Affective spaces of the rural: A praxeological analysis of the "spatial pioneers" of Upper Lusatia (Germany)

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ABSTRACT

While many rural regions in Germany are facing a downward socio-structural spiral, there is a growing societal yearning for rurality and the practices associated with it. By creating a network for individuals who migrate from urban centers to a peripheral rural area, the self-proclaimed "spatial pioneer" movement of Upper Lusatia operates at the convergence of these realities. Through an ethnographic inquiry into this movement, we study the social practices of these spatial pioneers, particularly focusing on affective practices that evoke emotional responses within individuals. We identified five dimensions that shape the spatial pioneers' rural lifeworlds — nature, work, community, simplicity, and self-efficacy. From the perspective of the spatial pioneers, rural spaces are not necessarily 'ideal' via their discursive representations. However, rurality as a lifestyle (as a way of liv*ing*) becomes desirable via the (affective) practices it enables. The singularity of structurally weak rural areas lies in the fact that they offer opportunities for living the 'good life' that, *due to* limiting material and cultural structures, are unavailable elsewhere (e.g., in urban settings). In applying the concept of affective spaces, we aim for a deeper understanding of the spatial pioneers' bodily-affective experience, perception, and practice-based production of space. By doing so, we provide insights into practice-based, affective (re-)productions of rurality and rural spaces.

1. Introduction

"We are facing this huge demographic change and so much has to happen and there can be no more of the same old thing […] and there is also the opportunity […]. There is this general sentiment that people want to move to rural areas." (Lukas, Member of the spatial pioneer movement 2022)

The above quote refers to the demographic challenges of Upper Lusatia,[1] Germany. Many peripheral rural regions in eastern Germany, Upper Lusatia being one of them, suffer from an unequal distribution of resources for public services, public finances, and economic performance in relation to more prosperous regions. This frequently leads to elevated levels of out-migration. At the same time, out-migration and neglect have opened new spaces for self-organized life practices and innovative networks for a group of people that is attracted by precisely these circumstances. Spaces that go through crises and upheavals are often nuclei for alternative ideas and creative solutions concerning regional development claims. The so-called 'spatial pioneers'[2] constitute a central group of actors in this context as they "test novel uses, institutions and organizations for spaces whose original functions have been thinned out or completely lost" (Matthiesen 2013: 155; own translation). They may be long-time residents, returnees, or newcomers who consciously choose to settle in the socio-economic periphery. By acquiring and transforming such 'left-behind' spaces in new ways, they recognize unique spaces of opportunity in the very 'crisis spaces' declared as such by politics, the media, and society at large (Christmann 2019: 1).

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[1] For Upper Lusatia, whose economic backbone was for decades the mining and energy industries, the phase-out of coal-fired power generation has been associated with unemployment and mass out-migration. As an exemplary 'crisis space', Upper Lusatia is particularly suitable as a site for studying the spatial pioneer movement through observation of the appropriation of its sites and the (re-)production of (new) spatial practices *in situ*.

[2] The term 'spatial pioneer' is controversial due to its militarily appropriating and exclusionary semantics (Dehne 2013: 169; Veihelmann 2013: 98). During the empirical study it became clear that not all participants could identify themselves with the term. However, we decided to stick to this term because in the German context it is the most widely used in the literature and the movement, we analyzed calls itself "spatial pioneer" movement.

While pro-rural migration itself is a well-researched field, we wish to examine the practiced subsequent lives in rural towns and villages and to address the "everyday entanglements with (rural) place" (Halfacree and Rivera 2012: 92). Against this backdrop, we are particularly attentive to affective practices of spatial pioneers, i.e., those that are interwoven through an emotional appeal to the subjects.

Networks of social practices and materialities, as well as the affects that subjects experience within them, constitute rural spaces that we will explore in this paper with reference to the concept of 'affective spaces' (Reckwitz 2012). In applying this concept, we aim for a deeper understanding of the spatial pioneers' bodily-affective experience, perception, and practice-based production of space These dimensions constitute spaces that are tangential to specific narratives and, at the same time, evolve as material places.

Spatial pioneer-like movements are not new phenomena. Since the 1970s, various 'back-to-the-land' movement across the Global North refer to a growing ecological awareness, protest against urban consumption patterns and the pressing questions about the 'limits of growth' (Halfacree 2007; Wilbur 2013, 2014; Calvário and Otero 2015). Many spatial pioneers today claim alternative, sustainable and nature-oriented ways of life that they want to advance in a pioneering way (Dehne 2013: 169; Matthiesen 2011: 61). In this respect, these actors define the rural idyll in terms of anti-capitalist, solidarity-based values (Woods 2011).

For the German context, Ulf (Matthiesen, 2011, 2013) describes a noticeable, but overall minor migration into the rural regions of the former German Democratic Republic (Eastern Germany) which has been ongoing since the 1990s. During this time span, spatial pioneers and similar actors have attracted the attention of regional planners and political stakeholders, for they are increasingly perceived as drivers of development in rural peripheries (Christmann 2019: 1). Nevertheless, research on spatial pioneers has mainly been conducted in disadvantaged urban districts (e.g., Christmann 2013; Noack and Schmidt 2022), whereas few empirical studies consider spatial pioneer movements in rural regions in Germany (exceptions are: Drews and Hollerbach 2014; Rössel 2014; Unthan et al., 2022). Given the currently growing (albeit often idealized) interest in rural life and the associated expectations and promises, the underrepresentation of rural spaces in this area of research represents a relevant research gap.

The paper unfolds as follows: To begin, we will delve into our theoretical framework, drawing primarily from Reckwitz's (2012) contributions to practice theory and his concept of affective space. Prior to presenting our empirical findings, we will detail the research methodology and methods employed. Our analysis of the empirical data has revealed five central dimensions of affective spaces in rural environments. Consequently, the empirical section of this paper is structured around the dimensions of nature, work, community, simplicity, and self-efficacy.

2. Practicing affective spaces

From a practice-based perspective, all social phenomena are specific complexes of interrelated practices that refer to a "way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood" (Reckwitz 2002: 250). In their performance, practices depend on shared knowledge. Therefore, they also always hold a cultural character, that enables a "shared way of attributing meaning to the world" (ibid.: 246). Simultaneously, all social practices are based on collectively shared patterns of affect. (Reckwitz, 2017: 116) emphasizes that it is not enough to merely consider affects in practice theory, but that "the crucial insight is rather that every social order as a set of practices is a specific order of affects". In other words, to understand the functioning of a practice, the affective structures underlying the practice in question must be examined. Therefore, our focus lies on the affectivity, the moods, emotions, and affective interpretation schemes inherent in the observed social practices. These are central to addressing the affectivity of rural lifeworlds, and the desires, goals, and fears associated with them.

Since the turn of the millennium, social and cultural studies have shown a growing interest in affects and emotions (Clough 2007: 1). In rural studies, a relatively small but growing literature has focused on affects (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2016; Sutherland 2020; Lindberg & Lundgren 2022). Yet, as Sutherland (2020: 352) has highlighted: "focused studies of affect have been rare". However, a turn towards affects in rural studies is promising, as "findings about the mobilization of affective responses are important to advance understanding of how beliefs about the nature of farming and rurality are unconsciously formed and shaped" (Sutherland 2020: 352).

The affective turn aims to erode the boundaries between culturalist and materialist theory (Anderson 2014: 7). Central to this turn is the assumption that affects, as constitutive elements of the social, are, like practices, simultaneously material and cultural (Reckwitz 2017). Materially, affects represent a state of arousal in the human body. Culturally, they can only be understood within a historical-cultural scheme of interpretation.

Affects are not to be understood as a mental process within an individual but as collectively understandable and shareable (Lindberg & Lundgren 2022: 78; Anderson 2009: 80). They present an "integral part of the practical activities within which human bodies relate to other objects and subjects" (Reckwitz 2012: 251). This contrasts with the oftentimes static understanding of emotion that an individual possesses 'deep inside' (Militz 2022: 89; Reckwitz 2012: 250). While affects cannot be attributed solely to the psyche of an individual, they are not purely external, public gestures. More accurately, affects are bodily expressions that are simultaneously enabled and constrained by collective patterns of interpretation, which makes them part of social practices (Scheer 2012: 195). Viewed in this way, affects are not necessarily disruptive but are "main ingredients in culturally standardized, routine bundles of practices" (Reckwitz 2017: 121). However, it is crucial to question seemingly stable patterns of collective affect and take seriously the potential for change within the reinterpretation of the practices associated with them. The reinterpretation of established (rural) practices is, as we will show, a core element of the spatial pioneers' affective production of space.

Within the framework of affective practice, subjects are affected by other subjects, objects, or even ideas in specific ways, which can be studied. Affectuation[3] ("to affect and [to] be affected" (Massumi 2002: 15)) illustrates the dynamic processualism and the interactive, always relational character of affect. The process of affecting and being affected entails a reciprocal flow between human and/or non-human entities, through which spaces and lifeworlds are constituted (Militz 2022: 92). In such a flow, affects express themselves as powerful connections without the individual being able to logically fathom and, in some cases, articulate the origins of the affect (Sutherland 2020: 352). Consequently, a methodological focus on discourse can only shed light on discourses *about* affects. To avoid such deviations, we consider said corporeality of affects carefully and study affects as a threshold between body and language (Gammerl and Herrn 2015: 11).

(Reckwitz, 2016: 174) highlights the affective potential of spatial atmospheres. These turn the attention not only to the individual artefact but especially to the three-dimensional spatial arrangement, which the subject enters and experiences in a particular way. Following the potential of this dynamic, (Schurr, 2014: 158) calls for a study of "affective spaces" that are "produced by new connections and configurations of people, affect, technology, and matter". Ultimately, the crucial question that ought to be answered regarding the empirical data is why, and how affectuations emerge within these spaces.

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[3] We coined this neologism to capture the processual 'becoming' of affects. Affectuation describes the process of activating (causing or calling forth) affects.

In practice theory, material arrangements are inseparable from practices, as they mutually shape, enable, and constrain each other (Lahr-Kurten 2012: 56). Similarly, practice theory views the constitution of spaces as the result of everyday practices (sleeping, hiking, eating, etc.), which in turn are shaped by spaces (Schurr and Strüver 2016: 88). Material orders form the context for social practices. Conversely, the material order acquires meaning through the practices taking place there (Kraehnke 2021: 246).

Through an extension into the categories of affect, Reckwitz (2012) extends the understanding of space as an affect-practice complex. Central to this extension is (in the case of both affects and practices) the overcoming of a dichotomous separation between culturalist and materialist theories. The social realm is structured in space in a relational order of bodies, practices, and artifacts (Löw, 2019: 158 ff.). At the same time, the orders of these relations are interpreted in a certain way by participants and observers. The category of space is thereby derived from a heuristic equation of cultural and material approaches to social phenomena (Reckwitz 2016: 165). As embodiments of these equations, spaces (just as practices and affects) are thus inevitably both cultural and material at the same time. Our field of concern is with affective-spatial processes that therefore neither run independently of socio-cultural structures nor arise exclusively from them. This conflation is achieved by illuminating space and affect from a praxeological perspective.

The concept of affective spaces firstly assumes that "every social practice involves an affective-perceptive structuration worth of analysis" (Reckwitz 2012: 249). The affectivity of all social practices and the affective-bodily perception and experience of space are therefore the starting point for further considerations.

Second, all practices involve "artefact-space structurations" (Reckwitz 2012: 249). Because practices emerge within relational networks of people and objects, the expression of a practice requires not only subjects who perform the practice but also specific materialities, e. g., tools, which are used and to which a certain meaning is attributed (Reckwitz 2012: 251). These materialities in turn shape (enable, restrict, or model) the practice (Lahr- Kurten 2012: 56). At this point, the scope of this theory expands to human as well as non-human entities. The relationship between artifacts, bodies, and practices leads to the dimension of socio-material space (Reckwitz 2012: 252). Social practices produce their designated spaces (e.g., an office, a garden, a swimming pool) as a particular relational arrangement of artifacts, bodies, practices and affects.

Affects, too, have a broad range of locations. They can occur not only between people but can also be directed at artefacts (e.g., an architecturally significant building) or artefact-space arrangements (e.g., a neighborhood). Therefore, the third principle of affective spaces states that "affects are often directed at artefacts/objects and are structured by the spaces these artefacts/objects form" (Reckwitz 2012: 249). In this context, affects are viewed as a force that produces spaces as a sense of place (Whatmore 2002: 3). Affects related to spaces emerge through bodily expressions of respective affective practices carried out within a space in question (Reckwitz 2012: 255). In this way, the affectivity of social practices influences the perception and the attribution of meaning to the spatial environment (Gammerl and Herrn 2015: 15).

Together, these three elements form the concept of affective spaces. In summary, every social practice implicitly creates an affective space: a nexus in which the dimensions of practices, affects, and artefact-space structuration intersect (see Fig. 1).

3. Methodology and research methods

To study affective spaces of rurality, a Grounded Theory (GT) research style was pursued. GT method-ology permits the researcher to be affected by the collected data and to enter a creative, explorative process of data evaluation. More precisely, we follow (Charmaz, 2011: 102) who proposes a "playful approach" to theory. Against this
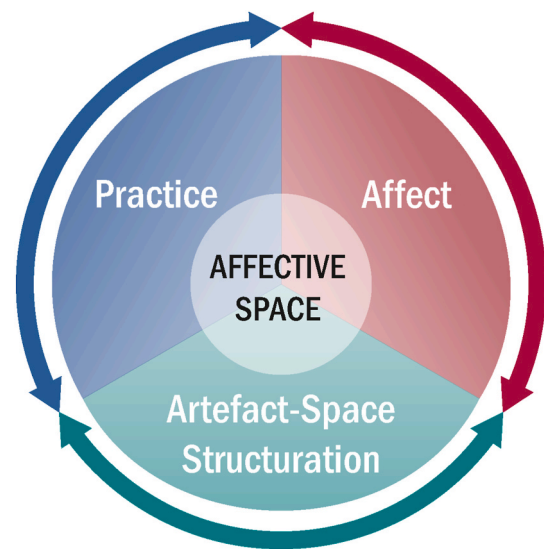

Fig. 1. Composition of affective spaces.

backdrop, our research strategy is partly theory-driven but open to theoretical considerations that emerge from the fieldwork. The thematical and theoretical research focus of this study, as well as the research question, developed according to the examinations of sets of data collected (Bading and Bosch 2018: 72). This process allows for the necessary continuous openness towards the data and "permits [the researcher] to follow leads that emerge" (Charmaz 2006: 14).

The combination of different ethnographic research methods allows for a flexible and multifaceted approach to the object of study. Empirically, fourteen walking interviews with members of the spatial pioneer movement in Upper Lusatia were conducted to reveal the appropriation and modes of experiencing space. Walking interviews lead beyond (the limits) of articulation to the experience of the everyday environment of the actors and their ways of perceiving space (Kusenbach 2008: 352). We consider the participants of this study to be self-reflective 'experts' of their own lifeworlds. According to this consideration, the narrative interview technique highlights implicit interpretations of their own actions and experiences (Lamnek and Krell 2016: 339; Charmaz 2006: 25).

To explore experiences of space beyond discursive methods, human geography increasingly relies on visual methods (Dangschat and Kogler 2019: 1340). To incorporate visual methods into this research, all interviewees were asked to draw explicitly subjective mental maps of their everyday environments. Mental maps are graphic representations that depict individual perceptions of everyday spaces (e.g., neighborhoods or every-day routes). These maps emphasize the affective and emotional experience of spatial extracts (Scholtz and Strüver 2017: 98). Therefore, they are eminently suitable for the analysis of affective spaces.

Additionally, we build on participant observation, the first author having lived, and worked in two spatial pioneer households in Upper Lusatia for one week each. The method of participant observation allows the researcher to temporarily immerse themself in the field under investigation with their entire physicality, senses, and perceptual patterns, including their subjectivity (Hauser-Schäublin 2020: 36). The observation of situational (everyday) practices was at the center of interest here. Likewise, the method of participant observation emphasizes the interaction between the research participants and the researcher. Therefore, a prerequisite for successful participant observation is gaining access to the field in a way that allows for participation based on mutual trust between researcher and research participant. For the method of participant observation, the researcher's body itself mutates into an auto-ethnographic data collection instrument, providing "bodily-affective primary data" (Steiner et al., 2022: 23; own translation). The core challenge of participant observation lies in balancing the dynamics

between closeness and distance, i.e. participating and observing, necessitating continuous renegotiation and reflection on these relationships in specific field situations.

4. Research findings: practicing affective rurality

4.1. Being in touch with nature

For all the interviewees, nature is a central affective element of their ways of life. The actors' move to the countryside or return to it is often based on an affectuation by the natural environment, as one interviewee recalls: "It's so beautiful here, the Kamenzer hills and the landscape […] when we saw it, we immediately fell in love" (Friedrich, 2022).[4] Among all the correspondents, the preference for a rural environment over an urban one "has a lot to do with nature" (Annabelle, 2022). Particularly, affective spaces are created through nature-based leisure practices such as canoeing, and the affects and emotions associated with them. For example, the "big garden right by the river which allows you to get right into a kayak and paddle down the Spree" (Inga, 2022), is referred to and sought out by the interviewees during the go-along interviews.

Nature is considered worthy of protection by the members of the spatial pioneer movement on both small and large scales and is central to their lives. They display a general understanding (Schatzki 1996) of nature as a source of "relaxation and free space and a source for personal development and inspiration" (Jana, 2022). This affectuation leads many spatial pioneers to strive for ecologically sustainable lifestyles. The opportunity to live more sustainably is often cited as a motivation to leave the city. Rural life and the practices associated with it affirm the "prospect […] of living more ecologically consciously" (Claus, 2022). The interviewees report a growing sense of responsibility for the environment, which they claim can be better fulfilled in rural areas. This affect finds expression, for example, in nutrition practices or practices of recycling and upcycling as well as mobility practices and consumption patterns.

In many cases, positive emotions that ecologically sustainable actions evoke in the subjects are not as-sociated with 'country life' per se. Rather, they are associated with the emergence of an affective domestic garden space that connects subjects, materiality, and emotions through specific (gardening) practices. The respondent Jana (2022) notes that she is happy to grow potatoes in her garden "and not to buy the potatoes from Egypt in the [supermarket], which are shockingly available there". As a result of water shortages in Upper Lusatia, Inga does not "grow radishes anymore but flowers that don't need as much water" (Inga, 2022). This shows that space and materiality both enable and limit certain practices. The practices of watering, for example, structure the garden space both on a material and on a symbolic level. The latter because the adaptation of actions to natural conditions serves as a demarcation from perceived dominant patterns of interaction with nature found outside of the spatial pioneer movement: "The garden philosophy of the others here in the village is rather to have such a smooth lawn, which is also watered" (ibid).

A similar general understanding that the respondent Annabelle (2022) describes as "networked thinking" regarding ecological interrelations translates into practices such as sharing a car or exchanging surplus fruit with neighbors — practices, in turn, based on a communal performance and fundamentally on shared access to a common understanding of what ecologically sustainable practices are. These foundations are affective structures — on the one hand, because of the positive evaluation of the conservation of resources and, on the other hand, because of the communal aspect of "sharing and caring" (ibid.). However, the data show that access to this general understanding (that

enables the practice in the first place) is reduced to a habitual 'bubble' which mainly comprises like-minded spatial pioneers: "It's not so common among our older neighbors" (ibid.). This, in turn, suggests the emergence of an affective spatial pioneer 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1976) based on shared knowledge and specific socio-cultural 'rules of the game' of an eco-friendly lifestyle.

The subject's involvement with space takes place through such physically enacted practices as "getting up early and walking barefoot in the garden" (Ronja, 2022) and the associated more-than-human elements, their sensory perception ("feeling the grass still wet from the dew between your toes" (Annabelle, 2022)) and in carrying the practice-based affects such as connectedness and familiarity. Practices that are close to 'nature' or understood as ecologically sustainable are emotionally charged and directly connected to the respondents' environment. For example, the respondent Ronja (2022) describes the outdoor toilet in her garden as a unique place. This is because there she "opens the door and looks into the garden" (ibid.). The material elements of a 'simple' life in nature, the physicality of using the toilet, and the symbolic 'preservation' of an outdated and now singular practice hold affective qualities that span the affective space here. The data reveals the particular importance of a "relationship to nature" (Gustav, 2022) that the subjects enter. Affective spaces are created within the 'becoming' of natural cycles and the interviewees find themselves in contact with a "living process" (Fabian and Ophelia, 2022). For instance, some interviewees claim to sense the seasons much more intensely: "Winter in the countryside is much longer and much harder and much grayer and much muddier. It's hard. But on the other hand, the first day of spring is kind of a blast" (Marie 2022). In the city, however, this contrast is viewed as "buffered or softened a bit" (ibid.). Here again it becomes clear that the subjects feel 'addressed' by nature whenever they are directly involved and affected.

4.2. Affective work

The high proportion of self-employed individuals among the spatial pioneers is striking. Many spatial pioneers work in occupations often lying outside employment relationships, such as in creative industries. Positive emotions of happiness and confidence are directed towards the "self-determination and freedom" (Fabian and Ophelia, 2022) found in self-employment. In part, this self-determination is made possible by advancing digitalization and the rise of mobile working models (Bürgin et al., 2021).

Handicraft practices affect the subjects primarily through the integrated corporeality and materiality of the respective occupation. For one interviewee, the affective connection with his historic carpentry machinery and the practice of woodworking creates an affective workshop space. He refers to this work-shop space as his "sacred halls". This shows that the role of materiality and (mechanical) technologies, as well as their potential to affect, is central to the constitution of affective spaces.

While some of those interviewed are employed, others live (at least partially) from what they produce on their land. This includes the cultivation of fruits and vegetables, but also the production of dairy products, firewood, and wool. Growing fruits, and vegetables in one's own garden is a practice linked to specific demands, desires, and (rural) narratives. Claus (2022), for example, sees the prospect of "growing one's own vegetables" as a reason for the increasing levels of migration to rural areas. In addition to saving money, self-sufficiency also has a symbolic value. The practices of "getting something out of the ground with one's own hands, without much use of technology" (ibid.) are central to his understanding of "being in the world" (ibid.). In addition to growing fruits and vegetables, many respondents also keep animals. Apart from the production of animal products and the experienced self-efficacy in learning how to keep animals, the animal husbandry of the spatial pioneers is mainly concerned with the encounter with the animal and its emotional significance (Pütz et al., 2022: 185). Like-wise, the affective human-animal relationship experienced by the subjects can

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[4] The use of acronyms ensures the anonymity of the participants. Direct quotes from the interviews conducted in German were translated into English by the authors.

also be classified as a pillar of an affective spatial experience.

The meaningful, often enthusiastic connection between individual spatial pioneers and their work practices is of strong relevance to the production of affective spaces. In this respect, an affinity for the region and its challenges is often intertwined with economic practices. This affective connection translates into a high proportion of spatial pioneers who are professionally (or voluntarily) involved in the field of (sustainable) regional development. Since their move to a Lusatian town, one interviewee has been professionally involved in regional planning processes and, together with his family, aims to shape the town's cultural life: "We want to make a contribution here so that it is a place worth living in, which also has an appeal or attractiveness" (Gustav, 2022).

The data demonstrates that the affective connection of the subjects with the region stimulates social commitment and civic participation. It further reveals affective links between work, private life, and leisure time in balance, which suggests that, as one respondent states, "work and private life are no longer separated, but it's kind of a way of self-realization where you can really immerse yourself in a passion. Of course, you can do that very, very well in the countryside" (Claus, 2022). The merging of private and professional interests is thought of in connection with a rural way of life. In this respect, rural contexts stand in opposition to a perceived urban alienation from work and convey a sense of an 'authentic' re-integration of individual and professional interests. This shows that the rural paradigm affects by offering a counterpoint to perceived urban economies and their practices. From the perspective of the spatial pioneers, rurality is understood as a socio-economic relationship. It is expressed through specific (partially) economic practices (e.g., self-sufficient farming, barter), materialities in the broadest sense (e.g., chickens), and positive emotions directed towards the chosen way of value creation. Rurality and its associated economic practices evoke a sense of independence. Additionally, they offer the actors a form of resistance to the alienated, growth-oriented labor, which is attributed to urban spaces (Baumann 2018: 209 f.). Therefore, the spatial pioneers' rurality also emerges as a political-ideological template, that is to be independent of capitalist value chains and "commodity fetishism" (Calvário and Otero 2015: 144). Already in the 1970s the 'back-to-the-landers' were striving for self-sufficiency through subsistence agriculture. The template continues to be active, as the focus of rural economies within the spatial pioneer movement lies on sustainable, independent, and cooperative forms of economic activities with an immense affective appeal to the involved subjects.

4.3. Solidarity and belonging

Rural life has been imagined as the epitome of social cohesion (Marszałek, 2019: 349). In the face of major social transformations, contemporary longings for community are growing (Neu and Nikolic 2020: 181). Rural community is also a central pillar of the affective lifeworlds of spatial pioneers. The aspect of a close neighborhood and the fact that "you can count people on two hands and know their names" (Annabelle, 2022) or the practice of obligatory greetings on the street, create a sense of familiarity. In these instances, rurality prepares a space for negotiating the virulent questions of late modernity concerning community, society, and solidarity (Neu 2018: 20). For the interviewees, the associated practices contrast sharply with a perceived anonymity of 'the city.' The breakdown of anonymity within the village context is largely assessed as positive and associated, for instance, with an increased sense of security. Of affective significance is the compassion for and involvement in the lives of fellow villagers that results from familiarity.

In this process, affective spaces emerge as social places. This is in accordance with previous research, which notes that the practice of gathering in places of encounter produces community, closeness, and cohesion (Neu 2018: 18). In these instances, moments of social interaction lie at the forefront of the constitution of affective spaces. In

accord with these findings, Marie's mental map (see Fig. 2) shows places of encounter within a 'bubble' that represents the village boundary. This kind of spacing highlights a perceived physical as well as symbolic 'proximity'. Diffusely felt late-modern fears, for instance regarding globalization and terror, feed an explicit desire for experiences of proximity (Neu 2018: 18). Places of proximity span a social space, framed by material structures that enable interpersonal encounters. They include, for example, the church and the church community, which plays a central affective role in Marie's social life, which she expresses through the comment "*there* we try to support each other" (Marie 2022). Additionally, she labels the cheese dairy on the map as a "place of encounter."

However, the materialities that enable practices of neighborly interaction, such as community houses, swimming pools, grocery stores, etc., are increasingly disappearing in remote rural areas (Neu and Nikolic 2020: 180; Kallert et al., 2021). In this respect, sociability outside established structures, self-organized by local private actors is crucial for the future of such village communities. In this respect, many spatial pioneers see themselves as initiators who create social opportunities and open social spaces.

From a perceived socio-spatial belonging arises the wish to contribute to the village community. Many interviewees describe the rural community as a 'caring community' (Neu 2016: 8). Here, the practices of "neighborly help" (Ronja, 2022) which they seek to actively engage in, form a "reliable relationship construct" (ibid.). In this subfield, the desire for one's own children to grow up in a "good network of relationships and commitment" (Lukas, 2022) is particularly present. Regarding educational tasks, an expansion to a larger circle outside of the nuclear family and alternative forms of living together can be found, for example, in multi-generational households or in housing communities in which several families live, work, and learn together.

For its members, the network of the spatial pioneer movement provides a value-based community space that emerges via shared interests and visions for the development of the region. Networking among spatial pioneers connects like-minded people in the region. What connects the subjects are affective strands solidified through practices of initiating, participating, acknowledging, valuing, or devaluing. For many of its members, the network offers: "A spiritual home, so to speak." (Friedrich, 2022). The spatial pioneer network can also be seen as providing emotional support. The relationships formed in this way are felt to be identity-building and empowering. Practices of cooperation and mutual support shape relationships in the network and, thus, constitute the social lifeworlds of many spatial pioneers. Goods, knowledge, and services are exchanged among members. These practices, in turn, are based on shared understandings as well as shared symbolic and material ties. The result is an affective social network space.

Sociality in the countryside is also addressed when it manifests in circumstances and emotions perceived as negative. Many interviewees describe their immediate social environment as "rather conservative" (Friedrich, 2022), "provincial" (Gustav, 2022), or "a bit backward and old-fashioned" (Jana, 2022). One interviewee reports that in her work as a progressive climate researcher in a former mining area, she is "discredited" (Frauke, 2022) by parts of the village community. Reports of conflict range from contested gender norms to political disputes and issues of historic preservation. Dehne (2013: 178) speaks of difficult relationships between spatial pioneers and long-term residents, fearing confrontation or at least the emergence of 'parallel worlds' (ibid.: 179). In the study area, sharp social and ideological divisions are particularly evident through political fault lines. Although such confrontations are not limited to rural areas, they prove that the idealization of the rural community as a social utopia is problematic: On the one hand, because it by no means reflects the complexity of the inhabitants' social lives; on the other, because it obscures the presence of social conflicts and intolerance in village contexts (Neu and Nikolic 2020: 181). Contrary to romanticized notions of village community, rural neighborhoods also
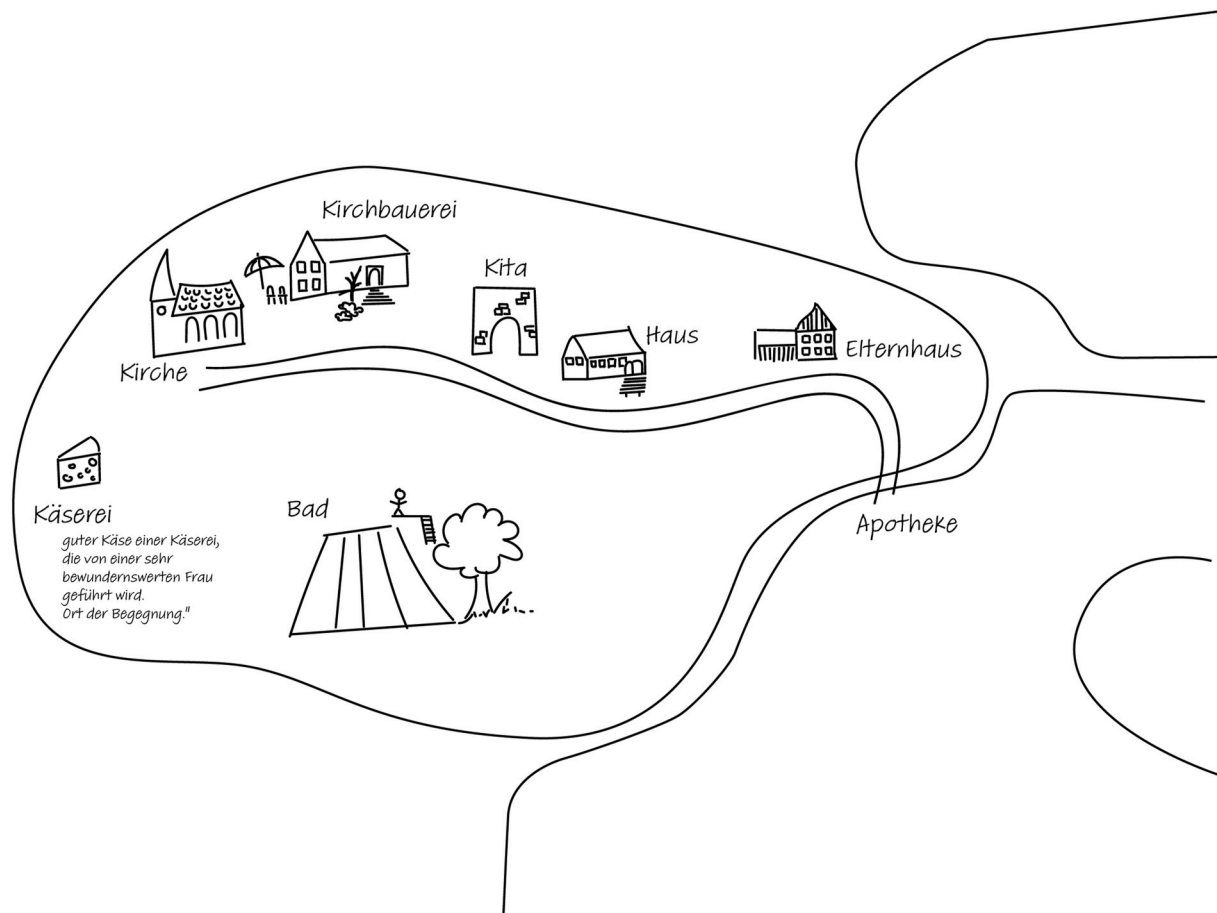
Fig. 2. Edited Mental Map, original drawing by Marie.

consist of isolation, mutual control, codependency, and conflicts.

4.4. Living the simple life

In addition to social cohesion, the desire for deceleration and mindfulness awakens the longings of city dwellers for the countryside (Neu 2016: 5). (Altrock et al. 2005: 11) found that peace and quiet, next to a village atmosphere, are important motivational factors for people moving to the countryside. The founder of the Upper Lusatian spatial pioneer movement confirms this conclusion: "Well, most of [the movement members] are looking for peace and quiet" (Annabelle, 2022). Some interviewees felt "increasingly overwhelmed" (Claus, 2022) by their former urban environments and reported being constantly worried there "about missing something, no matter what [they] decide to do" (Ronja, 2022). Meanwhile, rurality represents the small-scaled, the pure, and the decelerated. For the subjects, life in the countryside is limited to the 'essential'. The rural social and physical environment affects through its simple structures. In her village, "the streetlights still go out at night […] it is wonderfully relaxing and decelerating", Luisa (2022) reported. To the interviewees, the issue of the "tempo of the city" (Inga, 2022), in which it is "difficult to break the hamster wheel" (Claus, 2022), dissolves in the countryside into a highly affective "more relaxed atmosphere" (2022).

In the face of global crises "from the war in Ukraine to the Taliban and whatever … Taiwan" (Frauke, 2022) the rural home provides security and the "privilege […] of being able to block all that out" (ibid.). Positive feelings of being secure within a familiar space become apparent in the subjects' familiarity with their natural-material environment. For instance, Inga (2022) finds a safe haven in her garden. When she spends time there, she reported, "suddenly COVID and Ukraine are very far away, here I am just with myself and in nature". For the subjects, life in the countryside is limited to the 'essential'. What can be observed is a retreat into the small-scale lifeworlds — in some cases into the exclusively private sphere. Of interest is that such a retreat contradicts the ambitions of the socio-ecological activism of the spatial pioneer actor identified in the literature (e.g., Links and Volke 2009: 13). The data collected shows, that, in the first place, the spatial pioneer movement observed in Upper Lusatia touches on a 'small-scale revolution' that primarily refers to one's own immediate environment as rural spaces of the 'good life' and thus, as a highly affective space. In this context the qualities of a 'good' life often translate into a 'simple' lifestyle.

It is striking that the practices of simple living, referred to by the interviewees (e.g., getting up early and starting the fire) are materially anchored, for example, in the materiality of (fire)wood or in the simple furnishings of the house. Many interviewees mention that the routine of heating the house with firewood is a pivotal element of their 'simple life' in the country (Luisa, 2022; Friedrich, 2022). The perceived authenticity, to some extent primitiveness, of this practice seems to comprise significant affective structures. Similarly, the preservation of historic properties, which is a central part of many spatial pioneers' lifeworlds also constitutes a pillar of affective rural spaces. Reckwitz (2016: 176) emphasizes the role of objects as generators of affectuation, precisely regarding the built environment. Through the practices of renovation and rehabilitation, the subjects refer to the 'vivid' materiality of, for example, historic farmhouses. A strong attachment to certain materials is particularly evident here: "The old wood, I totally love it" (Marie 2022). A house that is more than two hundred years old "already has a history which kind of really *breathes* like that" (ibid.). A certain contact with the past, "perhaps with something frozen in time," (Inga, 2022) is

what holds the affective power here. Inga goes on to say that she wants to uphold and value the historical purpose of the building where she lives and works with her community: "It was just an important place for the village, for living together and celebrating and socializing" (ibid.). Accordingly, she wants to open their house to the village community in the future, e.g., for neighborhood events.

4.5. Spaces for self-efficacy

Especially in economically devalued, isolated rural areas, there are opportunities and free spaces for the development of specific (alternative) lifestyles (Dehne 2013: 171). Such free spaces are open to a variety of practices, leaving room for other courses of action than those currently in place. They provide a scope of action in which the subjects can operate. The ambition of spatial pioneers to use vacant spaces in novel ways first presupposes the physical availability of real estate, gardens, farmlands, offices, warehouses, inns etc. A high degree of vacancies is a central characteristic of shrinking regions such as Upper Lusatia. When such vacancies are "viewed from another perspective" (Gustav, 2022), opportunities open for "spatial pioneers, subcultures and those seeking free space" (ibid.). The physical vacancy is thus positively reinterpreted as a space of opportunity for the spatial pioneers, as it "creates opportunities that are not available elsewhere" (Inga, 2022).

The found material conditions (vacancy, availability) seem to enable creative practices, through which the perceived free space emerges as a bundle of (creative) practices (Schatzki 2016: 33). Hence, the affectivity of the space arises via the practice it enables. Free space refers not only to the physical availability of space but also to emotional free spaces, "so to speak, those spaces in which one can express oneself" (Jana, 2022). Here, it becomes apparent that the two dimensions of physical emptiness and symbolic openness are, of course, interdependent, as a demonstration that structure and cultural meaning cannot be thought of independently of each other.

In the perception of the interviewees, these "free spaces for development" (Jana, 2022) in rural areas are much more accessible than elsewhere. In this way, the rural mutates into a *terra incognita*, in which, as Jana states, there is "still a lot to discover that has already been discovered in other places". By this, she primarily refers to perceived professional or cultural niches that seem to be unoccupied in the countryside because it is felt to be a culturally "empty space" (Nell 2022: 101). The low density of cultural events has its own affective structures and has led to a culture of 'do-it-yourself' among many members of the spatial pioneer movement. Gustav (2022) puts it this way: "If we want to go to an outdoor movie show or a concert [...] then we do it. But then it's self-made". Based on their own desire for cultural and social infrastructure that goes beyond the provision of the bare necessities, the subjects change from being 'consumers' to 'producers' of their lifeworlds. In their conception, the practice of consumption is linked to a passive, urban lifestyle, whereas the rural transforms the subjects into producers, who henceforth see their ambition in shaping these rural spaces themselves. Claus (2022) describes this transformation as follows: "You live in the city because everything is offered to you, and you live in the countryside because you have to and want to offer yourself. That is the main difference". Doing things themselves, away from a purportedly over-regulated urban environment where "there is practically everything already there" (Marie 2022) affects the subjects.

Interviewees report that in rural environments they can "contribute according to their talents [and] make a difference" (ibid.). In principle, this is also possible in the city, yet in an urban setting, one respondent reports that he "did not see any effectiveness or simply did not see that there was still a need there" (Lukas, 2022). The dimension of participation in local politics, voluntary village councils or environ-mental groups is also mentioned frequently by interviewees. Here, too, the rural environment seems to enable practices of civic engagement. Fundamentally, this perception is related to the self-efficacy

experienced. As Lukas reports: "Well, people have more confidence in the countryside, I've noticed that. Because in the city, there is always someone who is more competent for everything". The possibility of shaping one's own lifeworld is a fundamental aspect of the emergence of affective spaces of rurality, both in terms of individual ways of life and of the ability to shape social circumstances (Rössel 2014: 214 ff.). This possibility is strongly linked to the 'here' as opposed to an undefined 'elsewhere' ("But *here* I can make a difference" (Friedrich, 2022)). Along this line of reasoning, one's own involvement is no longer perceived to be lost in an urban mass but, in the absence of alternatives, seems to be more relevant than ever.

As the members of the spatial pioneer movement display moments of collective hope for a 'good' life in the countryside, which they actively help to shape, they perceive themselves as hoping together and standing up for common goals. In short, shared spaces of hope, which are interpreted as spaces of opportunity, are mutating through the affective practice of participation into shared affective spaces. Nonetheless, the mutation is not homogenous. The degree of participation varies greatly among the interviewees. For some, civic engagement, and co-creation beyond the confines of their own property is a fundamental part of their lifestyle. Others primarily value the opportunity to freely shape their private lives and work. In both cases, there is an empowerment of subjects through physical, economic, social, and mental 'free' spaces connected to the rural context.

5. Discussion & conclusion

Our empirical data indicates that affective spaces of rurality emerge through different dimensions and heterogeneous components. The constitution of affective spaces is linked to the affective practices they structure and vice versa. Accordingly, they represent affective space-practice complexes.

First, a notion of relationship becomes evident through the relevance of connecting with ecological cycles and the feeling of entering a connection with nature. The tactile perception of nature and its anticipated effects on physical and mental health are emphasized by the interviewees, while urban environments are perceived as a negative contrast. Regarding the economics of rurality, an interpretive scheme of meaningful, less alienated work that transcends the function of mere gainful employment has been identified. Work and life practices of the spatial pioneers come into play and distinguish the involved subjects from perceived capitalist (urban) acceleration tendencies. Socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable value creation is located in and attributed to the rural context. The subjects fundamentally reinterpret the definition of prosperity and success for themselves. They do so in a consciously counter-cyclical way, in reference to a perceived societal majority. Additionally, affective references to more-than-human entities such as tools, animals, or plants come to the fore in the lifeworlds of the spatial pioneers. Such affectuations unfold in the proactive use of these artifacts within the framework of certain social practices. Thus, a reciprocal subject-object interaction is essential (Reckwitz 2012).

Practices of interpersonal relationships emerge as a further element of affective spaces of the rural. The focus here lies on social experiences within a spatially bound community. Therefore, affective spaces emerge as social spaces. Especially on the community level, however, negative affectuation concerning questions of belonging, social control, and conflict also shape the lifeworlds of the spatial pioneers. At the same time, affective spaces emerge from elements of tranquility, attentiveness, simplicity, and deceleration. In the homely seclusion of the rural habitat, late-modern subjects describe finding a place to escape from global crises and to (re-)enter a relationship with themselves. The practices of a 'simple' rural life cast the subjects back to what is understood as 'essential'. This often entails deliberately renouncing some of the comforts traditionally associated with affluence. Meanwhile, singular materialities, to which a historical, natural, aesthetic, or

emotional value can be ascribed, come to the fore. The fast pace and anonymity of the city are countered by a deep familiarity with and an attachment to the rural environment. Even so, it can be stated that many residents take a critical stance towards idealized narratives of the 'rural idyll' and are reflective of the idea of an 'authentic rural life'. What makes rural spaces particularly attractive to the actors of the spatial pioneer movement is the prospect of actively shaping them. Identification with and pro-active engagement within a specific socio-spatial setting reinforce each other.

The capability of freely creating one's own environment can be seen in the private environments of the spatial pioneers, where normative ideals of a self-determined life are experienced. Simultaneously, the experienced symbolic and material free spaces in Upper Lusatia allow for various forms of engagement and self-organized activities that go beyond personal benefit and are intended to promote the development of the region. Although these practices often result from a lack of public, social, and cultural services, the 'gaps' they fill should not necessarily be interpreted negatively in terms of the constitution of affective spaces. Rather, they represent an incomparable potential for activation and a powerful opportunity to reinterpret structurally weak rural areas as 'spaces of opportunity'. The subjects are affected by the material and cultural structures of the rural, 'deserted' space, which increases their ability to act. Practices of production then replace practices of consumption. In short, participation in the production of rural lifeworlds provides the subjects with self-efficacy, visibility, identity, and recognition, all of which are central emotional pillars of the respective affective spaces. We have shown that affects are an essential part of social practices that shape rural spaces. Accordingly, a robust understanding of rural spaces in their interplay with subjects must prioritize the question of 'feeling' or 'sensing' space.

The spatial pioneers' commitment to civic participation, as well as their pursuit of sustainability, deceleration, and community, increasingly resonates with a crisis-ridden late-modern society. However, their practiced affective ruralities are not self-contained, isolated phenomena; they are embedded in larger historical, political, economic, social, and ecological contexts. Ruralities serve various spatial imaginations and anticipated futures, which vary greatly concerning their context, their main actors, and their temporalities. When certain ruralities are practiced in place, others are displaced or repressed. This is reflected in the self-critical assumption of the spatial pioneers that they live in a privileged position as well as in tensions with long-term residents who, far from feeling activated by open spaces, largely suffer from the collapsing infrastructure and structural problems of the region.

Research on the affectivity of ruralities needs to carefully consider their ambivalent character, just as other (new) ruralities require further research. A phenomenon that has received little public and scholarly attention, is that of politically right-wing 'völkisch' settlers in the (German) countryside (Varco 2024; Maschke et al., 2021). At first glance, their anti-capitalist and communal principles of life seem to resemble those of the spatial pioneers considered here, but they are linked to racist, inhumane, and anti-democratic ideologies.

In the case of the spatial pioneers, a transformation of interpretations of rurality can be observed, as far as they do conform neither to an urban narrative of a 'rural idyll' nor to a stigmatization of rural areas as left-behind peripheries. For the spatial pioneers, the singularity of structurally weak rural areas lies in the fact that they offer opportunities for a 'good life' that, due to limiting material and cultural structures, are unavailable elsewhere (e.g., in urban settings). Within the network of the spatial pioneers, affective spaces of the rural emerge through a collective performance of (rural) practices and (rural) affects. We were able to show that from the perspective of the spatial pioneers, rural spaces and places are not necessarily 'ideal' via their discursive representations. However, rurality as a lifestyle (as a way of liv*ing*) becomes desirable via the practices it enables, i.e., via the possibilities of *doings*.

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