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On Meaningful Diversity: Reflecting on 75 years of rural sociology at Wageningen University

Introduction

On 9th May 1946, Evert Willem Hofstee was appointed to the position of Professor of Social and Economic Geography and Social Statistics. His formal employment began on October 1st, and on October 30th, he gave his inaugural lecture, entitled '*On the Causes of Diversity in Agricultural Regions in the Netherlands*'. Hofstee's appointment marks the beginning of rural sociology as a discipline and as a university department at Wageningen. The name of the department was initially 'Sociology and Social Geography'; later, this was changed to 'Sociology of the Western Areas', then to 'Sociology' and finally, 'Rural Sociology'.

Hofstee did not only play an important role in the founding and development of the study of rural sociology at Wageningen, but also in the Netherlands and in Europe more widely. He was the co-founder and first president of the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) in 1957 and co-founder of its journal *Sociologia Ruralis* in 1960. Both the ESRS and *Sociologia Ruralis* still exist, with the latter becoming one of the leading journals in our field. In the introduction article to the first issue of *Sociologia Ruralis*, Hofstee (1960: 4-5) wrote the following:

If rural sociology is to develop as a science in Europe, cooperation is essential, especially international co-operation. [...]

Rural sociology in Europe will be greatly aided by an international comparison of the problems studied, the research methods used, the scientific findings and the practical results. With international co-operation, comparative studies in different countries will become a possibility. These will furnish a broader and deeper understanding than could ever be derived from the sum of a number of unrelated investigations. International co-operation will be the basis of growth of our discipline, both in Europe as a whole and in the individual countries.

This refers to one of the key characteristics of rural sociology in Wageningen, that of (cross-national) comparative research, which I will elaborate on in this introductory chapter; there are other themes to be found in this 75-year period.

This introduction provides a general overview of the development of rural sociology at Wageningen University from 1946 to the present. Based on a largely chronological overview of the past 75 years, this introduction also considers the 'identity' of the Rural Sociology Group: what are the key features of our approach to research that define us as a group? Aspects of this discussion return in three chapters on the future of rural sociology at Wageningen written by current staff members – on agriculture, food and place –

placed near the end of the book. Here, the section on identity is followed by a section highlighting three other major developments in the past 75 years that did not really fit in the chronological overview but which cannot be left unmentioned. The introduction ends with a brief overview of the book.¹

Rural sociology: 1946 to the present

This section presents and briefly discusses the main episodes in the development of rural sociology at Wageningen University since 1946. This is based on a literature review for the first 45 years, while for the last 30 years, I can also draw on personal experience. I started at Wageningen as a PhD candidate in 1992 (until 1996) at the Department of Sociology and returned to the Rural Sociology Group in 2001, as an assistant professor.

Embedding rural sociology in the agricultural sciences

The beginnings of rural sociology at Wageningen University are to be understood against the background of its academic setting, that is, in the agricultural sciences. In 1946, Wageningen University was still an Agricultural College, and the technical and applied economic and natural sciences dominated the academic scene. In his inaugural lecture, Hofstee (1946) discussed the causes of inter-regional diversity in Dutch agriculture. The then prevailing agricultural sciences explained diversity in terms of differential physical-geographical conditions, differing distances vis-à-vis markets and differences in the general economic conditions of regions. Hofstee (ibid: 24) wrote thus:

[T]he structure of agricultural life in a particular region cannot just be seen as a

sum of attempts... to adapt oneself to the conditions one is facing. This structure can to a large extent, sometimes even decisively, be determined by consciously or unconsciously shared (within a specific social group) ideals, images and thoughts, which in their origin are detached from economic considerations.²

In order to conceptualise this inter-regional agricultural diversity, Hofstee (ibid: 21) introduced the notion of *farming style*, as 'a general accepted opinion, shared by a more or less coherent group of persons, about the way farming ought to be carried out'. With this concept and the thorough empirical analysis on which it was based, Hofstee clearly demonstrated the value of a social sciences approach for the agricultural sciences.

In his first years, Hofstee's efforts focussed on institutionalising sociology within the university. This eventually resulted in the establishment of the Department of Sociology and Social Geography. Another of Hofstee's achievements came with the changes that made it possible for students to major in Rural Sociology in 1956 (Anonymous, 1997). As well as Hofstee's personal successes, these milestones should be seen as a general recognition, by the university, of the value of rural sociology for the agricultural sciences.

On traditional and modern-dynamic cultural patterns

The development of rural sociology between the early 1950s and the early 70s was framed by post-war Dutch agricultural policy and its strong focus on agricultural modernisation. Starting with a sociological interest in inter-regional agricultural diversity (i.e.

different farming styles), Hofstee became increasingly interested in the agricultural modernisation process, particularly the question of why I was that certain farmers were willing (or able) to modernise while others were not, appearing reluctant or unable to do so (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001).

In order to understand and analyse the modernisation process in agriculture, rural sociologists at Wageningen developed the notion of *cultural patterns* and their conceptual dichotomy of *traditional* versus *modern-dynamic* (Hofstee, 1960; Benvenuti, 1962; Bergsma, 1963). Cultural patterns were understood as 'the mental heritage of a specific social group, its norms, ambitions, ideals, opinions and images, etc.' (Hofstee, 1960: 8). Following this dichotomy, also labelled as 'differential sociology', the past is the norm for judging the practices and strategies of oneself and others in the traditional cultural pattern, while in the modern-dynamic cultural pattern change is generally perceived, as positive (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001).

According to Hofstee (1960), the level to which farmers internalised the modern-dynamic cultural pattern depended on a range of variables. What appeared to be decisive, however, was the degree of sociocultural isolation and level of interaction with the outside world (i.e. the more urbanised world). This could be measured and quantified, as demonstrated by the empirical studies of Benvenuti (1962) and Bergsma (1963). For example, the physical distance between a farmhouse and the nearest paved road operated as an indicator for the level of sociocultural isolation and was shown by Benvenuti (ibid.) to be positively correlated with the degree to which the farming practiced there was (still) traditional. Hofstee (1960) explained the relevance and importance of the differential sociological approach

for Dutch agricultural policy by showing that in a particular region characterised by similar physical-geographical conditions for all farms, the annual labour productivity on modern-dynamic farms was 30 to 40% higher than that on traditional farms.

Towards the production of expert knowledge

In the course of the 1950s and 60s, rural sociology gradually shifted away from analysing the modernisation process through understanding its sociocultural dynamics at farm level towards producing expert knowledge that could be used in the policy-making process and facilitate the transition towards modern agriculture (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). The role of rural sociology in this modernisation process was to produce empirical findings that could guide the effective modernisation of Dutch farmers and thereby Dutch agriculture. In this respect, a thorough understanding of the conditions constituting the different cultural patterns was considered indispensable, especially for actors such as extensionists, spatial planners and agricultural policymakers (Hofstee, 1960b). If Dutch agriculture was to move forward, than these actors had to remove the barriers (as identified by means of empirical sociological research on cultural patterns) that were preventing the transformation from traditionalism to modernity.

This vision of the role of rural sociology implied an intensification of the interaction between rural sociology, on the one hand, and agricultural modernisation and agricultural policy-making, on the other. Rural sociology thus became part and parcel of agricultural modernisation and succeeded in producing expert knowledge that was increasingly considered to be 'as relevant as that produced by the technical agricultural sciences' since 'so well had rural sociology done its job that, in the early 1970s, Hofstee concluded that its

1 This chapter is a revised and updated version of 'Rural Sociology in the Netherlands: Past, present and future' (Wiskerke, 2004).

2 All translations by the author.

task was virtually concluded' (Anonymous, 1997: 2).

The fact that Dutch agriculture had, to a large extent, modernised, along with the establishment of new university departments, such as Extension Science and Spatial Planning, which had emerged from rural sociology, represented the summit of Hofstee's contribution to rural sociology. In the remaining years of his professorship, Hofstee turned to historical sociology, and most of his staff dispersed to the newly established departments and other universities (ibid).

Rural sociology in crisis

This 'golden age' (Anonymous, 1997) of rural sociology was followed by a period of disarray and misery, characterised by confusion and conflicts about the focus of the discipline (De Haan & Nooij, 1985; Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001; Van der Ploeg, 1995a). Should rural sociology continue to study, build upon and contribute to the modernisation process or should new directions be pursued? This state of crisis was not just characteristic of rural sociology at Wageningen alone but of European rural sociology in general. According to Benvenuti, Galjart, & Newby (1975: 8-9), there were three main reasons for this:

1. The close relationship between rural sociological research and governmental and agricultural agencies, resulting in a situation wherein the object of research was defined 'for the rural sociologist by these agencies rather than by him for the theoretical progress of the discipline';
2. The strong emphasis on empiricism, leading to a situation in which fact-finding dominated, which implied that rural sociology had become a deductive empiricist discipline, producing a 'multitude of facts, but little knowledge of what they mean' (again, this was due to the close

liaison with the above-mentioned agencies, as these preferred standardised data);

3. The positivist stance of rural sociology, characterised by a strong reliance on the survey method, as a result of which the outputs of rural sociology were mainly 'descriptions of rural social organisations and membership participation, the diffusion of innovations, and attitude data', with hardly any interpretation of social interaction and social structure.

De Haan and Nooij (1985) added a fourth reason for rural sociology's crisis in the 1970s: methodological individualism. Due to the close liaison with governmental and agricultural agencies, the emphasis on fact-finding and the dominance of the survey method, the cultural pattern theory became individualised: 'without taking into account the social context, every farmer was assessed for the degree to which he participated in the modern-dynamic cultural pattern' (ibid: 13).

The self-assessment of its state of disarray and misery eventually led to a reorientation of rural sociology. New issues appeared on the agenda, including the growth of agribusiness and its subsequent impact on farmers' autonomy and dependence, social cohesion and the liveability of rural areas, the role of women on family farms and environmental concerns (De Haan & Nooij, 1985; Van der Ploeg, 1995a; Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). These new issues all questioned, in one way or the other, the consequences of agricultural modernisation, focusing on the impact on family farms, farming families and rural areas.

From empiricist individualism to theoretical institutionalism

The developments in Dutch rural sociology in the late 1970s and early 80s can best be described as a shift from empiricist individualism to a more theoretically based institutional

sociological approach (De Haan & Nooij, 1985). This shift in focus is most profoundly illustrated by Benvenuti's (1975, 1982) TATE-theory. An acronym for the 'technical and administrative task environment', TATE refers to 'all the institutions that increasingly structure and (de)legitimise the management of individual farms' (Benvenuti, 1982: 112).

The institutions constituting the TATE are, among others, agricultural industries, banks, traders and extension services. According to TATE theory, the TATE expropriates parts of the farm, resulting in an important reallocation of decision-making power (from the farm to the TATE institutions). As such, it increasingly structures the development of individual farms (ibid: 117). In this process, the technologies developed by the TATE play a crucial role. Benvenuti (ibid: 122) developed the concept of *technology-as-language* to explain how farm development is being structured by the TATE:

[T]echnology is an ordering principle.

Technology is an explicit language as it specifies the conditions under which it should be deployed. It is also explicit regarding the goals at which its use should be aimed.

In other words, the technologies (i.e. artifacts and services) developed by the TATE contain instructions (prescriptions, inscriptions) specifying how they should be used by farmers. The TATE theory was later criticised by rural sociologists (De Bruin, 1997; Wiskerke, 1997) for being too deterministic as it a priori assumes the structuration of farm development by TATE. Faced with this criticism, Benvenuti (1997) responded that in the late 1970s and early 80s, he perceived TATE as an 'emerging reality despite its invisibility'. Thus,

Analytically speaking, to me, TATE was a conceptual tool for understanding and

answering the question: how is the room for manoeuvre of individual farmers being restricted? The reason for posing this question – I realise now – was embedded in the somewhat simplistic assumption that this was the most relevant rural sociological question in those days.

In other words, the TATE-concept was first and foremost a research programme that gradually developed into a theory in which a certain degree of a priori determinism started to prevail. Nevertheless, Benvenuti's TATE theory has been a major contribution to rural sociology, particularly due to its institutional approach (De Haan & Nooij, 1985). Many years later, even, it continued to inspire rural sociologists and agrarian economists, especially because of its many resemblances with theoretical concepts from neo-institutional economics and the sociology of science and technology (see e.g. Ventura & Milone, 2004; Roep & Wiskerke, 2004).

The actor-oriented and labour approach

In the course of the 1980s, rural sociology shifted towards a more reflexive analysis of the agricultural modernisation process. This period was characterised by lively theoretical debates about actor, agency and structure (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). The Wageningen position in this debate was characterised by the development of the actor-oriented approach (see e.g. Long, 1997). According to this approach 'farmers define and operationalise their objectives and farm management practices on the basis of different criteria, interests, experiences and perspectives', meaning that 'farmers develop, through time, specific projects and practices on how their farming is to be organised' (Long & Van der Ploeg, 1994: 70). The actor-oriented approach also made a strong plea for a definitive 'adieu to structure as explanans' (ibid: 80), but without neglecting the effects of

social, technical, economic and political factors on the practice of farming.

An important building block for the actor-oriented approach was the incorporation of the labour process approach in rural sociology (Van der Ploeg, 1995a). This was perceived by other authors (e.g. Marsden, 1990) as a crucial step forwards, resulting in a revitalisation, demarcation, specification and new theoretical foundation of rural sociology. The labour process approach combined three elements considered to be indispensable for a thorough understanding of agriculture as a heterogeneous and highly diversified social practice (Van der Ploeg 1991):

1. The production and reproduction process in agriculture;
2. Farmers as knowledgeable and capable actors;
3. The socio-technical relations that farmers practice, maintain and transform and which shape their daily lives and work.

The specificity of agriculture is, according to Van der Ploeg (1991, 1995a), situated in the unique nature of the agricultural labour process. First, this is an artisanal process, characterised by a close interaction between mental and manual labour (in contrast to the industrial labour process); and second, the agricultural labour process involves the transformation of living matter (animals, plants, ecosystems) into products. The intersection of artisanal production and the transformation of living matter explains the superiority of the family business as well as simple commodity production as the dominant organisational form (Van der Ploeg, 1995a: 253; see also Long et al., 1986).

The farming styles research programme

With the reflexive analysis of agricultural modernisation as overarching topic and the actor-oriented (more specifically, labour

process) approach as its focus, in 1992, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg was appointed as Wageningen's Professor of Rural Sociology and launched a new research programme. This became known as the farming styles research programme and aimed to explore, describe and analyse diversity in farming practices and agricultural development; it also implied a critique of the agricultural modernisation model. The latter assumed that agricultural modernisation would lead to a uniform mode of agricultural production, disconnected from locality (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001).

Inspired by neo-classical economics, this model was based on the assumption that markets and technology determine the shape, contents, direction and pace of agricultural development. Furthermore, vis-à-vis markets and technology, according to the neo-classical approach, there is only ever one optimal position. Therefore, different positions in respect of markets and technology can be classified in terms of 'good' and 'bad' agricultural entrepreneurship (i.e. in terms of proximity to the optimal position) (Wiskerke, 1997). Against this, Van der Ploeg (1994: 9) argued that markets and technology afford – or rather *constitute* – room for manoeuvre, wherein different positions are taken, the results of strategic actions:

Farmers themselves, as social actors, are able to define and influence the way they relate their farming activity to markets and technology. Distantiation from and/or integration into markets and technology... is the object of strategic reasoning, embedded in local history, ecology and prevailing politico-economic relations.

These different positions were conceptualised as different farming styles. While Hofstee had developed this notion to explain inter-regional diversity in agriculture, Van der Ploeg re-intro-



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duced it to explain intra-regional agricultural diversity. Farming styles, according to Van der Ploeg (1994: 18), represent a specific unity of farming discourse and practice (i.e. a specific unity of mental and manual labour), entail a particular organisation of the labour process and represent a unique set of interlinkages between the farm and its techno-institutional environment. During the course of the 1990s, numerous farming styles studies were conducted in the Netherlands to explore and analyse diversity in dairy farming (e.g. Van der Ploeg & Roep, 1990; De Bruin, 1997), horticulture (Spaan & Van der Ploeg, 1992), intensive livestock husbandry (Commandeur, 2003) and arable farming (Wiskerke, 1997).

The farming styles research programme demonstrated that although Dutch agriculture had generally developed along the guiding principles of agricultural modernisation, this development had been far from uniform – or

unilinear. On the contrary, Van der Ploeg (1995b) found that diversity in Dutch agriculture had increased significantly over the years; adopting a Chayanovian approach led to an analysis of farm economic accounts through a variety of strategies was shown to be earning a good income. The farming styles research programme also demonstrated significant differences between farming styles regarding the environmental impacts of farming as well as strategies to reduce this and regarding the (im)possibilities of combining primary production with other functions (nature conservation, landscape management, green care, etc.).

The farming styles research programme has had a major impact on Dutch agricultural sciences. Although its findings were strongly criticised at first by technical scientists and economists, the underlying notion of meaningful diversity gradually became accepted and used by other scientific disciplines (see e.g.

Almekinders, Fresco & Struik, 1995). The conclusions of the research programme had further implications for agri-environmental policy-making, with rural sociologists arguing that policies should focus on the goals to be realised and not prescribe the means to realise these goals (De Bruin, 1997; Wiskerke, 1997). Instead, farmers should have the freedom to choose those means most suitable to their own farming style. Finally, the programme had an important emancipating effect on the farming community. Farming styles that had been considered irrelevant, outmoded and outdated within the modernisation paradigm – such as ‘farming economically’ (i.e. keeping costs low by using own resources as much as possible) – were made visible and given scientific recognition for their merits.

From agrarian to rural development

The farming styles research programme in the Netherlands stimulated a European research programme aimed at describing and analysing the diversity, dynamics, impact and potentials of rural development practices using a multidisciplinary, comparative approach (Van der Ploeg & Long, 1994; Van der Ploeg & Van Dijk, 1995; Van der Ploeg, Long & Banks, 2003). This research programme was launched at a time of heated scientific and political debates about the future of Europe’s agriculture and rural areas. According to Marsden (2003), these debates centred around three different ideas about the future of agriculture and rural areas, namely, the *agro-industrial*, *post-productivist* and *sustainable rural development* models:

1. **The agro-industrial model** assumed an accelerated modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation of standardised food production characterised by high levels of production, spatially extended food supply chains, decreasing value of primary production and economies of scale;

2. **The post-productivist model** saw the countryside as a consumption space characterised by the marginalisation of agriculture (due to its low share in GDP), needs for the provision of private and public rural services and the protection of nature and landscape as a consumption good to be exploited by the urban population;
3. **The sustainable rural development model** emphasised the spatial integration of agriculture, nature, landscape, tourism and private and public rural services, along with spatially and socially re-embedded, short food-supply chains, multifunctional agriculture, rural livelihoods, new institutional arrangements and economies of scope.

By exploring alternative practices, models and strategies to the pattern and internal logic of agricultural modernisation, rural sociology positioned itself clearly in these debates as a critical voice. It did so by conceptualising rural development as the radical transformation of three aspects of the farm, namely, its resources (knowledge, animals, plants, capital, land, etc.), its sociocultural and ecological environment (the rural area) and its outlet (the food supply chain). According to van der Ploeg, Long & Banks (2003), these three aspects are all transformed in and through rural development practices, implying that rural development is characterised by three mutually reinforcing development trajectories:

1. **Regrounding:** new (compared to the modernisation approach) ways of mobilising resources, predominantly by building on the endogenous development potential of the local area;
2. **Broadening:** the incorporation of other rural functions and activities (nature, landscape, water, tourism, etc.) into the farm enterprise, thereby transforming its relationship with and position in the rural area as well as broadening the economic base of the farm;

3. **Deepening:** the transformation of the relationship between the farm and the food supply chain aimed at retaining more added value at farm level, for example, by producing high-value specialty products, on-farm processing and direct selling.

Taken together, these three trajectories were seen to be reshaping the farm into a multi-functional enterprise that delivering a much broader range of products and services than before. Impact analyses demonstrated that this broader range of products and services was also of economic importance. At the same time, the striking regional and national differences in rural development practices and trajectories within and among EU countries called for a better understanding of the social, economic, technical and institutional factors driving and hampering rural development practices more generally. Comparative research proved to be important in better understanding diversity and subsequently in identifying and designing promising strategies for enhancing rural development processes across Europe.

Broadening the horizon: food (and the city) on the research agenda

From the early 2000s, food emerged as a topic on the research agenda of the Rural Sociology Group. Like the work done on farming styles and rural development practices in the 1990s, food research came to the attention of rural sociology partly through the critique of modernised and industrialised food systems – referring to the ways and conditions in which food was grown, foodstuff manufactured, and these delivered to the market. This critique included negative appraisals of their environmental impact, their growing power inequalities and unequal distribution of added value (i.e. within the systems) and the lack of transparency in global food supply chains. The rural sociology food research

agenda also manifested through its studies building on the rural development trajectory of ‘deepening’, which began to focus on the emergence of a wide variety of alternatives to globalised and industrialised food-supply chains. These used short supply chains and alternative food networks (AFNs), characterized by notions of re-localization, social and spatial embedding and a turn to quality (Renting, Marsden & Banks, 2003; Watts, Illbery & Maye, 2005).

A steadily growing number and variety of research projects were directed towards the new concern. They included international collaborative research projects and scientific contributions to agri-food studies on short food-supply chains, local food systems and AFNs (e.g. Renting, Marsden & Banks, 2003; Wiskerke & Roep, 2007; Wiskerke, 2009; Roep & Wiskerke, 2012; Duncan et al., 2021). These scientific outputs mainly focused on the spatial and temporal dynamics, the socio-economic and socio-spatial impacts and the governance and diverse development trajectories of these short chains, local systems and alternative networks. The revisioning of food in terms of a systems critique along with the growth of unconventional, non-mainstream practices and organisations incorporated, among other things, a revalorisation of the traditional (as contemporary rather than unmodern).

Around 2010, the research agenda broadened further again with the study of food provisioning from an urban perspective – in other words, by linking the urban to the rural in food studies. The ongoing process of urbanisation – including new developments in urban food poverty – led to an important shift in the food security discourse: from a production failure issue to an accessibility and affordability challenge (Wiskerke, 2015). For many decades, food had generally been regarded in both research and policy-making as synony-

mous with agriculture and thus as a rural policy domain and hence an agricultural production challenge (Sonnino 2009). Food studies at the Rural Sociology Group was also, until then, rather biased towards the linkage of food supply (production and processing) to the rural domain. Approaching food sociologically as a whole system thus implied a reconsideration of rural sociology itself, which was now an orientation that also incorporated aspects of the urban.

Another emerging reality that pushed rural sociologists to embrace the urban domain was the growth in the number of cities and city-regions taking up the role of food system innovators and food policymakers (Wiskerke 2009). For these urban spaces, food became an entry point and lens through which several municipal challenges and responsibilities could be addressed and connected – such as climate change, waste collection and processing, social and spatial inequalities (in access to and affordability of food) and diet-related ill-health (Wiskerke, 2015). This area of food research particularly focused on a) the short-chain supply of food to urban and peri-urban areas (including urban and peri-urban agriculture); b) revaluing and (re) localizing public food procurement; and c) integrated urban and city-region food policies and strategies.

From rural to place-based development: moving beyond dichotomies

A final important change in our research approach has been another broadening of our horizon by shifting our focus from rural to place-based development from the early 2000s onwards. This has been inspired by a turn to relational thinking, which itself builds on critical geography (Massey, 2005). As a result, we have moved away from seeing the rural as a distinct place, one that is defined in opposition to the urban, and begun to regard it

instead as a set of practices, relations and connections. More generally, this relational approach has encouraged us to move beyond dichotomies, beyond not just rural and urban, which was already severely compromised, but also beyond local and global, production and consumption, and endogenous and exogenous.

A first step in this shift from rural to place-based development was the project entitled 'Enlarging the Theoretical Understanding of Rural Development' (ETUDE), which started with the notion of the *rural web* as a set of 'interrelations, exchanges between different actors and activities, and positive mutual externalities'. Through a comparative analysis of rural webs in twelve localities across Europe, ETUDE proposed a classification of different territories, including specialised agricultural areas, new rural areas, and peripheral areas (Van der Ploeg & Marsden, 2008). Each type of territory was also shaped and characterised by different types of rural-urban relations; specialised agricultural areas were identified through spatially extended global food supply chains, new rural areas through multiple spatially proximate relations (green care, on-farm education, farm shops, etc.) and peripheral areas through spatially extended tourism relations. Concomitantly, our focus moved away from rural development as such towards regional or territorial development (Wiskerke, 2007) and hence beyond the endogenous-exogenous and local-global development dichotomies.

An important step forward in this process has been the SUSPLACE project, which focused on sustainable place-shaping. By assuming a relational approach, places are conceptualised as differentiated outcomes in time and space, shaped at the intersection of unbound ecological, political-economic and sociocultural ordering processes. Hence, places are mutually shaped and (continuously) reshaped

and interconnected by these (trans)formation processes. Sustainable place-based development, as Hurlings et al. (2020) note, then entails a well-balanced

1. Sociocultural *re-appreciation* of respective places (beyond inherited assumptions)
2. Ecological *re-grounding* of practices (in place-specific assets and resources)
3. Politico-economic *re-positioning* (towards dominant markets, technologies and policies).

Most recently, in our EU research project 'Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies' (ROBUST), undertaken between 2017 and 2021, we explored and analysed the diversity of interactions and dependencies between the rural and urban in a variety of domains (e.g. food provisioning, ecosystem services, social services, culture and heritage) and identified practices, governance arrangements and policies that foster mutually beneficial relations.

Six key characteristics of rural sociology at Wageningen

This chronological overview – which is complemented by reflections on the history of rural sociology in the three chapters on the agriculture, food and place research agendas – has shown how the main interests, research approaches and theoretical perspectives have changed over the years. But there have also been continuities over the past 75 years that together define the identity of rural sociology as that which has evolved. They can be summarised as a list of six key characteristics or concerns, namely, people's everyday realities, dynamics, meaningful diversity, comparative research, a relational approach and being critical and engaged:

1. **People's everyday realities.** Most of our research takes people in their everyday worlds as a starting point, and we work from

there. People's quotidian realities are primarily explored through specific practices – the 'actions, processes, relationships and contexts through which and where the ordinary, real and everyday world is constituted' (Jones & Murphy, 2010: 308) – with the aim of understanding what people do (or don't do), how and why. Over the past thirty years, we have developed a focus on marginalised people and unconventional practices, giving a voice to the often unheard and making visible that which is commonly hidden, thus taking into consideration people and practices that are typically misunderstood and neglected in research studies and policy-making.

2. **Dynamics.** In most of our research, we aim to link the present to the past, as the everyday practices and life-worlds of today (and their robustness or fragility) can only be understood by tracing their development over the course of time. This enables us, for example, to explore the emergence of path dependencies (e.g. (in)formal rules and regulations, vested interests, lock-in effects of long-term financial investments) and comprehend their impact on people's everyday lives.
3. **Meaningful diversity.** In our exploration of the everyday realities and spatio-temporal dynamics of people, practices and places, there a key concern has always been with diversity – not with diversity as such, but with understanding what certain practices or development patterns have in common and how and why they differ from other, more or less coherent sets of practices and development patterns. In other words, we have been interested in *meaningful* diversity. The work on farming styles, both in the early days as well as during the 1990s, is a clear example of this.
4. **Comparative research.** Comparing practices and processes situated in different socio-spatial settings has been an

important means to better understand both the contextual (e.g. place-specific) and more general (e.g. structural) factors influencing and shaping socio-spatial practices and development processes. Comparative research, therefore, has also been crucial to our understanding of diversity in a meaningful way.

5. **A relational approach.** There are two ways in which relational thinking has been and continues to be important. First, starting with Hofstee's differential sociology, relational thinking implies that a particular pattern (e.g. traditional) or set of practices (e.g. farming economically) derives meaning in relation to another pattern (e.g. modern-dynamic) or set of practices (e.g. farming intensively). Such relational thinking has been key to conceptualising meaningful diversity. Second, inspired by critical socio-spatial thinking, a relational approach has enabled us to move beyond treating dichotomies as distinct entities. We increasingly understand pairings like rural and urban not as binary oppositions but as sets of relations and connections. This has been of particular importance to our research over the last two decades.
6. **Being critical and engaged.** A final key feature is that we critically analyse and reflect on the 'conventional' and 'mainstream' (e.g. agricultural modernisation) and thereby attempt to defamiliarize the familiar and question the taken-for-granted. This supports our contribution to the field through an exploration of new practices and examination of a range of credible options that highlights alternatives. In other words, we aim to be transformative by going beyond dominant understandings and constellations. This 'engaged' or 'activist' approach to research, for which we have been and still are sometimes criticised, has also been emancipatory by showing the potential of practices that

often remain locked away, as it were, rendered uncredible and worthless.

In addition to these six key features, there are several other defining characteristics of our research approach, but these are more research-theme specific and thus discussed in the respective chapters on agriculture, food and place.

A few other major changes in the past 75 years

While the chronological presentation of rural sociology's research topics and approaches gives a rather comprehensive overview of key changes in the past 75 years, there are three other main developments that need to be discussed for a more comprehensive picture. These are changes in doctoral research, the internationalisation of research (and the group) and the evolution of education.

Doctoral research

Over the past 75 years, a total of 102 doctoral theses in Rural Sociology have been successfully completed. The first PhD graduate was Jan Doorenbos, who successfully defended his thesis '*Opheusden als Boomteeltcentrum*' (Opheusden as a Tree-Growing Centre) on 14th June 1950. This PhD study was supervised by Prof. dr. E.W. Hofstee. The 102nd PhD graduate was Angela Moriggi, who successfully defended her thesis entitled 'Green Care Practices and Place-Based Sustainability Transformations: A participatory action-oriented study in Finland' on 1st June 2021. Her supervisors were Prof. dr. Bettina Bock and dr. Dirk Roep from the Rural Sociology Group and dr. Katriina Soini from the Natural Resources Institute Finland. The differences between the first and most recent PhD graduate and their theses mark some of the key changes in PhD research at the Rural Sociology Group over the past 75 years, which may be listed thus:

1. **Male-to-female PhD graduate ratio.** During the past 75 years, we have had twice as many male as female graduates; however, this 2:1 ratio is a totalising average for the whole period that disguises what has actually occurred. In fact, all 11 PhD graduates were men in the first 25 years, and most (14 from 16) were men, in the second; it is only in the last quarter-century that this has changed, with a swing towards equality (42 men vs. 32 women).
2. **Total number of PhD graduates.** As the gender numbers indicate, the overall number of PhD graduates has increased significantly over the years: from less than one per year in the first 50 years to three per year in the last 25.
3. **Graduate nationality and country of research.** Until 2000, the majority of graduates were from the Netherlands (31 from 34, with the three non-Dutch graduates being from other European countries). During the last 20 years, on the other hand, approximately 35% of the PhD students were Dutch, with the other 65% coming from all over the world, from Latin America, Africa and Asia (the Global South) in addition to other European countries. A largely similar trend can be observed when looking at the countries where PhD research was conducted and where PhD graduates are currently employed.
4. **PhD thesis language.** During the first 50 years, Dutch was the most common language used for a PhD thesis, with a few written in English and one in French. In the last 25 years the vast majority (75%) of PhD theses were written in English, 15% in Dutch and the remaining 10% in other languages (Spanish, Italian and Portuguese).
5. **Number of supervisors.** Another change has been seen in the number of supervisors, which has risen from one (typically) in the first half-century to two to three in the last quarter. With the second and/or third

supervisor usually having another field of expertise, this also points to a shift from (single) disciplinary to inter- and multidisciplinary PhD theses.

These changes, along with others, in the 75-year history of doctoral research in rural sociology at Wageningen have been summarised in a set of infographics that are included in the first section of this book (see pages 29-36).

Internationalisation

Another major change seen in the past 75 years has been the internationalisation of research and of the group itself. One expression of this internationalisation has been the aforementioned changes in PhD research – the nationalities of the PhD graduates, the countries in which PhD research has been carried out and the languages in which PhD theses have been written. This shows a gradual evolution from a focus on the Netherlands towards a European focus in the 1990s and beyond from the early 2000s.

The internationalisation of research is also articulated by the steadily growing body of international research projects, largely funded by the European Commission (EC) through its framework programmes for research and innovation (FP1-FP7, Horizon 2020, and Horizon Europe). This development began in the early 1990s with the project 'Design Methods for Endogenous Regional Development' (Van der Ploeg & Long, 1994). EU-funded projects have been important since then, and we have continually had multiple cross-national projects running concurrently throughout the last two decades. In total now, we have been involved in some 25 international collaborative research projects, mainly EU-funded, about half of which we have coordinated.

These projects involving individuals and partner institutions from across Europe and

around the world have enabled comparative research that has been important for the advancement of our understanding of a range of topics, including farming diversity, rural development and food provisioning. The comparison of policies and practices, strategies and dynamics across different socio-spatial, ecological, political, economic and regulatory settings has really enabled us to better understand the place-specific dynamics of change as well as the more general dynamics across places and the factors shaping these. Hence, empirically, conceptually and methodologically, these international collaborative research projects have been of indispensable value for the development and execution of our research agenda and group and beyond, for the discipline and related disciplines (e.g. rural and food geography). But these externally funded international as well as externally funded national projects have also become a sheer necessity for the survival of the Rural Sociology Group.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, research at Wageningen University has become increasingly and at present, almost exclusively dependent on research funding provided by external parties, such as the Dutch organisation for scientific research (*Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, NWO), the EC, central governments and provincial/municipal authorities, NGOs and the private sector. While we have been rather successful in securing EU research funding as well as national government funding, it does require us to be alert and cautious in order to ensure that our research agenda does not become overly determined by the conditions set by funding agencies.

In addition to the internationalisation of research, the group itself has also internationalised. In the early days, Bruno Benvenuti, born and raised in Italy, was the only non-

Dutch member of staff. When I joined as a PhD student in 1992, all the staff members were Dutch along with almost all the PhD students. Dutch was the common language of communication at meetings, and all official university documents were likewise in Dutch. This has changed considerably in the last 20 years, beginning with the rapid internationalisation of our PhD community. During the last ten years, the staff has also become more international; currently, there are three non-Dutch assistant/associate professors. Most of our PhD students are non-Dutch now, as are all our postdoctoral researchers at present. English has become the default common language for general communication.

As a final note on this topic, it is important not to assume that rural sociology was almost exclusively focused on the Netherlands in its first 50 years and only internationalised in the last 25. There were a few non-Dutch PhD candidates in the early years, and some PhD studies were carried out outside the Netherlands. However, and more importantly from an internationalisation point of view, we should recall that Hofstee took an active role in this development from the start, establishing the ESRS in 1957 and *Sociologia Ruralis* a few years later, in which Hofstee and several of his staff members frequently published and which has been an important publication outlet for the Rural Sociology Group ever since.

Education

The main focus in this chapter has been on research, but as a university unit, we first and foremost have an educational task, with teaching informed by research. This means that the content of most of our teaching – the curriculum and syllabus – has reflected our evolving research agenda, in addition to more general introduction courses in sociology, rural development studies, food studies and international development studies. The major

changes in education over the past 75 years beyond this – and the general pedagogical developments, facilitated especially by communications technology (most recently instantiated with online teaching) – essentially come down to the changing relations between the department/group and the academic programme and the (structural) composition of the program.

Concerning the latter, Dutch university programmes until 1982 consisted of three phases: *propadeuse* (a propaedeutic or foundation year), *kandidaats* (roughly the second and third years, which led to a candidate degree) and *doctoraal* (the remaining fourth, fifth and sometimes sixth years, which led to a diploma – despite the name, this final period of study was not for a doctorate). Until then, students worked for a candidate degree and then diploma – and, if they continued, a doctoral degree and diploma. In 1982, a ‘two-phase’ structure was introduced. University programmes were reduced to four years, of which the first was a propaedeutic year and the remaining three the *doctoraal* years. One could only gain a university degree and diploma after completion of the full four-year program. The second phase of this two-phase structure was research education, which, some years later, was extended to a (further) four-year doctorate programme.

In 2002, another major change occurred, namely, the introduction of the bachelor-master’s structure. This implied that all university programmes started with a three-year bachelor programme (resulting in a BA or BSc degree) followed by a one- or two-year master’s programme (resulting in a MA or MSc). For Wageningen University, as one of the four Dutch technical universities, this implied a two-year master’s programme. A final important change was the introduction of English as the language of instruction for all

master’s programmes in 2004. In more recent years also, a few bachelor programmes have used English as the medium of instruction, although the majority of BSc programmes at Wageningen are still taught in Dutch, especially the first year. With the rapid growth in international academic staff, however, this is becoming increasingly problematic.

Concerning the changing relations between the department/group and the academic program, there has been a history of evolving programmes and frameworks. In 1956, ten years after Hofstee was appointed, the academic programme Agrarian Sociology was launched alongside Agrarian Sociology of non-Western Areas (which coincided with the establishment of a department with the same name and Prof. van Lier as chair). The names of these programmes changed slightly to Sociology of Western Areas and Sociology of non-Western Areas in 1971. The two were merged in 1989, together with several economics programmes, into Rural Development Studies, with Agrarian Development Sociology and Agrarian Development Economics as two specialisations. In 2000, Rural Development Studies became International Development Studies, with Rural Development Sociology as one of its specialisations. International Development Studies still exists as a bachelor’s and master’s program, with Sociology of Rural Development as one of its specialisations. However, since the introduction of the bachelor-master structure, the Rural Sociology Group has become involved in more bachelor and master programmes.

At present, the Rural Sociology Group offers courses and BSc theses for the bachelor programmes International Development Studies, Communication and Life Sciences, and Health and Society, and courses and MSc theses and internships for the masters

programmes International Development Studies, Communication, Health and Life Sciences, Development and Rural Innovation, Food Technology, Landscape Architecture and Planning and Organic Agriculture. We no longer have our own academic programme and instead offer a taste of rural sociology as well as a deeper dive into the subject for a wide variety of academic programmes.

About this book

Prepared to mark the occasion of the 75th anniversary of what is now called the Rural Sociology Group, this book follows those written for the 25th and 50th anniversaries (Anonymous, 1971; De Haan & Long, 1997). Like the present work, the two previous anniversary books were written by the then members of the department. The 25th-anniversary book primarily reflected on the department's first 25 years, while the 50th-anniversary book mainly focussed on ongoing and future research. The chapters in both books were 'conventional' academic contributions to an edited scientific book.

This book is slightly different insofar as it reflects on the past, considers the present and proposes research agendas for the years ahead – and it does so, moreover, in a different style. In addition to this introductory chapter, three longer chapters have been written by groups of current staff members about the three thematic research agendas: agriculture, food and place. In these chapters, the authors focus on the future but also discuss the past and the present. In addition, this book contains a number of shorter contributions, mostly by group members presenting their ongoing work, which have also been published online as part of our 75th-anniversary weblog series. Chapters and blogs have been grouped into 7 sections:

1. Beginnings: this chapter plus ten contributions discussing and reflecting on the early

years and key features of rural sociology in Wageningen.

2. Roots: five contributions about the relations between rural sociology and other groups (rural history, extension science, cultural geography, environmental policy, and health & society) at Wageningen University, written by (former) staff members of those groups.
3. Education: nine contributions about education topics.
4. Place: a chapter about the past, present and future of a relational perspective on rural/place-based development and eight contributions about related topics and personal research activities and interests.
5. Agriculture: a chapter about the past, present and future of agrarian sociology and ten contributions about related topics and personal research activities and interests.
6. Food: a chapter about the past, present and future of food sociology and five contributions about related topics and personal research activities and interests.
7. People: short biographies of current staff members, postdocs and PhD students.

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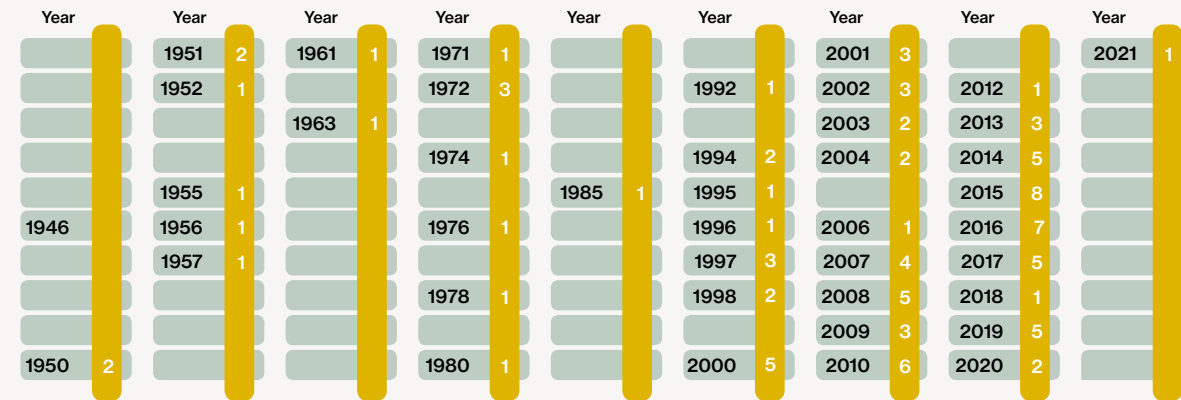
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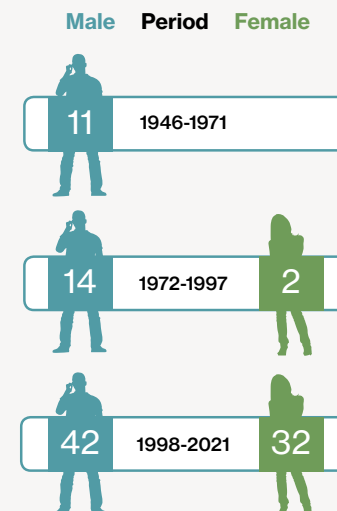
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Facts & Figures

PhD graduations per year from 1946 - 2021



Gender balance in 25, 50 and 75 years



First female PhD to defend her thesis at RSO:

1978

Marijke W. de Kleijn-de Vrankrijker