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IDYLIC LIVING IN RURAL SURROUNDINGS. PERCEPTIONS OF FINNISH RURAL RESIDENTS OF THEIR HOME ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Living in Finnish rural areas is different. Within the urbanized culture that perceives city living as a norm, residing in rural Finland is an exception to the rule. The rural-urban dichotomy represents the two environments as opposites rather than perceiving them as alternative dwelling opportunities.¹ Although this polarization has been challenged over decades in research on rurality² by emphasizing the cultural intertwining and continuities of these two environments as social spaces, the way of understanding them as opposites has persisted among commonly shared perceptions. Both urban and rural areas exist in spatial reality, but the distinctions are created at the level of cultural conceptualizations. According to these ideas, based on stereotypes and assumptions attached to rural and urban, urban represents the modern way of living while rural areas are perceived to be bound either to modern agriculture or its past and to an agrarian lifestyle. It is noteworthy that these cultural perceptions of rurality are based on urban standpoints.³ From this it follows that rural areas are understood as 'the other' in relation to the norm; whereas cities are understood in their own terms rural areas represent a site of conceptual struggles, which need to be explained and rendered comprehensible.⁴

The perceptions related to rurality are multiple. The way of perceiving urban and rural areas as cultural counterpoints is grounded on the historical ways of defining 'the city'. As cultural imagery, the countryside has represented the opposite of the features associated with cities: rurality represents

¹ On political and economic rural restructurings, 'desires' to dwell in the country and the assumed daily life challenges see e.g. Silvasti 2001; Woods 2005; DuPuis 2006, Kattilakoski 2011.

² See e.g. Pahl 1966; Mitchell 2004; Cloke 2006; Hompland 1991; Olsson & Ruotsala 2009; Hämeenaho 2013.

³ E.g. Short 1991, 28, 30; MacNaghten & Urry 1998, 120–121; Korhonen 2010, 82–83.

⁴ Cloke 2006, 18

poverty rather than of wealth and luxury, isolation rather than centrality, backwardness and stagnation rather than progression, civilization and mobility.⁵ On the other hand, the criticism of urbanism has led to the glorification of agrarian culture and ‘natural’ or ‘traditional’ lifestyle of pre-industrial times.⁶ These admired features of peasant living are considered to be lost in the cities but still to be found ‘out there’, in the country.⁷ It is argued⁸ that despite the myriad of meanings given to rural and rurality, this way of envisioning rural areas as ‘idyllic’ is the most common way to define the countryside and rurality. The romantic notion of rural idyll also associates the modern countryside of today with the agrarian past by emphasizing the significance of nature and lifestyles founded on a communality of local people as an essence of the rurality of today. Rural as a social space may be represented either as “at the back of beyond” (in Finnish: *syrjäkylä*) or as an idyllic place for ‘simple life’ but it remains bound to its agrarian past as a contradiction to modern urban.

In order to understand rurality one must admit the strength of these rural visions, the culturally valued interpretations of *what is rural* and how they affect our thinking and practices in everyday life.⁹ The ideas and stereotypes related to rural areas occur as underlying assumptions and are reiterated by mass media, popular culture, tourism and in preservation of cultural heritage, for example.¹⁰ Besides the aforementioned culturally rooted stereotypes, policy discourses also interpret rural areas from their perspectives, mainly from the viewpoints of the economic value of rural land and nature. The major policy discourses have perceived the countryside as a place for primary production and industries only.¹¹ Another policy orientation is to evaluate rural areas from an ecological perspective. This orientation reflects the idea of a ‘culture of nature’, the way of valuing products, practices and lifestyles considered natural.¹² This discourse grows from concern about the exploitation of nature for the benefit of industry and supports the idea that the countryside should mainly serve as a city-dwellers’ place for leisure and recreation among natural surroundings.¹³ This perception is closely connected to the idea of ‘peasant idyll’ that envisions the countryside as a haven for agrarian heritage and beautiful rural landscapes to be preserved. When these visions of nature conservation or the nostalgic view on rurality are combined, the countryside may be considered a location for heritage or

⁵ Williams 1985, 290; Greed & Ching 1997 (see also Rosenqvist 2007, 4); Macnaghten & Urry 2001, 2; Knuutila & Rannikko 2008, 19.

⁶ Williams 1985; Macnaghten & Urry 1998, 175; Hangasmaa 2007.

⁷ Woods 2005, 177; Hämeenaho 2013

⁸ See e.g. Mormont 1990; Cloke 2003; Figueiredo 2013.

⁹ Cloke 2003; also Hämeenaho 2013; 2014.

¹⁰ Urry 2002; Bunce 2006; Siivonen 2008; Hämeenaho 2013.

¹¹ Cloke 2003, Rosenqvist 2007.

¹² MacNaghten & Urry 2001, 1–2; Short 1991, 31.

¹³ Woods 2005, 173; Bell 2006, 158; Figueiredo 2013, 159–160.

nature tourism to the extent that the viewpoints of local residents and endeavours related to their (modern) home environment are forgotten.¹⁴

It is noteworthy that these seemingly very different rural visions are virtually carved out from the same source of cultural conceptions. They are a creation of *the urban view* that depicts rural areas as ‘the other’, or more precisely, its main characteristic is to be ‘other-than-urban’. Instead of giving rural areas value *per se*, these visions and perceptions are exploitative. They fail to answer the question ‘What is rural?’ but are in response to a dilemma ‘What is rural *for*?’ Another connection between these perceptions is that rural areas are not regarded as an alternative living environment but as a place in which urbanites could *consume rurality*.¹⁵ This perception of rurality is an outcome of the cultural process that has detached the idea of ‘rurality’ from its geographical referent.¹⁶ It has even been argued¹⁷ that the way of perceiving the rural as a social and cultural construct has led us to the point where ‘rurality’ no longer exists outside the countless re-representations and discourses. These multiple and often contradictory discourses may be utilized according to the needs of tourism, nature conservation, policymaking and development programmes – whatever the cause and need in question.¹⁸

The dichotomy between rural and urban is evidently connected to a dichotomy between nature and culture.¹⁹ Cities represent the man-made environment whereas rural assimilates with nature. Accordingly, rural areas may be valued as land or *soil* to be cultivated or forests and landscape to be utilized for industry or leisure.²⁰ On the other hand, rural may be considered to refer to wilderness – either to be tamed or preserved²¹ or as once cultivated land of which the visual features such as traditional buildings or pastoral sceneries now should be protected as a reminder of the agrarian heritage. Analysis of the rural visions stated above illuminates the nature-culture categorizations. All these visions define rural primarily by emphasizing the significance of nature as a key element of rurality.

In order to further study this aspect of rurality, my research focuses on exploring rurality in sparsely populated areas in rural Finland as a certain kind of environment, demarcated by nature and long distances to city centres. However, as I study the rural vision given by rural residents, the starting point of my study is to understand rural areas as a place *to live* – not as a place *to visit* for one reason or another. I ask how rural nature, understood both as land and as a living environment underpinned

¹⁴ Hansen & Waldenström 2012; Hämeenaho 2013. On tensions and conflicts over rural areas see e.g. Siivonen 2008; Dabezies and Ballesteros-Arias 2013; Uusitalo & Assmuth 2013.

¹⁵ Bunce 2003, 25; Cloke 2006, 18; Halfacree 2006, 57; Macnaghten & Urry 1998, 120–121

¹⁶ Halfacree 1993.

¹⁷ Cloke 2003, 18, see also Korkiakangas 2010.

¹⁸ Lehtonen 2016, 52.

¹⁹ Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 172; Ingold 2000.

²⁰ Cosgrove 1998; Gray 2012, 226.

²¹ Macnaghten & Urry 1998, 34; Cloke 2006, 18; Wollin Elhouar 2014, 192.

with culturally and socially constructed meanings, and its usage is envisioned in the course of daily lives of rural residents. Listening to those with experience of rural living widens our understanding of rurality by adding one more rural vision – that of local residents – to the discussion often led by urbanites.

Data and methodology

Among the ‘countless re-representations’ of rurality, my study aims to understand how rural, and especially rural nature, is given meanings in the context of everyday living. This requires ethnological research exploring rural visions and assumptions related to rural environment in the context of daily living. Paying attention to the everyday lives of people living in rural areas reveals the meanings attached to the countryside as *a daily activity space* instead of exploring merely ideas based on shared assumptions or cultural perceptions.²² This interpretative analysis thus provides another viewpoint, one ‘conception of truth’ that emanates from the daily life experiences and perceptions of my informants.²³ With qualitative content analysis, with a special interest in how cultural imagery is present in the talk (see Strauss 2005; XX), I give a voice to 14 women whom I interviewed during the fieldwork in 2009.

The data consists of fourteen thematic interviews, during which my informants, mothers living in sparsely populated rural areas of Central Finland, described their families’ daily living in the country. Perceptions attached to rurality were also scrutinized in the interviews, during which we discussed rural living from the viewpoint of the benefits and challenges related to the interviewees’ home environment and how living far from workplaces and services affected their daily life practices. The women had different relations to rural living, but they had all also lived in cities during their lifetime. Most of my informants had been born in the country and had only spent a few years in urban areas, mainly for vocational studies. Five of the informants were in-migrants, as they had been born in the city and moved to the country as adults. The data thus represent perceptions of people who have experience of both living environments, city and country.

Daily life practices in rural environment

“It is so peaceful here, we have this privacy. When I come home after the day at work I can do whatever I want, just be here. Nobody is watching us.” (Interview 8.)

²² Hämeenaho 2014, 30; Hamilton 2016, 298.

²³ On ‘ethnographic truths’ see Frykman & Gilje 2003, 35; Fassin 2017, 9; also Strauss 2005; Schnegg 2010.

When asked what was good about the home environment, and what the best features of country living were, all my informants wanted first to emphasize the significance of one's own peace that a rural environment and sparse population afford. The importance of natural surroundings was also stressed during the interviews. They all mentioned how the opportunity to live close to nature, forests and fields, was their main source of private wellbeing. Accordingly, living far from the centres was not considered burdensome in the daily life course; it was a personal choice for all my informants.

This thinking, perceiving rural areas as an inviting place to live contradicts the common assumptions emphasizing the difficulties of rural living. In Finland, these negative ideas are attached to rural geography: the long distances and to lack of jobs and schools.²⁴ Due to the lack of services and workplaces, rural residents are compelled to travel lengthy distances each day in order to conduct daily tasks and duties. With no functioning public transportation, the only way to be mobile is a private car. My fieldwork also clearly showed how living in a rural environment was made possible by having a private car and being able to drive.²⁵ However, the women I discussed with did not mention this as a problem. Instead, the busy mothers with hectic schedules in their family lives made a point about the freedom that private driving affords. They had adjusted to the necessity of driving and regarded the lengthy drives as much needed time for themselves. One informant explained: "Driving is no problem for me. Actually, I rather like it. I can clear my thoughts [after the day at work] during the drive." (Interview 10.)

In a rural environment, driving by private car through the beloved countryside enables much valued solitude and becomes a part of the peacefulness of the rural environment. The remoteness turns into distance that separates one's home from the hectic city living.²⁶ One mother, whose family lived in remote place outside the village observed: "Sometimes I feel bored due to driving along these same, long roads. But then again, I feel gratitude for that I do not have to be around other people too often." (Interview 14.)

In addition to the solitude and peacefulness that the remote location of home provided, the importance of natural surroundings in daily living was emphasized. This connects the 'experienced rurality' to the traditional ways of living and earning one's living: farming, animal husbandry and forestry. Those informants who lived from farming or forestry, connected rurality directly to the cultivation of land and noted, how rural areas provide food for the entire nation. Other interviewees also mentioned this when they wanted to highlight the significance of rural areas to modern living. Traditional livelihoods were specifically discussed when they told me how their home villages have emptied due to a drastic drop in the number of farms in Finland in recent decades. This disappearance of farming – and

²⁴ Nieminen-Sundell 2011; Tantarimäki 2012.

²⁵ Hämeenaho 2014, 91; Hämeenaho 2018; also Sheller 2004.

²⁶ See also Wollin Elhouar & Hansen 2011; Rau 2012.

inhabitants as well – was considered the main problem in regard to the future of sparsely populated rural areas. One informant, who had witnessed the out-migration said to me: ‘To my regret, I have to say this village is quite deserted nowadays. I have lived here for 20 years, people have moved out from here, or older people have died. More people have left than have moved here.’ (Interview 4.) Out-migration of all neighbours brings up the problems related to feelings of loneliness and may turn the peacefulness into loneliness.²⁷

For those who spent most of their time in the cities due to work or school the significance to their wellbeing of a rural environment was mainly attached to the possibility to enjoy nature through leisure activities,²⁸ such as gardening or walking in the woods. One mother told me how she had ‘just planted 25 metres of raspberry canes, 5 metres of gooseberry bushes and another 5 metres of blackcurrant bushes [in her garden]. She also said: ‘It is so easy here, to do this kind of thing, to take pleasure in the wonders of nature.’ (Interview 2.) Berry picking and mushrooming were common activities among my informants, and some of them had small fields they were cultivating as a hobby and as a source of extra income. For all of my informants, the rural ambience was of great value in itself, and it was also enjoyed as a landscape and scenery. One informant explained how her home provided her and her family with a chance to enjoy the beauties of the natural surroundings.

“[We have] so much open sky, here on the top of the hill where we live. This scenery, we can watch how the clouds go by, and we can watch the sun rising and setting. My sister-in-law has a summer place just there, at the foot of the hill. So we go there, watch the sunset and when we come back here we can watch it again!” (Interview 8.)

Talk about the benefits of living in a rural environment is captured in the comment of an informant who worked as a dairy farmer: “One thing I probably enjoy the most, is this chance to observe the natural cycle. To live here, close to nature and according to its tempo rhythm.” (Interview 14.)

Idyllic ideas on rurality

Besides affecting daily practices and leisure activities, a rural environment also has a greater impact on the level of lifestyle. By adjusting to challenges posed by the environment and by learning to enjoy the opportunities offered by the surrounding nature, ‘rurality’ becomes part of one’s thinking. This was clearly expressed by those informants who had moved to countryside as adults. One mother explained how this change in living environment had affected her way of living and perceptions of an admirable lifestyle. At the same time, she was well aware of the stereotypes attached to rural living.

²⁷ Oinas 2012; Hämeenaho 2014, 159–160.

²⁸ Also Wollin Elhouar 2014, 135.

When talking about the times when she became a rural dweller she noted how her own thinking had been filled with ideas reminiscent of the ‘rural idyll’:

“[when we moved here] it was like looking through the rose-tinted glasses. I had this, somehow nostalgic idea, that here in the countryside I would go around with a scarf tied around my head and carrying a basket on my arm. [laughs]. Even so, my life has changed a lot indeed, it is so different to live here than in an apartment block. I have started to bake bread in the oven, something I never did before. And now we are building a cellar under the yard so we can store the potatoes we grow. We have been changing our lifestyle intentionally.” (Interview 11.)

The idea of being self-sufficient turned out to be an important element of rural lifestyle, which was pursued in accordance with the families’ abilities. One couple I interviewed explained how they baked bread, grew vegetables in the greenhouse and filled their freezer with berries. As vegetarians they did not need any meat products, and they were proud to say that they were able to get almost all the food they consumed from their own garden and from nearby forests. One female informant explained how, due to the long distances to nearest grocery shop, the family went shopping only seldom. This had affected her views on what one really has to buy and she was highly critical towards shopping and consuming, which she associated with urban lifestyle. During the interview, she pondered:

“No wonder [citydwellers] spend so much money, there is everything available all the time. Shops are always crowded. But here, you just realize how you can cope without buying almost anything. A month may go by, and we only need to buy toilet paper and detergents. Really, that is all.” (Interview 4.)

It is noteworthy that in the interviews rurality was most often explained by contrasting it with ways of living considered urban. Besides the criticism of consumerist lifestyle attached to urban areas, other features that make rural areas better living environment were also mentioned. One mother who ran a dairy farm with her husband noted:

“One thing which is good about living in the country is that you can accustom your children to work. Sometimes I have wondered how I would have managed at all in some apartment block with two energetic boys. Here at the farm we have been able to channel their energy into all kinds of work and activities we have here on the farm.” (Interview 14.)

When the discussion focused on the best features of rural living, the mothers expressed their gratitude that they had been able to live in the country while their children were small. A will to raise one’s children among rural environment had also been a decisive reason for in-migrants, who had moved to the country from urban areas. The country was considered a safe place for children, due to absence of

urban problems such as heavy traffic or crime, for example. One mother, who had lived several years in a big city, told me:

“While living in the city, I saw it all, drug addicts and all those people. Here, I can send the children to the yard and I do not have to worry that somebody will kidnap them or that they will be run over.” (Interview 3.)

Rural nature was also mainly seen as positive, regardless of the dangers that ‘wild nature’ may pose. The mother of an 8-year-old boy pondered:

“It is so safe here, it is different from being in a big city. I can let my kids go out and play there by themselves. I do not believe that the wolves would come, put children in their backpacks and carry them away. This environment is also so clean; no pollution here.” (Interview 10.)

All these features related to rural living are in line with the idea of ‘rural idyll’.²⁹ On top of this, negative ideas attached to urban living were expressed by many of my informants, which reiterates the way of representing rural and urban as opposites. From the rural viewpoint, urban areas do not offer solitude, they are considered to be dangerous, polluted and they bind people to values and habits of a throwaway society³⁰. In contrast to urban areas, the country offers all the features of living, which are respected.

Rural visions revisited

It is often claimed that rurality as a cultural conception carries multiple meanings that represent ‘the country’ from the perspective of urbanites. The idea of rurality being bound to agriculture, whether modern farming and forestry or perceiving rural areas as a living museum of the agrarian past, dissociates rurality from the urban living environment at the level of thoughts. From this it follows that the features of modern daily living in the country such as busy workers commuting to nearby cities on a daily basis or challenges caused by the lack of services, are not present in commonly shared rural visions. During the fieldwork I discovered that these common assumptions, ‘the rural visions’ truly have an impact on the thinking of all.³¹ When asked about the most important features of their home environment, my informants gave me significantly similar answers in emphasizing the value of nature and solidity rural space. In addition, the ways they defined living in rural areas echoed the ideas of the ‘peasant idyll’.

²⁹ See Bell 2006, 149.

³⁰ Hämeenaho 2014, 112; also Wollin Elhouar 2014, 166–167.

³¹ See Cloke 2003, 18.

The country as a place to live is described as a peaceful environment that provides opportunities to enjoy nature and follow a lifestyle which differs from city living. Rural areas are thus represented as a place for an idyllic life in the present day. These features, the most valued elements of rural living are strikingly similar to those stereotypical ideas about the Finnish countryside being a place for nature and communal lifestyle based on lifestyles and practices related to agriculture and close connection to local nature. However, they did not base their stereotypical thinking solely on commonly shared ideas but also on their own, private life experiences. Living the daily life in rural areas had moulded their attitudes about rural – and urban. The interviews clearly show how the deeply ingrained stereotypes of the two differing environment also influence rural residents. They recognize the discourses and adjust their telling to these common ways of representing rurality. They also define ‘urban’ by utilizing the (negative) stereotypes attached to cities. It is arguable that the juxtaposition of the two environments should not be interpreted only as a product of the ‘urban view’ – rural residents also make these strong distinctions when describing their living environment.³² On the other hand, rural residents do have their own discourses to re-represent and define their home environment. According to my study, even if the key elements of this ‘local discourse’ follow the culturally constructed ideas and stereotypes, the elements of rurality are given different meanings when observed from the perspective of daily life. The ideas that connect rural and rurality to wilderness, as opposed to the civilized, manmade environment of urban areas, did not resonate with these rural residents’ thinking. On the contrary, their perceptions of rurality emphasized the significance of people and their activity in creating and maintaining ‘rurality’. The study shows how rural residents represent rural first and foremost as a place for living. It is both a cultural and social space and geographical location where a certain kind of lifestyle may be followed. It is a daily living environment for those who follow and renew the lifestyle attached to the agrarian past and who respect nature and cultivate the land. Most importantly, my research shows how the idea of ‘rural idyll’ is not just a cultural conception with no reference to the realities of daily life. The idea also has strong roots in the lived and experienced rural, and its significance in defining rural continues as rural residents reiterate the idea about idyllic living in their talk and lifestyle choices.

Conclusions

I began my journey by reflecting the multifaceted perceptions attached to rural and rurality from the perspective that envisages the countryside from outside. Whether rural areas are seen as a place for the production of raw materials for industry and food production or as a haven for untamed nature and green tourism, the perception of rurality is connected to nature and its significance for urban dwellers.

³² See also Abram 2003.

The dichotomy that distinguishes rural from urban at the level of cultural conceptualizations accentuates the idea that rural is not a living environment parallel to urban areas but emphasizes its location and lifestyle outside urban areas. In order to add another perspective on the issue, I asked *what is rural* when explored from the perspective of those who live their daily lives in this much debated environment. The analysis presented here has focused on the meanings attached to rural nature and environment during the interviews with mothers living in sparsely populated rural Finland.

As an outcome, the study clearly shows how stereotypes and especially the notion of rural as idyllic are also present among rural residents. Moreover, the idea that connects rurality to nature was present in the talk of my informants. However, the meanings given to idyll or to nature as a characteristic of rurality were different from those ideas that bound rural areas to their past and represent them as backward or only valuable as a place for nature or heritage tourists to visit. On the contrary, those who reside in rural areas today emphasized how active farming and utilizing nature for daily leisure and pleasure form the backbone of rurality and rural living. All the opportunities for enjoyment and making a living that rural environment and its natural attributes afford surpasses the daily life challenges entailed. The question *what is rural* has a simple answer: rural is cultivated land. It is a place for dwelling and an environment where one can follow a lifestyle that values nature and its local consumption.

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