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Vocational or Academic Track? Study and Career Plans among Swedish Students living in Rural Areas

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explores how rural lower secondary school students reflect on study and career choices, focusing on the choice between vocational and academic upper secondary programs. Applying a spatial perspective, we analyze individual students' reflections about study and career choices within a variety of rural regions, and compare patterns in the regions.. The results indicate complex interactions between structural factors and individual dispositions. In places where education levels were low and the local labor market predominantly offered unskilled manual and service work, there was a stronger tendency to choose vocational programs than in places with higher education levels and access to a more varied labor market. Likewise, there was an association between strongly gendered labor markets and gender-typical choices. However, individual students positioned themselves actively in relation to the local place, its local labor market and social relations; their choices were place-bound to varying degrees, and chose upper secondary programs and presented ideas about prospective careers that were harmonious with the local labor market in some cases, but discordant in other cases. The results are discussed in the framework of individuals' horizon for actions.

Key words: transition, rural, space, place, horizon for actions

Introduction

As in many other European nations, Sweden's education system after compulsory school is broadly divided between vocational upper secondary programs intended to prepare students to start work, and academic programs intended to prepare students for higher education. The choice between academic/vocational track and the kind of education the young individual invests in within these tracks have profound implications for his/her position and attractiveness in the local and wider labor market. This also applies to his/her positioning in society at large, as social relations of production, skills, expertise etc. constitute the foundation of class relations (Nylund 2012). Young people's study and career choices are, in

turn, strongly related to their background. For example, statistics provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2016) show that young people who are from lower social classes and/or have parents with lower educational levels tend to choose vocational programs more frequently than those who are from higher social classes and/or have more highly educated parents. Social class and educational background also interact with gender and geographical location. Young people in rural areas, particularly young rural men, are more likely to choose a vocational program and forego university studies than other groups of young people (National Agency for Education 2016).

A rich body of literature on youth transitions provides information about effects of social class, gender and other socio-demographic variables on positions of youths in the educational system (e.g. Biggart et al. 2015; Iannelli and Smyth 2008). Some studies have also included analyses of young people's *reflections* on their transitions, i.e. how they discuss, negotiate and justify their study and career choices (e.g. Heath et al. 2010; Snee and Devine 2014). However, few have focused on rural youths (Hargreaves et al. 2009). In rural environments, where the local labor market is often limited, and there are fewer higher education and training opportunities than in urban areas, decisions about the future are likely to be particularly complex. For example, young people living in rural areas face decisions that often involve having to leave their family and live by themselves or commute long distances, thus life trajectories and decisions about study and career paths also have spatial dimensions (e.g. Bæck and Paulgaard 2012; Evans 2016; Farrugia et al. 2014a,b; Lindgren and Lundahl 2010). This is particularly relevant for Swedish rural youths, as many rural districts in Sweden tend to offer limited choices of upper secondary education, and are far from urban centers (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2011).

The aim of this study is to add to the body of literature about students' upper secondary education choices and ideas about future careers by exploring how young people living in rural areas in Sweden reflect on their study and career choices, focusing on their choices between vocational and academic programs. A particular contribution is that we apply a spatial perspective. Rather than treating rural youths as a unified group with essentially similar life experiences, as in many previous studies (Niedomysl and Amcoff 2011) we analyze individual students' reflections on study and career paths in a variety of 'ruralities' and compare patterns in different regions. We address two specific research questions. First, how can the rural youths' reflexive practices be understood in relation to structural and

contextual factors, and to individual dispositions? Second, how are space and place actualized in their reflections?

The following sections describe the Swedish school system, outline the study's theoretical framework and methodology, then provide background information regarding the selected Swedish municipalities. The results are then presented in two sections, and subsequently summarized and discussed in a section entitled 'Horizons of action – a discussion'. Finally, conclusions are presented.

The Swedish school system and students' positioning within it

In Sweden, it is obligatory for young people to attend school for nine years (between the ages of 7 to 15 years). After compulsory school, upper Secondary School follows,¹ and students can choose between 18 upper secondary programs, all of them three years long. Of the 18 national programs, 12 prepare students for professional activities, and the other six prepare them for higher education.² This divide between vocational and academic programs has deep historical roots in Sweden. However, in the 1990s vocational and academic education began to be integrated through educational reforms stipulating that both vocational and academic programs were to be three years long and provide eligibility to enter higher education. In 2011, a new comprehensive reform was implemented that reversed this integration and once again strengthened the divide between academic and vocational programs. Since then, vocational programs have not provided eligibility to enter higher education, unless students choose some specific courses within the programs' framework (Nylund and Rosvall 2016).

In Sweden, most students choose an academic program — for example, 52, 26 and 22% of Swedish upper secondary students were attending academic, vocational and introductory programs, respectively, in the 2015/2016 school year (National Agency for Education 2016: 6). Concerning social class, students whose parents have high cultural capital in terms of education, occupation, and lifestyle etc., tend to choose academic programs, while students whose parents have low cultural capital tend to choose vocational programs. Young people living in rural areas are also more likely to choose a vocational program than their peers in

¹ Although Upper Secondary School is not compulsory, almost all Swedish adolescents choose to attend.

² There are also five introductory programs, mainly for youths who have not passed exams in sufficient subjects when they finish grade 9 (students must pass eight subjects to qualify for a vocational program, and at least 12 for an academic program) (National Agency for Education 2016).

urban areas, which is connected to social class, as high percentages of people living in rural areas have low- or modest-wage employment, such as unqualified work in the production and service sectors (National Agency for Education 2015; Nylund 2012).

Gender also influences young people's choices of upper secondary programs. Generally, girls tend to choose academic programs more frequently than boys. There are also gendered differences in intakes among programs. For example, the *Vehicle & transport*, *Building & construction*, and *Industrial technology* vocational programs are traditionally male-dominated, while the *Health & social care* and *Handicraft* vocational programs are traditionally female-dominated (Nylund, Rosvall and Ledman 2017). Similarly, the *Technology* academic program is male-dominated, while the *Humanities* and *Arts* academic programs are female-dominated (National Agency for Education 2016).

Theoretical framework

In public and policy discourse, young people are largely portrayed as free agents, whose study and career choices are based on their individual beliefs, convictions, and rational, independent considerations, often neglecting material and structural conditions (Ball et al. 2000). In stark contrast to this essentially individual understanding of study and career choices, educational sociology (particularly, macro-level) studies generally emphasize the importance of socially structured pathways. In efforts to avoid constraining analyses of career choices and associated decision-making processes by adopting either of these narrow views, Hodkinson and Sparks (1997) turn to the French sociologist Bourdieu and the concept of habitus, arguing that these processes have multiple dimensions, none of which should be ignored, including pragmatically rational dimensions and structural dimensions. In order to capture individual agency, structural patterns and the 'workings' of habitus in relation to career decision-making, they use the concept 'horizons for action': 'Habitus and the opportunity structures of the labor market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective.' (Hodkinson and Sparks 1997, 34). With Bourdieu, they understand the mediation between structures and practice as performed through a system of dispositions which make up habitus: [Habitus] 'encapsulates the ways in which a person's beliefs, ideas and preferences are individually subjective but also influenced by the social networks and cultural traditions in which that person lives' (Hodkinson and Sparks 1997, 33), and becomes

active in relation to a field. Thus, it is through the workings of habitus that practice is linked with structure (Bourdieu 1990, 2002).

In this study, we focus on how students *reflect* on their study and career choices. The concept reflexivity provides a way of understanding young people's lives in times of detraditionalisation and structural fragmentation – traditional or taken for granted models for identity have declined in importance, giving way to an ethic of individual self-actualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Beck et al. 1994). However, as argued by Farrugia when considering structural inequality among young people (2013), reflexive subjectivities emerge in response to local structural conditions, and interact with class and gender. Thus, when we address the students' *reflexive practices* (cf. Farrugia 2013) here, we consider the characteristics of the places they live, as well as individual *dispositions*, all of which form habitus and affect the options individuals see as possible or desirable, i.e. *horizons for action*. We do not use Bourdieu's theoretical tool 'field', but discuss the rural places in our sample as '*social spaces*'. Furthermore, we understand place as continuously constructed through local and wider socio-spatial and material practices, and as relational – a place is constructed and communicated in relation to other places in a process that involves power relations (cf. Massey 1994).

Methodology and methods

The study focuses on students in secondary schools in six Swedish rural municipalities.³ They were selected to cover rural areas with substantial variation in size, geographical location, local businesses, labor history, population density and distance to nearest city.⁴ Data were collected during five-week compressed ethnographic fieldwork periods (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) in 2015/2016, by three individual researchers, each covering two schools. The fieldwork included observations of classroom/school interactions, field conversations, and formal student interviews, supplemented with observations in the neighborhood and interviews with school staff from each school. At each school, observations and interviews were mainly focused on one school class (three grade 8 classes and three grade 9 classes, so the students were between 14 and 16 years old). Most of the students had grown up in the

³ Supported by the Swedish Research Council, grant no. 2013-2142

⁴ The selected municipalities were classified as 'rural' by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2011).

rural places, but the sample also included young immigrant students. Numbers of immigrant students in the classes varied between 0 and 8 (0 to 40% of total numbers). The (semi-structured) interviews were conducted at the end of the fieldwork period and included questions about which upper secondary program they planned to choose, and wider questions about the future, like where they wanted to live and prospective careers. The interviews lasted between 25-60 minutes. In total, 136 students were interviewed (68 boys and 68 girls).

The data were initially scrutinized for information regarding choices of upper secondary school programs made by boys and girls in the six regions. Their choices were compared both among regions and to national data. This part of the analysis was essentially instrumental and pragmatic – we looked for statements about the programs the students intended to choose, calculated frequencies of their choices, and compared the regional frequencies to each other and to national frequencies. After that initial phase of analysis, we coded and sorted the data (Charmaz 2014), focusing on how the students reflected on their choices, particularly influential factors mentioned when they discussed their choices and the future. When reporting the results of this part of the analysis we focus mainly on students in three schools (River school, Sea school and Coastal school, as described in the next session), as their choices provided clear and illuminating contrasts.

The ethnographic methodology seemed highly suitable, as our intention was to provide accounts of everyday mundane reflexive practices and conversations in the local contexts (Beach 2011; Walford 2008). It should be noted that we provide accounts of how students reflected on and discussed their plans for upper secondary education, not their actual and final choices. For example, we do not know if all the students' expressed plans materialized; some might have changed for various reasons. Another methodological issue that should be mentioned is that substantial proportions of students, approximately 5-40 percent of interviewees in the six schools, stated that they were not sure what to choose. This might have been related to the students' age range, as some of them did not have to make a final decision for up to a year.⁵ However, we based the presented frequencies on choices they indicated were most likely, and categorized their answers accordingly, even if they expressed uncertainty about their choices.

⁵ As Swedish students make formal upper secondary education choices in grade 9, and the sample included both grade 8 and 9 classes, the time between the interview and the formal choice of upper secondary school differed

Throughout the process of planning and conducting the study, we recognized and followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2011), including acquisition of informed consent to participate from the participants, and protection of their individual privacy and confidentiality. Participating schools and individuals were also informed about their right to withdraw at any time.

As already mentioned, the selected municipalities were intended to cover a wide range of ‘ruralities’. In most cases, the selected classes were representative of the respective schools in terms of students’ gender, and their ethnic and socio-economic background. However, in one case, the representativity was lower. In this school (‘River school’, see next section), the school class we studied only included students who lived in central parts of a town, where people generally had longer education than those who lived outside the town center.

The rural locations

The six municipalities were located in widely separated rural areas in Sweden with various population parameters and other characteristics. A shared feature was that substantial demographic changes were occurring in all of them, due to new patterns of in- and out-migration. Collectively, they hosted wide ranges of inhabitants in terms of socioeconomic and educational background, occupation, interests etc. In five of the six municipalities, the average level of education was lower or much lower than the national average, while in the other municipality (the location of Coastal town) it was equal to the national average.⁶

There was also variety in the labor markets. The forest and transport industries had historically been the main employers in some of the municipalities, while agriculture, mining, and/or manufacturing had dominated the labor market in others (Table 1). All the municipalities had been threatened by national and global competitive economic forces, which have had effects, to various degrees, such as closures of industries and depopulation.

The six rural areas offered students different possibilities for continuing education after secondary school: three offered upper secondary education but not the other three. The

⁶ Based on statistics retrieved from SIRIS, a database provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education where parents' education level is scored as first, second or third level, indicating completion of elementary school/primary school, completion of secondary education, and post-secondary education, respectively.

distance students had to travel to attend a higher education institution also varied.

Characteristics of the six rural areas and associated schools, based on data from Statistics Sweden, are summarized in Table 1. The municipalities, schools and students have been given fictional names to protect the respondents' confidentiality. The schools are named Coastal school, Inland school, Mountain school, River school, Forest school and Sea school.

Table 1. Characteristics of the researched schools and their neighborhoods

MUNICI- PALITY/ SCHOOL/ GRADE	Population: less or more than 3000	Upper secondary school in the municipality (Yes/No) and/or distance to nearest upper secondary school	Distance to nearest higher education: less/more than 150 km	Main traditional industries	Main current industries
Coastal school Grade 8	More than 3000	No, 60 km to nearest, a wide range of national and local programs	Less than 150 km	Forest industry Agriculture	Manufacturing Agriculture
Inland school Grade 8	Less than 3000	No, 70 km to nearest, only a few national programs	More than 150 km	Forestry Agriculture	Forestry Agriculture
Mountain school Grade 9	Less than 3000	Yes, only a few national programs	More than 150 km	Mining	Tourism
River school Grade 9	More than 3000	Yes, most of the national programs	More than 150 km	Military base Hydropower plant	Hospital Power plant
Forest school Grade 8	Less than 3000	Yes, 90 km away, only a few of the national programs	More than 150 km	Forestry Hydropower	Manufacturing Forestry Fisheries
Sea School Grade 9	More than 3000	No, 45 km to nearest	Less than 150 km	Hydropower Manufacturing Forestry	Manufacturing Construction

Results

Study and career choices – culturally, socially and geographically situated processes

Generally, the students were significantly more interested in academic programs than in vocational programs, and the most popular academic programs were *Social science* and *Natural science* (cf. National Agency for Education 2016). Gender influenced their expressed preferences, as more girls than boys preferred an academic program, and more boys than girls preferred a vocational program. There were also gendered patterns within the categories of vocational/academic programs. The ratio of males to females stating preferences for specific programs were highest for the academic *Technology* program, and the vocational *Vehicle & transport* and *Building & construction* programs, while proportions of female stating preferences were highest for the *Health & social care* and *Handicraft* programs, in accordance with patterns reported elsewhere (National Agency for Education 2016).

Comparison of schools showed that academic programs were most popular in River school; in fact, all interviewed students in River school stated a preference for academic programs. The most popular programs here were *Social science* (for boys and girls) and *Natural science* (mainly boys). The preference for academic programs was in line with characteristics of the local labor market of River town. This was the most densely populated municipality in the sample, and the people who lived in the main town (including parents of the students we studied) mostly had ‘middle-class jobs’ (e.g. in the municipal administration, small businesses, local industries or public health care facilities), and many of them had higher education.

By contrast, in Sea school, most of the students (60%) preferred vocational programs; *Building & construction*, *Vehicle & transport* (boys) and *Health & social care* (girls) were the most popular. This pattern is also consistent with the local labor market, as Sea town only hosted a few small businesses and public health care facilities, and offered fewer jobs that required higher education. Another characteristic of Sea town was a strongly gender-divided labor market; a clear majority of worked in health or social care settings of the service sector, and the men in the few local industries.

Thus, the material, structural and infra-structural differences between River town and Sea town, were reflected in the students’ choices. For example, Ron from River town, planned to choose the *Natural science* program. He aimed to study at the university like his brother, and

get a job at the university like his mother. When he reflected on what might have influenced him, he said:

Friends, I don't know, but my brother studies at the university and my mother works there, and I want to move there too [University city].

So, your mother works at the University in x [University city]?

Yes, well, she goes there once a month, the rest of the time she works at home, using Skype.

Are your mother and brother working in the field of Natural Science?

No, my brother is a political scientist, but my mother works in Natural Science. She is a pharmacologist. I would enjoy doing something like that. At least, I want to work at the university.

Ron's thoughts of a career at the university sharply differed from plans of Sven and Sofia from Sea school. Sven was an accomplished student, with an interest in motors and vehicles, chess, and movies from the 1950s. He planned to choose the *Vehicle & transport* program, a vocational program suitable for working with vehicles in the municipal recycling center where his mother worked and he had done his work experience period (PRAO).⁷ He wanted to stay in Sea town and get a job in the transport sector, preferably at the recycling center. His articulated reason for choosing a vocational program was that he did not want to continue studying after upper secondary school, but to start work as soon as possible, like many of his friends who did not want to 'sit still' any longer:

I don't want to wait any longer, I've been sitting still for 9 years now.

I agree, that's why I'll choose the *Vehicle and transport* program.

⁷ In Sweden, some schools offer short work experience periods (PRAO: praktisk arbetslivsorientering, literally practical working life orientation) at a workplace as part of education about the local and wider labor market. However, this is not obligatory and some schools only provide theoretical aspects of this education.

Sofia, also in Sea school, wanted to take the vocational *Health & social care* program. Her mother worked as a nursing assistant in Sea town's local health services, a service sector that Sofia also imagined herself working in. She wanted to get a job and start to work straight after school, but was open to the possibility of further studies later on:

Studying has never really been my thing. So, my plan is to choose the *Health & social care* program, then, later on, I might continue studying to become a nurse.

While River school and Sea school were identified as schools where students predominantly (or solely) respectively chose academic and vocational tracks, and Sea school as a school where students predominantly chose gender typical programs, students at Coastal school chose a more balanced mixture of academic and vocational programs, and some preferred non-gender-typical programs. More specifically, three girls had decided to choose male-dominated vocational programs: the *Agricultural*, *Building & construction*, and *Vehicle & transport* programs. This may be related to Coastal town having a more varied and differently gendered labor market than the other considered municipalities. Coastal town had historically been a small industrial town that had provided jobs in manufacturing for both men and women (since women had entered the labor market). At the time of the study, manufacturing industry still dominated the local labor market and provided work for both genders. Strong challenges to the industrial sector in recent decades had resulted in closures of many large businesses, but some small enterprises, including both handicraft and agricultural businesses, were still flourishing and contributed to a varied and gender-integrated labor market. Another major distinction between Coastal town and the other municipalities was its relative proximity to a large city with a varied labor market, offering academic, white collar, and various service and skilled industrial jobs. Good commuting links to the city attracted small businesses to the local town, and provided residents access to a greater and more varied labor market in the city. This variety of options was reflected in variety in the parents' professions and occupations. Moreover, it may partially explain why the Coastal school students had somewhat wider views of possible professions and workplaces, than (for example) those in Sea town, and why their choices tended to be less gender-stereotyped. However, the relatively low gender-stereotyping only applied to choices of the girls (who expressed both male- and female-stereotyped preferences); the boys' preferences reflected typical male patterns. Klara

was one of the girls whose choice was not gender-stereotyped; she wanted to become a carpenter, and start working directly after upper secondary school:

I want to become a carpenter, but I don't know exactly what program I'll need to take.

And what about studying at the university? To continue studying after upper secondary, at the university, is that something that attracts you?

No, I don't want to do that.

Why not?

After upper secondary, I can become an apprentice, and then get a job.

Another Coastal school girl choosing a less gender-typical program was Kerstin. Her brother was working as a truck driver, and in the interview it became clear that this profession attracted her. When Kerstin, like many other students who participated in this study, talked about the future she frequently referred to family members (cf. Butler and Muir 2016; Snee and Devine 2014). Her reflections clearly showed that her family members' careers influenced her ideas, as illustrated in the following remarks about where to do her PRAO: something that shows in the quotation below where she talks about where to do her PRAO. From Kerstin's reflections it became obvious that her family members' careers provided her with ideas about where to her PRAO:

My idea was first to do my PRAO at my brother's workplace. He's a truck driver, but he's got sick and won't be working for a while, so I got the idea to try to get a placement in a nail salon in [nearby city], but I'm afraid that they wouldn't let me do nails, just watch, so right now, I'm thinking of going to Finland and doing my PRAO where my uncle (who's a painter) works.

In summary, the differences between the schools regarding students' choices reflected the local labor markets and their specific socio-spatial, material and infrastructural characteristics. In places where education levels were relatively low and the local labor market predominantly offered unskilled manual and service work, students tended to choose vocational programs more often than in places with higher education levels and access to a more varied labor market. Likewise, strongly gendered labor markets seemed to be associated with more

gender-typical choices. The students were familiar with their parents' and siblings' occupations, and parents and other family members seemed to have strong presence in their local everyday lives. Parents of several of the students worked in the neighborhood, in local industries, the school or other amenities, like the local swimming hall, sports center or food store. Some also worked at home, running their own businesses, so students met them during the day, and saw them 'at work'. Furthermore, the students gained knowledge about their family members' work through work experience periods (PRAO).

We conclude that the local labor markets were distinctive, transparent and substantially influenced the students' reflections on the future. In the focal, rather lightly populated communities, each with a small town center, people meet more frequently in everyday manners, so working-life is more integrated with private life, than in larger cities. Thus, parents' and siblings' occupations, positions and life paths strongly influenced the students' visualization and understanding of what it means to 'work', and hence their reflections on future professional lives. Through their parents, older siblings and other kith or kin they were socialized into thinking about the future and future jobs in a way that harmonized with their careers. This implies that the local labor market provided knowledge and examples of future routes that had both collective and individual dimensions. The local labor markets and their local and wider social relations (Massey 1994), including their parents' and elderly siblings' positioning within this market, provided knowledge about what people living in these local places do, and in that sense 'what people like me do'. These collective and individual dimensions of the students' reflexive practices are further discussed in the next session using the concept *habitus*.

Study and career choices - a result of individual dispositions

There were different practices within the local places; while some students oriented towards the local labor market and the well-known, others had plans that extended beyond the local and known. This can be illustrated by two Coastal town students: Krister and Josefine. Krister found many school subjects difficult and was quite tired of school. He spent a lot of his spare time with his younger brother playing computer games. Although his mother was a teacher at the local school with a solid university education, and he was not essentially averse to the idea of studying at the university, he doubted that he would do it. He did not think that he had the required capacity, and he had financial reservations, saying he was not sure whether he wanted to commit himself to 'a long and expensive education'. Krister's father worked in a

small local company, and Krister thought that he was ‘doing alright’ without higher education. Furthermore, he emphasized that he wanted to start working directly after school. He had the *Hotel and restaurant* program in mind as he wanted to get a job in the local food store, where he had done his PRAO and he claimed was his ‘dream workplace’. When asked if he had considered other programs he said that he had trouble finding something else suitable: ‘[...] either I’m not that good at what they do, or my credits aren’t good enough to get in there.’ The overall impression was that he felt anxious about study and career choices (cf. Geldens and Bourke 2008), and managed his anxiety by choosing the ‘safe’ and ‘well-known’: a vocational program suitable for a career he knew from his local town.

While Krister oriented towards a local and well-known career alternative, Josefine, by contrast, oriented towards the non-local. She used to be a high-performing student, but had lost interest in studying during the last year, and her grades had fallen. In school, she distanced herself by skipping lessons and rarely socialized with classmates. She also distanced herself from the local labor market by not wanting to work in the healthcare sector like her mother, or in the municipal administration like her father. Her big interest was in music, and she wanted to become a musician: ‘I want to work with music, that’s what I like.’ She planned to choose the *Arts* program, oriented towards music, in a nearby city, and then ‘leave the country and go abroad’, to New York where her cousin lived, or Australia. She was determined to leave Coastal town as soon as possible:

My plan is to get as far from here as possible, I don’t want to become like the others living here. [...]

And if you were to live here, what do you think you would do? What is it that makes you want to leave so much?

I don’t know, but I guess I’d have to work at ICA [the local food store] or something like that.

And that is not what you long for?

No, no (laughs). Never ever.

Krister's and Josefine's different orientations (towards the local labor market and a wider labor market, respectively) illustrate what we interpret as interaction between habitus, cultural capital and social space, and what Bourdieu (1990) calls the logic of practice. Individual dispositions, which make up habitus, can be seen as the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's life experiences, and thus how they reflect on the future, i.e. their reflexive practices. Krister and Josefine were brought up in the same place, but had very different ideas about their individual 'places' in social space, for example towards the idea of working in the local food store.

From their reflections about the future, including their ways of articulating them, with anxiousness (Krister) or confidence (Josefine), we suggest that study, career choices and life paths are inscribed in habitus. Moreover, cultural capital is a resource that plays a major role in experiences and enactments of transitions: strongly influencing why given scenarios are possible and attractive for some, but rejected and even unthinkable for others. Krister's reflections suggest to us that his mother's occupation as a teacher and working at the local school, did not provide cultural capital in the social space represented by Coastal town, at least not sufficient cultural capital that he had embodied for him to seek career paths elsewhere with confidence. By contrast, Josefine's reflections indicate that her embodied cultural capital oriented her towards a starkly different labor market than Coastal town represented, and that working in the local food store did not fit with her existing schematic view of herself, her career and life. Cultural capital was strongly embodied by the students and not much articulated and reflected on. For example, when reflecting on study and career choices, they seldom explicitly raised and recognized the distribution of power, local and external power relations and social mobility, in contrast to reported observations in other studies (e.g. O'Connor 2015). Instead, they usually treated their study and career choices as individual rational decisions, mainly based on their interests and preferences, ignoring their social and classed connotations. This supports conclusions by Jamieson (2000), that social class is still a central element of subjectivity, and cultural capital resources influence young people's reflections on future careers and places of residence. It also supports the idea that reflexivity is one of the ways that inequalities operate in modernity (cf. Farrugia 2013) – that contemporary class inequalities are both mirrored in and reproduced in reflexive practices.

The analysis further indicates that the students' reflexive practices involved several spatial dimensions. The process of reflecting and making decision was in itself a spatial practice as it was situated locally. It was also spatial in the sense that it involved ideas about where participants should locate their studies and careers (a particularly complex issue for students living in rural towns without access to upper secondary school, or in places with a limited choice of programs), and where they saw themselves living in the future. Choosing a vocational program suited to the local labor market, as in the cases of Sven and Krister, was often motivated by approval of the local town and its surroundings. Both Sven and Krister strengthened their arguments about locating their careers to the town where they had grown up by expressing admiration for the local environment, its wild and open nature, and the social relationships the local community offered, in a manner reminiscent of what has been described as attachment to specific people and places and an idealization of the 'rural idyll' (cf. Jamieson 2000). When Sven, for example, talked about getting a job in the transport sector in Sea town, he said: 'I love this place, it's special [...] I'd really like to live here, I like the lake and I like X (a nearby small town), I want to stay in the region [...].'

This spatial dimension is further illustrated by comments by Sofia, a student from Sea school quoted in the previous section. As already mentioned, she wanted to take the vocational *Health & social care* program and, like many other participating students, she would have to leave Sea town to obtain her chosen upper secondary education. However, she planned to return to Sea town after upper secondary school, although only for 'a while':

I guess I'll move back here, and work as a nursing assistant; I can easily get a job at the local nursing home for elderly people. Earn some money, and then, after a while, I could take up my studies again.

So, you plan to come back here after upper secondary?

Yes, for a while, to earn money [...]. But after becoming skilled as a nurse, I don't think I'll come back here.

Sofia emphasized her interest in health and medicine in both daily talk and the interview, and in the beginning of the fieldwork she talked about becoming a doctor. But, as shown in the

above quote, she had a career as a nurse or nursing assistant in mind by the time of the interview. Thus, the cultural and social context seemed to have influenced the occupation (doctor, nurse or nursing assistant) she identified with *within* the health and medicine sector when reflecting on her career. Moreover, her decisions seemed to be closely related to her ideas about where to live in the future: in Sea town she saw herself as a nursing assistant, but as a nurse she saw herself living elsewhere. This could also be related to experienced constraints; she saw herself as a nursing assistant within the constraints of the local context, but as a nurse if she could escape those constraints in a freer context, and maybe even as a doctor in a context with barely imaginable freedom.

From this and other examples, we argue that students' study and career choices were interwoven with ideas about real and imagined places, and that students who wanted to invest in higher education and high-level jobs, for example 'psychologist', 'doctor' or 'researcher', often imagined themselves living outside the local town and working outside the local labor market. In many cases this scenario was relevant because the professions they had in mind were not represented in the local labor market. However, even in places where such positions were potentially available, at least within a commutable distance, those who saw themselves as highly educated and with high-status jobs in the future imagined themselves living outside the local town. Thus, negotiating study and career choices was a relational spatial practice (cf. Massey 1994) that included orientations towards quite separate labor markets: a national labor market with diverse positions and career opportunities including well-paid and high-status jobs, and a local labor market with generally more insecure and poorly paid occupations, and fewer career opportunities (cf. Shucksmith 2004, 46). Through this orientation, they also expressed identification or dis-identification with the local place and its social relations. This phenomenon was explored by Jamieson (2000), who found that the relations between attachment/de-attachment to a place and desire to stay or leave are complex, and influenced by both class background and family history of rootedness or migration. We have not included family history in the analysis presented here, but in line with Jamieson's findings, cultural capital seemed to influence the students' reflections on future careers and places of residence, and students planning to obtain an education in harmony with the local labor market often justified their plans with admiration for the place where they lived. We also note that their talk about study and career choices added to a perception of 'separate' labor

markets, a practice that contributed to production of ‘rurality’ as a social space lacking well-paid and high-status jobs, and an inappropriate environment for upward social mobility.

Horizons of action – a discussion

As shown in the previous sections, many students chose upper secondary education in harmony with what they had grown up with and been exposed to. This did not mean that they lacked a reflexive attitude towards their future. On the contrary, living in rural regions with limited opportunities for work and further studies seemed to evoke a reflexive attitude to life (cf. Geldens and Bourke 2008). Based on the results, and in line with Farrugia (2013), we argue that individuals’ reflexive practices emerge in response to local structural conditions and individual dispositions. First, the young individuals’ experiences of the social world and thoughts about the future were mediated through place. People grow up in local communities with specific structural opportunities and constraints, and specific gendered and classed relations, which shape their ideas about themselves, and their study and career choices, thereby affecting both their life opportunities and life courses. Second, as our analyses indicate, these practices are linked to cultural capital, which creates variations within the local contexts. Variations in cultural capital, incorporated by the individual, intersected with social space, and created dispositions that harmonized to highly varying degrees with the local environment, its labor market and its social relations. Thus, the students’ reflections depended not only on the local place and its material and structural conditions, but also on their wider system of dispositions, which prompted them to position themselves differently in relation to the local place and its labor market. Hence, individual dispositions were intertwined with structural factors (cf. Snee and Devine 2014) and formed what Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) refer to as horizons of actions.

Within their individual horizons of actions, the students’ reflexive practices strongly differed depending on whether they wanted to start to work directly after upper secondary school or not. That some students oriented towards the local labor market and others towards a wider one, does not necessarily mean that the former lacked reflexivity (cf. Farrugia 2013), or had lower aspirations and narrower horizons (cf. Jamieson 2000). However, as they wanted to start working as soon as possible, the labor market and what they saw around them was particularly influential; they tended to choose a suitable vocational program for the local labor market, which they knew through their parents, older siblings, and PRAO. In that sense, their

reflexive practices were more locally grounded and adapted to the local labor market than those of the students who planned to choose an academic program and continue studying after upper secondary school. Consequently, the choice of the first group to start working as soon as possible was inevitably linked to orientation towards the often structurally constrained and uncertain local labor market (cf. Cuervo 2014; Jamieson 2000). By contrast, choice of an academic program often meant postponing decisions about a profession, providing time in which knowledge of the labor market (local and broader) would probably widen.

An orientation towards the local and particular conflicts with late modern society's idealization of a global labor market and a mobile, flexible labor force, with easily transferable education and professional skills (Bæck and Paulgaard 2012). However, labor markets are pluralistic, constantly change, and local rural labor markets such as those that some of our participants oriented towards may offer occupations, and both require and develop less transferable skills, than other labor markets. Assessment of this possibility would require empirical analysis, and thus was beyond the scope of our enquiry. Furthermore, complex interactions are involved, and elucidation of the effects of place-bound study and career choices requires detailed knowledge of key characteristics of specific rural labor markets (which are all unique, as they include all available positions in manufacturing, construction, tourism and myriads of other sectors). Here, we have only considered obvious characteristics of the labor markets in the six selected municipalities and commutable surroundings. To obtain deeper knowledge of reflexive practices among rural youth (for example whether their reflexivity is circumscribed by place-related material disadvantages, and long-term effects of place-based study and career choices on young people's careers and life in general), more research on the specific rural labor markets in which the practices are embedded is needed.

Conclusions

The results show that the students' reflexive practices about study and career pathways were culturally and socially situated, and bound up with the places they lived. In places where education levels were low and the local labor market predominantly offered unskilled manual and service work, there was a stronger tendency to choose vocational programs than in places with higher education levels and access to a more varied labor market. Likewise, there was an association between strongly gendered labor markets and gender-typical choices.

Furthermore, drawing on various individual dispositions, students positioned themselves actively in relation to the local place, its local labor market and social relations; making choices that were place-based to varying degrees, and both choosing upper secondary programs and expressing ideas about prospective careers that either harmonized or conflicted with the local labor market. . Their reflexive practices revealed complex interactions between structural and contextual factors and individual dispositions, which need to be continuously explored. We particularly stress the need for further exploration of place-based study and career choices in rural areas, taking into account detailed information about rural labor markets' specific compositions and variations.

Limitations of the study

We do not claim to have completely captured the practices of young people in rural Sweden, which means that the studied contexts cannot be considered as representative of the broader national context from which they are drawn.

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