



Kraków, July 24–27, 2017

"Uneven processes of rural change"

The XXVII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress

Researching the Rural

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Abstract – In this paper we make a plea for increasing the use of mixed method approaches in research projects in rural studies. The paper is an offshoot from a book project, aimed at producing a volume on rural research methods. Rural research is in many ways different from research in more densely populated areas, not only because of the topics (agriculture, nature, remoteness) and the distances, but also because of challenges relating to data collection, ethical issues, and diverse cultural representations of rural places.

INTRODUCTION

There are countless books available on doing social, economic and geographic research, and quite a few books on doing research in the urban context (Andranovich & Riposa, 1993; Ward, 2014; Thakuria et al, 2016) but to date, there is no dedicated volume on doing research in a rural context. The most recent that we identified (Hughes et al. 1999) focuses on rural ethnography. However, undertaking research in sparsely populated areas has many challenges. Maybe the least complicated aspect is overcoming the physical distances involved to reach the place, although lack of public transport, bad infrastructure and even lack of accommodation for dinner or spending the night may be frustrating. More challenging is finding, or even reaching, enough respondents, especially when it comes to quantitative research. Secondary datasets are often less suited to rural situations due to the lower number of cases and the heterogeneity of places if a number of rural areas are amalgamated. There are very valuable datasets that are appropriate for analysing rural demographics, agriculture and rural development at national and European levels (e.g. Eurostat) but these tend not to be available at a detailed level. Hence they only give the "bigger picture" perspective from which researchers need to dig deeper in their own, new research.

The rural can also provide a conceptual challenge for researchers. Such challenges arise in relation to the delineation or classification of rural areas, which varies between countries, and more fundamentally, when thinking about meanings of rurality for different groups of people (Bosworth & Somerville, 2013).

The research questions for rural areas often differ from those in urban areas. Land use (conflicts), the development of agriculture, food issues, (neo-)endogenous development, the role of citizens' initiatives are some of the prioritized themes. Power relations in rural areas can be quite different from the general picture too: historical developments, long memories, and relative policy independence should be taken into account. These can also lead to ethical issues associated with small numbers and confidentiality.

There are a number of approaches that can be specifically attractive in rural circumstances: remote sensing, diary approaches, and application of visual means can be helpful in situations with fewer cases and longer distances. As shown in Table 1, research in rural sociology is dominated by qualitative research methods – perhaps partly in response to the sparsity of data for quantitative applications. However, qualitative findings are not easy to generalise, leading to criticisms from more quantitatively-minded researchers and research users.

Since it is often challenging to find enough cases, it can be attractive to choose a mixed or multi-method approach. Combining a number of observations about mixed methods, this could be described as: *to tackle a research question from any relevant angle, making use where appropriate of previous research and/or more than one type of investigative perspective*. In the remainder of this short paper we will show some first results of an analysis of the importance of mixed method approaches in the leading journal in rural research. It will be shown that these approaches are underrepresented, although gradually increasing in importance.

METHOD

In this paper we will analyse the number of qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches in the leading journals of rural studies. For this we classified all published research articles in two journals for the two years. In this short paper we use preliminary results from a quick scan; we restrict ourselves

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MOVING FORWARDS

to two journals (*Sociologia Ruralis* and *Journal of Rural Studies*), and two years spanning the latest decade of research publications (2006 and 2016). In the full paper more detailed data from the same journals, and from *Rural Sociology* will be presented.

MAJOR FINDINGS

From Table 1 it is apparent that SR is less inclined to accept papers using quantitative or mixed approaches, compared to JRS. Nevertheless, also in JRS most articles are of qualitative nature. It is also clear that the use of quantitative approaches is increasing but that mixed methods continue to be under-represented: In 2006 neither journal had a paper which could be labelled as mixed method; in 2016 JRS had 5, SR still none.

Table 1: The split of Qualitative and Quantitative/mixed methods papers in leading rural journals.

| | Journal of Rural Studies | | | Sociologia Ruralis | | |
|------|--------------------------|-------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------|
| | Qual. | Quant | Mixed | Qual. | Quant | Mixed |
| 2006 | 24 | 10 | 0 | 17 | 1 | 0 |
| 2016 | 52 | 22 | 5 | 24 | 5 | 0 |

INTERPRETATION

The above figures suggest that there is considerable scope for a broader application of mixed methods in rural research. Interdisciplinary and mixed methods approaches are strongly encouraged in funding calls for larger scale projects and increasingly, PhD students are applying a range of method too. In 2006 neither journal had a paper which could be labelled as mixed method; in 2016 JRS had 5, SR still none. One of the factors that perhaps precludes mixed methods in journal articles is the length restriction that sees research projects "sliced up" into a number of outputs. Such publication strategies are also driven by metrics that demand increasing numbers of outputs from projects alongside fears that reviewers will favour one methodological approach over another. In the Dutch system, where PhD promotion often requires a number of published articles, mixed methods approaches can be very effective, but to secure publications, the natural "slicing" of papers tends to follow methodological dividing lines.

While this is not a unique tension for rural studies, we argue that triangulation of different methods is more important in contexts with fewer people, sparser networks and competing representations of rural places.

The rural domain offers significant opportunities to test and refine new methodological approaches, without the "interference" of so many hard to disentangle networks, processes and activities that occur in urban spaces. Therefore, this research has prompted a call for chapters for a new edited collection with a working title of "researching the rural".

The book will aim to achieve two things. Firstly, to provide practical advice for researchers doing rural fieldwork with examples from leading researchers in the broad fields of rural studies. As well as the practicalities of doing the research, contributors will be encouraged to share challenges associated with analysis and interpretation as well as the positioning of their findings for publication. Secondly, a more ontological angle to each chapter will examine scenarios where rural research demands the researcher to reflect differently on his or her positionality, the purpose of the research and the knowledge it may yield. Research that is described as rural may simply apply generic tools to studying more remote places but in some cases it may concern issues that are considered innately rural and thus require alternative lenses for investigation and analysis.

Reflecting on the range of methods that contributors will present in each of the chapters will then allow the editors to reflect on the common challenges of rural research and hopefully some common strategies for smoothing the path to high quality data collection and analysis. A concluding chapter will also examine complementarities between distinctive methods and the potential for the promotion of more integrated mixed-methods approaches across the rural research discipline.

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