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Progress report

Rural geography I: Why should rural geographers 'care'?

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Abstract

This report presents the breadth of themes in current research where rural geography and care intersects. Relationships and dimensions of interdependence and distribution of power are addressed. Noting an increasing interest for caring relations in society and the agency of multiple actors, for public contexts such as landscape management and workplaces, I suggest that rural geographers pay attention to the opportunity to "spatialize" care theory development and inform rural policy formulation. Rural geography holds the potential to highlight spatial factors that invite to caring or uncaring and thereby influence rural living conditions in a broad sense.

Keywords

Care, rural geography, rural infrastructure, mutual caring relationships, public ethics of care

I Introduction

Care has attracted great interest among geographers, an interest that is persistent and growing (Power and Hall, 2018). One reason is that, understood from a feminist geographical perspective, the concept highlights the unequal relationships between individuals and groups that unfold in the interrelation of spaces, alliances, and dependencies, including society's handling of individuals' basic needs (Gregoratti et al., 2024; Middleton and Samanani, 2021; Sevenhuijsen, 2003). Following feminist understandings of care and caring work, spaces of care are not limited to the personal and private, to homes and personal relations. Rather, care infuses a range of scales and social relationships, includes public environments and situations and becomes political as it puts responsibilities, distribution, and interpersonal relations in the spotlight (Barnes, 2007; Fisher and Tronto, 1991; Morgan, 2010; Tronto, 1993, 2013).

Care needs are unevenly distributed among people and places, and they can change over time. How and why we care for others are among the most urgent and intricate questions for contemporary rural societies facing not only climate change (Morgan, 2010: 1853) but also increasing inequalities including vulnerability and poverty (Bernard et al., 2019; Schucksmith et al., 2023) and frequently occurring stress factors such as population loss, employment instability, and workforce shortages in healthcare and education (see e.g., Beehle et al., 2023). Recent research in rural geography mirrors the increased interest for theoretical initiatives where care is central and contributes to extended

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understandings of care practices and contexts. Also, it turns out that rural geography has a natural aptitude for paying attention to the heterogeneity of elements—including non-humans—in an analysis of caring relations.

When Lawson (2007) advocated for care to be considered a more pressing concern, she based her argument on two trends: the extension of market relations into the caring realms of our lives and reductions in the public provision of various forms of support or services. These have not become less relevant in the almost 20 years that have passed since. These challenges highlight that rural regions and places constitute both links and positions characterized by interdependent relationships, resulting in spatial inequalities. An emphasis on care ethics and unequal relationships might contribute not only to critical reflections on rural conditions and spatial justice, but also towards the formulation of new social and political orders that enhance mutuality and well-being (Lawson, 2007) and presupposes solidarity (McDowell 2004, 156).

This report reviews the contemporary intersection of rural geography and care and discusses the implications of a public ethics of care perspective in rural geography. The next section is devoted to examples of how care has been applied in rural geography. This is followed by a reflection on a conceptual framework of care that is argued to be of relevance from a rural geography perspective. In the concluding section, I outline why and how care further can inform rural geography, in particular when investigating contemporary rural living conditions, rural governance and planning as well as rural practices that manifest care and somehow make a difference.

II Rural geography and care

Geographers are well equipped to identify and scrutinize the socio-spatial structures that precede and result from care. Various studies have contributed to broadening ontological perspectives of care and highlight the importance of human and non-human actors. Rural geographers were early in broadening the approach to where, how and by whom care is enacted and although this report focuses on recent literature, there is reason to point to the relevance of a few earlier works. In 1998, Kearns highlighted how care, when analyzed in specifically rural contexts, is found to include more than just "a medical interaction" (Kearns, 1998: 236), that "health and place are mutually constituted through the activities of health-care provision" and that the reduction of the welfare state impacts such processes (Kearns and Joseph, 1997: 29). Also in 1998, Thurston and Berkeley broadened the definition of care in their study of school safety in a rural context and stressed the importance of being recognized and appreciated as well as owning one's own narrative in order to be able to recognize and understand other individuals and groups.

In 2003, Parr and Philo argued that care (health care services, community care, and care in the form of self-help) in rural places "is configured in specific ways as a result of the particular economic, political and social geographies of such locations" (p. 472). In their work on mental health, they interrogated the term "community care" and argued that "geographical distance, social proximity, stoic cultures and rural gossip networks all have a part to play in how caring occurs" in rural locations (Parr and Philo, 2003: 471). Community care thus includes both formal and informal caring and a wide range of practices, and their study includes aspects where caring relationships are concealed out of fear of the consequences it may have for other relationships.

Studies on the provision of care consider those who are cared for and those who give care (Lawson, 2007; Middleton and Samanani, 2021; Power and Williams, 2020). In a study on older adults and their caregivers, Bygdell (2014) identifies a rural landscape of care characterized by mutual dependency and carefulness. By applying a broad definition of care, including practical help and emotional support, this work makes visible a diversity of care workers as well as care practices. Formal and informal contacts together constitute a basis for care relationships and involve the public, the private, and the volunteer sector (Bygdell, 2014). With a focus on family carers, Holland and Skinner (2025) conclude that care work includes a multitude of activities such as preserving family connections and traditions, and a constant coordination of spaces and relationships. A study

exploring "landscapes of care" for rural youth, emphasizes the importance of youths' connectedness and belonging as well as agency of professionals and civically engaged youth (Jonsson et al., 2020), echoing the reasoning by Kearns (1998) on how health and place are mutually constituted.

Several studies deal with the intersection of care and farming. Pettersson and Tillmar (2022: 1446), in a study on care farming, discuss feminist care ethics as "an ontology of connections, by working from the heart." The observed relationships are characterized by mutuality between farmers, participants, and society, rather than the participants being dependent service users. The farms do farming differently, where farms providing care farming more prominently become places of care than places of food production. Thus, the caring practices contribute to re-configuring and re-evaluating the landscape. A desire for caring relations combined with a belief in the empowering benefits of direct marketing, was shown to be drivers for women farmers' engagement in short food chains. The women surveyed in this study strongly adhered to social and ecological values, while they alongside expressed economic views (Azima and Mundler 2022).

The intersection of human and non-human relationships are subject to analysis in a study by Barnes (2020). This work shows how a residential community established to support people in vulnerable situations—due to addiction, mental health problems, and other kinds of difficulties—thrives when care for individuals is mixed with care for the environment, animals, and community. The relationship involves care for people "who might be considered strangers" (Barnes, 2020: 143; see also Barnes, 2012; Langford, 2019; Morgan, 2010) and is based on geographical proximity rather than kinship or friendship, and voluntariness rather than duty. Likewise, Fullagar and O'Brien (2018) show how recovery from depression is enacted through place based relations that invoke human and non-human relations in informal care spaces. These studies highlight practices of care beyond more traditional health-related contexts and contribute to knowledge on the intersection of public and private care.

Further rural geographies of care, beyond contexts where care is supposed to be present, are exemplified by care relations at work. In a study on collaborative workspaces in a rural context, where people work independently (as freelancers) alongside others, Gatsinos (2025) introduces the term "worker geographies of care" to describe how coworkers navigate precarity and collectively claim control over hardship. Such co-working practices might also be identified between employer and employees as a study focusing on farmers' experiences of recruitment shows. Relationships of care are prevalent in the employer–employee interrelation, a relation infused with norms and ethical principles. This study emphasizes a multifaceted understanding of caring practices, also making visible the caring practices of male farmers (Stenbacka, 2019).

Landscape management includes practices of care, as in a study by Alcaron et al. (2020) where farmer–non-human relationships in relation to vineyards and biodiversity is explored. Participation in different environmental programs contributed to transforming farming practices. Likewise, in a study on forest management decisions, it is shown how decisions are influenced by relations to trees and infused with caring relations and emotions. The authority's decision-making structure included the public and local people engaged through volunteering (O'Flynn et al., 2021). Trees are thus seen as motivating human actors into mutual caring relationships. Moriggi et al. (2020: 2), in their study on green care, including a care farm, a biodynamic farm, and a nature-tourism company, extend the understanding of care to encompass "a way for people to express who they are, and who they wish to be". Jacobs and Wiens (2024), on the other hand, draw attention to inequalities related to landscape management (research, maintenance, design) and how care has become a way of pointing towards a hopeful future. Care can be related to hope as well as concern about relations of power. Jacobs and Wiens emphasize the importance of acknowledging power relations in order not to risk normalizing injustices through paternalistic modes of care.

A commonly cited work that allows the concept of care to make visible human–non-human interaction is Puig De la Bellacasa's (2015) analysis of humans' relationship to the soil. She questions the dominant understanding and management of soil, characterized

by technoscientific intervention to maintain and increase production, what she terms a "productionist soil care" (p. 692). A proposed way forward in breaking the taken-for-granted link between soil science and productionism is to allow alternative ontologies from within (p. 707), with an orientation to the articulations of temporality and care.

The concept of care is predominantly associated with hope and opportunity, a better future society and better living conditions for all. Care can be uplifting and strengthening, empowering and powerful (Lawson, 2007). However, as stated earlier, care can also be related to concern about relations of power. Care can be suffocating, hindering, and delaying and can include harmful paternalistic relationships between places and people (Murphy, 2015). Several researchers see a danger in the concept offering a convenient solution, where care is too simple an answer to complex problems. Critical approaches address paternalistic and stifling modes of care practices (Green and Lawson, 2011), "carewashing" as a strategy (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) and productionist management (Puig De la Bellacasa, 2015). In addition, to express "care" for something may include neglecting to care for others. For example, caring for the cultural character of a rural area may manifest itself in a reluctance to plan for housing for vulnerable groups (Frank et al., 2020) and "a caring community" might exclude people who are not able to cope and justify such disengagement and lack of care for the "other" by referring to the absence of virtues (Kay, 2011).

The limited overview presented here cannot capture all the work that has been done at the intersection of care and rural geography. The empirical examples are intended to reflect various dimensions and inspire further efforts in the field. Drawing on the concept of care and emphasizing a public ethics of care, I argue that rural geography has a strong contribution to make to research on where and how care is practiced, defined and facilitated or hindered. In addition, an emphasizing of care can strengthen the scientific position of rural geography as well as revitalize rural policy and become a key dimension in planning (Davoudi and Ormerod, 2025). Care can act as a guiding principle in the strife for creating resilient (rural) systems at institutional and local levels (Damgaard et al., 2022; Gregoratti et al., 2024). To achieve that, care needs to be researched across all geographical levels, from the global to the local. For example, national and regional policies can guide how care is designed, manifested and practised at a local level. In addition, increased insights into rural and local caring practices make contexts and actors visible that tend not to be included in traditional caring realms.

Further research is suggested to incorporate areas such as access to resources, welfare, and well-being, the role of material and social infrastructures for inviting to modes of care as well as visible and invisible caring practices. Caring may involve access to affordable housing, communications, and social contexts also in places outside metropolitan areas and growth zones. Geographers' works on regional equity, social justice, and the distribution of responsibilities aim at transforming and restructuring regional politics and its outcomes, and they are thus included in a research context where caring is viewed as enhancing well-being (Lawson, 2007). The importance of infrastructure for the development of care practices has received some attention, such as environmental programs for landscape management (Alcaron et al., 2020) and there is more to investigate in regard the potential in "structures inviting to care."

Future studies could also be inspired by recent efforts to promote care to nurture studies in urban geography. Examples from urban geographic research highlight how care can contribute to new perspectives on infrastructure and its importance in creating opportunities for care. The presence and organization of infrastructure impacts how care is provided and practised. Buser and Boyer (2021) argue in their work on water infrastructure, maintenance, and repair that participation of nonhumans is vital. Stratford and Byrne (2024), investigating public transports, emphasize that "infrastructures invite opportunities to care with" and that this "implicates how we move or not; where, when, and with what intentions and effects" (p. 381). Further studies on infrastructures in rural areas are needed, including on how these infrastructures both constitute care and invite further care practices, for example, in regard to food networks, energy provision, and common transports.

Another area for future study is invisible care practices—those found in professions within healthcare, education, or public social care where individual actors make everyday decisions based on their perception of what good care practices are and those found within civil society engagement. Such strategies, which involve caring for individuals in vulnerable situations, can be interpreted in terms of resistance to what is perceived as non-caring structures. Of interest are also contextual factors: what makes certain places more or less infused by caring practices, and why do some places receive more care than others?

III Care ethics

Environments and places cannot function without care, and there is a need to create a common understanding and shared aspirations towards life-friendly societies. This need applies not least to rural areas and to the policies and practices that affect them and constitute the conditions for rural life and livelihoods. The understanding of an ethics of care that could respond to contemporary urgencies and thus is promoted in this work is multifaceted.

When Kevin Morgan's article on the ethical foodscape and care was published in 2010, he put poverty and sustainable development in the spotlight. Writing that "food is the ultimate index of our capacity to care for ourselves and for others" (p. 1852), he focused on a public ethics of care as a guiding light for how we could look at our roles in an increasingly globalized society that involves frequent meetings and multiple relationships with people who are more or less like ourselves. He asked, "what and who do we care about most and, equally important, why do we care at all?" (p. 1853). Care can thus be seen as a counterpoint to a contemporary focus on individualism, an ontology of human interdependence that is a basis for thinking through a public ethics of care (Stensöta, 2015). A public ethics of care points towards how care manifests in practice and how it permeates policy areas beyond "traditional" care. The concept's ability to assist in policy formation and implication includes areas such as housing, infrastructure, and environmental politics (Stensöta, 2015).

Ausin's (2019) definition of a public ethics of care may act as a tool to move towards the position of the rural and the power relations in policy and planning:

> It is called "Public Ethics" to refer to applied ethics relating to the affairs of government and state organizations and institutions. It is, therefore, an ethics applied to public servants as agents of a panoply of joint activities with a view to favoring the common good, that is, the satisfaction of an ordered set of social preferences related to well-being, care, and service to the population in terms of equity. (Ausin, 2019: 9)

In this definition, the agency of bodies responsible for governance and planning as well as public servants themselves is visualized. This conceptual approach may be of relevance for further studies that focus on the spatial consequences of planning decisions—how rural environments and places are constituted through the actions of institutions and through personal encounters. Public servant employees make a number of decisions that are based on laws and rules but also contain some measure of judgment or discretion. This means that there is room for to interpret how rules within a specific area should be understood (Stensöta, 2015). Such a procedure requires a certain presence and contact between the public employee and other affected actors, or with the affected environment. An everyday example of how a public ethics of care might work in practice is a bus driver "prioritizing responsible and safe driving over following the timetable" (Stensöta, 2015: 196), or a civil servant at the public employment services providing answers to questions from new arrivals beyond labor market possibilities (Stenbacka, 2018: 36). Another example is provided by Morse and Munro (2018), on museum professionals' commitment and responsibility to local communities in times of austerity and how they create strategies of collective resistance. The promotion of care ethics' incorporation into practice and into policy areas of urgence for rural localities and regional relations could be further strengthened by the concept of public ethics of care. Rural geographical studies can be informed by illuminating people and places as both vulnerable and capable by making diverse forms of private and public care practices visible.

IV Conclusion: Why rural geographers should care

Rural geographical studies increasingly investigate the provision of and access to care, broaden the definition of care and scrutinize interpersonal as well as human–non-human relationships. Caring practices in the rural include caring for and about people, but also caring for the community, the built environment, animals, and "nature" in its broadest sense. It is a matter of the public as well as the private, and it concerns caring as such but also social and physical structures that invite caring. Besides paying attention to caring practices in the rural, caring about the rural involves external relations and forces, formulated in distant political contexts. The impact of ontological standpoints is emphasized, and works have increasingly questioned care design and management and exposed power relations among people and places. The quest made by Parr and Philo, 2003 for a situational understanding of care has thus been successful, but there is certainly room for further contributions from rural geographers, on the unequal relationships between individuals, groups, and also places.

Based on the insights from the works presented here, focusing on contemporary geographies of care, I want to encourage rural geography to increasingly be informed by a public ethos of care approach (as outlined in e.g., Ausin, 2019; Morgan, 2010; Stensöta, 2015). A public ethos of care does not limit itself to a theoretical approach in research but would be of use in national politics, regional governance, and in the development of markets (see also Power and Williams, 2020).

In public environments, care is, among other things, welfare. Welfare is more than interpersonal care; it is about providing infrastructure that contributes to living as good a life as possible, for example, public transport and broadband. This suggests that the perspective of a public ethics of care can contribute constructively and critically to investigations of such relationships and processes—that is, unequal relationships and social responsibilities in regard to creating good living conditions. A public ethics of care recognizes and takes into account spatial inequalities that both give rise to care needs and impact how care is practised, highlighting power positions and the role of public bodies and market actors.

It is of common interest to know how care can be "more than utopian," how care as value and practice (Held, 2005) may be infused into the shaping of places, communities and relations. Studies on how care can guide the design and governance of public spaces could assist in a development in this direction. Acts of care contribute to making places public in the sense that they are for everyone. Care constitutes a space where each individual can be public, in times of comfort or times of hardship. Being public does not have to mean that you require constant interaction; being public can also be participating without directly facing others. Places for care entail an elasticity where an individual to different extents can seek commitment of varying intensity during different parts of a day or different phases in life.

Care can be a concept that can accompany engagement in rural areas among politicians and planners, but not without a reservation. An increasing presence of "care" could be an expression of genuine interest in the rural, but it might also be a "brilliant disguise" for strategies of neglecting rural needs. A familiar way of explaining cuts or withdrawal of funding is to refer to rural places' own capacity. Regarding the ability of individuals to both give and receive care in mutual relationships, the state can observe the development without contributing the resources. To paraphrase Puig de la Bellacasa (2015: 692), what the rural is thought to be affects the ways in which we care for it, and vice versa.

There is thus a need to "trouble" care (Raghuram, 2016) in regard to spatial inequalities, and this contribution aims to encourage rural geographers to both critically examine current processes where "care" might involve different outcomes for different groups of people and identify the possibilities by allowing care to be a lens and a tool, a value and practice (Held, 2005) when investigating contemporary rural structures and how they play out in the views of rural people and their everyday lives.

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