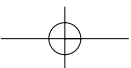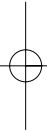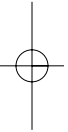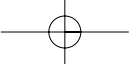# PART 1

INTRODUCING
RURAL GEOGRAPHY

1

Defining the Rural

Introduction

Clear your mind and think of the word 'rural'. What image do you see? Maybe you see the rolling green downland of southern England, or the wide open spaces of the American prairie? Perhaps it's the golden woodlands of the New England fall, or the forests of Scandinavia? The Rocky Mountains or the sun-baked outback of Australia? Are there any people in your rural picture? If so, what are they doing? Are they working? Or maybe they are tourists? What age are they? What colour are they? Are they men or women? Rich or poor? Do you see any buildings in your rural scene? Perhaps a quaint thatched cottage, or a white-washed farmstead? Maybe a ranch, or a simple log cabin? Or do you see a run-down dilapidated home, barely fit for human habitation; or an estate of modern, identikit, housing? Is there any evidence of economic activity? Farming, probably, but then do you see a farmyard of free-range animals, as the children's storybooks would have us believe, or do you see battery hen sheds, or endless fields of industrially produced corn? Maybe you see quarrying or mining or forestry. But what about factories, or hi-tech laboratories or office complexes? Are there any shops, or banks, or schools – or have they been converted into holiday homes? Are there any roads or traffic in your image? Is there any crime, or any sign of police on patrol? Do you see any problems of ill-health, or alcoholism, or drug abuse? Who owns the land that you are picturing? Who has access to it?

Do you still have a clear picture of what 'rural' means to you, or are you beginning to think that defining the rural is more complicated than you thought? There is, alas, no simple, standard, definition. Whatever picture of the 'rural' you have conjured up, it will probably be different to that imagined by the person sitting nearest to you as you read this book. This is not to say that we all have an entirely individual understanding of rurality. Our perceptions will be shaped by a wide range of influences that we will share with other people: where we live, where we holiday, which films we watch, which books we read. Local and national

cultural traditions are also important, as is what we learn at school, what we read in the newspapers and the political propaganda that we receive from pressure groups. In some countries, 'rural' is not a widely used concept at all but visitors to those countries will recognize spaces that look to them to be 'rural'. Thus, if our understanding of what 'rural' means is not individually specific, it is at least culturally specific. Someone living in the crowded countryside of south-east England will probably have a different idea about rurality than someone living in deepest North Dakota. A farming family in rural New Zealand will have a different idea than a city-dwelling tourist from Amsterdam. And so on … .

Yet, if 'rural' is such a vague and ambiguous term, in what sense can we talk about 'rural studies', or 'rural geography' or 'rural sociology'? This chapter introduces the different ways in which academics have attempted to produce a definition of rural, setting out the pros and cons of each approach, before eventually describing how the concept of rurality will be treated in this book.

Why Bother with Rural?

So, if 'rural' is such a difficult concept to define, why bother with it at all? For a start, distinctions between urban and rural, city and country, have a long historical pedigree and great cultural significance. Raymond Williams, one of the leading chroniclers of English language and literature, has observed that,

> 'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities … On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalised. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (Williams, 1973, p. 1)

So deep is this cultural tradition that differentiating between town and countryside is one of the instinctive ways in which we place order on the world around us. In academic usage, however, the term is more recent. Sociologist Marc Mormont, for example, has suggested that the use of 'rural' as an academic concept evolved during the 1920s and 1930s – a time when the countryside was undergoing major social and economic transformations – in an attempt to define the essential features of 'rural' society in the face of rapid urbanization and industrialization (Mormont, 1990). Very often, the definitions of rural society produced reflected a particular moral geography, with the 'rural' associated with values such as harmony, stability and moderation. These more judgemental ideas about the urban–rural dichotomy have been removed over time from academic thought, but the distinction remains a useful one for researchers for at least two reasons.

First, many governments officially distinguish between urban and rural areas and govern them through different institutions with different policies. For England, for example, the government published two separate policy papers in November 2000, one for 'urban

policy' and one for 'rural policy', and much of the latter will be administered by the Department of the Environment, Food and *Rural* Affairs and implemented through the government's *Countryside* Agency.

Secondly, many people living in rural areas identify themselves as 'rural people' following a 'rural way of life'. So strong is this sense of identity that when they are faced with problems such as unemployment, the decline of staple industry (such as agriculture) or the loss of local services, they do not build links of solidarity with people experiencing the same problems in urban areas, but rather assert their rural solidarity as a basis for resistance to a perceived 'urban threat'. An example of this can again be seen in the UK, where over 400,000 people joined a march in London in September 2002 organized by the Countryside Alliance to protest at the perceived neglect of rural areas and rural interests by the central-government (there is more on this in Chapter 14).

These two factors mean that although researchers may be able to identify the same social and economic processes at work in rural areas as in urban areas, they also know that the processes are operating in a different political environment and that the reactions of people affected may be different. The analysis of these differences, however, brings us back to the problem of what we mean by 'rural'. Halfacree (1993) identified four broad approaches that had been taken to defining the rural by rural researchers. These are (i) descriptive definitions; (ii) socio-cultural definitions; (iii) the rural as locality; and (iv) the rural as social representation. Each of these approaches will now be introduced and critiqued in turn.

Descriptive Definitions

Descriptive definitions of rurality are based on the assumption that a clear geographical distinction can be made between rural areas and urban areas on the basis of their socio-spatial characteristics, as measured through various statistical indicators. The simplest way of doing this is by population and this is the approach adopted in most official definitions of rural areas. After all, it appears to be fairly logical – we all know that towns and cities have larger populations than villages and dispersed rural communities. But, at precisely what population does a rural area become urban? As Table 1.1 shows, there is considerable variation in the maximum population size of a rural settlement permissible under the official definitions of rural and urban areas used in different countries.

There are other problems too. First, the population recorded depends on the boundaries of the area concerned. For example, if the population of the town in which I live, Aberystwyth in West Wales, is measured on its official community boundaries, then it comes in at just under 10,000 – sufficient to qualify as rural on some definitions. Yet the community boundary cuts right across the university campus. If the total population for the actual built-up urban area is counted, the real tally is nearer 20,000. Similarly, there are many rural counties in the United States that have larger populations than many incorporated urban areas, simply because they cover a much more extensive territory.

Secondly, simple population figures reveal nothing about the function of a settlement, or about the settlement's relation to its surrounding local area. A town of 1,000 people in Nebraska may be a definite urban centre for a dispersed rural population, but a village of 1,000 people in Massachusetts may be perceived to be rural in its regional context. Thirdly, distinctions based solely on population are arbitrary and artificial. Why should a settlement with 999 residents be classified as rural, and one with 1,000 residents be classified

Table 1.1 Official population-based definitions of rural settlements

Definition used by	Maximum population of a rural settlement	Notes
Iceland	300	Minimum population of an urban administrative unit
Canada	1,000	(+ population density less than 400 per km²) Census definition
France	2,000	
United States	2,500	Census definition
England	10,000	Countryside Agency definition
United Nations	20,000	
Japan	30,000	Minimum population of an urban administrative unit

as urban? What difference does that one extra person make?

Some official definitions of rurality have addressed these problems by developing more sophisticated models that also include reference to population density, land use and proximity to urban centres. In many countries a mix of different definitions is employed by different government agencies. For example, the website of the Rural Policy Research Institute (www.rupri.org) discusses nine different definitions used by parts of the United States government; whilst in the UK it has been *recently estimated* that there are over 30 different definitions of rural areas in use by different government agencies (ODPM, 2002). Many of these are actually 'negative' definitions in that they set out the characteristics of urban areas and designate anywhere that does not qualify as 'rural'. Three examples of this approach can be seen in the definitions used for the US and UK censuses and by the US Office of Budget and Management:

• The **US census** uses population to define urban areas as comprising all territory, population and housing units in places of 2,500 or more persons incorporated as cities, villages, boroughs (except in Alaska and New York), and towns (except in the six New England states, New York and

Wisconsin). Everywhere else is classified as 'rural'.

• The **UK census** uses land use to define urban areas as any area with more than twenty continuous hectares of 'urban land uses' – including permanent structures, transport corridors (roads, railways and canals), transport features (car parks, airports, service stations etc.), quarries and mineral works, and any open area completely enclosed by built-up sites. Everywhere else is classified as 'rural'.

• The **US Office of Budget and Management** defines metropolitan areas as at least one central county with a population of more than 50,000, plus any neighbouring county which has 'close economic and social relationships with the central county' – defined in terms of commuting patterns, population density and population growth. Anywhere outside a metropolitan area is classified as a 'non-metropolitan county' (Figure 1.1). Non-metropolitan counties are the most commonly used definition of a rural area in research and policy analysis in the United States.

All three of the above definitions, however, can be critiqued on the same grounds. First, they are dichotomous, in that they set up rural
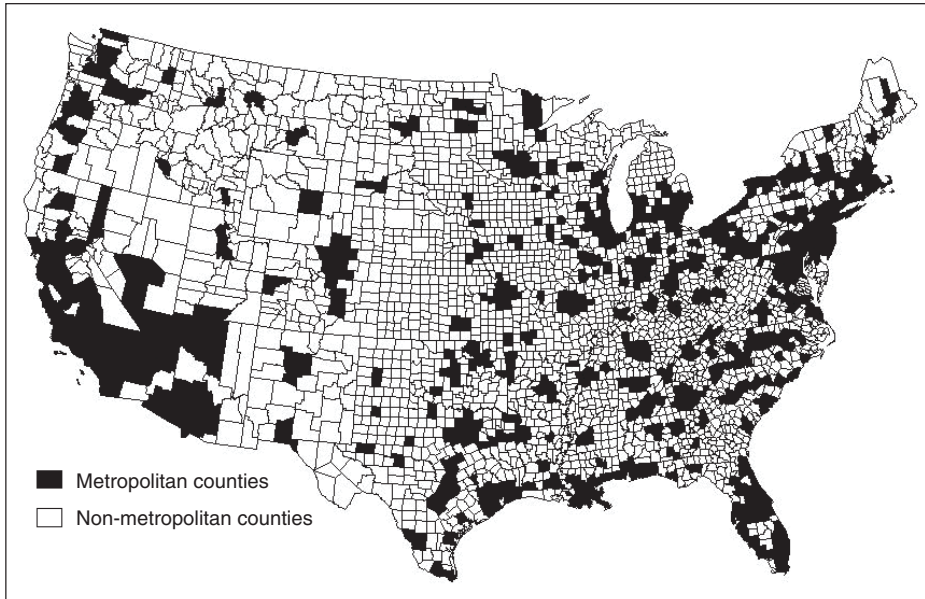
Figure 1.1   The US Office of Budget and Management's classification of metropolitan and
non-metropolitan countries in the United States
Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

areas in opposition to urban areas and recognize no in-between. Secondly, they are based on a very narrow set of indicators that reveal little about the social and economic processes that shape urban and rural localities. Thirdly, because rural areas are a residual category they are treated as homogeneous with no acknowledgement of the diversity of rural areas.

Indices of rurality

In an attempt to recognize some of the differences between degrees of rurality, and to overcome the problems that resulted from defining a rural area using just one or two indicators, Cloke (1977) and Cloke and Edwards (1986) constructed an 'index of rurality' for local government districts in England and Wales using a range of statistics from the 1971 and 1981 censuses. Significantly, the indicators used related not just to population (including population density, change, in-migration and out-migration and the age profile), but also household amenities

(percentage of households with hot water, fixed baths and inside WCs), occupational structure (percentage of workforce employed in agriculture), commuting patterns and the distance to urban centres. These indicators were fed into a formula that placed districts into one of five categories – extreme rural, intermediate rural, intermediate non-rural, extreme non-rural and urban (Figure 1.2).

Although the indicies of rurality did mark an improvement on simple dichotomous definitions, it still provokes a number of critical questions. First, why choose the indicators that were used? What, for example, does the percentage of households with a fixed bath tell us about rurality? Secondly, how was the weighting between different indicators determined? Is agricultural employment more or less important than population density in determining rurality? Thirdly, how are the boundaries between the five different categories decided? At what point on the artificial
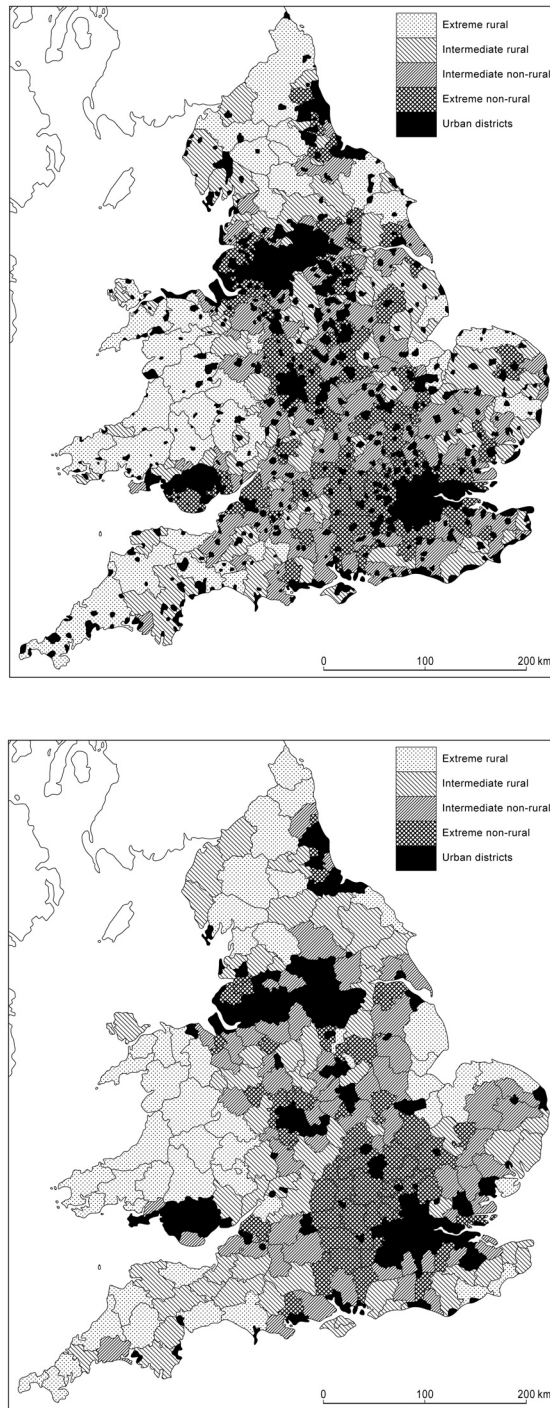
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Figure 1.2   The indicies of rurality for England and Wales, as calculated from the 1971 census (*a*) and the 1981 census (*b*)
Source: Cloke, 1977; Cloke and Edwards 1986

8

Table 1.2   Some urban/rural dichotomies employed in socio-cultural definitions

Author	Urban	Non-urban or rural
Becker	Secular	Sacred
Durkheim	Organic solidarity	Mechanical solidarity
Maine	Contact	Status
Redfield	Urban	Folk
Spencer	Industrial	Military
Tönnies	*Gesellschaft*	*Gemeinschaft*
Weber	Rational	Traditional

Source: Based on Phillips and Williams, 1984 and Reissman, 1964

scale produced by the formula does an 'intermediate rural' district become an 'inter-mediate non-rural' district?

More problematic still is the effect of using local government districts as the basis of the classification. Look at the two maps in Figure 1.2. On the 1971 map there are many isolated dots of black urban areas scattered across England and Wales. Yet, on the 1981 map they have disappeared. Did Britain suddenly become more rural during those ten years? No, local government had been reorganized in 1974, amalgamating the many small urban districts with their surrounding rural districts to create new, larger, districts – most of which came out as 'rural' when put through the formula for 1981. All that had happened was that the scale at which the index was calculated had changed.

Methodological flaws can be found with all the descriptive approaches employed to define rurality, but the real fundamental problem is identified by Halfacree (1993): 'Descriptive methods only describe the rural, they do not define it themselves' (p. 24). The descriptive definitions simply reflect preconceptions about what rural areas should be like, but offer no explanation as to why they are like that (or not).

Socio-cultural Definitions

Just as descriptive definitions have attempted to identify rural *territories*, so socio-cultural definitions have been used to try to identify rural *societies*. In these approaches, distinctions are made between 'urban' and 'rural' society on the basis of residents' values and behaviours and on the social and cultural characteristics of communities. Two of the best-known examples are the models developed by Ferdinand Tönnies and by Louis Wirth. Tönnies based his distinction on the social ties found within rural and urban areas by contrasting the *Gemeinschaft*, or community, of the rural, with the *Gesellschaft*, or society, of the urban (see Tönnies, 1963). Wirth (1938), meanwhile, suggested that urban life was dynamic, unstable and impersonal, with an urban resident having different contacts through work, home and leisure, whereas rural life was stable, integrated and stratified, with the same people coming into contact with each other in different contexts. Other writers produced similar dichotomies (Table 1.2).

Dichotomies of this type over-emphasized the contrast between urban and rural societies. In response, the concept of a rural–urban continuum was devised, suggesting that communities could be identified as displaying different degrees of urban and rural characteristics. However, Pahl (1968) criticized the rural–urban continuum for continuing to oversimplify the dynamics of social and spatial milieux, arguing that 'some people are of the city but are not in it, whereas others are in the

city but are not of it' (Phillips and Williams, 1984, p. 13). Pahl's own work identified so-called urban societies in rural Hertfordshire, whilst Young and Wilmott (1957) identified the supposed characteristics of rural communities in the East End of London.

The Rural as a Locality

The third approach to defining rural areas differed from the above two by focusing on the processes that might create distinctive rural localities. This approach was influenced by a wider debate within geography in the late 1980s that had explored how far local structures could shape the outcomes of social and economic processes. If, as some writers claimed, a 'locality effect' could be identified, might not it also be possible to distinguish between urban and rural localities? The challenge was therefore to identify the structural features that might allow this to be done: as Halfacree (1993) noted, 'rural *localities*, if they are to be recognised and studied as categories in their own right, must be carefully defined according to that which makes them *rural*' (p. 28).

Halfacree (1993) records that three main ways of doing this were attempted. First, it was suggested that rural space had to be associated with primary production (such as agriculture), or with 'the competitive sector'. Yet, as Halfacree notes, 'many urban localities could be similarly classified' (p. 28). Secondly, it was proposed that low population densities created distinctive connections between the rural and issues of collective consumption. Yet, again, Halfacree notes that the assertion is debatable, especially 'given the decline in the importance of friction of distance' (p. 28). Thirdly, rural localities were identified with a particular role in *consumption*, including the collective consumption of tourist sites and the private consumption of in-migrant house-buyers. However, it is not clear how this differs from gentrifying urban neighbourhoods and urban heritage sites.

The rural as locality approach faltered, therefore, because none of the structural features claimed to be rural could be proven to be uniquely or intrinsically rural. Instead, they simply highlighted the way in which the same social and economic processes appeared to be at work in both so-called urban and rural areas. Thus, in 1990 Hoggart proposed that it was time to 'do away with rural', arguing that it was a confusing 'chaotic conception' that lacked explanatory power:

> The broad category 'rural' is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural–urban similarities can be sharp. (Hoggart, 1990, p. 245)

So why are we still talking about the 'rural' more than a decade later? Because, as noted earlier, whatever academics might say about the difficulty of defining rural areas, there are still millions of people who consider themselves to be 'rural', to live in 'rural areas', and to follow a 'rural way of life'. It is the investigation of these perceptions that provides the foundation of the fourth approach.

The Rural as Social Representation

'There is an alternative way of defining rurality,' writes Halfacree, 'which, initially, does not require us to abstract causal structures operating at the rural scale. This alternative comes about because "the rural" and its synonyms are *words and concepts understood and used by people in everyday talk*' (Halfacree, 1993, p. 29). Thus, instead of trying to identify particular social characteristics or economic structures that are uniquely distinctive to rural areas, the social representation approach begins by asking what symbols and signs and images people conjure up when they think about the rural. This actually produces a more robust and

flexible way of defining rurality, which can, for example, accommodate the effects of social and economic change in rural environments. As Mormont (1990) has argued, social and economic change means that there is no longer a single 'rural space' that can be functionally defined. Rather there are many imagined social spaces occupying the same territory.

The question of defining rurality hence becomes one of 'how people construct themselves as being rural', understanding rurality as 'a state of mind'. To employ a more technical vocabulary, rurality is 'socially constructed' (see Box 1.1) and 'rural' 'becomes a world of social, moral and cultural values in which rural dwellers participate' (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992, p. 360).

Box 1.1   Key term

Social construction: The way in which people give themselves, a place, an object or an idea an identity by attributing it with particular social, cultural, aesthetic and ideological characteristics. A social construct exists only in as much that people imagine it to exist.

This approach shifts attention from the statistical features of rural areas to the people who live there or visit it. It suggests that an area does not become 'rural' because of its economy or population density or other structural characteristics – but because the people who live there or use it think of it as being 'rural'. People have preconceived ideas about what 'rurality' means – informed by television, film, literature, holidays, life experience etc. – and use this 'knowledge' to identify certain areas, landscapes, lifestyles, activities, people and so on as

being 'rural' (see for example Box 1.2). This in turn has a causal effect. If people think that they live in a rural area, and have preconceived ideas about what rural life should be like, it can influence their attitudes and behaviour. Similarly, people may be motivated to protect their image of what the countryside should be like if they feel it to be threatened – for example by housing development. Thus, as the rural is socially constructed differently by different people, conflicts can arise about what exactly it means to be rural and what rural areas should look like.

Box 1.2   What is rural? Views from rural Britain

In early 2002 a British pressure group, the Countryside Alliance, which represents traditional, pro-hunting and pro-farming rural interests, asked its members what it meant to be 'rural' and how 'rural' should be defined. These are some of the responses to the question 'What is rural?':

- 'A sparsely populated area, i.e. villages, hamlets and small towns necessitating travel for amenities not supplied in locality, i.e. cinema, bank, supermarket.'
- 'Rural should be defined as areas in which the primary land use is of an agricultural nature. This should include equestrian activities. Tourist activities should also be included. Dormitory villages should be excluded (definition of dormitory village

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Box 1.2   (Continued)

should be one where more than half of the working population travel more than 15 miles to work).'
- "Rural" is as much a state of mind as an actual place. It is an acceptance and under-standing of people and things living in a mainly agricultural area, the practices and traditions.'
- 'Rural is seeing the stars on a clear night, being able to breath unpolluted air, see-ing wildlife in its natural habitat, being able to sleep without the constant noise of traffic. The beauty of nature in landscape, woodlands, hedgerows, etc.'
- 'Living and working in the countryside – with roots in the countryside from child-hood. An understanding of the countryside and an unsentimental attitude to the animals, both wild and domesticated.'
- "Rural" is where strange cars are noted'.

For more contributions see www.countryside-alliance.org/policy/whatis/index.html.

The different ways in which the rural is socially constructed can be described as dif-ferent 'discourses of rurality'. 'Discourse' in this sense means a way of understanding the world (see Box 1.3), and therefore discourses of rurality are ways of understanding the rural. As Halfacree (1993) comments, 'our attempts at defining the rural can be termed "academic discourses" because they are the constructs of academics attempting to under-stand, explain and manipulate the social world' (p. 31). But academics are not the only people to produce discourses. Frouws (1998) describes some of the *policy discourses* that have informed the government of rural areas in the Netherlands. These include the *agri-ruralist discourse*, in which the interests of agriculture are prioritized and 'farmers are considered as the principal creators and carriers of the rural as social, economic and cultural space' (Frouws, 1998, p. 59); the *utilitarian discourse*, in which the problems of rural areas are seen as the product of underdevelopment, and rural development initiatives are required to inte-grate rural areas into modern markets and socio-economic structures; and the *hedonist discourse*, in which the countryside is repre-sented as a space of leisure and recreation and the 'ideal countryside' is perceived in terms of natural beauty and attractiveness.

Box 1.3   *Key term*

Discourse: There are many different definitions of precisely what 'discourse' is, and the term is often used quite loosely. Put simply, however, discourses structure the way we see things. They are collections of ideas, beliefs and understandings that inform the way in which we act. Often we are influenced by particular discourses promoted through the media, through education, or through what we call 'common sense'. Derek Gregory, writing in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, identifies three important aspects of discourse. (1) Discourses are not

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> ### Box 1.3   (Continued)
>
> independent, abstract, ideas, but are materially embedded in everyday life. They inform what we do and are reproduced through our actions. (2) discourses produce our 'taken for granted world'. They naturalize a particular view of the world and position ourselves and others in it. (3) Discourses always produce partial, situated, knowledge, reflecting our own circumstances. They are characterized by relations of power and knowledge and are always open to contestation and negotiation.

Just as important are the *lay discourses of rurality* produced and reproduced by ordinary people in their everyday lives, and the *popular discourses of rurality* that are disseminated through cultural media including art, literature, television and film. These two types of discourse are closely related as lay discourses will inevitably be influenced by popular discourses, and to some extent the opposite is also true. One of the most important popular discourses of rurality is that of the rural idyll (Bunce, 2003). This presents an aspirational picture of an idealized rurality, often emphasizing the pastoral landscape and the perceived 'peace and quiet', as Little and Austin (1996) and Short (1991) both describe:

> Rural life is associated with an uncomplicated, innocent, more genuine society in which traditional values persist and lives are more real. Pastimes, friendships, family relations and even employment are seen as somehow more honest and authentic, unencumbered with the false and insincere trappings of city life or with their associated dubious values. (Little and Austin, 1996, p. 102)

> [the countryside] is pictured as a less-hurried lifestyle where people follow the seasons rather than the stock market, where they have more time for one another and exist in more organic community where people have a place and an authentic role. The countryside has become the refuge from modernity. (Short, 1991, p. 34)

Whilst the 'rural idyll' is a myth, it has been influential in encouraging people to visit the countryside as tourists, and to move there as in-migrants. For many such people, elements of the rural idyll are entangled with lived experience to produce lay discourses that are never entirely matched in reality. Other lay discourses are more grounded in everyday life and can be cynical of, even negative towards, rural life.

Thinking about Rurality in Two English Villages: a Case Study

Examples of lay discourses of rurality can be found in the reports of two ethnographical studies of communities in rural southern England in the early 1990s – one by Michael Bell (1994) in the village of 'Childerley' (a pseudonym) in Hampshire, and the other by Owain Jones (1995) in an unnamed village in Somerset. The two villages are similar in that they both are within commuting distance of larger towns, and both have populations mixed between long-term, locally born residents and more recent in-migrants.

In Childerley, Bell found a number of in-migrants who described the rural nature of the village by drawing comparisons with the towns or cities that they had moved from. Usually, such comparisons emphasized the different pace of life:

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In the towns, people are in a rush. That's the difference! In the towns, you get in your car [for everything]. I had a neighbor, lived there thirteen years. But I never spoke to her because she'd come out of her door, get in her car, go off, come back, and go indoors … Here, the pace is that much slower. (In-migrant, quoted by Bell, 1994, pp. 91–92)

Life is like it was in the past here. You feel like you should lock it up every night. Coming home at night when we first moved here we used to think we should be closing a gate behind us at the bottom of the hill. (In-migrant, quoted by Bell, 1994, p. 93)

The influence of the 'rural idyll' can be seen in both these observations, yet Bell notes that even those who spoke most enthusiastically about the countryside ideal often qualified their statements. Furthermore, the perception of the countryside as a slower pace of life was shared by many longer-term residents. Bell quotes an 18-year-old farmer's son who comments that rural 'means a quieter lifestyle to start with. I don't know. You could call it an escape from the rat-race' (p. 91).

There are indeed a number of common elements that recur in the descriptions of rurality recorded by both Bell and Jones from all sections of the communities studied – and which reflect both geographical and social factors. First, the geographical context is important. Jones records a villager who suggested that rural meant 'a lack of industry, traffic, shops, offices, dense man-made environment' (p. 43), and another who commented that the village was rural because it was 'void of urban facilities, i.e., industry, street lighting' (p. 43). The presence of farming is also significant for many, Jones again reported the comments of one resident that, 'we are fortunate to have several local farms, animals graze the fields.

Tractors track up and down the road. Not always a blessing!' (p. 42).

Secondly, rural life was associated with a close-knit sense of community, with people drawing on examples from their own experience:

the small size of the community has encouraged me to get involved in part so that I can meet other villagers and also in order to support village amenities such as the hall, church, pub and assorted events. (Villager quoted by Jones, 1995, p. 44)

People have got time, time for living, time to talk, which I think is smashing. I mean, even in our little country shop, they've got time to serve somebody rather than expect them to rush around and get it all themselves and get 'em out as quick as possible. (Villager quoted by Bell, 1994, p. 91)

Thirdly, Bell observes that many villagers felt that rural life was closer to nature than urban life. The presence of animals was one symbol of this. Bell quotes one resident who said that the word 'country' made him think of 'woods, fields, the plowed fields, the sheep, the cows, the walks I go on, the dells, the badger holes, the fox holes, the rabbits, the lot of woodpeckers you see, the deer' (p. 90); whilst Jones quotes one comment that the village was rural because 'we regularly get stuck behind cows on their way back from milking. We hear sheep, birds, tractors etc.' (p. 42). For some, however, rural life was not just about *seeing nature*, but also about *understanding nature*. Knowledge about the seasons, botany, hunting and traditional culinary methods was used to distinguish true rural people. As one recent in-migrant to Childerley – albeit with a rural family background – told Bell: 'My aunt always told me that I can't be a country girl until I learn to eat jugged rabbit' (p. 104).

Yet, both Bell and Jones also found people who felt that their village was no longer rural,

or at least that it had lost some of its rural identity. This was often because of the decline of agriculture. One villager told Jones that 'very few of [the village] people work in agriculture so it is not as rural as it was 20 or 30 years ago' (p. 42), whilst Bell repeats a comment that Childerley 'is not really a rural area … It's not so farmery here' (p. 96).

Summary

'Rural' is one of those curious words which everyone thinks they know what it means, but which is actually very difficult to define precisely. Attempts by academics to define and delimit rural areas and rural societies have always run into problems, sometimes because the distinctions they have drawn have been rather arbitrary, sometimes because they have over-emphasized the differences between city and country, and sometimes because they have under-emphasized the diversity of the countryside. It is not surprising that by the late 1980s some geographers were suggesting that 'rural' be abandoned altogether as a category of analysis.

Yet, the concept of rurality is still important in the way that people think about their identity and their everyday life. As such, the dominant approach in rural studies today is to see 'rurality' as a 'social construct'. This means that geographers no longer try to draw precise boundaries around rural areas and sociologists no longer try to identify the essential characteristics of rural society. Rather, rural researchers now try to understand how particular places, objects, traditions, practices and people come to be identified as 'rural' and the difference that this makes to how people live their everyday lives.

This is the approach that is taken in this book. It is not a book about the geography of territorially delimited 'rural areas', neither is it about distinctively rural social processes. Indeed, many of the processes that will be discussed are at work in urban areas and urban society as well. Rather, the book is concerned with examining the processes that shape people's experiences and perceptions of contemporary rurality – and the responses that are adopted by individuals and institutions in order to protect or promote particular ideas about rurality. As such, the book is structured into four parts. After this opening, introductory, section, the second part examines the processes that are shaping the contemporary countryside, including processes of economic, social, demographic and environmental change. The third section explores responses to these processes, including political responses and strategies for rural development and conservation. Finally, the fourth part investigates how rural change is experienced in people's lives.

Further Reading

To read more about the different approaches to defining rurality, and about how rurality is 'socially constructed' by individuals, see two key papers by Keith Halfacree: 'Locality and social representation: space, discourses and alternative definitions of the rural', in *Journal of Rural Studies*, volume 9, pages 23–37 (1993) and 'Talking about rurality: social representations of the rural as expressed by residents of six English parishes', in

Journal of Rural Studies, volume 11, pages 1–20 (1995). For more on the case studies, see Michael Bell's book *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Country Village* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Owain Jones's paper 'Lay discourses of the rural: developments and implications for rural studies', in *Journal of Rural Studies*, volume 11, pages 35–49 (1995). The concept of the 'rural idyll' is discussed in detail by Michael Bunce, 'Reproducing rural idylls', in Paul Cloke (ed.), *Country Visions* (Pearson, 2003).

Websites

The various definitions of rurality used in the United States are described and discussed by the Rural Policy Research Institute at www.rupri.org. For more contributions to the Countryside Alliance's debate on 'What is Rural?' see www.countryside-alliance. org/policy/whatis/index.html.