# THE CONCEPT OF RURALITY AND THE RURAL-URBAN RELATIONSHIP AS PERCEIVED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

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## Abstract

This paper explores the concept of rurality and the rural-urban relationship as perceived by young people. First, there is a brief review of the main theoretical approaches to the issue of the definition of "the rural". Then, the theory of "social representation" is taken into consideration to better understand what makes the rural and natural environment attractive, together with the perception of the difficulties which hinder rural development. The Region of Abruzzo, with its blurred boundaries between rurality and urbanization was chosen as the area to be studied to verify if it is possible to identify a distinction between urban and rural lifestyles and whether the residents of urban and rural areas have different criteria for evaluation. The differences found among a sample of students in the Region of Abruzzo in questionnaire responses on the concept of rurality and the rural-urban relationship are presented with a quantitative model. The analytical framework raises some important concerns for the governance of the socio-economic development of rural environments and suggests that greater attention must be paid to how different social groups in different social environments understand, explain and articulate the complexity of rurality and the rural urban relationship in their everyday life.
Keywords: rurality, rural-urban relationship, social representation

## Introduction

In Europe the introduction of new tools for an agricultural policy aiming at the development of rural areas has aroused much public debate about the analysis of rural areas and their prospects.
Many of the contributions have addressed the definition of "the rural". Drawing a line between urban and rural areas seems quite simple in everyday life, but suggesting a conceptual definition which is both precise and statistically meaningful, becomes much more difficult. Conventional approaches to the definition of "the rural" have focused on either descriptive or socio-cultural features. However, the "different ruralities" and the development of economic systems which have shown a growing number of small- and medium-sized industries and, on the other hand, the decline of traditional rural activities, can be taken into consideration only by an alternative means of definition.
This alternative approach is the theory of social representations which enables us to define "the rural" in terms of the non-tangible space of "social representation".
The point is to give a definition and not a description of "the rural" taking into consideration the viewpoint of the people who actually live in specific rural areas and their perception of that specific place without suggesting any monolithic structure which can be termed "the rural".

Different social groups in different social environments and with different experiences will probably have a different perception of "the rural". Urban residents may see rurality as a mythical, idyllic place where people have happy, healthy lifestyles in free environments, away from the stress and uncertainty of urban society and where everybody enjoys the benefits of being part of an ideal community characterized by mutual support, harmony and integration (Short, 1991).

The aim of this paper is to find evidence for the possibility of drawing a line between urban and rural young residents' different perceptions of rurality, and also to highlight the strong and weak points of rural areas as compared to urban areas.

The choice of focusing on the young is based on the firm belief that they are the future of rurality itself and only a shared understanding of rurality will enable the young to contribute to the socio-economic development of the rural environment, becoming, in this way, keenly involved in local decision-making and positively connected with their local environment.

The paper is divided into three main sections. In the first, we briefly outline different theoretical approaches to the issue of the definition of "the rural". In the second, we consider the specification of a logistic regression model for the investigation of relationships between rural and urban residence. In the last part, we present the results of the questionnaire responses as a contribution to the recognition of the multiple situations lived by young rural people.

## 1. Rurality: the difficult task of conceptualization

The definition of rural has been in dispute for decades (Gilbert, 1982), many different definitions of the rural have been given, each focusing on a different specialized aspect: in turn, statistical, administrative, built-up area, functional regions, agricultural, and population density.

Since this paper is not meant as a further contribution to this ongoing international debate, there will be only a brief outline of those theoretical approaches which are most useful for better reaching the goals of our analysis.

Besides, the ongoing debate over recent decades has made it clear that the quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible.

Historically, traditional agriculture supplied both employment and income in rural areas. However, in today's developed countries the concept of rurality should not be confused with that of an agricultural economy (Barberis, 1988, Brunori 1994, Blanc 1997, Mathieu 1998).

The historical process of the structural transformation of economy has led to the decline of the importance of agriculture, both in terms of employment and of contribution to GNP, and this has deeply and rapidly modified the economic and social structure of rural areas where previously only very small and slow changes had occurred over the centuries, in this way granting the typical balance of the rural world (Iacoponi, 1998).

Everyone has acknowledged the need for an in-depth analysis of the evolutionary processes and the social economic mechanisms occurring in rural areas, therefore the approaches suggested for the conceptualization of rurality are still many and varied. Up to this point, no consensus has been reached on what is meant by "rural". The European Commission, aware of this difficulty, wrote in an official document (1997) "… the popularity of terms such as rurality and rural areas, resides in their apparent clearness. They are immediately understood because they suggest a physical, social and cultural concept opposed to the concept of "urban". However, to give an objective and unambiguous definition of rurality seems quite impossible".

Approaches range from descriptive to social representation of the rural. Descriptive definitions are all geared towards various planning and academic purposes and they consider

rural areas as deeply different and/or opposed to urban ones (Bodiguel, 1986, Halfacree, 1993. 1995).

As for the social representation of the rural, Mathieu (1998) points out how it cannot be separated from the representation of the urban and from the links between these two concepts, which change in time and space.

We believe the concept of rurality is changing due to the evolution of the processes of socio-economic development of these areas, but evolution may occur in different ways at different times in different countries or even in different regions of the same country. The weighty study of Hoggart, Buller and Black (1995) is based on this assumption and they give a definition and a description of "the rural mosaic" in Europe and of the diversity in national approaches to defining rural.

Different cultural, demographic, environmental, political and socio-economic circumstances in European countries lead their residents and their governments to emphasize dissimilar attributes as key characteristics of "their rurality".

Faced with the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the concept of rurality, some authors suggest a pragmatic approach in which the definition to be used is the one that best fits the aims of the study (Matthews, 1998, Hoggart, 1990).

A useful classification of the different approaches to the conceptualization of rurality has been suggested by M. Blanc (1997) who, on the basis of different modalities through which the heterogeneity of the space is analyzed, has classified three different approaches: a) the spatial approach, b) the territorial approach, and c) the structural approach.

In the first case, the space has been interpreted as a set of points endowed with attributes and separated by distances, as a territory in which there could be competition for the use of its resources. The fundamental problem faced in this trend of studies is the choice of localization for optimizing agents.

The second approach does not consider the space as a set of points or surfaces, but as a group of entities that represent a strong internal structure. The main problems faced in these studies concern the motivations on which the different performances of the territories are based.

Finally, the third approach is less interested in the objective characteristics of the space, but studies, instead, what representation of the space the social actors perceive. The main focus of the analysis is centered on the social construction of this representation.

This latter approach, not being based on the study of geography and variables, but on different representations of the space specific to the social actors, allows for the investigation of how the rural area is lived by those who integrate themselves in it every day.

In this kind of study, it is necessary to refer to the theory of "social representation" so as to explicate how people understand, explain and articulate the complexity of demands and experiences coming from the social and physical environments in which they are immersed (Schutz, 1967).

In a later paper, the same author underlines the renewed importance of the "paramount realities of everyday life" (Schutz, 1970). Falk and Pinhey also call for rural studies to pay greater attention to Shutz's constitutive phenomenology, which concerns the "actor's view of the world", specifically referring to different social contexts and situations.

Some important contributions to the debate about the conceptualization of rurality and its social representation has been made by the work of Halfacree (1993, 1995) following Moscovici (1981, 1982, 1984) on the theory of "social representation". The latter proposes that "people use social representations in order to deal with the complexity of the social world. These are defined as organizational mental constructs which guide us towards what is 'visible' and must be responded to, relate appearance and reality, and even define reality itself. The world is organized, understood and mediated through these basic cognitive units. Social representations consist of both concrete images and abstract concepts, organized

around 'figurative nuclei' which are a 'complex of images that visibly reproduce … a complex of ideas'. Therefore, whilst they are partly a description of the physical material world, social representations are irreducible to it. They are both iconic and symbolic". (Moscovici, 1984, in Halfacree, 1993).

Halfacree, therefore, underlined the need to distinguish between the rural as a space (a specific kind of place) and the rural as a represented space, the so-called social representation which, in a post-modern society permeated by symbolic elements, can evolve in a different way than the material space.

Hoggart, Buller e Black (1995) outline how a social representation of rurality allows for the connection of these studies to a more solid theoretical basis, mainly in those cases in which the analyses aim to understand the activities of residents in low density areas, or the opportunities offered by the countryside, or the residential strategies or recreational activities of residents in urban environments.

In contrast to this well developed studies, little attention has been paid to the representation of the rural held by rural and urban residents (Halfacree, 1995). Indeed we find it crucial to analize what different social groups link with the concept of rurality in order to understand and expalin strengths and weakness of the rural areas.

To verify if young residents in rural and urban areas have different interpretations of the concept of rurality and also different life styles, we chose the theoretical approach of 'social representation' because it provides guidelines for finding out if there is a degree of specificity of social representation in specific social groups.

We feel this kind of analysis can be extremely useful for understanding the perception of structural constraints and/or the existence of development opportunities for rural areas due to on-going processes in the society.

## 2. Methodology

The information necessary for carrying out our study was collected from a survey of 170 students at the Universities of Pescara and Teramo in Abruzzo. The respondents represent the population of students, resident in this region of central Italy, attending Economics courses in the academic year 1999-2000 (tab. 1).

Therefore, this nonprobability sample is limited to a specific social group consisting of a minority of young people; despite its theoretical weakness, various forms of nonprobability sampling are widely used in practice, mainly for reasons of cost and convenience (Kalton,1985). Nevertheless, although the results can not be extended to the majority of young people in the Region of Abruzzo, they do supply some useful information and are an interesting starting point in considering the issue of the rural-urban relationship.

**Tab. 1: Sample description:**

| N. of cases | Residence | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| SEX | Rural | Urban | Total |
| Male | 33 | 51 | 84 |
| Female | 42 | 44 | 86 |
| Total | 75 | 95 | 170 |

| Age (average) | Residence | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| SEX | Rural | Urban | Total |
| Male | 23,6 | 23,0 | 23,2 |
| Female | 21,0 | 22,5 | 21,7 |
| Total | 22,1 | 22,7 | 22,5 |

Questionnaire surveys were administered through personal interviews. A pre-questionnaire was used to define structured questions that were asked to solicit information on a variety of topics including demographics, concepts of rurality, opinions on positive/negative aspects of living in rural/urban areas, motivations for moving, shopping habits and free-time activities.

Responses to these questions provided the data necessary to classify residents in urban or rural areas and to compare both their perception and opinion of rurality and their lifestyles.

The independent variables used (table 2) concerned income, ownership of goods and use of services, food shopping habits, the perception of the identifying elements of rurality and the overall opinion of the positive aspects of rural residency.

The data cases have been classified in an exploratory mode with a logistic regression model, a versatile and powerful multivariate technique that allows for a careful examination of how various factors influence a binary outcome and that requires far fewer assumptions than discriminant analysis or multiple regression analysis. When the dependent variable has only two values, in this case urban and rural residency, and many independent variables (nominals and ordinals) concern qualitative aspects, the assumptions necessary for hypothesis testing in regression analysis are necessarily violated. For example, it is unreasonable to assume that the distribution of errors is normal. Another difficulty with multiple regression analysis is that predicted values cannot be interpreted as probabilities. They are not constrained to fall in the interval between 0 and 1. The logistic regression model directly estimates the probability of an event occurring; the parameters of the model are estimated using the maximum-likelihood method. That is, the coefficients that make our observed results most "likely" are selected. Since the logistic regression model is nonlinear, an iterative algorithm is necessary for parameter estimation.

## Tab. 2: Variables and codes

| Variable | Description | Values/Codes |
|---|---|---|
| RN | net family income | 1= low<br>2= medium<br>3= high |
| N_PERCRE | number of wage earners in family | 1= one<br>2= two<br>3= three<br>4= four or more |
| **ownership of:** | | |
| AUTO | car | 1= goods owned<br>2= goods not owned |
| MOTO_350 | motorcycle with less than 350 cc | " |
| MOTO_351 | motorcycle with more than 350 cc | " |
| CELL | cellular phone | " |
| PC | personal computer | " |
| FAX | fax | " |
| LAVAST | dishwasher | " |
| INTERNET | access to Internet | " |
| **monthly frequency of spending on:** | | |
| TEATRO | theater | 1= up to one time<br>2= 2 or more times |
| GIORNALI | daily newspaper | 1= up to 5 times<br>2= from 5 to 15 times<br>3= from 15 to 30 times |

| CINEMA | cinema | 1= up to one time |
| | | 2= 2 times |
| | | 3= 3 times |
| | | 4= 4 or more times |
| | | |
| DISCOTEC | discotheque | " |
| RIVISTE | magazines | " |
| FUMETTI | comic books | " |
| LIBRI | books | " |
| MUSICA | music products | " |
| SPORT | sports activities | " |
| VACANZE | vacation in Italy and/or abroad during the last year | 1= no vacation<br>2= in Italy<br>3= abroad |

**food shopping at:**

| GA_SUPER | supermarket | 1= never |
| | | 2= sometimes |
| | | 3= often |
| | | 4= always |
| GA_IPER | hypermarket | " |
| GA_NEGOZ | shop | " |
| GA_MERC | market | " |
| GA_AZAGR | local farm | " |
| GA_AUTO | self-sufficiency | " |

**elements perceived as identifying for rural areas:**

| PERC_AGR | percentage of agricultural employment | 1= element perceived |
| | | 2= element not perceived |
| NO_IND | absence of factories | " |
| BASS_DEN | low density inhabitation | " |
| NO_SERV | lack of services | " |

| GIUDIZIO | concise indicator of preference for the positive aspects of rural residence | 1= indifferent opinion<br>2= positive opinion<br>3= very positive opinion |
| MOBILITA | desire to change residence | 1= from rural to urban<br>2= no desire to change<br>3= from urban to rural |

For more than one independent variable, the model can be written as:

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{e^z}{1+e^z}$$

or equivalently:

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{1}{1+e^{-z}}$$

Where Z is the linear combination:

$$Z = B_0 + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + ... B_nX_n$$

And $B_0$ and $B_1$... $B_n$ are coefficients estimated from the data, $X_1$ ...$X_n$ are the independent variables, and $e$ is the base of the natural logarithms, approximately 2.718.
The probability of the event not occurring is estimated as:

Prob (no event) = 1- Prob (event)

As has already been mentioned, this method was chosen not so much for its predictive potential, as for its ability to define a model that shows the importance of various aspects that differentiate both the perception of rurality and the behavioral models of the young residents in the two different contexts (rural and urban). Concerning this, it should be pointed out how, the descriptive analysis allowed for giving importance to the presence of a dominating perception of the concept of rural based on the importance attributed, mainly by urban residents, to the element of landscape.

| Tab. 3 Frequency of responses* indicating identifying elements of rural areas | RESIDENCE | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | RURAL | URBAN | Total |
| LANDSCAPE | 53.3% | 61.1% | 57.6% |
| PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL JOBS | 41.3% | 41.1% | 41.2% |
| LACK OF SERVICES | 37.3% | 22.1% | 28.8% |
| LACK OF FACTORIES | 17.3% | 18.9% | 18.2% |
| LOW DEMOGRAPHIC DENSITY | 20.0% | 16.8% | 18.2% |

* All 170 questionnaires were used in calculating these statistics

## Results

In this paper only a small fraction of the collected data has been taken into consideration for demonstration purposes: the aim of the statistical model presented here is to provide a simple descriptive summary of a part of the complex relationship between rural and urban residents.
The specification of the logistic regression model highlights two main results of the study:
in the Abruzzo region, which is characterized by a diffuse SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) industrial development and by a consequent widespread economic stability, there is a large common base of consumer and other behaviors shared by both the rural and urban residents. Lombardi and Omodei Zorini (2000) have already observed how the development of communications systems has played, and continues to play, a strategic role in overcoming the greater part of difficulties associated with life in rural zones. Many variables were not included in the model because of the high level of homogeneity in the responses of rural and urban residents. For example, the ownership of goods like cars or TV sets and Internet access were so widespread as not to be meaningful for lifestyles. The income indicator itself did not make any significant difference between the two groups taken into consideration;
on the contrary, other aspects of lifestyles varied greatly between rural and urban residents, in particular the ownership of a cellular phone, the places where food shopping was done and the ways in which free time was spent.
Only 116 cases were included in the analysis, 54 cases were rejected because of missing data. Data processing terminated with the definition of a final equation in which 9 of the initial 33 (tab. 2) have been included on the base of maximum-likelihood function using the Backward Stepwise (LR) method. That is, the model starts with all of the variables and then, at each step, variables are evaluated for entry and removal. The score statistic, the likelihood-ratio

statistic in this case, is used to determine whether or not variables should be added to the model and only the coefficients that make the observed results most "likely" are selected (tab. 4).

## Tab. 4: Variables in the Equation

| Variable | B | S.E. | Wald | df | Sig | R | Exp(B) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MOTO_351 | -2.0385 | 1.1327 | 3.2390 | 1 | .0719 | -.0878 | .1302 |
| CELL | 1.8747 | 1.0914 | 2.9504 | 1 | .0859 | .0769 | 6.5189 |
| DISCOTEC | .3146 | .1595 | 3.8913 | 1 | .0485 | .1085 | 1.3698 |
| RIVISTE | .2494 | .1445 | 2.9799 | 1 | .0843 | .0781 | 1.2832 |
| FUMETTI | .7754 | .2671 | 8.4291 | 1 | .0037 | .2000 | 2.1715 |
| MUSICA | -.5251 | .1640 | 10.2526 | 1 | .0014 | -.2266 | .5915 |
| GA_SUPER | -.7261 | .3777 | 3.6970 | 1 | .0545 | -.1028 | .4838 |
| GA_AZAGR | .8987 | .4549 | 3.9026 | 1 | .0482 | .1088 | 2.4563 |
| NO_IND | -.9787 | .6001 | 2.6594 | 1 | .1029 | -.0641 | .3758 |
| Constant | -.7214 | 1.7045 | .1791 | 1 | .6721 | | |

Given these coefficients, the logistic regression equation for the probability of rural residence can be written as

$Z$ = - 0.7214  - 2.0385 (MOTO_351) + 1.8747 (CELL) + 0.3146 (DISCOTEC) –
-0.2494 (RIVISTE) + 0.7754 (FUMETTI)  - 0.5251 (MUSICA) - 0.7261 (GA_SUPER)-
– 0.8987 (GA_AZAGR) - 0.9787 (NO_IND)

The coefficients of the logistic regression equation that show a greater capacity to explain the complexity of relations between rural and urban residents are those related to the cellular phone, owned more frequently by the rural residents, the higher frequency of food shopping at local farms, the higher frequency of spending for comic books and the higher number of visits to discotheques by rural residents who, at the same time, spend more frequently for music products. The odds ratio, in the column labeled Exp(B), shows a change of 6.5189 in odds for the variable CELL for a case in which the variable increases by 1, which means that this variable makes a relevant contribution to the probability of rural residence; this result underlines the importance of this means of communication in rural zones.
The second variable, in order of contribution to the probability of rural residence, is GA_AZAGR with an odds ratio of  2.4563, which indicates, for rural more than for urban residents, the relevance of  farms as places where food shopping is done
The negative coefficient (B) of the variable MOTO_351, for which a value of 1 indicates ownership and the value of 0 indicates not owning one, shows that the probability of rural residence is associated with a low value of this indicator, that is, in particular, with not owning a motorcycle greater than 350 cc.
The positive coefficient (B) of the variable DISCOTEC shows that the higher the number of visits to discotheques, the higher the probability of rural residence.
The coefficient (B) for NO_IND is negative, indicating that the higher the perception of rurality as an area with few factories, the lower the probability of rural residence. This result could be explained by a stereotyped vision of the rural world on the part of young people who reside in urban areas and who identify rurality with a lack of industrial activity, more so than those residents of the rural zones who, probably thanks to the above-mentioned widespread SME industrial development, notice this element less.
Applying this to a student (questionnaire n. 14) who doesn't own a motorcycle with more than 350 cc., owns a cellular phone, goes to the discotheque at least four times a month, buys magazines three times a month, buys comic books once a month, buys music compact discs or

tapes four times a month, whose family sometimes buys food at a local farm and often at a hypermarket, does not think that rural areas are characterized by an absence of factories, we find

Z= - 0.7214 - 2.0385 (0) + 1.8747 (1) + 0.3146 (4) -0.2494 (3) + 0.7754 (1) - 0.5251 (4) –
    - 0.7261 (3) – 0.8987 (2) -0.9787 (0)

The probability of rural residence is then estimated to be

$$\text{Prob (rural residence)} = \frac{e^{1.454}}{1 + e^{1.454}} = 0.8106$$

Based on this estimate, we would predict that the student is likely to reside in a rural area. In fact, cases with a predicted probability of 0.5 or greater are classified as having rural residence, as shown in table 5.

The table compares the observed and predicted group membership and shows that urban residence was correctly predicted by the model for 41 students. Similarly, 39 students were correctly predicted to have a rural residence. The off-diagonal entries of the table show how many students were incorrectly classified. A total of 36 students were wrongly classified, 19 students resident in urban areas and 17 resident in rural areas. Of the students with urban residence, 68.33% were correctly classified. Of the students with a rural residence, 69.64% were correctly classified. Overall, 68.97% of the 116 students were correctly classified.

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Tab. 5 Classification Table for RES_TIPO

The Cut Value is .50
                    Predicted
                     0    rural res.
                     0  ⇔    1   Percent Correct
Observed          ⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕
 urban res.   0   ⇔   41  ⇔   19  ⇔    68.33%
                  ⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕
 rural res.   1   ⇔   17  ⇔   39  ⇔    69.64%
                  ⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇓⇕
                        Overall  68.97%
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The percentage of correct classification is an indicator of a satisfactory capacity of the model to operate a diversification of the sample in relation to residence.

As Halfacree (1995) points out, "... it is not necessary or indeed likely that such significant groupings will articolate strongly distinctive representation". Indeed, considering the perception of rurality, we noticed a dominating perception based on the importance attributed to the landscape by both groups of rural and urban residents; on the other hand, we found rival representation concerning some less relevant elements, such as the lack of factories, which still contribute in a significant way to classify the sample students in relation to their residence.

Our results have shown that similar dominant perceptions of rurality can be associated with different lifestyles and that there is only a partial homogeneity of the aspects of life between rural and urban environment.

**Conclusion**

What we have attempted to show is how academic analysis and its subject, the concept of rurality and the rural-urban relationship, can be linked, and, to do so we have put together some notions about the representation of rurality and some aspects of the lifestyles highlighted by an important part of the population: the young.

The analysis allowed us to begin to delineate the complex concept of rurality among young people residing in different territorial contexts: urban and rural. We verified the presence both of elements common to the two groups and of differentiating factors. An important element in common in the two groups was the tendency to interpret the rural in terms of landscape. Also common to both groups was the ownership of goods like cars, Internet access and TV sets. On the contrary, some other elements, such as lifestyles and consumption, although partially represented by the variables utilized in this first phase of the study, show a clear differentiation. Those elements which made the most difference in the perception of rurality and the behavior of the young people interviewed, were those relative to the indication of lack of factories as identifying elements of rural areas, owning a cellular phone, the places where food shopping is done and the ways in which free time is spent.

These differences in evaluation and behavior, as demonstrated by the model, can be traced to the subjects residence in urban or rural areas.

We present our results in the belief that an understanding of the idea of rurality and of the spending behavior of young people can be of great help in directing policies towards an integrated and sustainable rural development in which the young are keenly involved in local decision-making and in the politics of their place, in this way becoming more integrated in the processes of local rural development.

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