

## **Book Review**

### *Young People Making it Work: Continuity and Change in Rural Places*

Rayna Sage  
*Washington State University*

Citation: Sage, R. (2013). Review of the book *Young people making it work: Continuity and change in rural places*, by H. Cuervo & J. Wyn. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 28(7), 1-2.

In *Young People Making it Work*, Hernán Cuervo and Johanna Wyn use data from the Youth Research Centre's longitudinal Life Patterns study to follow Australian rural young adults over the span of two decades, giving voice to those coming of age during a period of rapid economic and social change. During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, changes in technology and regulations resulted in massive labor market reductions in the production-based industries that had previously provided economic stability for much of rural Australia. These changes, coupled with expansions in postsecondary education opportunities and new demands for educated workers in knowledge- and science-based fields, created new obstacles for rural young adults in the 1990s and into the early 2000s. In their challenge to urban-centric social research on education and work transitions and deficit approaches to understanding rural experiences, these authors highlight the expected and unexpected efforts rural individuals make to stay connected to the people and places they value most.

The study described in this volume focuses on two cohorts, one that finished secondary school in 1991, referred to as "Generation X," and one that finished

secondary school in 2006, referred to as "Generation Y."<sup>1</sup> Anchoring their analysis in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Cuervo and Wyn explore the unique experiences of Generation X as they were "unexpected participants in an education revolution" (p. 15) brought about by changes in labor force and workplace conditions that increasingly necessitated post-secondary education. The authors uncover the purposeful ways in which young people from rural areas have used postsecondary education credentials to return to or stay in rural places. In a new labor market that has been stripped of good paying jobs in extractive, resource-based, and production industries, earning degrees in high demand rural fields (e.g., healthcare and education) is one way in which rural young adults have maintained their presence in their communities, and in this regard the authors argue that postsecondary education can be used as a tool to enhance "self-reliance, choice, and entrepreneurialism" (p. 184) that makes being close to treasured family, friends, and places possible. The authors conclude that although many rural residents acknowledge a necessity of out-migration for education and work, those who stay experience how being in one's place of choice can create opportunities as well.

The Youth Research Centre's Life Patterns study began in 1991 with nearly 30,000 participants as they transitioned out of secondary school across Australia. Participants were again surveyed the following year to assess postsecondary progress, and a representative sample of about one-third of the original sample was surveyed a third time in 1995. The sample was reduced to about 2,000 participants in 1996, and since that time, participants in the sample have been

---

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Rayna Sage, Department of Human Development, 525 Johnson Tower, PO Box 644852, Pullman, WA 99164-4852. E-mail: [rsage@wsu.edu](mailto:rsage@wsu.edu)

The *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is published by the Center on Rural Education and Communities, College of Education, Penn State University, 300 Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802. ISSN 1551-0670

---

<sup>1</sup> Although definitions vary, Generation X generally refers to those born between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s and Generation Y to those born between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s.

surveyed about every two years. In addition to the surveys, researchers also conducted 50 to 100 in-depth interviews during each data collection period starting in 1996. Unique to this study, participants were allowed to self-identify as rural, creating more diversity and depth of experience among the rural subgroup than other national longitudinal studies. For comparison, a second cohort of about 4,000 respondents was recruited as members left secondary school in 2005 and 2006. The researchers conducted both surveys and in-depth interviews with this cohort as well. The book is built around 19 exemplary rural participants identified by Cuervo and Wyn in 2011 as particularly representative of the major themes that emerged from the longitudinal data.

Each chapter of this book is designed to stand alone, as individual chapters can be purchased separately online. Briefly, chapter one introduces the reader to the massive economic and educational changes that coincided with Generation X's coming of age. This generation and those that followed experienced less predictability and stability with regard to labor force options. They also had more diversity of opportunities, but access to these opportunities was more constrained and conditioned by class, gender, and social status than it had been under previous economic and educational circumstances. In this assessment, rural young adults faced more risks related to pursuing education, and those risks explained lower college attendance rates among both cohorts. Chapter two utilizes Bourdieu's concept of habitus for understanding how rural young adults assess their past and present to make choices about the future that conform with their individual sense of self and identity. By using this lens to understand the trajectories of rural young adults, the authors uncover how study participants managed changing structures while also maintaining continuity across the generations. In chapter three, the authors make direct comparisons between Generations X and Y in terms of educational pursuits, employment, and migration. In general, Generation Y experienced more access to postsecondary education, and respondents reported higher importance of education, but inequalities across class, gender, and social status still remained and shaped youth outcomes. Chapter four questions distributional, recognition, and associational explanations of inequality as they apply to rural settings and concludes that policies designed to reduce inequality must move beyond distributive approaches and need to better recognize the important role that place and biography play in decisions around education. Chapter five examines how "home" means something different to rural young adults than it does to their non-rural counterparts, and that proximity to family can play a large role in education, work, and migration decisions. Finally, chapter six provides insight into how "young people living in areas characterised by production landscape make it work" (p. 156). This chapter primarily focuses on young men involved in the

intergenerational transfer of family farms and what recent shifts in agribusiness have meant for these young adults and their families. Again, acquisition of educational credentials helped some of these young men to maintain continuity within their families, and people and place remained important themes in understanding the contextual picture of modern family farming.

This book, or individual chapters, would be very appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students as well as helping guide rural programming and policy. In emphasizing the strategies and discourses individuals use to make sense of their place in the rural landscape, the authors provide important insights into what types of interventions might work and where efforts could be missing the mark. These insights can help students, program managers, and policymakers to understand the important role that place plays in decisions about education, work, and migration. Although this study takes place in Australia, the findings could easily be applied in the United States, as rural economic and educational structures in the United States have also undergone very similar restructuring. Cuervo and Wyn's book synthesizes old literatures and new findings to call attention to the need to consider more contextual and rural-specific factors in migration and educational decision-making processes which are more complex than simple access or redistribution of opportunities.