

## Poverty and social exclusion in diversified rural contexts

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Rural poverty has received relatively little attention from scholars or publics in Europe over recent decades, often regarded as secondary to more visible urban poverty. The same holds true for research in the US, despite important contributions like Tickamyer *et al.* (2017). Lately, however, rural poverty and other manifestations of rural disadvantage gained unexpected prominence in public debates as an urgent and provocative issue, if only for its perceived role in generating political upheaval (see [Krugman, Hank](#) or [Guilluy](#) for example). Divergencies between rural and metropolitan electoral results, support of populism in rural areas and even the rise of protest movements in the countryside on both sides of the Atlantic have prompted a renewed interest in urban-rural disparities and rural feelings of inferiority and marginalisation - feelings described in detail in Wuthnow's *The Left Behind* (2018). Despite the plausibility of such upheavals deriving from a growing divide between rural and metropolitan societies, this has yet to be supported by rigorous research. Strong evidence of a new dynamic of rural-urban polarisation as a source of growing rural grievance and resentment is still missing<sup>i</sup>. This lack is one of the reasons for preparing a special issue on rural poverty and exclusion. The other reason is that exactly 15 years ago, two important publications concerning rural poverty were published: a special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* on social exclusion and Milbourne's book *Rural Poverty, Marginalisation and Exclusion in Britain and the United States* (2004). Both publications summarised the state of the art and proposed new research directions, building on Shucksmith and Chapman (1998). After 15 years it is time to look back again, to review what has been achieved, and to offer a fresh new outlook.

This introductory paper to the special issue is structured as follows: First, we summarise briefly the state of the art and the research directions proposed in 2004. Next, we present an overview of developments since 2004 and highlight the contribution of papers in this issue to these agendas and to new research directions in the field. In conclusion, we emphasise the importance of further Europeanisation and internationalisation of rural poverty research.

Milbourne in 2004 argued that "poverty in rural areas is less well recognised than its urban counterpart in terms of research inputs, academic publications, media representations, and policy interventions" (Milbourne 2004: ix), but he also recorded growing academic recognition of rural poverty within the last couple of decades in Britain and the US. In a similar vein, Commins (2004), in his review article on rural poverty and social exclusion, noted little coverage of poverty and exclusion in rural research. In the situation of relatively little academic attention devoted to rural poverty, both Milbourne and authors of the *Sociologia Ruralis* special issue in 2004 noted that even the recognition of the existence of rural poverty, actually with levels comparable to cities, represented an important research contribution. The reason for the low public awareness of rural poverty, according to both

Milbourne and Commins, was its invisibility because of spatial dispersal and cultural illegitimacy. Whereas highly spatially concentrated poverty in urban neighbourhoods attracted a lot of attention and was also well recognisable using area-level statistics, dispersed forms of poverty typical for rural areas could be easily overlooked by research, the public, and policymakers. Moreover, the widespread representation of rural communities as harmonious and inclusive places inhibited treating poverty issues in rural areas as a serious problem. Whereas the overall quantitative poverty levels may not be distinctive for rural areas, the authors demonstrated that poverty risks were somewhat differently socially distributed in rural areas compared to their urban counterparts. Rural poverty was less often related to unemployment and ethnicity. Employment offered somewhat lower protection against poverty in rural areas, where poverty in work was more common. Seniors were especially at risk of poverty in rural areas (Milbourne 2004).

Two specific issues were emphasized by the authors as conceptual advances deserving further investigation. The first one concerned growing interest in place specific factors of rural poverty. If rurality aspires to an important analytical concept for poverty research, poverty has to be taken seriously as an inevitably spatialised concept, grounded in locality specific power- and opportunity-structures. Moreover, those features of a place that make it be perceived and constructed as rural should be recognised as important drivers related to poverty and its experience. Basically, two research directions accounted for the specifics of rural places in terms of poverty. One devoted attention to the structural and community-related factors of opportunity allocation in rural areas. Structural economic factors embodied particularly in the sparsity of labour markets, and the historically established social structure of rural communities have been described as a milieu with its own rules for allocating support and resources (Duncan 1996; Cotter 2002; Milbourne 2004). The other research stream deals with the social constructions of desirable rurality and their impact on rural policy and ideas about acceptable development (Cloeke and Thrift 1987, 1990; Murdoch 1995; Sturzaker and Shucksmith 2011). This, in turn, affects mechanisms dealing with, or contributing to poverty (Shucksmith and Chapman 1998; Philip and Shucksmith 2003).

Besides the emphasis on place-related specifics, the other conceptual issue concerns the analytical shift from analysing poverty as the static outcome of economic inequalities, towards exploring the multidimensionality of social disadvantage and the processual features of it, using the concept of social exclusion. The conceptualisation of social exclusion as malfunctioning of different integration mechanisms that interconnect individuals with society and allocate resources has been used repeatedly, thus highlighting the process- and mechanism-related focus of social exclusion research (Phillip and Shucksmith 2003; Commins 2004; Reimer 2004).

Accordingly, Milbourne and the authors of the special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* proposed in 2004 a series of directions for further research. (1) The authors called for increased attention to contextual characteristics contributing to rural poverty. In this sense, Milbourne spoke about “local geographies of rural poverty, sensitive to place and the particular assemblages of economic, political, social and cultural factors that are associated with different rural places” (Milbourne 2004: 176). Besides research on place-based specifics and their comparison, cross-national comparative research has been found increasingly necessary. (2) The authors also agreed on the necessity to link rural poverty research more strongly with processes of social exclusion, be it in terms of exclusionary processes operating at the labour market and the housing market, services and public administration or interpersonal and community relations. Research on processes contributing to poverty should

explore the dynamics of poverty and examine the trajectories leading into and out of poverty. (3) Research should explore the poverty experiences of different groups in rural areas, through studies of specific sub-groups of the rural poor and on the intersections of groups-specific and place-specific aspects of their poverty. (4) A final issue highlighted for attention was the impact of different welfare systems on rural poverty, encompassing both the impacts of centralised welfare programmes and of locally specific welfare provision.

A number of studies have been published over the past fifteen years to address these above mentioned research directions. Black *et al.* (2018) have enriched the investigations of place-based influences on poverty drawing on Savage's concept of local habitus, arguing that a moral economy of hard work and independence shared by the inhabitants of their case study place can not only be regarded as a source of rural resilience, but also as a source of symbolic violence on those characterised as morally deficient. Similarly Kay (2004) and Shubin (2010) demonstrated that local institutionalised cultural values and moral discourses in rural communities serve as mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion. In the US, Sherman (2009) introduced a fifth form of capital, 'moral capital', in her ethnographic application of Bourdieu's framework to rural poverty.

Increased attention has also been devoted to cross-national comparisons. A descriptive study of Bertolini *et al.* (2008) on rural poverty in Europe demonstrated the diversity of rural-urban disparities in individual European countries and shed light on the different drivers of rural poverty in Europe. Shucksmith *et al.* (2009), as well as Bock *et al.* (2015) and Weziak Bielowska (2016) used a cross-nationally comparative dataset showing that increased rural poverty levels and a rural-urban poverty gap can be found particularly in the poorer, eastern and southern European countries, a conclusion also confirmed in detailed analysis of Eurostat data across the EU-28 by Copus *et al.* (2015b). The coarse spatial scale of harmonised cross-national data, typically only available at the NUTS 2 regional level with the OECD rural-urban identifier, and the narrow range of variables available were commented on in this study as barriers to cross-national and multidimensional research on rural poverty and social exclusion. Macours (2008) explained the differences in rural poverty levels among post-socialist countries arguing that the historical legacy of socialism and the form of the post-socialist transition affected the current differentiation. Several international consortia, often with EU Framework funding, studied aspects of social exclusion in case study areas to inform cross-national comparison, investigating for example social exclusion of rural youth (Jentsch and Shucksmith 2004; Dax and Machold 2002), social capital in rural areas (Arnason *et al.* 2009; Lee *et al.* 2005) and rural housing (Gallent *et al.* 2003). Beyond Europe, a further comparison of approaches to the study of rural poverty in the US and UK by Shucksmith and Schafft (2012) built on and updated Milbourne's 2004 paper. More recently, Hooks *et al.* (2016) and Milbourne (2016) also contributed to US and UK rural poverty comparisons

The shift from poverty studies to research on multi-dimensional and processual social exclusion can also be documented in a number of papers. Besides attention devoted to the socio-cultural and moral aspects of exclusion (Kay 2004; Shubin 2010; Milbourne 2014), housing availability (Gallent *et al.* 2003; Sturzaker and Shucksmith 2011), job search constraints (Matthews *et al.* 2009, Bernard *et al.* 2016), wage inequalities and low pay (Bernard and Šafr 2019) and mobility constraints (Osti 2010; Noack 2011; Plazinic and Jovic 2014) have been investigated. Only very little attention has been devoted to the dynamic aspects of poverty and low pay in rural areas (Phimister *et al.* 2006).

Studies differentiating between the various sub-groups of rural poor and disadvantaged have focused both on young adults becoming independent from the family and seeking work (Shucksmith 2004; Alston and Kent 2009; Culliney 2014; Black *et al.* 2018), and on the elderly (Giarchi 2006; Shergold and Parkhurst 2012; Walsh *et al.* 2012). Attention was also paid to gender forms of disadvantage (Buller and Hoggart 2004; Bock 2010; Olsson and Ruotsala 2010; Noack 2011; Contzen 2013; Bock and Shortall 2017; Quero-Garcia *et al.* 2017), one of the most intensively researched themes in rural studies over these past 15 years, the situation of families with children (Katrás *et al.* 2015; Bernard 2019) and ethnic forms of rural poverty (Schwarcz 2012; Růžička 2012). Little attention was paid to poverty and disadvantages of specific professional groups in rural areas such as farming families (Meert *et al.* 2005; Inhetveen and Schmidt 2010; Contzen 2015).

A few studies addressed explicitly the impact of welfare systems on rural poverty (Palacios 2007; Shubin 2012; Valero *et al.* 2016; Black *et al.* 2018). This is also a theme of the comparative review of research on rural poverty in the US and UK by Shucksmith and Schafft (2012) and of the TIPSE project exploring territorial impacts of poverty and social exclusion across Europe (Copus *et al.* 2014).

From this brief review, it might seem that research on rural poverty and the various forms of rural disadvantage has shifted significantly over the past 15 years towards topics that Milbourne, Shortall, Commins, Shucksmith and other authors of the special issue in 2004 considered essential. However, in spite of important achievements, “rural welfare continues to remain a marginalised theme within both rural studies and the academic policy literature... [and] within the policy domain where key initiatives on welfare reform, workfare and austerity continue to be developed largely in response to crises in and of the city” (Milbourne 2016, p. 459). It seems clear that rural poverty is still an extremely under-researched issue. Some of the challenges formulated in 2004 persist, some others have appeared. The following section summarises these persistent challenges and new topics. At the same time, we describe for each of them how the papers included in this special issue contribute to a better understanding of the given aspect.

## **1) Europeanisation and internationalisation of rural poverty and exclusion research**

Looking back at rural poverty research in the last couple of decades, an enormous concentration on a few, particularly English-speaking countries can be observed. Indeed, Milbourne’s 2004 book was a comparison of Britain and the United States while four out of five papers of the 2004 *Sociologia Ruralis* special issue on rural social exclusion derived from English-speaking countries (Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia). Such a linguistic bias is not unusual in social science. However, looking at rural poverty research, this focus on a few such countries risks unbalancing the whole academic discourse surrounding the issue. The scarce cross-national research on rural poverty demonstrated clearly enough that particularly the British case is rather exceptional for the situation in Europe, with poverty slightly lower in rural than urban Britain, in contrast to many other countries in Europe, with quite different demographic trends and processes of middle class colonisation well documented (Cloke and Thrift 1987, 1990; Murdoch 1995; Sturzaker and Shucksmith 2011). In this situation, the British debate on rural poverty highlighted particularly the perspective of “poverty amongst wealth” and class clashes between middle-class incomers and the local poor. Countries and regions challenged by much deeper and more widespread rural poverty (notably Eastern and Southern Europe) have been relatively neglected.

The contributions in this issue redress this imbalance to some extent, and confirm that the British perspective is far from typical of the European experience. By collecting contributions from nine different countries covering the wealthiest as well as the poorer countries in Europe, we draw a much more nuanced picture. Bernard's cross-nationally comparative paper in this issue demonstrates the uniqueness of the British case and shows that in the majority of the poorer European countries, poverty is significantly more prevalent in rural compared to urban areas. The paper reveals that three interrelated negative processes operate in the countryside of poor European countries: an increased concentration of low-resource households, a higher poverty risk to these households, and additional poverty-enhancing effects that operate independently of household resources. Bernard argues that a plausible explanation for increased rural poverty is the limited opportunity structure and difficult access to opportunities for better-paid employment in the countryside of the poorer countries. In the economically more developed countries, advanced urbanisation processes changed the nature of rural labour markets in terms of an intensive interconnection with cities, thus expanding heavily rural opportunity structures. As Bock (2018) reminds, this process affected most strongly city-adjacent rural areas, leaving often remote areas behind. The other papers in this issue offer in-depth probes into the situation in different countries. The paper by Papadopoulos *et al.* explores the crisis-induced austerity and unemployment in remoter and more peripheral areas in Greece, the papers by Morell and Nemeth examine ethnic and former manorial servants' rural poverty issues in Hungary, Decker focuses on precarisation of women with dependent children in Czech rural peripheries, Him and Hoşgör describe local patterns of gendered social exclusion and inclusion in the Turkish Black Sea region, Contzen and Crettaz deal with farmers' poverty in Switzerland, Knabe and Klärner offer a look at poverty in a peripheral rural region in Germany and Zakeviciute investigates the issue of livelihood diversification and poor labour market integration as a poverty driver in the Baltic countries.

## **2) Space and Place**

Compared to urban poverty research, studies on locally specific factors and contexts of rural poverty are still scarce. Neither is there much investigation into the relationship between social inequality and spatial inequality, in contrast to rural studies in the US (see e.g. Hooks *et al.* 2016). Given the high levels of residential segregation in many cities, specific place- and neighbourhood-based factors of poverty became one of the dominant issues for urban poverty scholars. Spatial aspects of social inequalities are commonly explored in minute detail and at the micro-scale in urban areas. 15 years ago, Milbourne advocated qualitative case studies of rural poverty to uncover the place-specific factors of disadvantage and local power relations. Such case studies are undoubtedly an important source of information. At the same time, there is a lack of quantitative comparative research comparing poverty and its drivers at different locations. Such research would have to take seriously both the specifics of rural areas, as well as the extreme differentiation of rural places and the existence of spatially specific structural factors of rural poverty (labour market, welfare) as an explanation of existing spatial inequalities. Place-based specifics and geographic variability should also be fully acknowledged in research on the macro level political and social transformations of the recent decades in relation to rural lives and economies, with deep impacts upon inequalities, including the impact of the economic crisis and austerity policies. In addition to research which examines the role of place in relation to rural poverty and opportunity structures, there is also a need for research to examine the role of space – specifically the relationship between social inequality and

spatial inequality. Rural sociologists in the US have been much more active in studying this relationship than Europeans (see Hooks *et al.* 2016 for a recent review of this literature) although several EU-funded teams are now addressing this lacuna (eg. [ReLocal](#), [ImaJine](#)).

Two contributions in this issue address the issue of spatial inequalities and place-based factors of poverty. Knabe's and Klärner's paper on social networks and coping strategies in rural Germany, highlight the importance of individual social networks for coping with poverty. The authors demonstrate that networks not only differ between urban and rural residents, but are also weakened by regional structural decline and demographic shrinkage, referred to as peripheralisation in the German scholarly discourse. Living in a structurally weakened rural region reduces a person's chances of building and sustaining supportive relationships. Weakening of regional opportunity structures in terms of jobs, services and infrastructure, followed by out-migration and ageing, not only increases the risk of poverty, but also limits the capacity to cope with it. Nemeth uncovers in her paper on rural poverty in a Hungarian village in a longitudinal, detailed micro-scale analysis, as advocated by Milbourne in 2004, the place-specific factors of stigmatisation shaping both, the locality's development path as well as the living strategies and life chances of the location's residents. She argues that places as such are not the only sources of territorial stigmata as "the specific social contexts and meanings attached to them also contribute to such stigmatisation."

### **3) Rural poverty and transforming global processes**

The countryside is globally interconnected and interdependent, declared Woods (2007), arguing that the interaction of local and global actors produces and transforms rural places. Whereas the concept of the 'global countryside' provoked a lot of research on rural economic restructuring, food chains, tourism and migration, it has not received corresponding attention in rural poverty and inequality studies. Once again, in the field of urban studies, the changes related to globalisation have been studied also from the perspective of social inequality dynamics and polarisation, as documented best by the thesis on growing social polarisation in global cities (Sassen 1991; Pratchke and Morlicchio 2012). Compared to that, even if Woods (2007) declared growing social polarisation as one of the defining features of the global countryside, labour market transformations, mobility and policy changes related to increasing global interconnectedness, the rising importance of global actors in transforming rural places, and global-local negotiations and configurations have not been sufficiently explored as drivers of social polarisation and inequalities within and among places. This neglect is addressed by Papadopoulos *et al.*'s paper in this issue, which examines the impact of the financial crisis (and the consequent Eurozone crisis) on rural Greece. The paper shows how rising unemployment and imposed reductions in public expenditure impacted on not only the poorest social strata and migrant labourers but also on middle social strata, and how the remote and peripheral areas were disproportionately affected. Case studies of two island areas also reveal the various coping mechanisms and strategies that are emerging in rural Greece. Suzuki Him and Gündüz Hoşgör show in their contribution another aspect of embeddedness of rural areas into global economic processes. They demonstrate how the establishment of a sea-food factory producing for the Asian market functions as a driver of social transformation in a rural Black Sea region in Turkey. Employing exclusively women, the integration of the peripheralised villages into a globalised production chains has ambivalent effects on local patterns of gendered social exclusion. While the social position of women increases their risk to be exploited through precarious and low paid labour,

working in the factory also widens the socioeconomic opportunities in particular of young women, who experience their off-farm work as a gain in autonomy and social participation, lowering their isolation, poverty and exposure to patriarchal restrictions.

#### **4) Incorporating multiple dimensions and power relations**

The deployment of the concept of social exclusion in rural research has facilitated moving beyond a one-dimensional focus on material poverty toward a multidimensional, dynamic approach which highlights the interaction of different systems of resource allocation and related capacities to act, connecting structure and agency also. This encourages investigation of the interconnectedness of labour market participation, housing, service provision, transport, childcare, social welfare, family and community engagement which characterises the day-to-day experience of rural dwellers, as well as drawing attention to power relations and 'voice'. Indeed social exclusion is a relational concept. There is a danger, nevertheless, that the term conjures up the idea of a dichotomy between a narrow excluded group in society and the remaining 'included' majority, so promoting a research focus on that minority rather than on the relational processes, and especially the power relations, operating more broadly in society to generate inequality. One way of avoiding this danger would be a return to class analysis in a new reinvigorated Bourdieuvian formulation, seeing class not as exogenous and fixed but as a continuous, contested and fluid process of discursive construction, identity formation, mobilisation and struggle based around habitus, field and capital and inextricably bound up with place (Shucksmith 2012). What is crucial, however, is to avoid the danger of studying only those who are disadvantaged or poor and instead to uncover the processes and relations in society which generate exclusion. Increased emphasis on different social hierarchies (not only class) and new sources of inequality such as precariatization of work (Standing 2011) would enable us to draw a more nuanced picture of rural poverty and its causes. Decker's paper in this issue is notable for considering paid and unpaid work as well as the whole life-situation to study processes of precarisation of Czech women with dependent children. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research in rural Western Bohemia she demonstrates through an in-depth analysis of two cases "how configurations of social insecurity arise beyond the most vulnerable groups of women" and shows how such situations are perceived and dealt with. Her paper highlights the ambiguity linked to experiencing motherhood in the particular context under study. While (rural) motherhood increases the social disadvantage of women, it constitutes also a realm of female agency. Another paper drawing explicitly attention to multiple dimensions of resource allocation is the contribution by Zakeviciute. Drawing on the situation in the Baltic countries, Zakeviciute tackles in her paper the issue of labour market integration and exclusion as a potential poverty driver. She shows how the post-soviet rural reforms and the process of kolkhoz disintegration contributed to a rapid increase of low-productivity small-scale farms which together with poor job offer in rural economies pushed high numbers of rural residents to poverty.

#### **5) Socio-cultural aspects of rural disadvantage**

In some, but not all, European countries in the 1990s, rural studies began to give much greater attention to cultural identities and differences, under the influence of the cultural turn in human geography and of post-structuralist theories. Many rural scholars moved away from concerns with

social class, incomes and material assets towards studying how people in rural areas may be marginalised through cultural practices in everyday life and especially through the social construction of identity and symbolic capital in social and lay discourses. As Milbourne found in 2004, this shift did not deplete research on rural poverty, but rather opened up new spaces for the study of poverty that are able to fuse together research on structural forces and cultural processes, issues of power, identity and difference that are bound up with poverty. Both rural geographers and sociologists have shown interest in processes of stigmatisation, discursive power and symbolic violence in the construction of rural disadvantage. With populist discourses emerging in many countries of rural people and places being left behind and disempowered, these insights are particularly valuable and can be the basis for further avenues of investigation into the production and reproduction of poverty and inequality, feelings of inferiority in rural and peripheral areas, and therefrom resulting mobilisation.

Several papers in this issue tackle the cultural practices driving rural disadvantage and influencing the experience of rural poverty. Morell's paper highlights processes of ethnic discrimination and stigmatisation in the local governance of social inclusion/exclusion in a marginalised rural community in Hungary, with a high proportion of Roma long-term unemployed. Morell identifies a schism between the paternalistic hegemonic local state, which distributes social welfare in the form of public work, and the national and international NGO based activities: the former see poverty in racialised terms whereas the latter view poverty in social terms. The paper employs Young's concepts of distribution, association and recognition in social justice theory to show how NGOs adopt various strategies to confront the racialised master narrative and to promote instead a social narrative. The role of public-private partnerships in challenging oppressive municipal power is highlighted.

Decker's paper on everyday arrangements of women with dependent children in rural Czech Republic shows how cultural concepts of rural childhood, good (grand)parenting and self-sufficiency interact with other factors such as labour market structure and the division of work within households, shaping the agency and scopes of action of the women. Her work contributes to a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of rural gender inequality in European societies. Contzen and Crettaz in this issue interconnect a quantitative study of poverty among Swiss farming families using monetary and non-monetary material assets with an investigation of the narrations of the farmers in precarious income situations regarding their life satisfaction. By combining these two types of analyses they are able to move beyond pure poverty ratios showing that most interviewed farmers subjectively perceive themselves as not being poor. While the statistical models used only show that farmers are, all else being equal, 2.5 times more likely to be satisfied with their income than other self-employed workers in the same financial and material situation, the often-ambivalent narrations of the respondents show the existence of adaptive preferences in the form of individual adaptive capacities and as socialised form of farmer's ethics and identity. Contzen and Crettaz conclude that adaptive preferences make farming families resilient to poverty and material deprivation, while possible leading to a loss of their livelihood in the long run. Knabe and Klärner in this issue document the existence of feelings of resignation, disappointment and disempowerment in structurally weakened rural German regions, but they also show the broad variety of identities and coping strategies, with some of them being highly resilient and future-oriented.

## **6) The dynamics of rural poverty**

Of the research agendas set out 15-20 years ago, one of the topics which has been least pursued has been that of the dynamics of rural poverty. The concept of social exclusion emphasises not only the multidimensionality of poverty and disadvantage but also a focus on the dynamic causal processes. For this reason, Shucksmith and Chapman (1998), in proposing an agenda for research on social exclusion and rural development, called for longitudinal studies to explore the dynamics of disadvantage in rural areas, using either quantitative skills to analyse longitudinal household panel data across several countries or qualitative skills to pursue a life-history approach. In either case, the intention would be to yield a greater understanding of the pathways or trajectories which lead into social exclusion (including the 'trapdoors' and 'trampolines' associated with moves into and out of poverty, unemployment or homelessness) and the associated relational processes. Very little such work has been undertaken, partly because of a disinclination amongst many rural scholars to develop expertise in quantitative methods and also because of data deficiencies – with incompatible data and definitions often frustrating international comparative work. The paper by Bernard in this issue, analysing EU-SILC data, is a welcome exception, along with Chapman *et al.* (1998), Phimister *et al.* (2000a; 2000b), Gilbert *et al.* (2003; 2006) and Vera-Toscano *et al.* (2019) – although more common in North America (McLaughlin and Jensen 1995, 2000; Rank and Hirschl 1999; Stevens 1999). Life histories and oral histories are also rarely used to investigate rural poverty dynamics. Nemeth's paper and Zakeviciute's paper in this special issue are two of the rare pieces of research adopting a dynamic perspective on rural poverty. With her detailed micro-scale analysis of the (re-)production of poverty and marginality among former manorial servants and their descendants in a Hungarian manorial village, Nemeth provides a fine-grained understanding of the "dynamic relationship between and among lived poverty, perceptions of territorial stigmatisation which shape local living strategies, and intra- and intergenerational patterns of social and spatial (im)mobility." Based on her intergenerational analysis she suggests the reproduction of poverty being neither entirely continuous nor discontinuous but shaped as a U-curve. By surveying former collective farm workers in three Baltic countries Zakeviciute concludes the process of kolkhoz disintegration resulted generally in high poverty levels among its former workers. She argues that wage-based livelihood portfolios are better able to provide protection from poverty than portfolios based mainly on farm income.

## **Conclusion**

The opening paragraph offered two reasons for preparing this special issue. One justification was to reflect on 15 years of rural poverty research, to identify where the research focus has shifted and which challenges are still under-researched. An important development, reflected in the papers included in this special issue is the growing Europeanisation and internationalisation of rural poverty research. This broader perspective helps reduce the bias and oversimplification inherent in the tendency to apply concepts derived from the Anglo-Saxon reality to other European countries. Rural poverty not only constitutes a quantitatively more serious problem in some European countries than, for example, in the UK, but also its form and drivers are different, whether it concerns ethnic rural poverty in Hungary, the problems of post-socialist rural transformation, the effects of austerity in southern European countries, or population shrinkage in the German periphery. Recognising this diversity not only enhances knowledge but also presents a major challenge for rural poverty research, complicating cross-national comparisons and theoretical conceptualisation. One of the concepts employed in several articles in this issue, spatial opportunity structures, may offer a conceptual base appropriate to this challenge. Unequal spatial opportunity structures are referred to

mainly by urban researchers (Galster and Killen 1995; Galster and Sharkey 2017), but a similar concept has been used fruitfully to tackle rural inequality issues as well (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990; Bernard *et al.* 2016; Bernard and Šafr 2019). The concept highlights inequalities in the spatial localisation of resources that differentiate individuals' chances of achieving socio-economic goals and unequal availability of these resources, driven also by socio-cultural forces. Focusing on the rural environment, where accessibility and spatial mobility issues still play a major role, the concept of unequal spatial opportunity structures offers a potential avenue for understanding the drivers of social disadvantage and poverty in different regional and national contexts.

The second justification for publishing this special issue is the growing current interest in urban-rural disparities and the resulting loss of social cohesion. The papers in this issue contribute in two respects to this debate. First, they show that there are indeed feelings of exclusion and being-left-behind in various rural contexts, related to the perceived decline of local economies, infrastructure and social environment. But, secondly, these papers reveal also that many people in rural areas – even among the poorest - do not share such feelings of exclusion. The notion of lagging rural areas is entrenched in modern society's imagination, but the current thesis about deepening urban-rural disparities leading to widespread resentment would require further cross-national research.

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<sup>i</sup> The growing importance of the topic is also reflected in the fact that a special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* on rural populism is being prepared to be published in 2020.