“Small town girls” and “country girls”: Examining the plurality of feminine rural subjectivity

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Abstract
Despite growing scholarly interest in the identities and experiences of girls, little attention has been paid to the identities and experiences of rural girls, and in particular how girls’ subjectivities are discursively constituted in rural spaces. Using interviews and focus group discussions with girls and young women who attended a girls’ empowerment program, this paper draws on feminist poststructuralism and positioning theory to examine how rural gendered subjectivities are constructed and negotiated by girls and young women within the social, spatial, and discursive boundaries of a rural Canadian community. I examine how the girls and young women positioned themselves and were positioned by others as “small town girl” and “country girl” subjects, and how rural positionality was accomplished through invoking real and imagined notions of more urban “others.” It is through these contrasts to urban subjecthood that the variability of rural positionality is made visible. The findings of this study complicate and extend the dominant narrative of the urban-rural binary, and gendered identities and performances within rural spaces, by demonstrating the plurality of feminine rural subjectivity. This study offers new applications for the role of girls’ empowerment programs in shaping girls’ identities, experiences, and perspectives.

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Historically, girls’ identities and experiences have been obscured in research on youth culture and child development, which has focused predominantly on boys (Aapola et al., 2005; Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999), and in feminist research, which has focused primarily on adult women (Currie et al., 2009; Harris, 2004). However, the last 30 years have seen a burgeoning of scholarship concerned with the subjectivities of girls and young women. Although this scholarship is growing and diversifying (e.g., Ringrose & Renold, 2011), it has focused on the identities and experiences of middle-class, and to a lesser extent, working-class girls, living in cities and urban centres. There continues to be little scholarly attention paid to girls and young women taking on rural identities (Cairns, 2014; Ward & Benjamin, 2004). This relative exclusion of rural girls is not inconsequential; the subjectivities of girls and young women, as with anyone, are (re)produced within, and cannot be separated from, the specific social, cultural, political, and material spaces in which they live. Gendered experiences, performances, and relations are thus locally specific in rural spaces (Norman et al., 2011). While some work has examined the lived experiences of rural girls, there is a relative absence of work examining how girls construct feminine rural subjectivities.

**Rurality and rural girlhoods**

Notions of rurality are socially constructed phenomena (Rye, 2006). According to Leyshon (2008), “rural social spaces are often coded and categorized by a powerful set of ideological and symbolic representations” (p. 8). Previous scholarship identified two dominant rurality discourses that youth draw on in constructing rural identities and giving meaning to their experiences as rural subjects. The *rural idyll* discourse conceives of rural life as more natural and connected to nature, as well as more tranquil, beautiful, safer, cleaner, and healthier than life in urban city spaces (Orderud, 2003; Villa, 1999, as cited in Rye, 2006). The rural idyll further conceives of the sense of community and strength of social relationships as stronger in rural spaces (Rye, 2006). In contrast, the *rural dull* discourse brings attention to the perceived negative aspects of rural living by conceiving rural space as duller and more boring than cities. The close-knit social fabric of rural communities is seen to
produce strict social control (e.g., facilitated through gossip and surveillance) and rural spaces are thought of as less progressive and more traditional than their urban counterparts (Rye, 2006).

Rural girlhood sits at an intersection of gender and geography, within which both femininity and rurality are characterized by a high degree of observation and surveillance that make rural girlhood “look and feel like a highly disciplined, space, period or category” (Driscoll, 2014, p. 124; Leyshon, 2008). Previous research with rural youth has found that girls, compared to boys, are given less social freedom and mobility (Dunkley, 2004). Other studies of gender, rurality, and subjectivity document how feminine subjecthood is constrained within rural space. For example, Driscoll (2014) examined the representation of the bored country girl found in Australian popular culture and rural scholarship and argues against this limited picture of rural girlhood. In another notable example, Norman et al. (2011) examined the production of gendered subjectivities through leisure activities among youth in rural Newfoundland, Canada. Their analysis demonstrated how “the woods” and its associated recreational activities such as camping and snowmobiling were coded by youth as masculine, while rural towns and associated activities such as shopping were coded as feminine. The authors document how rural youth drew on rurality and gender discourses to create gendered spatial boundaries between the woods and the towns in the production of embodied subjectivities. Previous research suggests that rural youth construct a clear gendered binary between the masculine performance of outdoor rural living and the feminine performance of the more urban spaces within rural communities (Cairns, 2013; Norman et al., 2011).

The disciplining of rural girlhood extends beyond mobility and leisure activities into the domains of identity, subjectivity, and lived experience. The gendered coding of rural spaces as masculine (Kenway et al., 2006) creates a natural place for boys (Jones, 1999) but reduces the visibility and possibilities for girls in these spaces. For example, when girls occupy rural space they tend to be coded by others as “tomboys” (Jones, 1999), arguably restricting possibilities for rural femininity within a narrow representation. At the same time, Kenway et al. (2006) suggest that stereotypical assumptions about femininity construct girls as inactive and passive in relation to the active outdoor lifestyles associated with rural spaces. As such, there is a tension inherent in embodying space at the intersections of femininity and rurality that risks obscuring or constraining possibilities for feminine rural subjectivity.

As previous research suggests, gender is deeply implicated in girls’ identities and experiences within the social and discursive boundaries of rural space, particularly through comparisons to boys and masculinity. Beyond gender, comparisons to an “other” urban subjecthood also influence the particular and complex subjectivities of rural girls. Previous critical girlhood scholarship has documented how girls’ identity negotiation and construction is often accomplished through invoking the “other” as a point of comparison (Aapola et al., 2005; Cairns, 2013; Hey, 1997). In the context of Canadian rural girlhood, Cairns (2014) examines this
identity formation process among students in rural Ontario. When talking about their futures, girls idealized “urban femininities” (e.g., being a working professional, wearing stylish clothes, drinking coffee from Starbucks), while simultaneously stating an intention and preference for living in rural spaces. Cairns’s analysis underscores how rural idyll narratives were central to the girls’ identities and imagined futures and how urban others are implicated in rural girls’ identity construction.

The data presented in this paper come from a larger feminist poststructuralist project on the discursive production of feminine subjectivities within the context of a girls’ empowerment program. Study participants were predominantly white working- and middle-class girls and young women who attended the empowerment program as program participants and facilitators. Held in a rural Ontario community, the program comprised a three-day psychoeducational intervention designed to improve girls’ self-esteem, confidence, and body image. The analysis attends to the discursive practices used by participants to position themselves as feminine rural subjects. Beyond the importance of centering the lives of girls in the psychological and related literatures, this study offers new theoretical insights into the subjectivities of girls and young women taking on rural identities. Furthermore, the particular context of the current study can offer new applications for the role of girls’ empowerment programs in shaping girls’ identities, experiences, and perspectives.

Method

Community, program, and research context

The geographic region where this research was conducted and the empowerment program operates consists of two large adjacent rural municipalities. In this regional context, “rural” classification refers to communities with fewer than 150 people per square kilometre and includes the countryside and small towns (Statistics Canada, 2001). The region has fewer than 40 persons per square kilometre, and the majority of them are white and English-speaking.

Girls’ empowerment organizations and programs, while broad and diverse, commonly seek to empower girls through various sources, such as self-confidence, education, and media literacy (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Programs aimed at empowering girls, which tend to be girl-only spaces, offer supportive environments with less criticism and scrutiny from boys, opportunities for skill-building and relationship development (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2011), and are important sites to celebrate girlhood and interrogate the changing identities, expectations, roles, and norms of femininity (Gonick, 2003).

The empowerment program in this study was initially developed out of grassroots collective action by youth concerned that teenage girls in the region were vulnerable to psychosocial problems such as poor body image and eating disorders. While these concerns are not specific to rural communities, girls living in
rural or remote communities face unique institutional and structural challenges given their particular social and physical geography, including lack of access to social and health services (Girls Action Foundation, 2012). While the three-day psychoeducational program does not explicitly position girls as rural, nor is the program curriculum explicitly contextualized in rural life, the program is understood by staff and the broader community to be critical for the region because of the lack of available social programs and health services.

The program is held annually at a camp (where girls sleep in cabins and eat in a mess hall) and is open to any self-identified girls in Grade 8 (typically 12 to 14 years old) living within the municipal boundaries. In this region, Grade 8 is the final year of elementary school prior to the transition to secondary school (high school). The program is facilitated by older young women peer volunteers, between 16 and 26 years old, who also live or grew up in the local community, although most facilitators are between 16 and 18 years old (i.e., high school students who live at home).

Although the larger feminist poststructuralist project was not initially conceptualized or designed to examine specifically rural subjectivities, it became apparent throughout the discussions that rural positionality was enmeshed in the gendered subjectivities of study participants and warranted examination in its own right.

Researcher positionality. Feminist research methodologies and poststructuralist approaches are responses to positivist paradigms and thus necessitate acknowledging research as a process, rather than simply a product (England, 1994). I position myself here to orient readers to how my social location is both similar and different from the participants and to situate the limits of my experiential and representational authority (Gonick, 2003). I am a white middle-class cis woman and was in my late twenties at the time I undertook this project for my PhD dissertation. In these ways, my social location was similar to the majority of program staff, facilitators, and participants. However, I held outsider status because I did not currently or previously live in their community, and, at the time of data collection, was living in one of Canada’s largest and most diverse cities. Discussed below, my positionality likely influenced my interactions with participants, including what knowledge was assumed and shared with me by the participants and vice versa and my interpretation of the data, including how I positioned the participants in my interpretation.

Study participants

Fifteen program participants (Grade 8 girls) and 25 peer facilitators participated in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions between March 2014 and February 2016. Participants attended the program in either 2013, 2014, or 2015. Study participants’ ages ranged from 13 to 26; the majority of program participants (60%) were 13 years old at the time of their interview or focus group discussion, and the majority of facilitators (68%) were between 16 and 18 years old. All study participants were born in Canada, the majority of their parents were
born in Canada, and most participants had lived in the community their entire lives. The girls and young women lived in varying degrees of ruralness within the community, ranging from the largest urban centre of 15,000 people to significantly smaller, less densely populated, and more socially and physically remote hamlets. Reflecting the broader racial demographics of the community, at the time of data collection, all but four participants self-identified as white: three who self-identified as biracial (white/Native) and one who self-identified as Native. All participants either identified as Christian/Catholic or had no religious affiliation. The majority (70%) of peer facilitators had attended the empowerment program as participants when they were in Grade 8.

**Recruitment and data collection**

Research ethics clearance was obtained through the University of Guelph’s research ethics board. Due to the small size of the potential pool of participants in any given year (approximately 30 to 40 program participants and 20 facilitators), recruitment and data collection took place over two years to obtain an adequate sample size. In the first year, recruitment was facilitated by program staff who had direct access to the program participants. Program staff contacted the parents/guardians of girls who were registered to attend the program to inform them of the study. Girls who were interested in participating were offered several focus group discussion date/time options scheduled for after they attended the program. Due to their busy academic and extracurricular schedules, most participants were unable to be scheduled for a focus group discussion. These participants were offered the option of a one-on-one interview. The same questions were used regardless of discussion format. Peer facilitators were similarly informed by staff about the research and asked to contact the researcher if interested in participating, and upon doing so were scheduled for a focus group discussion (or interview, if necessary).

In the subsequent year, the recruitment process was modified to reduce the burden on program staff. Program participants were informed about the study by the researcher upon arrival at the program. Due to the challenge in scheduling focus groups in the previous year, only interviews were used. Parent/guardian consent was obtained upon arrival at the program. After the program was complete, participants were contacted to schedule an interview. Across the years, informed consent was obtained for all program participants and the peer facilitators at the start of their interview or focus group. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, empowerment program staff were not provided with any information about the study participants.

The data come from 28 interviews and three focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were conducted separately for program participants and facilitators. All sessions were audio-recorded and conducted in person in private meeting rooms and in participant homes to enhance participant privacy and confidentiality. Two interviews were conducted over the phone because the participants were no longer living within reasonable traveling distance.
Interviews were approximately one hour, and focus group discussions were approximately two hours. Study participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire and received a small payment as compensation.

Discussion questions relevant to the analysis asked participants to describe their experiences of the empowerment program, their relationships with girls from the program, the experience of being in a “girl-only” space, the perceived issues or challenges facing girls, the meanings of girlhood and the empowerment program in their community.

Data analysis

Guided by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), I examine the subject positions, and thus the particular ways of knowing and being, made available to the participants through their particular discursive and material locations to locate themselves and other girls as feminine rural subjects. Positioning is a discursive practice through which social and psychological realities are actively produced by participants in the dialogue (Davies & Harré, 1990). According to Davies and Harré (1990), upon taking up a particular position, “a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story line and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned” (p. 46). Positioning theory, and the broader feminist poststructuralist orientation in which the analysis is embedded, problematize the notion that experience is universal and essential, but rather experience, identity, and selfhood are constituted, given meaning, and thus can be understood, through language and discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gavey, 2011; Potter, 2012; Weedon, 1997). I understood the discourses implicated in participants’ talk to construct representations of the world that had “real” ideological, institutional, social, and political effects for participants (Parker, 1992). I attend to what Davies and Harré (1990) call reflexive positioning, that is, how someone positions themselves, and interactive positioning, that is, how one is positioned by others. I examined aspects of the text that were concerned with the (re)production of social power in relation to rurality and gender, and how the subject positions related to larger sociocultural conditions, for example, the extent to which certain positions offered more or less power to the subject in different social contexts. Using NVivo 10 as an organizational tool, I coded the text for the various ways in which girls adopted or resisted certain subject positions within their talk, how they were positioned in relation to others, and how girls’ talk positioned other girls within discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990). Pseudonyms are used below when referring to participants.

Analysis and discussion

I begin by demonstrating how the community was constructed by participants as “rural,” and the perceived implications of rurality, to situate the girls’ and young
women’s identities and experiences. Next, I examine two dominant subject positions, namely the “small town girl” and the “country girl,” taken up by the participants to position themselves and other girls within the social and discursive boundaries of their rural community. I pay particular attention to how rurality, girlhood, and femininity discourses both constrain and afford new possibilities for feminine rural subjectivity, and I consider these productions in relation to their meanings for girls’ empowerment programs.

**Constructing the community as rural**

Many of the participants spontaneously labelled their community as a “small town,” “the country,” or a “rural area.” The discussion questions asked participants about their experiences as girls “in their community,” and did not emphasize the social and geographic marker of their community as “rural” during our conversations. Beyond explicitly labelling, participants constructed their community as spatially and socially rural by drawing on rurality discourses. A central feature of participants’ talk about the community was a reference to a deep familiarity that existed among the people who lived there. It was described as a place where “everyone knows everyone”:

*Savannah*: Because we’re so small, like you can know somebody from kindergarten to grade 12 because you’re so small you all go to the same school, so you can, maybe someone has been bullied by the same person since public school but in a bigger sense if it was in Toronto it’s like, I don’t know, it’s just bigger, it’s different like Bailey said, they’re ahead in a sense like that.

…

*Danielle*: …You hear absolutely everything about absolutely everyone whether that person knows that you know that about them or not.

*Hannah*: There’s no privacy [group agreement].

*Danielle*: Yeah, there’s no such thing as privacy in [our community]. (Facilitator focus group 1).

While the emphasis on social connection draws on the rural idyll, the young women’s accounts draw heavily on the rural dull discourse in acknowledging the surveillance, gossip, and lack of privacy resulting from their rural positionality (see Haugen & Villa, 2005). Previous research on rural identity and experience has similarly suggested that the “tight-knit” metaphor of the rural idyll is an oversimplification that obscures the multiplicity of rural life (Epp & Whitson, 2001; Norman et al., 2011).

Another feature integral to the participants’ construction of the community as rural was that “there’s not a lot of things…to do” in their community. This limitation was in reference to social and community resources such as social programming and access to information, and social events and opportunities, which
led to a perception that community members, and girls, in particular, were isolated:

_Sam:_ I think there’s also a lack of information sort of out here [referring to their community], whereas somewhere like Toronto you can get information practically anywhere, whereas people out here are more isolated.

_Morgan:_ We don’t have a lot of resources or like camps or stuff like after school programs that people go to whereas like the city does so it’s nice to have somewhere where girls can feel safe and like have a [empowerment program]. (Facilitator focus group 2)

In talking about the social and extracurricular activities afforded and, more commonly, not afforded to them by their material location, the participants again draw on the rural idyll and the rural dull discourses in constructing their community – and their gendered experiences as girls living in the community – as rural. While the limited social and extracurricular opportunities, particularly in contrast to larger cities such as Toronto, are in some ways a reference to rural life as more boring than urban life, the young women draw on a different rurality discourse, what I call the “rural isolated,” in their accounts of how their material location limits their access to resources, information, and social programming, the consequences of which have been well documented (e.g., Girls Action Fund, 2012).

**Feminine rural positionality**

In addition to constructing their social and material community as rural, girls and young women actively positioned themselves as rural subjects. Rural positionality was accomplished through discursive constructions of perceived contrast against (feminine) subjects perceived to be more urban than themselves. In taking up the subject positions of the small town girl and the country girl, participants invoked these real and imagined notions of urban identity and experience as points of contrast to their positionality as rural feminine subjects. Reflecting a conceptualization of rurality as both a “socio-spatial construct and a lived geography” (Cairns, 2013, p. 625; Little, 2002), rural positionality was linked with specific spatial locations within their community. The subject position of the small town girl was taken up by and assigned to girls and young women living in more densely populated towns who drew on aspects of rurality and girlhood discourse to position themselves as distinct from “city” girls, that is, girls who lived outside of their community in larger metropolitan areas. The country girl subject position was similarly contrasted against more urban feminine identities and experiences, including girls living in large metropolitan cities but also girls living in the more populated towns within their community. Although these particular subject positions were dominant in my reading of the text, feminine rural subjectivity should not be considered limited to these particular positionalities and these subject
positions should not be assumed to be mutually exclusive, unchanging, or statically bound by the material location of the subject.

A small town girl subject position and the construction of rural belonging. The subject position of a small town girl was made available to girls and young women through multiple rurality and girlhood discourses. In the following exchange about the role of the empowerment program in their community, the participants take up this position by drawing on the rural dull discourse to construct a clear contrast between themselves, as girls from “small towns,” and people living in cities:

Becca: When people are from small towns they go to the city they see people and go “what the hell?”
Chloe: Like what is she wearing?
Becca: What is wrong with this place? But I feel like, I don’t know, [the empowerment program] obviously helps with that. Now if we were all to go to the city we would probably be a little more accepting of it, but still you don’t see that everywhere.

... Jordan: Yeah, there is such a lack of diversity.
Interviewer: Here? [meaning in their community]
Caitlin: Yeah. In Toronto, in Toronto you see all different cultures everywhere. [group agreement]... I think that’s another thing that everyone is so equal there because you see [racial diversity] everywhere because here there is very few of certain things, so.
Taylor: I think in Toronto, or even bigger cities in general it’s good because they have certain sections of cities devoted to certain cultures [Unknown speaker: China Town] so it’s a lot more accepting in that way too because you know people go there just to see what your culture is like whereas here we all kind of have the same beliefs and religious views and the same everything and we’re all so used to “the normal” so when something different comes in we don’t know how to react to it. (Facilitator focus group 1)

According to Harris (2004), by constructing oneself against the “other,” social markers of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual identity, and ability become visible. What emerges through this process of identity construction, according to Gonick (2003), are narratives of what is “normal” (i.e., white, Anglo, middle class) and therefore “not normal,” thus rendering the “normal girl” imaginable and knowable through an identification of the “not-normal girl.” In speaking about themselves and others living within this “less diverse” rural space (an enactment of the rural dull discourse that constructs rural spaces as less progressive and behind urban life), the participants collectively position themselves, through a shared racial and religious identification, to fit within what they considered to be “normal” (i.e., white and Christian). In a Canadian context, rural spaces are primarily associated with whiteness (Cairns, 2013, 2014).

However, drawing on a discourse of Canadian multiculturalism that frames racial diversity as desirable, the young women questioned the normativity of
whiteness in their community by constructing the racial diversity found in larger cities as “good” and as the people occupying that material location as “more accepting” than people in their community. Thus, taking up a small town girl subject position assumed that the degree to which they could be accepting of diversity was constrained by their rural material location and its demographic composition.

Occupying the position of a small town girl, wherein one’s own identity and experiences are constituted in relation to the perceived diversity of city girls, required positioning oneself as highly similar to other girls occupying a similar rural material location. This extends beyond the cultural and racial similarity implicated in the participants’ rural positionality to a similarity in appearance. As Becca and Chloe’s exchange reveals, in order to collectively view the fashion choices of city dwellers as “not-normal,” there must be collective agreement on what constitutes “normal” appearance. Below, Nicole (facilitator, interview) makes explicit the expectation for conformity imposed on and by girls (and others) taking up rural identities. Positioning herself as from a “small town,” Nicole problematizes the extent to which she was expected to conform with the “current trend” as a feminine rural subject:

[In high school] I cut my hair short and start dressing way different from everyone else…people definitely looked at me, they made comments, they asked why you cut your hair…but like living in the city now it really doesn’t matter if I cut my hair, I could have purple hair and I would still be fine, I could dress a little bit more different and it would still be fine but being from that small town area that individual grey area is much smaller…back home I think everyone really wants to fit in with what’s the current trend.

Unlike the accounts of the young women above, for whom similarity was integral to their positionality as small town girls, Nicole’s account draws on the rural dull discourse to frame similarity as boring and restricting expressions of individuality. Nicole positions herself as a small town girl by contrasting her experience of rejecting expectations to conform to the “normal” aesthetic of her rural community with what she imagines that experience would be in a larger city, where she argues there is greater tolerance for diversity and uniqueness. The implication is that the same surveillance and policing of femininity would not be enacted by people in the city. While this mirrors the young women’s constructions of cities as more diverse, here the particular iteration of the rural dull (i.e., homogeneity) places limits on what is deemed “acceptable” small town femininity and constrains possibilities for girlhood within the boundaries of normative femininity.

In a different iteration of rural positionality accomplished through contrasts to urban others, the participants invoked comparisons to the (imagined) interpersonal dynamics of city girls. Here, participants draw on the rural idyll and mean girl discourse (a universalized and normalized understanding of girlhood as
characterized by relational aggression and social exclusion; Ringrose, 2006) to position themselves as more capable of getting along with other girls precisely because of their rural positionality:

*Bailey:* . . . the idea of putting a bunch of girls in one room together [at the empowerment program] and trying to get them to all get along is -
*Jordan:* It’s scary!
*Steph:* We’re able to get it to go and work.
*Bailey:* – absolutely crazy [Steph: Yes] but somehow it would work here and I don’t know if necessarily it would work in every place –
*Steph:* We don’t get it to go and work.
*Megan:* I was going to mention that I think there’s more opportunity for it [imagining city girls in the program] to be catty and for there to be more gossip in the city because there’s more people and they’re all different, you’re more likely to clash, as well, which

*Bailey:* I think we’re more appreciative here too because we [Megan: Yeah] don’t like, it’s so unique and it’s not anywhere else -
*Megan:* We don’t get opportunities like this.
*Bailey:* – and we feel lucky to get this experience, so we take more away. (Facilitator focus group 1)

The implication is that feminine rural subjectivity, characterized by a high degree of social cohesion with similar others, is not subjugated by mean girl discourse in the way it is for city girls who are perceived as being too dissimilar to get along. At the same time, the participants draw on the rural isolated discourse that speaks to the lack of social opportunities and programming to further contrast themselves against urban girls, who are assumed to take “less away” from the empowerment program because of the access to resources they are afforded as city girls.

*A country girl subject position and the demarcation of feminine difference within rural space.* While girls and young women taking up a small town girl subject position contrasted their identities and experiences in a multitude of ways to girls and other people living in the city, girls and young women who took up a country girl subject position drew a further divide between themselves and other girls that lived “in town.” Importantly, the construction of “city” and “town” was shifting and therefore contextually specific (see Norman et al., 2011). Participants drew on rurality discourses and a discourse of normative femininity to position themselves as country girls who were distinct from girls living in more urban spaces both within and outside of their community.

As part of a discussion about what it was like to be a girl in her community, Natalie (program participant, interview), who was interviewed at her home out in the countryside surrounded by farm fields and positioned herself as living in a “remote area,” rejected limited notions of rural girlhood. She draws on
stereotypical depictions of femininity to position herself as a productive country girl in stark contrast against “girls in the city”:

When I picture girls living out here in like the remote area I kinda picture them being stronger, you know? They’d much rather be outside than in a mall and when I picture girls in Toronto I picture girls wearing like tank tops, short shirts, you know always talking on their phone “like OMG [oh my god], that is so LOL [laugh out loud]” [said in a stereotypical ‘valley girl’ voice], like stuff like that. And here it’s all like, we need to get the crop in, [girls] go out they help, they do everything they can, they’re stronger basically than the girls in the city are.

The country girl through, for example, her preference to be outdoors, is constituted through the rural idyll discourse and the connection to nature implicated in this discourse. To some degree, this focus on work and productivity offers a solution to the construction of rural spaces as dull. While participants who took up a small town girl subject position focused on the lack of social opportunities in small towns, similar representations of rural space as lacking “things to do” were absent from the accounts of young women positioned as country girls. Previous research has suggested that stereotypical assumptions about femininity construct girls in general as inactive and passive in relation to the active outdoor lifestyles associated with rural spaces (Kenway et al., 2006). However, as Natalie’s account suggests, positioning oneself as a country girl – a girl who is strong, resourceful, and contributes to the community in a meaningful way – against the subject position of city girls – girls who are assumed to be conventionally feminine and, at least as far as Natalie’s account suggests, preoccupied with shopping, clothes, and talking on the phone – appears to create new possibilities for feminine rural subjectivity unbound by conventional femininity.

In addition to contrasting themselves against “city girls,” positioning oneself as a country girl was also accomplished through contrasts to the girls living in a small town within the community. The following exchange took place as part of a larger conversation about the social environment in Grade 8 (the final year of elementary school before transitioning to larger secondary schools, i.e., high school) comprised of students from multiple elementary schools:

Jasmine (facilitator, interview): So there were the [girls] that were in town and they didn’t play with mud and there were country girls where we, you know, dressed like boys sometimes and we’d go out and play in the mud and stuff […]

Interviewer: Oh, so there’s a divide between country and city girls?

Jasmine: Yeah kinda, and it’s not even like, ‘cause I live in a small town right [referring to the community broadly] so it’s not even like city girls, it’s just the ones that lived in town so they didn’t know what quading [a 4-wheeler or all-terrain-vehicle] was or, you know?
As Jasmine’s account makes visible, girls occupying a country girl subject position constructed themselves as being different from girls “in town.” Jasmine articulates an observable and socially important difference between girls who lived in town who “didn’t know what quading was” and girls like herself, who through their more rural spatial and social locations, have access to a different set of knowledge, and in this particular account, leisure activities implicated in feminine rural subjectivity. In this way, the availability of the country girl subject position complicates the standard conceptualization of the urban-rural narrative that positions these spaces (and the people who inhabit them) in binary terms (i.e., to be rural is to be not urban). For young women taking up the country girl subject position, to be a country girl is to be neither a city girl nor a small town girl.

Later in our conversation, Jasmine reported that she “didn’t really care about [her] hair, it was always in a ponytail” and when the other girls in her class “started wearing makeup and doing their hair,” she “wasn’t really into that.” Normative representations of “girl,” produced in part through normative discourses of femininity which position (hetero)feminine subjects as primarily concerned with beauty, appearance, and stereotypically feminine activities such as shopping, necessarily do not include notions of activities typically associated with masculinity and boyhood such as rough and tumble play and getting dirty. In these ways, a country girl subject position challenges the traditionally male-dominated space of rural outdoors through their engagement in the same types of play typically associated with boys and involvement in farm work. In this rural space, the representation of normative femininity is rewritten to afford feminine subjectivities that may not otherwise be acceptable in spaces where rural discourses are not as accessible or meaningful. Thus, rather than working to position girls as different and in violation of traditional femininity and therefore the social norms of girlhood, as was Nicole’s experience above, positioning oneself as a county girl opened up space for alternative girlhoods. Notably, the production of this particular subjectivity does rely, to some extent, on the devaluing of conventional femininity.

The distancing between the girls living in the country and those living in the towns is accomplished through a nuancing of what it means to be a rural feminine subject. As both Natalie and Jasmine’s accounts highlight, rural subjectivity is neither monolithic nor homogenous. As seen in the accounts above, even within rural spaces, girls are positioned as more or less physically active based on the perceived degree of “rurality” that they inhabit. While previous research (e.g., Norman et al., 2011) has documented how gendered boundaries are created by youth within rural space, such as coding “the woods” as masculine and “the towns” as feminine, the boundaries within rural space constructed by the young women in the current study are drawn not across gender categories but within gender categories. Positioning oneself as a country girl made available an alternative rural girlhood subjectivity that deconstructs and nuances the gendered binary within rural space (e.g., Carins, 2014; Norman et al., 2011) in a way not fully accounted for in previous research.
Implications

The findings of this study have theoretical implications for our understanding of feminine rural subjectivity, including the limitations of dominant discourses surrounding rural girlhood, and practical applications for the role of girls’ empowerment programs.

Importantly, this study brings attention to the plurality of feminine rural subjectivity. The particular subject positions taken up by participants complicate and expand the binary conceptualization of the urban-rural narrative. While both small town girl and country girl subject positions reflected, to some extent, this binary, particularly in how participants drew on the rural dull and rural idyll discourses to construct rural life as, for example, less progressive than urban life, the availability of a small town girl subject position offered a rural positionality somewhere in between urban and rural. Extending previous research by Cairns (2013, 2014) that demonstrated how urban others were implicated in rural girls’ identity construction, the findings of the current study reveal the variability in how urban others are constituted and subsequently implicated in girls’ subjectivities.

The plural rural positionality of study participants also complicates the gendered binary of youth identities and performances typically documented in rural spaces. The findings build on previous research with Canadian rural youth that has documented how gendered norms persist in rural space and how rural girls, compared to boys, are constructed by youth as inactive, averse to getting dirty, passive in relation to outdoor activities, and interested in stereotypically feminine activities (Norman et al., 2011). The different ways that participants positioned themselves as feminine rural subjects point to the multiplicity and nuance of rural girlhood subjectivities beyond simply being opposite or counterpart to rural boys or urban girls.

Previous research on rural girls’ identities, experiences, and subjectivities have documented how the possibilities for feminine subjecthood are constrained within rural space (e.g., Driscoll, 2014; Leyshon, 2008). The findings of this study echo similar constraints in the gendered experiences of rural girls, such as the surveillance and disciplining of some girls’ appearance or preferences. Notably, the surveillance and disciplining that participants in the current study spoke about came from and was directed toward other girls, both rural and urban. Despite the variable subject positions taken up by rural girls and young women in this study, dominant discourses and representations of girlhood continue to restrict the possibilities of feminine performance and subjectivity for girls.

Empowerment programs have the potential to support girls in identifying, resisting, deconstructing, and negotiating cultural messaging about girlhood. As previously mentioned, the empowerment program in the current study does not explicitly address the rural identities or experiences of the participants. However, this may be a missed opportunity to engage with girls and young women on these issues which may challenge assumptions about girls and girlhood broadly.
As I have argued elsewhere (Crann, 2017), girls’ empowerment programs often adopt a primarily psychological understanding of and approach to empowerment but may offer greater benefit to girls and their communities by engaging with a more sociopolitical form of empowerment. Notably, the study participants already identified their empowerment program as a mechanism through which they could learn to be “more accepting” of the difference they encounter when visiting the city. However, the program could further support young women in examining and challenging their privileged status within the community as white, primarily middle-class, and Christian and their assumptions about the meanings and implications of racial and cultural diversity based on their social locations.

**Limitations and future research**

A key strength of this paper is the focus on the identities and experiences of rural girls and feminine rural subjectivities, which have been largely overlooked in the psychological and feminist literatures. However, the geographic context of this research resulted in a homogenous sample of primarily white and middle-class girls. While the inclusion of working-class girls offers some diversity in the sample, other identities and experiences were not included in the community population and thus the examination of the influence of race or class in the production of girls’ subjectivities in the current study was limited. Furthermore, program participants self-selected into the program and the experiences and subjectivities of girls who chose to attend may differ from those who chose to not attend or were not aware of the opportunity to attend, as well as from those who chose not to participate in the research.

The use of multiple methods of data collection provides evidence that the patterns in the data (e.g., the availability of certain subject positions) were not simply an artefact of using a particular data collection method. There are, however, epistemic limitations to using both interviews and focus group discussions for the same analytical purpose. Working from the poststructuralist position that the meaning of dialogue and discourse is shaped by the social context, the social dynamics created through one-on-one interviews were different from larger focus group discussions. The nature of the social context would have influenced the dialogue, and subsequently, the reflexive and interpretative positioning of subjects within those dialogues.

My status as an outsider to the community, which was at times made explicit during our conversations when I had to ask for explanations of local references, may have influenced how the participants positioned themselves as rural. Importantly, not all of the participants explicitly positioned themselves as rural by taking up either small town or country girl subject positions. It is possible that girls and young women did not explicitly position themselves as rural simply because their lives are embedded in a rural context, and the interview and focus group questions did not prompt them to position themselves as rural subjects.
Finally, because the purpose of the larger study was not specific to rural subjectivity, the data and the analytical claims that can be made about feminine rural subjectivity are somewhat limited. For example, there are issues and experiences relevant to identity and rurality that were not addressed in the interviews, such as the role of social media and the internet in opening up access to information, resources, and insight into youth cultures outside of their own community. As a result, the current analysis is limited in its ability to examine these topics and their role in shaping feminine rural subjectivity. As critical scholarship on girlhood continues to grow and diversify, future research should attend to the identities and experiences of diverse girls living in rural and remote communities in Canada and beyond. Future research should examine more intentionally the varied ways in which girls and young women construct rurality and how they experience rural girlhood in daily life, including the influence of age, race, and class and their intersections on rural subjectivity. Moreover, research that intentionally examines rural subjectivity is needed to further our understanding of how rural girls and young women take up discourses and the subject positions they afford.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the discursive production of feminine rural subjectivity among a group of girls and young women in a rural community in Ontario. Drawing on positioning theory, the analysis focused on two dominant subject positions – namely the small town girl and the country girl – taken up by girls and young women occupying particular socio-spatial and discursive spaces. The current study extends previous research that has argued that girls’ identity negotiation and construction is accomplished in relation to the “other” (Aapola et al., 2005; Cairns, 2013) by demonstrating how feminine rural positionality was accomplished through invoking real and imagined notions of more urban others. Participants who took up a small town girl subject position constructed their positionality in relation to girls living in large metropolitan cities. For participants who took up a country girl subject position, the point of contrast was against “city girls” but also girls living in the “small towns” within their own community. The plurality of feminine rural subjectivity complicates and extends the urban-rural narrative as a mutually exclusive and straightforward binary and expands possibilities for feminine subjecthood within rural space.

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