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Rural entrepreneurship as-practice: a framework for research beyond stereotypical notions of entrepreneurial agency and contextual constraints

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ABSTRACT

Rural entrepreneurship scholarship has long underscored the importance of contextual conditions that enable or constrain entrepreneurial activities. However, contextual relations are, at times, characterized by a stereotypical or superficial understanding of what 'rurality' is and means for rural entrepreneurship, prompting calls for an exploration of new theoretical foundations. We develop a novel theoretical framework that underscores the ontological sameness of rural context and rural entrepreneurship as intersecting practice-material bundles. This enables us to propose four relations between rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts – causal, prefigurative, constitutive and intelligibility – that can be used as a heuristic to understand the processual and mutual relations between entrepreneurial agency and rural context. We map out three important contributions of this framework for future research, including integrating positivist-functionalist and social constructivist divisions, the necessity of an insider analytical approach, and foregrounding the dynamics and relations between practice-material bundles as the primary unit of analysis for future rural entrepreneurship research.

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1. Introduction

Unlike mainstream entrepreneurship scholars who consider it to be an aspatial if not implicitly urban phenomenon (Hunt et al. 2021), *rural* entrepreneurship scholars have driven home the importance of recognizing entrepreneurship as fundamentally 'embedded' in social and material realities (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). Whether considered as structures such as rural values, social networks, rural space ('attainability' or 'remoteness'), population density, gender contracts, social imaginaries, or formal institutions, notions of rurality have repeatedly been used by scholars to explain how rural entrepreneurs are constrained or enabled by the structural character of their local context (Beckmann, Garkisch, and Zeyen 2023; Ring, Ana, and James 2010; Roos 2019). Overall, this research stream has greatly advanced our understanding that the lived experience of all entrepreneurship is inherently related to the context in which it occurs.

While certain characteristics of rural entrepreneurs' contexts certainly matter for their activities, there is, however, a tendency to examine these elements superficially and mechanistically, prioritizing abstraction and deterministic explanations (Baker and Welter 2020). Collective social perception

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of 'the rural' is predominantly been informed by the likewise stereotypically exaggerated counter-horizon of the 'urban', starting with ancient bucolic literature (Bell 2006; Honigsheim 1953) from Tönnies (1887), and Simmel (1903) to Wirth (1938) whose socio-spatial concepts of 'city' and 'country' build on the juxtaposition of supposedly diametrical opposites, to the invention of agglomeration economics that by definition overlook any non-agglomerated areas. This overly dualistic view on regional context for entrepreneurship matters greatly – for rural and urban entrepreneurship scholars alike – because there is the lingering danger of an overly optimistic or romanticized view on rural social relations as close-knit, harmonious and supportive (Gaddefors and Anderson 2019), at the expense of the manifold non-local (Dubois 2016; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015) and non-social relations that sustain rural entrepreneurship through e.g. natural resources, machines or animals (Contesse et al. 2021; Muñoz and Hernández 2024; Tuitjer 2022). Entrepreneurship in the rural is often considered too briefly without giving due course to the heterogeneity, the complexity and totality of what rural context really means, and how one's relationship to rural context changes with time (Wigren-Kristoferson et al. 2019). Echoing Hunt et al. (2021), a large part of the problem are stereotypical notions of 'rurality' which influence our analyses of the relationship between entrepreneurial activity and rural context.

Our aim in this theory-building article is to answer calls by Korsgaard et al. (2022), who suggest advances in rural entrepreneurship research will happen by broadening theoretical foundations of rural context, by revising the ontological relationship between rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts. In particular, we aim to reconfigure these interrelations by developing an entrepreneurship-as-practice framework (Teague et al. 2021; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020) in which both rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts are perceivable and understandable as bundles of practices and material arrangements. Practices, which are normatively organized activities (such as, cheese-making, coffee-roasting, business accounting, sales, etc.), form bundles with material objects (milk, coffee beans, fields), technologies (computers, roasting machines) and artefacts (barns, roads, etc.). Bundles connect and relate to each other to form larger constellations. As rural entrepreneurs, for example, farmers and food producers, work very closely with and create value from imbricating agentic material arrangements (objects and technologies but likewise animals or rain) with their own agency (Contesse et al. 2021; Muñoz and Hernández 2024), this reconceptualization helps propose rural entrepreneurship as *the emergence, organization and persistence of practice-arrangement bundles amid larger constellations of bundles that constitute the rural*. Building on this ontology, we delineate the ways in which rural entrepreneurship may exist *in relation to* a rural context – through causality, prefiguration, constitutive, and intelligibility – rather than assume the rural context has a static, exogenous and generalizable effect on individual rural entrepreneurs. In doing so, we answer calls for more attention towards the dynamics and heterogeneity of rural places and rural entrepreneurship (Muñoz and Kimmitt 2019) without romanticizing or reifying them.

This article makes three important theoretical contributions. First, our practice theory framework contributes by enabling us to integrate divergent streams of rural entrepreneurship research. While positivist and functionalist-oriented scholars argue that what defines and shapes rural entrepreneurship is the objective features of contexts in which they operate (e.g. Clausen 2020), interpretative oriented scholars focus on the meaning and experiences of people embedded within these contexts (e.g. Cloke 1997; Shucksmith and David 2016). A practice-perspective contributes by enabling us to move beyond this dualistic thinking about the rural as either geographically or socially produced, towards viewing material and social aspects as intersecting within nexus of practices. This enables us to integrate positivist-functionalist and interpretative-oriented streams of rural entrepreneurship research by discussing how both intangible and subjective aspects of rural context as well as tangible dimensions such as landscapes, bodies and material arrangements matter for rural entrepreneurship, but neither are pre-determining. Second, and related to this altered understanding of how physical dimensions of 'rurality' come into play, we contribute to the ontological and epistemological discussion on what constitutes the 'rural' by proposing that it is not possible to know or understand 'rurality' or rural entrepreneurship *a priori*. This goes beyond stereotypical notions and

fixed definitions towards recognizing the time- and place-specific constellations of practices and material arrangements that define heterogenous rural contexts. Precisely, we can only know these formative elements of bundles and constellations which are reproduced, altered by or shaping rural entrepreneurship *through engagement from within them*. Finally, we contribute to the broader research stream of Entrepreneurship-as-Practice (Teague et al. 2021; Thompson and Byrne 2022; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020) by clarifying the relationship between practices, material arrangements and contexts. Accordingly, we contribute by 'zooming out' and conceptualizing these relations beyond a focus on a particular entrepreneurship practice or single cases of entrepreneurship. Overall, our framework has implications for future research, specifically by redirecting analytical attention onto practice-arrangement bundles which will allow us to understand better the interconnectedness of rural places and people within the fabric of diverse societies, policies and economies leading to more insightful theory regarding rural entrepreneurship and rural development.

The paper is structured as follows; we outline practice theories, namely Schatzki's theory of practice, including core concepts, then, use this conceptualization to redefining the ontological relationships between rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts. To do so, we present three illustrative vignettes, which we use to explain our arguments throughout the article. We end with a discussion on the theoretical contributions and implications of our framework.

2. Agency and context in practice theories

Entrepreneurship scholars have begun to ground contemporary practice theories into entrepreneurship studies in order to understand both the processes and contexts of entrepreneurship in new ways (Teague et al. 2021; Thompson and Byrne 2022; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020). Practice theories, as Thompson and Byrne (2022) explain, have been recently influential in entrepreneurship studies because they provide the unique argument that the creation and capture of new value happens through the actualization, organization and perpetuation of nexuses of practices. An as-practice perspective on entrepreneurship thus departs from mainstream understanding of entrepreneurship as the commercial valorization of innovations (Drucker 1985) with 'destructive' impact (Schumpeter [1912] 2006 [1912]), or the 'discovery' of (exogenous) opportunities (Shane Scott 2003). Rather, EaP scholars focus on the manifold everyday activities, entangled with meaning and materiality, which together form various forms of entrepreneuring (Sigurdarson and Dimov 2022), the entrepreneurial creation of opportunities, or the entanglement of other social practices such as gender in entrepreneurial identities (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004).

Because multiple people (re)produce practices, Entrepreneurship-as-Practice (EAP) scholars place analytical and theoretical emphasis on neither solely entrepreneurs nor the social structures in which they are embedded, but rather on observable practices and their relations. In this vein, studies by Thompson et al. (2020), Hill (2018) and Keating, Geiger, and McLoughlin (2014) have made novel gains by studying the practices of pitching, strategic fit and resourcing. Others have explored the tacit knowledge involved in entrepreneurship (D. Dodd et al. 2018; Selden and Fletcher 2019) while yet other focus on the performative aspects of power in practices (S. L. D. Dodd 2014). Recent empirical work has explored business modelling (Thompson and Byrne 2022), new venture ideation (Nicolai and Thompson 2023), acceleration (Skade, Wenzel, and Koch 2024), and incubation (van Erkelens, Thompson, and Chalmers van Erkelens et al. 2024) practices to reveal the social, cultural, political, processual and relational nature of these phenomena.

2.1. Practice theories: a short introduction

All practice theories view the relation between individual agency and social structures as a duality, occurring as social practices. Note that the term 'practice' differs from other common uses of the term that indicate an opposite of theory, to practice a behaviour in order to improve one's skills, or as

a category of profession organization (e.g. a medical practice). In line with Schatzki (Schatzki 1996, 2002; Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), we define a practice as a normatively organized, open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of basic activities (doings and sayings). Thus, a practice is not single doings per se, but are open-ended chains of doings (a nexus) held together by shared meaning and norms. In this way, a practice's activities are connected through relations such as sequence (how one action sets the context for another), causality (how one activity causes another) and intentional directedness (how two activities are linked by sharing an intended outcome). For example, cheese-making involves chains of activities by different people, who react to and set the context for other's subsequent actions. Practices are open-ended in the sense that they are not composed of any particular fixed number of activities, which allows for variability in chains of doings but still be recognized as belonging to the same practices (c.f., there are many ways to make cheese).

2.1.1. Normative organization of practices

The nexus of basic activities is informed and structured by a shared normative organization made up of practical and general understandings, rules, teleology and affect. Practical understanding is 'knowing how' to conduct an activity that is an irreducible form of knowledge beyond facts. An example is knowing how to milk a cow. General understandings are abstract senses, for instance, of the beauty of an artisanal product or meanings associated with a practice or place. They are not ends for which people strive but senses of the worth, value, nature, or place of things, which infuse and are expressed in people's doings and sayings. Rules are explicitly formulated directives, remonstrations, instructions, or edicts, while affects (emotions, moods) and teleologies (means-ends combinations) are enjoined and inform what emotions and purposes are acceptable in a given practice. Importantly, by conducting any action in a certain way, one also simultaneously reproduces a normative organization and keeps it alive. Hence, the normative organization of practices (structures) exist as a duality with agency (activities). While this means that practices are typically stable over time, there can be no guarantee that the present normative organization will ultimately determine what people do.

2.1.2. Material arrangements

Practices are intimately tied to what Schatzki (Schatzki 1996, 2002; Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001) calls 'material arrangements' – those entities, objects and technologies that people manipulate or react to when conducting activities. Without material arrangements most practices would not exist, just as most material arrangements that practices deal with would not exist in the absence of these practices. For example, the cows, pots, heating apparatus, other cheese-making tools as well as the bodies of the people, are intimately related to the various activities that constitute practices. Thus, we should think of practices and material arrangements as bundles. A bundle means that practices effect, use, give meaning to, and are inseparable from material arrangements, while, on the other hand, material arrangements are essential to practices. In this vein, the rural landscape brings together a range of practice-material bundles, places and spaces. The focus on materiality entangled in social practices enables us to conceptualize rurality as a feature of the 'wider' world that is material and visible, and whose components can serve as stabilizing 'anchors' for social practices, such as rural entrepreneurship. Finally, the material dimension distinguishes rural places from each other, such as horse farm landscapes, forested landscapes, agricultural landscapes across Europe, etc. This is helpful in that it incorporates and recognizes specific yet heterogeneity of spaces and places that are commonly referred to as rural.

2.1.3. Time and space of practices

The various activities that compose any practice are spatially-temporally dispersed. Each activity takes place somewhere in objective space at some point in, or over some duration of, objective time, but these activities do not need to take place all at the same time or all at the same place, to be recognized as a practice. The practice of selling legume coffee or Arab cheese for examples stretches

over space and time, entangling urban coffee shops, and Arab food stores across Europe with the legume plants and dairy farms in the rural, where the food is produced. Hence, the activities that compose practices, and thus rural entrepreneurship and/or rural contexts, are *inherently* spatially-temporally dispersed.

On the other hand, rural landscapes in their material composition are temporalspatial phenomena that figure into practices themselves, through what Schatzki (2011) calls timespaces. Timespaces are 'the world around in its pertinence to and involvement in what people do', taking the form of an array of places and paths. A place is a place to do an activity (which compose a practice), and a path is a path for getting from A to B. Places and paths are anchored at relatively stable material objects, like fields, buildings, trails, and roads, though the characteristics of places and paths vary widely relative to different practices and in relation to different forms of rural landscapes. And yet, all places and paths arise from and used by people contingently pursuing practices; thus, it is from within practices that places and paths are organized by people into settings, locales, and regions as it suits their practical purposes. Places and paths of the rural landscape are anchored to different subsets of relatively stable material objects, which are not only components of activity, but give meaning to the doings and sayings of a practice, while simultaneously providing meaning to other material entities in the landscape. Specifically, anchors of paths and places can be artefacts formed by past human activity (e.g. barns, buildings, roads) and non-human elements (e.g. trees, legume plants and valleys, mountains, rivers).

Finally, the temporalspatial nature of activities and thus practices are also social. They are social because the timespaces of different people's activities interweave within and between practices and the material arrangements. The interwovenness of the timespaces of different people's activities consists in the existence of common, shared, and orchestrated elements. For example, a marketplace is anchored for other rural entrepreneurs, farmers, cooperatives and buyers alike because this is enjoined in their practices.

2.1.4. Constellations of practice-material bundles

Finally, bundles of practices and material arrangements link to form ever wider constellations. How these constellations of practices unfold across time and space, linking individual action and societal structures, is the 'basic domain of study of the social sciences' (Giddens 1984, 2). For Schatzki, social life is human coexistence, which is, in turn, the hanging-together of different people's lives. The hanging together of human lives inherently transpires as part of nexus of practices. The total plenum formed by this mesh of linked practices is the overall site where social life transpires. Rural contexts are a hanging-together of human lives that happen through interlinked practices and arrangements. Rural contexts thus are phenomena that share the same basic ingredients – practices, arrangements, and relations among them. The difference between, for example, small social phenomena such as individual food-businesses and large social phenomena such as rural economies is the difference between less and more spatially (and temporally) expansive practice and material arrangements or aspects thereof.

3. The heterogeneity of rural entrepreneurship

In the sections to follow, we will argue how the theoretical concept laid out above can help us to better understand the relations between rural entrepreneurship and rural context as time- and place- specific, co-constitutive processes. Therefore, we present examples of various forms of rural entrepreneurship in different rural settings.

We use three vignettes taken from case-studies from a rural development scheme in Germany, which was conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture (2015–2019) to foster social infrastructures, innovation and economic development in addition to the EU's rural development schemes. 15 rural counties in Germany received around 1.5 million each to invest in innovative solutions for economic

growth and social infrastructures (Küpper et al. 2018, 2021; Tuitjer, Bergholz, and Küpper 2022). Among the innovative solutions funded in the 15 counties were many entrepreneurial approaches in the area of food, agriculture and tourism. The vignettes portray three of these approaches towards more sustainable agriculture, food production and entrepreneurship.

Vignettes are a common approach in entrepreneurship studies used to give short but illustrative insights to help ground theoretical argumentation (e.g. Gregori 2024; Hunt et al. 2021; Melin, Gaddefors, and Ferguson 2022). The vignettes are not intended as an empirical section in this paper, but simply used to get a better impression of what we have in mind when we talk about heterogeneous rural places and development processes. Our vignettes presented below are the summary of three different case-studies on sustainable rural development, sketching the development of each business in relation to a regionally specific rurality. Rural structures in Germany differ regionally with large industrial agriculture in the north (east and partly west) (Vignette 1), extraction and mining in rural border regions of the south-west and east (Vignette 2), and small-scale family farming in central and southern Germany (east and west) (Vignette 3). Although all regions are 'rural' and all three vignettes portray small-scale food production, the relations which link the entrepreneurial activities to their rural context look quite different. Most importantly, the vignettes help us to portray rural contexts and entrepreneurship as relations between practice-arrangement bundles, as we detail later.

3.1. Vignette 1

A man from Syria flees the civil war and eventually is allocated to a rural rust-belt area in the south-west of Germany by the Ministry of Migration. There is a dairy farm nearby and he now regularly fetches raw milk to produce cheese, as he would have done back home in Syria. Serendipity comes into play as the heir of this dairy farm is looking for a way to improve the farm's revenues. Together, they start producing and selling Arab cheese and eventually become key players in the European ethnic food market, improve the dairy farm's profitability and offer employment to other displaced people from the Middle East. Along the way, they overcome some hurdles that the rural material context poses for them: in comparison to Syrian pastures, the cows in Germany graze on richer grass and produce fatter milk, which negatively impacts longevity and taste of the Syrian cheese. Our entrepreneurs decide to use the surplus milk fat to produce Ghee, which they can also sell via the ethnic food stores. With innovative niche products, they were able to develop a profitable, entrepreneurial farm business outside of the 'grow or give way' trajectory, implicit in the growth-oriented common agricultural policy (CAP) of the European Union which incentivizes dairy farms to grow in terms of cows and milk output, to produce more milk for export while prices are going down. Turning to cheese production, dairy farmers are able to free themselves from the economic constraints imposed by the perishability of milk and can increase the vertical range of manufacture on their own farm to become less dependent on dairies and transport companies.

3.2. Vignette 2

Another food entrepreneur from our case studies is an urbanite coffee-lover stressed out from her job in hospitality. She decides to settle down in the hinterlands of the touristic rural coast of Germany for health reasons and to start a coffee roastery. For the planet's sake she starts roasting legume alternatives which grow on the plots of land nearby so she minimizes the carbon footprint of her 'coffee'. This business decision integrates her into a strong local network of other small-scale food producers, linked by the supplementary use of each other's produce and machinery and hold together through a firm belief in the ecological transition of food and agriculture. For example, some might use the coffee roasting machine to roast the grains for Whiskey, while a small farm plants the legume for the coffee as a soil-improving intercrop. The legume plant, bright and blue, now covers the fields through which the tourists ride their bikes on their day trips from one food-

factory to the next. Step by step, the group of craft-food producers shape their rural context in quite a physical way through the planting of speciality crops such as the legume and through the installation of small 'vitreous factories'. Furthermore, they set up weekly markets in small towns, previously dominated by discounter-supermarkets. This way, they partly shape the face of this rural area characterizes by large and intensified crop production and create spaces for tourism.

3.3. Vignette 3

In yet another rural area in the geographical heart of Germany, a group of families diversifies their small farms' production and come up with new ways of marketing in order to become independent from supermarkets. They start with niche-marketing of goat cheese, raise the farms' profitability and obtain government funding so that their historical farm buildings can be restored. Driven by the wish to conserve family-farming and vital public life in villages (and funded by EU money), they step-by-step rebuild the farm buildings into event halls, restaurants, and food-hubs with logistics centre. A brewery, a bakery, a cheese factory, and a soup kitchen selling processed foods are founded. They use the old farm buildings to create storage and cooling facilities for the fresh foods produced on the small farms and step-by-step they also manage to set up an effective system of collective cultivation planning to make sure the food hub can provide what is required by the customers on a reliable basis and in the right quantities. This group of small farmers as well manages to increase the vertical range of manufacture by processing left over and blemished food. Eventually, the small village caters the nearby university towns and the entire federal states' public schools and hospitals with fresh, organic and local foods and create a new development path for the village.

3.4. Redefining the ontology: rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts as practice-arrangement bundles

Building from practice theories, we argue that both rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts occur through or as various bundles of practices and material arrangements. Rural entrepreneurship exists as a nexus of practices (including, business practices such as customer acquisition, sales, accounting, etc. and non-business practices such as cheese-making, beer-making, coffee-roasting, etc.) and material arrangements (including, cows, milk, barns, roads, warehouses, pots, roasters, and other technologies, etc.). These bundles exist as part of a larger constellation, hence rural entrepreneurship is one aspect of the daily reproduction of rural contexts, while the rural context includes rural entrepreneurial as well as other bundles that are involved in any other particular instance of rural life, such as religious, entertainment, or educational practices and associated material arrangements. The total plenum formed by this mesh of linked practice-arrangement bundles is what is called 'rurality' and is the context related to rural entrepreneurship.

For example (Vignette 3), the step-by-step activities of the farming families to renovate and rebuild farm buildings into event halls, restaurants, and food-hubs with logistics centre happen through and form practice-arrangement bundles. The practices are normatively organized by practical knowledge (how to renovate and rebuild) and general understandings (values and visions such as conserving rural family-farming and public life in villages) and shared intended outcomes (profitability or sustainability, e.g.). Within the bundle, the practice of renovation is inseparably linked to existing materiality (the given structure of the historical farm complex) and new material arrangements (the components of a food-hub) around which new practices will span. These practice-material bundles happen in objective times and spaces, as well as intersecting timespaces. The bundles emerge over time and space, and may or may not persist in relation to other pre-existing bundles, such as transportation bundles, education bundles, entertainment bundles, etc. and/or may engender the dissolution of competing bundles, such as, other food-hubs, or former dairy farming practices etc., all of which may have consequential implications for regional development. Accordingly, rural entrepreneurs and rural entrepreneurship are not merely embedded in a static

and defined rural context, but act amid various, complex and unfolding practices and arrangements, who shape and are shaped by the features of practice-material arrangements that define the rural context. This reconceptualization helps us reset the parameters of rural entrepreneurship as *the emergence, organization and persistence of practice-arrangement bundles amid larger constellations of bundles that constitute the rural*.

3.5. Theorizing the relations between rural entrepreneurship and rural context

While the idea of rural entrepreneurship ‘transpires as part of practice-arrangement bundles’ (Schatzki 2017, 26) may seem trivial at first, it holds the insight that we cannot know what matters to rural entrepreneurial activities prior to understanding the constellation of bundles of which it is a part. Moreover, as bundles are open-ended, they structure rural entrepreneurial activities but not deterministically. For example, many other bundles of the same rural context are irrelevant to practices of the entrepreneurs. Thus, we argue that besides *causality*, there are three main ways in which practices may relate: *prefiguration, constitution, and intelligibility*.

3.5.1. Causal relations

Firstly, rural entrepreneurship may have causal relations with rural context given that certain bundles emerging through rural entrepreneurship can materially cause changes to the broader world of bundles and constellations. For example, consider Vignette 1 in which the local dairy farmer and a refugee fleeing Syria team up to start a business selling Arab cheese. By engaging in their activities, they can have causal relations with the rural context in many ways; for instance, the nutrient composition of the grass the cows feed on requires (causes) a special treatment of the milk to remove excess milk fat, or opening up an Arab cheese manufacture causes other displaced persons to apply for a job with this venture. In the same vein, practice-arrangement bundles making up the rural context can causally induce an act by a rural entrepreneur, such as in Vignette 2 when buying a roasting machine is the reason why a neighbouring farmer comes by to roast his wheat for whisky. In sum, there is a causal and direct relation between two instances where the one would not have happened without the other.

3.5.2. Prefigurative relations

Secondly, rural entrepreneurship may be prefigured, but not determined, as part of the rural context. The practice-arrangement bundles of rural contexts can make a difference in the present that matters for a nascent future of rural entrepreneurship by not only enabling or constraining them, but making these activities more/less expensive, nobler/baser, more/less time-consuming, etc. In this sense, the bundles making up a rural context ubiquitously prefigure rural entrepreneurship. For instance, in Vignette 2, the coffee roaster decides to grow legume for ecological reasons. The specific quality of the soil in this region however enables legumes to grow pretty well and indeed there was a legume-growing tradition in this region our entrepreneur was unaware of. Consider that the non-human agency of the soil and the legume are essential for legume cultivation and have helped constitute legume growing practices in this region for centuries. Thus, the physical dimension of this very rurality prefigures what is not possible, but viable to plant. Moreover, existing practice-arrangement bundles of e.g. transport and communications (or the lack thereof) in rural areas, ubiquitously prefigure the creation, perpetuation (or dissolution) of bundles of rural entrepreneurship.

3.5.3. Constitutive relations

The third way in which rural entrepreneurship may exist in relation to the rural context is through constitutive relations. The rural context as a constellation of practice-arrangement bundles can constitute rural entrepreneurship bundles when they are either essential to them or pervasively involved with them over a swath of space-time. Bundles matter because they constitute people’s,

including entrepreneurs', lifeworlds in which they may form experiences and act. In other words, elements of timespaces of practices – ends, purposes, motivations, places, paths – can constitute rural entrepreneurship when they act for the same ends, purposes, or motivations, or at the same places and paths anchored at the same or similar material entities. For example, in Vignette 1, the rural entrepreneurs may have their selling of Arab cheese constituted in part by innovative restaurateurs who are looking for novel products, or by the presence of a long-standing market for cheese in a nearby city. Conversely, rural entrepreneurship practices may constitute new practice-material bundles which means they create timespace relations and/or new normative organization of activities that would not exist were it not for their particular practices. For example, in Vignette 2, the legume coffee company plants fields of bright blue legume plant which both impact on biodiversity and on the region's attractiveness to tourists. Taken together, the uniqueness of interwoven timespaces is an essential way in which particular bundles that are constitutive of both rural context and rural entrepreneurship relate to each other.

3.5.4. Intelligibility relations

The fourth way in which rural entrepreneurship exists in relation to the rural context is through intelligibility. Intelligibility is the quality of being that makes it possible to understand another, and is facilitated by shared, embodied practical understandings. The mental world of people involved in producing rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts are not representational-causal representation, at their root, but rather intelligibility-articulating set forth by participating in various practices. As we mentioned already, to enact the various basic acts that compose a practice, people use and reproduce practical understandings that is distributed among different bodies but remains, for the most part, consciously unacknowledged. The rural entrepreneurs making Arab cheese in Vignette 1, for instance, carry out activities that compose bundles, which form elements of rural entrepreneurship and rural contexts by drawing on taken-for-granted practical understandings that are situated and shared to the bundles in question (hence, also shared among groups of people through community of practice). As the rural entrepreneurs pass through their days, they proceed sensitive to the actions and interests of others, technologies and objects, places and paths that are anchored in the material arrangements amid which they act. Likewise, stakeholders may share intelligibility about the actions and interests of others, technologies and objects, places and paths with the rural entrepreneur. Because bundles of the rural context have meanings for the people who carry them out, including nascent rural entrepreneurs, they may share thoughts about (the past and future) of policies, people, objects and technologies in various ways as they engage in activities, which are shared among other interested groups.

4. Theoretical contribution and implications

How does a practice perspective on rural entrepreneurship benefit our understanding of contextualized entrepreneurial agency vis-à-vis a rural context? We argue that an as-practice approach to rural entrepreneurship and rural context alters our understanding of what context actually is (4.1) and how it relates to human agency (4.2). This leads to implications for further research as well as for practioneers (4.3) in rural development (4.4).

4.1. Revising the role of 'context' in rural entrepreneurship

Rural entrepreneurship literature still mostly treats rural context as 'out there', i.e. as an entity of its own, independent from entrepreneurial agency (Welter and Baker 2021, 1155), yet having the capacity to influence it. While rural entrepreneurship literature has made gains by providing sound criticism of the ways in which scholars and others preconceive stereotypical notions of rural entrepreneurship (Gaddefors and Anderson 2019; Gashi Nulleshi and Tillmar 2022; Hunt et al. 2021) there has been less progress on proposing alternatives to preconceptions.

Regarding for example ‘typical’ rural features such as low population density, natural beauty or long travelling distances, we still lack a clear understanding of how these possible rural dimensions come to matter in the everyday lives of rural entrepreneurs (D. Dodd et al. 2018; van Erkelens et al. 2024; Wigren-Kristoferson et al. 2022). Rural entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship research more broadly, has not ‘conceptualize[d] adequately ... [the] interactions between different elements or levels of context, or the role of the entrepreneurs in enacting contexts or defining the situations they face in various ways’ (Baker and Welter 2020, 18–19).

The practice approach offers an inroad by marrying an objective perspective on ‘elements’ of rural context with the subjective ‘enactment’ of context. On the one hand, positivist and functionalist-oriented scholars argue that what defines and shapes rural entrepreneurship is the objective features of contexts, such as being ‘peripheral’ or ‘marginal’ (Grabher 2018; Shearmur 2017) within which an entrepreneurial activity is embedded (Clausen 2020; Tödtling and Trippl 2005). These objective features, such as climate, population density, infrastructure, etc., matter greatly for (the lack of) entrepreneurship in rural contexts, and serve to explain the different forms and successes of rural ventures. On other hand, other scholars are critical of the positivist-functionalist position towards rurality as it ignores the heterogeneity of people and experiences within these contexts. Rural entrepreneurship is, to these scholars, rather a cultural phenomenon, in which what matters is how people (typically entrepreneurs) make sense of their context, which mostly includes non-tangible factors, such as discourses, ideas, imaginaries and narrations as well as other normative features of the environment that positivist-functionalist scholars overlook (Cloe 1997; Haugen and Kjetil Lysgård 2006; Redhead and Bika 2022). This approach is in line with social constructivism, that is, how people think about their advantageous or disadvantageous context and opportunities for action, which is argued to explain their (lack of) entrepreneurial behaviour. Positivist-functionalist scholars are, in turn, critical of these views as they downplay the objective differences in physical environments and the real material consequences rural entrepreneurship can have for regional ecology and economy.

Alternatively, our practice theory perspective contributes to this discussion by providing an integration of these two poles. We argue that rural contexts (and rural entrepreneurship as well) are both spatial-temporal and social-material phenomena. Because practice-arrangement bundles are the fabric of both rural context and rural entrepreneurship, both the normative organization (representing the intangible) as well as bodies, actions and material arrangements (representing the tangible) matter for (re-)producing rural contexts, but neither are pre-determining (Gherardi 2017). Furthermore, rural context exists as bundles of human activities and agency entangled with agentic matter such as animals, machines or roads and distance (Muñoz and Hernández 2024; Tuitjer 2022). Rurality matters to the entrepreneur not just because of structural dimensions developed by scholars, but through their experiences of everyday life; they experience rurality through the movements of body, objects and technologies in their temporal and spatial dimensions, including, physical and affective dimensions such as smell, light, vastness. Thus, rural context is everything all at once, i.e. the plenum of spatial, temporal, social and material dimensions of their practical world which co-exist and co-evolve entangled in entrepreneurial practices.

4.2. Revising causality and entrepreneurial agency vis-a-vis ‘context’

To acknowledge the ontological sameness of rural context and rural entrepreneurship as bundles of tangible and intangible dimensions alters our understanding of causality and agency. This becomes even more clear when we contrast an as-practice-approach with embeddedness theory, widely used in rural entrepreneurship research to explain the situation of rural entrepreneurs and their behaviour in relation to spatial and social features of the rural (Bosworth and Atterton 2012; Dubois 2016; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015; Steiner and Atterton 2014).

Although contemporary entrepreneurship scholarship increasingly views embeddedness as a multi-dimensional, fragmented, dynamic, and thus processual, phenomenon (Korsgaard et al.

2022; Wigren-Kristoferson et al. 2019), embeddedness is still mostly seen as the *causal* mechanism making entrepreneurial success (or failure) the result of contextual conditions. *Because* nascent entrepreneurs have access to specific resource through embeddedness, they can overcome the liability of newness, for example (Wigren-Kristoferson et al. 2022). Thus, most empirical research takes successful (or failed) entrepreneurship and then explains the situation as a causal effect of relations to context. Although approaches such as mixed-embeddedness (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman, Rusinovic, and Yeboah 2016) describe the entrepreneurial position embedded in both a given contextual opportunity structure and within the entrepreneur's resource realm – similar to the individual-opportunity nexus (Shane Scott 2003) – and thus rightfully account for factors which are well beyond the individual's power or scope, we believe that the entrepreneur's agency in relation to context is not sufficiently understood in embeddedness theory.

On the one hand, entrepreneurial agency is often overrated. While it is important to account for the entrepreneurial 'doing' of context (Baker and Welter 2020), focusing solely on the entrepreneur and her activities runs the risk of reiterating the 'atomized' (Granovetter 1985) entrepreneur of rational choice theory. While certainly entrepreneurial activities impact on local context, this impact needs not be rational nor even intentional, and when it is intentional, it might in the end not be *causal* for entrepreneurial success. Non-human agency, collective agency and last, not least serendipity are forces which shape entrepreneurial-contextual relations and entrepreneurial success and are in danger to be overlooked.

On the other hand, entrepreneurial agency and the ability to shape context tend to be underestimated in embeddedness theory. Context, just as 'opportunities', are not given a priori (Berglund and Dimov 2023) but can only be understood from within entrepreneurial engagements. Thus, entrepreneurial agency vis-à-vis context might be much stronger, once we recognize the many contextual dimensions entangled in entrepreneurial practices and the far-flung mesh of these contextual dimensions which might be impacted by just a small entrepreneurial decision, for example the decision to plant legume from Vignette 2.

Precisely because we cannot assume that specific dimensions of the rural context are the same everywhere, then we cannot say how, where and when structural dimensions are directly experienced, reproduced by or shaping rural entrepreneurship a priori. Especially, we cannot assume their causal impact on entrepreneurial success or failure from the outside. As Redhead and Bika (2022) show, for example, there is a heterogeneity in the meaning – and in the opportunity structures – of a rural place according to the interpretations of the entrepreneur. Based on a comparative analysis of the sense-giving processes of in-migrating and locally bound entrepreneurs in a depleted region in England, they show how business strategies are closely linked to different perceptions of the place as either 'depleted' or 'with development potential'. Although both groups of entrepreneurs are 'embedded' within the same rural context, this process is guided by different meanings ascribed to place and subjective interpretations of belonging. By asking *how* different entrepreneurs relate differently to the same macro-structural context of remoteness and depletions, the authors are able to show that rural entrepreneurship is *a part of* the context in which it resides. In the same vein, practice theories are able to account for context from the insider entrepreneur's point of view (Wigren-Kristoferson et al. 2022).

4.3. Implications for future research

We contend that looking more closely into the daily life of diverse people who respond, adapt and perpetuate the rural context is one way to arrive at both a better understanding and more informed rural entrepreneurship theory. Yet, we recognize our proposal also creates a problem at first glance. There are a staggering array of diverse and unique rural landscapes and activities that compose nexuses of practices of rural social life, each organized with different normative organization amid diverse material arrangements – but somehow rural entrepreneurship researchers need to determine which features of them are relevant for inclusion in the analytic account to answer a research question. On what grounds should research include or exclude different elements of the landscape

and practices in analyses? The first step is to grasp what people actually do and then follow threads to investigate the reasons and motivations for why people do what they do and the states of affairs from within which they proceed as they do (Nicolini 2017). This sentiment echoes Gaddefors and Anderson (2019) that researchers should prioritize ‘entrepreneurial engagements [within contextual dimensions]’ to find out which aspects of rural context are relevant from the first-person point of view of the entrepreneurs and people they come into contact with. Practices are not abstract concepts useful only to scholars, they are of consequence for practitioners and, as such, they focus their attention and efforts on them. Scholars should be guided in empirical description and explanation of events or outcomes by the way practitioners, including not only entrepreneurs but families, clients, suppliers, investors, etc., demonstrably and accountably orient their conduct towards some (but not all) material features of the landscapes they inhabit. Because practices are made up of activities that are at once socio-material, dispersed over time and space (as well as having their own timespaces) and include tacit normative organization and understanding, scholars need to begin by prioritizing multi-sited observations of those activities and elements that practitioners utilize, invoke, or index in producing and coordinating action.

Consequently, using our framework, scholars can ask new research question, such as how and why different (aspects of) rural places and rural social life explain rural entrepreneurship practices, and how does rural entrepreneurship practices change (the meaning of) rural places and rural social life? Such insights would delve deeper into the heterogeneity of intersections of human and non-human agencies, sociomaterial arrangements and teleoaffective/normative structures such as norms and desires. Additionally, even blurry phenomena such as ‘rurality’, ‘embeddedness’ or even ‘something in the air’ such as Marshallian externalities of agglomerations can be pinned to practices and material arrangements and can thus be made accessible for empirical research. Regional economics and economic geography in general could benefit from practice theory-informed empirical research to answer questions related to the ways in which practices and arrangements form ‘agglomerations’ or ‘clusters’.

4.4. Implications for practitioners

The nexuses of practices matter for the way certain rural places are (envisioned to be) developed, the unfolding socio-economic history of rural communities, and the lived experience of people living within them. For example, many rural communities have experienced mass outmigration towards urban areas, changing environmental laws and regulations, and new arrivals who view the possibilities of ‘rural life’ differently. As a rural entrepreneur, being aware of and working with these unique historical, material and social aspects in the area will help make those vital connections necessary for integration of practices in the broader nexus.

Additionally, a more careful engagement with rural context as a combination of tangible and intangible dimensions of bundles will both lead to more nuanced views of rural-urban relations. Part of the ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) is caused by neglect of the physical-material living conditions in some rural areas and the again widening gaps between urban and rural places regarding every-day infrastructures, while public discourse about ‘left behind places’ is devaluing the many transformative activities taking place right there. These new or revived rural-urban cleavages will be exacerbated when the burden of climate change and the costs of its mitigation are not shared in a just manner and rural communities, for example, have to agree to the construction of wind farms to improve their precarious budgetary situation. A practice-perspective in the design of rural development policies could direct attention to the physical-material dimension of rural realities such as ‘dilapidated roads and bridges’ instead of ‘distance to centre’ and could thus get closer to rural people’s needs and wants.

Furthermore, engagement with rural context and rural entrepreneurship in these locales by way of understanding the nexus of practices and material arrangements will help to unpack the heterogeneity of rural places and individual development potential. Instead of a ‘one size fits all’ approach, truly place-based development strategies enable the local creation (not: ‘discovery’) of endogenous

resources and opportunities, and their valorization through integration into wide-ranging networks of production and consumption practices.

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