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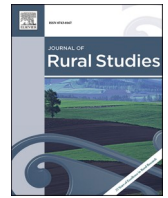
Enduring rural poverty: Stigma, class practices and social networks in a town in the Groninger Veenkoloniën

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ABSTRACT

In the Groninger Veenkoloniën, a former peat region in the northeast of the Netherlands, persistent poverty is more prevalent compared to other rural regions in the country. Grounded in participant observations and supplemented by in-depth interviews capturing the social life history of 21 participants, this paper paints a detailed picture of the social networks and class practices of those experiencing persisting poverty in the examined town and surrounding region. In addition, we explore the relations between the rural context and lived experiences of class and poverty. Our findings highlight the complex experience as well as spatial embeddedness of persisting poverty. We find that, although the specific circumstances to which the participants are exposed vary greatly, the repercussions in terms of the characteristics of their social networks and practices are very similar. In general, the social networks of participants are fragmented and small, tightly knit, and characterized by clear power imbalances. The most formative experiences that result in the isolation of networks of poor are found to occur in the home and family situation during childhood years. We argue that poverty and the region's history are intricately interwoven resulting in a socio-spatial stigma which in turn contributes to the persistent and intergenerational character of poverty in the rural context of our study. Due to the long history of stigmatization, dismantling the socio-spatial stigma attached to the Groninger Veenkoloniën will presumably take multiple generations.

1. Introduction

In the years of economic upturn preceding the global COVID-19 pandemic, the share of households living in poverty in the Netherlands decreased slowly yet steadily (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018a). Simultaneously, however, persistent poverty, i.e. households living in poverty for at least four years, was rising (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018a). Historically, urban regions tend to exhibit higher concentrations of poverty than their rural counterparts. Therefore, it is striking that a number of Dutch rural municipalities show persistent poverty rates comparable to urban centers. The Groninger Veenkoloniën have always been relatively poor (Keuning, 1933). In this region, persistent poverty is more prevalent compared to other rural regions (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018b; Edzes and Strijker, 2017). In the Groninger Veenkoloniën, the children of poor parents are likely to remain poor in adulthood (van Oosterhout, 2018; Edzes and Strijker, 2017). Research shows that both welfare dependency and persisting poverty have a strong intergenerational character Meyer et al. (2015); Moore (2005); Antel (1992). Why persistent poverty is so inextricably linked to certain rural regions, and continues over multiple generations is still poorly understood.

The notion that poverty transcends economic definitions derived from e.g. income is commonly accepted. Concepts such as social exclusion and social capital have become inextricably linked to poverty and have consequently been the subjects of vigorous research. However, the majority of empirical investigations into socio-spatial dimensions of poverty have been set in urban locales (see Rivera et al., 2019; Sampson et al., 2002). In contrast, notably less empirical investigation has been done into social dimensions of poverty in rural contexts – even though scholars have historically debated the differences in social dynamics between cities and the countryside, and in fact used to describe urban and rural social fabrics as polar opposites (see Tönnies, 1887; Simmel, 1903). Affirming this notion is the growing awareness in rural studies that the role of the rural in social mechanisms underlying enduring poverty requires a better understanding (see Rivera et al., 2019; Edzes and Strijker, 2017; Shucksmith, 2012; Milbourne and Doheny, 2012; Meert, 2000).

This paper takes an ethnographic approach to study persistent poverty in a rural town in the Groninger Veenkoloniën. Grounded in participant observations and in-depth interviews capturing the social life history of 21 participants gathered over the course of one year, this paper paints a detailed picture of the social networks and class practices of those facing poverty in the studied town and surrounding region. In addition, we explore the relations between the rural context and lived experiences of class and poverty.

2. Persistent poverty and the rural

In any context, poverty is considered a complex problem with many different possible causes and intertwined with other problems including unhealthy lifestyles, obesity and diminished mental health (see Visser, 2016; De Meyer et al., 2015; Townsend, 2014; Lee et al., 2009; Moore, 2005). Although various definitions of poverty are used, for this paper, which focuses on poverty in a Dutch rural context, we view poverty as relative. Relative poverty, a term coined by Peter Townsend, rejects absolute classifications of poverty in terms of e.g. income and is therefore better suited to be applied in different geographic contexts. Instead, relative poverty revolves around the subjective experience of a lack of resources deemed necessary to achieve a life considered normal and acceptable relative to the societies in which people live (Townsend, 2014 in Commins, 2004). A qualitative study among parents living in poverty defined in absolute terms indeed demonstrates that individuals and households have very subjective experiences and perceptions of coping with low income poverty (Besselink et al., 2013; see also Anderson, 2000).

As stated before, research shows that socio-economic and cultural factors are crucial in the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Meyer et al., 2015; Guiaux et al., 2011; Wagmiller and Adelman, 2009). Edzes and Strijker (2017) hypothesize a number of social mechanisms that potentially contribute to intergenerational poverty in the Veenkoloniën. Firstly, social norms that promote dependency on welfare and disregard for education are passed on from generation to generation; limited parental social networks restrict access to information e.g. about employment; limited intergenerational transfer of different forms of financial and human capital prohibit full participation in society (see Guiaux et al., 2011); and finally, institutional factors such as prejudices in educational advice or in social institutions exist, which inhibit upward social mobility. In order to better understand the potential mechanisms described above, the experience of poverty should be understood within the rural context (Woods, 2013).

Over the past decades, rural regions have undergone significant economic transformations in terms of diversification, agricultural intensification and digitalization (Salemink et al., 2017; Strijker, 2005; Fuller, 1990). The European countryside has undergone uneven development creating new and widening socio-economic disparities across and between rural regions (Bock, 2016). However, these disparities have predominantly been investigated in terms of urban-rural divides, rather than zooming in on the heterogeneity within the rural towns. Some scholars ascribe this gap in empirical investigation to rural poverty's supposed 'invisibility'. According to Commins (2004), this invisibility emanates from a number of causes. For one, rural poverty is characterized by a 'spatial pervasiveness' caused by lower population densities in the countryside as compared to cities. Another factor adding to rural poverty's invisibility is that life in the countryside is generally placed within romanticized narratives, referring to the 'Gemeinschaft-like' social structure of the countryside (Edensor, 2002). These narratives project the rural idyll and a problem-free way of life in which notions such as poverty and deprivation play only a small part (MacKrell and Pemberton, 2018; Woodward, 1996). Similarly, due to strongly articulated rural senses of place and community, a proper acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of the countryside as well as socio-economic differences in the rural population is obstructed (Lee et al., 2005; Commins, 2004; Edensor, 2002). Rural poverty's invisibility might explain why the role of rural contexts in enduring poverty has received relatively little attention in poverty research, in Europe at least.

However, in North-American research the spatial aspects of rural poverty have been looked at more closely. Economic downturns have long lasting effects in rural economies because they are quicker to recess and slower to recover. Furthermore, rural labor markets tend to lack diversity, which amplifies the effects of industry decline and job loss simply because families and individuals will have to travel further to find new employment due to rural regions geographic remoteness

(Tickamyer et al., 2017). Declining economies in rural regions are found to have a particularly negative effect on men. Several studies demonstrate how the loss of employment in rural contexts especially undermines the traditional masculine identity of provider creating a tension in gender roles (Jensen and Jensen, 2011; Sherman, 2006). In economically disadvantaged rural regions, social capital becomes of increased importance in rural communities in order to be resilient in the face of social and economic challenges (Flora et al., 2016). Studies for instance show how high levels of social capital and a strong embeddedness in family and community networks in rural regions is conducive to informal economic activities in order to cope with precarious labor contracts (Jensen, 2018; Slack et al., 2017; Tickamyer and Wood, 2003, 1998).

In some rural regions, poverty becomes inextricably tied to a region's history, e.g. Appalachia in the U.S., or indeed the Veenkoloniën in The Netherlands (Tickamyer et al., 2017; Duncan, 1999). Such rural regions offer specific opportunities to understand intergenerational aspects of poverty due to their small scale, the familiarity among social actors, the strong spatial boundedness of communities, and a tendency to maintain a rigid class structure (Greenberg, 2016; Duncan, 1996). Various scholars underline the importance of stigma connected to rural regions with a history of poverty (Tickamyer et al., 2017; Eason, 2017; Sherman, 2006). Stigma, in the context of rural poverty, is woven into the social fabric of rural communities. Sherman (2006) puts forward the notion of 'moral stigma', in which is associated to certain families, who, based on family histories, are branded as morally inferior within the wider community. Due to the importance of social values in rural communities, coping strategies of poor stigmatized families are usually elected because they are socially rational, rather than economically optimal.

3. Class practices in social networks

The enduring and intergenerational problem of poverty in the Veenkoloniën indicates the existence of a distinct underclass (see Scott, 2012) with limited prospects of upward mobility. Since the economic shift to Post-Fordism, understandings of class in relation to social stratification and poverty have changed dramatically (see Shucksmith, 2012; Harvey, 1989).

In an increasingly creative and global economy – associated with growing socio-spatial polarization and a so-called erosion of the middle class (see for example Hulchanski, 2010; Foster and Wolfson, 2010) – structuralist conceptions of clearly demarcated production-related classes are considered less potent for meaningful social analyses. Contrastingly, a constructivist understanding views the concept class as continuously contested and socially constructed rather than representing a rigid, objective and absolute structure (Shucksmith, 2012; Bourdieu, 1987). Bourdieu explains that boundaries of class in social space could ideally be viewed as imagined planes, fuzzy, in constant flux and subject to everyday representations of union and separation. In this sense, class represents groups of actors that take up similar positions in social space. Bourdieu asserts that class boundaries in social space can be defined *intrinsically*, in the sense that one's social position derives from 'primeval social experience', which is a type of highly developed social intuition rooted in shared norms and values; and *relationally*, which draws on the idea of othering with regard to boundaries being constructed in relation to other social positions – i.e. belonging or not belonging to that position in social space (Bourdieu, 1987). Relational dimensions of class can be traced in interactions and social ties between class groups. Studies into class and rural poverty offer insight into how poverty and class are reproduced through interactions between different families and groups within rural communities (see Jensen, 2018; Duncan, 1999). Due to the high degree of social familiarity in rural communities, power imbalances between different classes eventually carve out a trajectory of which families and groups get access to opportunities and advantages (e.g. in terms of employment) and who does not (see Duncan, 1999, 1996).

Because actors belonging to the same class share a similar position in social space, they are exposed to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors. These conditioning factors exert a homogenizing effect, and therefore individuals exposed to similar conditions develop similar practices (Bourdieu, 1987). Conditions of existence can be interpreted as the circumstances people encounter in life. These can be macro-scale circumstances such as contested gender roles, changing consumption practices, and increasing polarization (see Shaker and Rath, 2018; Hulchanski, 2010; Foster and Wolfson, 2010; Morgan, 2005), or meso-scale circumstances, e.g. the closing of a local supermarket (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017), or micro-scale circumstances, e.g. suffering a stroke and rehabilitating afterwards (Meijering et al., 2017). Conditioning factors are understood as factors that influence how people react to certain circumstances and how this may influence future practices.

According to theories of practice, everyday practices such as parenting, relationships and participation in social activities reflect shared understandings of class (see Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001; Bourdieu, 1987, 1977). Reckwitz (2002, p. 253) elaborates that everyday practices reflect forms of knowledge; how people view the world, the objects in it (tangible or abstract), others and themselves in relation to each other. Shucksmith (2012) adds that class practices have particular spatial dimensions in the sense that they are intertwined with social constructions of the rural. The ways in which marginalized individuals and groups are represented and represent themselves in relation to place instigate the reproduction of inequalities, which are thus imbued in place (Tickamyer et al., 2017; Sherman, 2006; Duncan, 1999).

An appropriate way to start exploring class practices is by closely examining the characteristics of social networks of poor and their position in social space (Lee et al., 2005). In a sociological sense, examining social networks entails looking at the structure of social ties and how they facilitate support or exclusion processes (Klärner and Knabe, 2019). Social networks and the resources located within them have a strong determining effect on the opportunities and life prospects of individuals (see Putnam, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). When individuals and groups are excluded from important resources and information, the likelihood of poverty enduring over multiple generations increases (Guiaux et al., 2011; Reimer, 2004).

3.1. A (very) brief history of the Groninger Veenkoloniën

The Groninger Veenkoloniën, the peat districts in the eastern part of the province of Groningen in the Netherlands, have a rich agricultural and industrial past. As early as the 17th century, peat was extracted from the land. A canal system was developed in which many small side canals running into the peat fields were connected to the main canals for drainage and transport. The main canals were embedded in a (trans) national system of waterways, which provided good trade connections to larger towns and cities (Keuning, 1933).

The agricultural land – left behind after most of the peat was harvested – as well as the man-made water infrastructure allowed for other industries to develop in the region. A thriving shipbuilding industry developed in the 18th and 19th century. The region also became home to potato starch and strawboard industries, which reached their zenith in the mid-19th century. The large scale of the strawboard industry provided employment for many local low-skilled workers. While the strawboard industry flourished, the production processes caused much pollution and the wages for the factory workers were low (Keuning, 1933). In this context, the Dutch Communist Party became very popular and influential in the region halfway through the 20[th]century. Eventually and gradually, due to political pressures and a lack of innovation the strawboard industry disappeared almost completely from the region, causing a surge in regional unemployment rates. The disappearance of the strawboard industry left behind large abandoned factory buildings, whose chimneys still dominate parts of the region's skyline to this day.

Our study was initially based in one particular town – which we will not name for ethical reasons – in the rural region of eastern Groningen. It is a mid-sized town in the region with a population currently between 5000 and 10,000. Inevitably, the town's economy took a severe hit when the strawboard industry disappeared and nothing substantial replaced it. Presently, the municipality in which this study is based exhibits the nationwide highest shares (4%) of persistently poor households in rural municipalities[1] (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018b; Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018c). In the Dutch context, the Groninger Veenkoloniën is remote from economic centers and the region has a poor reputation among people living outside the region (see Thissen et al., 2010; Rijnks and Strijker, 2013).

As the study progressed, the area from which participants were recruited was expanded to include surrounding villages and hamlets. We opted to do this as – even though the town as a geographical unit was integral to participants' experience of poverty – our participants' stories and contacts were not exclusively tied to the town. Rather, their experiences were embedded in the wider region of the Groninger Veenkoloniën. Therefore, the findings presented in this paper should be viewed as an account of how poverty is experienced by participants living in the Groninger Veenkoloniën – most of them based in what we will call 'the town'.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participatory approach

From the earliest stages, this study took a participatory approach to ethnography. This entails that, although the broader theme of rural poverty was determined before entering the field, the definitive aim and scope of the research was determined in consultation with participants. In the research phases that followed four participants became co-researchers in the study (see Mey and van Hoven, 2019). The co-researchers helped with recruiting participants and assisted the field researcher in the interpretation of early findings, in the final analysis, and in the dissemination phase (e.g. presenting and writing reports) of the research. One female co-researcher was prominent throughout the research. She grew up in intergenerational poverty and works as a so-called 'professional by experience', which can be understood as a peer advocate. In her work – which is still low-paid – she assists social workers by drawing from her own experience. Not only did this co-researcher make valuable contributions to the analysis and dissemination phases, she also co-interviewed several participants.

4.2. Observations and interviews

The methodology consists of participant observation combined with in-depth interviews conducted by the first author of this paper. The participant observations lasted from April 2018 to April 2019 and predominantly took place in two municipal workplaces where people worked on welfare jobs. Both workplaces were operating thrift stores; one located in the central town, the other in a small village close by. The welfare jobs are not paid for in the sense that the workers receive a salary. Rather, the work conducted for the position should be seen as a compensation for receiving welfare. The daily operations of both work places consisted of collecting and delivering used furniture with a van and preparing the furniture for sale as well as selling it in the store. Generally, the male workers would be in the van collecting and delivering furniture while the female workers took care of sales and the upkeep of the store. The field researcher participated in all activities. In

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[1] The Central Bureau for Statistics employs five categories for urbanization based on population density from which we classify the last two as 'rural': 1] Very highly urbanized, 2] Highly urbanized, 3] Moderately urbanized, 4] Not very urbanized, 5] Not urbanized (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2018c).

addition to the observations at the thrift stores, participant observations were conducted at citizen initiatives aimed at supporting those in the region with low income and at institutions and organizations involved in providing care and support for low-income households. Over the entire fieldwork period the field researcher was in regular contact – meaning twice a month or more – with circa 60 people with low income.

As literature reveals how the experience of poverty is complex and sensitive, much effort was dedicated to gaining a good rapport with participants. After participating in welfare jobs for a certain time, the field researcher felt he gradually became an accepted and trusted figure for the people he worked with. From this point on, the field researcher started to approach participants for interviews, which were recorded and for which informed verbal consent was obtained. With permission by the faculty's ethical commission, we chose to obtain verbal consent considering the inability of some participants to read and comprehend written consent forms. In total, 21 persons shared their life history for this study. In the occasionally sequential interviews participants were asked about significant social experiences with the following themes: early childhood, schooldays, adolescence, adulthood, family life, friends, social activities, housing history, connection to the town/region, and their experiences regarding institutional support and care. Some participants were interviewed in joint sessions. This gave participants an opportunity to compare their own story to those of others, often revealing striking similarities, which will be described in the following sections. Due to the extensive range of topics covered, the interviews lasted from 2.5 to 5.5 h. The majority of interviewed participants the field researcher knew directly as co-workers, although a small number were recruited by referral and with help from the co-researchers.

The interview participants' sex distribution is somewhat skewed toward females (thirteen females compared to eight males). Somehow the women encountered during fieldwork appeared to be more inclined to share their views on sensitive subjects compared to the men. Most men the field researcher approached for an interview declined, many of them expressing discomfort with speaking about sensitive issues such as poverty and their upbringing. For the analysis, drawing from the informal interviews with many men during observations mitigated the issue of the skewed sex distribution. These informal interviews occurred spontaneously but were always conducted with the informed consent of the participant. To all participants the field researcher introduced himself as being a researcher. To ensure this researcher role remained clear throughout the project, the field researcher always chose public spots to write notes, continuously informed people he spoke to about the state of the research and tested ideas and hypotheses arising from the fieldwork against participants' views, so that everyone could be reminded of the primary purpose of his presence: research.

Most interview participants were older than 40 (fourteen aged 40 or over compared to seven participants younger than 40). This phenomenon was reflected on quite extensively in field notes. The most likely factor concerns the fact that older people have simply had more time to process the hardships they have endured and were thus better able to share their stories. Many younger persons were interviewed informally during the observations. Consequently, perspectives and experiences from the interviewed participants were compared to notes from the informal interviews and the field diary to ensure a degree of evenness in terms of age distribution.

4.3. Enduring poverty: the context of existence

Most participants in this study report to have endured difficult circumstances over the life course. In terms of socio-economic conditions, all persons mention the unfavorable socio-economic circumstances in the East Groningen region. Older generations (in their forties and older) often mention how they used to be employed in the industrial sector that flourished in the region. Eventually, all the older generations we spoke to became unemployed due to various economic downturns, e.g.

bankruptcy or substantive budget cuts. Younger generations (younger than 40) mention how difficult it is to find employment that is not temporary. Nevertheless, most people do not consider these socio-economic conditions unique nor the most influential for their socio-economic situation of enduring and intergenerational poverty. Rather, most participants attribute more meaning to social issues, often unrelated, or not directly related to finances. Starting in early childhood and continuing into later life stages for most, people recollect their situation as being different and more difficult compared to what they observe to be 'normal'. The most influential difficult circumstances for the experience of poverty are reported in a person's home and family situation, and in their personal housing history.

First and foremost, almost every participant describes difficult circumstances in their home and family situation. These occur in social relationships with parents, siblings, other relatives and partners. Among the most frequently reported difficult conditions, by both female and male participants of all age groups, are physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, as either a victim and/or witness; drug and alcohol abuse, as either a user and/or victim; and finally, conflicts with family members, often related to a form of abuse. Out of respect for the sensitive nature of the stories shared with us we do not elaborate on the details of these difficult circumstances. It should, however, be understood that these difficult circumstances – most of these endured as early as childhood – have a decidedly formative effect on the lives of the persons with whom we spoke.

Second, in addition to difficult conditions endured within the home, most participants have experienced precarious conditions regarding their housing situation. These precarious conditions vary, among other things, from getting evicted to being placed in a foster home, having conflicts with neighbors, and being forced to move out due to restructuring or demolition. As a consequence of these precarious housing conditions, many people indicate to have moved frequently throughout their lives, often beginning in early childhood. All participants who moved frequently during their childhood indicate that opportunities to make new contacts and to build friendships and meaningful relationships were seriously hampered. Following participants' stories, it seems that families moving to a different town is in some cases a strategy to ensure that only a limited number of people know about their real and troublesome home and family situation. Participants often indicate they are ashamed of their home and family situation and/or afraid that it might become known in light of any possible associated legal consequences associated.

Sooner or later during childhood, all participants express to have experienced certain moments of realization, in which they notice the difficult conditions to which they are exposed in life are neither common nor acceptable in most other households. Here lies the root of a strong sentiment of inferiority, exclusion and shame, shared by many participants.

> "At a point in time you begin to notice, when you visit other children from school, that things are different. And only then you realize how different your home situation is. But you don't know any different, so you think it is normal. And then you discover it really isn't normal. And that's a terrible eye-opener. It gives you a feeling of inferiority."
>
> - Joshua (in his thirties)

The sentiment of inferiority is reproduced in ordinary yet significant experiences participants have every day at school, work, at their sports clubs or in public spaces. In fact, the sense of otherness and shame runs so deep that, in a social sense, many people operate from dispositions such as feeling different, excluded and inferior for the rest of their lives. Most of the people interviewed for this study explain how they keep battling with the experiences they endured in childhood. Difficult circumstances in the home and family situation in particular leave deep scars. In fact, a notable majority of participants mention having developed mental health issues, which they often associate with the

conditions they encountered in their early years. Reported issues include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety, agoraphobia, hyperventilation, anger and rage issues, and chronic stress. Often, these mental health issues are suppressed or go unrecognized until a certain trigger point is reached. Ironically, this trigger point often seems to coincide with relatively good periods of stability, as the following women eloquently describe during their joint interview:

Mary: "When I was 15 years old I made my mother choose. Either my father leaves or I leave. Luckily, they got a divorce. And then it became quiet. Just like she [R2] mentioned. But… your mind is still in turmoil. And you're still going to school, trying to get an education. But you still don't manage somehow. I couldn't concentrate. Oh— [becomes emotional]"

Lucy: "Because you became so used to the tension – the pressure belonging to that way of life and it suddenly disappeared. And nothing replaced that pressure. Only opportunity and space, which allowed everything to surface that you had been suppressing all that time! And suddenly… Suddenly it all came out."

- Mary (in her sixties), Lucy (in her fifties)

In this case, mental health issues added an extra layer of complexity, which surfaced after the situation had somewhat stabilized. The story demonstrates the many dimensions of precariousness that many of the participants face.

4.4. Socio-spatial stigma in a rural town

Participants allude to how perceptions of poverty are contained in a type of stigma. Certain families in the town have a reputation for being poor. This reputation derives from knowledge on these families' histories, often interwoven with the history of the town. In fact, we found how some families with the same last name have very different social reputations derived from which specific family line they belong to and where in the region that family was settled. For example, one particular family line was inextricably tied to a side-canal just outside the town with a history of disorder and poverty. Even when people have a different last name due to marriage, people in the town are still very aware of their family's history. Older participants in particular recall how historically – before areas became redeveloped – poverty used to be concentrated in certain areas and hamlets in the region. These hamlets and areas were located on the fringes of town or on so-called 'wijkjes', which are roads following the old side canals of the major peat canal, and almost exclusively housed poor people.

"We lived on a side canal. That was the lowest of the lowest. People in our street were all in the same situation. No one had a car. No one had a phone. If my mother needed to call the doctor or something, she needed to go to the principal's house to make a call. Those types of things. Everyone was from the same milieu."

- Lucy (in her fifties)

Stigmatized places of poverty described above unavoidably become linked to the stigmatization of people, families and groups that lived there, creating a socio-spatial stigma. Our participants demonstrate an intricate knowledge on the social history of others – e.g. where people grew up and to which family line they belong. One story frequently mentioned by participants talks about a certain family historically settled in a small hamlet located on one of the side canals. According to the hamlet's reputation, it used to be a place with much poverty and disorder – e.g. frequent bonfires, fights and drug dealing. Participants describe how there were rumors that the police did not even visit the area out of fear of the residents, who, according to legend, lived in a separate world with their own law and order. In the 1950's, many of the families – like the one described above – living dispersed along side-

canals were placed in a then newly developed area on the fringes of the town. Participants express how, based on the fact where families lived, people in the town continue to associate particular families with poverty and disorder. Likewise, the family in the story is still a notoriously poor family in town. In this sense, images of poverty and disorder are inextricably linked to stigmatized places.

Some participants explain how they dislike those areas in town where poor families became concentrated. They indicate a struggle to feel comfortable in the rather rough social environment in which they feel they have to actively assert themselves to not become socially isolated. Simultaneously, some participants describe how they feel comfortable in and connected to the poor areas. How it provides them, despite the rough and direct rules of interaction, with a sense of familiarity, safety and acceptance, which they feel enables them to cope with the challenges in life.

I: "How would you describe the people that lived in your neighborhood?"

R: "As people who had less, 'minima'. And yeah, they are the type of people that will help you. In any way. Whether you need money or food. I always felt welcome. So for me it was a very nice neighborhood. For as far as I can remember I have always only been friends with people on welfare or people who at least know what it's like. Yeah, I feel more connected to those people than to people who have enough money and don't have to worry."

- Tom (in his twenties)

Some participants become so accustomed to the way of life in the social environment of poverty in these particular towns and areas in town that it becomes difficult for them to adjust to social environs elsewhere. One woman recalls an experience of when she moved to a wealthier town. After the move, she felt that she was being treated in a slightly different way than she was used to in her old town, which made her feel uncomfortable. In a way, she felt she was not receiving the respect she desired. She claimed people were spreading rumors about her situation, which caused her much distress culminating into a series of confrontations with people in her new town. Eventually, she moved back to her old town – the poorer town – and she felt much more at ease socially:

I: *And why is that connection to the town so strong?*

R: That's difficult to say precisely. Well, when I moved back here after having lived in a better town for a period of seven years, I felt relieved to be back. Back there, people were talking behind my back. Once, I walked up to someone's door and said: 'OK, so you are talking behind my back? Please tell it to my face now, I know you're gossiping about me. That's how we do things in my town.' Around here it's more direct and a lot of people are scared of that. Maybe it makes it more difficult to make friends like that, but I would rather have a single friend who is honest with me than that I too have to go behind one's back."

- Bonny (in her thirties)

The quote above illustrates how the notion of respect is reproduced slightly differently in various places in the region. In addition, the comparisons participants draw between their views on social aspects of poverty in an urban context as opposed to their experience of poverty in a rural context also shed light on place-specific factors relevant to the experience of poverty.

R: "I notice people view poverty differently in the city. Because people in the countryside are like 'mind your own business, I am not poor.'"

I: "And why is that do you think?"

R: "It has to do with shame. Because in the city it is normal to be poor. Because my next door neighbor probably doesn't know me anyway. And the person living across the street doesn't either. I would have to check my navigation device. Tower 4? No idea who lives there. But around here you do know. Imagine a Food Bank van would park in front of here. I wouldn't dare to get out of the house! Well… I would, but I know many people who wouldn't leave the house anymore."

I: "Because people know each other around here."

R: "People know each other. Everyone knows everything about everyone. And that makes it very complicated."

- Jenny (in her forties)

The quote suggests that detailed knowledge of the comings and go-ings of neighbors and peers are a source of the shame many participants report to feel. Moreover, this knowledge is viewed as an explicitly rural characteristic. As the woman explains, this makes the experience of poverty very complex. On the one hand, participants express a sense of kinship, which is a source for support and understanding, while on the other hand it seems to be crucial to uphold an image of self-reliance. Many participants express how they want to avoid standing out or to be seen as someone from the bad part of town, in fear of being judged by and losing the respect of peers and neighbors. The social rules that govern the practices for our participants thus seem to be intertwined with the socio-spatial dynamics the town.

"Everyone has an opinion about another and that's why I think, growing up in a town like this, most people really want to be 'normal'. Be normal according to the standards in the town."

- Sheila (in her twenties)

5. Social networks

The characteristics of social networks must be understood in relation to the context of existence and the socio-spatial stigma discussed before. Despite the variety of difficult conditions people encounter, they have similar consequences regarding the social networks and class practices. Based on our data, we conclude that the social networks of our partic-ipants exhibit the following characteristics: they are small, tight, and have a strict social hierarchy. Within these networks we clearly observed class practices, which are also described in the sections below.

5.1. Fragmented, small and closed-off networks

From the observations a picture emerges of a fragmented landscape of many small and closed-off social networks of participants. This means there is not one single network of those experiencing enduring and intergenerational poverty, but rather many small networks consisting of no more than a handful of families and close friends, for which it is hard to obtain membership.

The insulated nature of these small networks is closely connected to coping strategies for the difficult and sensitive home and family condi-tions discussed above. However, the relations between networks, prac-tices and the context of existence should be viewed as relational rather than causal relationships. Many participants express how, from an early age, they conceal their home situation from outsiders to avoid shame, judgment and the confirmation of their sense of inferiority. Conse-quently, developing a social network beyond the family and those closest to the individual becomes very difficult. Simultaneously and perhaps counterproductively, cordoning off one's social network in-creases the likelihood of being misunderstood and judged by outsiders.

In a previous paragraph we discussed a quote by a young man in his early thirties who expressed to have a moment of realization in which he noticed how different his situation was compared to others. Strikingly, the following quote by a woman in her sixties addresses a very similar experience of perceiving difference and how she conceals this difference from others. In fact, all age groups report similar experiences and practices, which suggests that the social experience of poverty of older compared to younger participants has changed but little.

R: "There are certain things that you notice aren't normal. But it is your family, so you feel loyal to them. (…) When you visit friends from school and their home situation is totally different… so totally different… and you see the difference. Ohhhh – that's not something you talk about. (…) I would always say let's meet at your place because I was terrified they would [see the situation at home]. I was happy to have a friend in the first place!"

- Mary (in her sixties)

Another often-mentioned cause for the perceived barrier for making new contacts, especially those beyond the small and closed-off networks, is frequently moving house. Causes vary from not making rent and getting evicted to moving to a cheaper rental unit or moving out of the parental home as a strategy to not lose benefits. As a consequence, the housing situation for many people we spoke to has been, and for some still is, experienced as very unstable. Especially in childhood, making new contacts and building relationships is often viewed as a pointless exercise due to the frequent moves. In the case of the woman quoted below, her father initiated many moves in her childhood. He found it unwise to remain living in the same area for longer than a short period of time due to his involvement with illegal activities. Only later in life, when conditions had stabilized somewhat, did the woman realize she did not know how to properly establish contact with new people and build relationships.

R: "You just have to start again everywhere. You don't have friends anywhere, you are bullied everywhere. And when you finally have some stability you have to leave again. So there is no real way to build a trusted relationship with anyone. After a while, you just don't bother anymore."

I: "How does it feel to have missed that? Do you miss it?"

R: "Well, I'm only starting to realize that now. It's not that I trust people or make contact easily, but I'm trying to work on that."

- Lola (in her forties)

Lola also expressed how her father undermined her confidence in social relationships by suggesting people only wanted sex or other ser-vices from her. As a result, her and her siblings' networks remained very small, which simultaneously decreased the likelihood of detection of the father's activities. Therefore, moving frequently is not always just a result of financial problems, but it can also be a strategy to veil certain activities that cannot stand the light of day. Generally, our participants indicate only very few peers share the same experiences and housing history as they did, which limits the size of social networks substantially due to perceptions of difference and inferiority. Simultaneously, it makes the social contacts that did survive the frequent moves and difficult times all the more tightly knit.

5.2. Tight networks: "show respect to get respect"

In stigmatized places, such as described above, people have devel-oped emotionally close relationships forming small networks. Referring to the close nature of relationships, multiple participants express how their social networks provide them with feelings of safety and accep-tance, rooted in shared experiences and challenges. Simultaneously, according to participants, outward contacts are often under pressure because outsiders have generally not been exposed to the same condi-tions. Many of the people we spoke to mention they often perceive to be

misunderstood and judged harshly by outsiders – whether that be in formal relationships, e.g. with institutions, or informal relationships, e. g. at school, work or at sports clubs. The negative experiences with outsiders are often actively told and re-told within participants' own network, feeding into the collective sense of being inferior or excluded. Ultimately, a general distrust toward outsiders develops within the networks, reinforcing their tight nature.

Participants often refer to respect as a key value in their social contacts. Previously, we pointed out how respect is intricately interwoven with histories of places. Sharing a family history in a certain place creates a sense of common ground and acceptance, rooted in shared fates. As such, there is no sense of inferiority toward families coming from the same place. In contrast to the more conventional understanding of respect pertaining to keeping people's basic rights and wishes in regard, respect seems to encompass a number of other values and norms. Among the most important are unconditional loyalty toward loved ones, holding those of higher positions (i.e. elders or community leaders) in high esteem, being direct and honest, and understanding each other's hardships by showing consideration for emotional issues.

Our participants indicate how paying and getting respect is like walking a tightrope. Not paying due respect in any situation is considered very offensive, which is often the cause for the misunderstandings and conflicts people experience. A telling example of a violation of the respect principle and the subsequent reaction was observed when a coordinator of the local Food Bank summoned the researcher, while on a coffee break with his coworkers, to help with the preparations for the distribution that day. In a snide way she remarked: *"Time to roll up your sleeves now. Enough with the sitting around and drinking coffee."* The field researcher laughed politely in response and went to assist with the preparations. When he returned, his coworkers at the welfare workplace were fuming with anger. *"How dare she put you in your place like that!"* a female coworker exclaimed. *"She has no idea you just cleaned out a house this morning. I'm surprised you helped her. I would never move a muscle for that woman."* The field researcher asked his coworkers what aspect of the coordinator's behavior made them so angry with her. They explained how her comment showed a lack of respect and understanding for the work people did in the workplace. Indeed, people in the workplace, the researcher included, had worked hard that morning and were enjoying a well-deserved coffee break. Nonetheless, the field researcher had noticed their disdain toward this particular coordinator before, so their attitude toward her could not be attributed to this single incident. His coworkers explained that the woman in question had shown disrespect in their eyes many times before. For example, through the manner in which she habitually pinched her nose when she walked by the warehouse where people smoked and how this and similar actions made them feel like being treated as inferior: *"She sees us as some sort of miscreants who do nothing but sit on their asses, smoke and drink coffee all day. Well, if you treat me like that I don't want anything to do with you."* Because the coordinator had (perhaps sub consciously) not treated the group with due respect, the woman was treated with high levels of distrust and was shunned from the group. During fieldwork, many more instances were observed where a participants' network closes its ranks to form a front to outsiders who, in their eyes, do not pay due respect. Therefore, not being paid respect feeds sentiments of being excluded and a feeling of 'us against the rest', which causes the network of persistently poor to become even more closed-off and tighter.

In some cases, participants express that if they do not feel they receive respect, they sometimes resort to aggressive behavior. As one man put it: *"becoming aggressive at least makes them take you seriously. It gives you back some control."* The same outward distrust and belligerence, rooted in perceived prejudices and lack of respect, was observed in many other areas such as contact with social workers or relationships with schoolteachers and superiors in the workplace. Therefore, the tight nature of our participants' social networks, as well as their conflict-ridden outward relationships, is intricately linked with the notion of respect. A plaque on the wall in the home of a participant commemorates the rule that governs many of the people interviewed: *"Show respect to get respect."*

5.3. Social hierarchy and community leaders

Tied to the notion of respect, the networks of participants display a strict hierarchy. On the scale of families, we found how this makes the networks prone to power imbalances and abuse. Our data reveals a picture of clear gender role divisions vested in traditional norms. Women are expected to manage the everyday household chores and to take care of the children, whereas men take up the role of provider in charge of the household finances. The latter role is very much threatened by the disappearance of unskilled work in the region. Participants often refer to instances where the man in the household takes up a dominant position and tries to cover up the dire financial situation. Bills and dunning letters are withheld up to the point where repossession or even eviction is inevitable. Women and children in the household are commonly held in the dark regarding the finances through methods of intimidation and domination – particularly potent in small networks – so that the ultimate consequences come as a shock.

R: *"We lived there for about three years but we found out he [mother's boyfriend] never paid the rent. I was about twelve or thirteen when the receptionist called me out of the classroom. She tried to be very calm, so I got the feeling something was not right. (…) When I came home there already was a moving truck. They were repossessing all kinds of things. We were left on the street, I wasn't even allowed into my own bedroom."*

I: *"Did you see it coming at all?"*

R: *"Not really. We were suspicious though. He also abused me, you know? I don't know how he managed it but we hadn't seen a bill all this time. But we did suspect the bills weren't getting paid because… When you're on welfare and you can afford to do whatever you like… That doesn't seem right of course. But you know, my mother was also afraid of him so she didn't dare to confront him either."*

- Tom (in his twenties)

On a wider scale, another powerful position within networks of poor is taken up by community leaders. Community leaders have a prominent role in advocating right of the poor, organizing informal support and reproducing an image of 'outcasts'. The authority or respect of community leaders seems to derive from a personal history of hardship, endurance and resistance against the fate of poverty. The community leaders to whom we spoke and to whom participants referred can be characterized as charismatic and influential figures centrally positioned within multiple networks of persistently poor. Due to their many connections to different networks of poor they have a powerful gatekeeper type position and exert a great deal of influence within and across different networks of poor. The community leaders we identified exhibit an active social media presence. Through sharing stories, media articles, opinions and experiences of wrongdoings and inequities, community leaders take up a leading role in constructing a collective sense of solidarity and at the same time exclusion. Many Facebook support groups exist that explicitly focus on exchanging goods and services among welfare recipients and those willing to help. In addition to community leaders' personal social media pages, these Facebook groups are also used as a communication channel. Many participants referred to posts on these pages, which underscores that community leaders are indeed influential figures. Although the powerful position of community leaders in some ways reinforces social exclusion, they do not abuse their power like dominant figures in family networks and mostly try to advocate the rights of the poor.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper set out to shed light on rural aspects of poverty by looking closely at class practices and social networks. Our findings highlight the complex experience as well as the highly relational nature of persisting poverty in a rural context. Bourdieu (1987) and Shucksmith (2012) postulate that those in similar social positions and exposed to similar conditions develop similar practices. Indeed, we find that our participants are exposed to an array of difficult conditions over their life course, which shape their perceived social position and practices. More often than not, the difficult conditions take place in social rather than financial realms. In this sense, our findings confirm earlier assertions that poverty is a complex problem extending beyond financial definition (see De Meyer et al., 2015; Townsend, 2014; Besselink et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2009; Moore, 2005).

Scholars recommend to view social experiences of poverty in relation to constructions of rural places (Tickamyer et al., 2017; Woods, 2013; Shucksmith, 2012; Duncan, 1999). We argue that social reputations of poor families are inextricably tied to the stigmatization of places in the town and region. Spatial stigma becomes ingrained in perceptions of poverty in the town and region which are reproduced over multiple generations. Ultimately, this creates a highly developed social intuition (see Bourdieu (1987) shared by most people in the town. We stress stigma within the region creates a 'legacy of inequality' (see Flora et al., 2016; Sherman, 2006) and contributes to the enduring as well as to the intergenerational character of poverty in the Groninger Veenkoloniën (van Oosterhout, 2018; Strijker and Edzes, 2017; Meyer et al., 2015; Moore, 2005).

In terms of the social networks of rural poor, we firstly conclude that the social networks of our participants are small and fragmented. There is not one single network of poor but rather many different ones often not in contact or possibly even in conflict with each other. We find that many participants are conditioned to keep their social world very small – in order to shield shameful situations at home, and to prevent hurt from outside – thus reinforcing a socially excluded position. Practices to deliberately keep networks small therefore serve as a way of coping, however, are also likely another factor adding to rural poverty's invisibility (see Commins, 2004). We conclude, that despite the variety in difficult conditions experienced between participants, the consequences of how they operate in a social sense and the ways in which this shapes their social networks are remarkably similar. We find that experiences and difficult circumstances encountered in childhood form a deeply rooted social disposition of inferiority, exclusion and shame. We argue that this social disposition creates a sense of social isolation, which in turn reinforces social exclusion. To children that grow up in isolated and excluded networks, this sense of inferiority and stigma becomes deeply internalized. We argue that this feedback loop is a major contributing factor in the intergenerational and persisting character of rural poverty.

Secondly, the networks of participants are tightly knit, built on close and emotional ties rooted in similar experiences and endured hardships. A key value which governs many social norms in the participants' networks is respect. Adding to the understanding of social exclusion in rural areas (Klärner and Knabe, 2019; Shucksmith, 2012; Guiaux et al., 2011), we illustrate how participants regularly perceive a lack of respect in contacts outside their own network. The intricate notion of respect plays a key role in the outward distrust and many conflicts observed within the networks, which ultimately reinforce social exclusion. Arguably, the outward distrust encountered by outsiders feeds stigmas about families and places of poverty.

Finally, networks of poor shared a similar form of social hierarchy. On the scale of family networks, the hierarchy is characterized by uneven power distributions, which make vulnerable members of the network prone to various forms of abuse. Similar forms of social organization that favor an abuse of power might be found in groups to which membership is exclusive and social networks are kept small as a consequence – e.g. certain clubs, cults or religious groups. On the role of power in exclusion processes (Shucksmith, 2012), we suggest the abuse of power within participants' networks cannot be viewed separately from the small size and tight nature of these networks. One feature of the social organization of the networks that does transcend multiple networks of poor concerns the observed community leaders. Despite their influential role within networks of poor, community leaders often go unrecognized in or are excluded from policy and interventions as well as in research into social dynamics of rural poverty.

In a broader perspective, by comparing experiences of older and younger generations, we argue that, even though in general the Dutch countryside has changed over past generations (Salemink et al., 2017; Edzes and Strijker, 2017), the social experience and nature of persisting rural poverty has hardly changed. We believe policies' evident inability to address enduring rural poverty is likely due to the fact that most policies and interventions exhibit a normative character. Generally, policy and interventions are directed toward getting poor people to participate more in some or many domains of society. We argue that in this process, the traumatic and profoundly shaping circumstances people in enduring poverty encounter over the life course often go unrecognized. Consequently, policies and interventions – and more generally government – are perceived as impersonal, overly complex and rigid. In this light, we recommend that policy and interventions focus on first understanding individual situations, the networks and experiences of poverty; and second set realistic and tangible goals for support catered to individual situations and priorities and utilizing the qualities present within social networks.

Overall the strong embeddedness of stigma in family and community networks coupled with the strong hierarchy in terms of social class is a central component of understanding the persistent nature of poverty in the Groninger Veenkoloniën. Therefore, in addition to an individual approach, addressing persisting and intergenerational poverty requires a specific regional approach aimed to gradually mitigate this socio-spatial stigma. This regional approach should first and foremost focus on gaining access to and trust of closed and isolated networks of rural poor, before trying to dismantle the socio-spatial stigma. Due to the long history of stigmatization, dismantling the socio-spatial stigma attached to the Groninger Veenkoloniën will presumably take multiple generations. Breaking down the stigma can only start with acknowledging the difficult conditions of existence rural poor have had to endure and work from there toward more inclusive and equal rural communities.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.031.

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