

Rural youths' images of the rural

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Abstract

Following the cultural turn within the social sciences, recent debates on how to conceptualise 'the rural' have focused on 'rurality' as a phenomenon produced by processes of social construction. This paper presents an empirical account of the outcome of these social construction processes through an analysis of how teenagers in a remote rural area in Norway reflect on the concept of 'rurality'. What do they perceive as key characteristics of rurality? Contrary to most previous studies in the field, the data presented in this paper are collected from a large sample and through quantitative methods. This enables a more thorough description of the variety of images of the countryside, as well as an assessment of the degree to which they are representative in statistical terms. Importantly, the research design also allows for an analysis of how these images are related to structural variables, such as social class position, gender and migration trajectory. The results indicate that the majority of rural youth keep a view of the countryside that is in accordance with the 'rural idyll'/'rural dull' concepts—these two images of the rural being complementary rather than contradictory. However, there is a huge diversity in the rural youth's images of the rural, the predominant view being far from hegemonic. To some extent these differences follow structural lines, e.g., those on the top *and* the bottom of the social ladder have more positive views of the rural than others.

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1. Introduction

For decades the field of rural studies has been characterised by never-ending debates on how to define 'rurality'.¹ On the one hand, dominant perspectives have attempted to demarcate the term by defining 'the rural' as particular types of (overlapping) territories/societies according to some objective measures, and have then carried on to describe and explain the social interaction taking place in these areas from a variety of theoretical perspectives (for an overview see Halfacree, 1993). On the other hand, these approaches to an understanding of the defining matter of the discipline—'the rural'—have repeatedly been questioned. The classic texts of Pahl (1966) and Newby (1980) represent only two examples of the plethora of works disputing the relevance of the concept of rurality. The latter's conclusion, published in 1980, was and still is

illustrative in its definitive judgement: the rural '*has no sociological meaning [...] no sociological definition of rural is acceptable*' (Newby, 1980).

The debate still goes on. In the 1990s, however, the discussion on how to understand rurality gained new momentum as several contributions, inspired by the cultural turn within the social sciences, proposed to conceive of 'rurality' as subjective and socially constructed phenomena, located in people's minds, rather than as a material and objective reality (Phillips, 1998; Cloke, 1997; Halfacree, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Mormont, 1990). For example, Mormont (1990, p. 36) concludes that *rurality is not a thing or a territorial unit, but derives from the social production of meaning*. Halfacree (1993, p. 23) in a similar tone defines *the rural in terms of disembodied cognitive structures which we use as rules and resources in order to make sense of our everyday world*. Thus, the research focus seems to have shifted towards the processes underlying actors' constructions of the rural and the outcome of these processes. Rather than asking what rurality 'is' the pivotal question has become: how do actors socially construct their rurality?

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¹In this paper I use 'the rural'/'rurality' as synonymous to the Norwegian term 'bygd'.

This paper does not aim to enter into these definitional debates, or to enlarge the literature mapping them (for reviews see, e.g., Phillips, 1998; Cloke, 1997; Hoggart et al., 1995; Halfacree, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Mormont, 1990; Newby, 1980; Pahl, 1966). Rather, taking the social constructionist approach as a point of departure, the paper provides some empirical data shedding light on how rural youth in one remote rural area in Norway, the Mountain Region, reflect upon the issue of rurality. What do they perceive as typical characteristics of rural communities and what are their normative evaluations of these communities?

This analysis of lay people's conceptions of rurality, however, is supplemented by an attempt to root the production of such social constructions within a structuralist framework. Using Bourdieu's social theories as an analytical framework (Bourdieu, 1984), the paper discusses whether and to what extent the actors' conceptualisations of the rural may be understood as related to structural properties of their everyday life contexts. In particular, the paper analyses the impact of class with regard to how 'the rural' is described and normatively evaluated by teenagers in rural areas. This invites analyses of *differences* in lay people's understanding of rurality. Thus, the paper situates itself in between the extreme positions of structuralism (by accepting the relevance of actors' conceptualisations of rurality) and of social constructionism (by emphasising the structural foundation of actors' social constructions of rurality). In other words, structures and social constructions (and the related sociological perspectives of structuralism and social constructionism) are regarded as complementary rather than contradictory.

The research questions of the paper, then, may be formulated as follows:

1. What are the *dominant* images of the rural among rural youth?
2. To what extent do rural youth hold *differing* images of the rural?
3. Are rural youth's images of the rural related to *structural properties* of their everyday life contexts, such as social class position, gender and migration trajectory?

2. Mapping rural images

Scholarly interpretations of the rural have long traditions. Tönnies (2000 [1893]) may serve as an example with his theory of *gemeinschaftliche* and *geschellschaftliche* forms of social organisation that characterise rural communities and urban societies.² Other classical texts provide similar word pairs that attempt to capture the essence of rurality and urbanity and, more or less implicitly,

²It should be noticed, however, that juxtaposition of *gemeinschaft/geschellschaft* with rurality/urbanity is more pronounced in interpretations of Tönnies than in his original work.

traditional and modern forms of social life (see Pahl, 1966, and Halfacree (1993) for overviews of classical scholars' theories on rurality and urbanity). It is interesting to note the very abstract character of these interpretations of rurality. The rural is not described and defined solely by the concrete, or tangible, objective features of rural areas (e.g., landscape, settlement and occupational structures). Greater focus rests on the more abstract characteristics of social life that evolve in these areas, for example, traditionalism, dense social structures, a feeling of community, and so forth. Furthermore, these abstract descriptions of rural social life are often normatively charged, and most often in favour of the rural which is conceived as more 'natural' than the urban (Phillips, 1998, p. 130; Halfacree, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, p. 416; Hompland, 1984; Newby, 1980, p. 27).

This distinction between concrete and abstract characteristics of rurality, which is emphasised by Halfacree (1995), seems useful when examining lay people's conceptualisations of rurality. By and large, these seem to mirror the scholarly accounts of rurality. On the one hand, people seem to define the rural in terms of a set of objective criteria. These primarily include landscape features (wilderness or farm land, not built-up land), demographic structure (sparsely populated), and occupational structure (agriculture) (Almås, 1995; Jones, 1995, p. 42; Hoggart et al., 1995; Pahl, 1966). This list of rural indicators may vary from person to person and from society to society, as emphasised by Hoggart et al (1995) in their description of the many forms of rurality within Europe. However, these authors claim that open landscape and a sparse settlement structure seem to be accepted by most actors as generic characteristics of rurality.

At the same time lay people, as much as scholars, conceive of the rural in terms of abstract social characteristics, to which they ascribe values, and I will focus on these in the following. A review of previous empirical studies suggests the existence of quite a coherent structure for these characteristics, both within Norway and across Europe (for an overview of Norwegian studies, see Haugen and Villa, 2005, Berg and Lyngård, 2004; Fosso, 2004; Thorsen and Verstad, 2004; Bjaarstad, 2003; Orderud, 2003; Husmo and Johnsen, 2000; Villa, 1999a; Almås, 1995; for an overview of European research, see Auclair and Vanoni, 2004; Halfacree, 1995, 1993; Bell, 1992). Nature/natural seems the most prominent feature of rurality. Rural life is conceived as being more 'natural' than life in the cities, and this quality of the rural is usually positively valued and often perceived as its major advantage (Orderud, 2003, p. 310). Bell (1992) even argues that this feature of rurality serves as the moral foundation for rural residents. Second, rural life is conceptualised in terms of the social fabric of the rural. The feeling of community is stronger and people seem to be closer to each other, partly due to the transparency of rural life that ensures that 'everyone knows everyone'. Thus, people care for each other and are more willing to engage in others' lives. Furthermore,

this ‘community spirit’ facilitates collective action. When the community faces a challenge, everyone makes his/her contribution. A third element is the tranquillity, calmness and peacefulness of rural life, as opposed to the restlessness of urban life. Moreover, as Bjaarstad (2003) shows, even aesthetic judgements are occasionally made by lay people, who find the rural to be more ‘beautiful’ than the asphalted cityscapes. Some further abstract characteristics of ‘rurality’ often employed by lay people are ‘health’, ‘relaxation’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘safety’. These ‘safe and good’ qualities are particularly prevalent in the popular view that the countryside is especially attractive for raising children (Villa, 1999a, b), a vision of the countryside that radiates the impression of innocence attached to rural areas and their inhabitants. Taken together, these aspects of rural life may be summarised in the idea of the ‘rural idyll’—the conception of the countryside as location for the good life (Jones, 1995; Halfacree, 1993, p. 3; Hompland, 1984). Short (1991, p. 34; quoted in [21] Halfacree, 1993) summarises the rural idyll this way:

The countryside is pictured as a less-hurried lifestyle where people follow the seasons rather than the stock market, where they have more time for one another and exist in more organic community where people have a place and an authentic role. The countryside has become the refuge from modernity.

The other side of the coin is expressed through the idea of the ‘rural dull’ (Haugen and Villa, 2005; Berg and Lysegård, 2004, 2002; Lægran, 2002) or even the ‘rural horror’ (Bell, 1997). Despite the seeming acceptance of the idyllic version of rurality, rural people at the same time often articulate their reservations about the rural social fabric. In particular, research on rural youth’s perceptions of rurality has brought these darker sides of the rural to the fore. For example, studies have suggested that the negative side of the transparency of the rural social fabric is felt stronger by younger people, especially females (Haugen and Villa, 2005). Thus, strong social ties foster not only caring communities in the good sense but also a culture of strict social control. There is less tolerance for those who succeed, in particular if they brag about their achievements, or if their behaviour deviates in other ways. Besides this, the local community has more means to force the deviants into line. Actually, Fosso (1997, p. 35) in her case study of a Norwegian industrial rural community found that ‘everyone knows everyone’ was more often listed as a negative feature of the local community than as a positive one. As commented by Haugen and Villa (2005), this double-edged rurality—the social fabric being caring *and* controlling at the same time—was treated only with great ambivalence by their teenage informants.

Further, rural life is thought to be less progressive than life in urban societies. It is traditional rather than modern, backward-looking rather than exploring the opportunities for the future. As Bjaarstad (2003, p. 48) shows, urban youth even find the rural ‘primitive’. New knowledge, ideas

and trends are assumed to disseminate from urban centres to the rural hinterlands. Reflecting this, as Fosso (2004) emphasises, a popular explanation of young rural-to-urban migration streams are teenagers’ quest for (formal) knowledge: the rural is thought to be the place for unskilled manual jobs rather than high-skilled and high-tech occupations. Also, rural youth seem to conceive of the city as more ‘energetic’ and ‘vibrant’ than the countryside, which has an image of being boring rather than exciting. Thus, Waara (2000, p. 138) claims that rural communities are perceived by young people as ‘traditional’, underdeveloped’, ‘backward’ and ‘old-fashioned’. He concludes that:

The image of life in rural areas does not leave room for being young and involved in modern youth entertainment culture and other aspects of a ‘youthful lifestyle’

Thus, despite the fact that teenagers’ vocabulary for describing their rural environments in some regards echoes that of adults (see, e.g., Auclair and Vanoni, 2004), the literature suggests that young people are less likely to subscribe to the idyllic version of rurality. In particular, they seem to emphasise the narrower range of opportunities in rural areas. Given the transitional character of adolescence, this is expected and relates to very real problems faced by contemporary rural communities. For example, the Paypird research programme documents how poor access to education and work impacts on teenagers’ negative assessment of their rural home municipalities (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004a). Few entertainment opportunities and other cultural activities, and in general a more limited range of public and private services, are common complaints among rural teenagers reported in the literature. It is possible that the ‘peacefulness’ and ‘tranquility’ that adults value so much in the rural idyll may just be boring to teenagers.

2.1. *The Norwegian context*

The impact of the darker side of rurality is likely to vary, as structures of social control differ both in strength and perceived effects from one rural location to the other. These differences seem to be related to the ‘rural’ character of the communities and their relation to larger population centres. ‘Remote’ rural communities, in Jentsch and Shucksmith’s (2004b) terminology, face other challenges than the ‘accessible’ ones. However, after having noted the general lack of knowledge about living conditions of Europe’s rural youth, Jentsch and Shucksmith do conclude that this section of the population, despite their many similarities with urban youth, on average live in areas where ‘... low pay is more prevalent, education levels are poorer, and there is perhaps a narrower range of poorer jobs’ (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004c, p. 268). Other European studies have documented similar rural/urban gaps (e.g., the RYPE programme (Helve, 2000)).

These findings from European research are relevant to a Norwegian context, but qualifications are required. The rural/urban-divide seems less marked in Norway than in other European countries, including its Nordic neighbours, and in some regards the symbolic hierarchical arrangement between countryside and city is ambiguous. For example, rural municipalities on average score better on Statistics Norway's annual index of living conditions than the major cities (except rural municipalities in Northern Norway) (Statistics Norway, 2005). Contrary to the Paypird findings, unemployment does not seem to represent a particular problem for rural youth. Further, young people in rural Norway have good access to education. Thus, in the study area of this paper, the Mountain Region, more than 90 per cent of teenagers attend upper secondary education. Recently, a Norwegian daily could report that 'City boys are left behind by country girls' as the latter group is far more likely to enrol in university courses after completing high school education (Dagsavisen, 2005, see also Heggen, 2002). Moreover, despite the clear tendency towards urban cultural dominance, rural youth are not unequivocal in their acceptance of the urban cultural hegemony, as illustrated for example by rural male hunters' scepticism towards the 'inferior' hunting practice of urban hunters (Bye, 2003). Thus, while Norwegian rural communities are relatively inaccessible in terms of geography, the symbolic distance between city and countryside seems less than in most other European countries. However, also in Norway there has been little research comparing living conditions among young people in the centre and the periphery (Heggen, 2003).

At the same time, as emphasised by Berg and Forsberg (2003), in any case it is necessary to warn against uncritical attempts to generalise knowledge about rural youth's social constructions of rurality across nations, even within Europe. Norwegian rurality has its very particular features. For example, the countryside is even less populated than in other European nations. Also, the discourse of social equality, including gender equality, is prevalent in Norwegian rural societies. Interestingly, Berg and Forsberg employ the idea of the 'rural idyll' to illustrate how one concept may have different content in Nordic and British versions of rurality. Their warning also applies to findings in this paper.

2.2. *Varieties of ruralities*

Previous empirical studies of lay people's social constructions of rurality primarily address the common components of how the rural is conceived. Less attention has been given to exploring and explaining the possible variety of rural images. Halfacree (1995), for example, found in his study no systematic relation among his respondents' images of the rural with regard to variables such as class and gender, and suggests this is due to the hegemonic character of the conception of the rural idyll. The view of rurality as expressed by, in Philo's term, the

rural 'Mr. Average'—the typical white male middle class rural resident—seems too dominant to allow for competing images (Philo, 1992). This impression of conformity has been questioned, as it may result primarily from scholarly insensitivity to existing differences in lay people's images of the rural (Halfacree, 1995; Philo, 1992). This criticism is substantiated by a number of qualitative studies that have identified a certain plurality in lay people's images of the rural. For example, some studies have emphasised differences in how locals and in-movers relate to rurality. This divide has further been interpreted in light of class, the in-movers representing the 'monied' middle and upper class (Bell, 1992; Newby, 1980). Fosso (2004) further shows how rural youth relate to rurality in different ways, which echoes lifestyle related divides among the teenagers. Those choosing vocational training appear more 'localistic' and less sceptical of their rural communities, than those heading for academic careers. Another issue is gender differences, particularly emphasised in the Norwegian research literature (see Berg and Forsberg, 2003, Bye, 2003; Grimsrud, 2001). The gendered image of the countryside, giving predominance to masculine activities and symbols, implies that females feel less 'at home' with the rural social fabric. Thus, Orderud found in his Norwegian study that girls taking academic courses were the most likely to express preferences for leaving their home community, while boys in vocational training were least likely to plan out-migration (Orderud, 2003, p. 303).

These studies suggest there is considerable variety in lay people's social constructions of rurality. Particularly, the presence of such a heterogeneity among teenagers is very much to be expected as a result of the diversity of living conditions and lifestyles that has been documented in recent research programmes on rural youth, both across and within European countries (e.g., The Paypird programme (Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004a; Dax and Mac-hold, 2002), the RYPE programme (Helve, 2000), and the research programme on living conditions of young people in Nordic countries (Helve, 2003)). Yet, existing studies in the field do not provide much more than a skeleton outline of the divergences in their images of rurality. This paper attempts to provide more knowledge in this field. By doing so, the paper reflects Panelli's (2002, p. 113) editorial call for research to 'document the widely disparate experiences and contexts in which young people negotiate rural lives' published in *Journal of Rural Studies*' special issue on young rural lives (JRS, 2002, vol. 28, pp. 113–223). She related this challenge directly to the ongoing definitional debates on rurality, as we need more knowledge about how rural young people perceive and evaluate their ruralities (2002, p. 114).

3. *Habitus, capital, and class*

I shall address the variety of rural images by making use of the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu. Drawing on

Bourdieu's major work *Distinction* (1984) I discuss how lay people's individual and collective interpretations of social phenomena are embedded in (but not determined by) structural properties of their everyday life context. Bourdieu exemplifies this logic by demonstrating how actors' judgements of cultural products (paintings, literature, music and so forth) vary systematically between classes. Other social phenomena adhere to the same logic. For example, Bourdieu shows how actors' food preferences are rooted in their social class background, resulting in different food habits among middle and working class people.

At one level, Bourdieu's project is to propose a social theory that claims that actors' subjectivity is rooted in structural and objective features of their everyday life contexts. On the other hand, the latter is just as much constituted by purposeful acts carried out by actors. As such Bourdieu's project resembles Giddens' *structuration theory* (1984). However, contrary to Giddens, and particularly to the latter's later works (1992, 1991), Bourdieu insists that a conception of individuals as purposeful actors, who are able to act strategically, does not conflict with conceiving of them as strongly influenced by structural phenomena, in particular their position within the class structure. This is relevant to the on-going debate on lay people's social constructions of rurality. According to Bourdieu, all social phenomena are socially constructed. Bourdieu's critique is that these social constructions—or 'social representations' in the terminology of Halfacree (1993)—are not randomly generated but inherently rooted in structural properties of people's everyday life contexts. Just as working class people, in contrast to middle and upper class people, tend to develop preferences for 'naturalist' rather than abstract paintings, we may expect different rural social classes to socially construct different images of 'the rural'.

Thus, defining rurality as a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon, located in people's minds, rather than as a material and objective reality, does not preclude taking structural phenomena into account in order to explain what social constructions people hold.

Bourdieu's key analytical tools in his attempt to account for the relationship between social constructions and structural forces are those of *habitus*, *economic* and *cultural* capital, and *class structure*. Based on these he outlines a theory that may be disentangled into two separate claims, one with more general implications than the other.

The general claim relates to Bourdieu's outline of the concept of habitus. This concerns the inter-generational transfer of lifestyles. Reflecting other socialisation theories (see Jenkins, 2002), his argument is that actors internalise the predispositions of their parents or, more generally, those of the social category to which their parents belong. A person's habitus does not represent a deterministic force but rather a structure of predispositions towards specific ways of relating to the social world. This implies

schemes of perceptions and, further, schemes for how to react—consciously and unconsciously—to the social world.

The more specific claim of Bourdieu's theory concerns the *class character* of this habitus. According to Bourdieu, who views the social world as inherently structured by class and defined by struggles between classes, key features of an actor's habitus are those defined by one's position in the class hierarchy. Thus, working class members (and their offspring) will systematically hold similar habituses as opposed to members of other class fractions. Further, the defining elements of class are its relation to two types of resources; economic and cultural capital.

The third research question address both of these claims: to what extent are rural youth's images of the rural related to their habitus and, more specifically, their *class* habitus?

4. Data

The discussion of these issues is based on an analysis of a quantitative data set collected among pupils at the three upper secondary schools in an area called 'the Mountain Region' in the middle/eastern part of Norway in autumn 2003. The Mountain Region is a typical rural inland region of Norway. It has 25,000 inhabitants, scattered over 13,311 km² of land. There are two centres of some size, a number of smaller villages, a larger number of smaller settlements, and finally countless separate residences scattered through the region. Traditionally, the local economy has relied on agriculture and mining. This has changed over recent decades, and today the declining farming sector, industry, which no longer includes mining, and the private service sector employ about 15 per cent of the work force each. Most employment is in the public sector. About 40 per cent of the work force is employed by the municipality, county and state agencies. For a more detailed description of the region, see Rye and Winge (2002).

The questionnaire asked the teenagers to relate (among other issues) their reflections upon 'rurality' from a variety of angles. The following analysis relies primarily on their responses to a question about how they find different keywords to be appropriate in characterising the rural. These keywords address the different normatively laden abstract characteristics considered to be associated with rurality, and were chosen on the basis of a literature review and the feedback from teenagers during the pre-testing period. The aim was to construct a list of keywords that in sum represents the wide range of characteristics employed in lay people's reflections on rurality. An introductory question read '[h]ow well do you find that the following keywords describe the rural?'. The pupils were then presented with 15 different keywords and asked to rate each of them on a scale ranging from 1 (not very suitable) to 5 (very suitable). The keywords were: 'gossip', 'redneck', 'neighbourliness',

'nature', 'opportunities', 'masculine', 'everyone knows everyone', 'spirit of cooperation', 'peaceful', 'knowledge', 'tolerance', 'solidarity', 'feminine', 'modern', and 'boring'.³

The collection of data was administered through the upper secondary schools in the region. This ensured that most of the region's teenagers would receive and return the questionnaire. More than 90 per cent of the birth cohorts of 1985–1987 in the region attend upper secondary education, and almost all of them are enrolled in one of the three schools located in the region.⁴ Administering the questionnaire in classrooms increases the response rate dramatically. Of a total of 834 pupils, 653 returned the questionnaire, giving a response rate as high as 78 per cent. The missing data are mainly due to either whole classes being away from school on the day of data collection or individuals being absent because of illness.

The quality of the data is considered high. Previous knowledge about lay people's conceptualisations of the 'rural' formed the basis both for topics to be included in the questionnaire and the exact wording of the questions. Thus, it was possible to embed the work within existing theory on the subject. Furthermore, the questionnaire was pre-tested, both qualitatively and quantitatively: in two focus groups composed of five and seven teenagers, respectively, and in two upper secondary school classes in another region (in total thirty pupils). These sessions provided important insights about the teenagers' perspectives on rurality and helped improve the questionnaire considerably. The missing percentage is very low (1–5 per cent), and there seems to be no pattern in the missing data.

³Nuances are inevitably lost in translation, and some of the keywords/phrases presented have very specific connotations in Norwegian that are impossible to translate to English. In particular, three of the terms need further comment: 1. 'Redneck' (Norw.: 'harry') refers very broadly to the lack of sophistication and vulgarity of 'lower' class culture. However, it is not a working class phenomenon only. City people often find it descriptive of rural people. However, the term is also regularly employed to characterise behaviour of city people. It has negative connotations, though some people may accept the label as proof being in touch with 'common' people. It does not denote racism in the same way as the term 'redneck'. 2. The word-for-word translation of the term 'neighbourliness' would be 'people care for/about each other' (Norw.: 'folk som bryr seg om hverandre'); it refers to people's common concerns for others in their community. It has a positive connotation and reflects a sense of community. 3. 'Spirit of cooperation' (Norw.: 'dugnadsånd') may also be translated as the 'spirit of voluntary communal work' (Kirkeby 1986) and refers to a willingness to engage in mutual help projects in one's community. The culture of the Amish refers roughly to the American equivalent of the 'dugnadsånd'. Following is a full list of keywords in original language: 'Sladder', 'harry', 'folk som bryr seg om hverandre', 'natur', 'muligheter', 'maskulint', 'alle kjenner alle', 'dugnadsånd', 'rolig', 'kunnskap', 'toleranse', 'samhold', 'feminint', 'moderne' and 'kjedelig'.

⁴A few teenagers who grew up in the Mountain Region may have enrolled at schools located outside the region. As well, some of those interviewed may have migrated to the region in order to enrol at one of the three schools located in the region. By and large, however, the pupils enrolled in the three Mountain Region upper secondary schools correspond to the 1985 to 1987 birth cohorts raised in the region.

Teachers did not report any problems during the administration of the questionnaire.

Nevertheless, the quantitative design of the data collection necessarily generates data that is rather thin. The statements provided by the respondents are not situated in the wider social and cultural contexts within which the statements are produced and upon which they are dependent. Such a quantitative research strategy, contrary to more qualitative approaches usually employed in this kind of study, restricts possibilities of giving thick interpretations of lay people's perspectives on the rural. Furthermore, as always is the case with quantitative research frameworks, it is difficult to assess what meaning to attach to the numbers in the data matrix. The same responses may cover different meaning content. What is typically rural to one person may be less so for another. For example, in the present study two students may have ticked 'nature' as a suitable characteristic of the 'rural', however, they may vary in their understanding of this concept. To one of them 'nature' represents pleasurable qualities (e.g., harmony, peacefulness) while the other interprets 'nature' rather as a negative feature of the rural (e.g., lack of culture). However, during the pre-testing of the questionnaire I was struck by the straightforward way in which students related to the concept of rurality and the list of keywords. While the rural/urban-dichotomy still gives scholars a hard time, lay people seem to employ such concepts without qualms or other problems. The same applies to the keywords. These are social constructs with multiple possible meanings, however, the informants taking part in the pre-testing rarely problematised the keywords. Their comments primarily related to the *relevance* of a given keyword in terms of characterising the rural, not its possible *ambiguity*. However, researchers working with quantitative research designs needs to take the ambiguity of terms into account when interpreting results.

What is lost in depth, however, is gained in breadth. While several studies have inquired into lay people's conceptualisations of 'the rural' following a qualitative research strategy, there are few studies that map the distribution of these conceptualisations. In other words, interviewing a handful of teenagers in depth may give you deep insight into the process by which 'the rural' is conceptualised and socially constructed; interviewing several hundred teenagers allows you to say something about the dispersion of these differing conceptualisations.

Thus, the logic underlying this paper genuinely utilises a strategy of mixing methods, and quantitative and qualitative methods are regarded as complementary rather than competing approaches (Brannen, 1992). The analysis in this paper focuses on the *quantitative* part of the overall inquiry into lay people's social construction of rurality; however, it is deeply rooted in the findings of the manifold *qualitative* studies previously carried out within this academic field over past years (see the literature review above).

5. Results

The data at the same time corroborates and questions the accuracy of previous assertions regarding the image of the rural held by people in the countryside. On the one hand, the majority of rural youth seem to be in general agreement with traditional claims about the peculiarities of the rural. The countryside is characterised by ‘nature’ and its distinct social features; there are dense social ties; everyone knows and cares for each other; a strong feeling of solidarity and spirit of cooperation prevails. Gossip is common. The countryside is further strongly associated with calmness. The flip side of the coin is the streak of backwardness the rural youth in the survey seem to attach to rurality: boredom, lack of opportunities and an image of being non-modern.

Yet, at the same time, the data at hand clearly document that there is no unanimity in the youths’ conceptualisation of the rural. For example, the majority of respondents associate ‘solidarity’ with the rural; however, there is a substantial minority saying they do not find this to be an appropriate adjective to describe the rural. The same applies to most of the other keywords included in the questionnaire. Rurality holds different meanings for different groups. The *dominant* views on rurality are not necessarily also the *hegemonic* ones in rural areas.

5.1. Nature, strong social ties, and a little bit boring

First, I present what seems to be the *dominant* conceptualisation of rurality among rural youth in the Mountain Region. The first column in Table 1 reports their average judgement of the suitability of 15 chosen keywords to describe the rural. Of the keywords ‘nature’ is considered most accurate to describe the rural. Practically everyone finds it a suitable characteristic of rurality. Further, the results regarding keywords describing the social fabric of rural communities support previous findings in the literature. Most respondents agree with the claim that ‘everyone knows everyone’. The three characteristics with the greatest positive connotations are also found appropriate to describe the rural. The average score for the keyword ‘neighbourliness’ is 4.0, slightly higher than items ‘spirit of cooperation’ and ‘solidarity’. Further, the majority of the respondents find ‘peaceful’ to be appropriate to describe the rural.

On the other hand, the ‘gossip’ keyword also gets a score of 4, indicating that the rural youth do not see the social density of rural societies solely as a good thing. Moreover, the rural seems to symbolise backwardness for the respondents. A majority state that ‘modern’ is not a characteristic of the rural (2.7), neither is ‘opportunities’. Rather ‘boring’ seems appropriate. The ‘redneck’ item also finds support, signalling that the rural youth do find this indicator of rural ‘unsophisticatedness’ applicable to the rural. However, all these keywords have scores close to the midpoint of the scale (3). This indicates that the

Table 1

How suitable do you find the following keywords to be in order to describe ‘the rural’? Measured on a scale from 1 (not suitable at all) to 5 (very suitable). Average and standard deviation. ($N = 619\text{--}646$)

	Mean scores	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

respondents—considered as a group—have more difficulty determining the usefulness (or lack thereof) of these keywords in comparison to those concerning the structure of social ties.

This is also the case for the ‘knowledge’ and ‘tolerance’ keywords, which get scores above the middle point (3.5 and 3.2). These keywords are rather vague, e.g., it is debatable what kind of knowledge the keyword refers to or what is meant by tolerance (tolerance towards whom?). If nothing else, however, the results reject the hypothesis that rural youth interpret these characteristics solely as symbols of the urban.

The questionnaire further attempted to tap the gendered image of rurality by keywords ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. The responses, taken at face value, do not indicate that rural youth conceive of the countryside in such terms. The scores for masculinity and femininity are roughly the same (2.8 and 2.5), and although there is a weak but statistically significant tendency for the latter to be regarded as less descriptive of the rural, there is no sound foundation in the data for the claim that rural youth view the countryside primarily as a masculine arena. That the scores for these items are positively correlated (.306), implying that those most likely to find ‘masculinity’ suitable to describe rural also are more likely to judge ‘femininity’ an appropriate adjective, makes the results even less decisive. The results may be due to methodological/linguistic factors, as young people may not use academic terms in their everyday speech and thus not are able to apply them consistently in a survey context.⁵ Thus, the results do not necessarily imply that rural youth do not have gendered images of rurality and even less that the social structures of their communities

⁵It is noteworthy, however, that just 3.8/5.2 per cent did not answer these items in the questionnaire.

are gender neutral. Quite the contrary, as results in Section 5.4 demonstrate, this study supports the claim that genders do relate to the rural in different ways. Nonetheless, the results do indicate that rural youth do not very consciously reflect on rurality in abstract gender terms such as ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’—gender is ‘done’ in real life rather than being reflexively and explicitly ‘formulated’ when confronted with a researcher’s questionnaire.

5.2. *Diversity of rural images*

The second research question addresses the uniformity of rural images. Looking behind the majority view on rurality, diverse rural images make an appearance. The rural youth in the Mountain Region conceptualise the rural in a variety of ways, and the characteristics some teenagers judge suitable to describe the rural may not fit others’ understandings of the rural very well. The second row in Table 1, reporting the statistical standard deviations, provides a statistical account of this heterogeneity.

The discrepancy is most explicit with regard to the appropriateness of the adjective ‘boring’ in descriptions of the rural. The average score for the item is 3.1, indicating that the keyword is more or less neutral in relation to the rural. However, only one third (31 per cent) actually placed this adjective in the middle of the scale. Just as many said that the word is suitable (37 per cent) or, to the contrary, that it does not fit as a descriptor of the rural (32 per cent). This implies a polarisation among the teenagers with regard to the image of ‘boring’ so often attached to the countryside. The ‘rural dull’ image fits for some but not all rural teenagers. Three other items have standard deviations larger than 1.1; ‘redneck’, ‘gossip’, and ‘opportunities’.

On the other hand, the very uniform responses to the ‘nature’ item are noteworthy. With some rare exceptions, ‘nature’ is viewed as an appropriate description of the rural by close to all those interviewed. Again, this may not be surprising, but the strength of unanimity is nonetheless noteworthy. The results for keywords referring to the structure of social ties in rural areas also seem rather uniform. The standard deviations are 1.0 or lower. For example, only 3 per cent of the respondents do not find the claim ‘everybody knows everybody’ as descriptive of rural societies. The similar percentages for ‘neighbourliness’, ‘solidarity’ ‘peaceful’, ‘spirit of cooperation’ and ‘gossip’ ranges from 6 to 10.

These differences in the rural teenagers’ responses to the appropriateness of the keywords to describe ‘the rural’, raise questions about the conformity of lay people’s social constructions of ‘rurality’. Some characteristics of the rural (e.g., ‘nature’) may be accepted by all or most rural residents, but, nonetheless, other features of the countryside seem contested. The concept of ‘rurality’ holds different meanings for different rural teenagers. In the next section, these discrepancies will be further investigated by looking into the underlying structure of these differing social constructions of the countryside.

5.3. *Two dimension of rurality: the idyll and the dull*

At first glance the dispersion in the respondents’ responses across the keywords shows no clear-cut pattern. Those rejecting one of the keywords regarding the social fabric of rurality are not necessarily the same as those rejecting other keywords. Each item seems to address more or less unique aspects of relevance to the image of the rural.⁶ A more thorough inspection of data, however, indicates that there is an underlying structure in the data.

Using factor analysis, a statistical tool useful to identify hidden relationships between a larger set of variables, two dimensions in the rural teenagers’ responses to the fifteen keywords are detected. These dimensions account for (in statistical terms) more than a third of the total variance in the material. Put in non-statistical terminology, rural youth differ in how they conceptualise rurality along two independent dimensions. These dimensions mirror representations of the countryside as either the ‘rural idyll’ or the ‘rural dull’. However, these representations should not be perceived as exclusive to each other, as most often has been claimed in the literature, but rather as addressing different aspects of the rural.

The statistical details of the factor analysis are thoroughly presented elsewhere (Rye, 2004). For the following discussion it suffices to present the two dimensions extracted, noting, however, that four of the original items are excluded from the analysis: two keywords (‘nature’ and ‘everyone knows everyone’) are discarded due to the unanimity in the responses (low variance in statistical terms). It makes little sense to explain a close to non-existent dispersion. The gender keywords (‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’), on the other hand, are discarded because the responses to these keywords are not closely related to any of the other keywords, or, in other words, they appear to represent a third (and statistically rather insignificant) dimension.

- *The rural idyll*: The first dimension reflects the responses to six of the keywords: ‘solidarity’, ‘neighbourliness’, ‘knowledge’, ‘spirit of cooperation’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘peaceful’. These keywords (with the exception of the third) have in common a reference to a perceived distinctiveness of social ties in rural areas. These, further, resemble the essences of the ‘rural idyll’—the countryside as a place where people stick together and care for each other in quiet and peaceful surroundings.⁷
- *The rural dull*: The second dimension summarises responses to the five remaining keywords: ‘boring’, ‘opportunities’, ‘gossip’, ‘redneck’ and ‘modern’. The variables reflect both positive and negative attitudes.

⁶The statistical correlation between them ranges from close to zero (e.g., keywords ‘gossip’/‘nature’) to 0.6 (‘neighbourliness’/‘solidarity’).

⁷The discarded keywords ‘nature’ and ‘everyone knows everyone’ show relatively strong correlation (0.329 and 0.240) with this dimension, taking into account the low degree of variance in responses to these items.

Table 2
Two dimensions of rurality. Factor loadings on dimensions 1 ('The rural idyll') and 2 ('The rural dull') for 11 keywords. Pattern matrix (Only scores higher than 0.4 are reported)

Keyword	Dimension 1: 'The rural idyll'	Dimension 2: 'The rural dull'
Solidarity	0.753	
Neighbourliness	0.653	
Knowledge	0.571	
Spirit of cooperation	0.565	
Tolerance	0.541	
Peaceful	0.505	
Boring		+ 0.603
Opportunities		−0.568
Gossip		+ 0.524
Redneck		+ 0.477
Modern		−0.424

High scores on this dimension indicate what seems to represent the idea of 'rural dullness': the countryside as characterised by boredom, a lack of opportunities and non-modern features. These seem to be related to the image of the rural as a 'redneck' homeland or 'unsophisticated'. The 'gossip' keyword—the flip side of the dense social fabric in rural areas—hints at the reactionary character of social relations and a sense of social control that precludes an innovative atmosphere.

Table 2 displays the factor loadings (pattern matrix) for keywords on these dimensions; the higher the score, the stronger the relationship between the keyword and the dimension.

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the respondents along these two dimensions. High scores on the rural idyll dimension (the right side of the diagram) imply that the respondents agree with the idyllic image of the rural. Low scores (the left side of the diagram) imply that they are less likely to conceptualise the rural in such terms. Similarly, high scores on the rural dull dimension (the upper part of the diagram) indicate an agreement with the dull image of the rural while low scores (the lower part of the diagram) suggest a relative rejection of this presentation of the rural.

The dimensions are *negatively* correlated to each other, implying that high scores on one dimension tend to occur with low scores on the other (correlation: 0.595). In other words, rural youth who subscribe to the idyllic image of the rural are more likely to reject the dull version of the countryside. However, this is a *tendency* and not a *rule*. These dimensions should rather be regarded as reflecting *two different aspects* of rurality. Individuals may find the rural dull and idyllic at the same time, or neither one nor the other. For example, a teenager may acknowledge and appreciate the social density of rural communities (accepts the rural idyll image of the rural) while at the same time find the countryside lacking the opportunities to realise the dreams of his/her life (also accepts the rural dull image). On the other hand, a teenager may reject the idyll image of

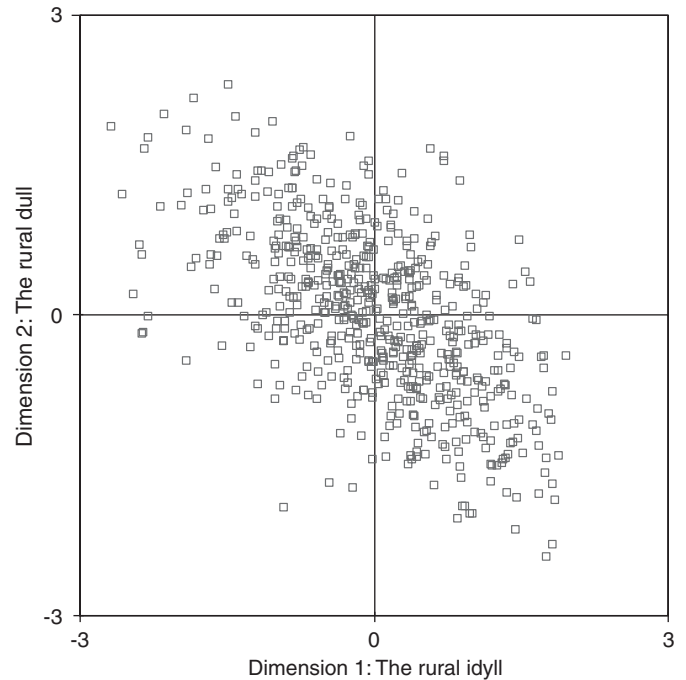


Fig. 1. Two dimensions of rural images: The rural idyll and the rural dull. Individual scores.

the rural but still consider the countryside as a less dull place than the alternatives (rejects both the rural idyll and dull images of the rural). Those in the upper right and lower left quadrants of Fig. 1 are examples of this.

The construction and interpretation of the dimensions are open to criticism, methodologically as well as theoretically. All statistics are social constructs, not objectively produced 'truths'. Nonetheless, the keywords seem to capture essential aspects of how rural youth in the Mountain Region think about their lives and rurality. A powerful indicator of the soundness and fruitfulness of the dimensions is the strong relationship between these and other key issues regarding how these teenagers relate to the rural. A few examples illustrate this:

- Among those holding the most positive view of the rural, a third (31 per cent) say they would prefer to live in the countryside or in a village while in their twenties, compared to only one in seven (14 per cent) among those with the most negative attitudes to the rural.⁸
- 48 per cent of those most positive regarding the rural think that it will be easier to 'find good friends' in rural areas than elsewhere. Only half as many (19 per cent) in the other group give the same answer.

⁸The first group is defined as those having positive (higher than average) scores on the rural idyll dimensions and negative (lower than average) scores on the dull dimension (219 cases). These are consistently the most positive to rurality. The second group are those with reversed scores and, thus, the most negative to the rural (219 cases). Those with contradictory (in substantial terms) scores—positive or negative on both dimensions, for example by scoring high on both the rural idyll and the rural dull dimensions—are excluded in this analysis (210 cases).

- Level of emotional attachment to their rural communities varies even more. As many as 82 per cent of those most positive to the rural agree with the assertion ‘I am proud of my community’, compared to just 37 per cent of those holding the most negative views about the rural.

5.4. Structural differences in rural youth’s images of rurality

The next question I want to address is the extent to which these differences in rural youth’s conceptualisations of the rural are related to structural properties of rural youths’ life situations—cf. the third research question of the paper. Are some categories of rural youth, in particular as defined by class position, socially constructing the rural differently from others? The analysis suggests a ‘yes’ to this question. However, it is a qualified one.

First, I will address differences in the rural youth’s images of the rural reflecting their social class background. At first glance, there are no such clear-cut differences when social background is defined by parents’ level of income or their educational level. Offspring of parents with high education generally seem to hold the same views on the rural as those with parents without much education. This holds for both dimensions, the rural idyll and the rural dull. The same results occur with regard to income level of parents. Neither has any impact on what images of the rural are held by their teenagers.

However, constructing a somewhat more sophisticated measure of class background, which—following Bourdieu—takes into account the *interaction* between economic (income) and cultural (education) capital yields interesting results. It is not the parents’ levels of income or educational levels considered separately that matters. Rather, it is the *combination* of these levels that matters. This is illustrated in Fig. 2, which displays how rural teenagers from four different social class backgrounds, as defined by parents’ levels of income/educational level, are located along the

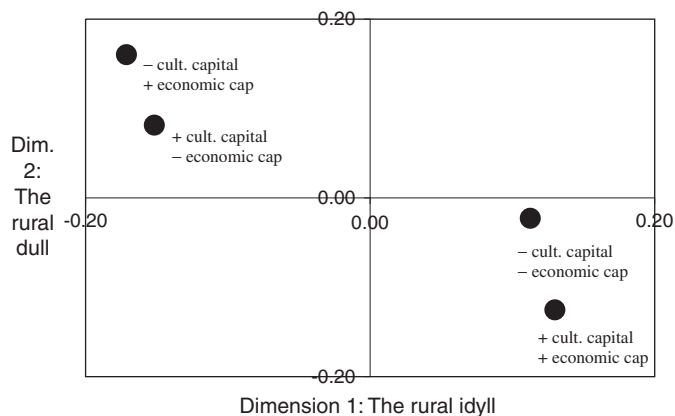


Fig. 2. Class scores on the two dimensions of rural images (Classes defined by fathers economic and cultural capital).

two dimensions of the rural. The four categories are: offspring of parents with

- high economic and high cultural capital
- high economic but low cultural capital
- low economic but high cultural capital
- low economic and low cultural capital.

There are clear differences between these groups with regard to the first dimension, in particular with regard to the rural idyll dimension.⁹ Those who have the most positive view of the rural are those coming from families with the least *and* the most economic and capital resources—categories a and d above. These subscribe most strongly to the rural idyll and at the same time are less supportive of the rural dull-image of rurality.

Regarding the latter group (those from families with the most capital resources), an explanation may be that they represent the successful rural classes, those able to dominate both the local social life and the social representations of this social life. In short—the countryside actually may be more idyllic and less dull for the resourceful.

For those on the other end of the social ladder, however, other explanations are required in order to understand their positive evaluations of the rural. A possible explanation may go as follows: Originating from the lower echelons of rural society, these are the least likely to have success in terms of future educational and work careers in their rural localities, however, neither do urban localities provide many prospects for success in these respects. In other words, the social fabric of the rural idyll may be unfavourable but nevertheless not so unfavourable as the alternative, the city. Such perceptions may reflect the fact that the social structure of rural communities is, or at least is thought to be, less class-structured than urban localities (see Rye, 2004). The disadvantages of lower class origins are fewer in their home municipality than in the city. Another explanation may be the existence of rural cultures that match the interests of the teenagers in rural lower social classes. Having few spare time activities on offer does not matter if these are the activities you enjoy the most.

The rural youth holding the most negative images of the rural, both on the ‘idyll’ and ‘dull’ dimensions, are those with parents having contradictory levels of economic and cultural capital; either high economic *or* cultural capital resources but low scores on the other—categories b and c above. For these groups the alternative to the rural—the urban—may provide better prospects for satisfaction than staying in their rural communities, often conceived of as less open for social mobility.

Another way to indicate social class background is by parents’ occupation. Data at hand does not provide for a

⁹The differences between these groups are significant in statistical terms with regard to the first dimension, the rural idyll (p -value = 0.003). For the other dimension, the rural dull, the conclusion is less secure as the p -value is slightly above the threshold level most commonly used in traditional significance tests (p -value = 0.051).

detailed categorisation of the occupational status of parents beyond a rough categorisation of their sector affiliation (primary, secondary or tertiary; and public or private). The results indicate small differences with one notable exception. Offspring of farmers are on average more inclined to get high scores on the first dimension and low scores on the other. This is probably very much due to their childhood and adolescence experiences as farm kids, the archetypal version of rural life. In other words, their habitus is more genuinely rural than that of other rural youth. Furthermore, many of them are likely to take over—or at least consider taking over—the family farm and, thus, spend the rest of their lives in the countryside.

These reflections are no more than preliminary explanations. Further research, and preferably qualitative rather than quantitative, is required to better understand these results with respect to the impact of social class background on rural youths' images of rurality. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that there are differences in their images of the rural and that these seem to be organised along structural and class related lines.

I shall briefly present some other structural differences in the images of the rural held by youth. First, an analysis of the impact of the rural youths' own, present stock of economic and cultural capital resources (rather than their parents') yields interesting results. In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to provide a subjective estimate of their family's economic situation; whether they had been well off or not during the last 2 years. The question taps their feeling of being privileged in economic terms. The analysis indicates that there is a (statistically significant) relation between declaring economic hardship and holding negative attitudes towards the rural. A second indicator, addressing the *cultural* component of their capital, is educational attainment as measured by respondents' grades at school. Once more, the most successful teenagers are more likely to hold positive views of the rural than those failing at school with regard to the rural idyll dimension. However, the results on the second dimension—the rural dull—is insignificant in statistical terms. These are interesting results given the relatively (and seemingly contradictory) positive evaluation of the rural among those from the lower rural social classes presented above. However, there is a relatively low correlation, in this study as in others, between people's objective location in the class structure and their subjective assessment of their economic situation: teenagers of parents with no education and low income may not experience economic hardship. The results referred to show that it is *when they perceive themselves* worse off—and not their 'objective' location in the lower part of the social structure—that they are less positive to the rural. The same logic seems to apply to the findings with regard to cultural capital: it is personal failure within the educational system, and not having parents with low educational level, that makes teenagers hold a negative image of the rural.

Second, boys have more positive images of the rural than girls. This applies to both of the dimensions. However, only the differences on the second dimension ('the rural dull') are statistically significant. Thus, although the respondents did not seem to evaluate the rural in terms of masculinity and femininity, cf. Section 5.1—these results indicate a more general difference in how young girls and boys relate to the rural. For rural girls the countryside seems to be less idyllic and duller than for their male counterparts.

Finally, I have analysed the impact of the rural/urban origins of the respondents and their parents, their 'geographic habitus'. In this regard the results are very clear. Those who grew up in a city hold far more negative images of the rural than those raised in the region or in another rural area. The same applies with regard to their parents: those reporting that neither of their parents were raised in the region similarly evaluate the rural in more negative terms, for them the countryside being less idyllic and more dull.

6. Discussion

At one level, the image of the rural kept by rural youth in the Mountain Region is a familiar one. By and large they reproduce the idyllic version of the countryside as a place characterised by nature and a dense social structure. Everyone knows everyone, and there is a feeling of neighbourliness and a spirit of cooperation. The idyllic aspects of rural life, however, co-exist with a more negative image of the countryside, the image of the rural dull. Rural life may be idyllic; nevertheless, the greater part of rural youth in the Mountain Region also associate rurality with boredom, the non-modern, and a lack of opportunities—the rural dull. The rural idyll appears, however, as a stronger and more consistent image than that of the dullness of rurality.

In this regard the paper supports the findings of previous studies on lay people's conceptualisations of rurality, despite differences in methodological approaches. The images of rural idyll/dull seem so solid that they inform qualitative just as much as quantitative research on the issue. The study presented here may be regarded as an attempt at methodological triangulation, checking whether different methodological approaches yield similar results. In this case the outcome is affirmative.

However, the quantitative approach of this paper has yielded findings that question the usefulness of regarding the rural idyll and the rural dull as mutually exclusive images of the rural. Rural youth do not conceptualise the rural as exclusively 'idyllic' or in terms of 'dullness'. The results of the factor analysis rather indicate that these conceptualisations constitute two more or less independent dimensions of rurality. These are related but, nevertheless, seem to address two different aspects of how rural youth evaluate rurality. There is no intrinsic contradiction in viewing the rural as an idyllic place and at the same time as

a very dull place. The rural may represent both for its inhabitants.

The findings provide for more nuanced conclusions in other respects as well. The greater part of rural youth in the Mountain Region seem to conceive of rurality in terms of 'idyll' and 'dullness'. However, there is disagreement on these matters among the teenagers. A substantial minority in the data do not subscribe to the dominant social construction of rurality. There are far more rural images than those most often painted, those of the rural idyll and the rural dull. This diversity of rural images, probably reflecting the trend towards more heterogeneous rural populations, deserves further attention.

The last part of the paper addresses these structural differences. Drawing on Bourdieu's social theories, I examine whether and to what extent structural properties of the everyday life context of rural youth may explain how the rural is conceptualised. The findings are equivocal. On the one hand, a number of structurally defined groups of rural youth in the Mountain Region express different views of the rural. Rural youth from families with the most or the least capital resources are more likely to see the rural idyll than others. Boys hold a more positive view of the rural than girls, locals are more positive than in-movers, and those raised by farmers are more positive than offspring from other occupational groups. Economic wellbeing and educational success also go along with a positive image of the rural. In this regard the paper indicates that actors' social constructions of rurality are embedded in structural properties of their everyday life context. This suggests the fruitfulness of a Bourdieusian perspective, when examining the social construction processes of lay people. At a general level, rural youths' images of the rural are not randomly generated but follow structural divides. These differences may be interpreted as reflections of the different habituses of the rural youth. However, this does not amount to saying that these differences account for all, or even most, of the diversity in rural images held by rural youth. Nonetheless, a claim that social constructions (also) need to be considered from structuralist perspectives is substantiated by the findings in the paper.

The fruitfulness of Bourdieu's class theory demands more discussion. There are no straightforward, or very strong, relationships between social background and the respondents' images of the rural. However, a more sophisticated measurement of social class background, taking into account the interaction between the economic and cultural capital of their parents, captures the existence of class-related differences in their images of the rural. These findings are equivocal, however, in terms of both methodological and theoretical interpretation, and need to be investigated further. Such studies should include further mapping of the rural images and more substantiated explanations of the differences. This invites quantitatively as well as qualitatively oriented methodological approaches.

The paper suggest a number of other conclusions as well. In particular, the analysis points to heterogeneity in lay people's images of the rural. There are *dominant* images of rurality but these are not *hegemonic*. The view of the 'Mr. Average', the typical image of 'rurality', defines just one of a multitude of possible rural images. Moreover, and contrary to previous claims (Halfacree, 1995), the paper indicates that this diversity in rural images has a systematic character. Lay people's social constructions of the rural are embedded in structural properties of their everyday life contexts.

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