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Kay, R. (2011) (Un)caring communities: processes of marginalisation and access to formal and informal care and assistance in rural Russia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 27 (1). pp. 45-53. ISSN 0743-0167

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Deposited on: 29 April 2013

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# **(Un)caring communities: processes of marginalisation and access to formal and informal care and assistance in rural Russia.**

## Abstract

The marginality of rural life, understood in structural, economic, political and geographic terms, has been an underlying theme in both historical and contemporary studies of the Russian countryside. Much less attention has been paid to marginality as relational and the moral discourses of (un)belonging and (un)deservingness through which moral centres and peripheries are constructed within rural Russian contexts. This paper explores the ways in which both fixed, structural and constructed, personalised explanations of hardship are employed by rural people and how these relate to processes of integration into or exclusion from ‘caring’ and ‘moral’ communities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Burla village, western Siberia, in 2008-10, and focusing primarily on the activities of the Centre for Social Assistance to Families and Children located there, the paper discusses the ways in which affiliation with the ‘moral centre’ facilitates access to both formal and informal forms of care and assistance from which those at the ‘moral periphery’ are more often excluded.

Key words: marginality, care, Russia, rural, deservingness, poverty

## 1. Introduction

The ‘marginality’ of rural life has been an underlying theme in many historical and contemporary studies of the Russian countryside (Shubin, 2006). Neither Soviet nor

post-Soviet economic policies prioritised agricultural production, investments in rural infrastructure or provision of services. As a result, rural people have suffered disadvantages in both present living standards and future opportunities (Donahue, 2002). The severing of ties between state and agriculture, the disintegration of infrastructure, including transport links, and the withdrawal of funding for cultural and social provision in the period since 1991, have been interpreted as increasing the physical, economic and social distance between rural and urban populations, exacerbating the marginality of rural life (Lindner, 2007). Marginality has thus been approached in much of the academic literature on rural Russia as a structural phenomenon, explained in terms of geographic, economic and political centres and peripheries, and referring to rural populations more or less as a single homogenous mass. Much less attention has been paid to the ‘relational nature of marginality’ (Cloke and Little 1997, 275) or to processes of marginalisation *within* rural places as these interact with socially constructed notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ and the production of ‘moral’ centres and peripheries, based on distinctions between those who ‘fulfil’ and those who ‘transgress’ local moral norms of lifestyle, behaviour and social interaction.

Issues of social inequality and poverty in rural Russia have been studied primarily through large-scale, longitudinal surveys (Wegren et al, 2003; O’Brien et al, 2004; Wegren et al, 2006). Whilst such studies provide important insight into the extent of rural poverty and offer explanations of its causes and consequences relating to household behaviours and strategies of adaptation, survey methods cannot uncover deeper, locally-inflected meanings, explanations and lived experiences of inequality, poverty and social transformation. By contrast, ethnographic studies have offered

insight into various aspects of rural life in the post-socialist field (Miller, 2001; Hivon, 1998; Shubin, 2003; Hann, 2003; Shanin et al., 2002). ‘Subjective’ experiences of change and the ways in which these interact with the norms and values associated with village life have been explored in many of these studies (Hann, 2003). A preference for collective forms of production, the value of labour and an imperative to work the land (Hivon, 1998), as well as the importance of networks of kin, neighbours and friends in mitigating against poverty, by pooling and exchanging material resources and labour have been noted (Shubin, 2007; Miller and Heady, 2003). Moral disapproval of those whose relative affluence allows them to withdraw from or monetise their input into networks of mutual assistance (Hivon, 1998, p. 48; Miller and Heady, 2003, p. 283-4), as well as the danger of exclusion faced by those whose poverty is too great to allow them to participate in required levels of reciprocity (Shteinberg, 2002, p. 280), have been discussed, pointing to inequalities within village societies. Yet, whilst the emotional and ‘moral’ benefits of and prerequisites for ‘belonging’ are alluded to in general terms (Shteinberg, 2002, p. 281-282; Miller and Heady, 2003, p. 278 & 288), they are not usually explored in depth, nor have intersections between formal provisions of social support and informal networks or communities of care been considered in detail.

This paper explores processes of marginalisation in a particular rural context: Burla village, western Siberia. It discusses the ways in which structural and individualised explanations of disadvantage are selectively employed by local people to emphasise the virtues of the moral centre, including a virtue of caring community, and to justify disengagement from and lack of care for, the ‘other’. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at the Burla District Centre for Social Assistance (CSA), the paper

discusses the interlinking of formal and informal networks of care and social support and the ways in which affiliation with the ‘moral’ centre facilitates access to both, whilst processes of ‘othering’ legitimate multiple exclusions of those at the moral periphery.

The following section explores more fully the theoretical frameworks on which the arguments outlined above are based. In section 3 the reader is introduced to Burla village and the fieldwork methods are explained in light of the realities and constraints facing western ethnographers working in rural Russia. Section 4 provides an overview of the work of the CSA, its ‘target groups’ and activities. The remainder of the paper explores the relationship between processes of marginalisation and incorporation into or exclusion from ‘communities of care’. This is achieved primarily through an analysis of the discourses of moral belonging employed by the ‘included’ to distinguish themselves from the ‘others’ of the moral periphery. These constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ contribute to interpretations of ‘deservingness’ and ‘need’ which, it is argued, offer those able to claim affiliation with the ‘moral centre’ considerable advantages in terms of access to intersecting formal and informal provisions care and emotional as well as practical support. Section 5 explores the structural explanations of marginality which are applied to the village as a whole, constructing rural life as ‘harder’ but also ‘more human’ than its urban equivalents. The ‘moral’ virtues associated with life in this context and claimed by those at the ‘moral centre’ include self-sufficiency, hard work and reciprocal care. By contrast, as discussed in Section 6, the hardships and suffering of those who are unable to cope is more often constructed as a result of individual failings and pathologies. Constructed as ‘other’, these people are relegated to a ‘moral periphery’. Formal assessments of

their needs entitle them to forms of monetary and practical assistance, but their incorporation into those caring communities which are dominated by the ‘moral centre’ is far more problematic. Finally, Section 7 returns to the CSA and discusses the advantages and opportunities available to those who are included in such caring communities, particularly with regard to their overlapping access to informal and formal resources and forms of care.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks: care, moral community and the marginalised ‘other’

The arguments and empirical evidence presented here draw on a wider research project investigating social security and care in Burla<sup>1</sup>. The project is framed by anthropological theorisations of social security, defined as encompassing the complex range of ways in which people mitigate risk and produce securities (social, economic, personal and cultural) by drawing on public and private resources, formal and informal networks, and state and non-state structures (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000). This approach to the concept of social security is helpful in highlighting the ways in which access to a wide variety of resources and forms of assistance are intertwined such that forms of inclusion or exclusion can be multiple and mutually reinforcing across formal and informal contexts. Feelings of trust and emotional forms of security are understood as equally significant as material forms of assistance in people’s experiences of security or vulnerability and their abilities to deal with difficult circumstances (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000, p. 7). Thelen and Read have argued that care needs to be considered explicitly as a ‘dimension of social security’ (Thelen and Read, 2007, p. 7).

Analysing the practices and relationships through which care is performed and the discursive constructions of morality, community and deservingness on which these are based, can help to highlight the ways in which certain needs and relationships are validated and supported, whilst others are viewed as blameworthy and deserving of punitive or controlling, rather than supportive responses. As feminist scholars of care have pointed out the relationships, structures and policies which provide and facilitate caring activities are never value-free or morally neutral (Ungerson, 2005; Kittay and Feder, 2002). In Tronto's theorisation of the phases of care, for example, the first phase, 'caring about', involves making an assessment of need and taking morally defined decisions about which needs should be met (Tronto, 1993, p. 106).

Socially and culturally situated notions of mutual obligation, rights and responsibilities, dependency and self-sufficiency create categories of deserving and undeserving need, and determine whether 'caring' or 'punitive' responses are considered appropriate (Fraser and Gordon, 2002). Categories of need and deservingness are all-too-easily mapped to socially constructed identities and representations of the 'respectable' citizen and the 'unworthy', and potentially threatening, 'other'. As such their implications can be understood through theories of marginality as discursively constructed, fluid and relative (Tsing 1994). As Cloke and Little explain, 'marginality is not simply about the possession or lack of certain essential characteristics ... but rather ... is dependent upon deeper processes relating to the construction of identities and the positionality of the self and the other' (Cloke and Little, 1997, 273). Whilst rigid and static definitions of centre and periphery may be critiqued (Perlman 1976; Gonzalez de la Rocha et al, 2004), locally meaningful

distinctions and relationships of power, nonetheless create strong binary divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The moral divisions implied in this process help to construct what Rose has termed ‘moral communities’ bound by shared allegiances and values and within which forms of care and mutual assistance circulate. These moral communities strengthen and ‘re-cod[e] dividing practices, revising the distinctions between the *affiliated* and the *marginalised*’ along lines of ‘morality, lifestyle or comportment’ (Rose 1996: 340). Moral categories of ‘deservingness’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘contribution’ are often tacitly acknowledged and shared by both the affiliated and the marginalised (Howe, 1998). As such they can lead to self-exclusion and/or legitimise the marginalisation of undeserving ‘others’ from the ‘moral communities’ of the ‘centre’, which offer those deemed ‘deserving’ an important means of negotiating and combating both material and emotional insecurities.

### 3. Fieldwork context and methodological issues

#### *3.1 The fieldsite: Burla Village*

Burla is the central village of Burlinskii district, an agricultural area of Altai krai, western Siberia. Near to the border with Kazakhstan, the district lies some 600km west of Barnaul, the regional capital. The district has no non-agricultural industry to speak of and many of the agricultural enterprises and processing plants which once dominated the economic landscape have closed down. Burla is home to one of only



two remaining large agricultural enterprises in the district and the only one which is currently profit making. The farm has greatly reduced its workforce, from several thousand in the late 1980s to less than 350 in 2009 and wages are low. Whilst average monthly wages are depressed across the district at 6,672 roubles (£148), they are considerably lower in agriculture at 4,824 roubles (£107) and unskilled or seasonal agricultural workers can earn as little as 800 roubles (around £18) per month<sup>2</sup>. By comparison the monthly subsistence minimum for Altai region is approximately 4,300 roubles (£95) (Zaplatnikova, 2008). It is clear therefore that, for many, local wages are insufficient to raise households much above the poverty line, even where the ratio of wage earners to dependents is positive.

With a population of 4,550, Burla is home to approximately a third of the district's population of 13,000, of which 61 percent are working age adults, 20 percent children and young people, and 19 percent pensioners<sup>3</sup>. Official unemployment rates for the district are kept artificially low due to high rates of temporary labour migration, as well as the stigma associated with unemployment and the limited amount and length of benefits available. However, figures provided by the district administration show that of 8,411 working age adults only 3,373 are formally employed. Thus a high proportion of households survive on a mixture of subsistence farming activity and informal forms of employment and income, including unregistered labour migration, as well as state support including various subsidies and benefits to families with children. Intergenerational exchanges are important with pensioners making significant monetary contributions to household income, as well as providing unpaid childcare and contributing to household production of food.

Burla itself offers rather better employment prospects than the smaller surrounding villages as it is home to a rather extensive set of state structures which provide a range of jobs for teachers, librarians, medics, social workers, creative and cultural specialists, accountants and administrators. There are also opportunities in the commercial sector which, although still modest, has grown considerably over the past few years: as well as a number of shops, there is a hairdressers, two café-bars, a small canteen and even a recently established taxi company. Living standards in Burla are visibly higher than in the district's surrounding villages: on my first arrival to the village the number of homes with new plastic double-glazed windows and satellite dishes was eagerly pointed out by my hosts. Nonetheless, many houses are still without indoor plumbing or central heating, in which case water must be carried by hand from stand-pipes in the street and houses are heated by coal and wood-fired stoves.

### *3.2 Conducting Fieldwork in Burla: methodology, positionality and constraints*

Gaining access to Russian villages and conducting qualitative fieldwork in what are still rather closed cultural environments with strong patterns of social control is a challenging process, particularly for the foreign researcher. As well as formal regulations governing the presence of foreigners, both local and federal authorities maintain 'informal' checks on the activities of researchers and, perhaps more importantly, on those local people most closely associated with them. Given this context, I was acutely aware of the need to allow for a gradual development of relationships of mutual trust and understanding and the careful negotiation of access

to a steadily widening circle of respondents by working through existing networks and structures.

My position as a British woman and fluent Russian speaker both complicated and facilitated the process of trust building and research interaction. On the one hand I was clearly an 'outsider' in the field, a strange 'other' and the only western foreigner to have visited the village in a long time. In a place with a history of restricted interaction with outsiders I was initially kept at a distance and people expressed both suspicion about my reasons for being there and reticence and embarrassment about sharing their daily realities with me. On the other hand I was a curiosity and my long-term interest in and contact with Russia, although mostly through visits to its more European and urban contexts, attracted interest and a willingness to show me the 'real Russia' of a Siberian village.

My original entry to the village was facilitated by a personal introduction to Tatyana, the director of the Burla CSA. This was followed by an accompanied and formal 3-day visit in March 2008. Whilst clearly rather bemused by my interest in their village, and cautious in their interactions with me, the local officials whom I met agreed that I could return for a longer period of research. Over two subsequent month-long periods of field research in 2009 and 2010, I spent a significant amount of time 'hanging out' at the CSA, getting to know staff and clients, taking part in day-to-day activities and socialising with those who were kind enough to share tea breaks with me or invite me to their homes. Through discussion with managers at the CSA I gradually negotiated the terms of my research and was allowed to participate in training sessions and group activities at the Centre. Nonetheless, my movements and contacts were closely

monitored by my hosts: many of the interviews I conducted in the earlier period of research were extremely formal and I was almost always accompanied on both interviews and social visits by a senior member of staff. The detailed research journals which I kept provided space to record and reflect on both what people told me about life in the village and my observations of interactions and practices in more informal contexts.

During my second month-long stay I perceived a shift in people's attitudes towards and interactions with me. I was allowed more leeway to move around the village unaccompanied, visited the homes of my respondents, even staying overnight on some occasions and gathered data in far more informal circumstances, using semi-structured and open ethnographic interview techniques. Nevertheless, as a result of my entry to the village having come through a connection to Tatyana, with whom I also stayed during both of my longer visits, and the focus of my research at the CSA itself, I remained much less able to make meaningful contact with people in the village who had minimal or no interaction with the CSA. Ironically, this included a considerable proportion of those locally categorised as 'undeserving' poor.

As a result of these fieldwork realities, this paper cannot and does not make any claim to 'give voice' to the marginalised 'others' of Burla. I am not able to offer detailed insight into the ways in which these people deal with insecurity and the forms of care which circulate within their communities or networks. I have no doubt that different ethics and practices of care, as well as alternative moral discourses exist locally and I gained limited glimpses of this in some of the informal relationships of care I heard about and witnessed. However, this paper focuses on dominant moral discourses

precisely because these framed and legitimated the operations of the CSA in ways which differentiated between those for whom an advantageous link could be made between informal and formal aspects of care and support and those for whom this opportunity was not so readily available. In other words, the paper tries to explain how and why a state structure, the remit of which is to provide services and support to the needy, has become an important and valued resource offering opportunities for emotional forms of care and support to circulate amongst those who already 'belong' to the moral centre. Meanwhile, those who do not 'belong', and whose needs may be arguably more urgent, receive more formalised, distant and pragmatic assistance, but are not drawn into 'caring communities' in the same way.

#### 4. Burla District Centre for Social Assistance: Activities, Target Groups and Access

The CSA was established in 2001 as part of a federal programme aiming to improve the delivery of services to local populations. It incorporates a social-work division providing homecare for the elderly and infirm and a division for work with children who have physical and/or learning disabilities. With over 30 staff, including 6 'specialists' (two psychologists, two youth workers, a health and fitness expert and an arts and crafts instructor) and 18 homecare workers, the CSA provides regular homecare support to 74 elderly and/or disabled people, as well as educational play and therapy sessions, physical therapies and social opportunities for disabled children and their families. It also runs non-residential summer camps and various after-school exercise and crafts clubs, hosts a health club for pensioners, and support groups for unemployed women and women in 'difficult circumstances'. These camps, clubs and support groups draw in a much wider group of regular clients, many of whom do not

in fact fall within the 'target categories' initially envisaged as the focus of the CSA's work. These 'extra curricula' activities play a key role in the development of 'caring communities' linked to the CSA and enjoying access to its facilities.

The federal programme under which the CSA was established involved the division of social services into two parallel structures: the social security administration (*upravlenie sotsial'noi zashity*), responsible for assessing entitlement to and distributing monetary benefits, and the CSA tasked with the local provision of caring services. The social security administration operates alongside a range of other local structures to assess and document the entitlements of local people on the basis of complex formal criteria including means testing, disability status, family composition, employment record etc. At the district level, the social security administration, the employment service, the committee for social protection and the commission for young people's affairs, all hold lists of 'needy' individuals and families defined on these bases.

Definitions of 'vulnerable' or 'needy' people eligible for support and services from the CSA are much broader and open to a considerable degree of interpretation both locally by staff and potential or actual clients, and by the regional and national authorities regulating the work of the CSA. On the one hand, elderly and disabled people in need of homecare assistance and children with learning and physical disabilities are clearly defined 'target groups', reflecting wider official designations of 'deserving need' and vulnerability. These groups receive specific services through the CSA's two divisions. The CSA co-operates with the social security administration to identify those in need of such support and to assess claims for assistance. It also takes

referrals from local schools, kindergartens and medical services, as well as district and village level administrations and veterans' councils.

However, as Alla, head of the CSA's division for work with disabled children explained, these 'target groups' are not the only sections of the local population to whom the CSA is expected to provide services and support:

Last year Dikarev [chairman of the regional committee for social protection] signed a decree that we should work with all subsections of the population regardless of who they are: children, disabled, not disabled, neglected kids, problem kids, old men, old women, young families, we work with all of them.

This wider definition of the CSA's remit is reflected at the local level where centre staff, local authorities, and the population more generally, also tend to adopt a 'catch all' understanding of the CSA's work. During fieldwork in Burla I witnessed local people come to the CSA for help with a wide array of issues and problems: physical aches and pains, family and relationship problems, issues of addiction, bereavement and depression. Doctors and teachers had referred some, but referrals by friends, relatives and acquaintances were also common. Local authorities also had a tendency to turn to the CSA for help and assistance whenever a 'problem' emerged, be it the need to implement a national social initiative such as 'year of the family' through a series of local activities, or a local crisis such as an outbreak of teenage suicides amongst boys in Burla's surrounding villages.

Concerned to demonstrate the relevance of and demand for their service, CSA staff to some extent encouraged this wider view of the Centre's remit and tried to help all those who came, offering counselling and advice, and sometimes establishing new clubs or activities in response to particular requests. An exercise group described as for 'women in difficult circumstances', but essentially accommodating a request from a group of women medics was established in 2009. An after-school club for teenage boys grew out of a specific programme of work with young men, co-ordinated in collaboration with local schools, in response to the aforementioned suicides. The development of such activities, involved considerable overlaps between formal and informal networks of care and support, both with regard to the benefits and advantages of membership and in terms of the processes by which local people became involved. All of the clubs and support groups using the CSA had grown primarily via word of mouth and personal invitations based on pre-existing networks of colleagues, neighbours, friends and family. As a consequence, there were certain noticeable similarities amongst the most frequent visitors to the centre. Amongst the adults, women predominated, most of them working or having worked previously in white collar jobs, mainly in the social sector. When I asked about the backgrounds of children attending the after-school and lunchtime clubs I was told, 'Oh they're not necessarily from poor or disadvantaged families. We don't discriminate. We're open to whichever kids choose to come'. Another common response to my questions about which groups were making most use of the CSA was that the Centre was 'open to all' since it was the only such facility available in the village and, 'after all, in a place like Burla, everyone is 'needy''.



Yet this emphasis on openness and non-discrimination jarred with my observation that certain groups (unemployed men, agricultural workers etc.) were missing, or at least much less visible in their interactions with the centre. Whilst members of the various clubs arrived in noisy and animated groups, interacting with humour and affection both amongst themselves and with CSA staff, those who came seeking more direct assistance and often expressing more urgent need, usually came alone, interacted in a much more formalised manner and left quietly. Their presence was often barely noticeable. As the following sections explain, differential explanations of hardship and dominant discourses of moral virtue and ‘deservingness’ may be useful in explaining the more limited ways in which ‘other’ people were able to access the Centre and its resources.

#### 5. Defining the ‘moral centre’: structural explanations of disadvantage and the virtues of coping with hardship

In general discussions of life in Burla and the problems faced by local residents, Burlinskii district was presented as a marginal place in geographical, political and economic terms. In this context, *generalised* experiences of hardship, the impoverishment of the district as a whole and ensuing social and demographic consequences were explained in terms of structural disadvantage. The central state was held responsible for failing to create the necessary political and economic environment for the district to flourish and the relative powerlessness of local authorities, enterprises or social organisations to turn the situation around was stressed (Zaplatnikova, 2008). The physical distance between Burlinskii district and the larger

urban centres of Altai krai, its isolation from commercial developments and markets, as well as from hierarchies of political decision-making and power, and the almost exclusive reliance of the local economy on agricultural production were all explained as compounding the economic and political marginality of this place.

Local people did not use an academic vocabulary of ‘marginalisation’, instead they talked about ‘loss’, the deterioration of facilities, a diminishing of local opportunities and precariousness of current and future livelihoods. During the months I spent in Burla in 2009 and 2010, people spoke frequently about the decline, bankruptcy and closure of agricultural enterprises, processing plants and mineral extraction companies which had in the past brought the district a sense of its economic connection to and importance for the centre, as well as a degree of financial security. I walked through the village one day with two young men, Alesha and Jan, both of whom had grown up in Burla. Eighteen-year-old Alesha was currently employed by a local small-holder and entrepreneur, but soon to leave Burla for his military service, Jan, an unemployed farm labourer in his mid-twenties had recently returned to Burla after an unsuccessful experience as a labour migrant in Moscow. As we walked, they repeatedly pointed out sites of loss and decay: the park where, ‘there used to be carrousels and summer discos, but it’s all broken down now’; the local bakery, which ‘used to sell great gingerbread and homemade lemonade’ but which has stood empty for several years; the derelict shell of what was once a two-storey service centre (*dom byta*) with hairdressers, dressmakers and repair shops. ‘There was so much here before the collapse of the USSR’, said Jan, ‘but now it’s all gone to wrack and ruin’. Despite this negative assessment of Burla and its perspectives, Jan had hated his time in Moscow and said he would rather stay in Burla. He helped his mother-in-law with the family

‘business’ of cultivating seeds and seedlings which he sold at the local bazaar. He was hoping to find formal employment on the state farm for the summer.

As Cloke has pointed out in his work on rural poverty in the UK and America, particular constructions of rurality and ‘dynamic relations between the material and the cultural’ can feed into locally reproduced versions of the virtues of rural life (Cloke, 1997, 260). In Burla, this dynamic relationship between the material and the cultural, combined with a shifting continuity of Soviet norms and newer expectations and values, to form dominant moral discourses where the generalised hardship and structural disadvantage of life in this place, underlined the moral virtues which nonetheless allowed people to live well here: hard work; agricultural skill and knowledge; affiliation to strong networks of reciprocal care and support; love of the land and a commitment to this place and its culture. Young people like Jan who rejected the glamour and material attractions of the big city and were willing to work in agriculture and participate in household production were referred to with pride as ‘local patriots’.

Sitting in the CSA kitchen one afternoon I chatted with Nikolai, a man in his late 50s who worked two full-time jobs simultaneously, one as driver at the CSA, the other as night watchman and janitor at the local school. I listened as he talked about his life and his admiration for the young women working as specialists at the CSA. His narrative emphasised the importance of hard work, commitment to family and to the village. He explained that when he had been made redundant the previous year, after 21 years working a 60-hour week for the post office, he had gone to seek work beyond the village despite his age:

They don't take on older men, but I got work no problem, driving a truck. I don't drink you see, and I've always had a good attitude to work. I'm quick on the uptake and I'm willing. I came back for the winter and got the janitor's job at the school. I planned to go back to work away in the spring. But then I got this job as driver at the centre.

Although his two salaries together still added up to less than half the 20,000 roubles he had earned in town, Nikolai said he would now stay in the village. The money was enough for him to give half to his children and his wife preferred him to stay home so he could help with the family's large plot. 'I've got two sons here, local patriots like myself' he explained, 'I give them a couple of thousand each a month to help pay off their loans'.

Making something out of nothing and striving to help others without an interest in material recompense was another important virtue emphasised by Nikolai. Pointing out the hand-produced paintings and decorations with which staff had adorned the kitchen and the rest of the premises he exclaimed:

Look at all the work and care that has gone into decorating this place. Look how hard all the girls here work to help people. They don't do it for the money you know. What are they paid? A pittance! No, it's their calling. They are patriots of the village too, every one of them'

These discourses were replicated in both public rhetoric and private discussions on many occasions during my stays in the village. In 2009, at two district-wide

celebrations speeches made constant reference to the hardships of village life and the endurance and hard work of local people. Bonds of care and community binding the local population to each other and to this place were emphasised repeatedly. In general discussions, particularly where people were comparing life in Burla either with urban life in Russia or with details of my life in the UK, I often heard the comment 'It's materially better there, but we have a more 'human' (*chelovecheskii*) way of life', the inference being that greater personalised and caring interaction between people was a positive characteristic of rural living.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a dominant set of moral discourses within the village challenged the values and norms of the urban centres, in relation to which people were aware of their own structural disadvantage. In emphasising endurance, self-sufficiency and reciprocal care as key virtues of village life people drew simultaneously on Soviet ideologies of entitlement through work and positive contribution to the collective, long standing rural realities of collective self-sufficiency, and newer, 'neoliberal', calls for a reduction in state 'paternalism' and increased personal responsibility. They also reproduced a moral division between centre and periphery within the village itself based on rhetorically and discursively constructed communities, relationships and people and rather different explanations of the extreme hardships experienced by the 'undeserving' poor.

6. Constructing the 'moral periphery': individualised explanations of hardship and 'othering' the 'undeserving' poor.

If generalised experiences of economic depression and lower living standards in the countryside were blamed on structural disadvantage, extreme poverty and deprivation were more commonly explained in terms of individual pathology and failure to embrace the virtues of rural life. Distancing themselves from the extremely poor, many of the people to whom I spoke blamed others who were 'unable to cope' for their laziness, drunkenness and failure to work the land. Despite a generalised awareness that opportunities for employment had fallen dramatically over the past two decades, local people continued to view work as the basis for moral entitlement to social assistance, reflecting Soviet era principles of welfare support<sup>5</sup>. When discussing the problem of unemployment, local people, especially those of the older generation, often recalled Soviet laws which compelled people to work, speaking of unemployment as 'parasitism' (*tuneiadstvo*), labelling those without work 'idlers' (*lentiai*), 'parasites' (*tuneiadtsy*) and 'dependents' (*izhdiventsy*). A common opinion was that people should at least have to participate in some form of socially useful or public work to justify their benefits.

Indeed, the establishment of a local unemployment office was described by many as an anomaly and blamed for growing rates of unemployment. During a family birthday party, a retired policeman reminiscing about changes in Burla during his lifetime exclaimed:

There was never as much unemployment before the job centre was set up. As soon as that happened and people could get money for nothing just by signing on once a month, why would they bother to go and work? They get sent from the employment centre to a vacant post and they ask the employer to write them a note saying they weren't suitable, so they can carry on claiming.

Others around the table agreed, contributing stories of their own about how people cheat and avoid work, preferring to claim benefits instead. Olessya a primary school teacher in her early thirties, told laughingly of how when she had visited the health clinic earlier in the week another woman had been asking for ill-health certificates to prevent the employment centre from sending her to work as a milkmaid. The general consensus was that she was only faking to avoid losing her benefits and having to go back to work. Claiming entitlements to formally assessed material assistance was thus constructed as contravening a local moral emphasis on work and self-sufficiency which has strong roots in both historical and contemporary frameworks of deservingness.

Negative attitudes towards those who depend on benefits were further compounded by a rural imperative of self-sufficiency and cultivation of the land, both of which have been highlighted in other studies of post-socialist rural moral economies (Hivon, 1998, p. 43; Miller and Heady, 2003, p. 268). When I visited people's homes even those with clearly very little in the way of material possessions and comfort laid on a generous spread of home-grown produce. People often asked to see photographs of my family and several of the pictures that I had brought showed family celebrations. Commenting on the photographs, women in particular quickly pointed out the evidence of shop-bought food on my table. 'We don't do that here' I was told, 'we make everything ourselves'. These statements not only constructed me, the 'affluent, urban, westerner' as 'other', but also those within the village who were not able or willing to make everything themselves. As people described their farming activities to me, I was told repeatedly that 'you can't go hungry in the village' and that 'it is only those who are really lazy (*lentiai*) who are poor'.

Recounting an encounter with a poor family who had come to him in search of material assistance, the deputy head of the district administration expressed his exasperation with those who fail to feed themselves from the land:

The winter had started, and they were like, ‘I’ve got no potatoes and I’ve run out of cabbage’. That was what they were used to. He would come one month and the head of administration would sign for him. He’d come to the deputy head, and the deputy head would help him out ... they were, as we say, dependants (*izhdiventsy*). ... They have 3 children. ... So I said, ‘What are you feeding your kids? Why have you run out of potatoes and cabbage? Run out at the start of the winter! I’ve always grown potatoes myself, even though there’s no-one growing up in my house’.

Working the land and managing to get by with very little was one way in which people who were ‘coping’ aligned themselves with the moral centre thus constructed by those in positions of authority and power. This allowed them to distinguish themselves from the ‘poor’, even when they in fact shared many of the same experiences of worklessness, poor health and material deprivation. At the home of one of the CSA’s homecare workers, Svetlana, and her husband, Sasha, a former brigade leader at the state farm, now retired early on ill-health grounds, I was fed mushrooms collected in the autumn, chicken raised on their plot, salad made from their own cabbages, carrots and tomatoes and jam from their own plums and blackcurrants. In spite of his own worklessness, which Sasha admitted only reluctantly, emphasising repeatedly how busy he was kept with the household plot, he nonetheless voiced the same criticisms of ‘the unemployed’ as I had heard elsewhere: ‘They don’t want to



work for 20,000, but they're happy enough to sit on the dole for 1000 a month and then complain that they are poor'.

Ultimately these ways of explaining extreme poverty lead to the conclusion that such families and individuals are beyond help, particularly where help is conceived of in terms of the provision of care. People in Burla did talk about social interactions between the 'undeserving poor' and the 'moral centre'. However, these were most often presented as shameful, troubling and ambiguous. Several older women made a point of telling me that they did not themselves interact with 'drunks' and would not provide vodka for them. Whether or not this depiction of their own behaviour was accurate is less significant than that their denials pointed both to the fact that such interactions do occur and that they did not want to be viewed as engaged in them. Ivan, a man in his late 70s talked with considerable distress about the dilemma he had faced in his relationship with a friend who had lost his wife, home and income as a result of alcoholism. On the one hand Ivan had felt a moral obligation to care for this friend, on the other he preferred to keep his distance:

He'd come to see me and he'd be drinking eau-de-cologne. I was afraid to let him stay the night – he was dirty. He'd sleep in the boiler house. But he'd come round and I'd feed him. He knew for himself where to find the eau-de-cologne. He'd find it, drink it. Well I'd give him a drink too. I got vodka for him, but then I thought, maybe I'm just making him worse. Then he didn't come for two days and I found out he'd gone out to the railway bridge and thrown himself under a train.

This tension between an obligation to provide support to those in need and a wish to keep a moral and social distance was also reflected in relations between the poor and formal structures for the provision of care and assistance. Driving through Burla one day, with Polina, head of the CSA's homecare section, we passed a family who she described as 'homeless'. Polina explained that when she had worked in the social security office the woman had come frequently asking for assistance: 'She was always very proper and polite, but she and her children were dirty and it was quite unpleasant to deal with her'. In response to my question as to what kind of help might be available to people and families such as this, I was told that they could get benefits. It was clear however, that despite her personal contact with this family in the past, Polina had not attempted to involve them in any of the more personalised forms of care available through the CSA, the children had not taken part in summer camps or after school activities, the mother was not invited to join the support group for unemployed women.

Formal entitlements to material assistance may be morally contested and may even contribute to negative appraisals of their 'dependency', yet this relatively distanced and impersonal form of support continues to be available to the poor. The provision of care rather than monetary payments, demands more intimate and involved relationships and interactions (Tronto, 1993, p. 105), and it is here that discourses which dehumanise and blame and perceptions of some of the most destitute and needy people as dirty, amoral, dangerous and threatening have the most potential to become powerful mechanisms of exclusion (Katz, 1989, p.201).

Access to care services, including the caring communities which have developed in connection with the activities of the CSA, intersects with local moral definitions of deserving need, and the ‘othering’ and marginalisation of certain needy groups. The contrast between structural explanations of generalised disadvantage as a feature of rural life and individualised explanations of extreme poverty serve to compound distinctions between the ‘deserving’ moral centre of self-sufficient and resilient rural people and the ‘undeserving’ others who have only themselves to blame for their poverty and exclusion. In a situation where everyone is deemed to be struggling against difficult circumstances, those who are unable to cope may be viewed particularly harshly and seen as embarrassing failures, who have, ‘let the side down’. Placing a moral distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is an important way of validating the ‘deservingness’ of the ‘moral majority’ and differentially applied structural and individualistic explanations of disadvantage become intertwined and mutually reinforcing in this process (Howe, 1998, p. 534-5).

### 7. Caring communities, the ‘moral centre’ and access to formal and informal networks of care

The giving and receiving of care is crucial to the functioning of the CSA. Alongside its more formal services, regulated through official state programmes and definitions of eligibility, the CSA’s clubs and support groups also provide spaces for the development of semi-formal or informal caring communities. These are generally structured around either health and fitness exercises, or arts and crafts activities, or both. This focus fits neatly with an emphasis on activeness, self-improvement, and thrift as markers of ‘deservingness’ and affiliation with the ‘moral centre’. CSA staff

characterise these groups as rewarding and pleasurable to work with precisely because their members are 'active', 'positive' and 'form a happy collective'. Staff were often more critical when talking about their one-to-one work with some of their arguably more needy clients, who were characterised as 'passive', 'awkward' and 'draining'.

The support group for unemployed women is run by Nina, the CSA's arts and crafts instructor. The women learn and share skills in knitting, crochet, sewing and other crafts and sessions often focus on ways of making 'something from nothing': a bag from an old coat, cushions from a pair of old curtains, knitted children's clothes from an old jumper. Members show off with pride the articles they have made, and frequently bring along homemade cakes and preserves to share over tea. Of course, such activities requires access to certain resources of time, recycled materials of reasonable quality, food surplus to household requirements; prerequisites of belonging which are not equally available to all (Shteinberg, 2002,p. 280). That such factors may contribute to defining who is or is not able to join support groups at the CSA is not acknowledged, however. Instead the emphasis on thrift and productivity within the group lends respectability to these women's unemployment, making their needs more deserving and justifying their inclusion.

Their backgrounds in white collar work do not exempt the members of these groups from experiences of poverty or insecurity. Discussions at both the pensioners' exercise club and the women's support group alluded to financial difficulties in many households and several people retracted initial invitations to me to visit their homes, saying that they would be too embarrassed for me to see their living conditions.

Nonetheless, there was an emphasis on 'respectability' and 'cultured' behaviour in all

the groups. As a member of the pensioners' exercise club explained, describing the club's birthday celebrations for members, 'We have a drink together and music and we dance and play games, have competitions. But it's all within reason. We don't have any drunks or anyone who likes a fight'.

Whilst 'others' were not explicitly excluded, the very closeness of the groups and communities which developed, the focus on particular kinds of activities and forms of social interaction, as well as the tendency for new members to join on the basis of personal invitations from existing members, encouraged the inclusion of others who 'fit', whilst those who did not might be discouraged in more subtle ways, leading to processes of self-exclusion as much as explicit discrimination. Talking about the relative absence of agricultural and manual labourers amongst the CSA's regular clients, staff emphasised issues of self-deselection:

They see the kinds of people who come and they say, oh they all have fine clothes and fine manners. I have nothing like that to wear. It doesn't make any difference that we tell them it doesn't matter what they wear, still they feel ashamed and won't come.

This observation reflects the findings of studies of social service provision, which have shown that approaches and activities geared towards class- or gender-specific forms of social interaction lead marginalised groups to opt out (Popay, 1998; Ruxton, 2000). To overcome this requires the careful development of deliberate policies and strategies and an input of resources and time (Kay and Kostenko, 2008: 112-4), something that the CSA staff were not contemplating at the time of my fieldwork.

For those involved, the CSA's clubs and support groups provide access to a range of facilities, equipment and expertise, and a focal point for the development of 'caring communities'. Members of the pensioners' exercise club talked about their group as a 'big family' and enjoyed their weekly meetings as much for the humour, gossip and chance to socialise as for the carefully developed exercise routines. One of the group's oldest members, a retired teacher in his late 70s, described the group literally as a life-line: 'I'd be long dead if I didn't have the club to look forward to'. Both the pensioners club and the unemployed women's support group also exchanged forms of practical support, lending each other money, exchanging food and other homemade articles, and sharing information about available benefits, where to buy the cheapest goods and homecures for various ailments. However, the positive aspects of belonging which people stressed the most were social intimacy and emotional support. As Masha, a central figure in the unemployed women's support group put it, 'Oh it's so good to come and talk and laugh like that. Sometimes when I'm just at home I can get to feeling so down'. The poignancy of this statement was underlined by Masha's tragic personal history. Her daughter had been murdered several years previously and she had struggled with serious bouts of depression, forcing her to leave her job at the local savings bank.

For those involved in these activities of the CSA, the care and sense of community and belonging provided as well as forms of practical support and assistance are important in mitigating against a sense of their own marginality and isolation in dealing with personal problems and traumas. The CSA provides them with opportunities for affiliation to 'moral communities' which through their explicit emphasis on reciprocity, activity and self-sufficiency identify their members as

‘deserving’ and worthy of care and support. As noted previously, it is not that more extremely impoverished people, those struggling with addiction or homelessness are totally excluded from the CSA. The Centre’s psychologists are regularly called upon to give help and advice to households struggling with the consequences of alcoholism, mental health issues and bereavement. Staff offer support and advice to families and individuals on the brink of destitution supporting them to apply for material assistance through the social security administration and other local structures, offering counselling and sometimes temporary employment at the Centre. Nonetheless, during fieldwork I witnessed little attempt to integrate these clients into the longer-term group-based activities of the centre. The help they received was more formalised, professional and distanced. Whilst staff spoke of their interaction with members of the clubs and support groups they ran as mutually rewarding and as a relationship between equals, these ‘more needy’ clients were more often spoken of with pity, condescension or irritation. As such, rather than integrating them into the moral centre, their very interactions with the CSA, like their reliance on material assistance from the state, emphasised their ‘otherness’ and inferiority, reinforcing rather than contradicting processes of marginalisation.

## 7. Conclusions

Marginality, disadvantage and poverty are invoked in diverse ways by people in Burla. On the one hand, the village and its surrounding district are described as marginal places, and by extension the entire population is portrayed as structurally disadvantaged. On the other hand the most disenfranchised and impoverished people: the long-term unemployed, homeless and destitute families, are often viewed as

personally to blame for their own predicament. As Howe (1998) has pointed out, these apparently contradictory understandings of marginality are in fact mutually interdependent and reinforcing. The moral virtues of hard work, an ability to live off the land and strong bonds of community and reciprocal care, are confirmed by people's ability to live well despite the 'hardship' which is assumed to be a general feature of rural life. In fact, they may claim to be more virtuous than 'spoilt' urban dwellers with their modern conveniences and processed foods. The 'deservingness' of this 'moral community' however also depends on very different interpretations of marginality applied to those who are not able to cope. Their need is attributed to a lack of precisely those virtues described above and as such they may be viewed as 'undeserving' of help and support.

Of course, such distinctions drawn between 'us' and 'them' are in primarily discursive constructs. The living standards, behaviours and values of the 'moral communities' of the centre are not always as different from those of the 'undeserving others' as they may wish to suggest. Heavy drinking, for example, whilst a constant feature in criticisms of the 'undeserving poor', is virtually ubiquitous. Nonetheless, a strong discursive belief in centres and peripheries and the power relations which these represent remains. These binary divisions play a significant role in defining the 'emotional bonds of affinity' which 'tie' people to 'a particular moral community' (Rose, 1996, p. 334). In other words they help to define whom it is necessary to care about and for and whom it is not.

This interweaving of 'moral community' and care can be seen at play in the context of the CSA. In practice, many of the CSA's activities synthesise practical and emotional



forms of assistance and care and provide recipients with important access to both formal and informal resources and relationships. For those who visit the CSA most regularly the emotional forms of support and care they receive are described as very important and are facilitated by access to the CSA's premises, equipment and the time and professional skills of staff. The intangible but significant qualities which this access adds to the groups was acknowledged in the many comments I heard about the 'positive energy' of the Centre, the sense of emotional well-being and calm which regular clients said they experienced as soon as they entered the building. The value of such provision and the needs of those who used the Centre regularly should not be underestimated or dismissed. Nonetheless, the ways in which membership was negotiated, as well as the types of activities and group work facilitated by the centre undoubtedly made them more attractive and readily accessible to those with certain 'cultural' and 'moral' attributes.

Access to the CSA is facilitated by informal networks of acquaintance and mutual assistance as much as by formal protocols establishing need and entitlement. The attitudes of both staff and regular participants at the CSA are shaped by locally-inflected moral discourses and representations of the needy, which define and construct understandings of deservingness, acceptable standards of behaviour, the proper balance between dependency and self-sufficiency and the appropriate roles and responsibilities of individuals, families, communities and formal state institutions in dealing with insecurity and risk. As a result whilst involvement with the CSA and access to the care and support it offers can make an important contribution to combating insecurity and marginality for those able to claim affiliation to the 'moral centre', its services and resources are very differently accessible to those who are

constructed as part of a ‘moral periphery’ for whom interaction with the CSA may serve only to reproduce and reinforce their marginality.

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<sup>1</sup> This research project, ‘Social Security, Care and the ‘Withdrawing State’ in Rural Russia: a case study from Altai Krai’ is funded by the British Academy Small Research Grant Programme, (Grant number 50447/1). I have considered changing the name of the village in order to protect the anonymity of respondents. However, discussions during fieldwork made clear that people were bemused and, if anything, rather insulted by such a suggestion. As they impressed upon me, one of their motivations for participating in my research was that it would tell the story of *their* village. As one woman put it, ‘We might not be able to read English or understand your academic arguments, but at least we will be able to find our own names in whatever you publish’. Anne White reports a similar experience in her work in small-town Russia (A. White, 2004, 10). I have therefore opted to use real place names and first names for respondents.

<sup>2</sup> All figures provided by Burlinskii District Administration and relate to the period 2008-9

<sup>3</sup> As above

<sup>4</sup> Narratives of Russian versus ‘western’ difference amongst urban young people have also been found to stress the soulfulness or spirituality of Russian life as superior by comparison with the material and economic achievements of ‘the West’ (Pilkington et al, 2002, p. 207-208). In the context of Burla, however, these comparisons were made with *both* urban Russia and western societies.

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<sup>5</sup> Under state socialism, delivery of social services via the workplace demonstrated a principle of entitlement based on contribution through labour rather than on attempts to measure need (Standing 1996). Overarching discourses of equality and a rhetoric of generous state provision meant that structural explanations of disadvantage and deprivation remained unacceptable and extreme poverty was either denied or explained in terms of individual deviance and failure (Rockhill, 2010).