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Regional opportunity structures: A research agenda to link spatial and social inequalities in rural areas

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Abstract

This paper introduces and discusses regional opportunity structures as a concept for analysing the inter-linkages between structural conditions in space, social inequalities, and people's agency, with a focus on non-metropolitan areas. The concept adds value in the following ways: (1) it emphasises the regional scale as an important spatial context of access to opportunities; (2) it accounts for the complexity of the regional context, which provides a plethora of opportunities; (3) it recognises the interdependencies of regional effects and other drivers of inequality; and (4) it takes the regional level seriously as a background of the agency of a region's inhabitants.

Keywords

agency, labour market, public and private services, regional opportunity structures, rural regions, social inequalities, spatial inequalities

1 Introduction

In this paper, we introduce and discuss the concept of regional opportunity structures to designate the regionally unequal availability, accessibility, and quality of the institutionalised opportunities that affect the socio-economic achievements and daily lives of a region's inhabitants. In doing so, we further develop the concept of spatial opportunities, which is mainly applied in research on inequalities at the scale of urban neighbourhoods, and adapt it to the regional scale so that it is better suited to rural areas. In particular, we focus on opportunities related to the economy, public and private services, community

and civic engagement, and the natural and the built environment. We look at how individuals interact through personal agency with these opportunities, and at the outcomes of these interactions. The concept serves as a heuristic and analytical tool for linking the largely disconnected debates on structural inequalities between regions on the one hand, and

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social inequalities between individuals and households on the other.

By emphasising the availability of opportunities at the regional scale, this concept is particularly suitable for extending the debate about spatial and social inequalities to rural regions, for drawing attention to the effects that operate within and between rural regions, and for comparing rural with urban regions. Limited access to opportunities has been repeatedly conceptualised as a source of rural poverty and disadvantage (Bernard et al., 2016; Tickamyer and Duncan, 1990). In rural regions, institutional catchment areas are often quite large, which can increase residents' dependence on the nearest providers (Bernard and Šafr, 2019) because alternative offers are located far away. This can result in more extensive daily activity patterns (Millward and Spinney, 2011), particularly in rural localities where the availability of goods and services is poor (Kamruzzaman and Hine, 2012).

While previous research has shown that regional disparities are important sources of social inequalities (e.g. Lobao et al., 2007; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), most studies of social inequality mechanisms have failed to consider how they vary by region. Similarly, in research on regional inequalities, the peculiarities of the social situations of individuals and social groups in different types of regions are rarely tackled in depth. The questions of how people cope with spatial inequalities, what resources they employ, and what constraints they face in overcoming these disparities—i.e. how they use their individual, socially embedded agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)—are hardly ever addressed in these analyses. Spatial drivers of social inequality have been thoroughly examined in analyses of residential segregation and context effects at the small spatial scale of urban neighbourhoods (Murie and Musterd, 2004). By contrast, relatively few studies have examined how social inequalities differ by region. In 2008, Lobao et al. even called the regional level 'the missing middle' in research on social inequality in space (Lobao et al., 2008).

The cleavage between the two debates is partly due to their institutional and disciplinary separation. The development of regional inequalities and their causes are typically studied in geography and

economics, while most of the literature on social inequalities and the mechanisms of their production and reproduction comes from sociology. Recently, however, there has been increasing interest in better understanding the spatiality of social inequality, and in identifying the regional mechanisms that produce inequality. In the context of the regionally unequal rise in support for populism, questions about the social consequences of spatial inequalities have been newly emphasised, and the need to understand the living conditions in 'places left behind' has been highlighted (Gordon, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

The umbrella concept of regional opportunity structures can be used to bridge the disciplinary gap, to link the scattered empirical evidence from various research fields, and to further stimulate this ongoing research agenda by: (1) offering a heuristic model of the effects of the regional environment on individual achievements, which allows us to go beyond projecting social inequalities onto regions (Ballas et al., 2017), and to instead identify region-specific mechanisms that create inequalities; (2) explicitly emphasising the regional scale as an important spatial context that strongly influences people's access to and use of various opportunities, which enables us to expand the dominant research focus from the scale of urban neighbourhoods to the scale of regions; (3) accounting for the complexity of regional contexts by examining not just their economic conditions, but also the plethora of institutionalised opportunities they provide through, for example, the labour market, public and private services, community and civic engagement, and the natural and the built environment; (4) accounting for the interdependencies between regional effects and other structural drivers of inequality, and especially for how spatial mobility enables people to make use of regional opportunities, and to transcend them; and (5) considering the regional context as a backdrop for the everyday agency of its inhabitants.

Interest in developing this concept has arisen in connection with research on disadvantaged regions that has attempted to conceptualise regional disadvantages from the perspective of the social situations of the region's inhabitants. However, the concept can be applied not just to the study of regional

disadvantages, but also to analyses of a wide range of social and spatial inequalities.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we outline the theoretical foundations of the concept of regional opportunity structures. In Section 3, we explore the four dimensions of regional opportunity structures: namely, economic opportunities with a focus on regional labour markets, public and private services, community and civic engagement, and the natural and the built environment. In this part of our reasoning, we apply a top-down perspective, and consider the availability, accessibility, and quality of these opportunities as contextual factors of inequality. In contrast, in Section 4, we apply a bottom-up approach by focusing on individual agency, and on how people use opportunities. In Sections 3 and 4, we present arguments and research related to rural areas, and demonstrate the important, though not exclusive, role that regional opportunity structures can play in conceptualising regional effects in rural settings. Finally, in Section 5, we discuss further empirical applications and conceptual approaches that may be developed in future research.

II Theoretical foundations

I Geography of opportunity and the unequal distribution of opportunities in space

There are good reasons why the concept of opportunity is central to inequality research. On the one hand, we consider a person's achievements in terms of her socio-economic outcomes and her integration into social relations as resulting from her individual traits, conceptualised as forms of capital. On the other, we can see these achievements as dependent on the opportunities the person has available to develop and apply these traits. Thus, social inequalities are a function of individual capital and available opportunities, and their interactions. Opportunities arise from the social environment—i.e. from institutions, values, and rules—and they are often spatially diverse (Petrović et al., 2020).

The observation that there are spatial inequalities in access to opportunities has led scholars to coin the terms 'spatial opportunity structures' (Galster and Sharkey, 2017), 'local opportunity structures'

(Cotter, 2002), and 'structures of metropolitan opportunity' (Galster and Killen, 1995) to express the idea that people have access to different opportunities depending on their place of residence. Geography of opportunity has emerged as a subfield for investigating how the spatial differentiation of opportunities contributes to social inequality (Galster and Sharkey, 2017).

Previous research on spatial opportunity structures was mainly conducted at the scale of urban neighbourhoods, and focused on issues such as residential segregation and immigration in metropolitan areas (Lens, 2017). Much less attention has been paid to spatial inequalities at the regional level, even if some scholars have emphasised the salience of multi-level spatial contexts in people's lives, and the need to broaden the spatial perspective (Petrović et al., 2020; Sharkey and Faber, 2014).

As studies on the geography of opportunity have mainly focused on socially and ethnically segregated urban neighbourhoods, they have largely attributed context effects to the compositional characteristics of residential places. By contrast, these studies have rarely systematically examined the structural characteristics of places in terms of the availability and the quality of various institutionalised assets as potential drivers of unequal opportunities. Recently, however, Lens (2017) argued that whether residents have access to assets and amenities that can improve their outcomes throughout the life course is a central issue when considering the complexity of neighbourhood effects. Different institutional structures operate at different spatial scales, as Petrović et al. (2020) and others have pointed out. The catchment areas of many institutions extend well beyond the neighbourhood level. For example, labour markets can cover whole functional urban areas or otherwise economically coherent regions. Moreover, individuals' options for taking advantage of institutional opportunities are often more closely associated with their daily spatial activity patterns than with their place of residence. These spatial patterns are highly individualised, but they go well beyond the neighbourhood scale, and often cover whole regions. By acknowledging the diversity of spatial scales on which institutional structures operate, the concept of regional opportunity structures emphasises a

multiscalar approach to examining spatial structures. By highlighting differences between larger spatial units, it is particularly appropriate for focusing on inequality-producing mechanisms operating within and between rural regions.

The concept can be usefully applied in analyses of regions equivalent to U.S. counties or EU NUTS-3 regions. However, it does not necessarily refer to regions of a specific size or definition. Moreover, it is not linked to a particular definition of rurality. It can be used to conceptualise spatial inequality drivers in regions with relatively low population and institutional densities. A wide range of rural and peri-urban regions have these characteristics.

2 Further relevant debates: Spatial justice and peripheralisation

Linked to the idea of the unequal distribution of opportunities in space are normative accounts of spatial justice, which have recently broadened established discourses on social justice. The emerging debate on spatial justice has different foundations and directions. First, it asks general questions concerning the spatiality of the availability and accessibility of resources, and thus about unjust geographies (Israel and Frenkel, 2018; Soja, 2010). Second, the spatial justice discourse originally focused on unjust conditions in large cities, and called for a ‘right to the city’ for all social classes. This argumentation is also highly applicable to the regional scale, and has been taken up by rural scholars demanding a ‘right to the countryside’ (Barraclough, 2013). It has been rightly noted that ‘there is nothing specifically “urban” about the components of the right to the city’; and that, rather, the related desires for emancipation, autonomy, and the appropriation of space are universal (Landy and Moreau, 2015: 18). Third, this debate builds on other justice debates, such as those on environmental and energy justice (e.g. Cutter, 1995; Walker and Day, 2012), by adding a more or less explicit spatial perspective. Fourth, some scholars have directly addressed the concept of ‘rural justice’ (Nordberg, 2020: 50), and have focused on the mechanisms that produce, maintain, and reinforce spatial injustice specifically in rural areas.

Issues surrounding the availability of and access to opportunities feature prominently in several strands of the spatial justice discourse. Based on a very general understanding of spatial justice, Israel and Frenkel (2018) argued that institutionalised rules ensuring access to opportunities have spatial aspects, and that efforts to achieve equal opportunities should also consider spatial factors. While focusing on rural areas, Nordberg (2020) and Farrington and Farrington (2005) conceptualised the right to equitable opportunities as access to services and facilities needed for daily life. These studies raised questions regarding the centralisation of such facilities and services in larger centres (at the expense of rural areas), the negative consequences of administrative reforms, and the restrictions imposed by tight municipal budgets. Both normative and empirical accounts of (rural) spatial justice have added to our understanding of the spatiality of social justice—or, conversely, of injustice.

There are strong links between the notions of (unequal) spatial opportunity structures and spatial justice and other discourses on territorial inequalities that focus specifically on the regional scale. Theories of spatial polarisation that seek to explain core-periphery relations (e.g. Friedmann, 1973), or that focus on (inner) peripheries (e.g. Copus et al., 2017), highlight the dependency relations of regions within and across countries. The more recent concept of peripheralisation additionally stresses a dynamic perspective on almost exclusively rural peripheries (Steinführer et al., 2016). In a processual understanding, peripheralisation can be defined as resulting from an overarching socio-spatial polarisation at the regional scale. As well as suffering from economic insufficiencies, peripheralised regions are characterised by decaying public infrastructure and private services, a lopsided dependency on economic and political centres, and a decoupling from positive impulses for development (Kühn, 2015).

In particular, the peripheralisation concept emphasises the concurrence of weak economic performance, which is a strong correlate of labour market opportunities, and accessibility issues of certain rural areas. Viewed through this prism, peripheries are conceptualised as rural regions with

comparatively poor opportunity structures (Bernard et al., 2016; Copus et al., 2017). Moreover, a link between regional structures and the social situations of individuals is often assumed—yet, hitherto rarely empirically investigated. Thus, the process becomes both a generator and an amplifier of social inequalities. Nevertheless, empirical research on peripheralisation rarely considers the subjective perceptions and coping strategies, and thus the agency, of the residents of these regions, or the effects of living in opportunity-poor regions. More frequent topics of interest include descriptions of the conditions in specific rural regions, such as their economic and demographic trajectories; and the question of what regional and planning policies might be appropriate in such contexts (e.g. Beetz et al., 2008).

3 Spatial inequality beyond the availability of institutions and organisations

To understand the connections between the spatial context and the (non)utilisation of opportunities by individuals, it is useful to focus on three interrelated aspects of regional opportunity structures: availability, accessibility, and quality. Availability generally refers to the (im)possibility to make use of a specific opportunity due to its presence or absence in a given place, as well as other prerequisites controlling its use (financial, temporal, regulative). The availability of an opportunity should not be understood in a strictly dichotomous way, but should instead be viewed in terms of how easy or difficult it is to make use of it. The focus on accessibility directs our attention to mobility constraints that can make it challenging for individuals to take advantage of a place-based opportunity. Enlarging the spatial scale implies paying more systematic attention to mobility as an intrinsic part of access. The recently intensified debate in transport geography on social inequalities in access to affordable means of transport offers important insights into this aspect of regional opportunity structures. Building on the older debate on fuel poverty, ‘transport poverty’ was recently coined as an overarching term to describe this set of issues

(Mattioli et al., 2017). Transport poverty refers not only to a lack of access to a means of transport, which in rural areas is typically a car (mobility poverty), but also to difficulties in reaching key opportunities (accessibility poverty), as well as to the costs of being mobile in space (transport affordability) (Lucas et al., 2016). Transport poverty or mobility deprivation (as it was called earlier; Shaw, 1979) can be considered a major link between social and spatial inequalities, particularly in rural areas, where infrastructure density is rather thin. The qualitative aspect of the unequal spatial distribution of opportunities is another important component of our considerations. Although it is difficult to evaluate the quality of institutions, it is clear that opportunities vary depending on their quality. This is especially apparent when we consider differences in the quality of schooling. The quality of schools has often been investigated as a factor that determines the returns to education (Card and Krueger, 1992). In addition, the debate on food deserts considers the quality and the healthiness of the groceries on offer (Wrigley, 2002).

Based on these considerations, we advocate using the concept of regional opportunity structures to address spatial (dis)advantages that go beyond the boundaries of urban neighbourhoods, and operate in both urban and rural areas. Regional opportunity structures refer to the unequal availability, accessibility, and quality of various institutionalised opportunities. Hence, these structures can be seen as contextual mechanisms of social inequality that affect the socio-economic achievements of individuals in a broad sense, and thus influence not just their social status attainment, but their overall well-being. While people are embedded in a given regional context of opportunity structures, they are active agents within it, and their perceptions and uses of opportunity structures are contingent on their capacities, interests, and ideals.

Emphasising the regional nature of the concept, we highlight the multiscalar structures of institutionalised opportunities and human activity patterns, which go well beyond an individual’s immediate surroundings. The regional focus makes the concept particularly appropriate for analysing the interactions between spatial and social inequalities in

rural settings, and for drawing urban-rural comparisons.

III Four types of regional opportunity structures

In this section, we assign the institutional assets conceptualised as parts of regional opportunity structures to four types: economic opportunities, including regional labour markets providing jobs; public and private services; institutionalised opportunities for community and civic engagement; and the natural and the built environment. In doing so, we bring together separate strands of research while also drawing on existing characterisations of local opportunity structures (Lens, 2017; Wilson and Greenlee, 2016) to propose a classification that reflects the regional context, and that is meaningfully applicable to rural regions. Such classifications are often not theoretically embedded. The four types of regional opportunity structures that we propose for heuristic reasons can be related to the existential needs of human beings, as distinguished by the Munich School of Social Geography. It identified housing, work, education, recreation, self-provision, living in community, and transport use as the ‘existential basic functions’ (*Daseinsgrundfunktionen*; Partzsch 1964). Specific places are needed for the fulfilment of these basic needs (or functions), and thus contribute to generalisable spatial structures. This concept was originally rooted in a functionalist approach to society and space, and was developed to explain the spatial structural patterns of a city or a region. We still consider it to be a valuable heuristic tool for differentiating the basic needs of individuals and households. To further develop the concept of regional opportunity structures, we first adopt a top-down perspective and summarise the existing research on the effects of regional opportunities on the socio-economic achievements of individuals (Figure 1).

I Economic opportunities: The labour market

Among the most essential and the most frequently studied types of institutionalised regional opportunities are the economic opportunities that result from

the labour market conditions of a given region. In general, two different hypotheses have been formulated to explain in more depth the effects of regional labour markets on the economic situations of individuals and households. The first hypothesis argues that the sectoral composition of the labour market and its dynamics significantly affect the availability of jobs, income, and job security (Curtis et al., 2019). The spatial concentration of higher wage and lower wage industrial sectors helps to explain the existing regional differences in social inequalities. Moreover, the rise and fall of individual sectors shape spatial inequalities to a significant extent. Old industrial regions are examples of places that have been left behind due to general economic restructuring, and they are typically burdened by populations with high levels of poverty and limited employability (Birch et al., 2010; Danson, 2005). The second hypothesis states that the density of the labour market is a strong predictor of efficiency and productivity, and thus influences the potential returns to employees. As cities and urban regions benefit from agglomeration economies and better job-match quality, their labour markets are more productive—and, in turn, their wages are higher—than those of rural areas (Andersson et al., 2007). The theoretical argument that the positive externalities of agglomerations stimulate innovation and economic growth in large cities and urban regions is backed up by convincing empirical evidence (Iammarino et al., 2019).

The effects of regional labour markets on the economic situations of households have been documented repeatedly by quantitative and qualitative studies. Scholars have shown that the sectoral composition of regional labour markets and the availability of jobs are among the drivers of regional poverty concentrations in the U.S. (Cotter, 2002), and in Europe (Copus et al., 2015). Bernard and Šafr (2019) documented negative place-based effects on income from work performed in peripheral labour markets. Lichter and Brown (2011) and Bernard and Šafr (2019) found that returns to education in terms of income are lower in less dense rural labour markets. The effects of regional labour markets are also central to the concept of escalator regions. Fielding (1992) reported that the labour market in

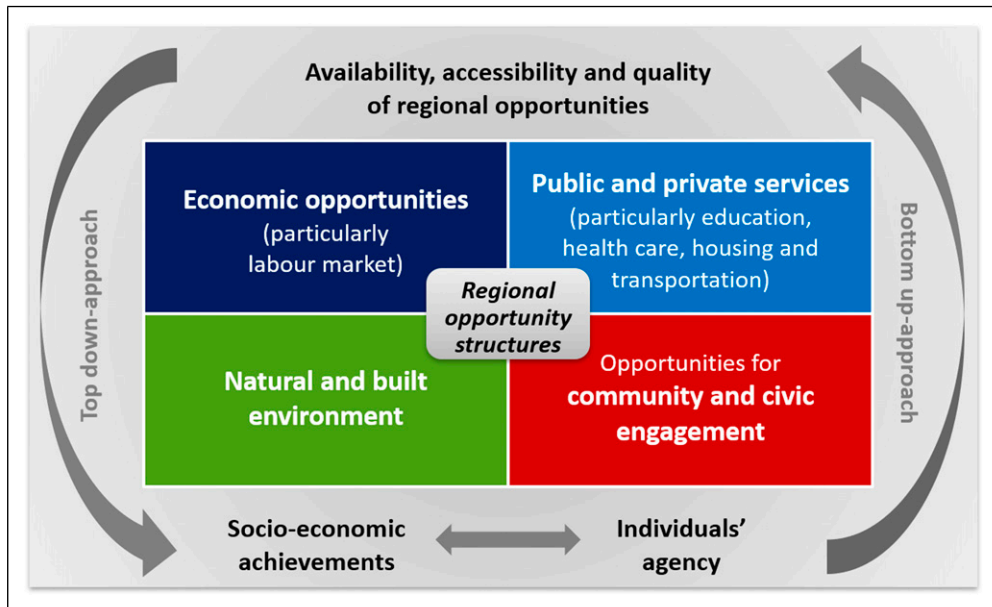


Figure 1. Conceptualising regional opportunity structures. Source: authors' draft.

the south-east of England enables the inhabitants of that region to advance more quickly in terms of socio-economic status than people living in other regions. At the same time, the region attracts young, educated people from elsewhere, enables them to progress economically, and, in some cases, sends them off again at a later stage of their career. Thus, the region provides a unique set of opportunities for upward mobility. The concept of escalator regions inspired a number of other studies (Champion and Gordon, 2019; Miles and Leguina, 2018) that have offered conceptual links for research on the inter-connections between social and spatial mobility.

Moreover, a handful of qualitative case studies have documented the labour market effects, and particularly the constraints, in peripheral and thin rural labour markets. Lindsay et al. (2003) uncovered low levels of labour demand in rural peripheral places in Scotland that they attributed to the dominance of small enterprises, the lack of permanent jobs, and the seasonality of labour market demand. Matthews et al. (2009) reported that in rural Canada, social ties are important for finding employment, and

that this structural feature, combined with lower incomes, lead to labour market constraints. Culliney (2014) similarly argued that nepotistic recruitment, the absence of larger businesses, and the lack of promotion prospects represent sources of disadvantage and barriers for young people in rural areas in the UK.

2 Public and private services: The materialised welfare state

A somewhat less studied aspect of regional opportunities is spatial inequality in the availability of, the access to, and the quality of public and private services in rural areas. Services are provided by a wide range of institutions that offer people opportunities not only for achieving their desired socio-economic outcomes, but also, more broadly, for satisfying their individual needs and ambitions in terms of education, health, consumer services, transport infrastructure, and housing.

Services are unevenly distributed in space, and access to services varies across regions. This pattern

can be attributed to settlement structures, as well as to the governance of service provision (Humer and Granqvist, 2020). Little attention has been paid to how inequalities in spatial accessibility lead to regional inequalities in opportunities, and, in turn, to social inequalities. Recently, several studies have linked public services, which are traditionally regarded as materialised outputs of the welfare state, to issues of spatial justice—or, as the concept has been called in the EU, ‘territorial cohesion’ (Clifton et al., 2016). There has been almost no research on how residents in different regions are affected by differences in the accessibility and the quality of services and infrastructure.

Focusing on metropolitan areas, research on the geography of opportunity has paid particular attention to the availability and the quality of schools as valuable neighbourhood resources. The existence of poor, racially segregated neighbourhoods is reflected in segregated school environments (De Souza Briggs, 2005). Thus, the landscape of schools both reflects existing social inequalities in space, and contributes to their production and reproduction. There is much less research on school accessibility and quality in rural regions. The existing studies on this topic have highlighted two issues. First, there are spatial differences in school quality and financing. Roscigno et al. (2006) found for the U.S. that the educational achievement of students in rural areas (like that of students in inner cities) tends to be low, and argued that resources that are influential for educational achievement (both familial and school-related, like per pupil expenditures or pupil/teacher ratios) are embedded within places, and are distributed unevenly in space. Similar evidence that school performance and school-related resources are lower in rural areas has been provided for other countries as well (Alston and Kent, 2009; Bertolini et al., 2008). The second issue is that there are inequalities in the spatial accessibility of schools. The lack of adequate access to elementary schools has been examined as a specific rural issue that is also related to the general development of rural places. Several authors have argued that the local provision of elementary education increases the attractiveness of rural places, stimulates population development, and promotes

the accumulation of local social capital (Barakat, 2015; Kučerová and Kučera, 2012). Shucksmith asked how far school pupils can reasonably be expected to travel before the distance has a detrimental impact on their school performance and their educational careers (Shucksmith, 2004).

The effects of spatial inequalities in the availability and the quality of consumer services and local supplies have been conceptualised most prominently in studies of food deserts; i.e. of places where it is difficult to buy healthy food. Among the questions that have been raised in research on food deserts are whether differences in access to healthy food exacerbate the problems people with low incomes face in being able to afford a healthy diet, and how spatial differences in access to various forms of retail influence individual shopping behaviour (Wrigley, 2002). Moreover, research on food deserts has primarily focused on metropolitan areas, analysing, for example, whether food deserts arise in deprived urban neighbourhoods, and, if so, how they affect consumer behaviour and the health of the urban poor (Walker et al., 2011). Efforts to apply this concept to rural areas have been more modest, even though access to retail and consumer choices is usually significantly worse in rural than in urban areas (Jürgens, 2018; McEntee and Agyeman, 2010). Limited choices of consumer goods, accessibility issues, and the need to make long shopping trips have been mentioned repeatedly in overview papers on rural forms of inequality (Bertolini et al., 2008; Philip and Shucksmith, 2003).

A cross-cutting issue in the field of public and private service provision is that of transport infrastructure. In many Western welfare states, rail-bound infrastructure was at least partly run by state companies until the 1970’s or 1980’s. Historically, the railway was a major facilitator of rural modernisation and welfare. Since World War II, public transport in rural areas has been increasingly based on buses that are run—depending on the specific national welfare system—by public or private companies, or through a mixed model. Increases in car ownership and changes in patterns of private mobility started to undermine the public transport system as early as in the 1970’s (reported, for example, for England by Shaw, 1979). Today, the car is the major enabler of

individual spatial mobility in rural societies in the Global North. The lack of a means of transport (whether through public buses or a private car) is a key dimension of social inequality, and, at the same time, of transport poverty (Lucas et al., 2016; van Dülmen et al., 2022). While transport poverty is found in urban and rural areas alike, the systematic lack of options (e.g. a regular and dense bus system) is an institutionalised feature of rural transport services.

Housing is another cross-cutting issue that arises when considering spatial opportunity structures, as the place of residence is a decisive factor in the availability, accessibility, and quality of all of the other services discussed so far. Yet, housing itself needs to be seen as an institutionalised opportunity structure. Housing policies differ between countries depending on their national welfare systems and social policies (Gallent and Allen, 2003). Thus, both the roles of different actors on the supply side (public, non-profit, and private investors) and housing policies vary considerably across countries. Housing opportunities have mainly been discussed in metropolitan contexts (Galster and Sharkey, 2017) and rural housing is rarely analysed as a problem, as private homeownership in rural areas is widespread in many countries. However, scholars have pointed out that owner-occupancy might mask social inequality, processes of social exclusion (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016), and rural homelessness (MacDonald and Gaulin, 2019). Unequal access to owner-occupied housing as a primary residence, but also to second homes, and a lack of both social and affordable housing in rural contexts (e.g. Satsangi and Dunmore, 2003; Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011) are topics that should be addressed in research on social inequalities in opportunities in rural areas.

3 Opportunities for community and civic engagement: Organisations and places

Community and civic engagement can take various forms (Evers, 2019), from participating in the fire brigade (Colibaba et al., 2021), local clubs, and churches; to being active in citizens' initiatives,

action groups, non-profit organisations, and political parties; to caring for non-kin children of deprived families (Sherman, 2009). Research on community and civic engagement has shown that it is distributed unequally across regions. There is evidence that there is more community engagement in rural than in urban areas, and in regions with stronger than with weaker labour markets (Paarlberg et al., 2022). However, particularly in peripheral rural regions with high unemployment rates, opportunities for community and civic engagement are often limited by population decline and ageing, and the outmigration of younger and better educated people, who tend to be more engaged.

Research on the causes of spatially unequal participation and engagement levels, and on the social and political consequences of these inequalities, remains very sparse, and is mainly found in the urban studies literature (e.g. Gilster, 2017; Sampson and Graif, 2009). The questions of how the quality of life in different regions is affected by differences in opportunities for community and civic engagement, and of how the availability of various forms of infrastructure, such as broadband access, affects the propensity to join clubs and organisations (Whitacre and Manlove, 2016), are understudied. More research is also needed on the questions of how (and under what conditions) community engagement and civic participation can ameliorate the life situations of community residents; whether these opportunities systematically exclude members of socially disadvantaged groups (e.g. Shortall, 2008; Kleiner, 2021); and what these patterns mean for the (re-)production of social inequality (Duncan, 2014).

Opportunities for community engagement and civic participation are difficult to provide without physical meeting spaces (community centres, clubs, town halls, cafés, theatres, churches, etc.), which depend on public and private funding. These spaces are unequally distributed in space, and they are harder to maintain in rural regions and rural peripheries than in metropolitan regions (Knabe et al., 2021). These spaces, or 'foci' (Feld, 1981), are important for establishing and maintaining social ties to other members of the community, and even to non-locals (Small and Adler, 2019; van Dülmen and

Klärner, 2022). Urban and neighbourhood research has shown that community spaces are also important for getting support by institutional helpers, especially for socially deprived persons (Small, 2009). Thus, opportunities for community engagement can be especially beneficial for socially disadvantaged individuals whose networks of personal contacts are smaller and more restricted (Cornwell, 2015). Yet, Klärner and Knabe (2019) stressed that people living in rural areas are more likely to lack access to such places, which can increase their vulnerability.

While it has been shown that community engagement has positive effects for socially disadvantaged individuals, and that opportunities for engagement may be more prevalent in metropolitan than in rural regions, there is also some, albeit modest evidence that there are qualitative differences in the inclusiveness of opportunities for participation. Local clubs can be exclusive in the sense that they are socially homogeneous, and ‘non-native’ and ‘non-participating’ inhabitants may be less involved in community activities (Gieling and Haartsen, 2017; Ishizawa, 2015).

It is also noteworthy that a strong sense of belonging within rural communities that is fostered by civic engagement can lead to the denial of poverty and the exclusion of poor people (Milbourne, 2014). When foci are very socially segregated, they can shape which types of people the users of these spaces get to know, and the composition of their social networks. Thus, civic engagement has the potential to reproduce existing social inequalities.

Finally, in recent years, the (neo-)liberal political discourse has put considerable pressure on people to become active and civically engaged. This engagement is expected to serve as a substitute for providing services not offered by the public or private sector, especially in rural areas (Steinführer, 2015). Moreover, in the recent neo-Marxist discourse, the hope has been expressed that the voluntary sector can be recast ‘as a non-commodified platform of care, sustenance, incremental commons and alternative citizenship, proving a barrier to further marketisation and state parasitism’ (DeVerteuil et al., 2020: 13). However, empirical evidence for the substitution effects of civic engagement, and research on the

processes, costs, consequences, and limitations of community engagement, are still rare.

4 Natural and built environment: Material opportunities and social practices

The natural and the built environment of a region has rarely been understood as providing opportunities in the same ways as the labour market or the services available to the inhabitants. However, there is evidence that the environment represents an important source of subjective well-being and satisfaction. The literature on counterurbanisation and amenity migration has, for example, shown that for some people, the perceived quality of the natural and the built environment plays a central role in how they evaluate places, and in how they select their residence (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011).

The natural environment is a major asset—or, in the language of this paper, an opportunity—that is regularly attributed to rural areas. In the scholarly and public debates, the natural environment is considered from two perspectives. First, scenic beauty, landscape embeddedness, and (seemingly) untouched nature are considered indispensable traits of rural areas, and of how such places are imagined in general. It has also been shown that these traits are important factors in attachment to place, including among older people in rural areas (Burholt, 2012). Perceived naturalness forms the basis of the so-called rural idyll (e.g. Little and Austin, 1996), and is partly linked to the idea of the ‘good life’ (Shucksmith, 2018). The rural idyll is the counterpart to contrasting perceptions of the urban. Maintaining this narrative contributes to an urban–rural dichotomy that scholars challenged decades ago, but that is culturally deeply rooted in everyday descriptions of rurality. A second perspective on the natural environment focuses instead on a functional understanding of the role of rural areas for the entire society, and is captured under the umbrella of ecosystem services (Gutman, 2007). As such, rural areas are viewed as places that provide food and fresh water, recreational and leisure opportunities, and space to put the waste of modern societies. In rural studies, these two perspectives are combined in the idea that rural areas today are

approached by way of consumption (e.g. by tourists), rather than of production (Marsden, 1999).

Rønningen (2016) offered a further perspective on opportunities in the countryside, observing that while post-productivist social practices are clearly relevant, there are also continuous or even newly strengthened material practices (not only) in rural areas. In addition to conventional and organic agriculture, traditional and revived mining activities, the exploitation of renewable energy, and hunting and fishing practices (e.g. Hogne, 2013) are modes of engaging with the material traits of rural areas. All of these examples refer to concrete and continuous (while still changing) uses of the environment, and contribute to specific ideas about rural life. Thus, they can provide opportunities for rural residents, newcomers, and temporary in-migrants. Taking advantage of the natural assets that are available in rural areas (e.g. collecting berries and mushrooms, cutting wood for small amounts of money) can help people with limited budgets make ends meet each month, and can therefore provide a buffer against financial hardship.

In addition to the natural environment, the built features of rural regions can provide opportunities, particularly with regard to housing. Surprisingly, the rural development and housing debates are largely disconnected (Gkartzios and Scott, 2014). As part of the built environment, the housing stock in many rural regions has distinctive material features. For example, the buildings are mostly one to two stories; the building density tends to be low; and, in Europe, there is often a regional building culture. Rural owner-occupancy is widespread, even in ‘renting’ societies, like Switzerland or Germany. Thus, owning a home is rarely questioned, and is considered desirable by many people (Tuitjer, 2018). People living in rural regions are more likely to be able to afford a house of their own than residents of urban areas. Moreover, ownership of a (semi-)detached building often means having a garden. Therefore, being able to own a home is part of the institutional opportunity structure of rural areas. For lower-income social groups, but also for middle-class people, buying a house in a rural area

might be both attractive and financially feasible. Musterd and Andersson (2005) found that in suburban and rural areas in Sweden, areas that are homogeneous in terms of housing are also characterised by social homogeneity, or, as it might also be called, by selectivity. Middle-class people may move to rural areas to purchase a first or a second home in a pleasant environment, often in a development that has been marketed as amenity-rich (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016); or to engage in rural gentrification (Phillips, 2004). Gentrification in rural areas is known to have ambiguous social implications: while having access to beautiful natural scenery and the countryside is yet another material(ised) opportunity to be exploited by the better off, rural gentrification contributes to selectively rising house prices and the displacement of lower income groups. This process of improving while also narrowing opportunities through rural gentrification has been described most notably for rural England (e.g. Méténier, 2020).

The four types of regional opportunity structures that we distinguished—economic opportunities, public and private services, opportunities for community and civic engagement, and the natural and the built environment (Figure 1)—are not separate worlds. Rather, they overlap and interact in people’s daily lives and social practices. For example, people use services as part of their daily activity patterns, including when commuting to work (Kamruzzaman and Hine, 2012). Regions with strong labour markets tend to provide better public and private services than peripheral places with fewer labour market opportunities. Alston and Kent (2009) provided evidence that the likelihood of experiencing social exclusion in rural and remote places is heavily influenced by both labour market and educational opportunities. While correlations between service provision (more precisely: broadband) and community engagement have also been found (Whitacre and Manlove, 2016), links between the natural and the built environment and volunteering opportunities are not straightforward. Gieling and Haartsen (2017), for example, found

that levels of satisfaction with local volunteering opportunities do not predict the perceived livability of a rural place. However, the attachment to place in rural regions is related to social and aesthetic attachment (Burholt, 2012), and thus to the natural environment.

IV Linking regional opportunity structures and individual agency in rural areas

Stressing regional opportunity structures and their effects on the production and reproduction of social inequalities in the rural runs the risk of conceptualising space as a container in which local opportunities determine economic and social outcomes (Schroer, 2008). However, in a study of regional growth patterns, Rodríguez-Pose (2013) showed that structural conditions explain only a small proportion of regional growth differences. Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) recently argued that human agency, and especially innovative entrepreneurship, should be considered a potential driver of regional economic growth. These authors make a strong case for a micro-level focus (see also Plummer and Sheppard, 2006).

We draw on these findings from economic geography, but employ a broader, sociological understanding of agency and combine it with a rural lens. Emirbayer and Mische's concept of agency as 'the capacity that actors have to mediate the structuring contexts within which action unfolds' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1012) stresses that social and spatial structures influence, but do not determine, an individual's behaviour or socio-economic achievements. These structures include social norms, cultural and socio-economic contexts, but also—which is of major interest to us—spatial conditions; in our case, opportunity structures in rural areas. Equally important—and following Milbourne's (2004) plea for 'a place-based approach' to poverty—we hold that individual actors are not mere victims of their environment, or of the lack of opportunities, even in areas with particularly poor regional opportunity structures, such as peripheralised rural regions.

The concept of agency recognises that spatialised societal structures such as the four types of regional opportunity structures we presented above (Figure 1) affect the capacities of individuals to act, and that people's actions in turn (re)shape these structures. As well as the spatiality of opportunity structures, a temporal dimension needs to be considered: actors make sense of and use of their environment by combining past and present experiences as well as future orientations (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Such a temporal perspective accounts for the dynamics in individuals' actions: they reinterpret and reassess ever-changing environments (i.e. opportunities) and relate them to their own aspirations.

Applying these general ideas to our concept of regional opportunity structures, we argue that the conceptualisation of individual agency should be accompanied by a bottom-up or micro-level perspective that recognises that the capacities, interests, and ideals of the inhabitants of a region are central to the evaluation and use of opportunities; and that takes seriously the indispensable role of the inhabitants in the creation of opportunities (see also Figure 1). Opportunities might be available and within reach of the inhabitants of a region based on accessibility analyses. Nonetheless, an individual resident may be unable to take advantage of these opportunities because, for example, of a lack of personal (car) mobility. Particularly in rural areas, where many opportunities (such as jobs or public and private services) are spatially conglomerated in regional centres (such as rural towns) and others (such as natural assets) are not bound to a village or a small-town neighbourhood, the mobility capacity of an individual together with his/her attitudes towards mobility belong to key aspects of agency in the face of existing opportunity structures.

In addition, when considering the quality of accessible opportunities, perceptions and assessments need to be empirically analysed from the perspective of the residents, as evaluations of a school's or a shop's quality depend on personal preferences and values. It is also important to keep in mind that people develop their own perspectives on spatial injustice. Thus, regional opportunity structures do not dictate individual actions or determine the socio-economic outcomes achieved by individuals. People

use, choose, shape, and evaluate opportunities in accordance with their needs, preferences and perceptions.

Subsequently, we will illustrate these complex relationships between social and spatial inequalities and agency in rural areas along the four types of regional opportunity structures discussed earlier in this paper:

- *Economic opportunities*: Individual reactions to a lack of (well-paid) jobs in a region and the related strategies differ markedly. While poor employment prospects in disadvantaged (rural) regions may lead to outmigration, community ties and individual commitments often prevent people from using this strategy. Long-distance commuting is another potential solution, but whether a person can take advantage of this strategy depends on the availability of means of mobility, and on his/her familial situation and care commitments (Bernard, 2019). Accepting less desirable working conditions, engaging in informal work (Meert, 2000), or founding a small-scale business also represent potential coping strategies (Bærenholdt et al., 2021) that were found particularly in rural areas. Moreover, whether people accept the existing working conditions and how they use social benefits depend to a large extent on the cultural norms and the prevailing work ethic, as Black et al. (2019) pointed out about rural England.
- *Public and private services*: In peripheralised rural regions, service provision with regard to schools, grocery shops, and GPs tend to decline over time. Having personal resources—like economic capital, social networks, and access to public or private transport, such as a neighbour offering a lift (Bernard et al., 2016)—is a precondition for traveling long distances to make use of service infrastructure. Moreover, recognising individual preferences, values, and identities helps us better understand the trade-offs people make between quality and accessibility when weighing the use of local or more distant facilities, as Decker (2019) showed in her case study on female agency under conditions of social precarity in a rural context. Outmigration at old age to regional centres

providing better services is another active way to deal with lacking local opportunities (Steinführer and Grossmann, 2021).

- *Opportunities for community and civic engagement*: In their research on older people living in a rural location, Shergold and Parkhurst (2012) showed that high levels of community inclusion coincided with short travel distances to participate in community activities, and that having access to a car was not a sufficient condition for participation. By also focusing on older residents, Lengerer et al. (2022: 54) provided evidence that the subjective perception of local opportunities for civic engagement as poor goes often along with non-participation in local activities. This holds particularly for villagers with higher income. Klärner and Knabe (2019) found that public meeting places and community centres are important foci for poor people, enabling them to become involved in community life, to maintain and build their social networks. They can also provide them with various kinds of support in coping with poverty more successfully. Such opportunities are less likely to be found in rural peripheries.
- *Opportunities provided by the natural and the built environment*: Rural areas are often characterised as ‘rural idylls’ (or ‘Arcadia’; van Koppen, 2000). The consumption aspects of rural amenities clearly represent a key opportunity dimension, particularly for wealthier in-migrants. Yet, long-term residents may resist changes designed to stimulate amenity migration (Ulrich-Schad and Qin, 2018), and observe with ambivalence and contradictions the saturation of their place of residence with tourism attracted by natural amenities (Villa, 2019). Instead, some of them seek to take advantage of very different opportunities provided by the natural environment. Growing vegetables and chopping wood are widespread activities that help rural people deal with both social and spatial inequalities (Bernard et al., 2016).

From these examples, it becomes clear that cultural factors, in line with community ties and social relations in general, individual mobility capacity and

attitudes towards mobility substantially shape the agency of residents in opportunity-poor regions. However, more systematic research on these issues, and on how they mediate individual agency and unequal geographies of opportunity, is required.

V Outlook: Why do regional opportunity structures matter?

Since the mid-2010's, there has been a revived scholarly interest in disadvantaged regions with structural weaknesses, particularly in rural areas. Social scientists from different disciplines have tried to understand the (e.g. voting) behaviour of people in places that apparently 'don't matter' and are considered 'left behind' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018). Such efforts imply that living in a 'left behind' region, of which peripheralised rural regions are typical representatives, produces 'left behind' people, because economic opportunities have been lost and state institutions have withdrawn from such regions. Thus, a region's conditions become mediating factors that negatively affect the social situations of its inhabitants. Surprisingly, empirical studies on the effects of the regional context have remained rather sparse and fragmented over different sub-fields. The concept of regional opportunity structures suggests that this research agenda merits recognition and further elaboration. The aims of this agenda include cross-fertilising scattered research on the topic; and drawing attention not only to how the structural conditions of regions differ, but also to how the inhabitants are actually affected by regional structural conditions.

At the same time, this concept encourages further development of research on the spatial effects of social disadvantage in rural areas, and rehabilitates this agenda vis-à-vis the much more prominent study of neighbourhood effects in urban settings. Already in 2008, Lobao et al. (2008) pointed out that rural scholars, in particular rural sociologists frequently study poverty and inequality across space at the subnational, i.e. regional level. This is not just because of their concern with long-term poverty regions like Appalachia in the U.S. There

are two more general reasons for this focus. First, rural poverty and disadvantage tend to be more spatially dispersed, rather than concentrated in small geographical areas like in urban settings (Commins, 2004; Milbourne, 2014). This not only makes them less visible, but at the same time, it turns attention to larger areas as the appropriate scale to study their spatial structures. Second, studying disadvantage through the lens of limited access to opportunities means focusing on the everyday spatial contexts within which such opportunities are achieved. While acknowledging that these contexts extend well beyond individual neighbourhoods in both urban and rural settings, the importance of such a perspective increases in low institutional density settings typical for rural and peri-urban areas. Thus, emphasising unequal access to opportunities at the regional scale may prompt researchers to pay more attention particularly to rural disadvantage and to adopt adequate place-based approaches (Milbourne, 2004).

In the outlook, we return to the five benefits of this concept presented in the introduction to demonstrate how regional opportunity structures enrich the research agenda on the links between spatial and social inequalities.

(1) The concept offers a heuristic model for studying the effects of regional contexts. The model consistently distinguishes between regional structures representing opportunities for status attainment and quality of life, and the results achieved by individuals and households. Such a distinction is essential for research into regional effects. We have demonstrated this with some examples from rural settings. For the purposes of empirical analysis, individual elements can be operationalised to construct a multi-level model of the impacts on the social situations of individuals and households. Nonetheless, the operationalisation of opportunities can be difficult. Recently, Brazil et al. (2022) revealed significant discrepancies in conceptualization and data between various opportunity indices used in urban settings to identify the neighbourhoods that are high or low in opportunity. One of the major challenges is to distinguish the indicators of opportunities from the social situation of the population which is dependent on them. For example, unemployment and

poverty rates, which are commonly used indicators of regional economic opportunity (Wilson and Greenlee, 2016), do not sufficiently distinguish between opportunity and outcome. A more appropriate approach would be to use indicators related to the region's job supply and job accessibility.

(2) The importance of the regional scale in the study of social inequalities is underscored by the observation that many factors of social inequality referred to in contemporary debates are regional in nature. For example, structural changes in the labour market, rising housing costs, and the changing geography of public spending and cuts have significant effects on regional and social inequalities.

(3) The regional context is a complex environment that can hardly be reduced to economic structures alone. Existing studies of inequalities at the regional scale mainly focused on economic disparities (e.g. Cavanaugh and Breau, 2018). Other differences between regions that could also have significant effects on the lives of their respective populations have scarcely been investigated. Our conceptualisation of regional opportunity structures with a focus on rural areas shows that in order to understand inequalities and quality of life, other dimensions—services, opportunities for community life, the natural and the built environment, and their interlinkages and interdependencies—need to be considered, too. While such aspects are often difficult to operationalise because of the lack of quantitative indicators in general and the lack of meaningful non-economic indicators more specifically, this does not diminish their theoretical significance.

(4) Recognising the interdependencies between regional effects and other structural drivers of inequalities means taking seriously the idea that regional conditions produce different effects for different social groups. This perspective has recently been fruitfully applied by Gordon (2018) in his analysis of the geographies of the Brexit vote, in which he argued that regional influences intersect with the social structural effects visible in cosmopolitan/localist societal divides. This finding again points to the need to bridge the gap between geographical and sociological research but also between urban and rural studies.

(5) While the availability of institutionalised opportunities certainly is a factor of inequality, a perspective capturing residents' perceptions and assessments of opportunities—i.e. their sense-making—is required to complete the picture and to understand lived experiences. The concept of regional opportunity structures also points to the importance of investigating the distinct needs and goals of different social groups, and the strategies they use for dealing with the challenges they face when seeking to satisfy their needs. Hence, we call for a bottom-up research approach in which resources and opportunities considered subjectively important by inhabitants and households, along with people's capacities and interests, are identified in order to understand their perceptions of regional opportunities, their use of individual opportunities, and their strategies for dealing with limited access to opportunities. By adopting a rural lens, such a perspective is well suited to understand e.g. why people remain in objectively disadvantaged rural regions, and why many of them express satisfaction with their living conditions (Bernard, 2019).

The concept of regional opportunity structures enriches this broad research area by enabling us to better recognise how spatial contextual structures are intertwined with other drivers of social inequalities, and the lived experiences that result from their interactions. These issues can be addressed by quantitatively-oriented research that measures the effects of regional opportunities on individual socio-economic achievements and well-being; as well as by qualitative studies that improve our understanding of how different opportunity contexts are experienced and dealt with by different population groups.

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