the countryside, away from the stressful city life.....In rural areas you have a lot of space outdoors where you can play. Everybody knows each other, so you have a lot of people around you all the time. It is harmonious in the countryside. Everything matches perfectly. As a child you can play everywhere; on the beach, around the house or in the forest. It is precisely as if there is a big wall around the rural parish, and nothing evil falls within the wall. (Country girl, 11B)

While the rural community is appreciated as safe and caring and isolated from city problems, it also has its costs: social control, loss of freedom, gossip and rumours (Haugen and Villa 2005).

When I was younger I used to think it was great to know who everybody was, but during the years I have changed my mind. It makes us always have to consider what others will say if there is something we want to do (Country girl)

In a close-knit community the youth imagine that social exclusion has much more comprehensive consequences than in a city:

What is negative with the countryside is gossip. If you end up with people talking/gossiping about you, you risk getting a bad reputation and then you risk losing your friends. Here [in the countryside] it is important to have a decent reputation, that people admire you in one way or another. As there are a limited number of people, it might be very lonely if you don't have any friends where you live. (Country girl 27 A)

In contrast, cities are associated with anonymity and impersonal environment. The positive aspect is that the anonymity allows more freedom:

In a small rural society everybody knows almost everybody, and often there is a lot of gossiping. I moved from the capital one year ago, and one thing I miss is the anonymity (Country girl, 5A)

The residents in the countryside are described as less tolerant for 'differences' than people living in the cities. Especially minority groups like gay and lesbians might encounter less acceptance and experience stigmatisation:

If one finds out that one is somewhat different from the majority, for instance that you are attracted to the same sex, many will have problems to understand this in the countryside, especially the older generation. Such things [homosexuality] are not as common in the countryside as in the cities, and it is probably more difficult for the rural dwellers to accept such things if they should turn up (Country girl, 32 B)

I have seen the negative sides of this local environment. It is very difficult to be different, and one might feel cooped up. Few months ago it was known that a person who had moved from the village was gay. The one that actually experienced the village's reactions was his sister who still lives here. She caught all the gossip, when her brother returned with his boyfriend. In the city it is much easier to hide in the crowd, and this will probably save many problems (Country girl, 36 B)

Some of the rural youth gave examples of gossip which had a negative purpose. Especially those who acted differently and didn't know 'their position' were victims of gossip and ill-natured aspersion:

A few years ago a family came to settle down here and start with a new business. But they were pushed out because of gossip and that people didn't want them to succeed with their business. (---) It tells how conservative we can be here in the countryside, compared with how people in the city probably are (Country girl, F6)

In the essays and also in the focus interviews the youth were talking about gossiping as a general and sometimes pervasive problem. What is interesting is that they hardly ever mention themselves as a victim of gossip. Rather they relate to gossip as a phenomenon they have to consider. The fact that the countryside consists of more overlapping social spaces and network of actors than in urban areas imply that the countryside is more 'transparent' and that the reputation more easily is transferred from one network to another. The risk of being 'talked about' negatively prevents many from doing what they otherwise would have done. In this way the 'transparent' countryside and the risk of getting a bad reputation constrain their freedom.

The youth also talk about gossip as a way of exchanging knowledge:

Like my parents, they use to gossip at home. But that is because – they do gossip about people- who are relatives with whom etc. But it is like this because they try to sort out things; who is she? Is she his daughter? If they gossip they got answers. They do not necessarily talk bad about others, they just find out of things (Country girl, F6)

This citation shows that gossip also can be perceived as ‘harmless’ and necessary in order to be kept informed and in this sense gossip maintains the rural as ‘safe and good’. Although gossip can be understood as a positive and efficient means of cementing and maintaining social bonds and transmitting information about rules and norms, the majority of the young people point to gossip as a negative force.

Discussion

In the beginning of the article we referred to the dilemma of safety versus freedom. This dilemma might be illustrated by the youth’s experiences or reconstructions of rural gossip. This might be discussed especially in relation to the concepts of individualization, youth identity, rural culture and gender.

Difficulties in accepting what is ‘different’, jealousy, gossip and conservatism are among the characteristics of rurality found in our interviews with youth from different localities, both urban and rural. This might be highlighted as most important critics of a ‘safe and good’-image of the rural, and youth might be among the most critical groups of the established rural ‘safe and good’.

In its function and consequences, gossip represents a kind of rural justice. The transitional point where ‘safe and good’ changes into unhealthy and greedy rural justice is however difficult to grasp. When analyzing our data we find that gossip might be understood as representing pastime, companionship, prevention, caring and control. The effects of gossip might vary, from being totally harmless, enhancing solidarity of the group “I think it knits the women closer together, that they have something in common to talk about” to social exclusion at the other end.

In post-modern analyses of youth the concept of individualization is crucial. During youth period it has become increasingly important to find ones own solutions, constructing ones own identity and doing ones own choices (Heggen 2004). While tradition and identity in earlier peripheral areas mostly were learned from one generation to another, youth

socialization is in modern theory described as disembodied from local culture, tradition and place (Giddens 1990). In his work on youth and individualization Krane (2004) is critical to such a statement, and refers to the false consciousness of individualisation as the most dominant cultural feature of post-modern time. Rural studies thus also have challenged a general and place neutral description of youth culture, and put weight on the situatedness of experiences (see Heggen 2004: 95-96). The importance of having a good reputation and the older generation's gossip as shown in our data, are examples of the importance of local context and the socialization of one generation by another. The situatedness furthermore urges us to be careful in drawing simple conclusions on differences between central and peripheral areas. In our analyses we have been occupied with youth's perceptions and constructions of rural areas. A preliminary conclusion is that there exists a general understanding of gossip which is strongly related to special places and cultures (rural communities). This is found as experiences of young people from rural areas, as well as urban youth's opinions of rural communities in general. In both cases the youth associate gossip with the country-life in contrast to the life in urban areas or cities. Although the youth in our focus groups admits that they also gossip among friends, the gossip in rural areas is seen as a much more comprehensive activity, represented by 'everybody knows'.

Villa (2000) found modernization of rurality to be identified through 'moral meetings', as the changing of gender relations, local norms and expectations throughout generations challenged the established 'proper thing to do' in the rural community. The dominant reconstruction of rural gossip found in our data might be analysed as - from a youth point of view - a 'un-proper' thing to do. The youth 'rejection' of rural gossip might be seen as continuous moral meetings between different age-groups and sub-cultures within a community. Hence it also might become part of a youth identity and individualization project, as distancing themselves, labelling or stigmatisation of certain phenomenon (gossip), places (countryside) or groups (scandal-monger) might be seen as processes in the construction of *us* and *them*. According to Heggen (2004) stigmatisation might be seen as one of the important cultural processes within local spaces. Not to gossip might be an important distinction between us; the youth, and them; the parents, aunts, grandmothers. Or maybe more correct: Not to gossip about unimportant things or within wrong contexts (as gossip of course also will be done within youth groups, and which they neither don't deny). This illustrates doubleness in freedom and individualization. The impact of local context and social network is evident. At the same time, to construct a distance to certain 'skills' might represent individuality.

The article has showed that there is a gendered dimension in the young people's rural discourse. Young girls and boys are expected to behave in different ways. There is a gendered hierarchy regarding what is accepted. The idea that 'everybody knows each other' has a certain control function. Especially the young women experience the countryside as more controlling and constraining than the young men. They have the feeling of being under supervision and that their behaviour appraised. Another gender difference is that women not only more often are 'victims' of gossip, but women are also those pointed to as the gossipers. Scandal-monger (*sladrekjerring*) is a gendered concept. Young women can to a smaller degree than young men challenge prevailing norms and rules without risking their reputation. This might be one reason why young women want the anonymity in the city in the phase of their life when searching for their identity as young women. In this sense the city represents more room of manoeuvre and opportunities for trying and failing.

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