

Thinking About Rural Inequalities as a Cross-National Research Project

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Introduction

The UK and the US share many attributes that would seem to make them good candidates for comparative social and economic analysis. They share a language, strong historical connections, similar forms of political and economic organization, and a host of relationships spanning a wide range of societal domains. Accordingly, one would think that social scientists could design and conduct comparative analyses of social structure and social change across the two nations; on issues such as the determinants of poverty and income inequality, factors associated with urban and regional development, or aging and the life course. With respect to this particular special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies*, one would expect a comparative analysis of Inequalities, of the changing fortunes of rural people, communities and environments in the US and UK. However, amidst this similarity, the UK and US are also importantly different. Hence, methodologically harmonized comparative analysis is not possible.

As has been discussed elsewhere (Shucksmith and Brown 2016), while truly comparative analysis of rural social and economic change is not possible across the UK and US, it is possible to place the two nations next to each other to identify similarities and differences in rural structures, changes, and policies. This introductory essay provides a conceptual framework for considering the diverse papers that comprise the *JRS* special issue on “Rural Inequalities Amidst Economic Crisis and Change.” We identify and examine similarities and differences between rural society and economy in the US and

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UK, and discuss the conceptual frameworks and research approaches currently used by rural scholars in the respective countries.³ In addition, we identify institutional structures that have developed to educate rural scholars, and to produce and disseminate evidence-based information on rural society and rural change.

Comparing the UK and US

As acknowledged above, and in our previous writings, strictly harmonized analytical and theoretical comparisons of rural community structure and change in the US and UK is not possible. Rather, the two nations can be placed in a “trans-Atlantic dialog” thereby exploring similarities and differences in rural structures and transformations (Shortall and Warner 2012). Hence, even though definitions of rurality and other key concepts may differ, and the methodology of rural research may follow different approaches, it is possible to place rural people and communities in the UK and US in parallel, thereby identifying fundamental similarities and differences in structures and changes across the two nations (Lowe 2012). The discussion in this section identifies some of the main ways in which rural US and UK are similar while at the same time different.

Some Fundamental Similarities between the Rural UK and US:

The most obvious similarity is that both nations are, and have been, highly urbanized for many decades.⁴ Regardless of how one delineates rural and urban populations, a large majority of the population of both nations resides in urban areas. According to the World Bank (2015), the UK is 83 percent urban while the US is 82 percent urban. The US’s rate of urbanization is more rapid raising from

³ The articles comprising this special issue were produced by scholars participating in the Trans-Atlantic Rural Research Network (TARRN). The papers were originally presented at TARRN’s annual meeting in Aberystwyth, Wales in 2016.

⁴ The entire world became 50% urban in 2007 (World Bank 2015)

70 percent in 1960 compared with an increase from 78 percent in the UK during that time. Accordingly, neither nation's rural population has exceeded a quarter of all people for over 60 years.

While the US and UK are both highly urbanized, the statistical measurement of urbanization differs across the two nations. The US uses two approaches; (a) a nodal measurement wherein places with less than 2500 residents are considered rural, and (b) a regional approach wherein large cities and their surrounding hinterland counties are aggregated into metropolitan regions with all other counties being non-metropolitan.^{5 6}

As Champion and Brown (2012) have discussed, the UK also statistically defines "rural" in multiple ways. Partly, this is because of differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The finest grained UK definition is based on the spatial extent of built-up land. Places that exceed a particular population threshold (say 10,000) are urban while all else is rural. All parts of the UK have produced hierarchical typologies of places that are useful for analysis and/or program targeting and administration. These classifications typically focus on population within certain areas. There is however, for each place a default rural/ urban definition.⁷Hence, while the US and UK use different statistical techniques to differentiate rural from urban, the conceptual underpinnings of these measures –population size, density, regional interdependence, are similar enough to place the resulting rural-urban aggregations next to each other for comparison.

The second obvious similarity between the US and UK is that both nations have experienced two major rural economic transformations during the last 70 plus years: (a) from heavy dependence on

⁵ The non-metropolitan residual is disaggregated into "micropolitan" and "non-core based' counties. This recognizes a degree of urbanization within the hinterland itself.

⁶ In fact, the US government uses more than two dozen different measures of rural and urban for program administration (Cromartie 2006)

⁷ In 2005, DEFRA, the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, has produced a six fold district-level typology that has proved extremely useful for research and policy. Unfortunately, this classification is only available for England (Rural Evidence Research Centre 2005).

extractive to industrial employment during the 1950s-70s, and subsequently from manufacturing to services (Vias and Nelson 2006; Atterton, Bryden and Johnson 2006). However, while services dominate rural economies in both nations, high wage information-intensive services have grown disproportionately rapidly in the rural UK (e.g., compared with urban areas), but have lagged behind their urban counterparts in the US (Atterton, Bryden and Johnson 2012; Brown and Schafft 2019).

Another fundamental similarity between the rural UK and US is that rural areas have become increasingly integrated with their urban neighbors. Rather than a rural vs. urban binary, both nations are increasingly characterized by a rural-urban interface where social, economic and environmental interactions produce and reproduce an intense set of mutually interdependent relationships among neighboring places (Lichter and Brown 2011; Brown and Shucksmith 2017). Whether it is local agriculture, waste management, public safety or fire protection, rural and urban areas are increasingly linked together in this field of interdependencies.

A final similarity that is worth noting between the UK and US is that rural populations are aging more rapidly than their urban counterparts in both countries. In the US rapid rural aging is a result of long term net out migration of young adults, low fertility, and in some areas net in migration at older ages and subsequent aging in place of these older in-movers. While these same processes also account for rural aging in the UK, net out migration during working ages, and especially during pre-retirement, is less prevalent. Moreover, rural aging in the UK is typically seen as a “care and pension issue,” while rural aging in the US, especially if it is the result of retirement migration, is framed more positively as a rural development opportunity.

Some Fundamental Differences between the Rural UK and US:

Policies toward rural people and communities are fundamentally different in the UK and US. This reflects basic differences in the respective nation’s overarching social welfare states. To be blunt,

while the UK has a defined rural policy, the US lacks a coherent strategy for assisting rural people and communities, except in the case support of agriculture. The UK's experience has given it, and Europe more generally, a greater commitment to the welfare state (Bryden and Warner, 2012). EU rural policy is underpinned by convergence theory, and the idea that it is important to invest in lagging regions in order to ensure economic and social cohesion (Shortall and Warner, 2012). This embodies a commitment to maintaining rural areas, regardless of levels of remoteness. By contrast, many US policy makers view the support of lagging rural regions as wasteful, and a drag on the nation's overall level of economic growth (Drabenstott and Sheaff 2001). Moreover, American values emphasize equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. Americans work hard, more hours than Europeans, and believe in individual responsibility more than the responsibility and solidarity of the welfare state (Fukuyama, 2006). Hence in the US there is very little rural policy as such, and the policies that affect people in rural areas are derived from policies that affect people regardless of where they live (Shortall and Warner, 2012).

Another very significant difference is what rural **means** in the UK and the US. Rural in the UK varies, with Wales and Scotland having remote rural areas, Northern Ireland having a rural border with the Republic of Ireland, and England being the most densely populated country in Europe. The idea of the rural idyll shapes the understanding of rural areas in the UK and is most pronounced in England. The OECD (2011) cannot classify England as rural using its own statistical definition, and instead uses a 'cultural' definition because it recognizes the strength of the UK's affinity with rural places. This romanticized notion of rural that developed with English industrialization is evident in the art and literature of the time. The landed gentry of England held a privileged position and were considered of higher status than the 'nouveau riche' who made their income from industry (Ashton, 1989; Hobsbawm, 1983). The rural elite have shaped rural areas, maintaining their beauty and preserving their heritage. It is an elite space and one primarily occupied by the privileged. The rural elite continue to have influential

roles in shaping policies. Wealthy titled people have key roles in many rural preservation organizations and lobby groups such as Action for Rural Communities England, the Rural Coalition, and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (Shortall and Alston, 2016). The countryside is socially constructed as a place of heritage and it is highly preserved. This brings with it social problems. Because rural is an elite space, affordable housing for lower social classes is a real difficulty (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). With the exception of agricultural migrant workers, rural UK is also a very white space (Woods XX).

The rural UK is an issue of considerable policy concern. Often this is fueled by a belief, often with little evidence, that the rural UK is disadvantaged or marginalized. The House of Lords report (2018) takes the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to task for not having attended sufficiently to the 'rural affairs' part of its portfolio, and recommended that this brief be given to a different government department. This prompted a strong government pushback, asserting its commitment to rural issues and arguing it was housed in the right department. The debate is illustrative of the commitment and attention to rural at a central government level. While many rural initiatives are driven by the European Union's Rural Development Programme, there are also strong national initiatives such as rural proofing, the Rural Needs Act in Northern Ireland, the Scottish rural university/ research institutes, and the various rural gender mainstreaming initiatives in Northern Ireland (FAO, 2018). Rural is conspicuously present on the public policy agenda.

Similar to their counterparts in the UK, Americans tend to hold positive values toward rural people and communities (Brown et al 1997). However, this rural preference seldom translates into explicit rural policies. In fact, the US has no real rural policies, and there is less commitment to maintaining rural places and landscapes, let alone assisting rural people who have been marginalized by decades of industrial restructuring. Scholars have argued that lagging regions in the US are seen as needing more market not more government (Brown and Warner, 1991). In keeping with the American emphasis on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome, it is assumed that individuals in

areas of decline will relocate to places with better economic opportunities (Brown and Swanson, 2003). The US welfare state, overall, is less developed than in the UK and the key principles of equality are rooted in equality of opportunity and individualism (Shortall and Warner, 2010). Hence, a particular policy focus on rural people and communities is difficult to justify within this efficiency-based framework. If rural places are inefficient, then supporting them is wasteful. If people are displaced in declining economies, then they should move to areas [typically urban or suburban] with better economic opportunities. A sentiment for place is largely missing in US domestic policy. Places are seen as interchangeable locations of economic activity. Social relations and community legacies are not prioritized in US domestic development policy.

Many American rural areas are more geographically remote than in the UK, and they are also less privileged. Levels of wealth are lower, the prevalence of poverty is higher, and the race profile is often more diverse in stark contrast to the image of the genteel rural English elite. Rural America is not a white space. Questions of race are more pronounced in the US overall, and especially in the rural South and Southwest. By contrast the rural UK tends to be white and privileged. While the US focuses on poverty in rural areas, the UK focuses on social exclusion. This studies the extent to which people are socially integrated so that they can fully participate in economic, social and political life. The extent to which this is linked to poverty is never clearly articulated.

Similarities and Differences in Approaches to Rural Studies

Rural studies in the US and UK start from the same point, e.g., an assumption that where one lives affects a person's social and economic opportunities over the life course (Brown 2019f). The intersection of individual and place shapes and motivates research on a raft of social issues such as social inclusion/exclusion, poverty and inequality (Shucksmith and Schafft 2012), the determinants and consequences of internal migration (Champion et al 2018), and fiscal capacity, access to essential

services and health and well-being (Warner 2006; Glasgow et al 2005). Population dynamics, changing family structures, economic transformations, land use and other environmental processes occur *in* places, and they affect and are effected by the social and economic organization *of* places. Moreover, policy regimes must account for micro and macro-level processes as well as the interaction between levels.

While rural social science in the UK and US is motivated by a similar set of issues, research strategies tend to differ in the UK compared with its US counterparts. This reflects the strong influence of European social theory on UK research, including research on rural transformation and change. Research in the UK is more likely to be framed through a social constructionist lens, while studies in the US are framed more structurally. Nowhere is this clearer than in the fundamental conceptualization of *rural* as practiced in the UK and US (Shucksmith and Brown 2016). The social constructionist vs structuralist approach contributes to different research strategies in the two nations. Consistent with the social constructionist lens, UK rural studies tend to be primarily qualitative and interpretative while US research is more likely to deploy statistical measurement and quantitative analysis. More recently, however, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic are moving toward research strategies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods. Developing truly multi-methodological research strategies is a challenge for rural research going forward in both the UK and US.

Institutional Infrastructure for Examining Rural Structure and Change in the UK and US

Even with similar substantive concerns shaping and motivating rural scholarship, rural studies is organized quite differently in the respective nations. Institutional support of rural studies is much stronger in the UK than in the US. This may seem counter-intuitive given the larger size of the US rural population and the nation's vast expanse of rural territory. However, as discussed earlier, positive attitudes toward rural places and landscapes, and government priorities focused on rural, are much

stronger in the UK. The UK's rural mystique legitimizes a range of rural policies as well as significant research and educational capacities focused on rural issues. While Americans also hold positive rural values (Brown et al 1997), these attitudes and preferences do not result in similar support for rural research and educational programs, let alone policies focusing on rural people and communities. Moreover, American social science has tended to disregard the importance of "place" in shaping social relationships. Hence, scholars who examine spatial differences and interdependencies as a determinant of social relationships have tended to be marginalized in American social science, although this appears to be changing (Brown 2019f). For example, as Linda Lobao (1996) has observed, rural social science is an examination of the periphery, not peripheral social science.

In both nations, scholarship on rural studies is primarily located in academic settings. But institutional structures differ, as does the current status of the enterprise within higher education in the respective nations. The US has a long tradition of empirical research on rural issues, primarily conducted at land grant universities in departments of rural sociology or/and agricultural economics. As Philip Lowe (2012) observed, rural sociology emerged as part of the "progressive era" in the US, and became strongly embedded in educational and other institutions. In Europe (including the UK) while there is a long tradition of scholarship on rural issues, the enterprise was slower to occupy a formal place in universities and other social institutions. Ironically, support for rural social research has declined significantly in the US during recent years while support for rural studies remains strong in the UK. In fact, only one free standing rural sociology program continues to exist in the US (Penn State), and virtually no department of agricultural economics has a significant focus on community development or other aspects of rural studies aside from environmental economics. Moreover, with a few exceptions (Wisconsin, for example) community development is poorly supported by land grant university-based extension programs in the US. As a result of the dramatic decline of rural social science units in the US, rural studies scholars can often be characterized as "academic orphans." Because they seldom have

collaborators in their home units, most must find research partners elsewhere. In recognition of this problem, the USDA supports “multi-state research committees” to provide an infrastructure for multidisciplinary and multi- institutional collaboration.⁸

In the UK, in contrast, rural studies is relatively well supported at numerous universities including Newcastle, Aberystwyth, Aberdeen, Gorsefield, Exeter, UHI and many others. While there is a strong emphasis on inter-university collaboration in the UK, many rural studies units include multiple scholars with complimentary interests. In such situations, the norm is to collaborate on large scale, multi-investigator projects.

Support for rural research is significantly stronger outside of academia in the UK as well. In the US, only one competitive grants program focuses specifically on rural people and communities (USDA-NIFA). While it is possible to obtain support for rural-oriented projects within other grants programs, rural topics are typically considered as marginal. In other words, as Lobao observed, social sciences of the periphery are seen as peripheral social science. This perspective is consistent with the nation’s market and efficiency based concept of domestic development in which investing in rural and spatially peripheral areas is considered to be a wasteful constraint on the nation’s overall growth. Similarly, with a few exceptions, charitable foundations in the US are not likely to support research or educational programs with an explicit focus on rural people and communities in the US.⁹

In the UK, rural-focused research is much more strongly supported, primarily by the European Union, but also by government and charitable trusts. A significant amount of European rural research is funded by the European Union, which requires comparative research across many European countries.

⁸ For example, the USDA supports Multi-State Research Project W-4001 which includes rural demographers located at about a dozen land grant universities, several government research agencies and several liberal arts institutions. This project examines the determinants and consequences of rural population change in the US.

⁹ The W.K. Kellogg Foundation is an exception. It supports extension programming in the area of rural community development.

This lends itself to the case study approach and provides useful information about the rural UK and its European comparators. There is great uncertainty about what Brexit will mean for access to these research funds, hence, the long term security of rural research in the UK is at risk. Many of the philanthropic charitable trusts and foundations in the UK fund research on social issues and inequalities. Over the years, for example, organizations such as Rowntree, Nuffield, and Age Concern have funded research on rural social exclusion, rural gender inequalities and rural ageing. In addition, different regions of the UK often request special studies of rural issues and academics are invited to be part of these studies or tender for them. Examples include crofting in Scotland, rural housing in England and Scotland, and rural proofing in Northern Ireland and England.

In addition to the differences in salience of rural issues and the availability of research support discussed above, rural studies scholarship is organized differently in the UK than in the US. In the UK, rural studies is organized as a multi-disciplinary enterprise. Geographers, economists, sociologists, planners and other disciplines routinely work together on large projects. In fact, such multi-disciplinary engagement can be a requirement for funding. Some UK funding schemes even require engagement between social and natural_sciences.¹⁰ Such interdisciplinary engagement is less typical in the US where disciplines continue to operate in silos. In addition to multi-disciplinary cooperation, UK (and EU) funding schemes often require, or at least prioritize, projects conducted by multiple institutions. Inter-university collaboration also occurs in the US, but not because sponsors require it. Rather it occurs because scholars often lack colleagues with complimentary interests in their home departments.

The US academic rewards system institutionalizes some of these UK – US differences. Single author publication in disciplinary journals is a requirement for tenure and promotion at many top tier US universities. Accordingly, and especially for junior scholars, there are systematic disincentives to

¹⁰ An example is the Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) project supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

collaborate at all, let alone with a colleague from a different discipline. Moreover, monographs and policy pieces published by government agencies or/and foundations are seen as low priority (and quality) outputs. Accordingly, academic researchers are hesitant to participate in research where such outputs are expected. This is considerably different than in the UK where major research monographs published by Rowntree, Age Concern, the Parliament, and DEFRA are recognized as being rigorous and important scholarship, albeit not by the Research Excellence Framework (REF).¹¹ Hence, UK scholars seek to 'translate' policy reports into peer-reviewed journal articles, as exemplified by Sherry and Shortall's article in this volume. The UK system does value academic interaction with the policy environment and 'impact' has become an important component of the REF. Universities and scholars who can demonstrate impact on policy are rewarded by the government. US universities pay lip service to policy impact and engagement, but this does not typically translate into academic rewards or promotion.

Given these differences, it is not surprising that US and UK social science institutions train PhD students differently, with somewhat different career paths in mind. In the US, highly successful scholars are expected to be independent entrepreneurs, to obtain competitive grants from NSF, NIH or USDA that result in sole authored (or first authored) articles in refereed journals in particular disciplines. Other kinds of scholarly outcomes including policy documents, special studies and articles in inter-disciplinary journals are valued more highly in the UK than in the US, hence, students are more likely to be trained to work in inter-disciplinary environments with multiple colleagues. Sole or first authorship is important but academic success and promotion are not typically contingent on this kind of work, at least not solely or primarily.

¹¹ The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. The allocation of research funding is closely tied to an institution's REF ranking.

At the interpersonal level, PhD training in the US differs greatly from that in the UK. Ironically, given the US emphasis on individual accomplishment, PhD programs in the US tend to be collectively governed. Students typically take a set of required methodological and theoretical courses prior to embarking on their dissertations. This reinforces the focus on strictly disciplinary knowledge. In addition, PhD programs generally require students to pass oral (and often written) qualifier examinations administered by a committee which may or may not include the student's dissertation advisor. Mentorship can also be somewhat different in the US compared with the UK. In the UK students tend to work exclusively with a single faculty mentor while in the US students typically have a dissertation committee comprised of a major advisor and two or three additional members. PhD students in the US are rigorously trained, but stronger social control during PhD training in the US can lead to a more predictable product. UK PhD students have more autonomy during early part of their studies and take less coursework. The strongest students probably benefit from this freedom, but some lesser students may fall between the cracks and come out with insufficient skills and knowledge required to succeed in academia, government or not for profit research organizations. These UK-US differences in graduate training have little specific effect on rural studies per se, but they do militate against UK-US collaborative training at the PhD level.

This Special Issue: Comparing Rural Inequalities Amidst Economic Crisis and Change in the UK and the

US

The articles in this special issue examine rural inequalities amidst economic crisis and change in the UK and the US across a wide range of substantive domains. Hence, we do not conceptualize "inequality" as a simply economic field. Rather, we adhere more closely to the social inclusion/exclusion frame that examines social participation and integration within a broad range of social, political and economic relationships. In addition to the contributions these articles make to our

scholarship on this question, they illustrate some of the similarities and differences in rural research in the US and UK that we have developed in the first part of this essay.

Brown and his colleagues consider ageing rural communities. They look at four case studies and consider provision of, and access to, ageing related services. They find that communities that are able to mobilize local resources, create partnerships across institutions, and establish relationships between the public, private and not-for-profit organizations seem to be better able to provide services for older people. Because no one place can offer everything, cooperative relationships are key to maintaining a good quality of life for older residents. They conclude that a multi-scalar approach underlines the importance of examining communities and the relational flows that link them to their environment in order to maximize equality of access to services.

Phillipson et al compare how rural enterprises in England fare compared to their urban counterparts. Their research shows similarities between urban and rural businesses, with high performance and rural firms more likely to report a profit. The analysis also reveals that rural firms are significantly stronger exporters of goods and services, and to have goods or services suitable for exporting. Nonetheless, some obstacles that rural businesses face more frequently were identified such as regulations or red tape, and staff recruitment and skills. The authors call for policy to facilitate rural businesses' ability to maximize their potential.

Sutherland considers the privileges conferred by land ownership in Scotland. She considers how purchasing or inheriting land allows individuals to attain privileged social positions as land holders. Classic rural gentrification activities are undertaken such as refurbishment and nature-leisure based activities. Land is a positional good that facilitates engagement in culturally valued activities like horse-keeping and afforestation. As Sutherland rightly notes, land ownership is a major source of inequality in the UK.

Sipple et al examine the socioeconomic impacts of proximity to schools on local community wellbeing in New York State. Their innovative statistical technique for measuring proximity while developed to measure access to rural schools has much wider applicability in rural social science. In this study, they look at the impact of school proximity on social outcomes such as household income and housing values, while controlling for other community attributes such as the proportion of the population that is white. This highlights one of the UK/ US differences of race in the rural that we discussed earlier in this essay. Their research finds a consistent, significant and positive effect of school proximity on community economic vitality. Household income is greater and so too are housing values in communities with higher access to schools. They caution however that the direction of causality requires further research. Is it that schools positively affect the socio-economic status of communities or is it that wealthy communities can afford greater access to schools? One very interesting finding is that as populations racially diversify, the village's economic indicators are significantly increased. Racial diversity seems to be good for the village economy.

Black et al look at the implications of the 2008 economic crisis on young people aged between 16-29 years. They conducted a case study of an isolated community in the North of England. They find that young people in isolated villages overwhelmingly rely on family support in times of economic hardship. Partly, this is because stigma was attached to accessing State and charitable support. Families did not just provide material support but also contacts to provide access to jobs or support around further education. Because parents with better connections can provide more support, this contributes to the intergenerational transfer of inequalities. This research underlines the critical importance played by social relationships in promoting rural people's wellbeing. Institutions, while critical, do not displace the role of informal social relationships.

Similarly, Jensen et al's research shows that informal economic relationships also contributes to rural wellbeing. Informal labour markets are often associated with inequalities, and this is the question

taken on by Jensen and his colleagues. In their article they use a US household survey of informal labour to examine rural-urban variations in types and forms of participation in informal work activities. It was anticipated that informal work would decline with industrialization, but this has not occurred. Most previous studies have relied on case study material and have not been able to meaningfully compare urban and rural patterns which is the significant contribution that this paper makes to our scholarship. Prior research has suggested that informal work may be undertaken by people excluded from the labour market because of race or educational attainment. Some research shows that informal work is undertaken as a means of avoiding taxation or regulation. However, Jensen et al find a much more complex reality. Two thirds of their sample engage in informal work, and it is more prevalent in rural areas. Economic factors are important but only partially explain the engagement in informal work. There is a complex mix of social, economic, and demographic factors including social capital and community engagement.

Meador's article is also concerned with the importance of social networks on social outcomes in rural communities. He studies how developing social capital networks promote rural development in challenging economic times. He carried out a case study analysis of community development organizations' network dynamics in rural and remote parts of Missouri. He is interested in how networks beyond the locale can build resources in rural areas. Meador considers both implicit and explicit networks, with explicit networks being the result of a policy forming the relationship; for example the EU LEADER network formed relationships amongst rural areas across Europe and also to urban places, notably Brussels and the EU Parliament. Implicit networks on the other hand arise through social interaction. Meador finds that rural organizations tend not to be well networked, and where they are it is often with other isolated organizations. Meador suggests that a policy to develop the strength of networks between urban and rural parts of Missouri might enhance social capital flows and guard against inequality.

Schafft et al turn to what were previously known as “boomtowns” in the US. These were places that experienced rapid industrial growth, short term social, economic and demographic growth, followed by precipitous decline. This process is generally seen in the context of natural resource development. Previously, the focus of research was on the psychological impacts, frictions and the inequalities of the bust or post-boomtown era. In contrast, Shafft and colleagues turn instead to look at rapid energy resource development in order to understand the divergent pathways by which energy development occurs, generating risks or opportunities. They consider how risks, opportunities and outcomes vary across places, spaces, time and people. They highlight how boomtown regions are diverse, and factors such as housing, social infrastructure, demographics and policy regimes shape the contours of risk and opportunity experienced by people and community.

Philip and Williams look at the digital inequalities faced by home based micro-businesses in a rural English case study. They examine the implications of the implementation of a fit for purpose broadband project on three rural businesses in their study community. While broadband was heralded for its potential to support of rural businesses’ access to new non-local markets, this has not been the reality. Philip and Williams analyze the reality that many remote areas are lagging because of the inadequacies of telecommunications infrastructure. They describe the stress of poor connectivity and the cost of doing paperwork submissions for livestock if broadband is too poor to allow it to be done electronically. They conclude that inequalities will increase in rural areas if fit for purpose broadband is not available to remote rural businesses in a fast changing digital economy.

The common media and public health narrative around the contemporary US drug crisis is that it is disproportionately rural. In here article, Monnat, argues that this misrepresents the geography of drug overdose and ignores the tremendous heterogeneity of the crisis in rural areas. She examines differences in county level drug mortality for non-Hispanic whites across the urban-rural divide while adjusting for socio-economic differences and opioid supply factors. She concludes that drug mortality

rates vary significantly by geography and are disproportionately clustered among places characterized by higher levels of socioeconomic distress, disadvantaged labour markets and greater access to opioids. She concludes that the physiological processes that underlie addiction may not discriminate, but the factors that place individuals and communities at risk are not spatially random. Without a clear understanding of this geographical variation, attempts to address this inequality will be less effective.

‘Rural proofing’ is a concept that originated in England, and it is a policy undertaking to examine all policies to ensure that they do not disadvantage rural areas in any way. It is a concept that is now gaining wider traction across the UK and globally. In their article, Sherry and Shortall interrogate the idea of rural proofing and use a case study of Northern Ireland, a devolved administration in the UK that has now legislated for rural proofing through the Rural Needs Act of 2016. They interviewed people with experience of pre-legislative rural proofing as well as those facing new responsibilities under the Act. They argue that the policy is premised on a perception of rural as a homogeneous, pre-modern category that is in need or disadvantaged. This is not evidenced and it means the process of rural proofing is not addressing any defined policy problem or issue which limits its ability to effectively address questions of inequality.

Concluding Observations

The research reported in this special issue was produced by an interdisciplinary group of social scientists associated with the Trans-Atlantic Rural Research Network (TARRN). While TARRN officially involves six institutions in the US and UK, the articles contained herein show that it has become a platform for interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration that extends far beyond its six official members. These 11 contributions show the wide range of social and economic realms where rural people are vulnerable to inequalities and insecurities. While the specifics of social and economic inequality differ in the US and UK, inequalities within rural communities and between them and their

urban counterparts are structured by similar processes and dynamics -- control of natural resources, the inadequate capacity of public institutions, exclusionary social relationships, infrastructure that is unable to overcome the constraints of geographic isolation, and the lack of effective policies supporting the wellbeing of rural people and communities.

These contributions also show the value of interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and international research collaboration. Even though none of these studies directly compares the UK and the US, taken as a whole, they demonstrate the value of diverse research approaches and perspectives for opening up the complex nature of rural life in contemporary society. Dedicated communities of scholarship such as TARRN regularly enrich each other by testing the merit of diverse methodologies, conceptual frameworks and institutional arrangements. By putting these eleven studies side by side scholars can determine where commonalities of thought and practice exist thereby strengthening future research.

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