

Conceptualizing Rural Areas in Metropolitan Society:

A Rural View

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“Once rural life was relatively static, the ebb and flow of similar events grooving deeply into channels of custom; today rural life is dynamic, changing, a mixture of the old and the new. Contemporary rural culture contains many relics of the thinking of those ages when all societies changed slowly, but prominent in it also are evidences of the effects of a revolutionary age. Evidences of culture lag, of an emotional clinging to old cultural traits, to fixed attitudes, to established patterns of life are apparent; but a desire for the mechanically new, the progressive, the efficient, the modern, the urbane is manifest also.

Vast differences are to be found in the degree to which these conflicting elements exist in various sections of the country and in different localities. Rural life is not one culture but many cultures. Old folk cultures persist with remarkable integration in the isolated hinterlands; where farm and city are in close contact in urban-industrial areas, rural and urban cultures are much alike. Within a few miles of New York City with its seven million people one may find isolated areas in which simple folk cultures persist, but in areas in immediate contact with the great city one finds a metropolitan-minded farm populace which is closely tied in with urban life. Between these two extremes is the great mass of American farmers who have little in common with peasants of other nations or with the metropolitan population of this nation.”

Landis (1940) *Rural Life in Process*, p. 3

Introduction

The distinction between city and country, urban and rural, is one of the oldest and most potent forms of categorization in human civilization. Raymond Williams, in his classic book *The Country and the City*, observed that “a contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (Williams, 1973, p. 1), and the terms city, country, urban and rural are all of Latin origin (Woods, 2011). So engrained is the rural-urban dualism in our culture that the differentiation between the two has become intuitive; place us randomly down in any spot on Earth and we will be able to impulsively state whether the environment around us is to us urban or rural, but articulating that difference in hard and fast definitions is far more challenging – as has become more so as rural and urban societies have become more integrated in a predominantly metropolitan age.

The quote from rural sociologist Paul Landis that forms the epigraph for this paper captures some of the ambiguities around the urban-rural relationship at a time in the mid twentieth century when the discipline of rural sociology was wrestling with understanding the urbanization of rural society, and with trying to identify an essence of rurality that might persist in increasingly metropolitan America. Faced with defining the rural a few pages later, Landis follows the U.S. Bureau of the Census classification of places of less than 2500 inhabitants as ‘rural’, but immediately notes the inadequacy of this definition for delimiting the rural economy or society, commenting that “the environment wherein people talk about their neighbours and regulate them by observations and gossip does not always cease to exist in a place of 2500 people, even though there are a few areas in open country where it has already practically disappeared” (Landis, 1940, p. 17). As such, he concludes, “no clear-cut, universally applicable definition of the rural has ever been stated, nor can it be” (ibid., p 18).

Government, however, has demanded the precise definition and mapping of rural space in order to render its territory governable, and in reflection of the unequal balance of power

between the city and the country, these definitions have tended to be formulated from an urban perspective. The very term ‘country’ derives from the Latin preposition *contra* or ‘against’, and in its original Latin form referred to the land spread around the city, a relationship made more explicit in the later term ‘countryside’ (Woods, 2011). In many cases official definitions of rural areas have similarly been negative definitions, in that the definition in fact sets thresholds for urban settlements or urban land, with rural areas being the remnants that fall outside this category. The simplest definitions of rural areas are districts that fail to meet the threshold population to be official designated as a ‘town’, ‘city’ or ‘urban area’; whilst some agencies, including the Office of National Statistics in Britain and Statistics Canada, also have official definitions of ‘urban land’ based on use and extent of development, with rural land being anything else. In Britain, for instance, urban land uses are defined as including permanent structures, transport corridors (roads, railways and canals), transport features (parking lots, airports, service stations etc.), quarries and mineral works, and any open area completely surrounded by built-up sites (Woods, 2005).

More ‘positive’ definitions of rural areas can also be formulated from an urban perspective, defining rural areas in terms of the functions that they perform for urban societies (for instance as a source of food, or through the provision of recreational amenities), or according to degree of development or service provision relative to urban areas.

Aside from the methodological critiques that can be levied against such definitions – for instance, that classifications will depend on the scale of the unit being measured and that the thresholds are arbitrary (Cloke, 1994; Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005, 2011) – the practice of defining the rural from an urban perspective presents three key problems.

Firstly, urban-centric definitions of the rural tend to over-emphasize the homogeneity of rural areas, especially negative definitions. Commuter villages on the edges of metropolitan centres can be defined as rural according population-based classifications along

with vast tracts of uninhabited land in remote parts of Alaska, yet in social, cultural or economic terms the experience of rurality in these two contexts is tremendously different. Secondly, defining rural in relation to an urban ideal level of development suggests that the urban environment is the default or climatic state. Defining buildings, roads, canals and quarries as 'urban' land uses implies that true rural land is completely undeveloped, and thus that rurality is only a condition of transience between the wilderness and the city. Thirdly, and following from the above, defining the rural in relation to the urban has meant that the increased integration of urban and rural economies, cultures and social structures is universally described as 'urbanization', even though the consequences may be as transformative in cities as they are in the country.

Indeed, the integration and interdependency of rural and urban areas in metropolitan society, and the difficulty of discerning clear and consistent differences between urban and rural economies and societies from statistical data, led some geographers to question the continuing usefulness of the 'rural' as a spatial category (Hoggart, 1990). Yet, rural still has currency as a brand that is powerful enough to sell products, attract tourists and encourage people to move residence; and it still is important emotionally as a foundation of identity for many people, even to the extent of motivating political action in some cases.

This paper therefore considers whether it might be possible to escape from an urban-centric perspective, to define the meaning of the rural in metropolitan society from a rural point of view, and if so, whether such a definition could be measured and mapped.

Defining the Rural from the Rural

There is no hidden line waiting to be discovered by social scientists through exploration and experimentation that naturally divides the urban and the rural. Rather, the concepts of 'urban' and 'rural' are both social constructions, that is, they are categories that have been

created through social discourse and applied to the physical world to give entities meaning and identity. As social constructions, the urban and the rural only exist in as much as people imagine them to exist, and people's understandings of the concepts will be informed by the social, moral and cultural values and context. Accordingly, social constructions of the rural are partial, situated and open to contestation (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992; Halfacree, 1993; Mormont, 1990, Woods, 2005).

Social constructions of the rural are articulated through discourses, or collections of ideas that frame a way of understanding the world. The definition of 'rural' as a category in official statistics or classifications is a discourse, as is the representation of rural areas and rural communities in policy documents, academic papers, art, literature and the popular media (Woods, 2011). As noted earlier, these discourses are largely (though not exclusively) constructed from an urban standpoint and express an urban view of the rural. In order to consider how rural residents themselves view the rural we need to investigate what Jones (1995) calls 'lay discourses of rurality': "all the means of intentional and incidental communication which people use and encounter in the processes of their everyday lives, through which meanings of the rural, intentional and incidental, are expressed and constructed" (Jones 1995, p. 38).

Lay discourses are more challenging to record and analyse than policy or media discourses because they are multi-authored and are embedded in the exchanges and practices of everyday life, not clearly defined and disseminated in documents or through scripted performances. In order to capture a sense of the lay discourses through which rural residents define and describe what 'rural' means to them, this paper consequently draws on a range of published sources, including academic papers reporting research in the United States (Edmondson, 2003; Salamon, 2003; Sherval, 2009), Australia (Bryant and Pini, 2011), Britain (Bell, 1994; Halfacree, 1994, 1995; Jones, 1995; Neal, 2009; Smith and Phillips,

2001), Canada (Masuda and Garvin, 2008), Germany (Duenckmann, 2010), Ireland (Mahon, 2007), the Netherlands (Haartsen et al., 2003), New Zealand (McCormack, 2002), Norway (Rye, 2006) and Spain (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012; Paniagua, 2014); more journalistic accounts of rural life (Decker, 1998; Ringholz, 1996); and exercises undertaken by interest groups, including a study on perceptions of rural America commissioned by the Kellogg Foundation (Kellogg Foundation, 2002), the Center for Rural Affairs's 'Love Letters to Rural America' blog (Center for Rural Affairs, 2015), and a project by the Countryside Alliance in Britain that asked members what it meant to be rural, and how rural should be defined (reported in Woods 2005).

These sources vary significantly in their methods and in the type of information collected and presented. Some are scientific studies, others are less formal information gathering exercises. Some have used questionnaire surveys, others interviews, focus groups, participatory exercises or ethnographic methods. Only a few have produced quantitative data, in most cases the data presented are qualitative. Neither is the overview presented in this paper a true systematic review, as the sources examined have not been identified through an exhaustive bibliographic search and as the data collected from them is not always directly comparable. Moreover, as the analysis is of published reports and papers, not raw datasets, the data examined has already been pre-interpreted and selected to fit particular narratives. For all of these reasons, the material presented over the next few pages carries the caveat that it is not a comprehensive or weighted analysis of the perceptions of rural residents, but is rather an exploratory and illustrative insight into what a rural approach to defining the rural in metropolitan society might look like.

Quantitative Data

As noted above, lay discourses of rurality have primarily been researched using qualitative methods, and relatively few have produced quantitative or quantifiable data. Those that have all have limitations in respect to their methodology, sample size or cross-tabulations for drawing precise conclusions about rural understandings of rurality, but nonetheless provide some useful guides that can in turn inform analysis of qualitative data from other studies.

The Kellogg Foundation study, based on 242 telephone interviews with a sample of rural, urban and suburban residents in eight states, identified a series of phrases that respondents considered to characterize rural America (Table 1), but did not differentiate in its report between rural and non-rural responses. Where the accompanying commentary does note differences, the tendency appears to be for rural respondents to more strongly stress associations of the rural with concepts such as tradition and community than non-rural residents. For example, 75 percent of rural respondents and 65 percent of non-rural respondents agreed that a 'commitment to community' better characterized rural areas and small towns than cities and suburbs; whilst 83 percent of rural respondents and 69 percent of non-rural respondents agreed that a 'strong sense of family' better characterized rural areas and small towns than cities and suburbs. Meanwhile, 63 percent of rural respondents but only 44 percent of non-rural residents considered that rural areas were 'more tolerant of others' than urban areas (Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

Halfacree (1995), in his study of residents' perceptions of rurality in two rural localities in England, quantified the responses received through questionnaires and interviews by a broad categorization of the elements of rurality being cited (Table 2). This showed attributes associated with the geographical or landscape context, settlement type (e.g. living in a village), and population size to be most frequently mentioned in association with rurality,

with the more social attributes emphasized in the Kellogg Foundation study coming further down the list for structured questionnaire responses, but discussed more in interviews.

A strong sense of family	33%
Hard working	31%
Commitment to community	21%
Strong religious beliefs	20%
Self-sufficient	14%
Loyal to their country	11%
Tough or resilient	5%
Behind the times	4%
Tolerant of others	3%
Lacking initiative	2%
Sophisticated	1%

Table 1: Which words or phrases best characterize rural America? (Multiple responses accepted; rural and non-rural respondents) (Source: Kellogg Foundation, 2002)

Type of rural element cited	Questionnaires	Interviews
Contextual	69%	80%
Named settlement types	45%	23%
Population size/density	38%	24%
Environmental	25%	32%
Occupational	30%	44%
Locational	23%	3%
Functional	21%	25%
Social	13%	26%
Animals	7%	18%
N	114	114

Table 2: Respondents citing attributes of rurality by broad category in questionnaire responses and interviews (Source: Halfacree, 1994)

Studies by Haartsen et al (2003) in the Netherlands and Rye (2006) in Norway, both focused on generational differences in constructions of rurality. Haartsen et al (2003) surveyed 631 participants from both rural and urban backgrounds, who most frequently cited

terms such as ‘quietness’, ‘open space’ and various word identified with agriculture as the terms most commonly associated with ‘countryside’. The results were not disaggregated into ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ responses, but instead Haartsen et al clustered the words together into three perspectives – a socio-economic functional image base (‘how rural areas work’), a visual-figurative image base (‘what rural areas look like’), and a socio-cultural image base (‘what rural areas mean’) – and through a multinomial logit regression demonstrated that younger people were more likely to define rurality in functional or visual-figurative terms, and older people more likely to define the rural in socio-cultural terms (Haartsen et al., 2003). Rye (2006), in contrast, focused specifically on secondary school students in a rural area of Norway, who were asked to score various words on their suitability to describe the rural, from 1 (not suitable at all) to 5 (very suitable). As Table 3 shows, the most highly scored terms related to a mixture of environmental and socio-cultural attributes.

	Mean score	Standard deviation
Nature	4.7	0.6
Everyone knows everyone	4.3	0.8
Gossip	4.0	1.1
Neighbourliness	4.0	0.9
Peaceful	3.9	1.0
Solidarity	3.9	0.9
Spirit of cooperation	3.8	1.0
Knowledge	3.5	0.9
Tolerance	3.2	1.0
Boring	3.1	1.3
Redneck	2.8	1.2
Opportunities	2.8	1.1
Masculinity	2.8	1.0
Modern	2.7	1.0
Femininity	2.5	0.9

Table 3: Scores awarded by rural youth in Norway to the suitability of words for describing the rural (1 = not suitable at all; 5 = very suitable) (N= 619-646).

(Source: Rye, 2006)

Finally, Duenckmann (2010) employed Q-methodology to investigate residents' perceptions of rurality in a village in northern Germany. Q-methodology is designed to elicit quantifiable results from qualitative research and involves interview participants sorting a series of statements on a scale of -4 (strong disagree) to +4 (strongly agree), and then discussing and explaining their scoring. Duenckmann statistically analysed the scores obtained from participants to identify three clusters of opinions, which he referred to as 'the idyllic view', 'the reform view' and 'the anti-conservationist view'. Each respondent expressed elements of each view, but tended towards one over the others. Although Duenckmann's analysis was based on a limited sample, it like Halfacree's categorization, points towards a way in which the diverse array of lay perceptions of rurality may be ordered into more coherent discourses (Table 3).

Qualitative Data

The limited quantitative data available is too partial and inconsistent to provide any firm hierarchy of elements in a rural definition of the rural, but taken together they do begin to point towards several key themes, including the geographical context, environmental attributes, agriculture and the qualities of social life. Furthermore, they indicate that rural residents define and understand rurality not only through structural factors and land use, but also through the experience of rural life. This observation is affirmed by the more voluminous qualitative data available from the examined studies. As with the quantitative data, there are limitations to the qualitative data, most notably that the context in which it was collected is not consistent. Some of the data are answers specifically to questions about how the rural should be defined, but others are comments and responses to questions about what the rural means to them, or their experiences of rural life or of a particular rural place. Additionally, close reading of the data reveals that the meanings of rurality to respondents is

	The idyllic view	The reform view	The anti-conservationist view
Positive associations (agree with statement)	<p>Agriculture is still important in the countryside</p> <p>People who live in the countryside regain their strength from nature.</p> <p>It is better for children to grow up in the countryside.</p> <p>Life in the countryside is healthier than in the city.</p> <p>Our local traditions should be preserved because they tie our community together.</p> <p>Country life is nearer to the 'roots'. Living in the city detracts from the basics of life.</p>	<p>Industry belongs to the city and not to the village</p> <p>New development areas in the countryside lead to urban sprawl.</p> <p>Agriculture is still important in the countryside/</p> <p>People who live in the countryside regain their strength from nature.</p> <p>It is better for children to grow up in the countryside.</p> <p>Life in the countryside is healthier than in the city.</p> <p>The idyllic picture of country life shared by many people doesn't fit with reality.</p> <p>Apartment houses don't belong in the village.</p>	<p>Agriculture is still important in the countryside.</p> <p>It is better for children to grow up in the countryside.</p> <p>Our local traditions should be preserved because they tie our community together.</p> <p>Here in the countryside there are fewer social tensions than in the city.</p> <p>The idyllic picture of country life shared by many people doesn't fit with reality.</p> <p>The rural way of life is slowly dying out.</p>
Negative associations (disagree with statement)	<p>Industry belongs to the city and not to the village.</p> <p>People in the village don't appreciate agriculture.</p> <p>New development areas in the countryside lead to urban sprawl.</p> <p>There are no more differences between life in the city and in the countryside.</p> <p>The idyllic picture of country life shared by many people doesn't fit with reality.</p> <p>The rural way of life is slowly dying out.</p> <p>Country life provides more space for alternative ways of life.</p>	<p>People in the village don't appreciate agriculture.</p> <p>There are no more differences between life in the city and in the countryside.</p> <p>Our local traditions should be preserved because they tie our community together.</p> <p>Country life is nearer to the 'roots'. Living in the city detracts from the basics of life.</p> <p>Country life provides more space for alternative ways of life.</p>	<p>People who live in the countryside regain their strength from nature.</p> <p>Life in the countryside is healthier than in the city. Life in the countryside is healthier than in the city.</p> <p>Country life is nearer to the 'roots'. Living in the city detracts from the basics of life.</p> <p>Country life provides more space for alternative ways of life.</p> <p>Apartment houses don't belong in the village.</p>

Table 3: Positive and negative responses to statements associated with different lay discourses of rurality, adapted from Duenckmann (2010).

in some cases more-than-representational, in that it refers to iterations, practices and performances as well as to sensuous and emotional experiences of the rural. As such, the descriptions that are discussed below are sometimes attempts by respondents to find a vocabulary that fits their innate understanding of the rural.

Nevertheless, these qualifications notwithstanding, a number of key themes can be identified from analysis of the qualitative data, some of which resonate strongly with the themes identified in the quantitative analysis.

Landscape and environment: The first set of associations discernible from the qualitative data closely reflect structural definitions of rural space in referring to the appearance and level of development of the landscape and the natural environment. Indeed, some definitions proffered by rural residents replicate the language of official definitions, describing the rural as “a sparsely populated area, i.e. villages, hamlets and small towns necessitating travel for amenities not supplied in locality, i.e. cinema, bank, supermarket” (Contribution to Countryside Alliance ‘What is Rural?’ Exercise, 2002, quoted by Woods, 2005, p. 11), “wide open country [with] scattered hamlets” and a “sparse population”, “set in an area of outstanding natural beauty” (all from rural residents in England, quoted by Halfacree, 1995, pp 5-6).

Moreover, some respondents echo urban definitions by describing the rural in negative terms by the absence of features deemed to be ‘urban’. For instance, Jones (1995) in his study in southern England records residents describing the village as rural because of the “lack of industry, traffic, shops, offices, dense man-made environment” and “the all but complete absence of urban features”, noting that the village was “not a built-up area” but rather the “antithesis of suburbia, e.g low density of people, little traffic, no commercialisation”, located “away from the bustle of the town” and “away from the noise of the town and city” (all page

43). Similarly, an in-migrant to a northern English village emphasized the absence of obstacles from their rural view:

“I lived in London for a while and I lost myself. But here I just have to look out of my window and all I see are endless moors, hills and sky. My view is not stopped by houses, lamp posts cars or people. It’s just me and the moors.” (Rural resident, northern England, quoted by Smith and Phillips 2001, p 462).

More interesting for establishing a rural perspective on the meaning of rurality are definitions that focus on the presence of particular elements as signifiers of rurality, most commonly natural entities including “open spaces, fields, trees”, “lots of greenery, fields, woods etc” and wildlife (all from Halfacree, 1995), “the greenery and the trees” (English rural resident quoted by Neal, 2009, p 69), and “woods, fields, the plowed fields, the sheep, the cows, the walks I go on, the dells, the badger holes, the fox holes, the rabbits, the lot of woodpeckers you see, the deer” (rural resident in southern England, quoted by Bell, 1994, p. 90). In some cases, engagement with these entities goes beyond the gaze to also encompass sound, smell and practice, with one rural respondent telling Halfacree (1995) that to be rural was “being able to hear the cattle in the fields near the house. To be able to keep chicken and duck” (p. 5). For a couple of residents in Bell’s (1994) study village of Childerley, it was knowledge about the natural environment and how to use its resources that defined rurality:

“Country life to me is – well, if you look out over there, there’s quite a nice view. Now, I can go out over there every day, and every day you see something just slightly different. Now there’s blooms just starting to get on the trees, getting ready to burst. And all over there, I know all those woods and fields by name like the back of my hand. Cause I’ve lived in the area for so long. I know what life’s going on in there ... I mean, you see the country life.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 90)

“My aunt always told me that I can’t be a country girl until I learn to eat jugged rabbit.”

(Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 104).

The Village Feel: Related to the above category, a second theme concerns more the morphology, appearance and amenities of a village or small town. Respondents to Halfacree (1995) in England, for example, identified their village as rural, because it had “the original thatched houses and pub” and was hence “a typical village with village green, shops, pub, church and hall” (Responses quoted by Halfacree, 1995, p 5), whilst a rural resident interviewed by Mahon (2007) in Ireland noted that “this is a village, yet it has everything that a town would. I mean, you wouldn’t have to go to town for anything, but it still has a village feel to it” (p. 353). There are, however, limits to the characteristics of a village before it starts to become urban, which notably are not defined in terms of population size, but rather refer to the architectural style and the occupations of inhabitants. Thus, Mahon (2007) quotes one rural resident remarking that, “you can’t put a city estate in a country area; I don’t disagree with development per se, but it must be in context” (p. 352), whilst one contributor to the Countryside Alliance exercise proposed that “dormitory villages should be excluded (definition of dormitory village should be one where more than half of the working population travel more than 15 miles to work)” (Contribution to Countryside Alliance ‘What is Rural?’ 2002, quoted by Woods (2005), pp 11-12).

Agriculture and agrarian society: A further area of correspondence between official and lay discourses of rurality is in the significance afforded to agriculture. Across the sources examined, respondents frequently described their area as rural because of the presence of farms and farming activity, noting for example “farms in vicinity”, “farms and all that goes with them” (both from Halfacree 1995, p 6), “there is still farming: green field, open space”,

“fields; cattle and sheep; tractors” (both from Mahon 2007, p 350). From a rural perspective, this association is often based on everyday experience. Respondents from farming backgrounds emphasize the centrality of agriculture because it frames their daily reality of country life, as McCormack describes for one respondent in a study of children’s perceptions of rurality in New Zealand:

“John Leslie lived in a rural setting on his parents’ farm, so much of his rural experience involved day-to-day agricultural activities. Within his interview, he explained: ‘I help Dad in the woolshed when he is shearing and in the shed when he’s crutching, and sometimes I go outside and help him on the tractor or something’ These experiences were reflected in his construction. His drawing focused on an agricultural scene in which a farmer is driving a ‘ute’ (utility vehicle) down a hill to feed out hay positioned on the back to a herd of cows waiting in anticipation. In the interview session John Leslie described rurality as ‘sheep farming, cow farming, and deer farming’.” (McCormack 2002, p 202).

However, the changing nature of rural economies and the decline of agriculture is alluded to in comments by other rural residents, who are not directly involved in farming, but who cite encounters with farming activity as evidence that they live in a rural area:

“we are fortunate to have several local farms, animals graze the fields. Tractors track up and down the road. Not always a blessing” Rural resident in England, quoted by Jones (1995), p 42

“we regularly get stuck behind the cows on their way or way back from milking. We hear sheep, birds, tractors etc.” Rural resident in England, quoted by Jones (1995), p 42

Moreover, for some rural respondents, the contribution of agriculture to rurality is more than functional, and it is not simply the presence of farms that makes an area rural, but the infusion of farming through rural society. One German rural resident asserted that, “For me,

agriculture is a natural part of the countryside. It's as natural as the sunset in the evening" (quoted by Duenckmann, 2010, p. 291), whilst contributors to the Countryside Alliance's 'What is Rural?' exercise in Britain made similar suggestions:

"Rural is as much a state of mind as an actual place. It is an acceptance and understanding of people and things living in a mainly agricultural area, the practices and traditions."

"[Rural is] Living and working in the countryside – with roots in the countryside from childhood. An understanding of the countryside and an unsentimental attitude to the animals, both wild and domesticated." (both quoted by Woods (2005), p 12)

In an American context, such assertions resonate with the long-standing discourse of Agrarianism, and the more recent 'New Agrarian' literature associated with writers including Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson and Gene Logsdon. This approach holds that farmers are central not only to rural life, but to American national identity – a connection articulated by a rural resident in Georgia who told the Kellogg Foundation study that, "It's what America is about. It's about the farm ... the farmers were the backbone of America for a long time. I still feel likely they still are" (quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 5). However, the New Agrarian thinking contends that the connection between rural communities and the land, or soil, has been lost with the modernization of agriculture and the import of urban values, and sets out a normative case for a return to what they perceive as a more traditional form of rural living (see for example, Berry (2009), Vitek and Jackson (1996)).

Community: References to open fields, trees, village character and farming all take cues from the visual appearance of rural areas, but a similarly significant theme emphasizes more performative aspects of rural life in associating rural areas with strong communities. There is an approximation here to statistical definitions of rurality based on population size, but also a key difference in that for the rural residents represented in the sources consulted, it

is not the size of population of a town or village that makes it rural, but rather the practice of community that may in turn be constrained by population size. In particular, descriptions of the rural or small town character of a community frequently emphasize interaction and inclusivity, with the repetition of terms such as ‘everybody knows everybody’:

“Everyone knows everyone. Everyone cares about everyone. If my child were to be out late at night and she needed help or anything, there would be no one out here that wouldn’t help them” (Rural resident, Mississippi, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 5)

“I think you know more people in the country because you can live in the town and not know the person who lives across from you.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 95)

“Brinham ... was like one big happy family, everybody knew everybody and every door was open to everybody.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 95)

“[I can] just go out and go into any business and be welcome ... I know everybody in town almost and I feel comfortable.” (Small town resident in Minnesota, quoted by Edmondson 2003, p 15).

“Smallville is so small, everybody’s in everything.” (Small town resident in Illinois, quoted by Salamon 2003, p 65)

“Three-quarters of this town is related to each other.” (Small town resident in Illinois, quoted by Salamon 2003, p 80).

“Living in a small community’s very nice, because you can’t not know people. If you’re in suburbia, you can live next door to somebody and not speak to them ... You can do that here, but it’s unusual here. Because you’re in a small community, you take notice of people and you get to know people. And it becomes much more of an overall community.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 93).

“You find that in a small town like this people are pretty much all on the same level. So it’s very friendly and welcoming.” (Small town resident in Australia, quoted in Bryant and Pini 2011, p 69).

“[Rural is] Knowing every member of the local Fire and Rescue Squad” (Contribution to Center for Rural Affairs, ‘Love Letters to Rural America’ Blog, 2015).

Accordingly, evidence of the rural character of a place is presented through anecdotes of social interactions and through reference to involvement in community organizations and activities (see also Box 1):

“That’s just the sense you get from the small town that I live in. It’s just you belong to a church and you do Sunday dinners with your family and everybody visits everybody and stuff like that. Everybody knows everybody, everybody’s friends with everybody. Everybody’s family, they all associate together.” (Rural resident, Georgia, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 6).

“I organise the British Legion Poppy round and my round takes me so long because I know the people so well. It takes a long time because people say ‘alright well come in and have a cup of tea’. It takes a long time, but you don’t mind, it’s nice.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 34)

“Knowing your ‘Social Calendar’ is set with the American Legion meeting on the first Thursday of the month; the EMT meeting on the first Tuesday of the month; the KC meeting on the second Thursday of the month; the Village Board meeting on the second Monday of the month; Wednesday nights being ‘church night;’ School Board meetings on the third Monday of the month; then ... during the nine months of school, football, basketball or track events every Friday night” (Contribution to Center for Rural Affairs, ‘Love Letters to Rural America’ Blog, 2015).

Box 1: *You Might Be from a Small Town If...*

You can name everyone you graduated with.

You ever went to parties at a pasture, barn, or in the middle of a dirt road.

You said the 'f' word and your parents knew within the hour.

You could never buy cigarettes because all the store clerks know how old you were and if you were old enough, they would still tell your folks.

You schedule parties around the schedule of different police officers, since you know which ones would bust you and which ones wouldn't.

The town next to you is considered 'trashy' or 'snooty' but is actually just like your town.

Anyone you want can be found at either the Dairy Queen or the feed store.

You refer to anyone with a house newer than 1980 as 'rich' people.

The city council meets at the coffee shop.

You decide to walk somewhere for exercise and 5 people pull over and ask you if you need a ride.

Your teachers call you by your older sibling's name.

Your teachers remember when they taught your parents.

(E-mail from local journalist in an Illinois small town, reproduced by Salamon, 2003, pp 28-29)

Moreover, for some respondents, living in a rural area both presents opportunities for being involved in community activities, and obligations to participate. Thus, one villager in southern England told Jones (1995) that they were "unlikely to involved – playing church organ – if we were living in, say town" (p 44) and another that "the small size of the community has encouraged me to get involved in part so that I can meet other villagers, and also in order to support village amenities such as the hall, church, pub and assorted events" (ibid.), whilst a third commented that, "I feel that if one lives in a village, one should make every effort to support functions and be part of the social fabric"

The significance of such social interactions in defining rurality, however, is not just in the depth and complexity of engagements, but in the qualities for solidarity and self-help. Rural residents in England quoted by Neal (2009) remarked that in rural communities "you look after your neighbours" (p 73) and "there's always somebody there who'd help you out" (p 95), whilst Bell (2004) repeats the comment of one English villager that "true country life"

was about helping each other out: “If you want something done, you go down and see so and so and he’ll do it for you. No question of any monetary exchange. You do it. And if he wants something done, he’ll come and ask you, and you do it just the same” (p 92). It is this sense of looking out for each other, of the rural being “where strange cars are noted” (Contribution to Countryside Alliance, ‘What is Rural?’ exercise, quoted by Woods, 2005, p 12), that leads to rural also being understood in terms of safety and the relative lack of crime:

“I sleep with my windows open and nine times out of ten, I go to bed with my doors unlocked. And I don’t have to lock my car ... or my truck ... You can leave things out and they’re there the next morning, and that’s why I like it here.” (Rural resident, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 4)

“There’s another reason for feeling safe here. It’s because I know my neighbour. And my neighbour has always looked after me. Any strangers around, they get questioned.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 98)

“I like small towns, the friendliness of the people here. There’s a lack of crime and we have no fear of our neighbors. It’s a safe feeling.” (Small town resident in Illinois, quoted by Salamon 2003, p 95).

The flip side to this culture of surveillance, that rural communities can be defined by regulation, the enforcement of conformity and a lack of freedom and tolerance, is less commonly remarked on in the sources consulted, but is evident in some, especially those more focused on the perceptions of young people or other marginalized groups (e.g. Bryant and Pini, 2011; Neal, 2009). As one small town resident in Illinois commented to Salamon (2003), “Everybody knows everybody’s business. They don’t give anybody a break. If someone does something wrong, they don’t forget” (p. 104).

Tradition and values: There is a connection between the use of tight social networks to enforce social norms and the association of rurality with tradition and (Christian) values that

is also evident from the sources. At one level, the association of rurality and tradition reproduces the idea of rural communities being static and unchanging, with one contributor to the Center for Rural Affairs's 'Love Letters to Rural America' blog, defining rurality as "knowing the family history of your neighbour because his great grandfather and your great grandfather came to America in the same year and farmed together for many years" (CFRA, 2015), whilst a rural resident in England observed:

"People talk about 25 years ago like it was yesterday. The three pubs and the hall have been here for years, the pantomime has been going for 30 years, and there's the bonfire and the cricket team. People still sledge down the same hill, swim in the same river use the same picnic spots and go for the same walks. This reflects the more time that is available and a less profit-motivated organisation. Things are done for enjoyment." (Rural resident, England, quoted by Halfacree 1995, p 8)

The perceived stability and continuity of rural communities is further identified with the passing on of traditional knowledge - such that, "country people do things in a natural way; for example, coppicing or cutting joints (where a town person would just use instant glue)" (rural resident in England, quoted by Halfacree 1995, p 9) - and with the inculcation of traditional values. Thus, the Kellogg Foundation study recorded comments that rural people "have the values that the forefathers intended when they settled this country" (rural resident in Georgia, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 7), and that "they are more down to earth and have more sense of who they are and more of what life is all about toward faith and things of that nature" (rural resident in Mississippi, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 4). As these statements imply, traditional values are often understood as Christian values, with other views emphasizing the centrality of the church and of Christian-based schools to rural life (Bell 1994; CFRA 2015; Neal 2009).

Isolation and Self-Reliance: As a counter-narrative to the association of rurality and community, a further theme stresses more the isolation of living in rural areas and the need for self-reliance. Isolation is understood as a characteristic of rural areas at different levels, including the absence of urban amenities such as shops and cinemas (Halfacree and Rivera 2010; Mahon 2007), but also in terms of the harsh environment of more remote and sparsely populated rural locations:

“When you are snowed in on the moor tops, can’t get your car out and have to get through 3 miles of snow drifts; it can be a bit of a pain. Although it is bleak in the winter, it is good and healthy. It’s natural! That’s why I came here in the first place.” (Rural resident, northern England, quoted in Smith and Phillips 2001, p 463)

“You have to be tough in the country because you have to scratch and work like hell.” (Rural resident, Georgia, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 5)

The challenges of isolation thus lead to an identification of rural life with toughness and self-reliance:

“Rural America will come together quicker for their fellow.... They have to struggle so much they really do depend on each other.” (Rural resident, Arkansas, quoted in Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 6).

“I think there’s a job to be done, they know it has to be done, and they’re going to be the ones to do it, because no one else is gonna fall in. So I don’t know how you classify that. They have a lot of self-responsibility.” (Rural resident, Pennsylvania, quoted by Kellogg Foundation 2002, p 5)

“Rural living, as in remote living, requires jobs to be done. Whether you are a man or a woman, Indigenous or not, neither gender nor color is a consideration. You’ve just got to do the thing because you know, you’re out there.” (Aboriginal rural resident in Australia, quoted by Bryant and Pini 2011, p 34).

Tranquillity and Pace of Life: The final theme evident in rural residents' descriptions of rural life extends into more-than-representational experiences by associating rurality with sensuous qualities of peace and tranquillity. Terms such as 'peaceful', 'tranquil' and 'laid-back' are repeatedly deployed by rural residents to describe rural places, and one contributor to the Countryside Alliance 'What is Rural?' exercise suggested that "Rural is seeing the stars on a clear night, being able to breath unpolluted air, seeing wildlife in its natural habitat, being able to sleep without constant noise of traffic. The beauty of nature in landscape, woodland, hedgerows, etc" (quoted by Woods 2005, p 12).

The perceived tranquillity of rural areas is explicitly compared to the perceived busyness of the city, with Duenckmann (2010) quoting rural commuters remarking that "In the evening I'm always glad to be back to my nice little village where I have my peace, a beautiful landscape and tranquillity" (p 290) and "We wanted to have our peace. We are both working, we drive away in the morning, come back in the evening and want to enjoy the country air and the country life" (pp 290-1). As such, a repeated element in lay discourses of rurality is that the rural is defined and contrasted to the urban in terms of the pace of life:

"There is a different set of time in Devon. 'Next week' really means 'next month', but that's okay because it's done with a smile!" (Rural resident in England, quoted by Halfacree 1995, p 7)

"You know, there's a quietness about genuine country people that sort of just plod along. The no-hassle of life ... People have got time, time for living, time to talk, which I think is smashing. I mean, even in our little country shop, they've got time to serve somebody rather than expect them to rush around and get it all themselves and get 'em out as quick as possible." (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 91)

"I think that you have to get used to people's customs here, that you have to take it easy, not be in a rush. You go to the bank and ... it's better for you to go [with] plenty of time. You can't go in a rush and say, 'Excuse me, I'm in a rush, I'm..' No, no. Tranquillity ... because

even if you want ... I'm used to that, to the speed of Pamplona, to go quickly and rushing. And here ... I'll get used to it little by little, but I still rush." (In-migrant to rural Spain, quoted by Halfacree and Rivera 2011, p 106)

Furthermore, the contrast with urban life is also understood as being less pressured to conform and less affected by fashion. Halfacree (1995), for instance, quotes rural residents in England commenting that "rural people take a simplified view of life. They are more laid-back and don't worry so much about the issues" (p 10) and that "things such as keeping-up with the Joneses and tidying-up don't matter as much" (p 17). For some, tranquillity and the lack of pressure equates to freedom to live as they choose, Neal (2009) reporting opinions from rural England that seemingly contradict the earlier narrative of surveillance, commenting that "you've got much more of your own space and can whatever you want really without people being in your face all the time" and that "it's very much a freedom thing, isn't it? Living in the country, you've got no hassle, I mean you don't have police cars roaming about do you? Nobody bothers you. You can just go where you want and when you want." (both p. 105).

Relative Rurality

The qualitative and quantitative data discussed above provide some indications of the qualities that rural residents associate with being rural, but there is also an acknowledgment through much of the source material that the distinction between rural and urban is not absolute, and that there are relative degrees of rurality. Some places are understood as being more rural than others, with proximity to cities and the significance of agriculture being cited in comments such as "this is not really a rural area ... it's not so farmery here" (Bell, 1994, p 96) and "I can see the lights of Bath ... we are not very remote" (Jones, 1995, p. 43). Similarly, some associations of rurality are more prominent for certain locations than others.

Discourses about community life, for example, are particularly identified with small town or village life, whilst the discourse of isolation and self-reliance is articulated more by residents of more remote and sparsely population areas.

There is also a clear sense of the rurality of an area changing over time, with the sources recording a number of respondents commenting that their town or village was less rural than it used to be. Mahon (2007), in her study of rural-fringe Ireland, observes that “all farm and native respondents had referred to their place of residence as having originally been country, however, a number of these stated that it had now become both country and town” (p. 350); whilst Bell (1994) quotes a resident of his English study village lamenting that, “Childerley is losing its face as a village. It’s not, ah, a villagey village, if you understand what I’m saying. It’s not so rustic anymore” (p 96), and Salamon (2003) reports a small town resident of Illinois commenting that, “Prairieview had a rural homeyness ... it’s not the same anymore” (p. 80).

In terms of capturing a rural definition of rurality, however, the significant question here is why residents perceive their communities to be becoming less rural. The evidence from the qualitative data suggests that the key factors are the fall in agricultural employment and decline of traditional farming, and the weakening of community interaction and with it an erosion of the sense of solidarity and security:

“It’s no longer really country; there’s not much full-time farming; you can’t go to your neighbours any more; you can’t just call in; can’t ask for help.” (Farmer in Ireland quoted by Mahon 2007, p 351)

“Nobody close by has a farm; the majority of people are working [i.e. absent] during the day; once it was all farms, but they were sold for housing; there are a lot of professional people here; it’s not typical of the country” (Rural resident in Ireland, quoted by Mahon 2007, p 351)

“Our county out here now, it used to be an agriculture county. Well, now, we’ve got a bit of industry, so now we’re getting lots of rural domestics, acreages, so we’re totally getting outnumbered.” (Farmer in Alberta, Canada, quoted by Masuda and Garvin 2008, p 117).

“It’s changed; no doubt about that ... There’s more distance between everybody. Before, people could walk across the yard without someone calling the police on ‘em. There is less trust in the community.” (Small town resident in Illinois, quoted by Salamon 2003, p 168).

“very few of its (the village) people work in agriculture so it is not as rural as it was 20 or 30 years ago.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Jones 1995, p 42).

The relativism of rurality as a category is also reflected in the diverse perceptions expressed in the qualitative data, including sometimes contradictory assertions. Although broad themes have been identified, each individual’s construction of rurality is their own, albeit informed by social norms, and differences in perspective have been noted between ‘locals’ and ‘in-migrants’ and between different age groups. Nonetheless, the views reported here have tended to be from mainstream groups in rural society, and other experiences of rural life and hence other definitions of the rural will be articulated by non-mainstream groups, including ethnic and sexual minorities, people with disabilities, travellers and those adopting ‘alternative’ lifestyles and so on. Research in rural geography and rural sociology has explored these ‘other’ discourses of rurality over the last 20 years, however there is not space to discuss them in detail here (but see, for instance, Bryant and Pini, 2011; Cloke and Little 1997; Gorman-Murray et al. 2013; Milbourne 1997; Neal, 2009; Sherval, 2009).

Rethinking Rural-Urban Relations

Rural residents’ discourses of rurality are not conceived in a vacuum, but rather have been constructed in a context that they themselves perceive to be dominated by urban society.

Even if constructed from a rural standpoint, definitions consciously contrast the rural and the urban. As such, they frequently implicitly incorporate discourses of the urban, which when articulated commonly emphasize characteristics such as crowdedness, busy-ness, pollution, noise, crime and rampant consumerism:

“Everything goes too fast in the cities and you don’t notice anything.” (Rural resident, northern England, quoted by Smith and Phillips 2001, p 465).

“Security is the biggest thing you get in the countryside, I think. Looking at different place, I mean well the nearer you get to a place like London, even if you’re in a village, you certainly don’t have security ... There’s no way that you can allow your front door to remain open. You have to follow your children everywhere. Now that might start to apply to this area as well.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 136)

“I dislike noise, pollution, crowded nature of city, particularly on account of my children.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Jones 1995, p 43)

“I go to London for all the shows and that sort of thing. But the squalor, and the people, and I find that mind-blowing. I just find consumer society, mind-blowing.” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 102)

Rural residents are conscious of perceived urban influences spreading into the country, and in some case suspicious of migrants from cities, studies capturing comments from long-standing rural residents such as, “It’s not that we’re against townspeople ... They are more than welcome to come to the countryside as long as they don’t make a mess and respect our way of life and don’t want to change it” (Rural resident in England, quoted by Neal 2009, p 40), and beliefs that urban incomers don’t understand rurality in the same way:

“They want town refinements in the country. All the things they’ve got in the town, they want in the country. And it doesn’t quite work that way. You see, I’m a countryman bred and born. Lot of people that come down, they have absolutely no idea of country life at all.

You can't blame them for it. But people don't understand the way country people work"
(Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, pp 101-2)

"Some people put on a Barbour coat and green wellies, and call themselves country people. But they don't know flowers the way I do. They might not know anything about the country." (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 105)

However, the polarization of rural and urban understandings that these statements imply is increasingly at odds with the reality of mobility to, from and within rural areas in metropolitan society. The discourses of rurality discussed in the previous section include comments from native-born rural residents and permanent migrants from cities, but also rural-born individuals who have spent part of their lives in towns or cities, and individuals who regularly travel between rural and urban areas for work, education, commerce or leisure. As such, neither the rural nor the urban is an alien world experienced only in abstract ways, and many of the respondents quoted drew directly on personal experiences, as in these examples from England and Australia:

"In the towns, people are in a rush. That's the difference! In the towns, you get in your car [for everything]. I had a neighbour, lived there thirteen years. But I never spoke to her because she'd come out of her door, get in her car, go off, come back, and go indoors ... Here the pace is that much slower." (Rural resident in England, quoted by Bell 1994, p 92)

"City life is like this, you get up by the time, you go to bed by the time, you eat by the time, you've got to catch transport. You live the life now that I used to have. I'm not really a cheery person, but out of the city rural people are really friendly. You can sit and have a talk with them, you can do that on the Lands when you are shopping. On the Lands you do not do anything by the time because you have your own time, but in the city you have no time. It is not your own No wonder people in town walk around with their faces scraping the ground. There are no friendly faces or even happy faces. They all walk around like zombies.

No one has the time of day.” (Aboriginal rural resident in Australia, quoted by Bryant and Pini 2011, p 30)

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the divergence between urban and rural perceptions of rurality is not as great as some rural opinion would claim. None of the studies consulted explicitly compared urban and rural perceptions, but it is notable that where research included both urban and rural respondents, such as the Kellogg Foundation (2002) report, no major contrasts were observed, more differences in emphasis. Rural definitions of the rural refer to the scale of development, agricultural land uses, settlement size and proximity to cities, as do more formal statistical definitions. Perhaps the most significant differences are that rural respondents are more likely to understand rurality in terms of everyday experiences and social practices, though the Kellogg Foundation (2002) also note that “non-rural residents speak in glowing terms about the peaceful, stress-free living of country life” (p 4), terms that are also present in rural descriptions.

Moreover, the lay discourses of rurality constructed from rural and urban perspectives are both influenced by other popular discourses, especially those reproduced through the media in film, television, literature and news reports, and which can in some case over-ride personal experiences. This was noted by McCormack (2002) in research in New Zealand on children’s perceptions of rurality. Having discussed one urban child, whose construction of rurality was strongly shaped by films such as *Babe*, McCormack turns to Sabrina, who was raised on a farm until she was four and whose family retained strong rural connections:

“In her interview she repeatedly referred to conversations with her parents about this period in her life. For example, she stated ‘mum says I didn’t like my horse, she took me up to the bush and there were wild hogs’ ... Sabrina’s past experiences reproduced in conversation with her parents formed an important cultural knowledge, which she used in her verbal construction of rurality. She understood rurality as ‘bush’ and ‘farmland’ but also as a site of ‘amazing things and adventures’. Alongside parental discourse, another important discursive

influence was noted. Sabrina loved to read 'Pony Pals', a series of children's books about a group of children who have adventures in rural settings with their horses ... Consequently, within the interview session, Sabrina suggested 'in the country you can go on adventures in the fields and rivers, like on horses or picnics or get lost'. While no mention was made of personal experiences of this nature, such experiences are consistent with the plot of many 'Pony Pal' novels ... Similarly, Sabrina's drawn construction presented people arriving at a barn dance on horseback and in a large horse truck." (McCormack 2002, p 205).

These findings could add weight to the argument that in metropolitan society the rural has been subsumed by the urban, and that even rural residents view the countryside through an urban lens. However, this conclusion still falls into the trap of privileging the urban over the rural. What is clear is that the integration of rural and urban has been intensified and that differences between the urban and rural have become blurred, but as rural residents assert the continuing rural-ness of certain elements and experiences, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that metropolitan society has involved both an urbanization of the country and a ruralization of the city. The latter has been noted in studies in the global south where migrants have introduced aspects of rural folk culture into cities (e.g. Englund, 2002), but the phenomena can maybe also be observed in the global north in individuals who spend their urban working weeks preparing for weekends spent on rural recreation or hobby farming; in gentrified urban neighbourhoods and ex-urban master-planned estates that style themselves as 'villages', incorporate motifs of rural vernacular architecture, and seek to reproduce the close-knit small town community; and in the revival of urban agriculture in cities such as Detroit.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the question of whether ‘rurality’ might be understood differently if defined from a rural perspective. The findings, based evidence drawn from a range of academic studies and other sources, are equivocal, but three main conclusions can be posited for challenge of defining the rural in a metropolitan age.

Firstly, there is no persuasive evidence that rural residents define the rural in fundamentally different ways to urban residents or urban agencies. Population size and density, land use, proximity to larger settlements, the presence of agriculture all feature in rural lay discourses of rurality as they do in academic and governmental definitions.

Secondly, however, it is also clear that rural understandings of rurality go far beyond lines on a map or statistical counts of residents. For many rural people, rurality is understood primarily as a lived experience, including in ways that are more-than-representation. Furthermore, there is a widespread perception that rurality in this sense is under threat from urban influences. The frustration of some rural actors at the perceived inadequacy of urban definitions and discourses of rurality is largely about their failure to capture this deeper sense of rurality (and to recognize the variable geography of relative rurality). The difficulty is of course in converting intangible experiences into statistical measures, but it possible that some proxies might be available, as for example in the ‘tranquillity maps’ produced by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), measuring factors including noise and light pollution (see <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/countryside/tranquil-places/item/1839>).

Thirdly, the discussion of rural and urban perspectives on rurality has reaffirmed the complexity of rural-urban entanglements in metropolitan society. This should not, however, simply be read as urbanization. If starting from a rural perspective identifies elements such as agricultural production, the presence of wildlife, or tight-knit communities where everybody

knows everybody as distinctively 'rural' in character, then perhaps we need also to recognize the ruralization of the city as a feature of metropolitan life.

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