

People , culture and nature in the rural-urban fringe : impressions from a study of rural gentrification in the English Midlands

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Key points This paper explores the value of four different conceptions of culture - classical , descriptive , symbolic and critical-to understanding social change and relationships to nature in a rural-fringe area . Drawing on a research project examining rural gentrification and nature in an area of permanent improved and unimproved grassland in the English Midlands , it is argued that whilst studies of culture in grasslands have often adopted a classical perspective on culture linked to a pastoral or anti-pastoral perspective , or else a descriptive approach often focused on urban and rural social groups , symbolic and critical perspectives may be of more analytical value .

Key words : culture , nature , rural-urban fringe , gentrification

Introduction Studies of culture in grass/rangelands have often adopted what Thompson (1990) describes as a classical concept of culture , which he defines as viewpoints that see culture as a process of cultivating the mental and behavioural capacities of people . Within such perspectives , which emerged strongly within sixteenth century Europe , culture is seen to relate to participating in activities that are seen to develop people's thoughts and habits , such as educational learning , scholarship and appreciation of the arts and philosophy . There is also clear element of social exclusivity surrounding the processes of culture : those people who participate in such activities are seen to be cultured , while those that do not as uncultured . A range of distinctions between the cultural and the non- or less-cultural have emerged , such as between high/noble/authentic culture and low/vulgar/spoilt culture . Such distinctions have been enacted widely and remain persistent to the present day , including within discussions of culture within rural grass/rangeland areas where two variants of the concept can be identified . First , the classical conception of culture can be seen to underpin pastoral conceptions of the countryside as identified by Short (1991) , whereby rural areas are posited as a foundational basis of culture . As Short notes , pastoral concepts of the countryside often involve claims that a rural culture is in some way better than an urban one , perhaps being wholesome , spiritually nourishing or natural , while urban cultures are seen as complicated , devious , unnatural . Short identifies a series of historical and contemporary examples of such perspectives , and they can be seen in many popular , academic and policy related discourses related to grass/rangeland areas , as in this description of the culture of Inner Mongolia : The magical grassland has nurtured the wise , brave , free and lively grassland nationalities , cultivated national instincts of honesty , unity , opening and creativeness , and given rise to the national spirits of being firm and indomitable , defying difficulties and dangers , pioneering and advancing" (Inner Mongolia Grassland Culture Protection & Development Foundation , 2006) .

Short argues that whilst rural areas are often presented as an idyllic pastoral , they are also often viewed in a very different , anti-idyllic way . He identifies an anti-pastoral whereby the countryside is considered to be a place of the non- or un-cultured , whereby rural people and their cultures are seen variously as backward , ill-educated , dull and "loutish and ill-mannered" (Short , 1991 : 13) . These features are often connected to notions of physical isolation and economic marginality and poverty . Short uses paintings of the Australian bush to illustrate this perspective , and it is clear that grass/rangelands are often represented through anti-pastoral imageries . Whilst presenting radically different images of rural areas , both the pastoral and anti-pastoral viewpoints enact a classical view of culture , whereby culture is seen as process of human development centred on participation in certain activities . Where the views differ is in where they see these activities being located : in the pastoral view culture is created through activities located in the countryside , while in the anti-pastoral view cultured activities occur primarily in urban spaces .

Although widely employed , Thompson argues that classical concept of culture has become increasingly displaced by other senses of the term culture , including what he terms descriptive , symbolic and critical concepts of culture . In the first of these , culture is seen as "an array of customs , conventions , habits and practices" (Thompson , 1990 : 123) characteristic of a particular society , historical period , area or social group . The descriptive sense of culture is a much more egalitarian concept of culture than the classical in the sense that all groups of people are seen to have culture , rather than culture being something possessed by a select group of people engaged in a select group of activities . It is also a sense of culture that has lost the process focus of the classical concept : in the descriptive approach people just have culture rather than doing something with culture or culture doing something to people .

The symbolic sense of culture retains the egalitarian dimension of the descriptive conception , but also incorporates a process focus , with culture being conceived as "the pattern of meaning embodied in symbolic forms . . . by virtue of which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences , conceptions and beliefs" (132) . Culture is seen as a process of communication , occurring through a variety of forms of direct communication and also indirectly through actions and objects that convey meaning . The egalitarian and communication foci are retained in Thompson's fourth conception of culture , the critical , which he argues adopts the features of the symbolic approach but which seeks to analyse these meanings in relation to "socially constructed contexts and processes" (136) . In particular , he argues that the production , transmission and reception of

meaning is inexorably linked to the exercise of power .

All of these alternative conceptions may be seen to have some relevance to the study of social change in rural and rural-urban fringe areas . They have , for instance , clear parallels with the three tendencies which Hoggart (1997) identifies as potential justifications for describing the English countryside as a middle class territory . The first of these tendencies was a demographic one , revolving around claims that the middle class has become the predominant social group in the countryside , in large part through urban to rural migration . This perspective has connections to a descriptive sense of culture in that colonisation of countryside by groups of urban middle class residents has been seen to bring about a cultural clash between rural locals and middle class incomers , a point clearly made by Newby (1979 : 489) in his early characterisation of the English countryside as " a predominately middle class territory" created as a result of the urbanization of the countryside consequent upon the movement into the countryside of an urban population-commuters , second-home owners , retired couples-whose present or past employment is located in towns or cities" (575) and whose values , behaviour and lifestyles , being commonly based on an urban , middle class pattern , are very similar , while being noticeably different from those of the locals" (479) .

Hoggart's second conception of the countryside as middle class territory is essentially a symbolic one , it being suggested that the term would be valid if " the conceptual essence" of the countryside was fundamentally a construction of the middle classes" (Hoggart , 1997 : 254) . Studies have argued that the British middle classes have a strong predilection for the countryside , being more likely than other social classes to visit the countryside (Urry , 1995) , as well as forming the major population component in many rural areas (see Phillips , 2007) . It has also been argued that the middle class figure prominently within rural lifestyle magazines and televisual and cinematic representations of the British countryside (Phillips et al . , 2001 ; Thrift , 1989) .

The third conception detailed by Hoggart relates to issues of power , it being argued that the term middle class territory is justified if members of the middle class are able to control the course of what happens in rural areas . Hoggart appears to be referring primarily to influence through governmental institutions and social associations , although he does highlight connections to symbolic constructions of the countryside , suggesting that the exercise of power and control is often linked to " idealisations on what is right for the countryside" (Hoggart , 1997 : 254) . Such arguments may be seen to provide an indication of how symbolic processes of meaning production , circulation and reception are embedded within , and act to perform , relations of power , as implied within Thompson's critical conception of culture .

Much of my own work might be seen as being of relevance to the concept of the countryside becoming a middle class territory , although I have tended to frame it using the term gentrification (e . g . Phillips , 2002b ; 2004 , 2005a) . Whilst gentrification is often seen as a very urban concept , it has , I would argue , almost as long a rural genealogy as an urban one , as well as clear contemporary rural applicability , bearing close connections with a range of other concepts such as counter-urbanisation , rural repopulation and migration , post-productivism , rural restructuring , rural renaissance and rural regeneration . Whilst gentrification has been defined in a series of different ways (see Phillips , 2005b) , it is widely seen to refer to processes whereby a new group of human occupants , members of some middle , service or new middle class , come into an area and displace existing local , more working class occupants , often in the process also refurbishing , extending and converting properties . It is a process that is increasingly seen to have important symbolic dimensions , as well as being potentially focused on issues of power and conflict . It is also a phenomenon which is seen to occur in areas of wilderness (Darling , 2005) , including areas of extensive grass/rangeland (e . g . Ghose , 2004 ; Walker & Fortmann , 2003) , as well as in rural-urban fringe areas .

This paper will explore the value of the descriptive , symbolic and critical perspectives on culture drawing on research conducted as part of the UK Research Council's *Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU)* programme , entitled *Gentrifying nature : an investigation of the social use and modification of nature in a Leicestershire village undergoing gentrification* . In the next section of the paper I will briefly outline the research materials and methods used in this project , before going on to explore people's attitudes to nature in one gentrified village in an area of permanent improved and unimproved grassland within Leicestershire , England .

Materials and methods The RELU research programme explicitly sought to foster interdisciplinary research , with all projects requiring the utilisation of research staff , methods and perspectives from natural and social science disciplines (Rural Economy & Land Use Programme , 2005 : 2) . In the case of this project , interdisciplinarity involved the use of social science data and survey methods in combination with remote sensing and ecological survey methods , integrated through a programme of research utilising the parallel and integrated strategies identified by Tress et al (2005) . As illustrated in Figure 1 , the former elements involved two phases of research centred on , initially , the regional analysis of social statistical and remote-sensed data relating to rural settlements , and subsequently , the employment of social and ecological surveys within and around one village settlement . In these elements , natural and social science methods were employed independently but concurrently . In the integrative research , social and natural scientists in the research team worked together on the research elements , which included initial theorisation of the research project , selection of the case study village , the conduct of integrated garden surveys and ethnographic interviews , and final interpretation . Overall some 140 questionnaires , 120 habitat surveys and 44 garden surveys/ ethnographic interviews were completed , as well as use made of Census data and high resolution aerial photographs supplied by

Infoterra .

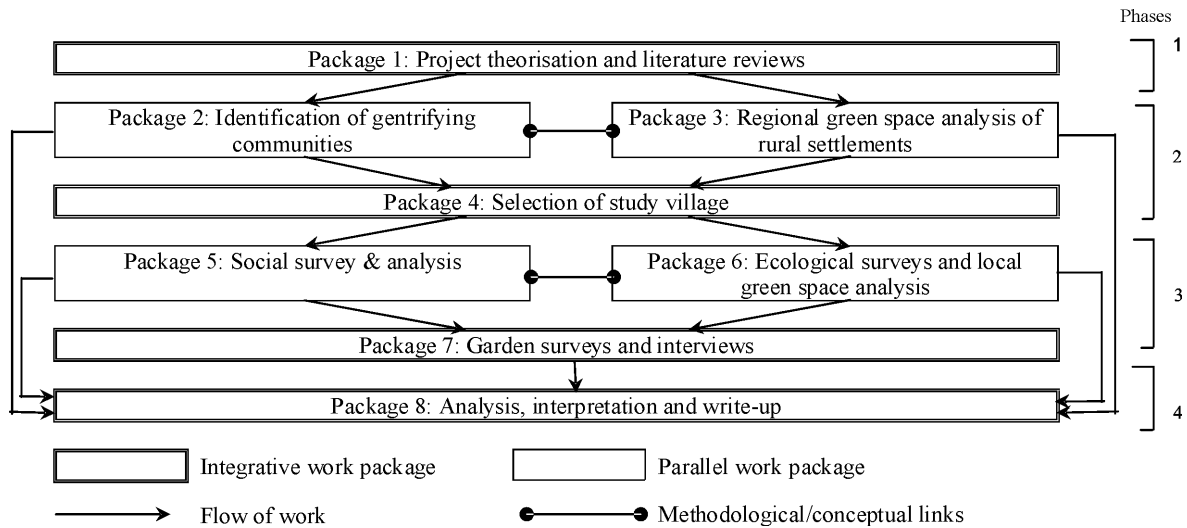


Figure 1 Research Programme and Implementation of Inter-Disciplinarity

Results and discussion A key element of the research was to assess the extent and form of greenspace within gentrifying villages . Here use was made of Census data and the aerial photographs , with the former allowing identification of villages where there was evidence of a sizeable and growing middle class , whilst the latter provided an assessment of the significance of green space within rural settlements . This was seen to be of importance for two reasons . First , the project sought to explore whether gentrifiers might be moving into rural areas because they desire proximity to nature , an argument which had been made by , amongst others , by Smith and Phillips (2001 : 457) who have suggested that rural gentrification is a process stimulated by the demand for , and perception of , "green" residential space . Studies have long identified the rural environment as one motivational pull leading people to move into the countryside , although the precise constituents of this pull has varied considerably . For Smith and Phillips (2001) the emphasis is on green space , for Halfacree (1994) it is on the physical qualities of rural space which might be seen to encompass such material characteristics as physical spatiality , chemical purity and soundlessness , features which are also evident in Kaplan and Austin's (2004) study of the attraction of nearby nature , although they also highlight the significance of visuality , a feature also emphasised by Paquette and Domon (2003) . Whilst many people still see nature as a singular , unchanging and discrete entity from society , as argued in Phillips and Mighall (2000 : 369-370) it might be better conceptualised as a series of actants which come to be defined by at least some people as natural or part of nature . Hence just as the notion of the post-rural has been coined to refer to any phenomena that any people take to be rural (Phillips , 1998 : 44) , so the study of post-nature might be seen to encompass everything that is taken to be natural or part of nature .

A second reason for assessing the extent and form of green space within villages was to consider the possible ecological impacts of gentrification . As Paquette and Domon (2003 : 426) observe , not only is relatively little known about how landscape attributes influence residential migration streams and rural socio-demographic evolution" , but also [e]qually unresolved is how rural migration affects landscape development" , save for repeated expressions of concern about the loss of grassland and other green spaces to house construction . The ecological impacts of gentrification are , however , far more diverse than is often recognised . Research in North America , for instance , has identified residential landowners as key agents in effecting landscape change , with Kaplan and Austin (2004 : 236) suggesting that residential developments at the urban fringe all too often meet the desire of proximity to nature at considerable environmental cost : [e]xisting forestland is removed ...impervious surface are increased ; and chemicals used to maintain vast lawns" . Residential development is not , however , necessarily detrimental to biodiversity : urban and suburban studies have , for instance , revealed that greater species diversity can exist in vegetated areas of residential built environments than is found in comparably sized areas of open countryside (e .g . Maestas et al . , 2003 ; McDonnell , 1997) .

Table 1 shows the percentage of green and non-green space within village envelopes as calculated from a spectral analysis of aerial photographs for seven gentrifying villages in the Leicestershire Wolds , an area composed primarily of permanent improved grasslands with pockets of unimproved grassland (see Phillips et al . , 2008 for details of methods of analysis) . The results suggest that green spaces have considerable quantitative significance within the built-up environment of the villages .

Assessment of their ecological significance in terms of biodiversity cannot be read off from such assessments and a ground level ecological survey was therefore conducted in and around one of the villages, Old Dalby. This village was selected because it displayed many classical features of rural gentrification, having seen a significant population growth over the course of the second half of the 20th/early 21st centuries associated with a rise in the proportion of residents working in non-agricultural middle class or service class jobs: some 64.8 percent of householders classified with a class position in the 2001 Census fell within the middle classes. This growth in population and changing social composition had been facilitated both by new-build house construction and also the conversion and extension of existing properties, including former agricultural ones.

Table 1 *The proportion (%) of green and non-green space in each village envelope*

Village	Village area (ha)	% Green space	Area of green space (ha)	% Non-green space	Area of non-green space (ha)
Ab Kettleby	9.7	52	5.0	48	4.7
Goadby Marwood	7.4	63	4.7	37	2.7
Knossington	12.0	57	6.8	43	5.2
Long Clawson	35.9	56	20.1	44	15.8
Nether Broughton	13.7	59	8.1	41	5.6
Old Dalby	20.6	56	11.5	44	9.1
Scalford	11.1	55	6.1	45	5.0
Average	15.8	57	8.9	43	6.9

The results of the surveys suggest that the green spaces within the village of Old Dalby support a higher botanical diversity than areas of comparable habitat in the wider countryside. A survey of publicly accessible grassland located in greenspaces within and outside the village envelope, for instance, revealed an average of 11.8 species per 4m² sampling quadrat inside the village versus only 7.3 species outside the village envelope (total number of quadrats = 52). This diversity can partly be explained by a continuous arrival of species in these environments as people seek to follow latest planting fashions, although more significant factors may well be the highly varied, small-scale habitat mosaic imposed by human actions, especially in garden spaces (Smith et al., 2006), and the less intensive regime of land management within the village envelope compared to that of the surrounding agricultural countryside. The survey work also included a sample of private gardens, which revealed considerable small-scale ecological diversity of garden habitats. Whilst species richness of garden grasslands (i.e. lawns) was generally lower (6.1 species per 4m² quadrat, n = 80) than in both public open spaces within the village and agrarian spaces beyond the village envelope, there was considerable variation (minimum species per quadrat was 2, maximum was 18). These values reflect the intensity and variability of grassland management regimes, with some gardeners adopting a frequent mowing regime whilst others either intentionally or unintentionally allowed the sward to grow to its full height, thus favouring the growth of a range of native, broadleaved species. There were also a wide range of other plants, and indeed fauna, within the gardens, reflecting again both intentional plantings and unintended consequences of human activity and inactivity.

Such diversity clearly raises questions as to whether these reflect socio-cultural differences. Studies of gardens and front-yards, particularly in North America, have long identified the presence of class-related social differentiation: Schmid (1975), for instance, has suggested that closed garden landscapes in which large trees and shrubs separate and screen properties from view is characteristic of upper social class areas. Such studies frequently adopt a descriptive sense of culture, whereby different social groups are seen to adopt quite distinct attitudes, tastes and practices. This viewpoint is very clearly demonstrated by Millbourne (2003: 291) who suggests that new social groups moving into rural areas are often holding on to different socio-natural constructions of rural life than those held by key fractions of the more established populations in these spaces". He continues by claiming that a series of "socio-nature conflicts" have emerged between new and established residential groups, although he also comments that whilst "in-moving middle classes" do appear to import different socio-natural constructions of rural life" (295), these are not necessarily distinctively different from those held by existing residents. Such comments reveal some of the problems associated with the descriptive concept of culture, which were also very clearly evidenced within the current study. It was clear, for instance, that identities, attitudes, values and practices were considerably more diverse than the descriptive approach may be seen to imply. So, for instance, many of the in-movers were from other rural areas, or neighbouring rural market towns, rather than coming from cities or other large urban centres. Furthermore, many were, at most, ambiguously middle class, and it was clear that values and actions, including those related to construction of the garden and use of the surrounding countryside, were influenced by factors such as age and gender.

A descriptive approach to culture is hence arguably of relatively little value in understanding the relationship people held to nature within the village of Old Dalby, and more widely as well. Turning to a symbolic approach, it was evident that nature

held considerable meaning for people in the village of Old Dalby, although this meaning varied considerably. It was, for instance, clear that a wide range of actants taken to be natural were seen as key elements of an attractive rural locality: "when you get upstairs in my house ... it is the most beautiful view over to the church and it is lovely ... It is open, there aren't any houses there, and there's trees, and the church, and fields, it is rural ... If you look over there you can't find much more rural than that"; "I would describe it as a very lively village, friendly village and a pretty village ... You come down the hill and it is magical, it looks lovely ... when the lights are just going on it is just beautiful really, and in different seasons, you get different reflections and different lights, and it is just lovely"; "I like the country, I like the quiet. I don't like towns. I work in a town, I don't want to live in the town as well ... I think the view out of this window, those trees, is fantastic ... There couldn't be anybody else in the country to have such a fantastic view out of their window and say that's all mine. I like that, I like the trees, I think trees are fantastic. We do watch the wildlife when it's there. We don't sit there waiting for the wildlife to appear. We don't have to". It was striking how not only were physical landscape features and flora featured in accounts of the village, but also how animals also featured prominently, with a particular feature of the village being the number of rustic animals present there, with many householders keeping old and rare breeds of livestock animals and birds.

Actants taken to be nature were clearly highly significant to many residents, and formed important constituents of a ruralised identity amongst both incoming and long settled residents. The same actants could, however, be viewed, or sensed, in quite distinct ways, with at least four symbolic constructions of nature being identifiable. First, as has been observed in other studies (e.g. Kaplan & Austin, 2004; O'Rourke, 1999; Ryan, 2006), for many residents nature was apprehended as essentially an object of an aesthetic gaze. Many descriptions already quoted make reference to views, often out of windows or from garden spaces, a feature which resonates with the work of Kaplan (2001). This attitude is often viewed through a descriptive conception of culture, being ascribed exclusively to incoming middle class residents, although I would suggest that it is neither universally adopted by such people, nor indeed assumed solely by people within this group. The notion of nature as an aesthetic object can be seen to have certain connections into what has been previously described as a 'move-in for self and show' lifestyle discourse, it being suggested that adherents to this symbolic construction tend to view the village and surrounding countryside as an aesthetic background to dwellings and a vista to be gazed upon, often from the privacy of their own property" (Phillips, 2002a: 97). This work, however, stressed that this lifestyle discourse was only one amongst a range of new middle class identities, and that people other than middle class people were positioned within and through this lifestyle.

Other residents sensed nature in more embodied ways, such as through being an object of labour: "when I get up in the morning I go ... Oh my lovely garden, the grass needs cutting"; "I spend quite a bit of time in the garden whether I spend much time looking at it is a different matter all together ... because I don't want to sit down. I see something, and I'll go to pull a weed up or something like that, or prune something". Again this is a relationship to nature that has often been viewed through a descriptive approach to culture, being seen as the cultural attitude of agricultural workers and as a differentiator of some truly/authentically rural person from an urban incomer. However, in Old Dalby it was an attitude and identity that was clearly adopted by some middle class incomers. Furthermore, it was not simply agricultural and horticultural activities that embodied notions of nature as an object of work; so too were more consumptive activities such as recreational walking, with stress often being placed on the physical effort required. Other residents engaging in activities such as gardening and walking seemed to stress rather different forms of embodied engagements, apparently valuing nature less in terms of an object with which they worked, but rather as something into which they were immersed during the performance of their everyday lives. Repeated references were, for instance, made to appreciating the sounds of birds and to routine encounters with them: "we are living in the countryside ... that's part of living here, but it's a different kind of peace because you can sit here and hear the birds, and get to know the wildlife"; "I walk around in the evening. I like it. There is more to see in the evening some times ... This bush down there, is ever so funny, I call it the flat, because the sparrows, they all fly down and they all go there and they have a great big argument. And you can hear them, all the time. And then all get out and go away and go and do something and then they all fly back". Yet for other residents, nature appeared and was valued not as some intimate and immersive entity, but rather as distanced and expansive: a space to be walked, and perhaps even driven through: "whenever I drive to or from ... [the village] I think, ah, I live in the country". Such perspectives may have close parallels with notions of nature as an object of aesthetic gaze, but for some people, expansive environments, including areas of grassland, were clearly valued in more embodied, less visual ways.

These symbolic constructions of nature and the countryside appear to draw upon a range of senses and activities, and arguably may be seen to demonstrate Thrift's (2003: 319) claim that nature is apprehended and constructed through 'planes of affect attuned to particular body parts (and senses) and corresponding elements of Nature (from trees to grass, to river and sky)'. These constructions may also be seen to connect to, and affect, relations of power and conflict, not least because they resource and constrain the activities in which people engage. Also their very diversity means that village space, and its actants taken to be natural, are often viewed in quite different ways. This point was very evident in relation to an area of open grassland in a central part of the village which was routinely valued by people in the village, including many incoming gentrifiers, but was itself under threat from gentrification related development. Whilst some other gentrifiers were adamantly opposed to its redevelopment because it represented a space for immersive engagement with nature, others who adopted more aesthetic relations with nature often could see no value in an area which was largely hidden from view.

Conclusions This paper has explored the value of four different conceptions of culture in people's relationships to nature in a rural-fringe area. It has argued that whilst studies of culture in grass/rangelands have often adopted a classical perspective on culture linked to a pastoral or anti-pastoral perspective, descriptive, symbolic and critical perspectives have also been advanced, at least in relation to the study of the English countryside as a middle class territory. The paper has then drawn on a research project examining rural gentrification and the role of nature within this. The research project has focused on gentrifying villages in an area of permanent improved and unimproved grassland within Leicestershire, England, with attention being primarily focused on assessing whether descriptive, symbolic and critical concepts of culture are of value in understanding people's conceptions of and relationships with nature. It has been argued that application of a descriptive approach is difficult, but there does appear to be value in applying symbolic and critical perspectives.

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