

THE CONCEPT OF 'RURAL' AS A PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESS: FROM CONCEPT ATTAINMENT TO CONCEPT UNLEARNING

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Manuscript received: March 13, 2019

Revised version: August 10, 2019

DYMITROW M., 2019. The concept of 'rural' as a psychosocial process: From concept attainment to concept unlearning. *Quaestiones Geographicae* 38(4), Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Poznań, pp. 15–28.

ABSTRACT: Realising that human geography has been defined less by its canonical works but rather by its canonical concepts, the current status of the concept 'rural' puts a question mark over progress in human geography in terms of how well we have been able to adapt knowledge to reciprocate with societal change at large. As one of the oldest geographical concepts still in widespread use, 'rural' stands in stark contrast to the immense changes encountered by the society during the last century, let alone decades. And while this problem has been approached both empirically and philosophically, not enough stress has been put on the cognitive and sociological processes that have governed the attainment and retention of 'rural' in science, and beyond. In this vein, the aim of this paper is to provide a structured argument for facilitating a view of 'rural' less as a geographical space and more as a concept purportedly thought to define such space by way of inculcation.

KEY WORDS: rural, concept attainment, concept retention, knowledge production, geography

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Introduction

The term *rural studies* is a heterogeneous designator, meaning different things to different people. According to *Journal of Rural Studies*, the term denotes any kind of research set out to "advance understanding and analysis of contemporary rural societies, economies, cultures and lifestyles; the definition and representation of rurality; the formulation, implementation and contestation of rural policy; and human interactions with the rural environment" (*Journal of Rural Studies*). This very broad term, thence, covers engagements with 'the rural' in various ways, each aligning with specific paradigmatic assumptions

(in the vein of Kuhn [1962] 1970), which in turn imply different metaphysical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, methodological, and methodical.

At the same time, we know that the concept 'rural' – just as its counterpart 'urban' – is highly problematic (Sher 1977; Gilbert 1982; Newby 1986; Hoggart 1990; Halfacree 1993, 2006, 2009a; Jones 1995; Cloke 2006; Stenbacka 2011; Dymitrow 2017a; Dymitrow, Halfacree 2018). On the one hand, the field of rural studies is very strongly marked by the legacies of the last 100 years, presupposing certain underlying spatial taxonomies derived from the period of capitalist development in which the field emerged. Hence,

the urban/rural divide – it is assumed – represents two specific types of space that supposedly should be studied according to their own particular principles, and this, Brenner (2015) concludes, continues to be “epistemologically constitutive for thought and action”. On the other hand, the concept ‘rural’ stands in stark contrast to the immense changes encountered by society over the last century, let alone decades. Steady, fast-paced transformations in the environmental, economic and social dimensions have rendered the rural/urban binary a contentious one – a conceptual vestige of sorts, whose blurred and malleable characteristics, immense spatial coverage and aspectual all-inclusiveness have come to form an odd marriage between bygone world views and a globalised 21st-century reality of interconnectivity (cf. Dymitrow 2018 for a historical overview of the constancy of critique towards ‘rural/urban’).

This intricacy is entangled in a compound argument that forms the rationale of this paper. Concepts, once established, change more slowly than the society because of various psychosocial and socio-material factors (cf. West 1985; Hodgkinson 1997; Bruner et al. 1999; Anderson 2007; Winthrop-Young 2014). Moreover, concepts governed by powerful mental schemata – such as ‘rural’ – become easily embroiled in common parlance and thus entwined in various institutional structures (Kegan, Lahey 2009; Young et al. 2010; O’Brien 2013). What happens is that fewer constitutive aspects of a questionable concept support its purported analytical and explanatory value (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer 2017), whereupon the concept reciprocates less with the needs of society to be adequately comprehended and responded to. Instead, the concept more easily assumes the characteristics of a stereotype (Rey 1983), i.e. it becomes increasingly associated with certain conspicuous characteristics, which – while still clearly visible – become insufficient to explain phenomena unrelated to those characteristics:

“No one disputes the right of the layman to use these terms to denote different patterns of land use, which are easily observable; what is disputable is the sociological relevance of these physical differences especially in highly complex industrial societies.” (Pahl 1966: 299)

Due to their longevity, concepts retained in spite of their poor utilitarian value gain authority in terms of lending, more or less explicit, justification to various projects, policies, strategies or even research lenses. In short, not only do old structures not reciprocate with a changing society but the concepts upon which those structures are based give rise to new structures (e.g. new “rural development programs” or new “rural research departments”):

“Conventional administrative, imaginative and intellectual boundaries have been developed between those supposedly different kinds of space, and subsequent understandings of changing spatial differentiation have served further to entrench the binary.” (Cloke, Johnston 2005a: 10)

The problem lies in the fact that by so doing we maintain and entrench a conceptual paradox that grows stronger with every passing year (cf. Seidman 2016). Perhaps more importantly, we do not seem to notice (or care to notice) this paradox despite a battery of resurfacing criticisms and available geographical knowledge on the subject. In one way or another, the awareness of the problematic nature of ‘rural’ as a concept is not sufficiently embraced (cf. Koch 2005: 5). The logical implication of this is that we may also not be aware of the pernicious effects of ‘rural’ (Dymitrow, Brauer 2016), including compromised communication, misdirected resources or the corrosion of social theory:

“Perhaps, as a loose descriptive vehicle, there is merit in acknowledging a distinction between rural and urban. However, what starts as loose description too readily attains causal status.” (Hoggart 1990: 247)

Conceding that a rural/urban distinction is a problematic representation of reality, then *any* derivative extraction building on such a distinction (be it in research, policy or planning) is then likely to favour some and disadvantage other aspects or subjects of that reality. What this means in practice is that the very fact that a rural/urban distinction is made at all makes the principal problem of understanding ‘rural’ approachable from a psycho-social perspective, i.e. beyond the constraints of situatedness (cf. Haraway 1991).

This, in turn, points to the need of reviving the discussion about 'rural' and the virtual yet apprehensible realities it shapes through new compelling approaches and arguments.

In this vein, the aim of this paper is to provide a structured argument for the need to approach 'rural' less as a geographical space (a representation of the world) and more as a *concept* purportedly thought to define geographical space (a conception that we think represents the world). At the end of my paper about the six most common conceptions of 'rural/urban' (Dymitrow 2018: 391), I point to the concepts' three under-researched psychosocial dimensions: conceptual constitution (what do we put into these concepts?), performativity of concepts (how do we keep the concepts alive?) and implications of concepts (what are the negative effects of sustaining the concepts?). In this paper, I will develop on the first of these three fundamental notions of concept attainment, and how it is played out with regard to the concept of 'rural' explicitly and on rural studies implicitly.

Methodological note

Since 'rural' as a topic could be made limitlessly broad, opening the discussion to all possible angles would neither be helpful for the consistency of this paper nor desirable for creating new insights in view of what has already been done. Generally, the focus of conceptual rural studies has fallen within three dimensions: the historical dimension (How did 'rural' come into being?); the phenomenological dimension (How can we better understand 'rural'?); and the applicatory dimension (How can we adapt 'rural' to better fit a changed reality?). However, these disparate foci on history, meaning and utility – rather than on how they fit together – have consolidated an intriguing attitude amongst geographers toward the concept's place in human geography through a collective preference for salvaging a sinking boat rather than discarding it. With this in mind, my point of departure is that the challenge to understand 'rural' of today lies not in determining what 'rural' is, but in what way something or someone is considered 'rural', and why. Hence, the focus is on the constitution of 'rural' as a concept governed by various subject positions and psychosocial factors (Pinker 2003; Lamont 2009;

Feist, Gorman 2013; Kobylarek 2016; Brauer, Dymitrow 2017). This is done by building specifically on psychological and sociological literature anchored in geographical writings critical of the use of the concept 'rural', rather than on "rural studies" in general.

The concept 'rural' in concept attainment theory

A discussion about concept attainment must commence with a definition of what exactly a concept is. A *concept* is a fundamental category of existence mediated as an abstract variant of an object, state or ability. Seen as constituents of thoughts – either as mental representations (cf. Locke [1690] 1975; Hume 1739 [1975]), abilities (cf. Wittgenstein [1953] 2010) or senses (cf. Peacocke 1992), concepts are crucial for most cognitive processes, including categorisation, inference and decision-making (Margolis, Laurence 1999). Although a concept has little value unless it supports a task or the doing of things, disputes about concepts "often reflect deeply opposing approaches to the study of the mind, to language, and even to philosophy itself" (Margolis, Laurence 1999: 1) Given that "the task of isolating and using a concept is deeply imbedded in the fabric of cognitive life" (Bruner et al. 1999: 122), the problem becomes more tractable when seeing concepts in the capacity of the human brain than of their 'fixed' characteristics. When our mind generalises, it extracts similarities from numerous examples, and, depending on what similarities are chosen, the scope of the concept is changed (Margolis, Laurence 1999). Hence, concepts are frameworks that shape the ways in which we perceive and understand the world, while the strength of the theories that guide any societal project will always be dependent on the quality of the chosen concepts.

This basic presupposition can be immediately tied to the concept 'rural'. Drawing on the very different developments in rural geography, Woods (2011) provides nine possible ways of engaging geographically with 'the rural':

1. Approaching it
2. Imagining it
3. Exploiting it

4. Consuming it
5. Developing it
6. Living it
7. Performing it
8. Regulating it
9. Re-making it

Depending on what kind of engagement is chosen, 'rural' can be understood as either an idea or as an object of study. It may have a specific purpose, referring to ways in which 'rural' is brought into being or deal with practices of constructing knowledge about 'rural'. This also presupposes a specific level of certainty as to what 'rural' is, let alone whether it exists at all. For instance, while the first of Woods's (2011) ways of engagement has an epistemological underpinning, the second approach is more phenomenological. Approaches 3 through 5 define rural space as a predefined economic space, approach 6 is experiential, while approach 7 is about how the concept is produced and reproduced. Approaches 8 and 9 engage mostly with political perspectives, with the former focusing on governance of "rural space" and the latter on changes in "the countryside" (once again assuming that there is one). As such, Woods's listing represents a discontinuous chain of abstraction, from meta-analytical to applicative, with regard to how 'rural' is understood and – consequently – studied.

Next, while concepts are generally thought to reflect our supposedly shared thoughts and ideas, we must not forget that they are mediated through *language*, which is a slippery, unreliable, obstructive, parasitic, and promiscuous mode of communication (Winthrop-Young 2014: 376–377). Our relationship to everything we know is mediated by our concepts, our language and the society that gives us both. In other words, all objects are the products of conceptual activity, while between us and objects there will always be concepts (cf. Hassard 1999). Hence, shared cognition and consensus are essential to effectively harbour human ideas and relations with the geographical environment (cf. Buttimer 1976), not least with regard to 'rural'. This, however, is not always the case.

In geography, two openings have traditionally prevailed (cf. Cloke, Johnston 2005b; Halfacree 2009b; Dymitrow, Stenseke 2016). Firstly, the debate has been held at an empirical level. By departing from observations, and, acknowledging

changes that occur, the discussion is about to what degree 'rural places' have changed and how they need to be reimagined and redefined in the face of default rural ideations. Secondly, the debate has been held on a philosophical level by looking into how 'rural' can be understood today based on new theoretical developments. Both approaches, however, depart from the basic assumption that there *is* a rural (it is treated as a given), whereupon not enough stress is put on the cognitive and sociological processes leading up to this assertion, and the sheer possibility that 'rural' as a concept may be inherently unsuitable to capture, understand and explain the various socio-spatial phenomena that take place within its overarching scope. The problem becomes more tractable when seeing concepts in the capacity of the human brain than in their fixed characteristics. This, in turn, calls for an understanding of the chain of events leading up to the attainment of a concept.

Concept attainment signifies an inductive process that constructs concepts, or brings meaning to concepts, by searching for common characteristics and distinguishing conceptual examples from non-examples (Bennett, Rolheiser 2001). Studies on the processes of concept attainment are concerned with how people achieve the information necessary for isolating and learning a concept, how they retain this information, and how this information may be transformed (Bruner et al. 1999: 101). Given that these vastly complex tasks of achieving, retaining, and transforming information are managed "without exceeding the relatively narrow limits of human cognitive capacity" (Bruner et al. 1999: 102), the process of concept attainment comes with a number of simplifications. Still, it remains a much-overlooked aspect of knowledge production due to our preoccupation with "meaning" (content¹) rather than with the process of meaning-making (cf. Brauer et al. 2019). Our understanding of concepts is indicative of how we bring meaning to facts, principles, systems, theorems, etc. (Bennett, Rolheiser 2001), but it also sets the tone for the discussion and negotiation of reality.

¹ Cf. "Reflecting this challenge, four perspectives on how one can position rurality today are now presented, instead of dwelling on its content, although the latter is unavoidably referred to at times" (Halfacree 2009b: 449).

Concepts are learned by associating external stimuli with internal mediating stimuli (Bruner et al. 1999: 122). Avoiding a neurological explanation, Perkins (2013) summarises concept attainment in four aspects: *attributes*, *purpose*, *model cases*, and *argument*. This is why we *know* some concepts but not others (attributional value); this is why we *understand* some of the known concepts but not others (purposive value); this is why we can relate and choose to *use* some concepts and not others (model value); and this is why we *care* to learn some concepts and not others (argumentative value)².

An important question is how do we know we have learned a concept in a serviceable way? According to Bruner et al. (1999), this happens when a person feels “able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty” (p. 103). However, as Peterson (2015) warns, to truly understand a concept, “[one must] increase [one’s] focus and concentration on every single element of the entity, and [it] takes a tremendous amount of cognitive effort ... to build [one’s] model of reality into that level of resolution”. Because humans prefer order over chaos, they instead default to low-resolution options, a behaviour that implies that we may think we know more about a concept than we actually do (Peterson 2015). Why we still will not let go of ‘rural’ easily is – following Peterson (2015) – because it destabilises our past, our present and our future, and presents us with a load of uncertainties, where we at one point had a functional map and knew how things related to one another, including how we should act upon it. Whether it is anxiety or fear depends on the magnitude of novelty added. Something that contradicts one’s axiomatic presuppositions releases a stress response, and although humans do like novelty in small doses, seeing their expectations dashed causes a “generalized disinhibition of potential” (Peterson 2015) with serious consequences upon our use of concepts, in this case ‘rural’. This, in

turn, requires greater emphasis on its conceptual constitution than its contents.

On the constitution of concepts

Understanding how concepts are attained segues into a discussion of what constitutes a concept. *Constitution*, in this sense, is a set of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which an entity is governed, and these rules together make up – constitute – what that entity is. Conceptual constitution denotes all those signifiers put into a concept, producing an intersubjective state of mind or a representation of reality, which is associated with the namesake concept (cf. Margolis, Laurence 1999). As such, it refers to the cognitive, logical and linguistic tenets of communication, using mental shortcuts.

Humans group objects and events into pragmatically useful concepts with regard to reality constraints (Bruner et al. 1999: 117). The terms ‘concept’ and ‘category’ are thus intimately related. A category is “a collection of instances, which are treated as if they were the same”, whereas a concept “refers to all the knowledge that one has about a category” (Kavouras, Kokla 2007: 8). Categorisation enables us to learn about our environment economically and allows us to cope with complexity (stimulus variability) to extend the acquired behaviour to new instances (Jitsumori 2012: 513). Although intended as an aid to communicate and act in the world (Dahlberg 2015: 207), some categories are vague and undetermined, and only exist as abstractions (Cloke, Johnston 2005: 1–2). With regard to ‘rural’, already a century ago Galpin (1918) characterised the term as “vague and contradictory and [whose] use should be discontinued for scientific work” (Galpin et al. 1918); others followed suit (e.g. Stewart Jr. 1958; Bealer et al. 1965; Copp 1972; Galjart 1973; Falk, Pinhey 1978). Sher (1977: 1) went even further, claiming that “[t]he simple fact is that rural people, rural communities, and rural conditions are so diverse that we can find evidence to support nearly any characterization”. Given this vagueness, understanding ‘the rural’ prompts looking at how categories are cognitively assembled.

There are different *types* of categories (e.g. physical objects, classes, properties, relations) and different *means* of categorisation (the right

² We may have heard about the concept of ‘transubstantiation’ but have no clue what it means; we may understand the concept of ‘landscape’ but only at the very basic level; we may be able to relate fairly well to the concept of ‘politics’ but lacking the necessary aptitude we may actively refrain from discussing it; lastly, we may want to learn more about the concept of ‘salary negotiation’ than about ‘a chicken’s worldview’.

to belong to a certain category). The most known way of categorising is by means of definition, as definition is thought to “transcend the particulars of experience” (Pinker 2015: 271). This form of categorisation creates so-called *classical categories* (also known as *Aristotelian categories*). What is perhaps less known is that most human categorisation is done not through definitions but by way of *family resemblance*, creating so-called *Wittgensteinian categories*.

The concept of family resemblance (Ger. *Familienähnlichkeit*) argues that things that could be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all (Wittgenstein [1953] 2010). Pinker (2015: 272–274), elaborating on problems inherent in categorisation by family resemblance, lists five basic problems:

1. Impossibility to find a set of membership conditions
2. Fuzzy borders
3. Crisscrossing features
4. Associations despite lacking criteria for membership (stereotype theory)
5. Unequal membership (prototype theory)

The first three problems are associated with difficulties of categorisation. For instance, while men of clergy are subject to celibacy, they are not considered ‘bachelors’, even though the definition of the latter is ‘an unmarried man’. Fuzzy borders include the inability to guess what category an object should belong to. For instance, tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, aubergines, and peas are often considered ‘vegetables’ (by way of family resemblance) whereas definition-wise, they are ‘fruits’. Crisscrossing is yet another trait of family resemblance, meaning that members of categories show both family resemblance and lack of such at the same time, e.g. many vegetables are green, but carrots are not (Pinker 2015: 273). Having analysed ten seminal papers which Woods (2010) has characterised to “have critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher”, Dymitrow and Brauer (2017: 35–36) found the following inconsistencies:

“Consider the following compilation: desert farming in Mali, luxury sub-London homes, peasant

movements in Guatemala, chronic poverty in West Bengal, youth identity in South West England, the sugar cane industry in Australia, and a tourist-packed park fringed by the UK’s most urbanized area. What is the common denominator? Is there even any? The Occam’s razor answer is that they all contribute to the production of “rural theory”. However, such production takes place even though the rural location is unspecified (“rural Africa”), anonymized (“Small Village”), generalized (“sugar cane industry”) or synergized (“reflections of past research”), but also when the rural label is pre-given by an organization or by a research project, or simply arrived at by implication – be it by lack of update at best (the false equivalency farming = rural), or by lack of reflection at worst (stereotyping).”

The final two problems – *stereotyping* and *prototyping* – are connected to the implications of categorisation. As both imply the involvement of unfavourable inclusions and exclusions (Feltynowski et al. 2015; Krzysztofik et al. 2017b; Dymitrow et al. 2018; Arsovski et al. 2018), they are perhaps the sharpest thorns in the logic of family resemblance, especially visible in the context of ‘rural’.

Understanding rural stereotypes and prototypes

Stereotyping requires perhaps less introduction. Stereotypes are “consensual beliefs about group characteristics that influence the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of others, sometimes blatantly but often in a manner so subtle that they are outside awareness” (Fein, von Hippel 2003: 1). As Pinker (2015: 274) notes, most categories have stereotyped features, that is, “traits that everyone associates with the category, even if they have nothing to do with the criteria for membership”. Why people then rely on stereotypes is predicated on a variety of cognitive, but also motivational and socio-cultural factors, which in combination add to the inescapability and maleficence of stereotyping (Fein, von Hippel 2003: 6). Moreover, given that stereotypes serve basic cognitive and motivational functions, “they are highly resistant to change” (Fein and von Hippel 2003: 1). This does not come without problems. As Abram (2003: 31) put it, “looking is

the active organization of what we see, and what we see is socially organized, structured through our internal interpretation of the visual stimulus". By departing from one or a few attributes, most likely the most visually prominent ones (such as contrasting morphologies), we inadvertently downplay a nuanced representation of a more complex state (cf. Dymitrow 2013; Krzysztofik et al. 2017a). As we have seen in the past, stereotypes, when cemented, have the tendency to become incendiary and even pernicious towards certain misrepresented groups (e.g. through racism, genderism, heteronormativity or age-centricity). However, precisely this often tends to be the case with 'rural' (and 'urban') representations. For instance, having investigated the discursive shaping of the most strategic policy designed to inform the path of "rural development" in contemporary Europe (EU's Rural Development policy), the results were unexpectedly unbalanced (Brauer, Dymitrow 2014). Despite the outlined intentions to broaden the policy's scope toward more human-oriented subtleties (cf. European Commission 2008), there was clear thematic overemphasis on agriculture, while the focus on aspects of quality of life was largely insignificant (cf. also Cagliero et al. 2010; ECoA 2011; Schuh et al. 2012). The strong focus on agribusiness effectively diverted the attention from "rural people" to "rural land", including the vast majority of "rural people" not involved in the primary sector. Here, a functional (prototypical) view on rurality overshadowed the subtler and less apparent aspects of rurality (community life, family life, health, political stability, gender equality) except for in the rhetoric that proclaimed otherwise. Due to ongoing rapid societal changes the categories 'rural/urban' can no longer conceptually accommodate the variety and fragmentation of socio-material morphologies that go under these labels.

The second major problem inherent in family resemblance categorisation is *prototyping*. Prototype theory (Rosch 1973) is a development in cognitive science where the idea has been explored. Instead of using a definition-based model (e.g. a bird is a feature with feathers, a beak and ability to fly), prototyping involves selecting and prioritising elements of unequal status (e.g. a jay or a robin is often considered more prototypical of a bird than a penguin, an ostrich or a hummingbird). Prototypical members of categories

are "those with the most attributes in common with other members of that category and with the fewest attributes in common with other categories" (Rosch, Mervis 1973, as cited in Jitsumori 2012: 513). The issue of prototyping is especially relevant with 'rural', given that "geographic concepts are associated with signs (images) used to capture their intended meaning" (Kavouras, Kokla 2007: 10). Open landscapes, bucolic hillside villages and horse-drawn carts amidst agricultural fields fill up the screen upon a single Google image search. There is no sight of rooftop horticulture in Mexico City, degraded towns, ghost towns, involuntary parks, luxury safari villages, Antarctic research stations, or high-rise suburbs like Kozięgłowy off Poznań, where the rural/urban label changes across the street. Admittedly, these are extremes. Obviously, 'rurality' is seldom encased in solitary cottages overlooking a placid lake. The irony, however, is not that these non-prototypical examples are exceptions, but that the mental images serving as prototypes for these concepts are not representative of the majority, let alone the totality, of all possible places that go under the invoked label (cf. Haysom et al. 2019; Atkinson 2017; Woods 2006). According to the United Nations (2014), the global rural population is now close to 3.4 billion, while 3.9 billion are considered urban. However, since the vast majority of these areas are neither bustling high-rise metropolises nor agricultural, sparsely populated lands (cf. Dijkstra et al. 2013; Dymitrow 2014; Vaishar et al. 2016; Hamdouch et al. 2017;), a syllogistic (deductive) error known as the undistributed middle arises. Still, these prototypical members influence our conception of 'rural/urban' as categories, when we select our case studies, when we reach for theory, when we explain phenomena, when we devise policies, and when we wonder why some problems remain insoluble (cf. Servillo et al. 2017).

In effect, what we do is turn prototypes into stereotypes. As Rosch (1973: 330) put it, "it is easier to learn categories in which the natural prototype is central to a set of variations than it is to learn categories in which a distortion of a prototype is central, and the natural prototype occurs as a peripheral member". This is a very important observation, because when we think of rural prototypes, it is likely we are invoking near-stereotypes. And because we are locked on stereotypes,

we do not actually know how a true rural prototype looks like today. This is perhaps the greatest reason why most rural geographers conduct their studies in stereotypically defined rural areas and most urban geographers locate their research in prototypical urban environments (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer 2017). Contrarily, relatively few choose the immense variety of places in-between³ (Bell, Jayne 2009) because they are more difficult to peg, more difficult to insulate theoretically (due to the lack of appropriately labelled scholarly debate), and perhaps also more difficult to sell to a 'rural' or 'urban' journal; in order to be interesting to a major general geographical journal, an *atypical* study must exert a higher level of skill and erudition.

Prototyping has more far-reaching implications if we consider how the concepts 'rural' and 'urban' are used in practice, not least in research. For instance, why call something or someone 'rural' by the image of, for example, an open landscape when talking about subjects causally unrelated to that image (or when such causality cannot be readily established), for instance 'rural youth'? This equals to creating an artificial category based on a prototype, which only occurs as a peripheral member within the invoked category ('rural'). There is great likelihood that the immense category 'rural' is not explanatory of what we wish to understand (cf. Hoggart 1990: 247). In effect, we often distinguish subjects on account of objectionable descriptive definitions of 'rural', while our logical connections smack of rejected socio-cultural definitions – a conflation, which, for example, in the context of deprivation, may have dire consequences. Shapiro (2015) takes it even further, arguing that "[a]nytime [we] put a modifier in front of a term that is inherently good [we] turn it into a perversion of itself" (e.g. 'political correctness' is no longer a question of true or

false, i.e. 'correctness', but about conscious avoidance of consequences). Using the expression 'rural youth', for instance, requires ample reflection, definition and motivation; why this modifier has been chosen and not another, and what it is supposed to explain (cf. Dewsbury 2000). More often than not, this is seldom the case, without ample discussion about how much concept-induced harm it can cause (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer 2016: 65–66). While attentive attitudes toward undesirable implications of binaries have suffused much of human geography, our culturally disproportionate focus on difference (in the vein of Deleuze [1968] 1994) continues to batter our psychological proneness to binarise. This, in turn, makes us rely on stereotypes, which are perilously prone to leave out the details, where the problems usually are located.

Understanding mechanisms of concept retention

"Words are stiff, obstinate, unyielding; they are slow to move and hard to change. Their recalcitrance is deeply rooted: words are frozen blocks of meaning with seven-eighths submerged in the past. This, too, theory exploits. The originality effect of many new proposals emerges from the confrontation between new conceptual enterprises and the ghosts of concepts' past. Conceptual inertia is no less fertile a source of intellectual unrest than conceptual slippage." (Winthrop-Young 2014: 377)

As noted earlier, concepts are mediated through language, yet language is notorious for creating iatrogenic (unintentionally harmful) symptoms (Foucault 1988 [1960]; Žižek 1991; Boisvert, Faust 2002; Smart 2015). In his quote, Winthrop-Young (2014) shows that concepts are not only slippery, but once established they can become rock-solid and may be very difficult to get rid of. More interestingly, Winthrop-Young couples this property of language to something theorists have come to exploit. Obviously, any theme can be developed infinitely by adding new elements, changing approaches and cross-breeding it with other disciplines. Also, 'rural' has been explored in an enormous range of facets, from a plethora of different viewpoints, and across numerous disciplines, even though any

³ For instance, as Atkinson (2017) argues, there has been limited recognition that small and medium-sized towns have a significant role to play in the European territory – 38% of the EU's population (European Commission 2011). Moreover, as Dijkstra et al. (2013) show, the relationship between locality size and economic performance has limited relevance in Europe. Servillo et al. (2017) add that small and medium-sized towns "have largely been neglected by urban research". Also, the rural-urban dichotomy is known to disguise the problems of small towns (Woods 2006; Dymitrow 2017b) with "small urban centres" often being overlooked in terms of aid assistance.

exhaustive conceptual discussion points to them being convoluted figments of imagination that poorly reflect a changed reality. In that vein, recourses to 'non-representation', 'embodiment', 'more-than-human' approaches, 'assemblages', 'effacement', 'post'- and 'beyond'-perspectives (cf. Dymitrow 2018), and many other analytical lenses attached to 'rural' can be seen in a dual way: either as "redevelopment" on the positive end, or merely as examples of pressured academics lending sophistication to empirically and philosophically exhausted themes by exploiting the obduracy of language. In the context of academia this of course is associated with the idea of 'scientific progress'. Regardless of what direction it may take, science cannot stand still (Kuhn [1962] 1970; Lakatos, Musgrave 1970). This prerequisite gives rise to a constant innovation requirement, according to which we are required to take knowledge further, even with regard to themes that seem to have come to an intellectual standstill (Brauer, Dymitrow 2017).

But are we really just cunning theorists who exploit the stiffness, obstinacy and unyieldingness of language? From a cognitive point of view – not necessarily. There are a number of concept retainment mechanisms, two of them being *cognitive inertia* and *belief perseverance* (Anderson 2007). Cognitive inertia refers to the tendency for beliefs or sets of beliefs to endure once formed. In particular, cognitive inertia refers to the human inclination to rely on familiar assumptions and exhibit a reluctance and/or inability to revise those assumptions, even when the evidence supporting them no longer exists or when other evidence would question their accuracy (Hodgkinson 1997). Belief perseverance means clinging on to an initial belief in the face of new information that firmly contradicts or disconfirms it (Anderson 2007: 109) and is consistent with the view that human beings act at times in an irrational manner (West 1985). A particular subtype of belief perseverance involves so-called *naïve theories*, which are social theories about how the world works, often based on stereotypes and prototypes and which are eagerly attributed to causes of various phenomena (Anderson 2007: 109). At least three mechanisms uphold belief perseverance: availability heuristic, illusory correlation and data distortion. The first involves recalling how well one has done in the past; the

second involves remembering more confirming than disconfirming cases; and the third involves the inadvertent creation of confirming cases while ignoring the disconfirming ones (Anderson 2007: 110). What this can mean for 'rural' is that a person who has in the past been successful while using these concepts (e.g. received a sizeable grant, earned a respectable title or published an important work related to the concept 'rural') is more likely to pursue similar approaches/solutions in the future. And while cognitive inertia is psychologically factored and belief perseverance is sociologically (culturally) conditioned, both exert the same effect on the retention of weary concepts by acting as psychological barriers to change: instead of thinking for ourselves, we subscribe to predetermined patterns. Most importantly, this is not necessarily a sign of ignorance; this is how processes of concept retainment work.

To avoid or eliminate the negative consequences of a bad concept, one must take into account any of the following: (re)developing it (making its meaning broader and its edges softer), limiting it (reducing belief perseverance) or unlearning it (eliminating it altogether). While my stance on redeveloping questionable concepts is unmistakable, let us now look at the two remaining ones. Limiting conceptual use by reducing belief perseverance is difficult given that the most straightforward solution – simply asking people to be unbiased – does not work (Anderson 2007). An important and often forsaken factor here is that concepts are of uneven significance and are therefore differently difficult to readapt. What we need to consider here is the so-called content effect in deductive reasoning (Cosmides 1985). Human performance differs dramatically depending on the type of problem we are facing. People are good logicians when it comes to social contracts (rights and responsibilities); however, with abstractions (such as 'rural') this comes less easy (Pinker 2014: 46). Although the premises of logic itself should hold regardless of the content, psychologically content matters. This is perhaps why 'rural' is more contested when tied to a social contract (e.g. in countries where differences in wages are diversified on account of 'rural' inhabitancy), but in instances where no such contract can be identified they merely hover as undisruptive abstractions (compare this, e.g. to the concept of 'race' or 'gender', where

breaches of contract spark much stronger reactions). Concluding her seminal paper on categories, Rosch (1973) states that “artificial prototypes (the best examples of nonperceptual categories) once developed, may affect the learning and processing of categories ... in a manner similar to the effects of natural prototypes” (p. 349). That would suggest that prototypical versions of the abstract (non-perceptual) categories of ‘rurality’, once learned, are difficult to get rid of, and this in turn affects how we have come to internalise ‘rural’. To amend that, Anderson (2007) argues that the most successful de-biasing technique is counter-explanation, namely “get[ting] the person to explain how the opposite might be true” (p. 110). For instance, for “rural researchers”, Dymitrow and Brauer (2018: 211) suggest the following consecutive questions: “Would you be open to the possibility of doing ‘urban’ research for a change? If ‘no’ – is it because it is ‘urban’ or because ‘urban research’ cannot possibly accommodate the aspects you are studying?” As stated earlier, however, a plethora psychosocial factors – including vested interest, boundary-work, perspectivism, politicised inclusionism, innovation requirement, cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, analytical ethnocentrism, dualistic thinking, textual entrapment or routinisation – is likely to stand in the way of attaining this form of defiltration maxim (cf. Dymitrow and Brauer 2018 for a comprehensive walk-through).

Unlearning ‘rural’?

While de-biasing is rooted in social psychology, the concept of *unlearning* has its origins in managerial and organisational theory (Hedberg 1981). It denotes a categorical change of perspective in the face of cognitive challenges associated with relinquishing outdated practices. The concept has since been used in a wide variety of contexts, including health, technology and education, indicating a thriving research field (cf. Becker 2005; Starbuck 1996; Pratt, Barnett 1997). Unlearning concepts is associated with a number of nested suppositions, including existential, methodological, and relevance-contingent (Thomas 2011: 17). Meadows (2008: 162), for instance, emphasises the importance of “exposing paradigmatic assumptions, or the shared ideas ...

that constitute our deepest beliefs about how the world works”, especially those that “unknowingly support actions that are no longer useful” (O’Brien 2013: 591). In an effort to understand why people, organisations and systems do not change, Kegan and Lahey (2009) metaphorise the inertia as an immune system designed to protect us against negative impacts, disequilibria and anxiety.⁴ And while important for the proper functioning of individuals and structures, the system, however, “can be dangerous when it rejects new material that it needs in order to heal itself or to thrive” (O’Brien 2013: 591).

In his evaluation of the concept of unlearning, Thomas (2011) notes that “the most apparent shortcoming of popular application of the unlearning concept has been the lack of holistic and integrative thinking” (p. 29), and that the concept of unlearning would be better served by a clearer distinction between two levels of unlearning: collective (organisational) and individual. This would suggest that unless the individuals’ relation to ‘rural’ changes, the institutions will not.⁵ At the same time, lest the institutions change, we may find it difficult to disentangle from the material web of actor-networks that hold ‘rural’ pinned to the wall. Such a perspective is also more in line with the psychological point of view given the difficulty “to recapture preconceptual innocence” (Bruner et al. 1999: 101) and the fact that memories are (apparently) never completely extinguishable (cf. Postman, Underwood 1973), but can be unlearned through individual effort.

In this constant crisscrossing between concept protectionism and concept progression (in Winthrop-Young’s [2014: 377] words, “the confrontation between new conceptual enterprises

⁴ The concept of ‘autopoiesis’ (Maturana, Varela [1972] 1980) is instructive here. It refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. While introduced as a biological concept, it has been applied within the fields of systems theory and sociology (Koch 2005).

⁵ When creating laws, order and institutions, we concurrently crystallise our actions by saving them in material actors, which in themselves create restrictions. An institutional lock-in occurs when a network is created, wherein actors enforce a self-referential system that solidifies its rules of conduct. It happens through “organizational learning processes, historical framing, and routinisation of management which creates taken-for-granted problem and solution formulations, or ‘rules of thumb’, that align with ruling institutional practice” (Essebo 2013: 76).

and the ghosts of concepts' past"), 'rural' assumes a precarious position. On the one hand, unlearning them at the individual level is a "complex process that integrates knowledge acquisition, skill building and the ability to make specific meaning out of a number of environmental cues" (Thomas 2011: 4). On the other hand, this is all too often thwarted by existing practices and habits (Clark 2009). In geography, despite heated debates on the nature and meaning of 'space' (e.g. Couclelis 1992), the sheer concept of 'space' has remained stable, and so has one of its most common permutations – 'rural'. Effectively, suggestive of Kuhn's [1962] (1970) paradigms, it is impossible to say whether 'rural' is still around because it is needed, or whether it is sustained at any price to withhold geography's identity in a competitive academic reality.

"I am aware that for some individuals, academic contexts, and even entire disciplines, the cultural turn will have made little impact on the everyday conceptualization of rurality and rural change." (Cloke 2006: 26)

Scientific disciplines are merely administrative structures set up to facilitate the production of contained knowledge (Latour 1987). In that sense, making significant impact within human geography is becoming increasingly difficult (cf. Brauer et al. 2019) without moving across disciplinary borders. Nevertheless, since the innovation requirement stands, a more obtainable goal for many researchers is to develop and redevelop old concepts through a smorgasbord of expansive neologisms. On a more optimistic note, if we subscribe to the idea that understanding the world *is* changing it (Gibson-Graham, Roelvink 2010: 342), we must question the assumptions underlying practices that uphold status quo. Seeing 'rural' not only as space but also as a psychosocial process, the question we need to ask ourselves is what kind of conceptual development do we want to pursue: the retentive or the forgetful?

Conclusion

In line with calls to pay greater attention to how concepts operate at a cognitive level, how they gain foothold and are collectively

maintained, and how to avoid harm by "unlearning" bad concepts, this paper has looked into the concept of 'rural' as a psychosocial process (Cloke, Johnston 2005b; Johnston, Sidaway 2015; Dymitrow, Brauer 2018). I have located 'rural' in a conceptual frame, that is, shifted the attention from 'rural' as a geographical space to 'rural' as a concept purportedly thought to define geographical space. I have defined what a concept is, explained how the processes of concept attainment and retainment work and how we construct the categorical basis for conceptualisation by way of stereotypes and prototypes. I further expanded this knowledge to a framework for understanding that concepts always come with implications, be it desirable or undesirable. Lastly, I have discussed the prospect of "unlearning" concepts in support of a more conscientious handling of 'rural'.

To conclude, the sociology and the psychology behind the attainment, retention and reinvention of 'rural' in human geography is rarely addressed, and almost never in a structured fashion. This is perhaps because such a perspective requires a change of angle of attack to include and combine theoretical frameworks from other fields of knowledge to a new level of integration, upon which the contagion of indifference can eventually start to break down. This, I argue, may be the only way to approach a long-lived problem head-on and, by so doing, create the basis for an open debate about our relation to one of geography's most canonical concepts (cf. Johnston, Sidaway 2015).

In concept attainment theory, *knowing* a concept means being "able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty" (Bruner et al. 1999: 103). This is also in line with the notion that categories should be construed with a particular purpose and be good enough to make inductive generalisations. Given the armada of existent adjectives with the help of which we can much more exactly articulate and qualify what we mean, there is seldom reason to resort to 'rural'. This then raises the question of how we wish to continue to approach 'rural' in our research: as a classical category – based on clear, easily manageable, definitions... of something that is too elusive to be conquered or held, or as a Wittgensteinian category – based on family resemblance, which, while more in line with

the amorphousness of the material world, is too messy to either grasp or explain any social process. There is no easy answer to this question, and we may be forced to embrace the inability to ever satisfy particular standards for completeness. I concede that science loves Aristotelian categories, because they are manageable and better adapted to the format of the scientific telos (Brauer et al., forthcoming). But is it fair to uphold Aristotelian categories for concepts rendered Wittgensteinian through societal evolution? For scientific justification, I would have to say no (cf. Markusen 1999; Collins, Evans 2008; Collins 2014).

“The suggestion that there is some scientific justification for employing the title rural may prove entertaining.” (Gillette 1917: 184)

Acknowledging that a concept can only be stable if it evokes the same or much similar meanings across a wide range of recipients, 100 years of conceptual disjunctivity of ‘rural’ can at most produce *literal* coherence and an inferred form of *conjectural* stability. In other words, we may think we are talking about the same things... but in fact we seldom do.

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