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## **PRODUCING RURAL SPACES FOR CONSUMPTION: PROPER STATES OF MIND**

### **ABSTRACT**

By drawing from rural, tourism, and working life studies, this article constructs a framework for understanding the concurrent processes of production and consumption in a rural space. In the specific context of the Finnish countryside, the article investigates the practices of the self-employed who run firms providing rural spaces for practising dog sports. Firms' customers are typically busy urbanites who seek an invigorating leisure experience. Those practising dog sports, in particular, seek functional spaces, adapted to their needs to train dogs and spend their leisure time. In addition to providing this physical resource, the entrepreneurs in this study, as service-sector workers, must also provide their customers with a certain state of mind. Using interviews and observations of six firms, this article demonstrates how space and state of mind are produced simultaneously and, consequently, entrepreneurs' personalities are entirely invested in their labour, challenging theoretical assumptions of rural areas as places of specific types of consumption only; it selectively transfers academic research about new service work to research on rural tourism.

**KEYWORDS:** commoditised rurality; emotion work; dog sports; late-capitalism; self-employment

### **INTRODUCTION**

Globally, individuals seek innovative ways to use, produce, and maintain rural landscapes. Drawing from rural, tourism, and working life studies, this article constructs an understanding of the concurrent processes of production and consumption in and of rural spaces, focusing on those who, after a change to self-employment, host visitors who come to rural locales in search of an experience that differs from their everyday, urban lives. The host's job is to enable a particular 'state of mind' among visitors. Difficulties in contemporary working life and the economy are both structural and personal in nature, including exhaustion, stress/burnout (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Green, 2006), unemployment/underemployment, fixed-term jobs, 'zero-hour' (i.e. short notice) contracts, and precarious labour markets (Adkins, 2012; McDowell, 2009; Standing, 2011). Working life, however, can be simultaneously precarious and passion-inspiring, with many leaving traditional waged work in favour of self-employment to pursue dreams of self-fulfilment. When waged work is known, or anticipated to be, miserable, or when it does not exist at all, self-realisation and downshifting inspire some to consider unusual ways to earn a living, such as the Finnish self-employed workers who serve dog owners in this research have done, becoming part of a counter-action against the mainstream.

The role of the countryside in capitalist value production has changed in recent years in Finland and other developed countries. The Finnish countryside experienced its golden age between World War II and the 1960s when small family farms flourished and trade and service-sector jobs were established in rural areas. After agricultural production became effective it had to be legislatively restricted, many left the

countryside in the 1970s and 1980s, with negative development trends delayed by regional policies supporting industries that invested in rural areas and welfare policies that created many public-sector jobs, particularly for women. In the 1990s economic recession commenced the dismantling of the welfare state ideologically and practically. Finland's entrance into the European Union in 1995 hampered agricultural production and free global economic competition in which the State intervened less and less, negatively affecting available workplaces (Granberg, 2004; Vihinen, 2004; Halfacree, 2006). Subsequently, many country homes and cow houses became unoccupied, cornfields started to grow bushes and rural areas increasingly diversified.

The Finnish, in particular, have a widely shared, albeit somewhat idealised, national memory of rurality, conceiving the countryside as offering an escape from the frenetic pace of urban existence. Rural tourism is one manifestation of working life and recent global rural change (Woods, 2005, p. 30). Tourism studies and tourism itself have moved towards bodily activities and multisensory experiences (Cloke & Perkins, 1998; Crouch & Desforges, 2003; Lynch, McIntosh, & Tucker, 2009; Urry & Larsen, 2011), with rural regions offering new business ideas and a variety of rural traditions in which visitors may partake. This article focusses on entrepreneurs who operate in the Finnish countryside and provide services to dog owners. The two main research questions are: 1) How is rural space made consumable and sellable for a certain segment of visitors?, and, 2) How is the entrepreneur's 'self' connected to and invested in this process? In developing an understanding of these entrepreneurial activities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORY**

Although some have argued rural tourism is neglected in tourism research (Page & Getz, 1997), the practice of rural travel has a long history and the elements of rurality that are sold as part of the rural tourism experience are well known (Roberts & Hall, 2001; Woods, 2005). Rural places often take on the role of reservoirs of traditional values and as appropriate locations for the consumption of specific aesthetics. Often an idealised image of rurality is offered which frequently involves presenting traditional gender roles and builds on certain culturally shared images of the countryside (Bell, 2006; Brandth & Haugen, 2014; Short, 2006; Vepsäläinen & Pitkänen, 2010; Woods, 2005). Today, those traveling to rural destinations often want more than passively observing rural surroundings (Urry, 1990). 'Post-tourists' (Feifer, 1985) are said to be in search of exceptional, active experiences for all five senses, are aware of their own agency in constructing such experiences, and resist prescribed tourist roles (Cater & Smith, 2003; Cloke & Perkins, 1998; Crouch & Desforges, 2003; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Commercial homes are examples of individualised services, although they sometimes rely on rather traditional values and landscapes (Brandth & Haugen, 2012). Hosts may also use the rural element in a special way, as is the case in serving travellers with dogs. In this sense, serving sport dog owners resembles sport tourism (Ritchie, 2011) or adventure tourism, which transcends most traditional tourist agendas (i.e. showing tourists something different from their present, everyday lives) and is a more embodied, total experience based on activity. These entrepreneurs and their customers are a part of a lifestyle-led and leisure-oriented society (Urry, 1995; Walmsley, 2003).

Generally, rural studies theorises the countryside has moved from a production-based economy to a post-productivist, consumption-based economy where new rural meanings and practices have emerge with global changes and exposure of 'old rural' problems (Halfacree, 1997; Holmes, 2006; Ilbery, 1998; McCarthy, 2008; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Woods, 2005, 2009). The countryside is increasingly used for different amenity purposes, including 'amenity migration' from urban spaces (Argent, Mailers, & Griffin, 2007; Cadieux & Hurley, 2011; Crump, 2003). 'Rural' is sold and consumed in numerous imaginative and even conflicting ways. The network of urban and rural ideologies is important to consider, since the local practices that are narrated to urban consumers according to their anticipated needs rebuild those rural localities. Thus, the meaning of 'rural' varies, although there are several idealised types for the post-productivist phase of the countryside (Halfacree, 2006).

Hosting visitors who come to rural places is service work. By providing the rural for consumption, entrepreneurs' and workers' job is to produce positive emotions for visitors which in turn affects hosts' selves. The requirement to induce or suppress feelings to produce a 'proper' state of mind in others (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7) represents a classical argument in the emotional labour debate (Bolton & Boyd,

2003; Brandth & Haugen, 2014; Cohen, 2010; Hochschild, 1983; Guerrier & Adib, 2003). Demands to use emotional management skills stem from the organisation's management and are intertwined with the capitalist labour market. Employees sell their labour, including emotional and bodily expressions, in exchange for a wage and management formulates that labour for the purposes of profit. In contemporary late-capitalism, it is timely to examine emotional requirements of the self-employed. Although the self-employed have power over the process of engaging in emotion control to match their customers' expectations, and may think about their work differently, such work may lead to emotional breaking points (Cohen, 2010).

Aesthetics is one component of producing a holistic experience for visitors and includes rural and employee aesthetics. Aesthetic labour refers to the embodied character of work and the ways in which employees present themselves (Hancock & Taylor, 2007; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Wellington & Bryson, 2001; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003) and includes, among other things, the appearances of the firm, landscape, and the proper clothing, look, gestures, and voice of the employees (or, in the case of this study, entrepreneurs). Both emotional and aesthetic labour take place within embodied and place-bound work and since both are essential elements in service work and production of experience, it is important to specify their roles in different modes of rural hosting work. This article examines the work of self-employed in rural settings; it does not focus on customers, tourists, or visitors, who are most often the topic of study of 'selling the countryside' discourses. Little research has been conducted on how it feels to work in rural settings and information is lacking on innovative ways to commercialise the countryside and its affect to rural landscapes.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### *Research design and sample*

This research uses a qualitative approach to elaborate the practices whereby rural space is made consumable and sellable for a certain segment of visitors, applying an interpretive approach to understand phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals bring to social phenomena and how they organise, relate to, and interact with, the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The decision to study dog-related enterprises was motivated by knowledge that, while firms involved in dog-related services are rather new entrepreneurial actors, their numbers are growing as are dog-related services. Pets, especially dogs, may be commercialised in many different ways. Alongside ordinary pet dogs, which may be pampered and treated almost like children, and working dogs, such as drug detection dogs, police dogs, and guide dogs, a recent subculture has arisen: dogs used for active dog sports (Gillespie, Leffner, & Lerner, 2002; Haraway, 2003; Lund, 2014). This subculture includes people interested in dogs' agility, obedience, herding, and working trials. The case entrepreneurs examined in the current study fulfil the increasing demands for proper coaching and training premises for such activities.

Accommodation hosts were selected by seeking those entrepreneurs who have 1) explicitly defined their target group as those who travel with dogs, 2) something special to offer and 3) advertised this choice. These criteria excluded those merely allowing dogs on their premises. All cases were located through different dog-related Internet forums and social media, common ways dog enthusiasts seek appropriate meeting and holiday destinations. Coaches were more difficult to identify. Those operating in rural areas are few in number; most coaches live and work in urban areas and do not own their own premises, traveling to coach or rent others' premises on an hourly basis, or they own sites in suburban industrial areas. Given the research's lifestyle and life change focus, most professional coaches were unsuitable for this study. Thus, coaches were selected who met inclusion criteria and volunteered to participate. A final sample size of twelve interviewees was obtained, with participatory observation conducted in six case enterprises.

The sample consisted of some who worked alone and some who worked with one/two partners. Demographically, the sample consisted of a mid-thirties woman who lives alone, has a business offering accommodation and works in close cooperation with an elder couple whose main business is elsewhere. Another coach who is a thirty-year-old woman, lives in a relationship, and has a small child. The third is a childless couple in their forties. Accommodation hosts include a young couple with small children, a couple with teenage children who also offer some teaching, and two mid-thirties female friends, one divorced and with a ten-year-old child and the other who has a boyfriend. All three accommodation places also serve target groups other than dog hobbyists.

Three firms provide coaching in dog sports and three firms provide premises for dog sports, including accommodation and training areas. Coaching in this study refers to individuals who have moved to suitable places where they teach people and their dogs agility and/or sheepherding. The other group of entrepreneurs, who operate as accommodation hosts, may invite coaches and attract people to participate in training seminars on dog agility, obedience, tracking, or searching, all which take place at the hosts' locales. Alternatively, guests may invite a coach to the host's premises, where the guests then train and eat and entertain themselves. Accommodation sites also host people who gather to meet others who have dogs of the same breed, for example, or who are single travellers who want dog-friendly places to stay during rural trips. Accommodation hosts offer food and lodging to all, but all guests must accept the presence of dogs on the premises. The firms are located in rural areas in south-western Finland (four cases), eastern Finland (one case), and southern Sweden (one case). The entrepreneurs have modified former agricultural or community buildings into sites of commercial activities. By this transformational labour, the places have become emotionally significant, even though the individuals have no previous connections to where they run their businesses.

### ***Interviews and data analysis process***

The semi-structured interviews lasted from one to nearly three hours and site visits lasted from half a day to three days. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. During and after the visits, the researcher took notes about observations and spoke with clients and entrepreneurs apart from the recorded interviews (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002). The premises and the practices before, during, and after customer encounters were observed and guests were informally asked about their experiences. The researcher also participated in activities, for example, lunching with guests and sharing in the training. Hosts were made aware that a researcher was present and agreed to the site visits in advance. In most cases the main organiser of a group visit was informed beforehand, and s/he informed the other guests; alternatively, guests were informed at the beginning of a visit. While it is possible some visitors did not receive this information, they were not asked any questions, nor were their behaviours used in the analysis (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, both inductive and deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Despite thematic analysis' theoretical flexibility, the research's epistemological and other assumptions have to be made clear (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher had some *a priori* knowledge of the different subcultures of dog owners and entrepreneurs who commercialise the rural, including those serving dog owners, which permitted achieving a sense of understanding of the daily lives at the firms, resembling a case study/ethnographic approach suitable to the research aim being to acquire an in-depth understanding of a small number of cases (Creswell 2013). During the analytical process, which was also based on observations, data patterns and themes were identified. Data analysis was grounded in research literature and transcript reading to formulate an interpretation of the phenomena of hosting dog owners as a lifestyle-based rural job and how one moulded oneself and/or one's workplace for customers. The analysis was partly deductive in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) since the ideas about consumable rurality were derived from existing research. Accordingly, information about this production and consumption was sought out in the interview data. When scrutinising the interview transcripts, academic discussions of the new working life and the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour were used. Elsewhere, data analysis was inductive in nature (*ibid*), for example the theme exploring fascination with work content which spontaneously arose during interviews and was not derived from interview questions.

### **FINDINGS**

Interviews included reflections on decisions to leave an insecure and unsatisfactory working life in favour of something new and the thinking leading to such choices. The practices of preparing for, and performing, this new, everyday life included producing and reproducing the rural place and the 'spirit' or 'atmosphere' of the firm. The processes of making the rural consumable involved more than simply modifying the site or interacting with customers; being oneself, and presenting oneself and the place, were equally important.

Participants described how their previous working life was inconvenient and pace of work was intense. There was a constant thread of redundancies in organisations, with futures in that work distressing or unthinkable, constituting many push reasons to become entrepreneurs. After finding a solution to the problematic issues of wage work, preparations began by searching for an appropriate place to settle and modifying it for target customer groups. Participants described difficulty and satisfaction in finding an appropriate location for their new work. *Buying a farm is extremely difficult. Either they are well-kept and cost far too much, or they are ready to be demolished. There are very few in the middle* (40s male sheepherding coach whose wife was also involved). Land prices in southern Finland, and, in one case southern Sweden, are much higher than elsewhere in these countries, but held greater potential for attracting customers. *We were delighted to hear that dog hobbyists are used to driving long distances to get to trainings, so where we are located is not a disadvantage* (30s innkeeper couple). Participants generally described appropriate places as those with fields and forests, enough space for their work, a hall for training, and buildings appropriate for accommodation and catering services. Access to forests is not a rarity in this geographical context; ‘everyman’s right’ to enter the wilderness is widespread in both Finland and Sweden. Sites chosen were close enough to urban areas, where most customers reside, but not so close that land prices were unaffordable. Participants did not intend to radically change the rural landscape; they were able to utilise their carefully chosen places without vast reworking of the physical environment. What entrepreneurs provide for their niche markets is areas with appropriate terrain for dog training.

Entrepreneurs identified potential customers would expect a dog training site in a rural setting:

*Well, of course, they are seeking to play with the dog and getting to try out what the dog has been bred for in real life. I mean, they hardly come here to search for the quiet of the countryside ...it is, of course, an experience itself to spend a day in the field, sometimes getting a little more muddy and sometimes a little less muddy.* (A 40s male sheepherding coach whose wife is also involved)

*Often, the places you’re allowed to stay with dogs are really dirty and messy, so what we’ve had positive feedback about is the tidiness here: that these are really lovely, tidy, and fresh spaces ...It’s not something you can take for granted: that dogs will be allowed in very tidy places.* (30s female innkeeper friends)

Entrepreneurs discussed customers considered accessibility and finding practical, beautiful, well-kept spaces important. These aspects separated these firms from more conventional rural tourism enterprises where organisational aesthetics is emphasised. Contrary to the new service work literature, which discusses skills and personalities as crucial for attracting visitors, coaches did not discuss their own skills and personalities much, finding it difficult to express, perhaps because it would be perceived as boasting which is strange to Finnish culture. Instead, coaches mentioned their lovely environment and excellent training premises. *People do not need to freeze outside, and the dogs enjoy the environment here* (30s female agility coach); *the Finnish top agility handlers who have visited us have said we have the best lawn in the whole country* (50s innkeeper couple). Coaches spoke of personal characteristics in a very humble way. *I’m easy to contact* (40s male sheepherding coach) and emphasised the importance of being oneself in customer interactions.

In all cases, the ‘spaces’ had the ability to surprise. Either the premises that the entrepreneurs bought, or the wider local environment, caused changes to firms’ activities. The theme of a ‘surprising place’ was unanticipated by the researcher and the entrepreneurs and the commodification of sites varied:

*It was definitely a positive surprise. We first thought, ‘What on earth are we doing with a big, empty garage?’ I had been practicing agility in [the closest city] long enough to know the situation there, that there is demand for this type of place. But we had been thinking that, because those facilities are often fully booked in cities, someone could drive here even from far away, like for a single training. But it turned out that we host these dog-training camps that take place on weekends, when people come even from far away and stay overnight. And that is, of course, a much better situation for us,*

*because then, we make our income through accommodations. So we have tried to make that overall package more attractive, and, apparently, have succeeded quite well. (30s innkeeper couple)*

This account demonstrates the co-production of post-productivistic rural activities where customers affected how space was used, at times having suggestions that hosts did not agree to fit their space. *The client thinks that a vending machine for selling soft drinks would be wonderful. But I don't think we can have it in a house that was built in the 1830s; those two things just don't go together (30s innkeeper couple).* This example illustrates a negative side of the new service work where hosts wanted to produce positive feelings for their guests, yet also wanted to work according to their own values. This kind of shared production of new types of activities in rural places, and the close host–customer interaction during visits, both typical to current service work and touristic practices, meant providing a rural space for consumption was a particularly intensive and holistic, yet passionate labour. Drawing from one's own 'self' was required to meet customers' expectations of personal service.

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS**

This study followed a withdrawal from urban working life towards rural self-employment in a passionately desired sector. The case entrepreneurs actively searched for proper locations for their new work, since none inherited farms or otherwise had origins where they started their self-employment. When entrepreneurs finally settled on locations, despite the admiration expressed in the interviews, they had to modify the sites to better fit their and their customers' purposes. Nevertheless, they were generally positive towards the traditional rural landscape. Customers were explicitly or implicitly involved in modifying labour. Entrepreneurs had to consider three aspects: 1) how to expect what *customers* were looking for; 2) how to accomplish that expectation in a given *rural setting*; and 3) how to accomplish expectations according to the *entrepreneur's* own values and desired lifestyle. Consequently, achieving success in the production of the rural for consumption meant entrepreneurs had to bring together the place, its often surprising characteristics, and customer expectations to produce a 'proper' state of mind in customers. This triad was packed with emotions. Entrepreneurs provided the space and services according to their own values and they voluntarily involved themselves in the process. Space was inseparably included in the business, as part of the business idea, a desired place to live and work, and emotionally special through the hard work done to modify and maintain it.

This article has described a combination of rural and tourism research that has been combined with working life research to 'make sense' of entrepreneurs' working-life choices commoditising the rural environment. In so doing, it challenges theoretical assumptions of the rural as a place of specific types of consumption only and explored emotional aspects of entrepreneurial practices to stress the affective dimension of service work, micro-scale tourism work, and work in the rural. Business ideas must be adapted to local contexts, as commercialisation research documents (Brandth & Haugen 2012; Cloke & Perkins, 1998; Page & Getz, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Woods; 2005). In the new economy, however, it is also necessary for entrepreneurs to be passionately involved, with affects and emotions important in late-capitalist society (Adkins, 2012; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Urry, 1995; Walmsley, 2003). More alternatives to commercialising the countryside exist than marketing its idyllic versions. The enterprises that serve active dog sport visitors made use of the rural space in a way that falls outside more conventional rural tourism yet did not demand radical changes to what is traditionally seen as idyllic landscapes. Dog sport hobbyists did not visit primarily for rural traditions or scenery. Their main intention was to find good premises for their dog training activities. The rural environment has the potential to provide this type of environment, and such environments could likely provide appropriate atmospheres and spaces for other innovative activities. Entrepreneurs sold elements of the countryside yet followed their desired ways of living, using rurality for amenity purposes in their own lives (Halfacree, 2006). Contributing to rural tourism research, it examined how entrepreneurs' own values affected providing the rural for consumption. Future studies may thus wish to could examine the total visitor experience, rather than concentrating on reasons to visit the rural that are

known *a priori*, allowing space for visitor narratives and/or observing visitor practices may enhance awareness of the use and experience of commoditised rural space.

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