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Perceptions of Place among Rural, Farm and Urban Young People in Ireland

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Abstract

In this paper, we report findings from a national survey of 8,316 Irish young people in 2002, which reveals the ways in which socio-spatial context impacts on young people's perceptions of the places in which they live and their views about the nature of certain 'social capital' aspects of their local communities, such as safety, friendliness, potential support from others, opportunities for recreation, and physical environment. It is clear from the evidence presented that perceptions of place are coloured by key contexts such as age, gender and social background. Our evidence also points to the striking significance that socio-spatial location implies for young people's perceptions of their communities. Differences are apparent between rural and urban young people, particularly the strength of positive perceptions among rural youth, while simultaneously reflecting the influence of gender, age and occupational status of parents. Within the rural environment, farm young people also show distinct patterns in the kinds of perceptions they are likely to hold. Our findings raise several conceptual considerations and implications for further inquiry.

Keywords

Young people; community; social capital; gender; rural; urban; farm.

Introduction

As cultural geographers and sociologists of childhood and youth make clear, place exerts a distinct influence upon social relations, necessitating considerable negotiation of young people's spaces, time and status (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2002). It is also clear that young people have an astute awareness of the communities within which they live, despite their lack of voice at a political level. As community and family life alters significantly, the implications are profound for the way in which young people experience and regard the places where they live. In recent years, there has been a growing body of international literature dealing with the impact that living in rural and urban environments has on young people's everyday encounters, social relations and identities (e.g. Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Morrow, 2000; Valentine and Holloway, 2001; Matthews et al, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Nairn et al, 2003; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003; Karsten, 2005). Not surprisingly, place and community matter to young people in distinctive ways, not least of which include the possibilities provided

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for friendship relations, freedom, escape, exploration, adventure and general wellbeing (O'Brien et al, 2000; Morrow, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Pooley et al, 2002; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005).

However, our knowledge of the extent to which young people's perceptions of where they live are distinctly different or congruent within and between these environments is less than systematic. More specifically, knowledge of the extent to which rural and urban socio-spatial aspects, over and above such critical factors as a young person's age, gender or socio-economic status, show distinct effects is generally limited. Within the present paper, the following research questions explore the complexity surrounding the degree of difference and similarity among young people on this issue:

1. How do age, gender, socioeconomic status, rural/urban location and farm upbringing exert independent effects on young people's sense of where they live?
2. Is there a distinct statistically significant difference between growing up in a rural or urban socio-spatial context in terms of young people's perceptions of place?
3. Within a rural environment, does living in a farm household influence or alter these issues in significant ways?

The research findings are based on a survey of 8,316 young people aged 10 to 17 years who participated in the Irish component of the 2002 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. We explore young people's perceptions of where they live, using some 'social capital' type measures, such as: safety; friendliness; potential support from others; opportunities for recreation; and physical environment. Before attending to the substantive elements of our paper and by way of context, we present a short overview that illustrates the significance of place, community and social capital in young people's lives.

Young People, Community and Social Capital

Young people actively cultivate local spheres beyond the home; places that are safe to occupy in the context of their fears about risks and vulnerabilities (Harden, 2000). Harden (2000) and Speak (2000) show that young people are concerned by the same kinds of issues as their parents, such as 'stranger danger', crime and vandalism, and are attuned to the concept of participation. Research by Pooley et al. (2002) shows that when talking about 'sense of community', young people emphasise their relationships with family, friends and neighbours as the best aspects, while in the research by Nairn et al. (2003) aspects of the natural and built environments are important community features for both urban and rural young people. Although a much debated notion, 'community' appears primarily as a 'relational' notion for young people in the work by Pooley et al., with the emphasis on people and relationships in the first instance, while for the respondents in the study by Nairn et al. 'inclusion' meant occupying spaces of comfort and familiarity with other young people. Pooley et al. (2002) show how young people who were recent incomers to a community sensed a degree of loneliness since they had not been able to establish the kinds of close relationships that would tie them into their communities. The authors also suggest that a young person's age has a bearing on the relationship to neighbourhood or local public space, with younger adolescents tending to report higher levels of support, activity, and friendships in their

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neighbourhood than older ones (Pooley et al., 2002: 10). In sum, being part of a safe environment, caring people, cleanliness, proximity to amenities, and low crime levels are all valued as positive elements by young people.

Recent work has focused on how 'social capital' within communities can be key to the creation of well-being and health among young people (Jack, 2000). Although a contested notion (see Shortall, 2004; Leonard, 2004), social capital is seen to be a vital component of contemporary community life in terms of its use and exchange value (Leonard, 2004). Social capital can be viewed as both the value of an individual's social relationships, which can provide benefits, and as a quality of groups, networks, institutions, communities, and societies (Perkins et al., 2002: 36). Trust, safety, support networks and information are all viewed as constitutive ingredients and in this paper we don't make any assumptions about its exchange value but accept the experience of social capital as important to the general well-being and welfare of young people (Ferguson, 2006). Studies of child neglect, for instance, suggest that it is quite often the poor social capital base of neighbourhoods that constitute a vital ingredient in accounting for its incidence (Jack and Jordan, 2001).

Young people's experience or perception of social capital, however, is a complex consideration when we have regard to the changing patterns of contemporary lifestyles and livelihoods. One general feature identified in the literature is that young people's use of time and space has become increasingly structured in accordance with adult life and subject to heightened surveillance (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; O'Brien et al., 2000; Childress, 2004; Karsten, 2005). Risks associated with place, such as traffic concerns or strangers inhabiting public space have altered the nature of parent-child relations in terms of time-space usage (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Harden, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Maguire and Shirlow, 2004). The result is that young people's play and recreation is controlled and regulated by adults as opposed to being spontaneous (Karsten, 2005: 287) and public space has generally narrowed in accessibility (Childress, 2004). Such aspects have led to an increase in the institutionalisation of leisure and play (e.g. swimming clubs, theatre groups) for young people, who have become what Karsten (2005) describes as the 'backseat generation', especially those from middle class backgrounds (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Lareau, 2000). While O'Brien et al. (2000) question the assumption that 'chaperoned lifestyles' are somehow negative for friendships and peer relations, some authors (Adler and Adler, 1994) claim, however, that the growth in institutionalised play has negative implications for the development of young people's self-reliance, cooperation, problem solving and interpersonal skills. Nevertheless, a recent phenomenon noted by childhood geographers and sociologists, such as Valentine and McKendrick (1997) and Karsten (2005), is that outdoor play has declined and tends to be undertaken increasingly within the confines of the home or in close proximity, such as private gardens. Valentine and McKendrick (1997) note that those in more working class or mixed class areas tend to use public space more than middle class young people (see also Lareau, 2000).

Against this backdrop, it is often parents who are the ones to perceive the countryside as a better place to grow up in, with more opportunities for children's play. The extent to which growing up in the countryside provides the recipe for an idyllic lifestyle - through its sense of community, naturalism, tranquility - has been the subject

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of some recent examination within rural studies (e.g. Matthews et al., 2000; Nairn et al., 2003; Wiborg, 2004; Rye, 2006). While living in rural society generates multiple understandings (Wiborg 2004), whether one views the rural as 'idyllic' or 'dull' (which are not mutually exclusive characterisations) depends in large part on one's stock of economic and cultural capital resources, gender, education and incomer/native status (Rye, 2006). The 'dullness' of rural places, however, tends to be especially connected with the lack of youth provision, which appears as an almost universal theme in young people's accounts of rural life; a finding that is well-documented in the international literature (Matthews et al., 2000; Tucker and Matthews, 2001; McGrath, 2002; Panelli et al., 2002; Auclair and Vanoni, 2004; De Roiste and Dineen, 2005; Rye, 2006). In the absence of suitable outlets for the development of young people's lifestyle, the dominance of pub culture, especially among males, appears in several accounts of rural life (e.g. Campbell, 2001). Such cultural practices can begin the process of disaffection with rural life quite early on and can be especially problematic for young women (Haugen and Villa, 2005). Almost two thirds of young girls in the study by Geraghty et al. (1997) felt it was harder to be a young woman than a man in a rural area. This echoes Rye's findings (2006: 419) that 'for rural girls the countryside seems to be less idyllic and duller than for their male counterparts' (see also Tucker and Matthews, 2001).

In summary, a wide range of studies show that age, gender, socioeconomic status and the socio-spatial contexts of rural and urban residence exert types of influence on young people's encounters and perceptions of where they live. However, our knowledge of the interactive effects of these on young people's perceptions of place is less than systematic. In other words, how pronounced are the effects of these variables in shaping young people's perceptions of the 'social capital' aspects of the spaces they inhabit? The departure point for the present study is therefore to address this complexity in the Irish context.

The Research

The findings presented are based on the Health Behaviour in School-Children (HBSC) survey undertaken in 2002, which surveyed 8,316 pupils in the Republic of Ireland. HBSC is a cross-national study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation European office. Data are collected every four years within participating countries, from young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years covering late childhood, early and mid-adolescence. Multidisciplinary teams from 41 countries collaborate in the design of the survey, which involves the administration of self-completion questionnaires to students in classrooms, and must conform to the international protocol in relation to sampling and data collection (see Currie et al., 2004). The Irish data reported here were collected from a sample designed to be representative of the distribution of young people in the target ages throughout the country. Primary and post-primary schools were randomly selected from lists provided by the national Department of Education and Science. Classrooms within schools were subsequently randomly selected for participation.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on young people's response to a series of closed statements about their local area. The first statement asked young people to respond to the following: 'Generally speaking, I feel safe in the area where I live ...', with four response categories of 'always', 'most of the time', 'sometimes' 'rarely or never'. A second statement asked 'Do you think the area in which you live is a good

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place to live?', with a five point response set from 'Yes, it's really good' to 'No, it's not at all good'. A third statement asked young people 'How well off is the area in which you live?' and provided five responses, from 'not at all well off' to 'very well off'. A further five statements were rated on a five-point scale, from 'I strongly agree' to 'I strongly disagree'. The statements were: 'People say hello and often stop to talk to each other on the street'; 'It is safe for children to play outside during the day'; 'There are good places to spend your free time (e.g. leisure centre, parks, shops)'; 'I could ask for help or a favour from neighbours'; and 'Most people around here would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance'. Young people were also asked to choose from a three point scale of 'lots', 'some' or 'none' as to whether the following aspects existed in their area: 'Groups of young people who cause trouble'; 'Litter, broken glass or rubbish lying around'; 'Run-down houses or buildings'.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). For the current analyses, the response options for variables were dichotomised (e.g. 'agree strongly/agree' versus 'disagree strongly/disagree'), as indicated in Table 1. A series of chi square analyses were employed to test for the significance of differences in reported perceptions between urban and rural young people and - within the rural group - between those who come from farm and non-farm households. To avoid masking any possible effect of gender, these analyses are conducted separately for males and females. Table 2 presents the results of a series of logistic regression analyses, where the perceptions of place/social capital measures are employed as dependent variables. Gender, age group, parental occupational group, urban/rural status and farm/non-farm household were employed as predictors simultaneously in the regression models tested. The values presented are the odds ratios and the associated 95% confidence intervals for each predictor (explained further below).

Finally, some conceptual considerations need to be pointed out. First of all, deciding what counts as 'rural' and 'urban' is a notoriously difficult and contentious issue within the social sciences (e.g. Mormont, 1990; Halfacree, 1993; Rye, 2006). Such categories tend towards dualistic and dichotomous views of the world, which we accept are problematic. Nevertheless, we argue that such concepts are significant in the structuring of everyday life. We have classified 'urban' from respondents' description of where they live as 'city or town' while 'rural' indicates 'village or country'. This of course does not capture fully the socially constructed meaning of 'rural' and 'urban' in the sense that places can share elements of both in their symbolic and material composition; for example suburban areas or satellite towns can retain a 'rural' feel while having material elements that we associate with more urbanised environments (see Corcoran, 2005). It is also important to bear in mind the unique residential settlement pattern of the Irish countryside which sets it apart from other European countries. The Irish countryside is characterised by low density, widely dispersed residential hinterlands, served by many small centres, villages and small towns Jackson and Haase, 1996). Towns in an Irish context can thereby show considerable variation in terms of continuity of a 'rural' legacy. Nevertheless, if we look at the New Zealand study by Nairn et al. (2003) in which young people understood 'rural' predominantly to refer to areas with a history of farming, small population size and limited social and economic infrastructure, then it would appear that our categorisation of 'village and

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the countryside' is aligned to a considerable degree with what young people themselves imagine to be rural. In our analysis, we also generalise in our treatment of the 'farm' category, where the main parental occupation is described by the young person as simply 'farming'. Such characterisation does not distinguish in terms of farming system, size or type which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Findings

Our first analysis (Table 1) reveals significant sets of differences between rural and urban young people's assessments of where they live, which also tend to be distinctly gendered. It is also evident that the differences are significant statistically ($p < 0.001$). When presented with a host of social capital measures, responses reveal striking differences in attitudes about the nature of trust, safety, friendliness and support. It is clear that rural youth have more positive views about the nature of social interactions with others in their communities, which is especially the case for rural boys. Boys living in rural communities tend to feel distinctly safer than their urban counterparts, with 67 per cent of boys in rural communities compared to 44.3 per cent in urban locations suggesting they always, or most of the time, feel safe. Other social capital type measures, such as being able to ask for help from neighbours, the presence of everyday greetings and being able to trust others not to take advantage, are higher among rural young people. There is a notable difference among rural and urban boys in terms of the perception of being able to ask for help from their neighbours (78.2 per cent rural agreeing compared with 66.7 per cent urban).

Table 1: *Place and community perceptions according to gender and socio-spatial context of urban, rural and farm environments*

Statement	Urban Males	Rural Males	Urban Girls	Rural Girls	Farm rural boys	Non-farm rural boys	Farm rural girls	Non-farm rural girls
I feel safe in local area ('always/mostly')	44.2	67.0***	43.8	57.2***	71.6	54.3	60.7	48.3**
Local area is a good place to live ('really good')	35.1	52.0***	37.7	45.6***	58.8	42.0**	47.2	40.6**
People say hello ¹	71.3	81.5***	75.7	83.0***	85.7	75.9**	86.0	78.0*
Safe to play outside ¹	81.1	87.7***	81.5	82.1**	85.9	84.2	83.0	82.0
Good places to go ¹	53.6	42.6***	50.1	31.1**	46.7	47.1	28.6	42.9
Can ask for help ¹	66.7	78.2***	74.4	77.5**	79.6	72.1	78.0	75.6
Most people would take advantage ²	56.9	63.1***	61.2	67.5***	62.6	60.5	70.8	64.5
Local area is well-off ('very' or 'quite')	44.5	46.7	46.3	42.2	43.7	45.8	43.0	45.5
No groups of youth causing trouble	26.2	51.8***	32.1	52.0***	57.0	36.8***	58.4	39.6**
No litter, broken glass, rubbish visible	32.7	49.8***	36.9	49.2***	53.5	40.8*	52.9	41.4*
No run-down houses	74.7	69.9**	80.0	72.4***	67.1	73.1	71.1	77.2

¹ response of 'strongly agree or agree'

² response of 'strongly disagree or disagree'

* significant difference, $p < 0.05$;

** significant difference, $p < 0.01$;

*** significant difference, $p < 0.001$ (Chi squared test)

Differences between rural and urban girls are noticeable on the social capital measures, albeit not as distinctly as the differences between their male counterparts. Where a distinct difference emerges between rural and urban girls, however, is in the extent to which they agree that there are 'good' places for them to frequent, such as parks, leisure centres and shops (31.1 per cent of rural girls agreeing compared with 50.1 per cent of urban girls). The finding here confirms the extent to which growing up in the countryside can be a difficult experience especially for girls, who perceive fewer opportunities open to them.

When we compare the experiences of being brought up on a farm, again a set of significant differences emerge, albeit a smaller set than between rural and urban environments. Of particular note is the higher proportion of farm girls who feel safe (60.7 per cent compared with 48.3 per cent non-farm rural girls) and the sense, among farm boys, of rural areas being 'really good' places to live (58.8 per cent compared with 42 per cent other rural males).

Finally, differences are quite striking between rural and urban young people in terms of their encounters with the physical environment. The experience of the rural cohort is that young people generally perceive less evidence of physical decay and neglect and are less likely to indicate the presence of other youth deemed to be troublesome (almost twice as many rural boys as urban felt there were no groups of young people causing trouble where they lived). Compared with non-farm rural boys, a significantly higher percentage of those brought up on a farm believed there were 'no groups of young people causing trouble' (57 per cent compared with 36.8 per cent).

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis investigates the extent to which living in a rural, urban or farm environment has an effect on perceptions of place, over and above other important factors such as age, gender and occupational background. The 'regression' model allows us to test the power of individual variables while simultaneously taking into consideration the remaining variables in the analysis. The results are presented in the form of odds ratios where a 'reference' category has an odds ratio of one (in our analysis the reference categories are: 'male' in the gender variable; 'under fourteen years' in the age variable and so on). For each statement in Table 2, if an odds ratio result is indicated as greater than one, then young people who are not in the reference category (in this case, 'female', '14 or older' and so on) are more likely to express a particular response (listed in the left hand column of the table) than young people in the reference category. Likewise, a value less than one indicates lower likelihood vis-à-vis the reference group. For example, a response of 0.8 to the 'safe to play outside' question within the gender variable (where the reference group is male) means there is less likelihood or odds of females agreeing positively with this statement. We also provide the range of values within which we can be 95 per cent confident that the true value of the odds ratios fall (the confidence interval).

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Table 2: Logistic Regression Odds Ratios (95% confidence intervals) for community perceptions: selected variables

	Gender (reference: Male) OR (95% CI)	Age (reference: under 14 years) OR (95% CI)	SES (reference: white collar) OR (95% CI)	Urban/rural (reference: urban) OR (95% CI)	Farm/non-farm (reference non- farm) OR (95% CI)
<i>Place-Social Capital Perceptions</i>					
I feel safe in local area ('always/mostly')	0.8(0.7 0.9)***	0.8(0.7 0.9)**	0.9(0.8 1.0)ns	1.9(1.7 2.2)***	1.3(1.1 1.6)**
Local area is a good place to live ('really good')	0.9(0.8 1.0)ns	0.5(0.4 0.6)***	0.8(0.7 0.9)**	1.6(1.4 1.8)***	1.1(0.9 1.3)
People say hello ¹	1.1 (0.9 1.3)ns	0.8(0.7 0.9)**	1.2(1.0 1.4)**	1.6(1.4 1.9)***	1.5(1.2 2.0)**
Safe to play outside ¹	0.8(0.7 0.9)*	0.9(0.8 1.1)ns	0.8(0.7 0.9)**	1.2(1.1 1.5)**	0.9(0.7 1.1)ns
Good places to go ¹	0.7(0.7 0.8)***	0.5(0.4 0.5)***	1.0(0.9 1.1)ns	0.5(0.4 0.5)** *	1.0(0.8 1.2)ns
Can ask for help ¹	1.1(1.0 1.3)ns	0.8(0.7 0.9)**	1.0(0.9 1.1)ns	1.4(1.2 1.6)***	1.0(0.8 1.3)ns
Most people would take advantage ²	1.2(1.1 1.4)**	0.9(0.8 1.0)ns	0.7(0.6 0.8)***	1.3(1.2 1.5)***	0.8(0.7 1.0)ns
Local area is well off ('very' or 'quite')	1.0 (0.9 1.1) ns	0.8 (0.7 0.8)***	0.6 (0.5 0.6)***	0.9 (0.8 1.1) ns	0.7 (0.5 0.8)***
No groups of youth causing trouble	1.1 (1.0 1.3) ns	0.6 (0.6 0.7)***	0.9 (0.8 1.1) ns	2.3 (2.1 2.7)***	1.4 (1.2 1.7)***
No litter, broken glass, rubbish visible	1.0 (0.9 1.1) ns	0.8 (0.7 0.9)***	0.9 (0.8 1.0)*	1.8 (1.6 2.0)***	1.1 (0.9 1.3) ns
No run down houses	1.3 (1.1 1.4)**	0.6 (0.5 0.7)***	0.8 (0.7 0.9)**	0.7 (0.6 0.8)***	0.7 (0.6 0.9)**

1 response of 'strongly agree or agree'

2 response of 'strongly disagree or disagree'

* significant difference, p<0.05;

** significant difference, p<0.01;

*** significant difference, p<0.001

The effects of age and gender, over and above socio-spatial residence and occupational background, are evident in some respects. Older adolescents have a greater likelihood to report negative aspects of place and to be more critical of the lack of opportunities and some social capital measures (viz. safety, friendliness, being able to ask for help). Girls are less likely to take a cynical view that others are prepared to take advantage if the opportunity presented itself but have a reduced odds ratio of seeing their areas as safe or to find good places to go.¹ Unlike older adolescents, girls are less likely to perceive there to be elements of physical neglect in their communities, such as rundown houses or buildings.

The effect of socioeconomic status seems slightly more ambivalent, with 'blue' collar young people more inclined to see people as friendly, but also less likely to deny that others would take advantage if the opportunity arose.² Such backgrounds make young people more likely to see or perceive negative aspects, such as lack of safe play areas and more aspects of physical neglect. They generally don't regard their environments as 'really' good places to live (reduced odds by a half compared with 'white collar' youth).

What is less ambivalent is the effect of living in a rural environment on young people's experience of social capital. Across all measures, with one exception (view of area as well off), significant differences are encountered among those living in the countryside and villages. Growing up in these locations raises the odds significantly - almost double in

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some cases - of feeling safer, having people to ask for support, encountering friendly neighbours and perceiving less physical neglect and decay (although rural youth in general are more inclined to notice dilapidated houses or buildings than their urban counterparts). Within the rural environment itself, we find that it is farm young people who tend to perceive more dimensions we associate with social capital, namely feelings of safety and friendliness. Farm youth, however have reduced odds that they will view their areas as well-off and are more inclined to notice run down houses and buildings.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study has sought to provide a systematic understanding of how young people differ in their experience of place and their communities. Some of the findings help to confirm existing evidence, while others elicit new insights and areas for further investigation. Overall, significant variations are apparent in this regard, which identify not only the distinct importance of age, gender and socioeconomic background but also the socio-spatial contexts of rural, farm and urban environments. While we know more about the extent to which the former variables have influenced young people's relationships and interactions, the lack of comparative data about the latter contexts has heretofore limited our understanding of their substantive influence. The evidence suggests that the impact of such factors on young people is quite nuanced. Incorporating these in a multivariate regression analysis allows us to compare and disentangle the significance of these key contexts on the lives of young people and serves to strengthen our understanding of what influences their most immediate worldviews.

In terms of young people's experience of the communities and environments in which they live, gender, occupational background and age clearly continue to predict differences in perceptions among adolescents, but particularly age. The multivariate analysis shows more evidence of age differences in how places are perceived, while controlling for all other factors. Older adolescents (over fourteen years) are less inclined to see their areas as good places to live or to perceive the place as friendly, safe and helpful. They are also less inclined to suggest that there are no issues of physical neglect or problems. Our evidence regarding age would seem to affirm the point made by Pooley et al (2002) and referred to earlier, that one's sense of place changes over the adolescent period. This is difficult to explain in any straightforward way. What we see though is a hardening of attitudes among teenagers and perhaps alterations in expectations about what they want and what's on offer as they make the transition to early adulthood and begin to extend their social boundaries. As the study by O'Connor et al.(2002) of young people's narratives suggests, the 'local' area may be more central in the world views of younger adolescents and children. It might also reflect the perception (whether or not it is objectively the case) that communities seem to cater more for younger adolescents in opportunities and outlets for recreation. It may reflect more restrictions on older adolescents' social boundaries. Further research is needed to provide deeper insight into these particular findings.

Gender and parental occupational background also account for key differences in how place is perceived, although fewer than those relating to age. Girls show less sense of safety and trust in the spaces available to them and are more inclined to feel that there are fewer opportunities for recreation. This is no doubt a reflection of a complex mixture of differing expectations, worries and perhaps restrictions on girls by parents

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and other adults (see Tucker and Matthews, 2001). It may indeed echo the work of O'Brien et al. (2000) which illustrated how girls were typically more likely to be restricted in the use of public spaces and to express heightened risk anxieties about places they could go. Young people from 'blue collar' backgrounds appear to be more negative about the physical aspects of their neighbourhoods, which probably reflects the fact that their communities are less well-off and perhaps also the restricted opportunities to engage in activities outside their areas. The possibility that most people would take advantage of them if the opportunity arose is also less likely to be refuted by such young people. Nevertheless, the upside, according to these young people, appears to be that people are more inclined to regularly say hello and talk to one another. A point worthy of further inquiry is whether this reflects a tendency towards a 'chaperoned lifestyle' among more middle class youth who engage recreationally, like their parents, outside their neighbourhoods.

The multivariate analysis reveals the strong independent effect that socio-spatial environment plays on the world view of young people. Consistent across almost all community and social capital measures is the strength of rural young people's positive perceptions, even after we have controlled for and taken into consideration gender, age and occupational status of parents. This paper does not suggest a dualistic reading of a rural/urban divide, where 'rural' denotes idyllic life and 'urban' translates as 'alienating', since there is no unitary experience of social life in these terms (Nairn et al, 2003). But, when we take account of gender, age and occupational status of parents, the evidence suggests that growing up in a rural environment retains a powerful effect and increases one's chances of perceiving and feeling positive forms of social capital, namely trust, safety, friendliness and the availability of support networks. Although providing a signpost towards 'social capital', these are, of course, only perceptions and do not, in any clear objective sense, tell us that social capital exists in more abundance in rural areas. These perceptions that seem to conform to the literature of a putative 'rural idyll' come from young people themselves, although we don't know whether in reality they transpire to be somewhat 'mythical' (Tucker and Matthews, 2001). We find clear evidence surrounding the possible 'dullness' of rural life as young people suggest a lack of 'good' spaces to interact in rural areas. This would conform to Rye's (2006) conclusion that a strong rural idyll within young people's discourses can co-exist with a sense of rural bleakness. Although our analysis presents them separately, the age and rural factors resonate with research reported elsewhere showing that young people's feelings of 'nothing to do' in rural areas tends to increase steadily over the teenage years (Matthews et al., 2000). De Roiste and Dineen's (2005) evidence suggests that older adolescents (seventeen and eighteen year olds) in rural areas are those most likely to encounter transport constraints as they seek to widen their social boundaries at this age. By the time many reach the age of sixteen, youth clubs no longer appear attractive spaces to occupy for teenagers (Geraghty et al., 1997).

Harden (2000) argues that trust is often seen as a dangerous characteristic among young people because of their vulnerability but that being in places where others are known to young people provides a form of protection and risk management. Growing up in a rural area contributes towards a distinct sense of safety, which is statistically higher than in an urban environment. Furthermore, being from a farm family increases one's chance of feeling safe within the community, albeit there remain gender

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patterns to this. Farm boys and girls both perceive a sense of friendliness, which alongside the safety variable, might intimate that within the rural environment it is young people from such backgrounds who tend to perceive social life in more cohesive terms. Research from the United States shows certain distinct characteristics among farm families, notably, strength of generational continuity (presence in the community), extended family, interdependence and efforts among farming parents to get involved in community life (Elder and Conger, 2000). If similar cultural properties apply here, this might help to explain why farm children attach a greater sense of cohesion to their localities. Generational continuity as a feature of farm life in Ireland suggests that farm families are particularly embedded in the social and cultural spheres of rural communities, which may have implications for children's sense of social capital. Again, further research would greatly illuminate the differences that have emerged within our investigations of farm and non-farm young people.

Growing up on a farm is also associated with a raised perception among young people of the existence of run-down houses and buildings, and an increased likelihood of regarding the locality in which they live as not particularly well-off. There may be some resonance here with the suggestion by Perkins et al. that 'those most aware and critical of local problems are often the most satisfied with their community as a place to live' (2002: 42). It could also point to young people's awareness of the hidden dimensions of poverty in rural areas, especially in the context of evidence that many farm families encounter serious deprivation and income poverty (Commins, 2004). With regard to urban-rural differences, the irony is that while rural young people feel a general sense of cohesion within their local environments, as noted earlier rural places seem to be most limited in terms of offering recreational or institutional spaces (Matthews et al., 2000).

It is clear from the evidence presented here that perceptions of place are coloured by key contexts such as age, gender and social backgrounds. Our evidence, however, points also to the striking significance that socio-spatial context plays in young people's perceptions of their communities and the opportunities immediate in their lives. There is a distinct socio-spatial patterning evident even after we account for young people's age, gender and occupational backgrounds of parents. While we conclude that the socio-spatial context of young people's lives exerts significant influences on patterns of perception, we concur with the point expressed by Nairn et al. (2003) that there is, of course, no unitary essence to being a young person in the countryside or in more urban places. In fact, our evidence suggests the need to further deconstruct notions such as the 'rural' to illustrate how differences emerge within socio-spatial contexts. Here, we have demonstrated that within rural life itself, there are key distinctions to be drawn between the views of the immediate world inhering within farm and non-farm ways of life.

In the context of immense changes affecting families and communities in contemporary Ireland, it is important we begin to further explore the impact that socio-spatial context plays in young people's perceptions but not in isolation from other key determinants. From what young people reveal about their perceptions, our aim has been to provide more insight into the nuanced patterns which differentiate their outlook about the nature of social life around them. While the present paper is based on quantitative findings that reveal statistically robust patterns among Irish

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young people's perceptions, more qualitative sources of data are needed to complement this approach. Qualitative research can further this work by providing more insights into the varying and complex ways in which place is understood, regarded and utilised by young people.

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Notes

- 1 The less cynical view is based on a response of 'strongly disagree/agree' to the statement that 'most people would take advantage if they had the chance'.
- 2 'Blue collar' refers to occupations categorised as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. 'White collar' occupations refer to professional and managerial positions.

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