

# Romancing the rural: reconceptualizing rural entrepreneurship as engagement with context(s).

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to consider the role of context in understanding and theorising rural entrepreneurship. We discuss the relation between entrepreneurship and its context and review some of the implications of how context has been used. We problematise how attribution errors and the romancing of the rural can shape research about context and entrepreneurship. To employ the explanatory power of context, we propose engagement; the connecting and relational practices of entrepreneurial processes. For us, rural context is more than background; so how can considering context improve our understanding of how entrepreneurship works? Our contribution is to propose a theoretical framework and to suggest an appropriate unit of analysis in context research: rural entrepreneurship is about engagements with contexts, rather than simply within a context.

In the last decade, the extent of academic interest in rural entrepreneurship has grown apace (McElwee and Smith, 2014). The numbers of journal articles have increased and special interest research groups have flourished. This is largely a European phenomenon (Baumgartner et al, 2013), although supplemented by a rising number of interesting studies from developing countries (Newbery et al, 2017). North American scholars seem to have paid more attention to rural enterprise as an extension of agriculture or tourism. Besser and Miller (2013) explain how American rural communities are often considered more remote than European, inferring that rural entrepreneurship may be deemed less important. Moreover, Fortunato (2014) suggests that US rural entrepreneurship is treated differently from entrepreneurship in urban areas, reflecting a US tendency to focus on more glamorous fast growing urban enterprise (Welter et al, 2017). Nonetheless, in Europe at least, rural entrepreneurship is now an established academic field of scholarship.

Given the growth in interest and number of outputs about rural entrepreneurship and rural enterprising, we believe it is time to take stock; to reflect on what we study and how we go about it. As an academic community, we have produced lots of good work describing many aspects of the topic. Indeed, rural entrepreneurship researchers were forerunners in exploring the explanatory power of context (Zhara et al, 2014). Pato and Teixeira (2016) describe two decades of such research, but the literature is studded with early attempts to relate rural contexts to entrepreneurship (for example, Johannisson, 1988; Bryant, 1989; Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989; Anderson and McAuley, 1999). In an early issue of a journal which is home to much rural entrepreneurship research, *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* (2000), the editor, Gerard McElwee, set out the Journal's scope as being 'concerned with praxis'. This concern is a thread that runs through the rural entrepreneurship literature - the effect of the rural on entrepreneurial practices, and sometimes but not very often, vice versa. Stathopoulou et al (2004) offer a good example of this pioneering work. The rural context for them is a milieu that affects the entrepreneurial process. To them rural context has three components, geographic, social and economic, which interact with different stages of the entrepreneurial process.

Interestingly, the theoretical implication from this viewpoint is that being rural produces a different kind of entrepreneurship, a unique entrepreneurial genre. This issue forms the focus of this paper. We want to examine and consider the implications of the juxtaposition of 'rural' and 'entrepreneurship' in our scholarship.

The paper is not a comprehensive literature review of rural entrepreneurship but explores interesting issues. A contribution may be in that highlighting these issues, we draw out interesting research agendas. Alternatively, the contribution may simply be in examining aspects of our research that have become taken for granted. Of course, the issue of the significance and consequence of the rural in rural entrepreneurship has not gone unexamined (Anderson, 2000; Smith and McElwee, 2013; Korsgaard et al, 2015). There are several well-argued papers that tackle the issue directly and many more which include the debates (Welter, 2010; McKeever et al, 2014; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017; Muller and Korsgaard, 2018). However, few are conclusive and none seem to offer us a satisfactory approach or sound theoretical framework for studying context in our topic. Our suggestions about observing entrepreneurial engagements with different contexts begin to offer a methodologically robust approach. Moreover, we propose practical methods that address many of the conceptual issues.

We also believe that studying rural entrepreneurship is productive and useful. As we proposed earlier; what we learn may be usefully applied in other topic areas. Moreover, the relative ease of access to rural process is appealing. Because society seems spread thinner in rural areas, processes may appear more transparent and seem less complex. Moreover, entrepreneurship holds a theoretically privileged position as an engine of change (Dodd et al, 2013). Thus, understanding how change making is entrepreneurially practiced in a rural context may further our understanding of broader entrepreneurial processes. Arguably, it is easier to observe entrepreneurial change processes and outcomes in a rural context. This may carry explanatory benefits for entrepreneurship in other contexts.

Our objective is to better understand entrepreneuring and how the process are linked to context. We want to challenge the reader to question underlying assumptions of influential ideas. We first set out how we see the problem by identifying assumptions in context research. We continue by examining the implications ensuing from different perspectives of the rural in rural enterprise. Finally, we propose and discuss methods for finding out more about the juxtaposition of context and entrepreneurship. Our own perspective is that context matters, not just for rural entrepreneurship; but also for developing understanding other academically 'contextualised' entrepreneurial phenomena such as social enterprise or female enterprise.

### **The contextual turn in entrepreneurship research – insights and assumptions**

We first consider rural entrepreneurship as a contextualised (socially, culturally, spatially, institutionally) phenomenon, arguing that these 'boundaries' affect how we conceptualise rural enterprise. We discuss how these conceptualisations may carry normative assumptions. If applied uncritically, such contextualisations risk attributing causality to what are essentially descriptive characteristics. Theoretically extending this issue to view the rural as socially constructed, we consider how some qualities attributed to rurality romance the concept.

The 'rural' seems the container for our topic and that 'rural' has spatial, social and economic boundaries. Yet that simple assumption raises issues about the nature of what we study (Pato and Teixeira, 2018). Is it about entrepreneurship in the rural context; or about a form of enterprising that

arises uniquely in rural areas? Both seem valid, but offer a somewhat dichotomous view. If we follow the idea that the rural shapes enterprise, *the* context for our entrepreneurial phenomenon, there is an inference that the context profiles enterprise deterministically. Consequently, our findings will not be generalizable beyond this context. In contrast, if our world view is that what we study is simply entrepreneurship in rural surroundings, we acknowledge implications of being rural, but believe we can offer insights to entrepreneurship in general. Are there fundamentally different types of entrepreneurship, for example as rural, social, ethnic or even female entrepreneurship? Indeed, we wonder if there is simply 'entrepreneurship' that shows up dressed differently depending on who holds the party or where the party is held.

Our view is that context shapes enterprise (Zhara, 2007). Yet context does so in both urban and rural contexts. However, it may operate differently. For example, the social seems more evident in rural areas (Smith and McElwee, 2013; McKeever et al, 2014). Moreover, as Korsgaard et al (2015) argue, a comprehensive understanding of the role of context in rural entrepreneurship must also address spatial context. The geography of being rural, distances from markets, and thinness of customer base have profound effects in practice (Anderson, Osseichuk, and Illingworth, 2010). We argue that these rural factors must certainly shape processes and outcomes. Nonetheless, our key argument is they do not determine what it means to be rural.

We can draw on quite different categories of entrepreneurship to illustrate this point. We read for example about ethnic entrepreneurship, and like rural entrepreneurship, it superficially offers a tempting 'explanatory' category. The trap is that we *explain*, that is to say we claim to understand and theorise, ethnic entrepreneurship in terms of its *ethnicness*. This is not simply a tautology, but an attribution error (Dimov, 2007). A category based on description, characteristics, is used to explain behaviour. Yet there is nothing about being rural, female or ethnic that determines how she will enterprise. There may well be patterns of association- for example, rural firms are often small (Anderson and Ullah, 2014). But to account for this, we need 'explain' how remoteness works on the rural firm. Put differently, it is likely remoteness, not simply rural, that enables us to understand why most firms remain small. A similar problem arises in so called necessity entrepreneurship. Here the label is constructed to determine that this necessity enterprise is not only different, but less valuable than opportunity enterprise. When presented this way the problem becomes obvious, yet it persists in rural entrepreneurship and how we study it.

Building from this issue, Henry and McElwee (2014) consider whether there is a distinct category in 'rural' entrepreneurship that we can delineate as somehow different from urban enterprise. They found there is little intrinsic difference in structure or management to distinguish rural from urban. Contrastingly, Siemens (2014) showed how rural conditions created particular and specific needs for rural small business. Interestingly, she also suggests that the appeal of rural lifestyle balanced the 'rural' problems. We are thus left with intuition that rural entrepreneurship is categorically different; yet may struggle to specify differences. Accordingly, we are concerned that the notion of being rural spuriously determines a unique form of entrepreneurship; arbitrarily and artificially creating a genre of entrepreneurship. This problem is what some sociologists (Nisbet, 1993) call a unit idea, where explanation becomes confused with description (Pyysiäinen et al 2006). The consequence is an attribution error, where descriptive qualities are thought to influence behaviour. We noted earlier a similar problem in so-called 'necessity' entrepreneurship. Descriptions of motivation, essentially a focus on income generation rather than growth, are deemed to form a less appealing type of entrepreneurship. Yet there is nothing about entrepreneurship born in necessity that *determines* that it will be categorically different from any other form (Anderson, Harbi and Brahem, 2013).

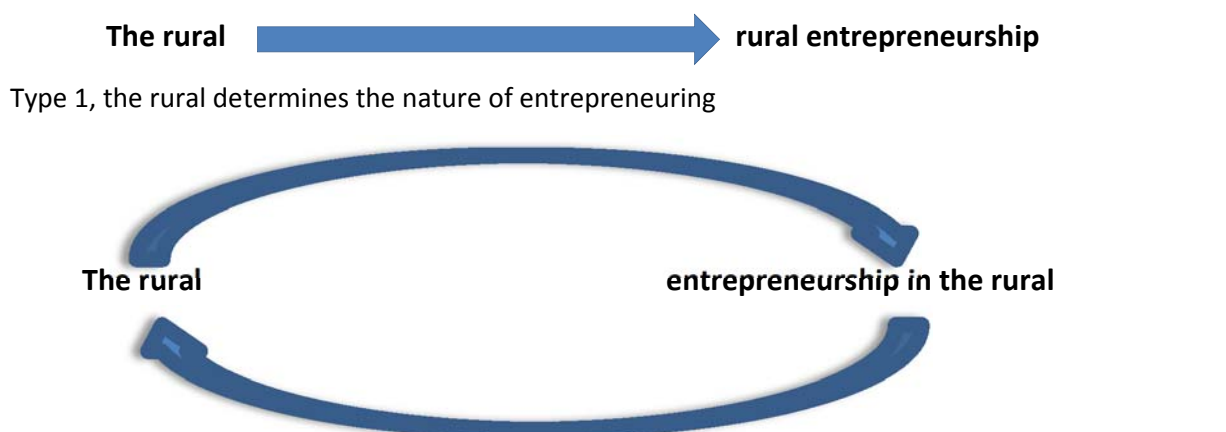
There is a second form of attribution error, but a socially constructed error. We believe that the romance of the rural, the idyll, the bucolic social construction of rurality is a powerful conceptual attractor (Steyaert, 2007). Carbó et al (2013) describe social representation of rurality that see the territory as an imagined and idyllic landscape, perhaps even masking a darker side (Somerville, Smith and McElwee, 2015). Conceptually as Pittaway, (2005) notes, researchers in entrepreneurship now recognise that ideology, or the political basis of ideas, meta-theory and other 'taken for granted' assumptions (axioms) have a critical influence on knowledge construction. Consequently, we want to consider why the rural appeals to entrepreneurship scholars as a conceptual attractor (Steyaert, 2007) and offer some explanation. Intuitively we suggest the countryside tugs our emotions, perhaps as offering a 'better' way of life. Jansson (2013) calls this a 'moral geography'. An unspoken, but deeply embedded, admiration draws us to wanting to know how things work in the rural. This emotional appeal of rurality has several dimensions. We are all ancestrally rural, but significantly the rural is deemed to be a reservoir of values (Deakins, Bensemann and Battisi, 2016) where traditional and natural prevail as an anathema to the hurly-burly of modern urban life (Anderson, 1998). This romance of the rural is the emotive appeal that first captures our hearts, before engaging our heads. We suggest that this romancing can spillover into conceptualizing the rural.

Despite our claim about the theoretical usefulness of context, the very idea of 'a' context is problematic because practicing enterprising involves operating and existing simultaneously within several contexts. Rural entrepreneurship can be, *is*, within economic, social and spatial contexts at the same time (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). Moreover, entrepreneurs experience and engage with all of these contexts in their everyday actions (Anderson and Ronteau, 2017). We may even neglect a critical point - that these contextual boundaries are an academic contrivance, albeit a useful technique for narrowing down big questions (Anderson, 2015). However, we seem to give theoretical priority to one context by so labelling the phenomenon, and this may be unjustified, even misleading. The risk is that in labelling it rural, we attribute qualities, even causality, that may not be warranted. For example, Anderson and Smith (2009) showed how social constructions create a moral space for entrepreneurship; yet Somerville et al (2015) demonstrate a dark side, the extent of illegal or illicit activities that go on in the rural. Our point here is that the dark side and the idyll exist simultaneously in the rural milieu; it is us - academics - who decide to privilege a context in analysis and explanation. A further problem lies in how we approach the context.

Newbery et al (2017) suggest that the community lens is often used in studying rural entrepreneurship. Kalantaridis and Bika (2006) suggest that rurality is often associated with a sense of community, but that this is caused by the smallness of rural settlements. Nonetheless, it seems that the socially constructed idyll inadvertently melds into how we conceive and discuss rural places as community. Rather than simply being place, rural places are often presented as *communities*. The notion of community becomes invested with nostalgia for with benevolent 'community' values and endowed with possibly spurious togetherness. McKinnon (2002) suggests much of the appeal of community rests on a sense of loss in terms of nostalgia for earlier forms of social organisation supposedly characterised by close interactions and intimate face-to-face relations. This serves to focus attention on rural areas as contemporary repositories of these (imagined) virtues. Indeed, Mandler (1997) criticises this historical construct that was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century; the nostalgic, deferential and rural. McCrone (1992) makes a similar and well-informed critique of the constructions of 'Scottish' community. Burnett (1998) points out how the LEADER programme had developed initiatives that celebrate crofting communities as 'authentic' communities. In England, Bosworth et al (2016) note the growing interest in community-led local development across Europe, but emphasise the localness of rural community.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence that a rural community spirit exists. McKeever et al (2104, 2015) talk about mutuality and a shared sense of importance of their place. For them, community carries a sense of attachment, *belonging*, to rural places and implies rights and carries responsibility. In contrast Anderson, Warren and Bensemman (2018) showed how locals' sense of place, disapproved of entrepreneurial action. However, it also seems likely that these effects are partly a consequence of rural places offering a bounded entity for study; as well as a bounded space for interaction (Muller and Korsgaard, 2018). In contrast to the sheer size and frequencies of urban multiple interactions, the institutional concentration apparent in rural may lead us to believe we are observing a 'community'. Nonetheless, we believe the problem is largely one of *affect* rather than effect; the rural community offers an iconic symbol of embedded relationships rather than simply a place where people live together (de Bruin, Shaw and Lewis, 2017; Muhammad, McElwee and Dana, 2017). Consider how community is portrayed here; Korsching and Allen (2004;26) 'Entrepreneurship recirculates resources locally and multiplies benefits for the local community. Unlike businesses recruited to locate in the community that demand financial incentives and tax and regulatory concessions but have no strong local ties, local entrepreneurs generally have a commitment to the community'. Ironically, rural heritage centres that celebrate place are often set up by incomers who have invested cultural. Symbolic and financial capitals in deciding to move into rurality (See Burnett, 1998). Regardless of the extent of a communitarian ethos in rural place, we propose caution in our use of community as context.

Our research problem reflects whether the rural in rural entrepreneurship is a conceptual, categorical or simply a spatial boundary. Indeed, we wonder if it is this contextual ambiguity in rural enterprising that makes it so appealing. Socially, there are lingering traces of the old Tonniesian dichotomy, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. The artificial and competitive city versus the natural and organic of an imagined community still permeates some rural literature. We (may) impute some kind of moral appeal in the rural that is thought to be absent in the urban. Whilst this social and spatial ordering of society as rural and urban is tinged with Tonniesian romance, the rural also offers us the practical benefit of a bounded and more distinct unit for analysis. We know that social processes are complex and interconnected (Drakopoulou Dodd et al, 2016). But the relative simplicity of the rural seems to allow us to see things more clearly. For us, there may then be a problem in that because we can see the dynamics more clearly, we assume they are different. The harshness of the rural environment for small business is hidden behind the rose covered cottages. Our point here is that the rural is a social construction, but we may treat it as an objectified reality (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2009). Worse still, there is strong risk of reification of the rural (Ogbor, 2000), so that we may read too much into our interpretations. Figure 1 describes two perspectives for the rural in rural enterprising.



Type 2, the form of entrepreneuring is influenced by the spatial, social and economic engagements

### **Fig 1 Two research perspectives on the rural in entrepreneurship**

In summary, we see how attribution errors (rural entrepreneurship as a unique form of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in a rural context) and in the romancing of the rural (rural as a better way of life, community and the rural as more natural) may lead us astray. These methodological and conceptual problems may be overlooked in our enthusiasm to understand and explain rural entrepreneurship. Of course, it is always easy to see problems, but much more useful to offer solutions.

#### **Entrepreneurship as engagement in a milieu**

We propose that we treat rural entrepreneurship as enterprise in a rural milieu, but rural enterprising as the engagement with rural contexts. We justify this proposition by arguing that context(s) provide the resources to which entrepreneurs connect to create value; consequently, these entrepreneurial engagements are the phenomenon, the practices that carry explanatory power. Seen this way, context whether rural, female, spatial, institutional, business, cultural, social – or any other contextual domain, does not determine the nature of enterprising, but the extent, degree and type of engagement shapes both practice and outcome. At a philosophical level, the ideologies of contexts normatively shape what is considered important and appropriate (Galani-Moutafi, 2013; Siemens, 2013). However, our argument is that it is the extent and nature of how enterprise engages with rural context that carries explanatory power.

To summarise, we believe that different approaches to context may ask different kinds of questions and produce different kinds of answers.

For example;

- as a spatial phenomenon, distance shapes the opportunity space for enterprise (Korsgaard, Ferguson and Gaddefors, 2015)
- as a cultural phenomenon, culture opens up enterprising interpretations of the otherness of the rural (Anderson, Wallace and Townsend, 2016)
- as a social phenomenon, the enforced sociability of being rural (Rooks, Klyver and Sserwanga, 2016.)
- as an economic phenomenon, profitability and growth are constrained by rural features (Anderson and Obeng, 2017)

Rural entrepreneurship, as is the case with all enterprising, is a malleable social construction (Aldrich and Martinez, 2010). Put another way, there are differing, but quite possibly equally valid, meanings attributed to the rural and to entrepreneurship. Consequently, a key issue is to determine what is, or rather how should we treat this interesting phenomenon (Steyaert, 2007). Whilst we are not unduly concerned about definition (McElwee, 2008), we recognise that a positivistic epistemology requires definition before even beginning research. Rindova et al. (2009) note the tendency for conventional approaches to characterise entrepreneurship in terms of nouns and to focus on the investigation of entities. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that conventional entrepreneurship research has generally relied on functionalist and positivist assumptions that define entrepreneurship as an economic activity (Goss et al, 2011; Anderson, 2015). In contrast, our post positivistic concern

(Karatas-Ozkan et al, 2014) is about how to conceive, and hence recognise and apply the concept as a process or as a practice (Jack et al, 2004). We therefore argue that refining the concept should be prioritised over defining the phenomenon.

Nonetheless, the concept of rural entrepreneurship has been contentious and mirrors the problem in defining entrepreneurship itself. Most probably this is because entrepreneurship is not one 'thing'. Indeed in practice terms, it is not even a noun, but a verb - *entrepreneur*ing. It is a type of behaviour, a range of activities that create value (Firth and McElwee, 2009). A long time ago Anderson (2000) argued that entrepreneurship is the creation or use of values from an environment. This, however, did not develop the importance of 'from an environment'. Entrepreneurship had also been recognised as a process of connecting (Anderson, Dodd and Jack, 2012), but combining these separate views shows us how entrepreneurship can be better understood as a *relational process*. The implications for understanding 'rural entrepreneurship' become a little clearer; to understand rural enterprising we must first look at relationships, the interactions (engagements) between the rural and the enterprising. This relational theme peppers the rural entrepreneurship literature, but often surfaces indirectly in efforts to better conceptualise the phenomenon.

However, returning to our concern about categorising enterprise as rural, we challenge this on two grounds. First, that simply being rural is causal; that somehow being rural carries cause and effect. Secondly, the very idea of genre, typological or categorical uniqueness is difficult to reconcile with the diversity of ways of being entrepreneurial (Anderson and Starnawska, 2008) and the everydayness of much rural enterprising (Welter et al, 2017). An alternative viewpoint, one that we propose and support, is to treat the rural in rural entrepreneurship as an interactive context for entrepreneurship. In other words, we assert that rural entrepreneurship is no more, and no less than entrepreneurship within the rural milieu. For us this permits, even enables, us to recognise what may be important in rural entrepreneurship. It does so by drawing our attention to the processual interactions with *things* in the rural and how this engagement affects entrepreneurship. Indeed, Anderson (2000a) had argued entrepreneurship is best understood as a combining of the entrepreneurial self and the circumstances in which it arises. Consequently, *entrepreneur*ing is 'protean' in form, it takes shape from the context. Moreover, in a recent, but provocatively extreme case, Gaddefors and Anderson (2016) showed how a rural context created entrepreneurship. Thus, we acknowledge that enterprise takes many forms, that it arises within different contexts; however, we are very cautious about conflating context with form.

Benneworth (2004;4) offers some interesting theoretical middle ground, conceiving the rural as a mode of entrepreneurship. "Anderson (2000), who uses the idea of a peripheral 'mode of entrepreneurship' to articulate how entrepreneurship can take place in a peripheral region and benefit that region. His argument is that 'gravitation works to strip out higher order functions from the periphery, investing and reinforcing central power'. Consequently, what remains are 'left-over qualities such as tradition and underdevelopment, those very characteristics that made it peripheral in the first place' (p. 92)". Benneworth's proposal is that the rural context and the entrepreneurship within this context are interactive; each conditions the other, but does not determine.

Korsgaard et al (2015) are also well aware of this issue, but suggest a useful schema for distinguishing the rural in rural entrepreneurship; *enacting* the rural. To explain, they offer two ideal types (Weberian models that characterise the quality examined), namely "rural entrepreneurship" and "entrepreneurship in the rural". The latter engages with the immediate spatial context as merely a location for its activities, thereby employing a logic of space characterized by profit and mobility. An industrial plant or a shop that, unlike say rural jam production, could be relocated without any significant loss of function or identity. They conclude that 'entrepreneurship in the rural' is a better



account, because involves an intimate relationship between the entrepreneurial activity and the place where it occurs.

Lang et al (2015) make a good case for understanding rural entrepreneurship as enterprising as shaped by the rural context. They draw out how institutions influence practice, arguing that the social context may be more important than the economic. Interestingly, they refer to this perspective as 'placed based' and see this as geographic. In this view, rural place is a container of 'institutions'; as Marquis and Battilana (2009: 294) propose, 'local communities are institutional arenas'. Studies such as Lang et al (2014) can tell us how rural entrepreneurial practice responds to the institutions. In a later paper, Kibler et al, (2015) argue for the importance of social legitimacy in *how* place is used.

Other scholars have placed less importance on functionalist links with the rural. For example, Pato and Teixeira (2016) tell us a rural entrepreneur is someone living in a rural environment who is community-based and greatly influenced by social networking and social traits of that rural locality. They (2016:5) further argue for 'embedding in the rural', "many firms in rural areas present rural characteristics, as they are embedded in the local economy... ". In this context, an effective conception identifies rural enterprises with businesses that employ local people, use and provide local services and generate income for the rural environment (McElwee and Atherton 2011; McElwee and Smith 2014)". Clearly their review has led them to believe that rural entrepreneurship is different from other types by the extent of engagement with things rural. Whilst this is appealing in its simplicity, we see a risk of over-determining in the circularity of description and the cultural undertones in the account. McElwee and Smith (2014) grapple with this problem and concluded that to be rural extends beyond domicile or location.

We would like to develop these perspectives as entrepreneurial engagement with the rural. Like both Pato and Teixeira and McElwee and Smith, we recognise explanatory power of the rural context for explaining entrepreneurship. However, these accounts present a relatively passive form of engagement; essentially - as situated in the rural. As such they work well for description, but less well for explanation. We want to take this a stage further and consider entrepreneurial engagement as agency. This extends Korsgaard et al's (2015) proposition of enacting the rural. For us, the processes of enactment offer a key to understanding engagement. In turn, this helps to explain the distinctive nature of rural enterprising.

This theorising envisages context as a pool of resources; some are obvious, others latent. Enactment is the use, or mobilization of these rural resources (Bryden, 1998). Many rural resources are context bound, but may range from the physical resources of scenery or landscape, or the social resources in community; or any combinations of resources. The entrepreneurial agency in rural enterprising connects to these 'resources' to create values. The values may be rural in character, but need not be (Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011); it may be sufficient to enact them within the rural. Thus, we contend that for *explaining* rural entrepreneurship, the focus has to be on these processes of engagement.

There is a persistent and difficult problem in dealing with context, that several different contexts create the entrepreneurial milieu. Singling out one for explanation could undertreat the complexity of interconnected contexts as the configure practices. For example, if we want to enquire about rural female entrepreneurs, we have to confront different influential 'contexts' (Roos, 2017). We can argue that being a rural female, especially if understood as a social constructed context, carries a number of influences on their rural engagement (Bock, 2004). There are expectations of behaviour, of roles and of practices (Bock 2015). These affect how we observe and understand, as well as the enactment and practice. It matters little if these exist only in the mind, because the effects are as if they were real.

Anderson and Ronteau (2017) recently attempted to understand this as a theory of entrepreneurial practice; relating the everyday micro of what entrepreneurs do, to the macro of *perceived* institutions. They argued that whilst practices vary, they can be better understood in terms of their relationship to institutional context. We propose that the *rural* has become a kind of institution. However, social constructions of rurality carry *emotional baggage*, romancing the rural is an ideological loading.

In short, enterprising practices engage with several contexts, but not equally. Accordingly, for theorising - say female rural enterprise - we may acknowledge the relative importance being female, but at other points refer to how the rural context shapes what is possible. Calás et al. (2009; 564), for example, use feminist theories to show that entrepreneurship is a 'complex set of social activities and processes'. Contexts are thus interaction spaces; they can be conceived as stacked contexts; almost the multiple levels of a cake stand. Developing the metaphor, we can imagine each layer in the cake stand holding up the other, moreover the lower layers are overshadowed by the upper layers - perhaps reflecting the relative scope of contexts. Enterprising as engagement flows through and interacts with this plurality of contexts, but will likely be shaped by some more than others. Our task is to understand these engagements and to build theory that explains them. Accordingly, our argument is that because entrepreneurship is action, a practice, understanding it in context is to explore how it engages with contexts.

### **On methodology and method (How can we study entrepreneurship in context? What are the challenges?)**

Theorising is all very well, but there is a practical question about what is the best way, what methods, what tools should we use, to further our enquiries? Chalmers and Shaw (2017) explain that understanding of context is largely shaped by the ontological and epistemological stances assumed by researcher. Given our argument that rural engagement captures practice, and engagement can be with the imagined as well as the 'material' (Anderson and Gaddefors, 2016), the ontological assumptions of positivism seem poorly equipped (Leitch et al, 2010) to deal with intangible social constructions (Jennings et al, 2005). The empirical manifestations of social constructions may be elusive, albeit experienced as very real. In contrast, positivistic approaches require us to be able to measure tangible and objectifiable entities or actions. Consequently, often we can only invent proxies for the intangibles that infer meaning to the rural. We may be constrained to measuring only the measurable rather than meanings. As we see it, positivism builds in assumptions, whilst interpretivism encounters them. A richer, fuller appreciation of context in practices requires encounters with entrepreneur's engagements.

Our proposal is that we should be critically aware of our concepts. To do this well, we may first have to establish their contextualised meaning, rather than uncritical application. In some cases, this indicates a qualitative approach is needed to interpret the meanings of our phenomenon. Interestingly and referring to our opening about rural entrepreneurship scholarship as European, Packard (2017), seems to have rediscovered interpretivism in the US. Nonetheless, he reminds us the social entities we examine, including our critical concepts of entrepreneur and rural, are not real. Such concepts are mere artifacts designed for the contextualization and interpretation of behaviors. As he puts it, 'interpretivism sees the social world through a distinct lens of intentionality rather than causality, of 'becoming' rather than 'being,' and relationships and interactions rather than social entities.' We agree, but add that it seems unlikely that a functionalist lens will ever be capable of explaining, far less determining causes of rural entrepreneurship. The malleability of our concepts and the variety of practices suggest that such a task is, in any case, almost pointless. Entrepreneurship emerges over

time from the interaction of the developing entrepreneurial self and circumstances (Anderson, 2000a). However, we can very usefully try to interpret the relationship between this self and particular circumstances; the *interactions with contexts*. Such accounts will provide an *explanation* of what happens in practice.

In contextualising, we take into account the environment; the milieu surrounding, supporting and challenging entrepreneurial action. The physical properties of the rural are overt and palpable. Yet the way we perceive the rural; the social constructions of the rural are also real, but changing, less obvious and not directly observable. We should be alert to smuggling normative social constructions into our perspectives (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). Light and Dana (2013) describe how the rural context of their study created a cultural boundary where there was a risk of imposing their beliefs and values on their analysis. Put simply, when society is spread thin as it is in the rural, it seems easier to see what goes on. We propose *observation* and analysis rather than assumption. In short, to research how entrepreneurship engages with contexts, we suggest a critical, reflexive interpretivist approach that will develop our understanding of rural process and practices.

## Conclusion

In problematising our topic, we hope to have demonstrated the theoretical richness of context. Nonetheless, the rural is a spatial configuration to which we attribute social characteristics. We risk treating these social constructions as causal, even although they may be romantic manifestations of imagined community. We argued that the key issue for understanding and, thus theorising rural entrepreneurship, is the relationship between the rural and entrepreneurial action. In other words, how does enterprising engage with the rural. We saw that sound cases could be made for studying enterprising as a rurally based phenomenon or alternatively; a rural phenomenon. Both are valid approaches and capture different aspects and elements of the relationships and interactions; they are different conceptual perspectives capable of answering different questions. However, our concern is that as researchers, we must be specific about our own perspective, because we will have different answers. Moreover, when *asking* these questions, we must be very clear about how and what we ask. The risk of imposing embellished assumptions of the rural is high. Our point is that to ensure the rigour of our analysis, we must state *and* justify our perspective. From an entirely practical point of view about getting published, this works to counter that damning critique of research - so you found what you were looking for!

Our novel theorising of context saw context as pools of attributes. This enabled us to explain entrepreneurship as connecting to and using these resources. Each context has different resources, so understanding rural entrepreneurship entails relating actions and practices to the enactment of these resources. Understanding entrepreneurship is about understanding *the engagements with contexts*, rather than simply within context. This suggests we begin each study by critically examining, and specifying, what aspect of engagement we want to understand. Our contribution is first to draw attention to some problem areas in conceptions of rural entrepreneurship. A second contribution is to propose a solution, that research could focus on how entrepreneuring engages with different rural contexts. We believe this framework might also have applications for other categories of entrepreneurship. In turn this should help us to better understand the nature and practices of groups such as female entrepreneurs, ethnic or even necessity entrepreneuring.

We conclude that rural entrepreneurship is likely best conceived as those activities where entrepreneurship interacts and engages with contexts. This gives us plenty of scope to explore aspects of what it means to be entrepreneurial; and ability to develop the nature(s) of rural contexts. It delineates our topic. We have important caveats; we must not forget agency in this focus on context, after all that is what entrepreneurs do and engagement is a two way process. Nor should we overlook choice, after all that is why we have rural entrepreneurs (Brock, 2004).

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