



# Youth migration, rurality and class: a Bourdieusian approach

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## Abstract

Drawing on Bourdieusian social theory, the paper combines class and social constructionist perspectives to reconceptualize youth's rural-to-urban migration. It discusses how structural properties of everyday lives, e.g. class background, inform rural youth's evaluations of rurality, and how these evaluations generate specific rural/urban residential preferences and migration practices. The theoretical discussion is informed by a survey study among rural teenagers in a remote rural region in Norway – the Mountain Region. The results show significant correspondence between informants' location in the rural class structure as measured by parents' economic/cultural capital resources and occupation, their evaluations of rurality and, finally, their preferences along the rural–urban dimension for a future place to live. The findings indicate that the social background of rural youth has a greater influence on migration decisions than has been acknowledged in contemporary and predominantly social-constructionist rural migration research. Thus, the paper advocates a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the migration decisions of rural youth as resulting from individualized and free choices, but still structured by predispositions of their rural class habitus.

## Keywords

Bourdieu, class, locations, rural–urban migration, rurality, youth

## Introduction

Every year in late August a stream of cars leaves the rural areas of Norway, carrying high school graduates about to embark on their new lives as students in the country's university cities. Their journey takes only a few hours on the road, yet the distance between their past childhood and adolescence in the countryside and their future lives in the cities is vast. As for other young people who leave the countryside, the decision to out-migrate from rural areas will have profound implications for their lives – in terms of education and jobs, finding a spouse, a location to raise their children, and their lifestyle. Rural-to-urban migration is about far more than moving in physical space, from one place to another. It is just as much a journey in social space. The youths' drive to the cities is expectant with new

lives that will set them apart from the peers whom they leave behind.

This paper discusses the journey of these rural youths along the rural–urban dimension – how such geographical mobility is integral to the construction of their life histories and the ways in which social circumstances influence their migration practices. Every move from one place to another emerges from actors' reflections, calculations and decisions in their everyday life – conscious and not so conscious ones – but

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in the background hide the burdens and benefits of their location in the rural social structure, only rarely acknowledged by the individuals travelling along the road to their next home. This paper addresses the workings of these social structures in relation to the migration practices of rural young people, as well as the results of these interactions. It asks how one can understand the decisions of rural youths to leave the countryside, in particular: 'How are their migration decisions influenced by the structural properties, e.g. the class background, of their everyday lives?'

As such, the paper provides reflections on the debate within the social sciences on actors and structures, specifically the interplay between individual choice and societal forces (Grimen, 2000; Guneriusen, 1996; Hollis, 1994; Moe, 1994). These are tensions that are also very much present in the field of migration research, in studies of internal as well as of cross-border migration (Boyle et al., 1998; Orderud, 1998; Perrons, 2009; Perrons et al., 2010; Wills et al., 2009). Whereas rural migration theory has historically focused, in a realist science vein, on a range of social properties in order to account for migration behaviour, contemporary 'post-ish' and social-constructionist approaches have revived the status of the acting and empowered actor. In this paper, an attempt is made to mediate between these approaches in rural migration research by discussing the ways in which migrants make history – their own and that of their societies – but, to quote Marx. 'not in circumstances of their own choosing' (1954 [1852]: 10).

The paper furthermore reflects on the discussions related to the new mobility paradigm on how practices of mobility unfold in contemporary societies, since it analyses migration as an inherently geographical *and* social phenomenon. As Urry (2000: 3) notes, the literature on social mobility has 'failed to register the geographical intersection of region, city and place, with the social categories of class, gender and ethnicity'. In contrast, the literature on rural-to-urban migration has largely ignored class in its analyses of where and why the rural population migrates. In this paper, these forms of mobilities, geographical and social, are analysed as integral dimensions of each other. The paper proposes a theoretical framework for analysis of rural youths' out-migration that negotiates and integrates contemporary social-constructionist

perspectives and traditional structure-oriented class perspectives.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first is a review of current developments in rural migration research, particularly the dominance of social-constructionist perspectives and their emphasis on agents' freedom to construct their life biographies. In the second section, these developments are contrasted with some research that demonstrates the persisting class pattern in rural youth migration practices. However, this has largely been ignored and untheorized in terms of social-constructionist perspectives. A Bourdieusian approach is suggested for solving this incoherence, and a strategy along these lines is developed in the third section. Results from a small-scale survey among rural young people in a peripheral region of Norway demonstrate how residential preferences across the rural–urban dimension are formed in an interplay between actors' class location and their evaluations of rurality. Thus, in the fourth and concluding section, the paper advocates conceiving of rural youth migration as resulting from actors' 'structured freedom'.

## New ruralities, new rural studies

Despite Milbourne's (2007) justified observation that the majority of recent studies of rural migration in high-income countries have focused 'on *uni-directional flows* of people *to* rural areas', there exists a rich literature on rural-to-urban migration within the tradition of rural studies. In the following discussion, I will focus on key developments in this literature that relate rural-to-urban youth migration to more general issues, in particular the descriptions of more diversified migration practices, the emergence of post-modern countrysides, and the reconceptualization of 'rurality' in the wake of cultural and qualitative turns in rural studies.

### *Diversified migration practices*

In contemporary rural migration research, three macro-level social changes have been seen as general underlying explanations of the out-migration of young people from rural areas.

First, in many respects people in the West today are more mobile than previous generations – physically, economically and socially. The distance between peripheries and the core has been dramatically reduced; for most rural youths, migration from the rural periphery to an urban centre is no longer a venture into the unknown. The travel distance in time has commonly been reduced to only a few hours. In most affluent Western countries, the state provides some kind of financial support for students in higher education, and the journey has been made by plenty of other people in the locality already. Most rural teenagers are able to leave their home municipality and enrol at a university or find a job in the city – if that is what they choose, as many do. As emphasized in the mobility literature (Urry, 2000, 2007), being on the move represents the rule rather than the exception, and rural-to-urban migration belongs to the kind of mobility that is enhanced rather than problematized in the contemporary Western society (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Also, the fact that present-day migration for similar reasons is often characterized by temporariness and circularity rather than permanence, both in the short term (e.g. by weekend commuting between places of home and of study or employment) and in the long term (e.g. by return migration after completed education), makes it less of a decision for rural youth to leave their rural places of upbringing (see the conceptual distinction between *mobility* and *migration*).

Second, the rural-to-urban migration phenomenon relates to the development of knowledge-based economies, which has increased the demand for education, from the perspective of society as much as from that of the actors. More people want or need higher education, which is often available only in larger centres, including university cities and the regional urban centres that host colleges. Pulling in the same direction, there has been a concentration of jobs in urban centres, both in knowledge-intensive industries and in traditional industries. In other words, more people have more business to accomplish in urban areas than previously.

Thirdly, the departure of rural youth from rural regions in present-day high-income societies is often interpreted in the context of the individualization theory within the social sciences. Prominent social theorists such as Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992), Beck

(1992) and Bauman (2000) have argued that contemporary societies are characterized by the actors' 'disembedding' from traditional social constraints, releasing them from traditional pre-written scripts for how to live their lives. Although class constraints still play a role as a backdrop in these analyses, because individuals' levels of resources define their abilities to exercise the freedom to construct their own life biographies, the emerging affluence of Western societies not only allows for but increasingly requires individuals to take charge of their destiny. They become 'authors of their own lives', as Beck (2000: 53) writes, or, in Giddens' conclusion: '[i]n post-traditional contexts, we have no choice but to choose, how to be and how to act' (1996: 28). From this analytical perspective, rural youths feel free – and most of them really *are* freer – to explore the world outside the rural communities where they spent their childhood and adolescence.

Thus, according to such perspectives on contemporary society, rural youths are more able to out-migrate (owing to increased mobility), have more reasons to do so (education and jobs in the cities) and are more free (or forced to be 'free?') to make their own individual decisions about whether to go or not (the individualization thesis). The result has been persistent high rates of out-migration from rural areas in many countries.

Moreover, these migration practices are more diversified than previously; they are also less predictable. Correspondingly, the migration becomes less open to systematic scientific enquiry. Sociologist Peter Berger once stated that any sociologist would be able to generate a long list of predictions concerning a person's life based on information on his/her scores on two class indicators: income and occupation (Berger, 1963). Few sociologists would dare to say that today. When the traditional structures of society crumble, the actors are set free to explore the world on their own, no longer within the confines of class or other societal constraints. According to this view, it has also become more difficult – as well as less relevant – to theorize about the *structural* patterns/causes of actors' behaviour, including in migration studies. As the powers of social constraints on actors' everyday life disintegrate, they lose their importance for the rural migration researcher.

### *The 'post-ish' countryside*

In parallel with these developments, contemporary rural studies seem to be characterized by increasing heterogeneity in theoretical as well as methodological approaches. However, a common denominator may be the emphasis on the 'post-ish' character of its subject matter, the countryside. The contemporary Western countryside relies on a post-agricultural economy, where farming, fishing and extractive industries now account for only a few of the many different rural occupations. Service production provides the new economic base of the rural areas. The countryside nowadays is just as much a site of consumption as of production, as illustrated by the importance of tourist industries for rural regions. The development requires rural communities to change in profound ways, for example cultivating landscapes to satisfy the expectations of the 'tourist gaze' (see Urry, 1990) and other forms of re-resourcing of land to attract the growing second-home populations in many rural regions (Overvåg, 2010; Perkins, 2006). In addition, regional policies are often explicitly directed towards growth within new knowledge-intensive industries where rural actors face urban as well as global competition (Nuur and Laestadius, 2010), emphasizing the role of exogenous factors in local development.

Furthermore, the shift in the economic base of rural societies is intertwined with processes that more or less efface the traditional social and cultural distinctiveness of rural societies. Contemporary ways of rural life are becoming more varied and amenable to diversity. In the Norwegian context, Hompland (1991) uses the concepts of *local nationalization* and *local heterogenization* to summarize these processes. As rural societies and actors are exposed to the same national social forces as are their urban counterparts, they develop similar social and cultural practices. The practical boundaries between city and countryside are blurred, though the representational boundaries are affected to a lesser extent (Hidle et al., 2009). At the same time, the integration into wider social structures leads to disintegration of the previously coherent rural societies. The rural population has become more heterogeneous (Almås, 2002; Almås et al., 2008; Villa, 2004),

and the identity of its individuals often includes urban elements. They may even conceive of themselves as city people, as expressed by Pahl, who noted that 'some people . . . are in the city but not of it . . . whereas others are of the city but not in it' (1966: 307).

The greater diversity of rural populations is, on the one hand, the result of the increased migration between city and countryside, as more and other kinds of people locate themselves in rural areas, e.g. urban commuters. On the other hand, this heterogeneity adds to the diversity in observed out-migration practices, as these reflect the larger heterogeneity in rural societies. There is no longer *one* rural population; there are *many* rural populations, each having its own social logic and practices, including residential preferences and migration decisions. This development is celebrated rather than problematized; as the traditional hegemonic ways of rural life evaporate, everyone becomes free to create their own life. 'Everything goes', and the rural population happily goes in manifold directions, which include crossing the rural–urban dimension.

### *Cultural and qualitative turns*

The debates about how to define the concept of rurality reflect these changes in the economic, social and cultural fabric of the countryside (Bell, 1992, 2007; Cloke, 1997; Halfacree, 1993; Hoggart et al., 1995; Mormont, 1990; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Newby, 1980; Pahl, 1966; Phillips, 1998). If the rural has no distinct character, as claimed by several of these authors, why and how should it be treated as the subject matter of sociological analysis?

In the 1990s, a new round of conceptual debates on 'rurality' arose, which further questioned the traditional and generally realist understanding of the rural. Inspired by the 'cultural turn' within the social sciences, several European writers proposed conceiving of the rural as mental categories, located in people's minds, rather than as outward reality (Berg and Lysgård, 2004; Cloke, 1997; Phillips, 1998). An illustrative example of this reorientation is Mormont's conclusion that 'rurality is not a thing or a territorial unit, but derives from the social production of meaning' (1990: 36). Similarly, Halfacree defines 'the

rural in terms of disembodied cognitive structures which we use as rules and resources in order to make sense of our everyday world' (1993: 23).

Such a reconceptualization has profound implications for migration research. Rather than addressing the 'objective' conditions surrounding the potential migrant, whether these are at the micro level (e.g. gender, age, marital status) or the macro level (e.g. economic structures), recent research has attempted to understand how actors socially interpret – and socially construct – these surroundings. The question is not what the countryside 'is' but how it is 'created' by the constructive actor and, subsequently, how these constructions impact on their actions, e.g. migration (Baylina and Berg, 2010; Berg and Forsberg, 2003; Berg and Lysegård, 2004; Villa, 2004). The work of Grimsrud is illustrative of the consequences of this reconceptualization for migration research:

The aim of the report is not to examine whether the countryside is more patriarchal than cities but to investigate *whether the women see it this way*, and if this influences their choice of residential location. (Grimsrud, 2000: 13, my emphasis; see also Grimsrud, 2001)

Following from this shift in research focus from structures to constructions is the replacement of quantitative with qualitative methods of enquiry in rural migration research and more generally in the 'new' studies of mobility (Blunt, 2007). The standardized questionnaire and other large-scale statistical materials are rightly regarded as poorly suited to investigating the meaning-laden aspects of actors' migration. Such research is better implemented with various techniques of analysis of 'texts': in-depth interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis and participant observation.

### **Class analysis, the Bourdieusian way**

As the empowered, individualized and free agent is emphasized in the 'new' post-ish, social-constructionist rural migration studies, less interest has thus been invested in more traditional and quantitative

structure-oriented analyses of rural-to-urban migration. Nevertheless, there are strong patterns in the out-migration practices of contemporary rural youths that appear to follow 'old-fashioned' traditional structural divides. This invites research strategies that combine quantitative and qualitative exploration, rather than replacing one methodological tradition by the other. This may provide for a fuller understanding of rural-to-urban migration, as such a mixed-method approach is better suited to investigations of both scales and rationales of migration, answering questions about how different migration practices are distributed across sections of the populations as well as understanding the rationales of the actors that underlie these practices. For example, following from the growth of feminist rural studies, researchers have successfully studied differences in migration practices between genders by using such mixed-method approaches, e.g. in analysis of women's higher migration rates (e.g. Grimsrud, 2000, 2001).

In this paper, I discuss another such supra-individual structural property of social life in some detail: social class. Although ignored in recent rural-to-urban migration research, there seems to be a distinctive class pattern of individuals' migration careers at the aggregate level that invites scientific explanation. An illustrative example is the large-scale studies of the full Norwegian 1965 rural birth cohort (reported in Rye, 2006a, and Rye and Blekesaune, 2007), which displays an inherent relationship between their social and geographical mobilities, their class location and migration patterns. The studies build on national register data containing information on individuals' class locations, both their parents' and their own, as well as their migration careers. Class was defined in a Bourdieusian way: possession of economic and cultural capitals. The former is operationalized as income (data from public tax registers), the latter as educational level (data from public educational registers). Data on migration careers were gathered from the national migration register.

First, the results showed that the likelihood of rural out-migration is far larger for rural youths originating in the upper rural social classes. In particular, fathers' educational level affects out-migration. For

offspring with the best-paid and highest-educated fathers, the probability of out-migration to an urban or semi-urban region was twice as high as for those with the lowest-paid/educated fathers. Migration destination similarly varies with class background: those from upper classes are more likely to migrate to urban regions than are others.

Second, the outcome of these migration practices varies between classes. For all social classes, rural-to-urban migration is beneficial in terms of the long-term accumulation of cultural and economic capital. However, the outcome of rural-to-urban migration differs between migrants from different rural social classes, because those from the upper rural social classes have far greater returns from their migration. For these, the average income of urban migrants is 24 percent higher than that of the non-migrants. For the lower classes, the income gap between stayers and leavers is far smaller (12 percent). The same applies to the educational rewards of rural-to-urban migration: for those originating in the upper rural social classes, the likelihood of gaining higher educational credentials increases from 33.3 to 77.9 percent if the person migrates to cities; for those in the lower rural social classes, the figures are 5.1 and 32.1 percent respectively.

While the social-constructionist approach has provided valuable insights into actors' rationales for rural-to-urban migration, the flip side of the coin seems to be less interest in studies that endeavour to identify and explain the documented class aspects of rural-to-urban migration in high-income societies. Unfortunately, analysis of migrants' evaluation of rurality has often *replaced* rather than *complemented* analysis of the structural context of the migration behaviour of rural people. I do not suggest reversing this development and reviving class analysis as the key analytical perspective. Rather, the objective is to find new ways to combine these perspectives in order to establish a better theoretical framework for understanding rural-to-urban migration.

A Bourdieusian analytical perspective seems particularly valuable in discussion of the implications of these class patterns in migration (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990). Although Bourdieu's social theory has become very influential in Norwegian and European sociology in recent decades, his works seem to have

been less extensively applied in the field of rural sociology, and even less so in US rural sociology (Bell, 2007), including in rural migration research. There are a few studies that have explicitly discussed class aspects of rural youths' migration drawing on Bourdieusian concepts and perspective. Of particular interest in this regard is Trondman's (1994) analysis of rural-to-urban migration in Sweden. He describes how the migration of rural working-class youngsters from the rural northern parts of the country to the educational centres constitutes a 'class journey' – an educational journey from the working class that takes them into an academic middle-class culture. For the migrants, this is a journey with double-edged results in terms of identity and social belonging. They often feel simultaneously included and excluded in their original home social environment as well as in their new academic environment. However, work such as Trondman's represent exceptions rather than the general trend in rural migration research. Moreover, in so far as Bourdieusian concepts have been employed, it has been primarily to add nuances to cultural and lifestyle-oriented analyses, and not to investigate class and social inequality per se. In this regard Wiborg (2003), an anthropologist, is typical in her remarks. Although she does not deny the relevance of class, in the Norwegian context she prefers the concept of 'lifestyle journey' to Trondman's concept of 'class journey'. Moreover, Bourdieusian investigations of rural migration have almost exclusively relied on qualitative methodological design, reflecting the developments in the wake of the cultural and qualitative turns in rural studies and migration research.

My claim is that a Bourdieusian approach also invites better and more focused analysis of rural youth migration in which class is brought to the fore, including quantitative and structure-oriented investigations of aggregate-level migration practices. First, Bourdieu's emphasis on cultural capital is fruitful as an analytical counterpart to the concept of economic capital. The economic foundation of class is important, and in its deeper sense may even be the defining aspect of class. In social practice, however, class expressed through processes associated with cultural capital has just as much influence on actors' actions and their location in the class structure of rural

societies (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Thus, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital allows for a more appropriate understanding of the cultural logic of actors' struggle for social recognition in various fields without falling into the 'pure' constructivist trap.

The other main benefit of Bourdieusian class analysis is the way he conceptualizes the resolution of the actor/structure antagonism. At the core of Bourdieu's theoretical understanding is his concept of 'habitus', which mediates between individual drivers and social structures. People have their dispositions, and they act strategically on the basis of these. However, the dispositions of actors are influenced by their social environment – their previous experiences (Bourdieu, 1990: 9). Habitus represents the socialized subject (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993). The social constructions of rural youth, their evaluations of rurality and the strategies arising from these, are neither random nor uncorrelated, but originate in their habitus and, thus, their class conditions.

I suggest that this allows for a fruitful theoretical integration of social constructionist and class perspectives in analysis of rural youths' migration practices. There exists an inherent relationship between actors' class background and their social construction of rurality and, consequently, their actions in terms of migration behaviour. Underlying the actors' apparent freedom to create their own life biographies, also along the rural–urban dimension, there are class dynamics that influence their actual choices of where to live. The explicative logic extracted from Bourdieusian social theory thus goes like this: Class background → social constructions of the countryside → migration strategies.

### **Class, constructions and migration in the mountain region**

In discussing how this chain of mechanisms operates, I will use the 'Migration and Youth Culture in the Mountain Region' survey, in which the everyday lives of rural teenagers in a remote rural region in Norway were studied. The study area is typical of rural Norway in many regards, and also reflects key aspects of the European countryside. The Mountain

Region covers 13,311 square metres of land, with a population of some 25,000 distributed across two major centres (Røros and Tynset), in a number of villages and smaller settlements, and in houses scattered all over the region. Its economic base resonates with that of the 'new' post-agricultural countryside, as the traditional reliance on primary industries for employment has been replaced by a service-oriented labour market. Today, less than 15 percent of the labour force is found in agricultural sectors, primarily as part-time family farmers on small plots generating low incomes.

The survey was conducted in 2003. The study sample comprised senior high school students enrolled in the three upper secondary schools in the region, which by and large is equivalent to the 16- to 18-year-old cohort living in the region. The study was administered by teachers in the classroom, which ensured a high response rate (78 percent) and no systematic missing data. In total, 653 students took part in the survey. The questionnaire covered a wide range of issues concerning the students' life conditions and lifestyles, including items on social background (class location of parents), evaluations of rural life environment (rurality) and future migration/residential plans and preferences. Here, class was operationalized in a Bourdieusian way, as parents' possession of economic and cultural capitals (income and educational levels) and as their occupational activity.

The study yields a number of interesting findings demonstrating the inherent relationship between class background and migration practices. First, the results show how rural youths' cognitive and normative conceptions of rurality do not stem from random processes but reflect the social context of their everyday lives. Whereas the literature on the social construction of 'the rural' has often emphasized the uniformity of lay people's image of the countryside, more recent studies referring to 'rural others' and 'rural otherness' have challenged this assertion by pointing out how some rural groups feel excluded from the rural social fabric and hold more negative images of rurality. Such diversity in lay people's images of the rural was also clearly manifest among the rural teenagers in the study. For example, the informants were asked to evaluate a list of

characteristics often used to describe and define rurality (e.g. solidarity, neighbourliness, peacefulness, boredom, lack of opportunities, old-fashioned ideas). Using factor analysis, their answers were scored along two dimensions: the first corresponding to the idyllic image of rurality, the second to that of the rural dull (see Rye, 2006b). The overall results showed that the informants tend to experience their rural social environment both as rural idyll *and* as rural dull. On average, the students agree in describing the rural as socially dense (everybody knows everybody, solidarity, a spirit of cooperation), peaceful and natural, but at the same time as old-fashioned, boring and red-necked. However, their *relative* emphasis on these aspects of rurality was quite different. Some emphasized the idyllic aspects of the rural; other informants focused on rural dullness. For example, a third (37 percent) found 'boring' suitable to describe the rural, whereas another third (32 percent) deemed it inappropriate as a descriptor of rurality, and the remaining third had a neutral view.

More interesting is that this diversity to some extent follows structurally defined lines, e.g. gender; girls tend to be less positive towards the rural than their male counterparts. Here, I will draw attention to the class dimension. The results showed that parents' location in the rural class structures also correlates significantly with their offspring's evaluations of rurality. The relationship was not straightforward, however. It is those originating from the highest *and* the lowest positions in the rural class structure who held the most positive views on

rurality (see also Rye, 2006b). Class, defined in terms of parents' occupational position, is similarly associated with statistically significant results. However, it was primarily the division between farmers' offspring and those of 'other rurals' that stood out. Farm youths are far more positive than others, finding the rural much more idyllic and far less dull. In short, where you originate in the social structure influences – but does not determine – your conceptualization of rurality.

Second, the actors' social constructions of rurality corresponded to other aspects of the teenagers' relationship to the countryside. Table 1 shows how four different groups responded to various items that reflect overall evaluations of the rural as a present and future living environment. For example, the rural youths in the survey referred to were presented with the statement 'I am proud of my local community'. On average, 60.5 percent agreed with the statement. Those holding the most positive views of rurality (see above), however, were far more likely than those holding negative views to express such an emotional attachment to their rural home location. Similar differences are observed with regard to where (i.e. countryside or city) one is most likely to fulfil important aspects of one's life project. As expected, those with the most negative views of rurality were also the most likely to feel that the city provides better opportunities in terms of both interesting education and interesting jobs. More personal questions – such as the prospects of finding a spouse – were similarly ascribed a rural–urban dimension by the rural teenagers in the

**Table 1.** Scores on aspects of attitudes to rurality among different groups of young people in the Mountain Region (percent)

Agrees with the following statements ...	Positive views of the rural	Negative views of the rural	Total	<i>n</i>
I am proud of my local community	82.1***	37.0***	60.5	645
Getting an interesting education is easiest in a city	77.3	84.0**	78.2	637
Getting an interesting job is easiest in a city	46.4***	80.8***	60.8	641
Finding a girlfriend/boyfriend is easiest in a city	12.2***	37.6***	25.6	641
It is important to maintain a decentralized settlement pattern	92.3***	71.9***	81.7	640

*Sig. tests* (Pearson's *chi-squared*): Results for all subgroups are tested against results for those not included in the particular subgroup. \* < .10; \*\* < .05; \*\*\* < .01.

*Data source*: 'Migration and Youth Culture in the Mountain Region'.



survey. A quarter of the informants stated that they thought it was easier to find a boyfriend or girlfriend in a city. Again, however, the percentage varied considerably within the teenage population. For example, among the young people holding the most positive views of rurality, only 12.2 percent looked to the cities as the best place to find a spouse. Among those with the most negative views of rurality, three times as many looked to the cities. A final question tapped the informants' more political views on rurality by asking whether they were in favour of maintaining a decentralized settlement structure. On average, four-fifths (81.7 percent) agreed that this is an important political objective. This percentage varied systematically across different groups. For example, for those holding the most negative views of rurality, the percentage was down to 71.9.

Third, the varied evaluations of rurality expressed by rural youths were reflected in their responses about their future residential preferences (Table 2). On average, 12.2 percent stated that they wanted to live in the countryside when they were in their twenties. However, among those with the most positive views on rurality, this percentage was significantly higher (19.9 percent). On the other hand, among the rural youths with the most negative views of rurality, far fewer had residential preferences for the countryside. In this group, close to two-thirds (63.4 percent) wanted to live in the city when in their twenties. Very few selected the countryside as the preferred alternative. It should be noted, however, that the overall urban orientation reflected in rural youths' residential preferences for their twenties was stronger than for later life phases. For example, fewer than 1 in 10 informants saw themselves living in cities at retirement age. In other words, many of

the respondents had plans involving circular migration practices: going to the city to embark on educational and/or professional pursuits, then returning to the countryside. Nevertheless, and of interest for the present analysis, *differences* in residential preferences between rural youth seem consistent over life phases, though less marked. It should also be noted that teenagers' residential preferences will not necessarily match their actual future residential choices (Listhaug et al., 1980; Myklebust, 1995). Nevertheless, they are good indicators of future migration practices, because their answers identify their wider cultural orientation, which will provide guidance for their choices about where to live.

In total, there seems to exist a systematic correspondence between class background and rural teenagers' social construction of rurality and, furthermore, between these constructions and migration preferences. Where you come from influences how you interpret the rural; your interpretation of rurality has an impact on your wishes concerning where to live and how to create your version of the good life.

### Structured freedom

To explain these survey results I suggest using the concept of habitus as the binding theoretical element between class background, social constructions of rurality and migration plans and preferences. The habitus works to disguise, for the actors, the social mechanisms underlying their appreciation of the countryside and their subsequent migrational choices along the rural–urban dimension. Nonetheless, childhood and adolescence in particular social environments seem to translate into corresponding ways to interpret and evaluate the social world.

**Table 2.** Where rural teenagers want to live when they are in their twenties (percent) ( $N = 558$ )

	Average scores	Positive views of the rural	Negative views of the rural
In the countryside	12.2	19.9	5.7
In a village/small town	33.5	36.0	30.9
In a city (suburbs/centre)	54.3	44.1	63.4
Significance		***	***

Sig. tests (Pearson's chi-squared): \* < .10; \*\* < .05; \*\*\* < .01.

Data source: 'Migration and Youth Culture in the Mountain Region'.

Thus, some rural youths develop different preferences for what is on offer in the countryside and in the city. Moreover, the same upbringing equips these rural youths to take advantage of these offers in correspondingly different ways: the rural child coming from a family with strong educational capital will be more likely to conceive of higher education as an inherent value, but, in addition, will have better chances of success if he or she actually ventures into the educational institutions of the cities. To employ a parallel from Bourdieu's own work, the offspring of the cultural elites are not only more likely to develop aesthetic tastes for non-figurative paintings but also more able to interpret and understand – to make 'use of' – such cultural artefacts (Bourdieu, 1984).

Elsewhere (Rye, 2006c), I have elaborated on this logic by using farm youths as an example. The great majority of these young people, both male and female children of farmers, had opportunities to undertake long and demanding education programmes, and they could in any case move from the countryside to a city – if that was what they wanted. In contrast, the analyses show that farm youths' strategies for the future were different because of their positive assessments of rural life. Farm youths did not explain their wishes for a future in the countryside within agriculture in terms of compulsion, pressure and expectations from their surroundings – that they must become farmers. Nor was the reason that they could choose farming as a livelihood due to allodial rights. The farm youths genuinely wanted a rural and agrarian future, a life rooted in their rural idyll.

However, the relationship between class, social constructions of rurality and strategies is not as straightforward as the suggested line of argument may indicate. At least three modifications are required. First, as Bourdieu emphasizes in response to the criticism of his works being 'overly structuralist', the nature of causality in the social world is a matter of chance rather than of destiny. The relationships between social background and actors' social practices are not deterministic, but rather probabilistic. This applies even more strongly to the sociological formulations of these relationships; these are descriptions of past regularities and not in any sense 'laws' (see Bourdieu, 1993: 24–6; see also Bugge, 2002: 222).

Second, this leads to an awareness of the inherent imperfection of sociological models in terms of their

ability to account for the diversity in social life, and even less to account for the future. Even though some categories of rural youth appear to conceptualize the rural *relatively more* positively than others, and accordingly are also less appreciative of a non-rural future, the attraction of the city is, *in absolute terms*, strong within most sub-categories of rural youth. In the survey, even the majority of farm youths expressed residential choices for less rural places than 'the countryside'. This invites alternative explanations than those of social class and habitus employed here. To some extent such alternatives may centre on competing structural forces at work, e.g. the restructuring of the agricultural sector, which makes it difficult to sustain smaller farm production economically, thus making farming an impossible future. Another explanation may focus on the gendered differences within categories of rural youth, which produce a great diversity in their social constructions and strategies, regardless of their common class background.

Nevertheless, any sociological model will, regardless of its level of sophistication and the number of independent variables included, fail to account for all variation in social life. If anything, we know for sure that some rural youths will be located in the social space where no rural sociologist, or themselves, could predict that they would arrive.

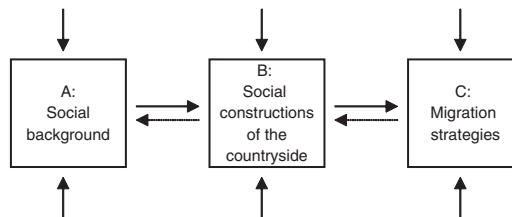
Thus, the analyses suggest class as one among a number of factors that contribute to – but do not determine – migration patterns. A claim that present-day rural societies are 'class societies' where resources are unequally distributed, and that this structures actors' migration pattern, is not equivalent to a claim that rural societies are class societies *only*. In other words, the analyses demonstrate that the rural youths' habitus sets its *imprint* on their future actions, which is not the same as claiming that the class habitus represents an obligatory and narrowly predefined trodden path, with no escape opportunities.

Third, and again reflecting a major strand of the critique of the Bourdieusian tradition, the relationship between social background, social constructions and actors' strategies should be considered as a *two-way* relationship. To take but one example, the migration practices of Norwegian rural youths, which have generated net out-migration, contribute to the new configuration of rural space. By leaving the countryside, this group lends support to the 'rural dull' image

and the impression that the countryside cannot provide attractive settings for its youth – an impression that in turn influences later birth cohorts' images of the countryside. Another example is how the class-structured migration patterns noted above, where those with the highest capital resources are the most likely to out-migrate, have an impact upon the very class composition of the rural communities.

The explicative line of argument, incorporating these qualifications, may be illustrated as in Figure 1. The reflexive nature of the relationships between structures and social constructions, e.g. between class and images of rurality, furthermore needs to be embedded in more concrete material conditions of the rural. For example, rural youth's image of the rural as dull is often caused by the countryside plainly offering a more limited range of opportunities and challenges – fewer jobs, a smaller range of educational possibilities and spare-time activities, and so forth. Furthermore, the tameness of rurality experienced by many rural youth is traceable, *although not in a deterministic fashion*, to various structural properties in society. Tight economic times for Norwegian municipalities result in the closure of youth clubs and less exciting Saturday nights in rural Norway; lower global food prices result in less attractive prospects for rural youth wanting a farming career. In contrast, few developments have contributed as much to the social representations of a rural idyll as did the discovery of North Sea oil, the revenues from which made it possible to develop, for example, the welfare state in rural Norway and the high level of agricultural subsidies.

On the other hand, social representations of rurality reflect back on and influence further development of these social structures (see Baylina and Berg, 2010). For example, the traditionally strong symbolic position of the rural in Norwegian society has been a precondition for the economic development of the countryside in later decades. The maintenance of agricultural production in remote rural regions, investments in communication infrastructure in the periphery and the decentralized politico-administrative structure of Norway are all results of long-term policies founded on wide popular support. For example, in annual opinion polls in Norway, about three-quarters of respondents subscribe to the view that the agricultural sector should be kept at its current size, and they also express strong support for



**Figure 1.** A model of the relationship between social background, social construction of the countryside and strategies

maintaining the present level of agricultural subsidies (Dalen, 2003). In conclusion, rurality needs to be conceived of in terms of social constructions, ‘mental categories’ in Mormont’s (1990) terminology, which are located in actors’ minds, *and* as materiality external to these. The rural is both representation and location. These conceptualizations of the rural do not stand in an oppositional relationship but are intertwined with each other, and, as noted by Baylina and Berg (2010: 13), ‘research should go back and forth between the representations and the realities of rurality’.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have put forward a theoretical framework that negotiates between contemporary social-constructionist and traditional structure-oriented class analyses in an effort to understand the migration of rural youth across the rural-to-urban hierarchy. The foundation is Bourdieu’s social theory, using in particular his concepts of economic and cultural capital and habitus. As noted, such a class perspective is not able to account for all facets of rural migration, or even most of them. However, the discussion does document the relevance of reintroducing class analysis as one approach among others when attempting to understand the underlying logic of actors’ movements in social and geographical space. This is long overdue, as class analysis has been out of fashion for decades within mainstream rural studies. There are important divisions in rural societies that follow a class logic, and these have an impact on migration practices. Where rural youths ‘migrate to’ and ‘what awaits them’ are both dependent on the travelling provisions they bring along.

Further, elaborating on insights from contemporary social-constructionist perspectives within rural migration research, the discussion suggests processes through which the weights of actors' inherited capital and their position in the social structure are mediated into actual migration practices partly through their cognitive and normative social constructions of 'rurality'. People's decisions to move in and out of rural areas, or to stay, are embedded in their evaluation of 'the rural' and its alternatives.

The migration practices of rural youth should be understood as elements of their striving for self-realization and construction of life projects; in Giddens' (1996: 28) terms, choosing 'how to be and how to act'. However, there are at the same time distinct class structures in their chosen strategies for how to do so. Actors' 'cultural liberation', Ziehe's (1989) concept that is often used in analyses that highlight (post-)modern youth's freedom of choice, is embedded in rather than disembedded from (Giddens, 1990) the local conditions. Thus, in accordance with Bourdieu, this paper argues for a view of migrants as 'free' actors. In terms of the paper's research question, the large numbers of out-migrating rural youth are leaving the countryside of their own choice, in search of the good life, and not feeling expelled or in any other way forced. Nevertheless, this freedom is a 'structured freedom', influenced by properties of their everyday lives, for example class position, through their habitus.

## Notes

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