

## RURAL COMMUNITIES

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### INTRODUCTION

The conceptual understanding of the term 'rural' is a key lens in this paper. However, rural is not a simple concept, as there is no one set of attributes that represent this complex space (Larson, 2002a; Woods, 2011). Woods (2011) cautions that "[t]he rural is a messy and slippery idea that eludes easy definition and demarcation. We could probably all instinctively say whether any given place was rural to us, rather than urban, but explaining why it was rural, not urban, and drawing a boundary line between urban and rural space on a map are altogether more difficult tasks" (p. 1).

Instead, there are multiple ways of characterising the rural in which individuals and institutions, both within and beyond rural geographical boundaries, construct their own understandings. These understandings fall into two categories – the rural is both real (internal subjectivity) and imagined (external subjectivity). Halfacree (2006) has studied the social constructions of the rural for many years; he has noted a change in how the concept is represented and imagined, while also being associated with diverse meanings. These diverse meanings reveal that the rural is a contested space, according to Woods (2011), who notes that a variety of different approaches are used to make sense of this space. He describes these approaches as marked by "imagination, representation, materialisation and contestation ... taking on different forms in different contexts and from different perspectives" (p. 30).

These diverse understandings associated with the rural imply that there are multiple ways of knowing, engaging and understanding this space. In this paper a deeper understanding of the rural is sought through both text and photography. According to Richardson and MacLeod (2010), photographs can convey a strong sense of meaning which can be significantly more dynamic than the written word. And when photographs are united with text, they "have the potential to be more powerful and expressive than the written word alone" (Burke & Evans, 2011, p. 174). It is for this reason that a number of photographs are included in this paper, providing a visual representation that speaks to the observer by illustrating an alternative medium (Richardson & MacLeod, 2010).

### DEFINING RURAL

Defining the rural in technical terms is attempted in what follows. Rural has been associated with population density and distance (Bidwell, 2001). Distance is measured by kilometres from urban centres (Bushy, 2000), which provide services such as tertiary health-care and employment for rural residents who commute from their rural locations (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). According to Halfacree (1993), typologies or continuums have been in use since the 1940s to measure the rural–urban divide. The aim of using a continuum is to measure differences in size, population and factors associated with a particular location, from the remote through to urban contexts. According to Hugo (2002), typologies or continuums are valuable measures for defining the rural. Measurements, whether in terms of distance, the population base or access to health-care, are widely used in defining the concept of the rural. Various indices are used to measure specific rural characteristics which, collectively, can be used to develop a rurality index. A rurality index assists with the planning of health-care and takes into consideration the nature of rural communities and their health-care needs (Kulig et al., 2008). Equally important is the context in which community members live and go about their everyday activities.

## A RURAL COMMUNITY

A community is not necessarily associated with a physical location, but can be a part of a global community (Ife, 2013; McMurray & Clendon, 2015). In general terms, the concept of community refers to people who align with similar values and beliefs which bond them together in a common cause. The purpose of this paper is to consider community in reference to people who relate to each other within the context of an identified space, in this case a rural location. According to Hughes (2009), the "very notion of 'community' sits rather more comfortably in a rural rather than urban framework. One does not often hear the term 'urban community'" (p. 201). Communities are spaces of social networks where residents work, live, communicate (online) and play and are associated with each other through shared connections, obligations and responsibilities (Hughes, 2009; England, 2011). Communities are also places where people other than residents live; rural communities are places that non-rural people visit for holidays and recreation. Rural communities comprise rural people as a social collective. However, the existence of a social collective does not imply that all its members share the same values, as a variety of views exist amongst rural people, as elsewhere.

Rural communities have both negative and positive connotations. Both Woods (2011) and Murray (2012) reflect that the rural is sometimes considered as backward, in contrast to positive images associated with the 'rural idyll,' noting how the rural environment is often seen as an attractive and romanticised place to live in or visit. Liepins (2000) associates community cohesion, the social collective and action with rural locations, and notes that the sense of cohesion increases as rural communities become more remote from urban centres. Physical remoteness builds resilience among rural residents (Leipert & Reutter; 2005) and self-reliance (Bushy, 2000), and in addition promotes community sustainability (Panelli, 2006; Dillon, 2008).

Rural communities are constructed through their rural context, rural people, community values, community practice and community space (Panelli, 2006). This is linked to expectations of social participation among rural residents who practice a sense of community through various social practices (Panelli, 2006). Rather than being seen as a structural



Figure 1. Local landmark representing a sense of place and belonging.  
Source: Brian Scantlebury; printed with permission.



Figure 2. Local community members' hat representing relational knowing among community members.  
Source: Brian Scantlebury; printed with permission.

concept, community can be considered as a symbolic construct where meaning is made through the social relations that occur within it. The meanings of community can be shared or contested. Liepins (2000) contends that rural people feel a sense of belonging and social cohesion in relation to their communities based on where they live. Community and place are constantly intertwined (England, 2011).

Figure 1 reflects local people's connection with local landmarks, producing a sense of belonging and emotional attachment leading in turn to the development of a sense of place.

Communities are based on social relations that occur continually in places and spaces as interactions develop and as links are developed between people (Hughes 2009). Social relations are formed through family, friends, functionality and loyalty to others, as well as being a consequence of community membership (England, 2011). In rural areas, social relationships are based on personal bonds of friendship and kinship, inter-generational stability and a close proximity to associated beneficial interactions (Liepins, 2000) that are considered in positive terms when associated with the rural.

Figure 2 represents the establishment and maintenance of local relationships – knowing the person who this particular hat belongs to.

## IMAGINING THE RURAL

In addition to the elements discussed above, 'rural' can conjure up a range of images including wilderness, outback, village, bush and open space (Halfacree, 2006). Rural places are understood as productive – for example, in terms of food, fuel and minerals. Rural places have also become recreational areas, holiday venues and a space to enjoy a slower pace of life (Woods, 2011; Central Otago, A World of Difference, n.d.). Rural areas are associated with

wide-open spaces where, generally, activities are associated with production or recreation, which are in turn both associated with the land. However, definitions and perceptions of the rural differ widely around the world. Difference is a particularly interesting phenomenon in relation to rural studies. It is useful to consider the different associations of images (such as those reproduced here) for different geographical location – for example, the concept of the village as it relates to perceptions in Britain and the concept of the Outback as it is conceived in Australia.

Equally, there are numerous representations of the rural. These include engaging with nature, farm life (including animals), farmed space, domesticated and wild space, clean air and the simple, healthy lifestyle associated with agriculture (all positive aspects of rurality) (Thurston & Meadows, 2003), as well as isolation (Bushy, 2012).

Family is also an important focus of the rural scene, with family members living and working close to each other (Panelli, 2006) and maintaining family values (Bushy, 2000). Positive aspects associated with community include small populations, having a strong sense of community (Liepins, 2000; Cloke, 2003) and the availability of local meeting places, such as community markets, as well as a slower pace of life (Bushy, 2000). Ideas of adventure, recreation and freedom are associated with the term 'rural' and have come to be represented as adventure tourism (Woods, 2011). Adventure tourism includes a range of recreational activities, including traditional activities such as rock climbing and mountain biking, while contemporary adventure tourism provides the individual with opportunities such as jet boating and four-wheel-drive activities. In New Zealand, adventure tourism in rural locations has become fashionable and is considered a leading part of the tourist industry (Woods, 2011). Often run by local people, it is not necessarily indulged in by the locals.

The Urban/Rural Profile prepared by Statistics New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2006) illustrates the specific differences between the rural and the urban contexts as they relate to one country. Such descriptors reveal that the rural has its own culture, or 'rurality', a neutral term coined by academics to refer to the countryside (Woods, 2011). According to Cloke (2006), "it is [through] the social distinction of rurality that the significant differences between the rural and urban remain" (p. 19). Thus rurality relates to the countryside or an isolated geographical location and includes traditional ways of living and being. These representations of the rural are also associated with the open spaces found outside of cities (Bunce, 2003). They are also identified with the traditional term 'countryside' (Cloke, 2003) and, more recently, with the term 'rurality.'

According to Woods, rurality is a "social construct – that is as an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policymakers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals" (Woods, 2011, p. 9). For some people the rural is imagined, for others it is a lived reality; alternatively, it is a place to visit. It is clear that the concept of rural is contested, depending on the individual's construction of rurality, which in turn shapes their representations of the rural.

One outstanding understanding of the rural is constructed by non-rural residents and is known as the "rural idyll."

## THE RURAL IDYLL

The rural idyll constructs rurality as a form of anti-urbanism or counter-urbanism, while maintaining a nostalgic and romanticised idea of the rural played out in social, economic and cultural structures, with the intention of keeping an idealised rural image alive. Some people value and dream of the rural countryside as a simpler way of life which has been lost in urban contexts; they "seek to construct rurality in a certain way rather than representing the rural that actually exists" (Woods, 2011, p. 22).

The concept of the rural idyll can influence policy development by non-rural people (Cloke, 2003). Likewise, Liepins (2000) states that those from outside a rural community may be influential in constructing or constraining understandings about it, including policymakers in core agencies who can shape resources, responsibilities and relations within and beyond the community.



Figure 3. A fence line in Central Otago representing rural geographical isolation.  
Source: Brian Scantlebury; printed with permission.

By contrast, the interpretation of the rural by rural residents represents situational knowledge related to their lived experiences and assists in understanding how these people are constructed (Woods, 2011). As rural residents come to know their rural context, a sense of self and identity associated with this space develops (Woods, 2011). Edensor (2006) emphasises that there is a way of performing within the rural, which he calls an "unreflexivity habitus" (p. 491). This refers to a situation where everyday tasks are performed routinely and confidently in place and among other rural residents, buildings and the countryside, including places where non-human activities occur.

According to Woods, the separation of rural and urban is one of the oldest ideas in geography (2011). Urban-rural differences are associated with the density of population in urban regions, which contrasts with the isolation experienced by rural residents. The differing social interactions which result from this play a significant part in the fabric of rural existence and communication (de Leeuw et al., 2011; Nagel, 2011). Figure 4 presents an excellent example of rural encounters that differ from urban living.

Rural residents are aware that they identify themselves as different from urban people (Strasser, 2003). Community connectedness is one such factor (Hughes, 2009) – in rural areas, everyone generally knows everyone (Hughes, 2009; England, 2011). According to Woods (2011), rural residents may feel a sense of belonging with each other; the shared identity that results has been referred to as the traditional notion of *Gemeinschaft*. However, this strong social connection does not mean that all rural residents think and act in the same manner; residents have differing values and views (England, 2011). Rural identity is therefore an important aspect of understanding how the self identifies with the rural.



Figure 4. The everyday non-human encounters with animals on a large scale.  
Source: Brian Scantlebury; printed with permission.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have provided an introduction to the nuances associated with rural attachment to place and the importance this has for rural people's sense of identity, safety and life satisfaction (McKinnon, 2011). A sense of identity is also associated with a sense of belonging or feeling connected to a rural location and the people residing in that location (Nagel, 2011). This encompasses both rural dwellers who are accepted as a part of the rural community as well as residents who either have not yet been accepted into the community or who remain physically outside of the community and its membership. The rural has historically been identified with the countryside (Cloke, 2003) and with notions of isolation, family connections and a small population, as well as the strong sense of community associated with rural locations.

This paper has included images that support the written material to provide a visual representation that speaks to the reader in an alternative way. Images trigger multiple meanings for viewers; what is significant to one viewer may not be the same for another, leading to unexpected revelations (Richardson & MacLeod, 2010) and the potential for meaningful dialogue through which our understanding of the rural can be deepened.

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