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Mobility and the Social Differentiation of Rural Youth in Australia

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Abstract

Geographical mobility has become an integral element of the biographical trajectories of young people from rural areas. In this paper, we contend that theories of rural-urban inequality tend to unduly homogenise rural social groups and are insufficient to understand rural youth out-migration as a selective rather than universal practice. We draw on a statistical analysis of the social differentiation of rural youth mobility in Australia to argue that sociologists gain from further theorising the social differentiation of rural society. Empirically, we find that classed resources and stratified dispositions toward one's future life are important properties associated with outward mobility. Theoretically, we propose the concept of rural social space to make sense of these patterns. Rural social space describes the material and symbolic hierarchies that structure the social differentiation of rural society. We conclude by suggesting how future research could refine the conceptualisation of rural social space proposed in this paper, by further considering the opportunities, practices and representations that distinguish the lives of different groups of rural young people.

Keywords Rural youth · Social space · Belonging · Mobility

Introduction

Research on the lives of young people in rural areas has become a burgeoning area of study in youth sociology (Cook and Cuervo 2020; Ennerberg et al. 2022; Waite 2018). Despite these advances, the rural remains theorised primarily as a counterpoint to the urban in sociological research. Less attention has been given to theorising the social differentiation of the rural itself. This gap is theoretically important

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because the conceptual instruments customarily used to spatialise young people's lives in sociology are not sufficient to make sense of intra-rural social distinctions.

In the context of rural youth transitions, this manifests in inadequate theorisation of a key practice, i.e. geographical mobility. Renewed theorisation is needed to conceptualise patterns of rural youth out-migration that are socially selective rather than universal. Although mobility aspirations and practices now concern the majority of rural young people (Dufty-Jones et al. 2014; Basnet 2022), not all rural youth leave their rural community. As a result, we argue that the spatialisation of youth sociology (Farrugia 2016) should not disregard the social inequalities that exist within spatial categories. In this paper, we analyse social correlates of rural out-migration to carry out this theoretical reflection on rural social hierarchies among young people.

The tension between desires for geographical mobility and belonging to local places in rural young people's aspirations and imaginaries have been brought into sharp relief in qualitative studies (see Farrugia et al. 2014; Nugin 2020; Pedersen and Gram 2018; Waite 2018). By contrast, few studies have used quantitative methods to examine actual practices of out-migration in the biographies of rural youth (Dufty-Jones et al. 2014). In this paper, we draw on longitudinal survey data from Australia to theorise the social differentiation of youth relations to space in rural areas. We build on a statistical analysis of social correlates of rural youth out-migration to consider 'rural social space' as a conceptual resource that helps explain social differences in mobility practices. In doing so, we argue that analysing the social drivers of rural youth mobility offers an opportunity to explore the material and symbolic differentiation of rurality through the concept of rural social space.

The Sociology of Rural Youth Out-Migration: Opportunities, Aspirations and Belonging

The literature on the causes, experiences and consequences of rural youth out-migration has expanded in the last two decades, highlighting the significance of space in understanding these social practices. Young people's rural out-migration practices tend to be future-oriented and reflexive (Cook and Cuervo 2020; Farrugia et al. 2014), driven by aspirations for future self and perception of the enablers and barriers associated with life in rural and urban places. Alongside the symbolism of out-migration as a 'life transition', research shows that perceptions of the relative availability of opportunities in urban versus rural places play an important role in aspirations for out-migration among rural youth (Cuervo 2014). Representations of space play an important role in making sense of rural youth belonging, mobility and futurity (Butler and Muir 2017).

Public policy has been used to shape youth identities and desires in Australia. In particular, the notion of aspirations has gained currency in education policy to raise levels of post-compulsory educational participation (see Bradley et al. 2008). Education policies have especially emphasised the importance of tertiary education participation among young people characterised as belonging to 'disadvantaged' groups, including poor, rural and Indigenous youths. In a context of limited tertiary

education provision in rural places (Department of Education 2019), this has generated an emphasis on rural youth out-migration for tertiary education purposes (Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Gibson et al. 2022). In this normative policy context, young people who ‘fail’ to display expected (educational) aspirations and education-work transitions tend to be perceived as having individual deficiencies, such as lacking in motivation (Bok 2010) or failing to appreciate the significance of self-capitalisation (Sellar 2013). These individualising and psychologising approaches to ‘failure’ generally neglect spatial and structural barriers.

The varied ways young people *relate* to place are equally important to analyse rural migration practices. Belonging has been recognised as a central category to understand the lives of young people in rural regions (Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Stenseth and Bæck 2021). Researchers have uncovered multiple forms and modes of belonging linked to more or less institutionalised groups and entities. Rural belonging captures young people’s relationship to places, with their geographical properties and built environment, but also their relationships to people (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). Family, intimate relationships and friends are often foundational to rural belonging. Because of the sociality that they enable, school and associative institutions (e.g. sports clubs) are also central to youth belonging in rural places (Spaaij 2009). The concept of belonging helps capture the significance of social relations to ‘spatialised’ social life.

Both aspirations and belonging have been theorised as elements of the socially constituted self, produced through the embodiment of past experiences resulting in current dispositions (both representational and affective) guiding how young people relate to and navigate their social environment (Stenseth and Bæck 2021; Cook and Cuervo 2020). Regarding mobility, while aspirations for higher education study and middle-class employment may act as a centrifugal force pushing rural youth to emigrate, a strong sense of belonging built around local institutions and relationships may act as a centripetal force leading young people to long-lasting rural residence. Various configurations of dispositions can thus lead to complex forms of attachment-detachment observed across class lines in rural communities (see Bryant and Pini 2009; Jamieson 2000), thus challenging a simple equation between mobility and place detachment and between immobility and place attachment.

Young People and Rural Social Space

The fact that the rural is not a homogeneous space but a socially differentiated one implies that there is a need to better explore the diversity of rural youth transitions (Cuervo and Wyn 2012). Building on early community studies on gendered social hierarchies in rural Victoria (Dempsey 1993) and New South Wales (Poiner 1990), a growing body of qualitative research literature has sought to examine the gendered, racialised and classed nature of mobility and transition experiences among rural youth in Australia (Butler and Ben 2021; Dufty-Jones et al. 2014). Alongside studies conducted in the UK (Leyshon 2008, 2011), these analyses have foregrounded the complex, dynamic and multidimensional nature of rural belonging, where

representations of place and mobility interact to shape biographical trajectories in geographical and social space.

The dominant focus in the extant literature has been on subjective experiences and representations. This literature tends to contrast views on, and experiences of, mobility across individuals, with class, gender and ethnicity considered as the main sources of inter-individual differences. This subjective dimension of mobility has been examined skilfully using interview and ethnographic methods. By virtue of this methodological angle, however, current scholarship is rarely positioned to identify broad patterns in the social differentiation of out-migration as a socially codified and normative practice. To date, few studies have thus proposed a synthetic perspective on the relationship between mobility and a broader set of social attributes, both material and symbolic. This paper's statistical analysis is an empirical contribution that seeks to address this gap.

At a theoretical level, the emerging focus on the social diversity of rural youth has been broached from two perspectives. On one hand, some have criticised the limits of existing concepts. For instance, mainstream uses of key concepts in youth studies, including 'transitions' and 'mobilities', have been challenged for centring the experiences of some youth over others, such as young whites in the Australian context (Idriss et al. 2022). On the other hand, others have proposed new concepts to capture this reality. The diversity of rural youth trajectories has been studied with notions such as 'place dynamics' (Pedersen and Gram 2018) and 'emplaced identities' (Farrugia et al. 2014). These concepts have the benefit of foregrounding the social processes through which belonging is made, unmade and remade. They are well-suited to the existing literature's study of subjective experiences of place and movement across geographical space. To this conceptual terrain, we propose to add the concept of 'rural social space'. We argue that this concept offers a useful instrument for the synthetic figuration of main lines of social differentiation among rural youth. To that effect, we propose to rescale the concept of national social space developed by Bourdieu (2010) to rural contexts. This way of theorising the concept contrasts with the (passing) use Leyshon (2008) makes of this notion to explore youth representations of rural society in England. This is the paper's theoretical contribution.

Efforts to apply the concept of social space to different geographical settings are underway in sociology. Ripoll (2023) has highlighted the importance of thinking social differentiation at different geographical scales, and Laferté (2014) has proposed the notion of 'localised' social spaces as a means of theoretical renewal for rural sociology. Drawing on Bourdieu's general social theory, the concept of rural social space can be understood in an analytical sense, i.e. as a heuristic figuration where axes of social differentiation define the social position of individuals and groups. If, following Bourdieu (2010), social space is structured by the unequal distribution of resources (especially economic capital and cultural capital) that undergirds a diversity of lifestyles, we contend that young people's access to resources should be relevant to make sense of rural representations and practices. In particular, given that the resources and dispositions that enable rural youth migration demand greater attention from sociologists (Nugin 2020), we hypothesise that the concept of rural social space can help theorise this normative yet socially coded

practice. In this model, social space is constituted through hierarchies of resources and representations, unequally distributed across rural youth.

Methods

In this article, we draw on the [Life Patterns] longitudinal study of young Australians to theorise the significance of different resources and dispositions in the making of rural social space. This longitudinal design allows us to analyse the relationship between prior migration dispositions (including aspirations) and later migration practices in a way that captures the temporality that links aspirations and migration. [Life Patterns] is a mixed-method longitudinal study following young Australians from school into adult life. Participants are sent a survey annually, and a subgroup of respondents is invited to participate in interviews every few years. The study follows several cohorts, including one that left school in 2005–6 (now aged 33–34). For that cohort, participants were recruited from a diverse range of urban and rural Australian high schools in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. This article focusses on respondents who reported living rurally when they first joined the study.

The analysis reported in this article uses survey data to investigate the geographical trajectories of rural participants between waves 1 (2005) and 13 (2017). Within the broader sample, we selected respondents who declared living in a country town or rurally (not in town) in waves 1 or 2 of the survey (using the most recent response available), i.e. when they were 17–18 years old and at school. We then recorded whether they declared living in a regional city or capital city at any point between waves 3 (2007) and 13 (2017), i.e. throughout their twenties. We used these two criteria to classify rural youth into leavers and stayers: those who declared living in urban Australia at least once between waves 3 and 13 were classified as rural leavers, while those who did not were classified as rural stayers. By drawing on respondents' own definition of what counts as rural locations, as opposed to apposing this label to administrative information provided by respondents (e.g. residential postcode or town), we remain faithful to participants' understanding of rurality.

This two-category classification was used to examine the resource and dispositions associated with young people leaving their rural place during their twenties. Four binary logistic regression models were fitted to estimate the direction and strength of the relationship between four groups of variables and rural out-migration: class, education, belonging and aspirations. The models include 13 covariates, and all four models were fitted based on the cases with valid values across the 13 covariates ($N=346$). All the variables included in the models were coded as dummy variables (coded as 0 for absence and 1 for presence of the listed attribute) based on the original categorical variables. The covariates were all constructed as dichotomous variables to allow for a comparison of estimates across variables. The descriptive results for all variables are shown in Table 1.

In addition to modelling the social correlates of rural youth out-migration, we present descriptive results on young people's experiences of study, work and

Table 1 Sample description for 13 variables included in models (2005–2017)

Category	Variable	Wave collected	% Yes
Gender and class	Women	1 and 2 (latest used)	63.3
	University-educated parent	1, 2 and 5	36.8
Education	Private school	1, 2 and 5	32.4
	Feeling very positive about progress in school	1 and 2 (latest used)	17.0
	Very strong belief in job benefits of post-school study	1 and 2 (latest used)	30.1
Sense of belonging (% very satisfied, teenage years)	Family support (very satisfied)	2	63.2
	Close friend support (very satisfied)	2	49.2
	Social life (very satisfied)	2	28.1
	Sport and leisure (very satisfied)	2	26.3
Aspirations	Happy if married by age 25	2	65.5
	Unhappy if never had children	2	73.8
	Unhappy if physical job	2	31.0
	Unhappy if desk job	2	46.5
Out-migration	Left rural Australia between ages 18–19 and 28–29	Origin: 1 and 2 (latest used); trajectory: 3 to 13	78.9
	N (listwise)		346

relationships during their twenties for rural stayers and leavers. We report the proportion of time spent in education, work and relationships between waves 6 and 13. We use descriptive results given that longitudinal attrition leads to a high number of missing cases on these questions in the selected waves ($N=187$ to 216 for rural leavers, $N=20$ to 27 for rural stayers). These results are included to illustrate how the biographical bifurcation that is out-migration can be associated with differentiated social trajectories, inviting future research to further explore these questions.

Variables

The variables included in the regression models were chosen based on theoretical considerations arising from the extant literature on rural youth out-migration and based on their availability across different waves of the [Anonymised] survey. Based on the literature reviewed above, we include four categories of variables in the analysis: (1) two variables relating to young people's social background and identity (i.e. class and gender), (2) three variables relating to young people's education, (3) four variables relating to young people's sense of belonging and (4) four variables relating to young people's aspirations.

The first category of variables includes young people's gender and class background. Research highlights the importance of gender to rural sociology (Bryant and Pini 2011), including in the study of young people (Basnet 2022; Stenseth and Bæk

2021) and their migration trajectories (Dufty-Jones et al. 2014). The role of class in aspirations for out-migration has also been noted in the literature (Farrugia et al. 2014). Here, young people's class background is, for lack of a more sophisticated indicator, measured using parental level of education, considered as a proxy of family cultural capital. Respondents with at least one university-educated parent were coded as 1 (others as 0).

Given the importance of tertiary studies in aspirations for rural out-migration (Cuervo 2014), the second category of variables focusses on experiences of schooling and educational representations. Based on the important role of private schooling in stratifying educational opportunities in Australia (Teese and Polesel 2003), the first variable relates to the sector of school enrolment in high school (public or private). The second variable uses students' self-assessment of progress in school to indirectly measure young people's acquisition of academic capital (i.e. academic results). The third variable measures young people's representations of the significance of post-school qualifications to job opportunities, capturing their views about the role of education in labour market stratification. This is an important aspect of young people's representation of the opportunities associated with different geographical spaces.

The third category of variables captures major dimensions of youth belonging. Based on survey questions on young people's life satisfaction with their family support, close friend support, social life, and sport and leisure, it focusses on relationships with people as a means to capturing their relationship to place (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). As indicated earlier, kin, social and broader community relationships have been described as key elements of rural youth belonging, and they may lead young people to build a sense of attachment to place that may stand in opposition to a potential appeal of out-migration. Given the Likert-scale structure of the original survey items and the fact that the vast majority of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with these aspects of their life, we focus specifically on the discriminant role of 'very satisfied' responses.

The fourth category of variables relates to young people's aspirations, with a focus on relationship, family and job aspirations. These variables are based on survey questions asking young people how happy they would be with various outcomes in adult life. We concentrate on these aspects of young people's aspirations due to their significance for rural youth trajectories. Regarding relationship and family formation, we use the best items available in the survey, i.e. young people's views about being married by age 25 and having children, in order to consider the place of the conjugal norm to their representations of belonging and transition (Cuervo et al. 2024). Regarding work, the decline of rural industry in most of the Global North has undermined what used to operate as opportunities for economic and social recognition, especially for rural young men (Farrugia 2021). Accordingly, we focus on whether respondents would be unhappy with a physical job and with a desk job. The social definition of taste as distaste of alternative tastes (Bourdieu 2010) makes these items useful indicators of young people's desires and aspirations.

Limitations

The analysis reported in this paper proposes an empirical basis to theorise the social space of youth rurality, examined through the prism of social determinants of out-migration. We use the most relevant variables available in the survey on class, education, belonging and aspirations as a starting point for theoretical reflection on the diversity of transitions among rural youth, but a number of limitations need to be mentioned.

First, the focus on out-migration as a binary event is simplistic. We recognise that the staying/leaving dichotomy only imperfectly captures the forms, temporality and role of migration for rural youth (Cuervo and Wyn 2012) and that return migration further differentiates the ‘leaver’ category (Cook and Cuervo 2020). For the present purposes, however, this two-category classification is sufficient to propose a first quantitative analysis of the social differentiation of rural out-migration in Australia. More broadly, by virtue of its statistical analysis of the relative importance of various material and representational properties of young people to outward urban mobility, the paper trades off a certain degree of depth for breadth in the analytical construction of indicators of rural social space. It must thus be considered alongside more specific studies of attributes, locations and social groups within rural areas.

Second, the fact that information on ethno-racial identities was not collected in the surveys means that racialised experiences and trajectories are not featured in the analysis. Given this gap (see Idriss et al. 2022), as well as other potential absences in significant forms of social diversity, the paper does not claim that the rural social space it theorises is to be read as an exhaustive mapping of all pertinent lines of social differentiation in rural Australia. Rather, it offers a mapping of the differentiation of social properties or attributes in relation to out-migration, which specific individuals and groups can embody in various measures. In doing so, we primarily *illustrate* the value of thinking through rural social space, rather than seeking to provide a figuration that faithfully captures all socially significant social differences in Australian rural youth.

Third, although the use of longitudinal survey offers an opportunity to make an original contribution to the literature, especially by examining more closely than hitherto the relationship between early aspirations and later migration practices, missing responses are common in [the Life Patterns project], as is true of most such longitudinal studies. This limits the sample size and coverage across waves. For rural young people with at least one place of residence response provided between waves 3 and 13 (449 cases), data on place of usual residence was available for an average of 5.2 waves, or just under half of the 11 waves considered. This calls for further testing, using other data sources, of the patterns identified here.

Fourth, preliminary analyses were conducted to determine the right balance between model comprehensiveness and sample size, i.e. maintaining a large enough sample while still including the variables most relevant to address the key theoretical aspects of rural youth life considered in the literature. The inclusion of the 13 variables across the four models, with a final sample of 346 cases, was found to offer the most meaningful balance between theoretical coverage and data limitations, retaining 77.1% of the original sample with adequate residential information.

Finally, the lack of availability of variables relating to important aspects of rural inequality, such as family economic capital and direct measures of young people's academic results, must be acknowledged as a limitation. In the same vein, we do not claim that the sample is representative of rural youth in Australia as a whole, as the over-representation of women and university-educated respondents indicates. This also points to the need to confront and complement the results presented here with future analyses conducted using other data sources.

The Social Differentiation of Rural Youth Out-Migration

In the [Anonymised] sample, around four in five rural young people (78.9%) relocated to a regional or capital city at some point during their twenties (Table 1). Even though some of these geographical mobilities may be temporary, this result confirms the prevalence of rural out-migration practices for young people in Australia (Butler and Ben 2021; Dufty-Jones et al. 2014). It also suggests that out-migration is likely to concern various groups of rural young people rather than being exclusive to those with access to middle-class economic and cultural resources.

To gain a better understanding of social differences between rural leavers and stayers, Table 2 presents descriptive results for the gender, class, education, belonging and aspirations of these two cohorts. Young women are more likely to leave than are men, and young people with parents with a university qualification are also more likely to leave, suggesting that class and gender may be foundational to the differentiation of rural social space (see Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Bryant and Pini 2009). Private school students are over-represented among those who leave, as are those who assess their own academic progress positively and those who believe in

Table 2 Mean results across 13 variables used in regression analysis, by geographical trajectory (%; 2005–2017)

Category	Variable	Stayers	Leavers	All respondents
Gender and class	Women	54.5	66.1	63.3
	University-educated parent	25.0	40.6	36.8
Education	Private school	20.0	36.5	32.4
	Feeling very positive about progress in school	10.7	18.7	17.0
	Very strong belief in job benefits of post-school study	25.6	31.3	30.1
Sense of belonging (% very satisfied, teenage years)	Family support	54.7	65.5	63.2
	Close friend support	40.0	51.6	49.2
	Social life	21.3	29.9	28.1
	Sport and leisure	33.8	24.3	26.3
Aspirations	Happy if married by age 25	66.7	65.2	65.5
	Unhappy if never had children	68.0	75.4	73.8
	Unhappy if physical job	13.3	35.7	31.0
	Unhappy if desk job	56.0	44.0	46.5

the occupational benefits of post-school study. These results support the central role ascribed to educational trajectories and aspirations in the literature on rural youth out-migration.

Regarding young people's belonging to rural communities, the results are contrasted. Young people who report greater satisfaction with family support, their friend group and their social life are more likely to leave at some point in their twenties. A strong sense of kin and social belonging in rural areas may thus not be a barrier to geographical mobility. On the other hand, rural youth who report being very satisfied with their sport and leisure activities are more likely to stay, suggesting that this form of associative belonging may be related to stronger attachment to rural places.

With respect to young people's aspirations (based on questions asked at ages 17–19), leavers are more likely to want children and less averse to a desk job, but the difference is small. By contrast, distaste for physical jobs is most strongly associated with out-migration practices among rural youth, with leavers around 2.7 times more likely to report being unhappy with such job prospects than stayers (a 22.4% point gap). The relationship between some forms of aspirations—or, more specifically, aversions—and mobility practices does highlight the importance of considering the role of taste and affective dispositions in the differentiation of rural social space.

Table 3 reports the results from the binary logistic regression models fitted for the four categories of variables capturing classed dispositions and resources. Model 1 includes gender and class and shows that, in the [Anonymised project] sample, young women are more likely to migrate out of rural places after controlling for parental level of education, while rural youth with university-educated parents are more likely to move to a city after controlling for gender. In this model, young people's social class—measured using family cultural capital—and their gender are both statistically significant correlates of different levels of engagement with the mobility imperative, with a higher odds ratio for young people with university-educated parents than for girls.

When educational experience variables are added (model 2), both gender and class background remain statistically significantly associated with rural out-migration, with girls and young people from university-educated families more likely to leave rural places. On the other hand, the attribute with the strongest association with rural out-migration becomes private school enrolment. Model 2 indicates that for rural youth, attending private school in the senior years is associated with a significantly higher out-migration odds ratio compared to public school students of the same gender with similar class backgrounds and representations about the value of education. Young people's classed and gendered relation to rural place thus appears to be mediated through their experience at school. A very strong belief in the occupational benefits of engaging in post-school study and self-satisfaction with progress at school are both positively related to higher incidences of later rural out-migration, but not in a statistically significant way in the sample.

Model 3 adds young people's sense of belonging, measured through satisfaction with social relations. Of the four variables considered in this model, three are positively related to later out-migration—strong satisfaction with family support, closest friend support and social life—but not in a statistically significant way. By contrast,

Table 3 Binary logistic regression model parameter estimates of rural youth leaving rural Australia between ages 18–19 (wave 3, 2007) and 28–29 (wave 13, 2017)

Category	Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
		Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Gender and class	Women (ref = men)	1.81*	0.03	1.88*	0.03	1.78*	0.05	1.67	0.09
	University-educated parent	2.24**	0.01	2.05*	0.02	2.14*	0.02	1.92*	0.04
Education	Private school			2.71**	0.00	3.00**	0.00	2.91**	0.00
	Feeling very positive about progress in school			1.66	0.22	1.44	0.41	1.20	0.69
Sense of belonging (% very satisfied, teenage years)	Very strong belief in job benefits of post-school study			1.14	0.67	0.98	0.94	0.99	0.98
	Family support					1.53	0.16	1.46	0.22
	Close friend support					1.38	0.29	1.33	0.36
	Social life					2.03	0.06	2.01	0.07
Aspirations	Sport and leisure					0.39**	0.01	0.46*	0.02
	Happy if married by age 25							1.03	0.92
	Unhappy if never had children							1.15	0.65
	Unhappy if physical job							2.57*	0.02
Constant	Unhappy if desk job							0.79	0.40
	Left rural Australia between ages 18–19 and 28–29	1.98**	0.00	1.37	0.24	1.08	0.82	0.95	0.91
Pseudo R ²		0.054		0.103		0.156		0.189	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; $N = 346$ (74 rural stayers, 272 rural leavers); 103 missing cases based on total sample with valid migration information, or 22.9% of the sample; final model $-2 \log$ likelihood = 311.814; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.189$

the out-migration likelihood of young people who are very strongly satisfied with their sport and leisure activities is significantly lower compared to young people with similar class, gender and educational experiences but lower levels of satisfaction with their sport and leisure activities. Model 3 also shows that, even after considering young people's sense of belonging to the local community, the positive relationship between attending a private school, having university-educated parents and being a female, on one hand, and rural out-migration, on the other, remains significant. In this model, the foremost correlate of rural out-migration remains private schooling, with the odds of out-migration being three times higher for young people attending a private school compared to young people with similar profiles in public schools. Schooling, class and gender identity appear to be related to rural out-migration independently of young people's sense of family, friend and associative belonging.

Model 4 further tests this interpretation by considering young people's aspirations as well. Among the four dimensions of aspirations considered, only aversion for a job demanding physical labour is a statistically significant correlate of later departure for urban places: the likelihood of out-migration for rural young people who seek to avoid a physical job are significantly higher than for young people less averse to physical labour, after controlling for their class, gender, education and belonging. This suggests that, for rural young people migrating to a city, rural labour markets may entail representations of primary and secondary economies requiring physical (e.g. farm or trade) labour, as opposed to urban labour markets, dominated by representations of tertiary (service) work. Rural youth's matrimonial and family aspirations are not statistically significant correlates of later rural out-migration in this sample.

So far, to draw the contours of the social space of rural youth, we have explored the relationship between teenage representations, experiences and practices, on one hand, and later out-migration on the other. To complement this analysis, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the different transition pathways associated with rural out-migration. This helps highlight the biographical significance of migration and its place in the social trajectories of rural young people and, hence, its use as an instrument to theorise rural social space.

Table 4 describes the place of post-school study, work and family formation in the transitions of rural young people in the [Anonymised] sample, comparing the results for rural stayers and leavers. The small sample size available for the 'stayers' category for this part of the analysis means that the results should be interpreted with caution. Between ages 21–22 and 28–29 years, the lives of both leavers and stayers are dominated by work, with at least 70% of their twenties spent working for both groups. The proportion of young people holding a permanent job at some point is slightly higher for rural leavers, and leavers are somewhat more likely to have had a full-time job (by around 4% points), but the sample is too small to meaningfully interpret these gaps. Overall, paid labour plays an important role in the transitions of both rural stayers and leavers, and it occupies more of young stayers' twenties than it does of rural leavers' post-school decade (by around 10% points).

Based on these generic indicators, work differences between rural leavers and stayers are far less significant than are educational differences. Rural leavers in the

Table 4 Experiences of study, work and relationships for rural stayers and leavers between ages 21–22 (wave 6, 2010) and 28–29 (wave 13, 2017)

Variable	%	
	Stayers	Leavers
Completed a university degree (%, waves 7 to 13)	30.0	72.6
Time spent studying (% of years, waves 6 to 13)	34.3	45.8
Time spent working (% of years, waves 6 to 13)	82.1	72.2
Permanent (ongoing) job (%, any point between waves 6 and 13)	77.8	80.6
Full-time job (%, any point between waves 6 and 13)	70.4	74.5
Married (%, any point between waves 6 and 13)	18.5	24.5
Parenting role (%, any point between waves 7 and 13)	17.4	14.4

study spend more of their twenties studying (by over 12% points) and are more than twice as likely to complete a university degree (72.6% versus 30.0%). These educational differences emerge as what most distinguishes the transitions of rural leavers and stayers, as gaps in marriage and parenting rates are far more limited. While these results are not representative of the Australian youth population as a whole, the gap portrays higher education credential acquisition as a decisive element of the rural out-migration story. This interpretation is also congruent with the fact that the vast majority (83.8%) of rural leavers in the project sample first leave rural Australia early on, typically when aged 18 to 20 years. Overall, while not entirely absent, rural-urban mobility for work reasons is far less significant than study-driven mobility.

Discussion

This paper has offered an empirical assessment of the social differences associated with young Australians' rural out-migration practices, as a means to conceptualising the social space of rural youth. In contrast to most existing studies that focus on mobility *aspirations*, our longitudinal dataset has allowed us to explore the relationships between dispositions, resources and *actual* mobility. We have complemented the analysis with a comparative description of rural stayers' and leavers' activities in their twenties to highlight the role of out-migration as a biographical bifurcation.

Building on the findings from existing studies (Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Butler and Ben 2021; Farrugia et al. 2014), the regression models are useful to assess the relative importance of different aspects of young people's identities and representations to the stratification of rural social space. Of the 13 variables analysed, private schooling is most strongly associated with rural exodus. This shows that school system hierarchies

represent a major line of differentiation of rural social space for young people. Meanwhile, the fact that young people growing up in families with a university-educated parent are significantly more likely to leave confirms the central role of class in stratifying rural social space, as suggested in prior qualitative studies (Cuervo 2014; Gibson et al. 2022).

Just like private schooling and family cultural capital shape one's educational opportunities within Australia's urban contexts (Lamb et al. 2020), so they shape out-migration practices for rural youth. Since rural youth access to higher education is largely conditioned on prior academic success, it comes as no surprise to find that representations such as 'the brainy ones are leaving' are prominent among rural youth (Pedersen and Gram 2018). The implication for young people's relation to space, however, is that the acquisition of academic capital can produce a form of spatial detachment for rural youth or, perhaps more accurately, a sense of legitimacy in one's desire to access other (urban) spaces, well captured by the 'learning to leave' metaphor (Corbett 2007).

The analysis offers a useful basis for theorising the social space that rural youth navigate. The socially stratified logic of rural out-migration is a catalyst of the simultaneously social and spatial differentiation of rural youth biographical trajectories. The unequal opportunities and experiences social agents have in rural areas, and the contrasted meanings they ascribe to rural life, are decisive to grasp the structures of rural social space, in the form of a multi-dimensional hierarchy of social positions. Like social space as a whole (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), rural social space is constituted materially and symbolically (Gieryn 2000; Farrugia et al. 2014), i.e. through institutions (such as schools) and embodied dispositions (such as aspirations). Rural space is (re)produced through the material and symbolic hierarchies between the urban and the rural, as earlier studies have shown (Bourdieu 2008; Farrugia 2016). But it is also structured by hierarchies of resources and representations *within* the rural itself, that is, in the relations between social groups within rural places.

As is true of (national) social space in Bourdieu's theory, rural social structure is a stratified space, with hierarchies of resources between young people that shape their access to opportunities, including migration. Rural social space is constituted through material (i.e. resources and opportunities) and symbolic (i.e. representations) hierarchies that define structural positions within the social space of rural locations. And just as in urban society, family and educational resources are central to the hierarchies that structure rural society. By focussing on the role of family and personal resources, the present analysis contributes to the necessary exploration of class in rural sociology (Bryant and Pini 2009; Butler and Muir 2017).

Focussing on the specific properties and practices that differentiate the social trajectories of rural youth, as with geographical mobility practices, highlights the value of developing more localised—and hence diverse—models of social space than in Bourdieu's sociology. The focus on rural social space helps consider that it is not only the volume or shape of distribution of resources that vary across places; rather, it is the very nature and combination of resources structuring inequality that are likely to vary at different geographical scales (Ripoll 2023). In the case of youth out-migration, the unequal appropriation of differentiated geographical spaces through mobility appears central to the social stratification of rural youth in Australia.

The necessity of conceiving of social space at different geographical scales also suggests possible bridges with other theoretical traditions. In particular, Lefebvre's conception of social space 'as a multilayered, multiscalar, and contradictory scaffolding of social relations' (Brenner 1997) could form the starting point to build on and extend Bourdieu's development of the concept. This multi-scalar model of social space would sustain not only a better theorisation of the territorialisation of social resources (Ripoll 2023). It would also help re-integrate the role of territorial practices in the general theory of practice that Bourdieu sought to develop in conjunction with his theory of social space (Bourdieu 1990). If the material and symbolic matrices of social hierarchies are spatially differentiated, this multi-scalar model of social space offers an important resource for advancing our understanding of the properties that underpin social distinction between and within urban and rural areas.

In developing this research agenda, future scholarship will benefit from using more comprehensive and nuanced indicators of class, education, belonging and aspirations than have been available in this study's dataset, in order to offer a fuller and more detailed depiction of the lines of social differentiation that structure rural social space. It will also gain from exploring the pertinence of other categories of dispositions and practices to rural social hierarchy than those considered here. Finally, resituating the 'out-migration' event in a fuller temporality of hierarchised rural youth biographies will offer important contextualisation to the theoretical angle adopted here, where geographical mobility is foregrounded as a means to understand rural social hierarchy.

Conclusion

The literature on the spatialisation of youth transition has shown that 'rurality' is not a homogeneous category. It is differentiated 'materially' based on rural places' unequal distance from and connection to urban space (spatially and socially). It is also differentiated symbolically in the meanings individuals and families invest in and ascribe to different rural places compared to towns and cities.

In this article, we have argued that the rural can be apprehended as a social space and that this conceptual instrument can be used to theorise the social differentiation of rural youth. We have drawn on an empirical analysis of rural youth out-migration to theorise the social space of rural youth. The importance of out-migration in the social trajectories of rural young people makes it a nodal biographical practice through which to analyse the sociological dimensions of rural social space. More visibly than for the countrywide conceptualisation of social space in Bourdieu, the analysis shows the importance of hierarchies of geographical representations, about different places and about young people's own relation to places, in the making of social trajectories.

Several questions are yet to be considered systematically in future research to advance the conceptual instruments developed in this paper. First, while the analysis has shown that family cultural capital and young people's own academic capital are operative as principles of social stratification in rural spaces, we did not explore the

role of economic resources. The growing significance of assets and rents in economic life (Adkins et al. 2020) highlights the need to directly explore the role of economic capital in the social and spatial trajectories of rural youth. Relatedly, as regards the economic consequences of rural exodus, future research would benefit from analysing the relative labour market experiences and outcomes of rural leavers and stayers.

Second, in addition to paying greater attention to the material dimension of rural social space, future research could also consider its symbolic dimension in a more sophisticated way that could be done here. Future research on rural youth would benefit from systematically comparing the representations of more or less geographically mobile young people in two main areas. On one hand, it would be important to examine not only young people's occupational aspirations, as we did here, but also their representations of the job opportunities available in rural and urban locations. The same could be said about the geographical distribution of cultural markets and institutions. On the other hand, exploring young people's representations of the 'physical' space of rurality in a relational way, including its built environment and access to institutional (including public) resources, would be equally timely.

Finally, although the longitudinal design used in this paper allowed us to consider the temporal structure of rural mobility more directly than hitherto, we could only give passing attention to the multiple temporalities of migration in young people's biographies. There is a need to pay greater attention to mobility as a dynamic and continuous process rather than as a biographical rupture. Research on Australian rural youth (see Waite 2018; Cuervo and Wyn 2014) shows that rather than a simple staying/leaving dichotomy, a richer description of the social construction of rural space for youth entails a multiplicity of transitions that are constructed over time. Further considering the temporal unfolding and multi-modality of mobility could yield important theoretical gains in conceptualising rural social space.

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Data Availability The data used in the analysis was collected from participants who only consented to its use by the research team.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The research was approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (OREI), University of Melbourne.

Conflict of Interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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