New representations of rural space: Eastern European migrants and the denial of poverty and deprivation in the English countryside

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ABSTRACT

To date, there has been relatively little focus on Eastern European 'accession' (EU8) migrants' representations of the rural in Western Europe. Through drawing on research conducted in England, this paper highlights how the materiality of the English countryside strongly shapes EU8 migrants' views of rural space. In turn, their representations of the rural as 'idyll', as social and cultural capital and as relational, coupled with their own moral values promoting self-sufficiency serve to perpetuate the rural as being 'problem free'. Furthermore, the conflation of the rural idyll with 'Englishness' and 'whiteness' provides EU8 migrants living in the countryside with the opportunity to become involved in various aspects of rural community life. Consequently, the paper argues that their actions, as well as their representations of the rural, further contribute to the cultural 'screening out' of rural problems.

1. Introduction

This paper provides a number of new and significant insights into representations of rural space – and more specifically the English countryside - from the perspective of a new 'minority' population in the UK, namely Eastern European 'accession' (EU8) migrants.[1] First, the paper asserts the importance of the materiality of the rural in shaping EU8 migrants' representations and practices in the rural. This includes the importance of different elements of the built and natural environment and which combine to inform a view of the rural as a predominantly idyllic space. Second, the paper highlights how the importance of the rural idyll and the English countryside as being 'therapeutic' and a place that individuals aspire to live within, rather than move from, leads to EU8 migrant representations of the rural as being relatively 'problem free'. Third, whilst various studies have explored issues of racism, discrimination and processes of 'othering' in the English countryside (Garland and Chakraborti, 2006; Burdsey, 2013) the focus has predominantly been around minority ethnic communities who are 'visibly different' (Pemberton, 2016). Consequently, there has been a conflation of rurality with Englishness and 'whiteness' (Burdsey, 2013). However, little attention to date has been placed on the extent to which EU8 migrants – and who are predominantly white – have been 'othered' and subject to racism and discrimination in rural England. Hence the extent to which such individuals have become self sufficient and/or participated in rural community life is also considered. As such,

it is argued that whilst EU8 migrants may contribute to welfare 'by local for local' (Gallent et al., 2015), at the same time their actions may exacerbate on-going challenges of the (in) visibility of rural problems, and the role of governments and policy makers in responding.

Following the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 considerable numbers of EU8 'accession' migrants moved to other European countries, including the United Kingdom (UK). However, unlike previous patterns of migration, EU8 migrants moved to rural areas as well as urban areas (McCollum et al., 2012). The most up-to-date and reliable figures from the 2011 UK Census estimate that 64,326 EU8 migrants live in rural areas of England, out of a total EU8 migrant population of just over one million (1,085,351; Office for National Statistics, 2011). Whilst constituting only 0.68% of the total rural population in England, the impacts of the influx of EU8 migrants has been quite significant in many rural locations (Trevena et al., 2013). A key driver for the movement of EU8 migrants into rural areas has been the availability of employment in a number of sectors, including agriculture, food processing, hospitality and services and manufacturing (Jentsch, 2007).

Moreover, whilst much discussion has taken place in England of the impact of EU8 migrants on local labour markets (including their experiences) and on access to services (for example, see Jentsch et al., 2007; Chappell et al., 2009 and Findlay and McCollum, 2013), no research has yet focused on EU8 migrants' representations of the English countryside. Nor has there been any consideration of the implications of

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such representations. As such, a migrant-centred perspective of the rural is absent (Danson, 2007; Rye, 2014). In a UK context, 'migrant lives beyond the workplace' have also received little attention (see Spencer et al., 2007 for an exception; also Sumption and Somerville, 2009), and with even less reference to migrant lives in England's rural areas. This paper therefore responds to several gaps in knowledge and contributes to a wider body of literature presenting a new view of rurality (Cloke and Little, 1997; Little, 1999).

Reflecting recent calls for a re-materialization of the rural (Woods, 2009, 2011) the paper highlights the importance of the physical and material aspects of the English countryside in shaping EU8 migrants' representations of rural space. In so doing, it also highlights the importance of the 'rural idyll' – as opposed to 'anti-idyll' imaginaries of the rural that have been reported elsewhere (da Silva et al., 2016). EU8 migrant's representations of rural areas in England as being problem free are also discussed. Comparisons are made between the English countryside and rural areas in Eastern Europe in respect of the rural signifying social mobility and 'moving up' as opposed to the rural as being problematic and the need to move out to 'move on' (Garapich, 2016).

EU8 migrants' representations of the 'idyllic rural' relate to a number of previous research studies which have highlighted the continuing influence of the 'rural idyll' within national media and popular discourses, and a denial of poverty and deprivation in rural places (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992; Woodward, 1996). Previous research has additionally drawn attention to the sociocultural and natural contexts of place being constructed as compensatory factors capable of offsetting material problems in rural areas (Milbourne, 2014), and community inclusion and local cultural norms (for example, self sufficiency over welfare dependency) counterweighting rural poverty and perpetuating an insular approach towards the resolution of such issues (Milbourne, 2004, 2014).

Thus questions arise in relation to the importance of EU8 migrants' representations in the cultural 'screening out' of problems in rural areas, as well as how such representations shape their own activities and relations with others in the English countryside. Garland and Chakraborti (2006, p.160) identify how the conflation of rurality with (rural) populations, which are English, homogenous and white serves to reinforce the marginalization of those who look visibly different from the 'white norm'. However, Halej (2014) has highlighted how EU8 migrants have emphasized their whiteness for invisibility, cultural fit and residential choice. As a result, the degree to which such individuals are self-sufficient *vis a vis* engaged in providing formal and informal support to others also needs to be critically considered.

Section 2 of the paper elaborates further on work undertaken in relation to EU8 migrants in the English countryside, the importance of the rural idyll in masking rural problems and the implications of the 'othering' of minorities in shaping levels of self sufficiency and welfare support in different rural communities. Section 3 outlines the research strategy and methods, including a justification for the selection of the case study area, the sampling framework and details of EU8 migrant interviewees. Section 4 presents and analyses the results of the research. It focuses on the importance of i) EU8 migrants' rural representations; ii) how these promulgate the rural idyll and the rural as problem free; and iii) the implications for rural community relations and the role of EU8 migrants in welfare provision. In the final section, EU8 migrants' representations of the English countryside are discussed, including the on-going neglect of government and policy initiatives addressing the problems of rural areas.

2. Rural representations, the rural idyll and the rural panacea

Romantic notions of the rural in the West as reflective of a peaceful and past way of life have informed broader social constructions of the rural. However, whilst the Romantic movement of Europe viewed the rural nostalgically and to be preserved in order to anchor society to its past, in North America, the Transcendentalists viewed the rural as a place for betterment and to enhance the life of city and rural residents alike (Gallent, 2014a, pp.302–304). Such perspectives highlight that the countryside cannot be viewed within a shared cultural frame. Indeed, Halfacree (1993) has explored the rural as a social representation and a lay discourse, rather than a specific material location – and highlighted how it could be formed through a variety of personal experiences and 'traditional' handed-down beliefs informed by literature, the media, the state and family and friends. Social representations may therefore give different meanings to the rural (da Silva et al., 2016) and with Bell (2006) differentiating the 'countryside in the mind' (the 'second rural') to the material countryside (the 'first rural').

Woods (2009) has noted that in recent years there have – at least in Anglo-centric circles – been attempts to rematerialize the rural and to conceptualise the rural as a hybrid and networked space. As such, it has been argued that the remaining distinctiveness of the rural lies in its differing physical material characteristics that are recognised as 'rural' (Dymitrow and Stenseke, 2016). In turn, these characteristics may serve to 'animate and produce effects (both) dramatic and subtle' (Bennett, 2010, p.6), and with "heterogeneous entities aligned in a variety of ways … …(so that) there is no single vantage point from which the panoply of rural or countryside relations can be seen" (Murdoch, 2003, p.274). In sum, the representations and actions of individuals are informed by the effect of the entanglements between subjects (individuals) and objects (rural place) as they become folded into each other (Hetherington, 2003).

To this end, there has been little attention to date of representations of rural space by rural 'others', and in particular new rural 'minority' populations, such as EU8 migrants (Rye, 2014). Yet the English countryside has increasingly become a place of settlement for new immigrant populations from Eastern Europe. For example, Polish migrants (the largest group amongst EU8 nationals) have been recorded in every local authority area across the UK (Jentsch et al., 2007; Pollard et al., 2008) and have helped to reverse population decline in rural areas (de Lima and Wright, 2009: Jentsch et al., 2007; Trevena et al., 2013). Nevertheless, we know comparatively little of the importance of the materiality of the rural – *vis a vis* other influences – in shaping EU8 migrants' rural representations.

What we do know, however, is that broader representations of the rural focused around the physical and material characteristics of rural space have shaped notions of a rural idyll – certainly in Western European contexts (Gallent, 2014b) – and involving a "set of ideas about rural areas as aesthetically pleasant and desirable places to live in" (Woodward, 1996, p.60). As far back as McLaughlin (1986), this has served to render problems of the rural – such as poverty or deprivation - as invisible. Indeed, Woodward (1996) highlighted how many participants in a large-scale study of lifestyles in rural areas in England (the 'Rural Lifestyles Project'; also see Cloke and Milbourne (1992) and Cloke et al., 1994) generally denied the existence of deprivation in the rural. In addition, through focusing on how discourses of the rural operate with reference to deprivation, she also identified how deprivation was often constructed as a 'necessary' element of rural life; as such, individual's lifestyles – which might otherwise be seen as deprived – were constructed as a natural outcome of specific ways of living in the countryside (Woodward, 1996, pp.62–63). Similarly, Milbourne (2014) noted more recently how community, landscape and nature were seen as compensating for elements of material deprivation in Wales. He also drew attention to the ways in which people were largely reluctant to define themselves as poor or identify problems with their everyday lives (Milbourne, 2014, p.577).

Beyond the denial of deprivation, Woodward (1996, pp.63–65) also pointed out how deprivation was often concealed due to the importance of the rural idyll, and which given its historically specific social construction meant that deprivation in the countryside was seen as a historical problem. Deprivation in rural England was also identified as arising from a personal failure of individuals, and with such individuals