

## Performing rurality. But who?

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**Abstract.** Reflective inquiries to better understand ‘the rural’ have tried to embed rural research within the notion of performativity. Performativity assumes that the capacity of language is not simply to communicate but also to consummate action, whereupon citational uses of concepts produce a series of material effects. Of late, this philosophical shift has also implicated geographers as active agents in producing, reproducing and performing rurality. This paper provides a critical evaluation of what this new insistence really means for the production of geographical knowledge. Using framework analysis as a method, the paper scrutinizes several reportedly influential papers on the topic of rural performativity. Our findings reveal that, while indeed reflexive on issues of academic integrity, methodology and ethics, performances of rurality are continually placed ‘out there’ amongst ‘rural people’, i.e. in a priori defined and often stereotypically understood contexts, either by way of ‘spatial delimitation’ or ‘activity delimitation’. Effectively, such testimonies provide a truncated state of fidelity, where performance-oriented reflexivity is seconded by contradictory empirics of uneven value and with few commonalities. We conclude that by turning towards performativity as an allegedly more helpful way of obtaining rural coherence, we at the same time overlook our own role in keeping ‘rural theory’ alive.

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If an Englishman vacationing in Seville has a sip of Evian from an IKEA glass made in Poland, is it Englishness, Spanishness, Frenchness, Swedishness or Polishness he is performing?

## 1. Introduction

As one of the oldest geographical concepts still in widespread use, the notion of ‘rurality’ today stands in stark contrast to the immense changes encountered by the society during the last century, let alone decades. Steady, fast-paced transformations in the environmental, economic and social dimensions (cf. Millward et al., 2003) have rendered the rural-urban dichotomy a contentious one – a conceptual vestige of sorts, whose blurred and malleable characteristics, immense spatial coverage and aspectual all-inclusiveness form an odd marriage between bygone world views and a globalized 21<sup>st</sup>-century reality of interconnectedness (Hoggart, 1990; Halfacree, 1993; Woodward, 1996; Little, 1999; Pile, 1999; Champion, Hugo, 2004; Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 2006; Hubbard, 2006; Scott et al., 2007; Woods, 2011; Brenner, 2013; Bosworth, Somerville, 2014; Dymitrow, 2017) (1).

However, while the elusiveness of ‘rural’ as an intersubjective analytical concept is widely acknowledged, it continues to be widely sustained throughout the society within a wide range of situations (cf. Dymitrow, Stenseke, 2016). The principal point is that due to increasing rural-urban blurring (and thus increased subjectivity and solipsism involved in this process), there is an ever greater likelihood that current understandings of ‘rural’ as used in formal contexts (legislation, administration, land use, funding and research) may misappre-

hend the societal phenomena this concept purports to explain and, by that, get in the way of making sound planning, policy and development decisions. Moreover, reducing complexity to simplicity for the sake of convenience (stereotypification) almost inadvertently leads to exclusions (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer, 2016; Dymitrow et al., 2017).

Geographers concerned with this worrying development have tried to attach rurality to the notion of performativity – i.e. how the ‘rural’ comes into being in *everyday life* (e.g. Rojek, 1995; Frykman, Löfgren, 1996; Abram, 1997; McGill, 2000; Nash, 2000; Beedie, 2003; Edensor, 2006; Eriksson, 2010; Woods, 2011; Bossuet, 2013; Dymitrow, 2013, 2014; Jonasson, 2014; Mordue, 2014; Morse et al., 2014; Pini, Mayes, 2014; Wright, Annes, 2014; Cassel, Pettersson, 2015; Shirley, 2015a; Bærenholdt et al., 2017; Schaefer et al., 2017; Wright, Eaton, 2018; cf. also Kruger, 2013; Stickells, 2013; Laszczkowski, 2016 – in the context of “performing urbanity”). The concept of “everyday” presumes the presence of mundanity, first-hand stories and an alternative to grand narratives that otherwise inform and justify the ubiquity of the rural as a viable concept (cf. Munkejord, 2009; Bossuet, 2013; Shirley, 2015b; Halfacree, Maclaren, 2016). It also implicitly extends an invitation to the creation of ‘the rural’ through a focus on conceptual enactment (Bohler et al., 2013).

Of late, this philosophical insight has also come to implicate geographers themselves as active performers of rurality (Woods, 2010):

[R]ecognising the rural as performed also means acknowledging the ways in which rural geographers ourselves perform rurality through our research –

reflecting our positionality, our engagement with various rural research subjects as well as with research-funders and users, our selection and use of different research methods, and the political and policy implications of our work. In these ways, the practice of rural geography is closely tied to the performance of rurality, and rural geographers are revealed not only as observers and recorders of the rural but also as active agents in producing, reproducing and performing rurality (Woods, 2010: 844).

There is a caveat though. Although commendable from an ethical point of view, sheer recognition of one's own role in the process of conceptual enactment alone is unlikely to be effective unless we actually can pinpoint in what way such enactment creates realities (cf. Brauer, Dymitrow, 2014; Dymitrow, Brauer, 2014, 2016). Yet, this particular relation has to date not been scrutinized, or fully understood. Using a selection of pivotal academic writings, the aim for this paper is to critically explore the effect of geographers' own knowledge production upon the actual performances of rurality. A number of research questions will help obtain that goal: (a) how do we identify, approach and use 'the rural', (b) where exactly do we place those "rural performances", and, most importantly, (c) who is really performing rurality? We do not pretend to provide definitive answers, but aim instead at stimulating debate about a pervasive trend within human geography, namely to elevate the local, the mundane and the quotidian to a position of authority in academic knowledge production, including the uncharted effects such transposition has on intellectual consistency.

The disposition of the paper is as follows. In the next chapter the concept of performativity is laid out, discussed and coupled with the practice of scientific knowledge production. In the third chapter, we make the connection between performativity theory and the concept of "everyday" with regard to the creation of rurality. This is then followed by a concise chapter on method (framework analysis) and data (select academic papers) used. A detailed results chapter ensues, interspersed by analytical commentaries. In the discussion chapter, we return to the question of who shapes 'rurality' by way of performance, where we also propose a number of alterations to Keith Halfacree's seminal model of "rural space". A succinct conclusion finalizes the paper.

## 2. What is performativity?

Of late, human geographers have been attending to the relations and experiences shaped by a focus "not on the way the world *is*, but on how the world is *coming to be* through an engagement with our interventions in, and responses to, the world" (Greenhough, 2010: 42, emphases in original). Mindful that "[s]ocial practices have citational force because of the spaces in which they are embedded" (Thrift, 2000: 677), the past twenty years of anti-humanist and post-humanist dominance within human geography have awoken calls for new forms of humanism, one "that avoids the rationalist and self-righteous claims of the old ones but maintains elements of the experiential dimension of social life" (Simonsen, 2013: 10). With that mindset, geographers have entered a new dimension of knowledge-making, one where comprehension of lived experience, notions of agency, politics and participation, as well as processes and performances of knowledge production, become increasingly relevant for how we come to understand various concepts from a range of theoretical, methodological and empirical considerations (cf. Nelson, 1999; Nash, 2000; Dewsbury, 2000; Gregson, Rose, 2000; Houston, Pulido, 2002; Szerszynski et al., 2003; Pearson, 2006; Christie et al., 2006; Waitt, Cook, 2007; Kay, 2012).

Inquiries reflective of this philosophical shift often overlap with the notion of performativity. Performativity is a perspective acknowledging that reiterative, citational uses of concepts produce a series of effects (Butler, 1993) (2). By taking on certain roles or acting (performing) in certain ways we consolidate an impression of certain things 'being' the way they are (e.g. "female", "scientific", "valuable", "artistic" or, indeed, "rural"), including how we choose to present that knowledge to the world (cf. Carlson, 1996; Schieffelin, 1998; Butler, 2010). By taking cue from earlier developments, postmodernist and poststructuralists exposed a host of paradoxes, false axioms and hidden power structures implanted into the neutralized realities of racism, colonialism and patriarchy (to mention but a few) (see Saïd, 1978; van Dijk, 1993; Bourdieu, 1990; Butler, 1990). Effectively, hitherto neutralized con-

ceptual binaries like ‘black–white’, ‘civilized–wild’ or ‘male–female’ have become socially sensitized.

The concepts of ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ are no exceptions to this development, given that characterizations of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’, while subjective (Hubbard, 2006: 69–70; Woods, 2011: 44; Dymitrow, Stenseke, 2016), are well “implicated in the production of places and, in particular, in the judgment of people’s practices within places” (Cresswell, 2009). However, unlike e.g. race and gender, the rural–urban binary is less associated with the discourse of (collective) victimhood, and, as such, is not generally perceived as potentially harmful to the subjects it purportedly portrays (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer, 2014, 2016, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the conceptual constitution of the rural–urban binary has made it popular with the metaphor of performance.

The idea of “performing rurality” has been sumptuously laid out by Tim Edensor (2006) in the *Handbook of Rural Studies*, where it denotes “ways in which people are predisposed to carry out unquestioned and habitual practices in rural settings”, but also “ways in which the materialities and meanings of rural space are reproduced, consolidated and contested” (p. 487). The coherence of “performing rurality”, hence, draws on the notion of repeated conventions in specific settings, in which they supposedly “reinforce group and placial identities” (Edensor, 2006: 487; cf. also Groote et al., 2000). While Edensor’s exposé goes into great detail to account for the fluidity and non-staticity of rural performances, the concept of rurality is handled rather one-sidedly throughout the paper, boiling down to all-too-familiar paraphernalia, such as: craft products, golf centers, vineyards, gardens, family farms, cheese dairies, themed pubs, manor houses, hedgerows, farm yards, barns, streams, fences, pastures, horse breeding, foxhunting, houndsmen and the blowing of horns, silage and fertilizers, livestock and farming techniques, and “a sensual apprehension of the textures of turf, hay and soil, the smells of beasts and vegetation, and the sounds of animals and machinery” (p. 491). Perhaps more worryingly, it does not state explicitly why *certain* (and not other) performances come to count as *rural* (and not something else) and, importantly, by whom.

In view of this omission Woods’s (2010) identification of geographers’ as active agents in producing,

reproducing and performing rurality adds a significantly different dimension to the notion of “rural performativity”: it acknowledges that concepts and categories take shape through processes influenced by history, discourses, ecologies, and power relations (Dahlberg, 2015: 207). And while all of these factors belong to the firmament of academia, not all of them would count as ‘scientific’ by contemporary standards. This means that conceptual performativity need be addressed through the prism of so-called *extra-scientific factors* (Brauer, Dymitrow, 2017a), i.e. socio-material and cognitive drivers that shape science, but which typically are not considered part of its canon and should not influence or interfere with science according to disciplinary norms (Weber, [1904] 1941; Fleck, [1935] 2012; Kuhn, [1962] 1970; Foucault, [1966] 1970; Lakatos, 1978; Deleuze, Guattari, 1980; Bourdieu, [1984] 1988; Latour, 1987; Harding, 1991; Lamont, 2009; Tribe, 2010; Brauer, Dymitrow, 2017b).

The basic assumption is that the cost involved in the unmaking of a concept (in terms of socio-material alliances holding it together) conditions if a proposition is accepted as true or false, whether it will be criticized or praised, and whether it will be maintained or abandoned (Fleck, [1935] 1979; Latour, Woolgar, 1979; Law, 2004; Latour et al., 2011). This form of conceptual performativity, however, runs into problems of representation, because previous knowledge (upon which its construction was based) inherently influences how ‘reality’ is to be interpreted for every new study. STS (3) researchers have called this dilemma the *multiple reality assumption* (cf. Mol, 2002). This interpretation is at odds with the conventional assumption that the more different approaches are implemented to solve a problem (e.g. “lived experiences”), the better our understanding of it; for instance, if we adopt new, “borrowed” or just different, lenses to approach ‘the rural’ this will lead to better understanding of it. However, the multiple reality assumption implies that depending on what research is chosen to serve as an alliance, a new interpretation of the *same* reality is created, a transformation which is *not* the same as “better understanding” (cf. Law, 2004). On a theoretical level, this gives rise to an inescapable relativism of ideas that has laid the foundation for much criticism towards classical definitions of science, which cannot circumvent this impasse philo-

sophically (Kuhn, [1962] 1970; Feyerabend, [1975] 1993; Sismondo, 2012). The implication is that although philosophically contradicting knowledge claims cannot be achieved, as a *matter of praxis* it is perfectly feasible (cf. Collins, Evans, 2002). In instances where rules and regulations are vague (as is the case with most sociological research), we will face greater difficulties determining what is scientifically sound and what is not (Shanteau, 1992; Kahneman, Klein, 2009). In other words, putting more emphasis on the knowledge production with regard to most concepts (performativity of science) is crucial not only to avoid the ‘garbage in–garbage out’ effect (the downgrading of social theory), but also to avoid causing indirect harm. This is particularly important whenever our research findings percolate into the public realm under the guise of scientific justification (e.g. lobotomy, eugenics, tobacco smoking, burning of fossil fuels, nuclear weapons, etc.).

When discussing performativity, it is therefore important to understand how that concept relates to established methods in the context of conceptual research. Different methods, as Law and Urry (2004) explain, produce different and often very inconsistent results, and this has been a major concern of (social) science (cf. Bloor, 1991; Collins, Pinch, 1993; Coopmans et al., 2014). While some might argue that some methods are “better” than other (epistemology), others say that methods are “tools”, and different tools do different jobs (pragmatism); yet still others contend that different methodological approaches imply different “perspectives” which *a priori* inform the quality of the outcome (perspectivism). Concerned with the power of social science, which by its methods enact, rather than merely describe, social realities, Law and Urry (2004) argue that all three approaches direct attention away from the performativity of the method and make it “difficult to imagine that different research practices might be *making multiple worlds* (...) [that are] equally valid, equally true, but simply unlike one another” (p. 397; emphasis in original). This led Law and Urry (2004) to conclude that established methods do not resonate well with important reality enactments in that they deal poorly with the fleeting, the distributed, the multiple, the sensory, the emotional and the kinesthetic. In other words, they are ill-adapted to conceptual research and tacitly reproduce the idea that there is a single reality

out there, waiting to be “discovered”, “understood”, and ontologically politicized:

We argue that social and physical changes in the world are – and need to be – paralleled by changes in the methods of social inquiry. The social sciences need to re-imagine themselves, their methods, and their ‘worlds’ if they are to work productively in the twenty-first century where social relations appear increasingly complex, elusive, ephemeral, and unpredictable (Law, Urry, 2004: 390).

Performativity lends much from that parallel. Although ‘reflectiveness’ about one’s choice of methodology is a standing requirement of academia, a truly axiological discussion about method (and its ability to say something about the world) is often omitted, allowing for the researcher to hide behind what is simply a historically established procedure. This tendency is particularly visible in academic texts, which, even though they do engage in discussions about the ‘shortcomings’ of the employed tools, they reticently dismiss the flaws and go on with the research (which inevitably produces very concrete results). It is our contention that the concept of performativity inscribes itself into that category and therefore requires serious attention.

### 3. What are “everyday ruralities”?

Despite the outlined problems with the material whereabouts of performativity, geographers have begun to add significant performative gravity to those “largely unreflexive habits, [and] quotidian performances that tether people to place” (Edensor, 2006: 491). Subsumed under a more general disciplinary re-focus on ‘bottom-up’ (Pain, 2004; Barnett, 2011), ‘outside-in’ (Bawaka Country et al., 2016) and ‘more-than’ (Head, 2011) perspectives, this new wave of gaining understanding has been instantiated through numerous attempts to access geographies where “rural experiences are felt, sensed, [and] intuited through bodily actions and performances” (Woods, 2010: 835; cf. also Lorimer, 2005; Wylie, 2005; Carolan, 2008). Assertions that “the most grounded, situational relationship between people and space occurs within the mundane sphere of the everyday” (Edensor, 2006: 491)

can also be found in Keith Halfacree's (2006) influential tripartite model of "rural space", in which 'rural localities', 'formal representations of the rural' and 'everyday lives of the rural' are tightly interwoven (visualized in Figure 1 in the discussion section). Such an envisionment is thought to provide a better approximation of what may be meant when talking about 'rurality', including how coherent any one referral is. It also implies that the extent to which an individual place can merit the label 'rural' "depends on the extent to which the totality of rural space dominates that space relative to other spatialities" and "must always be determined on the ground/in place to avoid rural fetishism" (Halfacree, 2006: 51).

However, given the vast array of problems with 'the rural' as a viable concept (cf. e.g. Dymitrow, Brauer, forthcoming), the sheer precept of "everyday ruralities" comes across as laconic. Is it really possible to obtain a better understanding of rurality by modifying this repudiated concept by way of embracing decentered insights? (4) And how are those insights assigned the rural label? Are they sensed or imposed? Induced or deduced? Experienced or re-enacted? Are "everyday ruralities" that long-awaited eureka moment for social science, or perhaps a road to perdition?

To begin with, what exactly are "everyday ruralities"? This assemblage consists of two signifiers. The attribute "everyday" is easy to comprehend. It implies some form of rhythmicity (every + day) and ordinariness (as 'extraordinary' is unlikely to happen every day); in other words – something 'typical'. But what are "ruralities"? Notwithstanding the recognizable and now largely mandatory 'postmodernist plural' [-ies], identifying rurality "is to identify the various things that make somewhere, someone, or something rural" (Halfacree, 2009: 449). With the slight rectification that 'things' cannot make anything an abstract concept (but humans can!), we can at least agree upon that the verb "make" is crucial to this definition: it needs to be understood literally, in an active sense, rather than to signify some (passive) state of becoming. Departing from the today commonly accepted notion that rurality is an 'imagined space' and an 'artificial construction' (Woods, 2011: 264), it is fair to assume that "everyday ruralities" *are* in fact rurality. However, unless we have actually witnessed anyone ever utter

the words 'I am making rurality', pinpointing those practices to some people – or, of late, also animals – 'out there', misses that whenever we look for "everyday ruralities" in "rural areas", we *will* find "rurality" (cf. Law, 2004). Such appeals, as Shields (1991: 168) put it, "are indicative of a tautological circle (...): starting out from commonsensical intuition, statistics are gathered and then interpreted in the light of commonsense. Thus ennobled by the clothes of empiricism, commonsense is represented as scientific conclusions". Lest tautology (5) is what we are aiming for, understanding "everyday ruralities" must involve a shift in semantics: in order for someone to perform rurality, one must first indicate it is rurality – and not something else – that is being performed. And since "rurality" can only be performed by calling it beforehand, anyone evoking this imaginary concept is a potential *rural subject*.

In view that social science helps enact realities (Law, Urry, 2004), the starting point for our inquiry is that whenever "everyday ruralities" are evoked, the 'everyday' of one important group is likely to be omitted – that of the geographers: the same geographers who go to work *every day* and *make* places, people and things *rural*. In this paper, we put our supposition to the test by scrutinizing a selection of influential papers, which have explicitly addressed the issue of geographers' enactment of rurality. More specifically, our methodological task is to critically evaluate what this specific insistence really means for the production of geographical knowledge.

#### 4. Method and data

This paper utilizes framework analysis as its principal method. Framework analysis is a tool for analyzing textual material to create an audit trail between the original material and the final conclusions. It is used to organize and manage research by means of summarization, resulting in a robust yet flexible matrix output which allows for analyzing data both by case and theme. By borrowing principles from different epistemological traditions, framework analysis works independently of theoretical approach as long as sufficient preliminary thinking about the studied material has been done (6). The method is most effective for analysis of prima-

ry data, such as in systematic reviews of published texts and of in-depth qualitative data, where it can be used to test a theory or to develop it (Ritchie, Lewis, 2003; Smith, Firth, 2009; Srivastava, Thomson, 2009; Ward et al., 2013).

As any other method, framework analysis has its limitations. Firstly, the method involves coding, which, although systematic, is a subjective process. Second, the method is resource-intensive, and with a limited manpower can only be applied to a relatively small sample. Lastly, its 'spreadsheet' look may trigger the temptation to quantify qualitative data in spite of knowledge that sampling in qualitative research "is not designed to be representative of a wider population, but purposive to capture diversity around a phenomenon" (Gale et al., 2013: 6).

The analyzed data material represents seven papers hand-picked by M. Woods (2010) as a point of embarkation in his seminal paper in *Progress in Human Geography* about performing rurality, and which he characterizes to "have critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher" (Leyshon, 2002; Chacko, 2004; Pini, 2004; Dougill et al., 2006; Moseley, 2007; McAreavey, 2008; Edelman, 2009). Leaving the selection process to an expert on the topic is not uncontroversial, but by so doing we could subvert our own selection bias (cf. Berk, 1983). The papers were read thrice; first – in a read-through manner, second – relevant chunks of text were re-read for context, situatedness and cues of intertextuality, third – the correspondence between the analysis, the argumentation and the data material was cross-referenced during the writing process. The procedure then followed the protocols for framework analysis as outlined by Gale et al. (2013), which were modified to context: transcription, familiarization, coding, developing a working analytical framework, applying the analytical framework, charting data into the framework matrix and, finally, interpreting the data. The purpose of the procedure was to outline the relation between the authors' posited philosophical stance on the practice and positionality of being a 'rural researcher' and the actual attribution of "rural performance". In other words, we were interested to find out how the allegedly high level of critical reflection about geographers' role in performing rurality was channelized in practice: *what* and *who* was eventually made "rural" by way of performance.

## 5. Findings and analysis

This section outlines the empirical basis for our argumentation by leaning against the aforementioned seven papers. This will be done in two steps. The first step involves summarizing how "performing rurality" was reflected upon in these studies; the second involves pinpointing how "rurality" was identified in the first place. By weighing these two aspects of rural performativity, the actual effect of the authors' reflexivity upon their own role in "performing rurality" could be tried for consistency.

### 5.1. Reflections on 'performing rurality'

The first step was done in a dual fashion. We looked both into how the authors evinced reflexivity with regard to their own performances of rurality, but also how the declared advantages of better understanding 'the rural' were tied to the concept of performativity.

The results show that the researchers conceptualize their own reflexivity around performances of rural research in different ways. Leyshon (2002) emphasized that little attention "has been given to [...] ethical considerations" (p. 179) in relation to rural research on youth-related issues. As such, the main subject of reflexivity was not rurality per se, but rather the research process, seen as a "highly politicized act" (p. 189) of social relations and of identity traits amongst teenagers, like class, age, gender and ethnicity. Chacko (2004) emphasized that research is a viable tool of "obtaining valid representations of people and their activities in real space" (p. 61). However, it was less clear what the implications of these 'experiences' were, both for the object of research and for the researcher's relationship to rurality; especially when Chacko characterized the researcher as a person "[t]orn between insider [and] outsider [...] in a state of uneasy balance" (p. 54). Pini (2004) acknowledged rural researchers' role in shaping the discourse how rural performances should be interpreted. However, she was more concerned with challenging others' "academic mode of production" (p. 177) in line with her

preferred feminist principles, and less with her own role in reproducing “rurality”. Dougill et al. (2006), in turn, focused on the role of stakeholder participation within rural research. However, how this related to geographers’ role in maintaining and being part of the rural performance was bypassed.

Moseley (2007) stressed that rural researchers within an African context are often assigned their research site by the NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations], as these “have the most active development programmes in rural areas” (p. 335). Thereby, researchers engage in performing rurality according to the standards of organizational ‘experts’, which are not necessarily representative of “rural Africa” (whatever that may mean) as a whole. Meanwhile, McAreavey (2007) stressed that the dual position of simultaneously being an employee and a researcher allows for insights into “institutional politics and power games” (p. 403), which to some extent legitimize “practitioner expertise” (p. 404). Lastly, Edelman (2009) outlined the complexities that arise between sympathetic researchers and activists, stressing that the underlying ethical tension cannot be resolved by any single approach (p. 260). However, how this relates to geographers’ role in shaping rural performances was not addressed in the paper.

In summary, most papers failed to reflect upon the authors’ own role in performing rurality per se, and merely evinced their ethical and political stances with regard to rural performances. Only Pini’s, Moseley’s and McAreavey’s papers were tangentially reflective of what this implies for the creation of geographic knowledge about “the rural”. Still, this was less of an intellectual issue than a teleological one, well in line with D. Haraway’s calls for “a tradition of thought which emphasizes the importance of the subject in terms of both ethical and political accountability” (Braidotti, 2006: 197).

## 5.2. Actual performances of rurality

With those insights in mind, in the second step of our research we wanted to pinpoint the *whereabouts* of the knowledge that instantiated the authors’ reflections upon their own partiality and positionality; in other words, how “rurality” was identified in the first place. For some papers, the objects of study were readily legible; for others, some backtracking

was necessary. This was done either by following up on the sources connected to the referenced research project or, if the insights drew on the totality of previous experiences, by evaluating the author’s overall research profile.

Leyshon (2002) conducted his study within a self-appointed “rural area” of South-West England. No other detailed description of the area was provided as “the names of the villages [...] have been changed” (p. 179). Since the organization tied to the research project was located in this area, the studied youth issues were effectively made ‘rural’ by the organization, with no possibility for the readers to determine in *what way* they were considered rural and what was the role of rurality for the research outcomes. Similarly, Chacko (2004) conducted her study in self-appointed “rural areas” of West Bengal (India), more specifically in Kultali Thana as this area is supposedly “entirely rural, lacking in infrastructural facilities, and characterized by chronic poverty” (p. 200). It should be noted though that the town of Kultali had (as of 2001) 187,942 inhabitants, and even Chacko herself depicts the area of West Bengal (subdivided into 24 administrative units) as one that ranks fairly high in terms of socio-economic indicators within India. Hence, the author’s characterization of her area of study as “entirely rural” came to perform rurality, despite the fact that lack of infrastructural facilities and instances of “chronic poverty” are not generally accepted as determinants of “rurality”, but can be found in any one spatial context (Dymitrow et al., 2017; Krzysztofik et al., 2017) (7).

Dougill et al.’s (2006) study was situated in UK’s Peak District National Park, where the authors focused on the role of stakeholder participation in “rural research”. The study was done in collaboration with the ‘Moors for the Future’, an activist group consisting of “representatives of the National Park, Farmers Union, Land Owners’ organisation, conservation agencies and private water companies” (pp. 264–265). Thereby, the special interests of the lobby group came to locate rurality within the boundaries of the National Park (which also encompasses the town of Bakewell and much of western Sheffield, UK’s third largest city with 575,400 inhabitants). Also McAreavey (2008) conducted her research in the UK, more specifically in two communities, anonymized as “Great Vil-



lage” (8,000 inhabitants) and “Small Village” (3,000 inhabitants). The first was a Victorian era settlement with “a quantity London overspill housing” from the 1960s, while the second – a mix of “council estates, affordable homes and luxury housing” (p. 392). No other clues of context were provided, although proximity to London, the considerable size of the settlements (8) and their non-standard morphologies all render the qualification of the study as “rural development research” questionable, especially when the author positions her research within the field of “rural sociology” (how can we know that the social relations present in those cases are rural?). However, the studied areas were made rural simply because the project tied to the housing association where the author was employed was labeled a “rural development project” (p. 391).

Pini’s (2002) study was conducted at “two different agricultural sites that make up the Australian sugar industry” (p. 171) and was undertaken in partnership with an agri-political group of 6000 sugar cane farming families, who provided “cash and in-kind support” for the research (p. 171) as well as meeting facilities. As such, she was restricted to an understanding of the rural as one of the sugar cane industry within the collective. It is unclear, though, in what other way the studied sites were rural, or even where exactly they were located. Also Moseley’s (2007) sites remain unspecified. His reflections are tied to “rural communities” in Mali, Malawi, Lesotho, Niger, South Africa and Zimbabwe during his employment at various development-oriented governmental and non-governmental agencies (p. 335). No other hints of context are provided, although general expressions such as “rural Africa”, “rural settings” and “rural farmers” can be found throughout the paper (the last does suggest agricultural context). Perhaps more certain than not, the studied communities were made rural by the context of the author’s workplace and its working methods (e.g.: “In African development work, rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) [...] have become popular diagnostic and assessment tools”; p. 336).

Lastly, Edelman’s (2009) paper on “rural social movements” is perhaps the most restrictive as to clues of spatial context (9), although the name of the venue – *Journal of Peasant Studies* – and the declared focus “mainly on peasant and farmer move-

ments” (p. 246) provide some indication. There is no method section but the author states that he “draws on a reading of materials produced by movement and professional and academic researchers, on many conversations over the years, and on [his] own experience as a researcher” (p. 246). Noteworthy is the ease with which peasant and farmer movements were made “rural social movements” just by reading professional and academic materials, and which supposedly made the now largely false equivalence between farming and rurality – both in developed (Dymitrow et al., 2017) and developing countries (Rigg, 2006). As Edelman states upfront, his choice of approach “results from the author’s own *disciplinary* location” (p. 247, our emphasis). Such geographical (“rural”) perspectivism (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer, forthcoming), however, can run the risk of leaving out sufficient consideration whether the invoked phenomena really warrant the use of the label “rural”.

### 5.3. Doing the ‘god trick’?

In summary, Woods’s (2010) selection of papers, which have supposedly “critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher” (pp. 835–836) is a double-edged sword, with high levels of reflexivity easily being exchanged for facile evincements of partiality. Some authors highlighted issues of academic integrity in the sense that the identity of the researcher can be conflicting and therefore evince bias (Pini, 2004; Edelman, 2009). Others reflected upon the potential of new approaches to obtain a more holistic understanding of the rural, e.g. by combining different theoretical ideations (Chacko, 2004). Some raised the possibility of approaching land use and development issues in more productive ways (Dougill et al., 2006; Moseley, 2007) while others discussed the potential of ethical considerations in order not to marginalize and harm research subjects (Leyshon, 2002; McAreavey, 2008). None, however, had fully addressed the consequences of their own agency “in producing, reproducing and *performing rurality*” (Woods, 2010: 844; our emphasis).

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-infested park fringed by UK's most urbanized area (10)... 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". 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 ("farming = rural") or by lack of reflection at worst (stereotyping). In other words, while all authors expressly signaled their awareness about partiality and positionality in connection to the whereabouts of "rural knowledge", they at the same time evinced elements of "representation while escaping representation" (Haraway, 1988: 581), a sleight of hand, which Donna Haraway (1991: 189) has described as the "god trick". However, instead of invoking divine emulation, we should perhaps focus on the real devil incarnate: the notion of performativity.

## 6. The performativity paradox

The presented empirical material gives rise to certain regularities. While examining rural performativity geographers either depart from a *spatial delimitation* or an *activity delimitation*. When departing from a spatial delimitation, geographers usually focus on certain material manifestations of rurality (e.g. remoteness, open landscape, or "nature"), yet the entire variability of the studied area's performances becomes rural by extension, normalizing its definition through a morphological contingent. When departing from an activity delimitation, on the other hand, 'rural activities' are often identified from a preconceived traditionalist understanding of rurality (e.g. farming, hunting, mining, and so on), whereby any area exhibiting those traits becomes rural by extension, effectively normalizing rurality's definition by the actions of a few. By so doing, geographers will always be able to make any performance or any spatiality "rural" (11).

It should be noted, however, that this is not an unconditional indictment of geographers as uncritical. Performance studies in general have been criticized for the difficulty to identify *the subject* (cf. Schechner, 1994; Pratt, 2004; Green, 2007), which instead "is abstracted in time and place, has little agency, [and] is conceived within a purely discursive, non-material world" (Pratt, 2009: 527). Since the subject problem arises when the epistemological premise of the performance approach is synthesized with 'conventional' sociology at large, it effectively renders everything a performance:

[W]hilst the performative, as a theoretical tool or concept, can be used in any given circumstance, its usefulness and what it uncovers and creates are fundamentally specific to the context in which it is sited (Dewsbury, 2000: 475).

It is also a matter of power given that the shifted attention towards performances of the rural has been thought to bring to light "power relations within the rural, that may be overlooked in other approaches" (Woods, 2011: 201). However, if 'the performative' is "necessarily aberrant and parasitic upon conventional, citational, and socially stratified context" (Dewsbury, 2000: 475), by making others 'perform rurality' for us, we are hardly gaining any better understanding of 'the rural', including its allegedly embedded power relations. On the contrary, we – as researchers – could be blamed for extending a perfunctory, tokenistic gesture towards disempowered 'rural people out there' in a wish to atone for our own guilt or to deflect possible accusations of exercising a top-down approach (cf. Gilbert, 1997; Niemann, 2003).

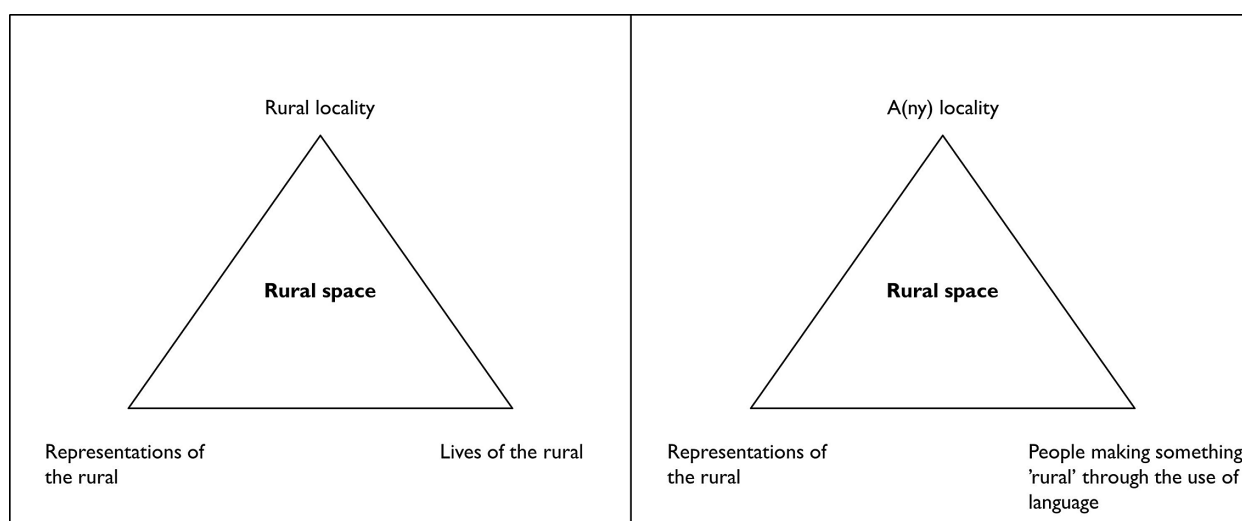
In view of the invisible subject problem, turning to the 'performativity of rurality', hence, falters on the finish line. While performativity is undeniably linked to the idea of a performance, it is a slippery term in that 'the performative' is not itself a concept signifying a discrete act ('the performance'). Besides this easy conflation of performativity with performance (Butler, 2010), a performance can only come about through there being an audience (Abercrombie, Longhurst, 1998). Hence, claiming that 'people out there' are performing rurality because we have empirically witnessed it, misses that "people become performers because they *underline* their behaviour under the auspices that they are being

scrutinised by others” (Dewsbury, 2000: 475; emphasis in original). This, then, additionally blurs the boundary between performance and “everyday life” by discursively doubling up the ‘performing’ (as in ‘making rurality’; cf. Halfacree, 2009: 449) with ‘acting’ (dissimulating an action as ‘rural’) (cf. Schechner, 1994). Effectively, it is methodologically impossible to tell who is performing what, and, consequentially, eliminate the fact that we might be performing rurality from the privacy of our offices.

Alas, despite geographers’ interest in rural performativity, the only substantive change this allegedly increased awareness has generated is a shift in the methodologies used and a greater sense of ethics. What has not shifted is the persistent tendency to pre-label subjects as “rural”, whose experiences and mundanities were meant to justify this very label in the first place. This dual attitude – condoning the rural as a normative category on the one hand and soliciting it on the other – has created a cum-

bersome, if not fatuous, intellectual dilemma, where the conclusion doubles up the all-too-familiar liberal axioms which essentially instigated the conducted research.

This observation is important insofar it challenges the famous triadic conceptualization of “rural space” as envisioned by Keith Halfacree (2006) (Fig. 1, left). To make space “rural” today, firstly, we need a physical locality, which – importantly – no longer must be constituted by distinctive spatial (“rural”) practices (our first alteration). Secondly, that locality must be tied to some mental representation of rurality (no alteration on our behalf). Thirdly, to make a representation-infused locality “rural”, we need people whose choices to make it “rural” (rather than “something else”) are not random but tied to a number of sociological and psychological factors (cf. Dymitrow and Brauer, forthcoming). In short, anybody doing something by referring to the concept “rural” (i.e. *using* the very term) is in fact performing rurality (Fig. 1, right).

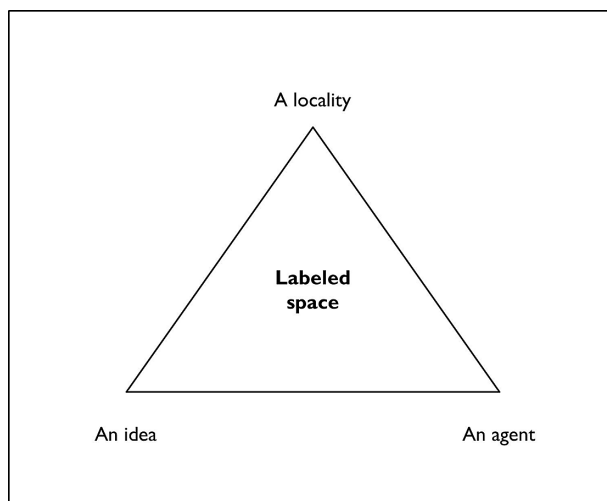


**Fig. 1.** *Left:* The hybrid totality of rural space as envisioned by K. Halfacree; *Right:* The authors’ suggestions for alteration

*Source:* *Left:* Halfacree (2006); *Right:* The authors’ reinterpretation of Halfacree (2006)

This model can also be vastly simplified. Since space in the *geographical* sense must be tied to a physical underlay we need a locality. However, remembering that “mathematical spaces are pure form, devoid of human meaning” (Couclelis, 1992: 231), we also must infuse that locality with some

form of idea. Such ideas often stand in for representations of historical states of affairs. Lastly, we need agents (“apostles”, “propagandists”, “campaigners”, if you will) to make the ideated locality “rural” by proclaiming – in speech or writing – that it is “rural” (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** The hybrid totality of labeled space (e.g. “rural”, “urban”, etc.)

Source: The authors, inspired by Halfacree (2006)

While the first alteration (‘a locality’) only reflects a changing society by stressing the greater variability of spaces to which the label ‘rural’ can be potentially attached, the second alteration (‘an agent’) is probably more important, insofar without agents who *make* spaces ‘rural’ we are only left with localities with very different representations. This might not be a bad thing though. The omission of ‘labeling agents’ would open up of for a new way of understanding places without squeezing them into a binary category which reality repeatedly rejects. Contrarily, by making things, places and people ‘rural’, we keep adding to a discursive field whose load – often subconsciously – is likely to discharge to other, thematically more or less unrelated, contexts. And in instances where the discursive linkage is not directly apparent (or obscured by years of cultural inculcation), certain assumptions (or “facts”) are then less likely to be questioned and reflected upon. This, in turn, creates silent ground for justification of the rural, as countless empirical examples show.

On a final note, our suggested interpretation of rural performativity is also more genuine to Butler’s intended use of the term. Given that citational uses of concepts suffice to produce a series of effects, we do not have to do anything physically to perform a concept. In fact, continuing to see activities like tilling, milling, hulling, harvesting, mining, tree-felling, hunting, fishing, animal-raising, bee-keeping, basket-weaving (and so on) as ‘performances of

rurality’ today could be described as a way of reproducing stereotypes. We must not forget that the spatial taxonomies underlying the rural/urban divide, are really derived from the period of capitalist development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that this typologization sadly continues to be “epistemologically constitutive for [scholarly] thought and for action” (Brenner, 2015: 9.06–10.59). A *lot* goes on in “rural areas” today (however we may wish to define them), and most of those activities occur irrespective of spatial variance: eating, sleeping, caring for children, jogging, running a barbershop, singing in a choir, checking Facebook, working from home, taking the bus to the mall, fixing the car, having a beer, being unfaithful, being hungry, falling ill, becoming unemployed. Contrarily, in view of the steadily diminishing primary sector of the economy, disregarding these abundant yet ‘atypical’ everyday performances as rural (because they fail to meet the preconceived taxonomies) could be seen as disenfranchising the vast majority of “rural dwellers” (whoever they may be) from their right to rurality (should they so choose), and thus violating the principal assumption of the performativity approach.

So while turning towards ‘rural performances’ as an allegedly more helpful way of obtaining “rural coherence”, there is the risk we will overlook our own performances in keeping the rural-urban divide alive. Little warrants us to uncritically project rural performances onto ‘people out there’ and *then* evaluate how rurality is like by examining those people’s actions. Such *ex officio* approach is tautological at best and usurpationist at worse. With that in mind, we would like to round off with a thematically unrelated, yet poignantly accurate, simile to rural performativity: “The theory is so amorphous that it is meaningless. It can be used by anyone, anywhere, for anything. It’s a game we all can play but none can win. So why play it?” (Hoff Sommers, 2017: 5:30).

## 7. Conclusion

Studying how ‘rurality’ is performed involves taking into account its development as an idea within both academic, management and lay discourses, but

also how it materializes through habit and practice. However, unlike Michael Woods (2011: 14), who interprets ‘performing rurality’ as the “enactment of rurality through performance and the everyday practices of rural life” – also visible in Halfacree’s (2006: 51) tripartite model of rural space (“everyday lives of the rural”), our interpretation of performativity is different. In line with the supposition that the capacity of language is not simply to communicate but also to consummate action, performing “rurality” (an abstraction) must not be tied to the lives and practices of “rural people” but reflects the lives and practices of *anybody* using this concept.

‘Rurality’ is indeed a tricky idea, something geographers have increasingly become aware of. In an attempt to improve social theory, the growing interest in the performativity of concepts has since actively sought to attend to its interdependencies across various places, scales, and cultures. However, regardless of whether it is research, policy or market investigation we are dealing with, performativity rarely involves the throwing out of a *carte blanche* to

be filled with personalized opinions. Think about it. If you ask somebody ‘How is it like to be rural?’, you *will* get some form of an answer. But if you instead ask that same person ‘How is it like to be *you*?’, you will probably not hear rurality mentioned. In that vein, resorting to “everyday ruralities” as the new nexus of geographical understanding, rurality’s true whereabouts become glossed over, and conformity to “rural orthodoxy” takes precedence over the intellectual method.

If rurality is merely a figment of imagination, then “everyday ruralities” can only belong to those imagining them. Yes, “everyday ruralities” *can* take place ‘out there’, but this can only happen if rurality is *admittedly* the concept its alleged performers identify their performances by. Perhaps more often than not they unfold ‘in here’, ‘on the other side’, whilst what happens ‘out there’ are merely our own projections and transpositions. If performativity is truly the way we want to obtain better knowledge about the rural, we first need to clear our own backyard.

If an Englishman vacationing in Seville has a sip of Evian from an IKEA glass made in Poland, is it Englishness, Spanishness, Frenchness, Swedishness or Polishness he is performing?

...Maybe he is just drinking water.

## Notes

- (1) Although this paper engages specifically with ‘the rural’, the core of our argument is just as much applicable to its conceptual antipode, ‘the urban’, given that derivatives like “performing urbanity” and “everyday urbanities” are constructions that are also gaining traction.
- (2) Butler (1993: 2) defines performativity as “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names”.
- (3) STS (Science and Technology Studies or Science, Technology and Society) is an offspring of science studies, looking into how social, political, and cultural values affect scientific research by shifting the definition of ‘how science works?’ from philosophy to sociology. Effectively, STS sees science as an essentially human endeavor (Latour, 1987; Orlikowski, 2007) shaped by both ‘scientific’ and ‘extra-scientific’ factors (cf. Dymitrow, Brauer, forthcoming).
- (4) According to Shapiro (2015), “[a]nytime [we] put a modifier in front of a term that is inherently good [we] turn it into a perversion of itself”. For instance, the term ‘political correctness’ is no longer a question of true or false (which is the definition of ‘correctness’), but rather conscious avoidance of consequences.
- (5) Tautology is a logical argument constructed by repeating the same concept or assertion using different phrasing or terminology. It presupposes that the proposition as stated is logically irrefutable, while obscuring the lack of evidence

or valid reasoning supporting the stated conclusion.

- (6) Ontologically, the method adheres most closely to subtle realism, i.e. the assumption that we can only know reality from our own perspective of it.
- (7) Poverty and lack of infrastructure are evident in shanty towns, favelas, gecekondu, socjalki, barrios, ghettos, bidonvilles, and many others, including regular housing estates. A notorious example of this is Luník IX, a Roma-inhabited borough in the Slovak city of Košice, infamous for its extreme poverty in combination with cut-off gas, water and electricity supplies, cancelled waste management and communication routes (cf. Berescu, 2011).
- (8) Many towns in the UK have populations smaller than 8000, and even 3000, like the city of St David's with 1841 inhabitants or the town of Fordwich with a population of 381.
- (9) Backtracking Edelman's prior research experience takes us to Spanish Central America, especially Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.
- (10) The Peak District is fringed by Manchester, Sheffield, Derby, Huddersfield and Stoke-on-Trent.
- (11) The both approaches correspond roughly to the descriptive and socio-cultural definitions of 'the rural' as outlined by Halfacree (1993), with the first rendering spatial indifference (Short, 1976) and the second spatial determinism (Sayer, 1984).

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