CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE AMONG RESIDENTS OF RURAL AREAS OF
VIRGINIA

by

Dakota Dougherty
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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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Bachelor of Arts
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ABSTRACT

CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE AMONG RESIDENTS OF RURAL AREAS OF
VIRGINIA

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This thesis is about rural Virginia and the perceptions of it among its residents. This

research is theoretically grounded in the sociological and geographical literature on place.

My approach to place follows the two main assertions of Gieryn (2000). First, that place

has three components: it is a "geographic location" (Gieryn 2000:464); it has "material

form" (Gieryn 2000:465); and it has an "investment with meaning and value" (Gieryn

2000:465). Second, place is an important area of sociological inquiry because while it is

constructed socially, it has real significance (Gieryn 2000). This research examines what

is important in rural Virginia residents' perceptions of the places in which they live

because as Gieryn (2000:465), informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465),

points out, perceptions are an important component of place meaning. To study this, I

conducted interviews with residents of rural Virginia. From this data, I find that both

physical and non-physical aspects of the places they live are important to residents. This

study contributes to the sociological understandings of place, which is important because place tends to be understudied in sociology (Morris 2012:33). This study is exploratory, and its main contribution is that it opens up important areas for potential research on place, including the effects of the changing built environment in the face of growth and development as well as further research on the complexity underlying the themes of the physical and non-physical environment in what makes places meaningful to the people who live in them.

CHAPTER ONE

While most people understand that places are different – Washington, D.C., for instance, is different from Columbus, Ohio – differences among places are not simply an interesting phenomenon; they have real consequences for people's lives (Bell 1992:66; Gieryn 2000; Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007; Morris 2012). For example, Morris (2012) finds that differences in the rural and urban place context influence how boys achieve masculinity, which in turn affects their relationship with school and perpetuates the gender gap in education.

As Cresswell (1996:3, 2015:7) has pointed out, place is a word we use often and in different ways, yet is weighty. It not only refers to geographic areas or locations, but can also have connotations of power, such as when it refers to a hierarchy (e.g. "she put me in my place" [Cresswell 2015:7])(Cresswell 1996, 2015).

Generations of sociologists have studied place differences. Louis Wirth (1938) and Georg Simmel (1971), for instance, both argued that cities affect how people live their lives. Early in the sociological study of rural places, rurality was conceptualized as both distinct from and an opposite of urban places, but by mid-twentieth century, this was questioned (Halfacree 1993:25). Thinking about places as located on a continuum of rural to urban gained popularity among some scholars, but others (Pahl 1966 as cited in Halfacree 1993:25; Dewey 1960 as cited in Halfacree 1993:25) questioned the usefulness

of a continuum at all in understanding place (Halfacree 1993:25). Some scholars today continue to question how rural places should be studied (Cloke 2006:20).

Imagery of rural communities among non-academics tends to fall into one of two categories, although both can coexist in people's minds (Haugen and Villa 2006; Rye 2006). One is consistently referred to as the rural idyll, or the idea that rural places are safe, close to nature, beautiful, community oriented, and peaceful (Haugen and Villa 2006; Rye 2006; Short 2006). The other is the rural as boring (Haugen and Villa 2006; Rye 2006) or even dangerous (Bell 1997).

Following Gieryn (2000:464-465), I conceptualize place as a geographic location that is meaningful to people. Clearly, rural Virginia is a physical geographic location. But what about the meaning component? Following Gieryn's (2000:465) statement regarding the third component of meaning, that everyday perceptions of place are a component of meaning, which is informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465), I look at the perceptions of the rural Virginia place context that the people who live in it hold.

I position my study similarly to how Rye (2006) positions his study of how rural Norwegian youth perceive the places in which they live. He works from the perspective that places are socially constructed, writing (2006:409):

…the research focus seems to have shifted towards the processes underlying actors' constructions of the rural and the outcome of these processes. Rather than asking what rurality 'is' the pivotal question has become: how do actors socially construct their rurality?

I similarly center perceptions of the rural places in which participants live. My study is different from Rye's (2006) in that I use solely qualitative methods, my participants are all adults, I study only the unique and specific place context of rural Virginia, and the specifics of my research question are different. But like Rye (2006), I too study perceptions of rural place by the people who live in it.

Statement of Problem

This research takes place in rural Virginia, which has a few key characteristics: it is on the east coast of the US; it is in the southern US; and it is near several major cities, including Richmond and Washington DC, with the latter especially standing out as a powerful and wealthy city.

There is a substantial scholarly history of trying to understand what "rural" and "place" means. My study is located at the intersection between these, and attempts to illuminate greater understanding of how places – in my study, the specific place of rural areas of Virginia – become meaningful. My study is exploratory, but suggests that the physical and non-physical aspects of the rural Virginia place context are important to this study's participants' perceptions of the place in which they live.

Statement of Purpose

The broad purpose of this study is to contribute to the sociological body of knowledge on place. The significance of place first became an interest for me after

moving from where I grew up in central Ohio to the Washington, D.C. metro area. I found that these two places were different, and wanted to further understand characters of place.

It is my goal as a researcher to contribute to a greater understanding of place without ascribing more privilege to one way of living over another. I am not trying to make the case that rural places are better or worse in any way than non-rural places nor are non-rural places better or worse in any way than rural places. Many people love their rural communities, just as many people love their urban communities. The following chapters will be organized as follows. Chapter two will contain a literature review in which I discuss how other scholars have discussed place. In chapter three I will discuss my methodology including sampling procedure and the interview guide, as well as some limitations. Chapter four will be comprised of the analysis of this data, in which I will discuss the themes that arose during the interview. Finally, chapter five contains discussion and conclusion. In that chapter I discuss limitations, future directions for research, and practice implications.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUALIZING PLACE

Although place seems like a common-sense word (Cresswell 2015:165), it has a long history in various disciplines including philosophy and geography (Cresswell 2015). In this research I draw predominantly from sociologist Thomas Gieryn's (2000) conceptualization of place, but there are many points of consistency with scholars in other disciplines as well (Agnew 1987 as cited in Cresswell 2015; Relph 1976), particularly geography.

I additionally follow Gieryn's (2000:465) distinction between place and space. He writes that space is more abstract than place, which is also argued by Tuan (1977:6 as cited in Cresswell 2015:15). Gieryn further explicates the difference between place and space, writing (2000:465):

> …place is not space—which is more properly conceived as abstract geometries (distance, direction, size, shape, volume) detached from material form and cultural interpretation (Hillier & Hanson 1984). Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out (de Certeau 1984, Harvey 1996; for contrasting definitions: Lefebvre 1991). Put positively, place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations.

Gieryn's (2000) conceptualization of place has three parts: it is a "geographic location" (2000:464); it has "material form" (2000:465); and it has an "investment with meaning" (2000:465). I will discuss each in more detail in the following sections.

Geographic Location

The first main component of place as conceptualized by Gieryn is that it is a "geographic location," (2000:464) consistent with political geographer John Agnew's (1987 as cited in Cresswell 2015:12) point that it is a "location." Ultimately, they can be made into points on a map and identified with coordinates (Cresswell 2015:13). This is a more straightforward piece of the rural Virginia place.

Material Form

Gieryn's second main component of place is that it has a "material form," (Gieryn 2000:465). He further elaborates, writing, "Place has physicality. Whether built or just come upon, artificial or natural, streets and doors or rocks and trees, place is stuff. It is a compilation of things or objects at some particular spot in the universe" (Gieryn 2000:465). This is also consistent with Agnew's assertion that place has a "locale" (1987 as cited in Cresswell 2015:12). Cresswell explains, "By 'locale' Agnew means the material setting for social relations – the actual shape of place within which people conduct their lives as individuals" (Cresswell 2015:13-14). Relph (1976), too, emphasizes the importance of the physical environment to place. Because the built and natural environments were important to the participants in my study, I will now discuss these two aspects of the "material form" (Gieryn 2000:465) of place.

The built environment does not arise without human influence. Yet narratives about a community and the built environment mutually shape each other (Bridger 1996). Buildings are not benign pieces of landscape that simply fulfill needed functions – they are both shaped by, and shapers of, the social structure and human interaction (Gieryn 2002:61). As Gieryn explains, "Buildings emplace sociations and practices" (Gieryn 2002:61). Geographer Relph (1976), citing Levi-Strauss's (1967:132-133) example of a village which had a built environment arranged in rings, writes (Relph 1976:13):

> The spatial organization of the village has in fact been made to unselfconsciously to correspond with a whole variety of social beliefs and practices; each member of the culture is aware of the significance of the various spatial elements and responds to them accordingly.

Billig's (2005) study, although focused on urban areas, found that the physical environment of her area of study influenced the participants' sense of place. This is consistent with Relph's (1976:13) idea that the built environment is not insignificant and in fact is both a result of and an influencer on human life. I note that this is in contrast to Kyle and Chick's (2007) general finding that the participants of their study (attendees of a fair) emphasized social relationships over physical environment in their construction of meaning of the fairgrounds.

The natural environment is important to constructing place as well. As several scholars of rural place (Rye 2006; Short 2006) have shown, the natural environment plays

an important role in the construction of the rural idyll, which is an important narrative that contributes to perceptions of rural place. This will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Meaning

The third aspect of place, according to Gieryn (2000:465) is meaning. Gieryn (2000:465) explains, drawing from Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465):

> Without naming (on toponyms: Feld & Basso 1996) identification, or representation, by ordinary people, a place is not a place. Places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, and imagined (Soja 1996)

Thus place is not just a location (Gieryn 2000; Cresswell 2015; Relph 1976); it is constructed daily by "ordinary people" (Gieryn 2000:465). Relph (1976) also centers meaning as a key component of places. Various scholars have explored place meaning specifically, and there is often overlap between place meaning and physical features. Gustafson (2001), for instance, finds that the physical environment (along with other factors) is important to meaning construction. Manzo (2005) likewise centers meaning in her study comprised on interviews of New York City residents and finds that everyday places are important for constructing meaning.

CONCEPTUALIZING RURAL PLACE

This study centers rural residents' own perceptions of their areas. As Rye (2006:410) notes of his own study, the purpose of this study is not to define rural. However, I discuss the sociological conceptualization of rural place so as to address the discourse of the discipline in which this study is situated. Equally importantly, the academic and lay discourses do not always exist in entirely separate vacuums (Bell 1992); for example, the understandings of rural that were present in early academic literature are still relevant to the non-academics in Bell's (1992) study. Therefore, because this qualitative research centers the participants' own lives and understandings, given that the goal is to understand how people make sense of their own places, it is important to discuss these early sociological understandings of rural.

Late 19th and Early to Mid 20th Century Conceptualizations of Rural Places

I begin by discussing early sociologists' conceptualization of rural and urban, which centered around the rural-urban dichotomy (Halfacree 1993:25). Halfacree (1993:24-26) considers these early conceptualizations as a type of "socio-cultural" definition, which, "concentrates on highlighting the extent to which people's sociocultural characteristics vary with the type of environment in which they live. In short, socio-cultural definitions of the rural assume that population density affects behavior and attitudes" (1993:24-25). While more prevalent in early sociological thought on place, Cloke (2006:20) sees these early conceptualizations and thoughts about the rural-urban dichotomy as subtly influencing today's functional-concept approaches to defining rurality (2006:20).

In the following section I will discuss one of the well-known and early

sociological ways of approaching place: Gesellshaft and Gemeinshaft, which certainly

reflects both Halfacree's (1993:24-25) and Cloke and Park's (1984 as cited in Cloke

2006:20) ideas that there are certain ways of living and acting that accompany different

kinds of places. I will then look briefly at Wirth's (1938) "Urbanism as a Way of Life"

and Simmel's (1971) "Metropolis and Mental Life" along with the rural-urban continuum

because, while these are focused on urban areas, they illustrate the early ideas about how

place matters.

The Rural-urban Dichotomy and Continuum

Early sociologists tended to think of a rural-urban dichotomy, in which rural and

urban are very different (Bell 1992:65). Tonnies's (1957) conceptualization of

Gesellshaft and Gemeinschaft, which are often respectively translated as "society" and

"community" (Cloke 2006:20), is a well-known early instance an attempt at trying to

capture the meanings of different types of communities (Halfacree 1993:25). Gesellshaft

and Gemeinschaft were influential in the idea of the rural-urban dichotomy (Cloke

2006:20). The rural-urban dichotomy and continuum, however, became less popular

(Halfacree 1993:25). By the mid-20th century, sociologists such as Gans (1962 as cited in

Halfacree 1993:25) found that characteristics such as close community ties that were

typically associated with rural areas (Gemeinshaft) were also present in some places that

are typically associated with Gesellshaft (urban places), which challenged the idea that

rural and urban places are completely different (Halfacree 1993:25).

However, the influence of the rural-urban dichotomy remained well into the 20th century (Halfacree 1993:25). One of the most influential sociological writings along these lines was Louis Wirth's famous "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938), in which he defines cities as, "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals" (Wirth 1938:2) and further argued that these demographic qualities of cities fostered certain kinds of behavior and social relationships (Wirth 1938). Simmel, too, in his "Metropolis and Mental Life" (1971) asserted that characteristics of a city affects the people who live in it. Wirth's (1938) "Urbanism as a Way of Life," and Simmel's (1971) "Metropolis and Mental Life" both reflect the idea that the characteristics of the place a person lives affects how they act or think, and that different social characteristics accompany different types of places (Halfacree 1993:25).

However, as mentioned, research began to complicate the idea that the rural and urban were opposites, and the idea of a continuum instead of a dichotomy began to surface, although scholars still found a continuum insufficient to understand places and communities (Halfacree 1993:25). Pahl (1966) is often recognized for his work surrounding dichotomy and continuum, which he influentially argued was not useful (Halfacree 1993:25). However, he was neither the first nor only scholar to question and work against the dichotomy and continuum, and he acknowledges the contributions of Dewy (1960), Benet (1963) and Hauser (1965) (Pahl 1966:299-300). That said, the rural-urban continuum has not gone away: as mentioned, the rural-urban continuum is still present in some academic or official definitions of rural (Cloke 2006:20) and is also relevant in non-academic discourse (Bell 1992).

Modern Sociological Conceptualizations of Rural Place

Today scholars take a variety of approaches to conceptualizing rural places, and as Halfacree (1993:20) notes, the purpose of the research often has a significant influence on how the researcher defines "rural." Halfacree states that "socio-cultural definitions" (1993:24-26) (which he argues the aforementioned 19th to mid 20th century falls under [1993:25]) and "descriptive definitions" (1993:23-24) are two popular types of definitions, while Cloke points to "*functional* concepts," (2006:20) (emphasis in original) (which were discussed in a previous section), concepts based on political economy (2006:20), and concepts based on the "*social constructions*" (emphasis in original) of rural place (2006:21). However, in this research I center the perceptions of people who are not place scholars, due to their significance in constructing meaning, as Gieryn (2000:465) asserts, informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465). Therefore, I will now turn my attention to the literature that has focused on non-academic understandings of rural place.

Lay Understandings of Rural Places

As Gieryn (2000:465) notes, informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465), the perceptions of place that non-scholars hold is important in constructing place meaning. Following this, my study consists of interviews with residents of the rural place. In this section, I discuss what other scholars have found in studying everyday perceptions of rural place.

The Rural Idyll

The rural idyll is an idealized conception of rural places that typically paints rural places as safer, closer to nature, and with a tight-knit community (with the last being seen in a positive light) (Haugen and Villa 2006; Little and Austin 1996; Rye 2006; Short 2006). Nostalgia is also an important piece of the rural idyll (Bell 2006:151; Short 2006).

Today the idea of rural idyll continues to exist. Rye (2006), for instance, finds that the rural Norwegian high school students he surveyed said that their rural communities were closer to nature and tight knit, which are both components of the rural idyll. Francis likewise finds that early teen girls who live in rural places perceive their rural areas as safer than non-rural girls view their own, non-rural areas (1999:340), which is consistent with the safety aspect of the rural idyll (Francis 1999).

Adults and parents subscribe to the idea of the rural idyll as well. Valentine (1997) found that parents were attracted to rural areas to raise their children because they wanted the closer-to-nature aspect (1997:139) and a close-knit community (which they also believed provided greater safety) (1997:144), and also because it would provide a "more innocent, less worldly, and purer experience of childhood" (1997:140) than an urban environment would provide (1997:140). The mothers in Little and Austin's (1996) study likewise report being attracted to the rural area they lived in for its closeness to nature, safety, friendly community, and the greater freedom they believed their children would have (1996:105).

Perceptions rural idyll has thus real effects on people's lives and choices. For example, it can potentially influence migration such as it did for the people in Valentine's

(1997) study of parents' perceptions of their rural place in England, Little and Austin's (1996) study of women in a rural area of England, and Van Dam, Heins, and Elbersen's (2002) study of perceptions of rural places by rural and urban residents in The Netherlands. Little and Austin (1996) additionally find that can influence women's lives and behavior once in the rural place. In Little and Austin's (1996) study, the women's decisions to move to their rural location, motivated by their perceptions of the rural idea, affected them economically in that they had difficulty finding work in the rural areas (1996:106) (they also felt obligated to be involved in their children's activities [1996:106]). At the same time, the women were not passively affected by the rural idyll; their actions and views actively constructed, maintained (and changed) the rural idyll (1996:107-109).

Yet the rural idyll is not without critics nor uncomplicated. Scholars (Haugen and Villa 2006; Rye 2006) have found that young people may especially see both positives and negatives of life in rural places. For the students of Rye's (2006) study, the rural idyll coexisted with what Rye (2006) calls the "rural dull," or the idea that rural areas have less to do. Haugen and Villa (2006) similarly find that young people in their study have ambivalent views of the rural places in which they live.

However, adult urban-to-rural migrants' views of their rural places are not necessarily one-dimensional either. The parents in Valentine's (1997) study find that their expectations of the rural idyll were not met entirely, as they were still worried about potential threats to their children's safety such as people they did not believe belonged in their idyllic rural place, and traffic (1997:141). Many parents therefore limited their

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children's independence and got them involved in formal activities instead of letting them take advantage of the natural environment (1997:143). There was a class aspect to this too since wealthy families of Valentine's study could purchase large tracts of land so that their children could safely have the idyllic childhood the parents had imagined (Valentine 1997:145-146).

Thus, researchers who have studied lay perceptions of rural (Little and Austin 1996; Rye 2006; Short 2006; Valentine 1997) have found that the rural idyll is popular, along with less positive ideas about the rural, such as that it is boring (Haugen and Villa Rye 2006). My study, like these others, focuses how everyday people construct the meaning of their rural Virginia place. My study is exploratory but makes a contribution to sociological knowledge because it focuses on the specific place context of rural Virginia, and opens up questions for future study.

CHAPTER THREE: DATA AND METHODS

To collect data for this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with residents of rural Virginia who were recruited through snowball sampling. In this section I will discuss the study design and the theoretical foundations underlying it.

I utilized qualitative methods because they are compatible with studies that focus on meaning (Schutt 2017:121; Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016:7-9), such as this one. Places and people's relations to them are complex, and qualitative methods allow the researcher to tune into the many aspects of their respondents' lives (Taylor, Bogden, and DeVault 2016:9) including place. Additionally, qualitative methods center the everyday (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016:9), and contextual factors (Schutt 2017:121), which are both important in understanding place construction since places are formed continuously in people's everyday lives (Relph 1976). Finally, qualitative methods go hand in hand with inductive reasoning (Schutt 2017:121; Taylor, Bogden, and DeVault 2016:8), which I adhere to because I did not go into the field with a hypothesis to test, but instead built my ideas from the data.

The specific qualitative methodology I used is semi-structured interviews which allowed me the flexibility to ask follow-up questions. A foundation of interviewing is the viewpoint that through the interview, the researcher can capture the participants' understandings of their lives (Weiss 1995:7-8). Of the various reasons researchers use

interviews in their research, two stand out for my research. First, interviews allow the researcher to account for the complexity of social life (Weiss 1995:10). Second, interviews allow us to hear how the observers understand various parts of their lives (Weiss 1995:10), providing great insight into aspects of participants' perceptions.

In a qualitative study, participants have two key characteristics: they are observers to internal and external events the interviewer would like to know about, and they should be experts in the area of knowledge the researcher is studying (Weiss 1995:17). Therefore, in order to answer my research question of how the place meaning of rural Virginia is constructed by its residents, it made sense to go directly to those who are best suited to tell me about their own understandings of those places: the residents themselves. My sample therefore consisted of adults who currently live in areas of Virginia that they consider rural. In recruited participants, I sampled for range (Small 2009). I did not make any exclusions based on characteristics such as gender, race, length of residence in their area, or occupation. Because I centered participants' perceptions of their own areas, I did not use any pre-conceived or standardized definitions of what a rural area of Virginia is to determine a person's eligibility for participation. Instead, I based their eligibility on their own perceptions of their areas as rural. I reached theoretical saturation (Small 2009) on the broad themes that arose, which are the importance of physical and non-physical aspects of place in participants' perceptions of their areas. However, this study was exploratory, and there was diversity within the specifics of these two broad themes.

I recruited participants using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling may result in selection bias (Schutt 2017:75). The participants in this study are diverse in terms of age,

length of residence, and proportion of their life spent in a rural area. However, they also share some characteristics, especially that they all identify as white, and they all either have at least a bachelor's degree or are in the process of completing one. Snowball sampling may limit the generalizability of a study (Schutt 2017:75). However, following Small (2009), I emphasize that although my empirical data found in rural Virginia may not translate to other places, my findings contribute to the sociological understanding of the construction of place meaning.

However, snowball sampling has some benefits. Most importantly for this study, snowball sampling offers the ability to reach difficult to reach populations (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). Because rural populations may be hard to reach for outsiders (Neal and Waters 2006), such as me, I used snowball sampling to overcome my outsider status and find participants. The first participant was introduced to me by a faculty member at George Mason University. In an effort to grow my snowball, I asked participants after the interview if they knew anyone who might be interested in participating, although I did not recruit any additional participants this way (participants were found through multiple contacts). In total, I conducted eleven interviews, which typically lasted thirty to sixty minutes and were conducted in-person, over the phone, or with FaceTime or Skype.

I had a recruitment phone script and a recruitment email which were approved by the IRB. A recruitment video and recruitment email were also shared with an introductory sociology course at a large Virginia university, and I obtained one participant through this recruitment method. At the time that I had this additional sampling strategy approved by the IRB, I also wrote a new recruitment email. One reason

was that I needed to specify in my recruitment email to the university students that participants needed to be both a current and permanent resident of a location in Virginia that they considered rural, since some students are likely permanent residents of urban and non-Virginia places. I also updated my informed consent form, which I used for all subsequent participants, to include that participants need to be a "permanent resident of an area of Virginia that you consider rural." I do not believe that these changes or differences affected my sample. At this time I additionally modified my recruitment email to include some information about myself (which was also in the university email), including why I am researching this topic ("I became interested in this topic after moving from central Ohio to the DC metro area and finding that the two places were different, which made me want to learn more about how the places people live affect how they understand and live out their lives").

In designing my interview schedule, I was guided in particular by Rubin and Rubin (2005, 2012). As they explain, the goal of interview is to find "the underlying ideas through which people understand and explain their world" (2005:52), and I designed my questions to do so. Qualitative methods allow for flexibility, and the semi-structured nature of my interview allowed me to ask follow up questions. Not every question on the interview guide was asked of every participant, although most were, and they were not always asked verbatim or in the same order. Question five was added after my first several interviews, and questions twelve through fourteen were only asked to the last two participants. I do not believe these differences influenced my finding that the physical and non-physical aspects of place are important to participants.

After greeting each other and going over informed consent, the next step I took in the interview was to ask them demographic questions. In my first interview I asked the demographic questions last, but this did not appear to affect the content of the interview compared to the other interviews. The demographic questionnaire is presented in the appendix along with the interview schedule. I often sensed some hesitation when I asked about the participant's income. For that reason, although the participants had been told during informed consent that "Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party," I usually reminded them when I got to this question that they only needed to answer if they felt comfortable answering. I phrased this in various ways, but I do not believe the phrasing impacted who answered the question and who did not. The majority of participants did answer that question.

After the demographic questionnaire, I began to the open-ended questions. The first question was asking them to introduce themselves, which I asked with slightly different wording for each different participants (for example, "so the first question I have is just will you tell me a little about yourself, if you'd just introduce yourself however you want to?" or "So my first … general interview question is… if you'd tell me about yourself or how do you identify yourself?"). I do not believe the slight differences affected how participants responded. I asked this very broad question in alignment with Rubin and Rubin's (2005:160) suggestion that the earlier questions are more broad. After

this question, for some interviews it was appropriate to ask follow-up questions.

Sometimes they brought up points earlier in the interview that I had planned to ask at later points. Thus, not every interview followed exactly the same pattern of questions. Additionally, I did not ask every interviewee every question for various reasons, including running out of time or my judgment that it would not have been a beneficial line of inquiry. However, most interviewees were asked most questions, with an emphasis on questions that were more directly centered on the place they lived (for example, "what do you like about living where you do now?" and "what do you like least about living where you do now?"). Additionally, even if an interviewee had alluded to a question that I had been planning to ask but had not yet, I would typically ask the question anyway but also acknowledge to them that I knew they had touched on it. Asking them the question again more directly was typically fruitful and yielded additional explanation that I would not have otherwise heard. At the end of the interview, I asked the participant if there were anything they would like to add that I had not asked.

Although not every question was asked of every participant and not in the same order, I will discuss each of my subsequent interview questions and why it was asked. Question two asked, "How long have you lived in this town?". For some later interviews, I modified the question slightly to ask "How long have you lived in this town? How long has your family lived in this town?" (these were asked separately), and also added question three. I made these changes because of the importance some previous interviewees had mentioned familial or generational length of residence as important. This decision is aligned with qualitative methodology's strength that it is flexible (Schutt

2017:107). Due to adding what became question three, in these later interviews I asked "if you were to describe your town to someone, how would you describe it?" as question four. Regardless of where it is placed, the purpose of this question is to try to obtain their perceptions of the place in which they live. I ask this question as a general question about the rural place that should be easy for the respondent to answer. At the same time, someone might describe where he or she lives to an outsider differently from what they actually think of it, which is why I ask question eleven: "What do you like about living here? What do you like least about living here?". This question was designed as a "compare-and-contrast" question as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005:161). Between this question and the previous one, I believe this helped me get a good picture of what they really thought about their communities, although it is impossible to know if they would answer this honestly, since I am an outsider. Question five was based on a question asked by Puddifoot (2003) and was focused on perceptions of the social aspects of community. Puddifoot's question was, "Thinking about the people who live in your area, how would you describe the social make-up of Durham city?" (2003:103). This was a question that was added later in the study and not asked of earlier participants.

Questions six and seven served different purposes depending on where the interviewee grew up. If he or she grew up in his or her current rural area, then it would provide me information on the area's change. However, I also gained useful insight from people who did not grow up in their current areas because they contrasted it with where they live now, similar to a "compare-and-contrast" question as discussed by Rubin and Rubin (2005:161). Question eight was designed to be what Rubin and Rubin (2005:160-

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161) call a "tour question." Question ten on the interview guide was, "What do you think it is like compared to (where you used to live, or other towns in general if the respondent has never lived anywhere else)?" Again, this is a contrast question (Rubin and Rubin 2005:161). Questions twelve and thirteen were originally asked by Eisenbach (2015:146) and fourteen through sixteen were originally asked by Handke (2012:105-107). They were added for the last two interviews, and are aligned with questions four, eight, nine, ten, and eleven, which ask about how the participant perceives his or her area. Questions seventeen and nineteen were designed to focus on both class and gender. Question eighteen was, "If your town were to have a town hall meeting, what issues would you bring up? What do you think can be done?". These questions were asked either together or separately. I designed this question as a modified version of the question posed to subjects in Fine and Weis's (1998) study, which Rubin and Rubin (2012:161) referenced. Fine and Weis's question was, "If President Clinton were to come to Buffalo, what kinds of things should be dealt with here, and what specifically would you like him to do about it?" (Fine and Weis 1998:29 as cited in Rubin and Rubin 2012:161). Both because I wanted to avoid an overly political question and because wanted to keep the focus on the interviewee's specific community, I modified the question to be in reference to a town hall. This measure is meant to find out what issues that concern them are. Questions twenty through twenty two were designed to focus on gender. Question twenty two was in particular designed based on Davis and Greenstein's (2009) assertion that ideas about gender and marriage are linked. Question twenty three was designed to focus on religious identity.

The sample for this study consists of eleven participants. They are all current residents of places in Virginia that they consider rural. I did not ask the name of the town or area they live in (although most told me anyway), and their eligibility was based on their own perceptions of their places.

Table 1 Pseudonyms

Name	Age	Gender	Additional notes
Alan	35-64	Male	Moved to current rural area as an adult
Barbara	Over 65	Female	Moved to current rural area as an adult
Jake	18-34	Male	Grew up in rural area of Virginia; currently lives in a different rural area in Virginia
James	35-64	Male	Grew up in current rural area
Sarah	35-64	Female	Moved to current rural area as an adult
John	35-64	Male	Moved to current rural area as an adult
Katie	18-34	Female	Grew up in current rural area
Larry	Over 65	Male	Moved to current rural area as an adult
Lisa	35-64	Female	Moved to current area as an adult
Andrew	18-35	Male	Grew up in current rural area
Walter	Over 65	Male	Moved to current area rural area as an adult

In the following chapter, I discuss the main themes that arose during these interviews, which were the importance of physical and non-physical aspects of their environments. I present what the participants told me, their emphasis on different aspects, and what the implications for this data are.

CHAPTER FOUR: FNDINGS

The analytical focus of this study is the place context of rural Virginia. I follow Gieryn's (2000) articulation of place as an entity with three features: a "geographic location" (Gieryn 2000:464), "material form" (Gieryn 2000:465) and "investment with meaning and value" (2000:465). Clearly rural Virginia is a physical place that is possible to locate on a map, and therefore it fulfills the requirement of being a geographic location with material form. But how does it become invested with meaning? In discussing meaning, Gieryn writes (2000:465), informed by Soja (1996, as cited in Gieryn 2000:465):

> Without naming (on toponyms: Feld & Basso 1996), identification, or representation, by ordinary people, a place is not a place. Places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, and imagined (Soja 1996).

How is the geographic location of rural Virginia perceived by the "ordinary people" (Gieryn 2000:465) who live there? What are the important components of their perceptions? Although my study is exploratory, two themes arise. One is the importance of the physical environment, or what Gieryn called the "material form" (2000:465)

(similar to what Angew called "locale" [1987 as cited in Cresswell 2015:12-14]).

Participants typically emphasized the built environment and the natural environment, although participants were diverse in the specifics of how they discussed these. The built and natural environments will both be discussed subsequently. The second important theme that arose was non-physical aspects of place. Although, again, the specifics were diverse, various kinds of non-physical relationships that existed in the rural places for the participants were regularly brought up.

First, I will discuss the physical environment. This study was exploratory, and there was great diversity in the specificities of how participants discussed the physical aspects of their rural places. Although every participant referenced the physical environment, they did so in different ways. I focus on two themes that began to emerge as far as the physical environment.

The first is the built environment, which was brought up in some way by all of the participants. When I asked participants to describe their towns, over half started by describing the built environment to me first. Of those who did, most specifically discussed the small size, or *lack*, of a built environment. When I asked John, for example, to describe his town, said, "wide spot in the road," and laughed before continuing, "very small town. We – you know – there's no um, no downtown…Very rural." Likewise, when I asked Katie how she would describe her town to someone, she replied, "I'd say it's in the middle of nowhere, it's very small." A minority of participants did not directly talk about the built environment or lack of built environment when I asked them to describe their towns, but they did reference it at other points during the interview, such as

when I asked what in their town had changed. In general, and in response to various questions, the majority of participants brought up some kind of growth or change, either through the development of subdivisions or through increased traffic, either in their own area or a nearby area. When I asked John, for instance, what has changed in his area, he told me, "You know, it hasn't changed much. When we first moved here though…we could literally- not that we did, but the kids could actually probably play in the street because there was still so little traffic… And now there's traffic most of the day." But several participants saw their own areas growing through development. For instance, when I asked Sarah what had changed in her area, she told me, "It seems like the city is coming further in."

The second theme that arose within the general theme of the physical environment was the natural environment, which was brought up in some way by the majority of participants. I note here that I consider farms part of the natural environment, because they are part of the physical environment but are not buildings. However, I recognize that they may not be fully "natural" because they are the result of much human effort.

There was substantial variation in how the natural environment was brought up. Farms were brought up by slightly over half of participants. Of those who brought up farms, several tended to bring them up to describe their areas (such as James who told me, "my area is … still rural … there's still a couple farms here and there").

But farms were not the only way people talked about the natural environment. Aside from farms, of the people who brought up the natural environment, about half listed a part of the natural environment either as an important place for them or

something that they liked about where they live now. Alan told me, when I asked what places were important to him, "one would be the [nearby river] … I've grown very fond of that," and Katie likewise told me when I asked her the same question, "Definitely the lake… that's always been a solid spot." Others told me that they they liked that their areas were beautiful.

The other major theme that arose in my data as far as what people emphasized about their places was the non-physical aspects of place. Every participant brought up some kind of social relation, although there was significant diversity in how they specifically brought it up. About half of participants said either that people in their areas were particularly friendly or that there was a close-knit feel. An example of the former would be Barbara, who grew up in a non-rural area, told me a story of when she first moved to her current rural area:

> When I first moved here I went to the gas station, I was pumping gas and a strange man started talking to me and I was like you know, cause ... you know the area I came from somebody starts talking to you they're hitting on you, you know? And here, it was just the polite passing the time of day.

An example of the latter would be Andrew for instance, who told me his area has "the small town feeling everyone knows everybody" (notably, Andrew was one of the few participants who did not emphasize a small built environment, and actually said his area was quite built up). When I asked Walter how the area has stayed the same, he told

me, "basically its still a small town area. The people are very very friendly … we know all our neighbors … we really don't interfere with each other… don't visit each other very often but we do … keep an eye on for each other." Other participants told me that the friendships they have in the area are important to them. Andrew, for instance, also told me that one of the things he likes most about living where he does now (which is also where he grew up) is that his best friend lives so close to him. Katie likewise said that some of her memories in high school, in addition to extracurricular activities, was spending time with friends at the lake.

Another way that non-physical aspects were brought up was through differentiation between people who had lived in the area a long time or had multi-generational ties to the place, and those who were newcomers or visitors. A majority of participants told me there is this type of differentiation, but they talked about it in very diverse ways. Sarah, for instance told me that in her area there is, "somewhat of a dichotomy between people who have moved in from the city to get a more rural lifestyle for their families … but then also people who have been here that never left here." Alan, on the other hand, told me simply,

> Everybody waves to each other, whether you know them personally or not when you drive down the road, so we kinda joke when we're driving somewhere, if you wave at a person and they don't wave back they must not be from around here. That's kind of a standing joke amongst the community.

Both Sarah and Alan saw a differentiation, but talked about it differently. Several other participants talked about this sort of differentiation, but also in diverse ways.

I have discussed the two major themes that arose in my data: the importance of the physical aspects of place and the non-physical aspects of place. Within the physical aspects of place, the built and natural environments were important to participants. As far as non-physical aspects, community and social relationships were brought up. However, this research was exploratory, and there was certainly diversity within each of these broad categories or themes. In the subsequent chapter, I will present the discussion of these findings and the conclusion.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study, although exploratory, sought to illuminate the meaning of the rural Virginia place context for its residents by looking at perceptions of place, which is consistent with Gieryn's assertion, which is informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465) that, "Places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, and imagined (Soja 1996)" (Gieryn 2000:465). This work focused on the perception of the rural Virginia place context by its residents. What was important to them in their perceptions of the places in which they lived?

This study's participants consistently brought up two themes: (1) the "material form" (Gieryn 2000:465), namely the built and/or and natural environments and (2) non-physical aspects of place, namely social relations. This was an exploratory study, and there was diversity within these two broad themes.

However, these two themes were consistent with the literature. Conceptualizations or definitions of rural that are used today often involve attributes of the physical environment (Halfacree 1993:24; Cloke 2006:20). The centrality of the physical environment is also present in the literature on place and space. Gieryn (2000) considers physical form to be a key component of place; Agnew (1987 as cited in Cresswell 2015:13-14) asserts the physical form as being important as part of his

discussion of his own three components of place; Relph (1976) likewise sees "physical features or appearance" (1976:61) as a key feature of identity of place. Stedman (2003), too, finds that the physical environment is a component of how the participants in his study constructed meaning of their places. Thus, my finding that the physical environment – both its built and natural aspects – are important to participants' understandings of their places is consistent with the literature.

However, although participants consistently talked about the physical environment, the ways they did so were diverse. For many participants, they first described the built environment, or its small size, when I asked them to describe the area in which they lived. An implication of this is that the built environment is key for perceptions of place. Further, over half of participants told me that there was growth and/or change occurring in or around their areas. If the built environment is a key means of perceiving place – and thus the construction of meaning (Soja 1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465) – then this research opens doors to research for future research on how the meaning of the rural Virginia place context changes in the face of growth.

Whereas the focus for the built environment tended to center on its small size (although it was also brought up in other ways), there was less consistency in how the natural environment was brought up, although the natural environment as a broad theme was raised by the majority of participants in some way. The finding that the natural environment is important to participants' perceptions of their rural places is consistent with the findings of Rye (2006), who found that the adolescents in his study brought up nature as a key component of their rural places. Although I am not making my argument

in relation to the rural idyll, my findings are aligned with these other scholars' (Rye 2006; Short 2006) findings and assertions that the natural environment is important in how people think about and perceive rural areas. However, the lack of focus on a specific or single aspect of the natural environment potentially signals the complexity of people's relationships with the natural environment. Future research could focus on how people's emphasis on the natural environment in their perceptions of place changes as development occurs. As growth and change, either in their own or nearby areas, was brought up by a majority of participants (although some told me that there was no change in their areas), the nuances of this would be an important avenue for future research.

I also found that participants brought up not only physical aspects but also non-physical aspects of place, particularly as far as social relationships. Within this theme, there is much variation. However, many believed that their rural place had a strong community or were especially friendly. This is also consistent with the rural idyll and the idea of rural places as being more community oriented (Rye 2006; Haugen and Villa 2006). Although people tended to emphasize positive social relationships (such as friendships or a friendly community), there was diversity within the specifics. There was also diversity within how much emphasis people put on the non-physical or social aspects of their places; some people put much more emphasis on it than others. Future research should explore this further – why do some people emphasize community more than others? Additionally, over half of participants also told me that there was a differentiation between people who were considered long-time residents and those who were not, which

is certainly a non-physical aspect of community. This is consistent with Little and Austin's (1996:108) finding that the women in their study:

> …recognised certain conventional divisions between groups of village people (classically the 'locals' and 'new-comers') but were quick to point out that such divisions in no way impinged on the overall friendliness of the place and the ability of village people to 'pull together' and look after one another in times of need or crisis." There are open doors for future research on the complexity of this issue, especially within the context of growth and change.

This study is situated theoretically, as discussed, in the place and space literature (Cresswell 2015; Gieryn 2000; Relph 1976). Empirically, it is situated within research on rural places as well as on place meaning in general. Participants' focus on the nature and community is especially consistent with the existing literature on perceptions of rural place, especially the rural idyll which centers community and the natural environment (Haugen and Villa 2006; Little and Austin 1996; Rye 2006; Short 2006; Valentine 1997). It is also consistent with aspects of Gustafson's (2001) findings, in which he discusses the various themes that the participants in his study brought up, which contributed to the meaning they put into their places. In particular, Gustafson (2001) found that the physical environment and social aspects of place were two of the themes his participants brought up. This is consistent with my findings that the "material form" (Gieryn 2000:465) and non-physical aspects of place were important to the participants perceptions of their

places (and thus their places' meaning [Soja 1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465]). My study's major contribution to the sociological body of knowledge is that it is exploratory. It therefore illuminates openings for future research, especially surrounding how meaning changes within a changing built environment.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. One limitation is methodological. This study is conducted using interviews, and other scholars (Bye 2009:281; Peter, Bell, Jarnagin, and Bauer 2000:221) and have highlighted the advantages of using observations in addition to interviews. Another limitation is that this study only focuses on rural Virginia. A comparative study that includes other rural locations or even urban locations could further illuminate the processes underlying meaning making. Finally, this study was exploratory, and a much larger sample size would allow for theoretical saturation in the complexity, nuances, and specificity of my findings. For example, I find that the built environment is important, but, for example, are schools, community centers, or other specific types of public space especially important? What is the relationship between the built and the natural aspects of the physical environments?

This leads to areas of future research. Comparative studies among different types of places including urban, suburban, exurban, and rural, and in different regions or cross-nationally would further illuminate the processes underlying meaning creation for place. Larger scale studies of rural Virginia could illuminate geographic differences within the state, especially in relationship to growth and change. If the built environment is central to the participants perceptions of their places, how does its change affect the place

meaning? How is this different for life-long or long-term residents compared to new residents?

Lastly, there implications that arise from my study. The purpose of this study, like the purpose of Rye's (2006) study is not to attempt to define what rural is (2006:410). However, my findings to suggest that there are certain aspects of the rural Virginia place that are important in the ways people perceive it. Because the small built environment was brought up my many participants, this suggests that as places grow, perceptions of them will change. Future research should focus on how perceptions of place can change.

This study examined rural Virginia residents' perceptions of the places in which they lived. According to Gieryn (2000:465), who is informed by Soja (1996 as cited in Gieryn 2000:465), perceptions are a component of meaning. I found that physical and non-physical aspects of place were two themes that emerged from the data. Although this study was exploratory, it contributes to sociological knowledge by opening up doors for future research.

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age?

What is your race?

What is your gender?

What is your relationship status?

Do you have children?

How many? What are their ages?

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

What is your occupation?

What is your partner's/spouse's (if applicable) occupation?

What is your approximate monthly and yearly income?

What, if any, is your religion?

How often do you attend religious services?

Interview Guide

Question 1: Will you tell me about yourself?/ How do you identify yourself?

Question 2: How long have you lived in this town? How long has your family lived in this town?

Question 3: What brought you/your family to the town you live in now?

Question 4: If you were to describe your town to someone, how would you describe it?

Question 5: Will you tell me about the people who live in your town? (Puddifoot 2003:103)

Question 6: Will you tell me about the place you grew up?

Question 7: Will you tell me about any memories you have growing up?

Question 8: Will you tell me about some important places for you in this area?

Question 9: In what ways has this area changed? In what ways has it stayed the same?

Question 10: What do you think it is like compared to (where you used to live, or other towns in general if the respondent has never lived anywhere else)?

Question 11: What do you like about living here? What do you like least about living here?

Question 12: "What does the word 'rural' mean to you? What does 'rural life' mean to you?" (Eisenbach 2015:146)

Question 13: "Do you consider yourself to be a 'rural' individual? Why or why not?" (Eisenbach 2015:146)

Question 14: "Would you say that being raised where you were has had an effect on the type of person you have grown to be? How?" (Handke 2012:105)

Question 15: "Career logistics aside, would you go back to where you came from to live in the future? Why or why not?" (Handke 2012:107)

Question 16: "Now, considering your education and career goals, would you say it would be feasible for you to go back and live where you came from? Why or why not?" (Handke 2012:107)

Question 17: What do you do with your free time?

Question 18: If your town were to have a town hall meeting, what issues would you bring up? What do you think can be done?

Question 19: Will you tell me about your job? What challenges do you face in it? What do you like most and least about it?

Question 20: What are the most important qualities for women? For men?

Question 21: If you were (or currently are) raising a daughter or son, what would be important to teach them about being a man or woman?

Question 22: What changed after you entered into a long-term relationship or had kids?

Question 23: Do you identify with a faith? How does it play a role in your life, if it does?

Question 24: Is there anything that you would like to add that I haven't asked?

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