

Big Brother in rural societies: Youths' discourses on gossip

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The article examines the rural discourse among rural and urban youths. The 'rural' is not seen as a fixed reality, but as a constructed and contested concept. The article is based on essays and focus group interviews with youths in a comprehensive school. The youths construct the 'rural' by contrasting it with the 'urban'. 'Safe and good' is found to be a general representation of rural life. The feeling of security is closely related to the idea of visibility, that 'everybody knows everybody' in small communities. The youths stress, however, a negative aspect of the visibility, as it facilitates mechanisms of social control such as gossip and rural justice. Girls are more concerned than boys with the limitations this puts upon rural life. Visibility is found to be a premise for the representation of the countryside as 'safe and good', while at the same time visibility allows informal social control. The article focuses on the balance between freedom and informal social control, between visibility and lack of privacy in rural areas. The narratives of the rural are explained in terms of the relationships between expectations and representations of social processes in small-scale communities.

Keywords: *countryside, gender, gossip, informal social control, rural narratives*

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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 such as safety, peace and quiet dominate, and the other highlights the negative side where rural communities are described as intrusive, constraining and controlling (Haugen & Villa 2006). Narratives of the rural as 'safe and good', but also constraining and controlling, are perspectives which, although 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 informal social control in the countryside.

A vital part of what is considered 'safe and good' is the transparent community, in which everybody is visible and 'everybody knows each other'. As pointed out by Burnett (1996), the perception that everybody knows each other becomes a guideline for both representations and behaviour in a rural context. In order to generate the sense of 'knowing everybody' the residents need to be kept informed and have a certain overview of what is going on in the community. One way to be kept informed is to exchange information and participate in what might be considered as small talk, or gossip. Informal social control in the form of talk, gossip and rumour challenges the well-worn ideas of the rural as 'safe and good'. We will explore how young people experience and understand gossip to be a rural phenomenon, and how constructions of gossip might conceptualize what is on the agenda in rural societies today. By analysing youths' narratives, it is possible to explore what ideas and priorities a new generation will represent in rural communities.

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 common sense wisdom and image of the rural presented by rural residents, namely women and men of all ages and in different life phases. In people's stories of rural areas, this is variously identified as peaceful, the feeling of safety, no need for locking doors, no stranger dangers or unwelcome visitors, a stable and surveyable community, less 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 countries (Halfacree 1995, Shucksmith et al. 1996, Ziebarth et al. 1997, Stenbacka 2001).

In his observations of the modern world's history, Zygmunt Bauman reflects upon how 'security always calls for the sacrifice of freedom, while freedom can only be expanded at the expense of security' (Bauman 2001, 20). Freedom and security, Bauman 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' (Bauman 2001, 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 and freedom to act and live the way one likes is continuously challenged by youth's experiences and understandings of rural gossip.

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 such as 'safe and good' and close relations, the city is associated with risks, anonymity and impersonal relations (Bjarstad 2003, Haugen & Villa 2006). Such polarizations of the rural as 'good' and the urban as 'bad' is said to be characteristic of the Norwegian public and theoretical discourses on rural and urban areas (Pløger 1997). Furthermore, for centuries, polarization also has been described as informal social control in traditional settings and societies, and formal social control in modern settings. According to Baumgartner (1991), this polarization has contributed to there being less knowledge about informal social control in modern life. With regard to this article, it is aspects of informal social control within Norwegian rural communities – whether considered as positive or negative – that are explored.

A study of moral order in an American suburb found a system of social control based on *moral minimalism* (Baumgartner 1991). Citizens of the community related to interpersonal tensions and conflicts in the family, neighbourhood and between friends mainly by avoidance, tolerance and silent exclusion. This contributed to the suburb's peace and quiet, and Baumgartner describes the social morphology of moral minimalism as characterized by: weak ties; lack of places where strangers mingle; independence among people, arising from equality, autonomy, and self-sufficiency; individuation and social fragmentation; and social fluidity and mobility. He further suggests that more socially cohesive, interdependent, interconnected, and stratified settings than the upper-class suburb will be incompatible to moral minimalism (Baumgartner 1991, 129).

In Baumgartner's study of social control in the suburb, the phenomenon of gossip was not explicitly explored. However, he found it to be far more preferable and common for people to complain to other family members and close friends about offences and undesired behaviour than to face conflicts directly. Baumgartner found that people were reluctant to exercise any social control upon each other, explained by the fluidity and lack of social integration. Complaints to family and friends might also represent 'talking' or gossiping – even if those talked about were unaware of the talking. Important differences between the larger suburb and a small rural community is that in small and surveyable communities it is also *expected* that there will be talk and gossip, and this has some consequences for the people living there.

The feeling of security is based on transparency and that 'everybody knows everybody' and everyone cares about what is going on in the community. At the same time, visibility facilitates negative informal social control, such as gossip and the spreading of rumours. Gossip – or the threat of gossip – represents strong expectations and exerts forces on individuals in terms of how to act and live within small

and surveyable communities. According to Waara (1996, 271), the social pressure to behave in certain ways in small societies is huge and leads to individuals acting in line with the expectations, regardless of their own preferences and interests.

Gossiping – a moral discussion of the expected?

Gossip is a common element of everyday conversation among both adults and children (Bergman 1993, Baumeister et al. 2004), and a social phenomenon independent of geography. Still, gossip is very much associated with rural areas, partly as a consequence of the transparency of small communities.

In general, gossip refers to unverified news about the personal affairs of others, which is shared informally between individuals. Gossip might be understood as a morally questionable activity associated with hearsay, lies, slander, backbiting, aspersion, and tattle. However, gossip might have a more culturally diversified meaning. Transmission of gossip is considered important for establishing friendships, catching attention, and providing mutual entertainment (Rosnow & Fine 1976, Rosnow 2001). It might also be a means of exchanging knowledge and gaining information about individuals and cementing social bonds by enhancing the solidarity of the group or social network (Holtedahl 1986). Baumeister et al. (2004, 111) argue:

Gossip anecdotes communicate rules in narrative form, such as by describing how someone else came to grief as a consequence of 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.

It follows that gossip is potentially an efficient means of transmitting information about rules, norms and guidelines for living in a certain culture. Gossip serves to create and maintain agreement about crucial values (Gluckman 1963), and has a function to maintain a society where everybody has their own position and therefore knows where they belong (Skjølås 2002). As such, gossip is an efficient means of informal social control.

Men as well as women participate in gossiping and spreading rumours. According to Gullestad (1984, 252), the difference is that 'men have somewhat less access to confidence and personal information than women'. Leaper & 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 to in Baumeister et al. 2004) have revealed that men gossip more about celebrities, sports figures, politicians, and mere acquaintances, which is consistent with the view that men are oriented towards the broader social and cultural sphere, whereas women's gossip is more concerned about family members and close friends. Research on youths and socialization has found that girls are more occupied with social relations with friends in their spare time than boys are (Frønes 1987).

Based on a study among young women in a suburb, Gullestad (1984, 220) argues that 'women's talk when they

are together may be analysed as a moral discourse about what is right and wrong'. 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 or within a social group. Lisbeth Holtedahl (1986) has studied everyday talk in a small Norwegian community. She questions whether one can call everyday talk gossip or whether, for many people, this actually is a unique source of information and exchange of news. Especially for the older people in the community, it was important to know everything, which also could be a sign of caring for others.

Patricia M. Spacks (1985, 5) 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.

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' (Spacks 1985, 5). The link between gossip and spreading rumours is not always straightforward. In Spacks' (1985) classification, spreading rumours is on the 'ill-natured aspersion' end of the continuum. Gullestad (1984, 251) expresses this as follows: "'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'. In everyday language, however, the terms gossip and rumour overlap substantially. In our context, it will be analytically helpful to distinguish between 'talk' in the form of informal information exchange which is a functional (necessary) tool in order to maintain the surveyable rural as 'safe and good' (everybody knows each other and cares about each other) and 'gossip' as a dysfunctional tool of informal social control and rural justice constraining individual freedom. 'Gossip' is a constructed concept – talk becomes 'gossip' by definition or interpretation.

In analyses of youths the concept of individualization has been crucial, as when applied to the dilemmas of finding one's own solutions, constructing one's own identity and making one's own choices. In social science theory such processes are described as disembedded from local culture, tradition and place (Giddens 1990). Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) likewise refer to an institutionalized individualism in post-industrial society, in which the collective group identity has been de-traditionalized. Authorities such as kin, family, religion, class, and gender systems have been weakened, though more weakened in urban areas than in rural areas (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Though widely used, the individualization thesis has been criticized for its lack of sensitivity to context, class, gender, time, and place, and also lack of empirical grounding (Brannen &

Nilsen 2005). Rural studies explicitly have challenged a general and place-neutral description of youth culture, and put weight on the situatedness of experiences (Jørgensen 1994, Karlsen 2000, Panelli 2002, Heggen 2004, Krangle 2004).

In this article we analyse how young girls and boys experience and understand gossip to be a rural phenomenon. By being sensitive to place and gender, we explore how young people's narratives conceptualize the phenomenon of informal social control in rural areas. Young people are key informants as they are in a life phase where they are striving to find their own independent position in the community, constructing their identity at the intersection between individual freedom and collective expectations. Youths are commonly expected to be key persons when discussing and planning for rural development strategies. Analysing young people's perceptions of informal social control and gossip might inform us about their attitudes and hence possible changes to social life in rural areas in the future.

Data and methods

When we started out our research project our aim was to analyse young people's understanding of 'rurality' in Norway in the early 21st century. Young people are crucial for rural futures; however, their voices are rather absent in arenas of rural planning and rural policy. They represent an alternative to the rural establishment and they might introduce new insights to the constructions of the rural. Young people were asked to write an essay about 'Rural life – positive and negative aspects' (*Bygdeliv – positive og negative sider*). Subsequently, we set up focus group interviews to follow up some of the themes in the essays. This article is based on these two data sources: 126 essays and 6 focus group interviews among students in five *kommuner* (local authority districts) in Norway. The data collection was carried out during 2002–2004.

The data sampling was conducted in comprehensive schools in two rural *kommuner* in central Norway and in three cities, one in the south, middle and north of Norway respectively. One of the two rural comprehensive schools is situated in a regional centre in a mountain *kommune*, while the other is situated in the administrative centre of a coastal *kommune*. The rural *kommuner* have 5400 and 3400 inhabitants respectively. Both are situated more than 100 km from a larger city. The urban comprehensive schools are situated in Oslo (512,000 inhabitants), Trondheim (154,000 inhabitants) and Tromsø (60,400 inhabitants).

The essay writers and the essays

Norwegian language teachers in the selected schools were asked to administer the students' writing of essays about rural life and filling in a simple questionnaire. The majority of the respondents were between 17 and 19 years old and in their second or third (final) year at the comprehensive schools. These students were in a position where they would soon have to make decisions regarding further education,

work and where to settle down. Altogether, seven classes participated and various streams were represented, such as general academic studies and vocational training. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were students at the rural comprehensive schools, while one-third was at the urban comprehensive schools.

We received 126 essays together with completed questionnaires; the length of the essays varied from 1 to 15 pages. Of the essays, 85 (67%) were written by rural youths and 41 (33%) by urban youths; 59% of the essay writers were girls and 41% were boys. As the majority of the essays were handwritten, all were subsequently typed in Microsoft 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 youths' and those growing up in an urban area are labelled 'urban youths'. Those who grew up in the countryside but were students in an urban comprehensive school are treated as rural youths and vice versa.

The students had the option to remain anonymous and none chose to reveal their name. The questionnaire covered general background information with respect to age, gender, branch of study, where one grew up, and parents' occupation and background, whether rural or urban.

The focus group interviews

Students in three comprehensive schools, two located in an urban area and one in a rural area, were asked to participate in focus groups discussing rural life. Six focus groups were set up, all conducted in the afternoons: three in a classroom, one at our workplace, and two in a meeting room at a local hotel. The participants were asked to discuss the theme of 'rural life' and this was preceded by a brief introduction. Although we did not want to steer the discussion, some themes were introduced and follow-up questions were sometimes necessary to keep the discussion within the main theme. The discussions were taped and afterwards transcribed. In two of the focus groups there were girls only, in two groups there were boys only, and in two there was a mix of boys and girls. Altogether, there were 36 participants: 20 girls and 16 boys.

Procedures

The texts offer an insight into the young people's representation of the rural. The data were not collected especially to explore the question of social control and gossip, but many of the essays gave information on this topic. We searched for key words and made thematic lists of the themes that most commonly were mentioned as advantages or disadvantages. Equally important as the search for keywords was to look closer at the context in which the statements were given and the way the statements were formulated. In some essays the use of humour, irony or exaggeration made us take care in the interpretation, and not use the quotations uncritically. We were interested in whether there were differences between rural and urban youths, and between genders. When we later on set up the focus group interviews we were able to

investigate some of the themes that were presented in the essays in more depth.

Youths' experiences of gossip in rural societies

Knowing everything about everyone

There are multiple meanings ascribed to living in the countryside. There is not one single image of the rural, although some images might be more dominant. The two dominant images which are found in the youths' essays are interlinked: The rural community is appreciated as safe and caring and isolated from city problems, which comes at a cost: social control, gossip, rumours, and loss of freedom:

One of the disadvantages of living in the countryside is that when everybody knows everybody, you can't be anonymous, and there is next to nothing you can keep to yourself. In a small place, rumours – often false – can be spread very quickly, so that everybody 'knows'. One cannot do anything without everybody knowing the next day. This can be very annoying. (Country girl)

I said previously that it is positive with few inhabitants [as everybody knows each other and there is little crime], but it is not only positive as it makes people notice what you are doing, and this makes gossip much more widespread in the countryside than any other place. (Country boy)

'Everybody knows each other' is regarded as positive because it creates a more close-knit and secure society and negative because one cannot do anything anonymously. The youths also considered some aspects of the rural as positive for other people in other life phases, but not necessarily for themselves. One of the city girls expressed that 'It must be difficult to live in the countryside. Everybody knows everybody; everybody knows everything about everybody. It can't be easy to be young there'.

Gossiping conformity

Another aspect of the anticipated stronger informal social control in the countryside is the claim of conformity. The cost of acting differently and not according to the accepted norms (morally regulated and expected behaviour) might be labelling and social exclusion. The youths described rural residents in general and the older generation in particular as less tolerant of 'differences' than people living in the cities. The 'difference' is anything that breaks with the ordinary, the common. All that is different becomes more visible in a small society, and gives people something to talk about: 'One must not stand out', as one of the country girls put it, meaning the way one dresses, the way one behaves, one's leisure interests, or one's sexual orientation:

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 with understanding 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 arise. (Country girl)

The youths did not differentiate between 'talk' and 'gossip'. Some conversations, labelled by the youths as gossip, have the harmless intention of giving information and a necessary 'overview': 'They do not necessarily talk badly of others, they just find out things', one of the country girls claimed. However, most examples of what the youths described as gossip had a negative purpose. There was a general view that especially those who were newcomers and those who acted differently and did not know 'their position' in the community more easily became victims of gossip and ill-natured aspersions:

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... This tells how conservative we can be here in the countryside, compared with how people in the city probably are. (Country girl)

In Baumgartner's (1991) suburbia, the tranquillity and lack of social control was found to be encouraged by the social homogeneity among people living there. What we see in our data is that the youths describe rural inhabitants as inclined to respond with suspicion when diversity is introduced into the community. Gossip is one way of managing this suspicion. The youth fear that the consequences might be that innovative people who do not adapt to the established way of doing things in the community become victims of social exclusion. Those who gossip are participating in the formative stage in the development of 'public opinion' on a wide range of issues. By exerting informal pressure upon individuals, conformity might be maintained. A more optimistic view presented by the youths is that visibility of differences challenges the representations of homogeneity in rural communities. When rural areas gradually become more globalized, and rural people and rural lifestyles become more heterogeneous, tolerance for difference increases.

The gendered context

Our data show a gendered view of the countryside. Young women and men perceive the countryside in both similar and different ways. The impact of gender is seen in various ways. One interesting finding was that girls were more concerned than boys with the limitation that rumour and gossip puts upon rural life. Among the essay writers, 70% of the rural girls addressed gossip and the spreading of rumours as a negative aspect of rurality, compared with only 14% of the rural boys; 27% of the urban girls and 6% of the urban boys mentioned rumour and gossip as a possible negative aspect of the rural.

Although gossip is widespread and probably exists in most societies and cultures, and although both men and women participate in gossiping, according to our informants gossip was to a large extent regarded as a female activity. Further, women were regarded as more likely to be the victims of gossip. One of the urban boys from one of our focus groups told about his experiences of rural life when he carried out his military service in the north of Norway: 'If I did anything, then the girls told tales about me'. The interesting part of this young man's claim is, however, that it was his

(male) driving instructor who told him about what was being said about him. Nevertheless, he regarded the girls being those responsible for the gossiping. In other words, he demonstrated that the perception of 'who gossips' is gender biased.

The girls told about their awareness of taking care to avoid risking their reputation. One of the country girls said: 'I talk about women who do not hesitate spreading the message that you were seen together with him – really with him! And then one feather becomes one-two-three-four – ultimately, five fowls. "I saw them together. Soon she will be fatty [slang for pregnant]"'. Another country girl wrote the following: 'Where I live now, girls cannot wear a miniskirt without getting a reputation as "cheap" and a "tart". I think this is nonsense'. The latter shows that the awareness of the risk of being labelled 'cheap' has an impact on the presentation of oneself. As these girls indicate, sexually-orientated labelling is experienced as one characteristic of rural gossip, and girls are presented as more exposed to this kind of gossip than boys. In a focus group with country boys, it was asked whether they thought it was more negative for girls to be exposed to gossip and rumour. This 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 to be accepted too.
- Per: Yes, but we are accepted in other ways.
- Ola: We do not worry if somebody gossips about us, but for the girls, if somebody questions their reputation, it is simply more devastating for them.
- Interviewers: Does this mean that girls have less freedom of action?
- Ola: Yes, in a way it does. 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. Yet if a boy fancies seven or eight girls, it is cool. It gives the boys status, but the girls damage their reputation.

According to these young men, women are more vulnerable to gossip and the informal social control it implies. In addition, the room for manoeuvre tends to be more limited for young girls than for boys, as the same behaviour is evaluated differently.

Studies have shown that it is problematic for both women and men to break with traditional gender roles in rural areas, which points to a particular type of femininity and masculinity within rural societies (Waara 1996, Berg 2002). However, a large body of research has shown that young girls and women experience expectations of the rural community to be more intrusive, constraining and controlling than men (Bøe 1991, Jørgensen 1994, Chapman 1996, Little 2002, Glendinning et al. 2003). According to Little (2002), there exists a particular version of femininity within rural society and a strong belief that a traditional construction of womanhood is more appropriate to rural society.

This indicates that rural women have more limited room for manoeuvre compared to urban women. Social control puts pressure on women to act in certain ways and not challenge the traditional gender roles. This was illustrated in the essays and interviews by reference to a woman's reputation. Especially, the girls talked about having a 'good reputation' and avoiding a 'bad reputation' as something important. Gaining a reputation and being ridiculed might thus be ingredients of a 'moral maximalism' in rural society. Sanctions come into practice whenever the expected order of gender relations and the proper way of being women (or men) is challenged. To be 'talked about' is a potential threat for both women's and men's identity. In a traditional patriarchal gender perspective it is especially moral issues, such as the number of partners, sex and drugs, which can harm a woman's reputation.

The transparency of the rural community was often presented as upheld by the moral discussions of the women. Women (elderly 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. Others told:

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

In small societies, at least in my native district, there are small 'clubs' for religious, older women. ... Paradoxically, it is these old, religious women who often spread these ill-natured rumours. When women in their seventies and eighties know more about the youths than I do, there is something wrong. (Country girl)

As the statements indicate, the women also in a more general way were more explicitly pointed to as those who produced and reproduced interpersonal information.

The youths talked about gossiping as a general and sometimes pervasive problem. What is interesting is that they hardly ever mentioned themselves as the victims of gossip. Rather, they related to gossip as a phenomenon they have to consider. The countryside consists of overlapping social spaces and network of actors which implies more or less transparency and reputations more easily transferred from one network to another. The risk of being 'talked about' in a negative manner prevents many from doing what they otherwise would have done. In this way, the transparent countryside and its perceived informal social control constrain their freedom. In comparison, the city is perceived as a place where it is easier to hide away from supervision, allowing more individual freedom and 'otherness'.

Talk about events (always involving actors) in the community can be perceived as 'harmless' and necessary in order to be kept informed, and in this sense this practice is a functional tool for maintaining the rural as 'safe and good'. Although talk 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 refer to this kind of talk as gossip and, as such, a negative force. The balance in this 'caring

and controlling' becomes one concretization of Bauman's (2001) dilemma of freedom versus security.

New technology – new arenas of gossiping

The young generation in the 21st century is characterized by their extensive use of communication technology. Practically all young people own a mobile phone, which is used widely to communicate with friends. It allows them to quickly send an SMS (short message service) at any time to a large number of friends and acquaintances. They can easily inform each other about what is going on and thus the mobile phone might be regarded as a new tool facilitating gossip. The Internet is another important medium for communication. Chat rooms make it possible for people to communicate with each other online, and represent a new cultural arena for children and adolescents (Tingstad 2003).

In one of the focus groups, the country boys told us that it was very important to be linked to the Internet, and that they were likely to talk (chat) with their friends in the afternoons. Some spent many hours daily at their personal computers. The chat room has become an alternative meeting place to spend time with friends and they actually reach far beyond the local neighbourhood. This implies a possible technologization of gossip which more or less excludes the eldest generation. Another implication is that the chat room is not visible in the same way as the local meeting places, such as the petrol station. An interesting question for further research is whether communication technology replaces the oral chatting (and influences gossiping) and whether we find similar gendered patterns. The specific rural context might be less important in future when it comes to the discourse of gossip.

Discussion

In this article young people's discourse about the rural has been examined in the light of their experiences and perceptions of gossip. Our data do not allow us to conclude that there is *more* gossip in rural areas than in urban areas, but they show how the youths associate rurality with informal social control and a higher cost of breaking the socially accepted. They expect that there is more gossip and that the consequences of the gossip are more constraining than in urban areas. In its functions and consequences, gossip, or rather the awareness of possible gossip, represents a kind of rural justice, an attack on those who depart from the informal norms. However, it is difficult to grasp the transitional point where 'safe and good' changes into unhealthy and greedy rural justice.

We have seen that young people view social practices in rural communities very much within a gossip frame of reference. The experiences and perceptions of a surveyable rural society, in which it is difficult to hide, give associations to a 'Big Brother' society. However, it is important to be aware of some nuances related to this. One is that what is called 'gossip' in the everyday language of youths might represent all kinds of talk, including 'harmless information

gathering'. When analyzing our data we find that gossip might be understood as representing pastimes, companionship, prevention, caring, and control. The effects of gossip might vary. As one of the girls argued, 'I think it knits the women closer together, that they have something in common to talk about'. From gossip or talk being totally harmless and enhancing the solidarity of the group, social exclusion might be at the other extreme. Another nuance to the youths' representation of 'rurality as gossip' is that they might reproduce the expected: the main narratives of common wisdom of how things are working in rural communities. In popular culture 'gossip' is associated with everyday life in rural communities, and this might be too easily reproduced in the youths' discourse on rurality.

The article has shown that there is a gendered dimension to the young people's discourses on the rural. A patriarchal-gendered hierarchy is at work when young women cannot challenge prevailing norms and rules without risking their reputation. Another gender difference is that not only are women more often the 'victims' of gossip, but they are also those pointed to as the gossipers. There are at least two possible interpretations for this. One explanation is that women's talk is more likely to be understood and labelled 'gossip' while there is less inclination to label men's talk the same. Another possible explanation further to this is that women are those who traditionally have been responsible for caring and looking after. Having this role, women also gain and produce personal and social information about their surroundings.

Individualization by creating distance

The phenomenon that people not only respond to the objective features of a situation, but also to the meaning the situation has for them is described in the Thomas theorem: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' (Merton 1968, 475). The fear of being talked about functions as a limitation to individual freedom. In other words, the imagined informal social control becomes real in its consequences.

The youths' distancing from rural gossip might be seen as continuous moral meetings between different age groups and subcultures within a community. Hence, it also might become part of a youth identity and individualization project: distancing themselves from gossiping or from those who gossip. Labelling or stigmatization of certain phenomena (gossip), places (countryside), or groups (older people gossiping) might be seen as processes in the construction of *us* and *them*. Not to gossip might be an important distinction between us (the youths) and them, namely adults who have the authority to exercise social control. The authority is represented by parents, aunts, grandmothers, neighbours, or country people in general. To be more precise, the youths distance themselves from what they see as ill-natured aspersion and gossip that limits people's freedom to act and live the way they like. They do not deny that they also gossip among friends, but not in the same way as 'the others'. This illustrates duality 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.

Towards increased heterogeneity?

The young people's awareness of gossip might be discussed in relation to life course changes, generational changes and changing rural cultures, and also youth identity projects. From our data it is not possible to conclude that the practices or representations of gossip in rural areas are changing. However, the data have shown that young people attribute the controlling and exaggerating gossip to older people in general and to women in particular. The rural might be viewed differently as a result of life course changes and priorities, as when the youths place emphasis on the rural as a safe and good place to grow up in, but less attractive for young people. The negative social control felt by young people becomes the positive safety of 'everyone looking after one's children' when becoming a parent oneself. The life phase transition of becoming a parent changes the position from being controlled to being a controller.

To question the generational differences, highlighted by the youths in our study as permanent changes (based on cohort differences) in rural areas, is more problematic. Yet by allowing these differences to represent any such changes could also indicate that new generations are less inclined towards, and more aware of, the negative effects of informal social control than earlier generations. This would be in line with theories on the modernization processes of rural areas, and their transformation into more heterogeneous and less transparent societies.

Baumgartner (1991) found the strategies of a moral minimalism and lack of confrontations to depend upon the homogeneity of the society. The youths in our analysis experience and perceive rural communities to resist differences. Following these findings, it is not a logical consequence that there is less talk or gossip in a more heterogeneous rural society. However, our data indicate that more acceptance of differences is forwarded by the youths. This might encourage heterogeneity, weaken claims of conformity and influence the extent and importance of gossip. To illustrate this, if the youths keep their critical attitude towards excluding those acting or being 'different', the rural community might become more open and less prejudiced in future.

Both the importance of having a good reputation and the older generation's gossip are examples of a contextual socialization of one generation by another. The situatedness furthermore urges us to be careful in drawing simple conclusions about differences between central and peripheral areas. In our analyses we have been concerned with young people's perceptions and constructions of rural areas. There exists a general understanding of gossip that is strongly related to rural communities. This is found in the experiences of young people from rural areas, as well as in urban youths' opinions of rural communities in general. In both cases, country life is associated with gossip, in contrast to life in urban areas or cities. Although the urban youths in

our focus groups admitted that they also gossiped among friends, the gossip in rural areas is seen as a much more comprehensive activity, represented by curiosity, meddling in other people's affairs, and voiced in the statement 'everybody knows'.

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 encounter sanctions such as gossip, exclusion and being ridiculed. New generations tend to challenge local norms and expectations: the 'proper thing to do' in the rural community. Social control through gossip might be analysed as – from a *youth* point of view – an 'improper' thing to do.

The way youths experience and perceive rural societies to be places of gossip and social control might give rise to a negative attitude towards settling down in rural areas. As our data have shown, this might be of special influence for young girls in the early phase of adult life. However, if those young people who argue in favour of more tolerance and acceptance of differences finally settle down in rural areas, one consequence might be a less constraining rural society in the future.

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