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‘I Love this Place, but I Won’t Stay’: Identification with Place and Imagined Spatial Futures Amongst Youth Living in Rural Areas in Sweden

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Abstract

This study contributes to a body of literature that addresses relationships between space, place and identity, and their effects on young people’s ‘spatial horizons’. Drawing on ethnographic data from Sweden, it analyses youths’ identification with home-place and how it relates to their imagined spatial futures in terms of staying ‘local’ or migrating. The findings indicate that locality strongly influenced the identity-processing of youths, but there was no straightforward relationship between identification with home-place and willingness to stay in that place. Rather, the home-place’s perceived and narrated relation to other places, as well as its material conditions, social relationships and practices, contributed to the youths’ articulated views of their spatial futures.

Keywords

rural, space and place, identity, spatial horizons, transitions, belonging

Introduction

Most youth research has traditionally paid little attention to young people living in rural environments (Farrugia, 2013, 2014; Paulgaard, 2017). However, growing numbers of studies are highlighting the experiences of rural youth, exploring different rural contexts in more depth and considering the various experiences of young people living in different rural areas (e.g. Bæck and Paulgaard, 2012; Bærenholdt and Granås, 2008; Corbett, 2013, 2015; Kiilakoski, 2016; Stenbacka, 2011). These studies have clearly shown (*inter alia*) that decisions about the future, notably whether to stay ‘local’ or move away from the region, raise complex issues for young people living in rural regions. They generally have far fewer educational options if they want to stay in their region than young people living in urban have, and usually a much more limited labour market (e.g. Corbett, 2013; Shucksmith, 2004).

Studies addressing lived dimensions of rural life also clearly show that they generally have strong bonds to the place, their family and other residents in their locality—an identification with home-place which (in combination with dominant discourses on mobility, globalism and urbanism) further complicates their choices (Cuervo and Wyn, 2017; Evans, 2016; Wiborg, 2004).

The main aim of this study is to further explore relationships between young people's identification with home-place and their 'imagined spatial futures' (cf. 'spatial horizons' in Evans, 2016) in terms of staying local or migrating. Drawing on data from an ethnographic project conducted in rural areas in Sweden, the study adds to the growing body of qualitative studies about rural youth, their desires and possibilities to stay or leave, by considering various 'ruralities' and perspectives. It also adds to the discussion in youth research on the significance of space and spatiality in young people's lives (see for example the special issue 'Youth and Spatiality' in *Young* 2017, Issue 25, Volume 3). Two sets of research questions are addressed. First, how do young people in two different rural regions in Sweden identify with home-place, and how do they reflect on the future? Second, what are the relationships between their identification/non-identification with home-place and thoughts about staying/leaving, and how can differences in practices and discourses regarding staying/leaving be understood?

Scholars have discussed the issue of rural youths' staying and leaving in relation to structural factors such as social class, gender and migration background (e.g. Jamieson, 2000). Others have emphasized the importance of the local character of the place (e.g. Evans, 2016). Most studies that have addressed young people's lived experiences and thoughts about staying or leaving, have focused on particular factors, or aspects, for example representational (Haukanes, 2013) or affective (Farrugia et al., 2015) dimensions. Few authors – exceptions include Cuervo and Wyn (2017) and Farrugia (2016)—have attempted to explore multiple perspectives (e.g. structural and phenomenological aspects) of relationships between place, space and identity simultaneously. Moreover, relatively few have simultaneously considered experiences of youths in various rural places, which may be crucial for gaining insights regarding the significance of local factors for identity-processing in relation to space and place. Drawing on a classification by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2011), the study includes two types of rural municipalities: 'sparsely populated

municipality’ and ‘municipality with small-scale businesses’.¹ Young people (14-16 years old) residing in these types of municipalities were observed and interviewed in ethnographic tradition, as described below. However, before presenting the findings, some key concepts, the methods applied and the focal rural contexts are described.

Common perspectives in sociological youth research and central concepts

Researchers often claim that the social space characterizing the place where young people grow up strongly influences their identification processes, including their geographical orientation (e.g. Paulgaard, 2002). However, there are differing opinions about the importance of spatiality and the local for identity in an increasingly globalized and mobile world. Some researchers believe that increasing globalization has loosened our former spatial anchoring, and fostered more floating lifestyles and preferences, so we are becoming less closely linked to the local and the region (e.g. Giddens, 1991). Within this sociological theorizing, identity is viewed as being formed by consumerist choices, more than by place and locality, indicating that place has lost its central role in processing identity (Bauman, 1992). However, other researchers claim that (home-) place still plays an important role in shaping our identities, and that globalization may even have raised the importance of the local and regional. For example, in times of rapid social change, floating identities, and apparently infinite life choices, places and local contexts become even more important to people as they offer something to clasp (McDowell, 1999).

Researchers who have empirically explored relationships between place, space and identity have used concepts such as ‘belonging’ (Cuervo and Wyn, 2017; Haukanes, 2013; Stahl and Habib, 2017; Sørensen and Pless, 2017), (place) ‘attachment’ (Evans, 2016; Jamieson, 2000; Wiborg, 2004), and the ‘spatial contours of identity’ (Farrugia et al., 2015). Some have also focused on the production of social space, for example using concepts such as place-making (Waite, 2017). In this study relationships between place, space and identity are explored using the concept *identification with place*. The basis of this concept is that people have bonds to the outside world and *identity* is at least partly created through the individual’s interactions with space and place (Easthope, 2004: 130), and the associated emotions and experiences. Identification with home-place is being perceived, narrated and practiced not only in self-conscious and reflexive, but also unreflective processes and actions in everyday life, and the experiences of these practices and discourses foster identification or dis-identification with

certain relations, people and places. Hence, (collective and individual) social identity is understood to be intrinsically tied to place. Furthermore, home-place is likely to have significant implications for young people's thoughts about their future lives in terms of geographical location – their '*imagined spatial futures*'. *Place*, finally, is understood as continuously constructed through local and wider socio-spatial and material relationships and practices (cf. Massey, 1994). Such a relational view of place and space challenges understandings of place as bounded and enclosed, and intends to bring wider contexts, such as relationships extending beyond the local place, into the analysis.

Methods and data

The analysis draws on data from an ethnographic research project addressing rural youths' education and everyday life in six Swedish rural municipalities.² Ethnographic approaches are essential for addressing various important issues in rural research (Shucksmith and Brown, 2016), and highly suitable for obtaining accounts of everyday mundane practices and discourses in local contexts (cf. Beach, 2011). However, accounting for all six local contexts adequately would require more than the available space, so the analysis presented here is based on data concerning subjects in, and contexts of, two of the six municipalities: Inland and Coastal. They were selected because they differ substantially in terms of potentially important factors including geographical location, labour history, population density, labour market, distance to nearest city and (to some extent) inhabitants' socioeconomic and educational background.

Data were collected during compressed, five-week periods of ethnographic fieldwork (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004) in 2015/2016. The main data sources were observations of classroom/school interactions, field conversations, and formal student interviews, supplemented with observations in the neighbourhood and interviews with school staff and people working in central municipality businesses. Observations and interviews mainly focused on one school class in each municipality, with students between 14 and 16 years old. Thus, the students were approaching the end of lower secondary school and were about to decide which upper-secondary education programme to choose and where to study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the fieldwork period and included questions about their desires and plans for both the near future and broader horizons, such as where they wanted to live and what they wanted to do. Throughout the process of planning

and conducting the ethnographic fieldwork, the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2011) were recognized and followed, including regulations concerning acquisition of informed consent to participate, protection of individual privacy, and maintenance of participants' confidentiality.

The analysis draws on data acquired from student interviews in the project. Recorded responses in the interviews (with 52 students) were coded and categorized inductively (Charmaz, 2014), noting both common patterns and variations between the two locations and the students. The coding and categorizing focused on three themes. First, meanings given to home-place. Second, how the students defined and thought about themselves in relation to both other people living in the local town and their characterization of the local place. This phase of analysis of identification primarily addressed senses of similarity and difference, as well as understandings of 'I', 'we' and 'them'. The third theme was the students' meaning-making in relation to their future lives. The analysis resulted in a number of meaning and identity categories and sub-categories which are reported in three sections followed by a synthesizing analysis.

The Swedish context and the two rural locations – Inland town and Coastal town

In the last 50 years, national and global competitive economic pressures have had effects of varying nature and magnitude on Swedish rural municipalities, such as restructuring of jobs and businesses, and closures of services and schools. While Swedish cities have generally grown during this period, rural areas have been successively depopulated and the remaining population has aged. These trends have been addressed with various regional policy strategies and debated in various discourses (Andersson et al. 2008). In recent years, parliamentary and media interest in regional development in Sweden has increased. A frequently addressed concern is that young people are leaving the countryside. For example, a parliamentary report published in 2017 (SOU 2017: 1) highlights the need to expand youth activities and educational possibilities to stimulate local economic growth and development in rural areas.

The two rural places in focus in this study were both exposed to the pressures described above, but to different degrees, as they differed in several important respects. Inland town was situated in a sparsely populated municipality quite far from any big city with a higher education institution (more than 150 km from the nearest city with more than 100 000

inhabitants). For many years Inland town had had a limited labour market, and available jobs were mainly in services and care, and to some extent forestry and transport. Fishing and hunting had traditionally been important sources of income for people living in the region and were still activities that many people pursued. The services in the municipality had also decreased over time due to population decline (Statistics Sweden, 2014). Parents of the students participating in the study mainly worked in services and care, or tourism and other seasonal occupations, and few of them had higher education. Most of the students were ethnic Swedish, although there were also some migrant students, some of whom had lived in Inland town for years while others had recently arrived (including refugees fleeing overseas conflict and other migrants, or family members of migrants, who had chosen to move to Inland town for economic and lifestyle-related reasons).

Coastal town was a small-scale businesses town situated in a municipality within 100 kilometres of a big city. The local labour market was limited (mainly offering jobs in small-scale businesses or work in service and care), but because the town was within commuting distance of a nearby city, people could work in the city and still live in Coastal town (or vice versa). The nearby city had a higher education institution, and a varied labour market, offering academic, white collar, and various service and skilled industrial jobs (Statistics Sweden, 2014). The relative proximity to the big city and good commuting links attracted small businesses to the local town and provided residents access to a greater and more varied labour market in the city. The parents of the students participating in the study worked in various service and skilled industrial jobs, including both handicraft and agricultural businesses. Among the parents there were also teachers and civil servants who had high-level positions in the municipality administration. A great majority of the students had non-migrant backgrounds and parents who had lived in the region all their lives.

Although the municipalities of Inland town and Coastal town were quite large geographically, they each only had one lower secondary school covering the region, so many of the students had to travel long distances to get to school. Neither of them offered upper secondary education, so the students had to attend upper secondary schools in other municipalities. For students in Inland town, the nearest was about 100 kilometres away, while the nearest for Coastal town students was about half that distance away. Depending on the upper secondary programme they planned to choose, daily commuting was possible for some of the students,

while others needed to move away from home during the three years of upper secondary education.

Findings

The home-place

In both Inland town and Coastal town the students presented the home-place as a **small place**. 'Small' had different meanings, but was primarily connected to **social closeness**. They valued and praised the local town's social relations and talked positively about living in 'a small community' where 'we all know each other', 'everybody talks to each other', 'I recognize people' and 'I am recognized'. This meaning-making draw heavily on comparisons with urban life and life-styles. As pointed out in previous studies (e.g. Leyshon, 2008), the rural and urban are constructed in relation to each other, and this was clearly demonstrated in narratives about their home-town: 'It's not like in the city where you see new people everywhere. Here, you recognize everyone and we are all like friends'. This dual construction was built on beliefs that social relations are more closely knit in a small community than in a larger place, and that small places create closer contact between people: 'In the city you may get more friends, but here I think you get closer friends, closer but fewer'. This idea of social closeness was repeated with several variations, but always with urban life as a reference frame:

I say hello to everything and everyone, it doesn't matter if I've seen them before or know them or not. And if you compare that with the city [...] in the city you don't say hello to people you meet [...] So, it's a difference, you get a bit more enclosed and isolated there, like for example when you ride the city bus. So even though there are much more people in the city, you become more enclosed and by yourself. (Girl Coastal school)

Factors that strongly contributed to a sense of a socially tight community were visible and apparent family relationships over generations (cf. Holm 2008):

Girl: You know, I have all my family here. My grandfather worked at the local food store, he worked there all his life, and now my dad has taken over the store.

Interviewer: So, when you say your last name, everyone knows who you are?

Girl: Yes, Peter's daughter.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about that?

Girl: I like it. (Girl Coastal school)

The family relations appeared to provide great meaning in the students' everyday lives (cf. Cuervo and Wyn, 2017), and their comments indicated that they often 'hung out with the family', just 'taking it easy' or socialising in activities such as hiking, snowmobiling, fishing and hunting. When talking about their everyday lives they expressed a sense of intertwining of the individual and the family, as expressed when a boy was asked about his interests and immediately began to talk about his father's interest in fishing: 'I fish a lot with my dad, he's a fishing enthusiast, he loves to fish [...] we used to go on fishing trips together'. The lived experiences of being part of a family were also expressed by emphasising socialising with close relatives during weekends and holidays:

Where I live there are only a few houses, where my grandma, grandad, uncle and aunts live. All of us also have cabins a kilometre away in the woods. We celebrate midsummer and Easter there. There we can spend time with each other. (Girl Coastal town)

While students who lived outside the local towns needed a ride from someone if they wanted to take part in organised activities and socialize with friends (collective transport was not available), students who lived in the central towns had easier access to such activities. This did not mean that the students living in the central towns experienced the family less meaningful. Besides, parents and relatives were often engaged as leaders of activities, which meant that the students frequently socialised with the family also in organised leisure time activities. The family and extended 'families' that formed around leisure time activities constructed social communities that were experienced as significantly meaningful in their everyday lives. Through them, they experienced being part of social, often inter-generational networks that provided them with knowledge and social skills, a kind of 'location-specific capital' (cf. Moilanen, 2012).

The **richness of nature** was another common element of the students' narratives about the home-place. The natural environment was described as an **arena for activities** or a

‘playground’ (cf. Sørensen and Pless, 2017) – a place for outdoor activities. It was also described as having existential and emotional meaning, the landscape was experienced as being part of the person and the person as part of the landscape. For example, living close to a large forest or wild river etc. and having constant access to it evoked a feeling of being **free**: ‘it’s freedom living like this’. Furthermore, it contributed to a life that they described as **calm and not stressful**: ‘It’s quiet here, there aren’t lots of things happening all the time, and I appreciate this calmness’, ‘there is not as much stress here as in the city’.

There was also a counter-narrative present in the students’ positively charged talk about their home-places, and that was rural places **‘lacking’** various things. The ‘lacking’ applied to local services such as local collective transport, upper secondary education facilities, organized youth activities and provision of care, as illustrated by this example: ‘Yesterday someone hurt himself badly in the hockey rink and we had to wait for the emergency vehicle coming all the way from [town in another municipality], it took a while, at least one and a half hours’. In the narratives about the local rural place as lacking, the distance to urban places was a core identity marker, for example, the students did not want to ‘go hundreds of kilometres to buy clothes’. However, the local services, facilities and activities that *did* exist, were experienced as meaningful, which moderated the image of the rural place as lacking and empty:

People think that Inland town is really small and that it’s nothing. But if you live here and see all the all the activities that are around, and that there are market fairs, then I think they would think of Inland town as big enough. The first impression used to be that Inland town is nothing, but it is more than it seems at first sight. (Girl, Inland town)

In summary, understandings and meaning-making of the home-place were strongly connected to social relations (tightness of the community) and materiality (nature). These localized resources (cf. Haukanes, 2013) were assigned far greater significance than more negative aspects of rural life in their subjectification of the rural place as an attractive place to live. For example, their narratives indicated that living in a close-knit community was more important than full services. Using urban life as a contrast, the positive aspects of rural life dominated the narratives, while the deficiencies of rural places were less prominent. Thus, the local rural town was narrated as ‘*the place to be*’, and the city was constructed as the negation. This narrated relation between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ challenges dominant discourses on

urbanism reported in many youth studies. For example, a study on youths in rural Denmark found that the urban was the obvious and unquestioned norm. In contrast to how the home-place was narrated by the Coastal and Inland students, the Danish students narrated the ‘rural’ as empty and dull, and the city as ‘the place to be’ (Sørensen and Pless, 2017).

The ‘self’

As well as the young people giving meaning to home-place, they also defined themselves in relation to those meanings. Generally, they introduced themselves as a **small place person** with interests and characteristics that harmonized not only with those of other people living in the locality (friends, family-members, neighbours etc.), but also with their interpretations of the local place itself. Thus, interpretations of a ‘small place person’ included various parallel characteristics, such as being a **social person**, a **nature person** and a **calm** and **not stressful person**: ‘I like to take it easy’, ‘I’m a person who likes to spend time in nature’, ‘I’m a social person’, ‘I have close friends’ etc. In this meaning-making, the understanding of ‘we’ corresponded to people living in ‘small’ places, whereas people living in urban areas were ‘the others’. They presented themselves as more calm, socially oriented and welcoming than people from larger cities who were portrayed as stressed and anonymous to each other: ‘They don’t even say hello to their neighbour’. The overall impression was that the students experienced harmony between the understandings of themselves and the home-place, as expressed through statements such as: ‘I feel at home here’ and ‘I feel I can be myself here’. In line with this experience, the home-place was described as a place where people are seen and recognized for ‘who they are’ (cf. Leyshon, 2008; Sørensen and Pless, 2017).

While identification with home-place was the dominant narrative, there was also a narrative about dis-identification. This was associated with an understanding of having deviating interests, as demonstrated by a girl in Inland school who had immigrated to Inland town with her family from a large European city:

I do music, I play the piano, and I also sing [...] sometimes I go to cities, because I can’t stay here for a long time, I find it so boring here, I am not used to this [...] and it’s hard to find people who have the same interests as myself, like in my class for example, there is almost no one who has the same interests as me. Not anyone, I would say. (Girl Inland town)

In the students' talk about everyday life, music and arts were linked to urban life and lifestyles, rather than to rural social and cultural life. For example, the girl quoted above talked about her mother as a 'city person' and as one of the few in Inland town who shared her interests in music and arts. Connecting music and arts with urban life left her with 'not much to do' in Inland town: 'I grew up in xxx [European capital] so I'm used to that life, I'm used to doing things and I like to do things, but here in Inland Town there's not much to do.'

Experiences of being different also referred to interests in a wider sense, such as thoughts about one's future professional life. For example, when a Coastal school girl who had grown up in Coastal town talked about everyday life, she actively distanced herself from the local town's labour market, arguing that the local labour market did not suit her interests and ambitions. She did not want to work in the health care sector like her mother or in the municipal administration like her father, but dreamed of a job as a musician in a big city, preferably 'abroad somewhere'. In her talk, she distanced herself from the local place including the people living there: 'My plan is to get as far from here as possible, I don't want to become like the others here.' Due to experiences of difference, or as an intertwined process, the home-place was experienced as bounded and enclosed (cf. Stenbacka, 2011), with limited freedom: 'I've had so much trouble with people here. Both relatives, and others, like friends. So, I look down at this place pretty much, I think there's too much petty gossip here and stuff.' Thus, experiences of difference in young people's talk were strongly connected with a dual understanding of urban and rural lifestyles, and of 'good' and 'bad' lifestyles.

As demonstrated in this section, the meaning of experience is complex, and various intersecting social relations (cf. Massey, 1994) contributed to the feeling of identification or non-identification, i.e. a feeling of being 'at home' or not 'at home'. This dual nature of subjectification highlights the relational and symbolic aspects of place. Places are interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, and communicated – with reference to other places. And as been showed in some of the presented quotations, the benefits and/or shortcomings of the local rural town are often emphasised by contrasting them with urban space and life (cf. Bæck and Paulgaard, 2012). Thus, a place is not only experienced in relation to by its inhabitants, the

character of the local infrastructure and the range of services, cultural events etc., but also by its real and interpreted relationships to people and places ‘outside’ (Massey, 1994).

The future

While the rural place was perceived as ‘the place to be’ when growing up, it was rather the city that was perceived as ‘the place to be’ in the future. Thus, the students planned to live a more urban life as grown-ups, indicating that transition, development and the phenomenon of ‘moving on’ as key elements of youth as a life phase, are strongly associated with the city (cf. Corbett, 2009). However, the students communicated their plans somewhat differently, indicating that various lived experiences lay behind their ambitions to leave their home-towns. For example, in Inland town, leaving the local town was experienced essential to get on in life and as **something one must do**. The students felt that they had to move in order to study or getting a decent job, as articulated by this Inland girl: ‘Jobs are essential, there must be jobs if you’re going to live here’. Another girl in Inland town expressed: ‘Because one can’t live in a place where there are no jobs, that’s a waste, so it’s better to live in any city where there is a job’. This also included a need for education of some kind. As described by Sørensen and Pless (2017), education is almost impossible to escape nowadays — ‘there seems to be no way around it and, therefore, no way around the city’. Due to lack of work, education and career paths, staying in the local town was not seen as a realistic option: ‘I don’t want to move, but I realize I don’t have much choice, if you look at the options here.’ This is interpreted as a feeling of being torn between a desire to stay and pressure to leave (cf. Bloksgaard et al., 2015).

In comparison with the Inland students, the Coastal town students talked about moving away from the local town in quite an agentic manner and as a **self-actualising** project. They planned to move to cities in Sweden and abroad, and articulated moving in a global youth middle-classed discourse as something desirable that one ought, and was expected, to do. Demonstrating identification with an imagined urban lifestyle was, for example, expressed by referring to oneself as a ‘city person’: ‘I see myself as a city girl. I like being away from home. I want to live abroad, that’s my dream, and move to somewhere like Paris’. Thus, students in Coastal town embraced a discourse of ‘urban’ and ‘global’ life to a greater extent than their peers in Inland town, and expressed leaving as a precondition for getting on with

one's life. Conversely, remaining in the local place after upper secondary school was articulated more as outside the norm, and as a failure.

Whereas the dominant narrative in both Inland town and Coastal town involved moving away from the local town, a **staying local** narrative was also expressed. Staying local was justified with references to personal interests that coincided with traditional local interests and occupations, and to direct access to arenas for such interests: 'It is of course easier to hunt and fish when living here than in many other places'. The talk about staying local clearly demonstrated a sense of being in the world that strongly connected to the local place – identification statements that also connected to having resources of some kind. For example, one Inland school boy whose parents ran a farm planned to get a job in the transport business in the neighbourhood, e.g. 'driving a sawmill truck', while he was waiting to take over the farm. He felt confident about his decision to stay local and trying to get a job in the region, even though the local sawmill had closed down: 'but I guess that will be difficult since the sawmill in [] closed down'. Similarly, forest-owning parents contributed to confidence to stay in a place like Inland town where the local labour market was limited and young people had difficulties finding a job:

Interviewer: How come you are so sure about that [working in forestry and transport]?

Boy: This is how I grew up, it's as simple as that, I'm used to it. [...]

Interviewer: And where do you want to live more exactly?

Boy: In the neighbourhood, I'd like to take over my grandpa's house. [...] or at least live somewhere near. [...]

Thus, an interest in and habit of engaging in traditional (male-dominated) activities and socio-economic resources to draw on (family ownership of houses, land, forest etc.), influenced the students' sense of place, and their thoughts about where to live in the future (cf. Johansson, 2017).

Synthesizing analysis and discussion

As demonstrated in previous sections, the students generally identified with the place they lived. They admired the local place and local life, and felt that their individual identity harmonised with the perceived identity of the local town. Nevertheless, there were tendencies

both to idealise and criticise it; the students expressed appreciation for the closeness to nature and close social relations etc., but also criticism about its lack of transports and services, being enclosed etc. This ambiguity (cf. Stahl and Habib 2017) – appreciation for elements of ‘the rural idyll’ (cf. Rye, 2006), juxtaposed with disparagement of the local town’s deficiencies – also appeared in narratives of individual students. The dual meanings the individuals gave to their home-place drew heavily on their personal experiences in relation to localised characteristics connected to relations, materiality and functions, indicating that spaces and places have multiple associated identities (cf. Massey, 1994). Thus, there were parallel understandings of the home-place – the students understood the local place as both rich and lacking, as both free and enclosed. However, the dominant narrative focused on the locality’s richness (of social relations and nature), rather than the deficiencies, emptiness or dullness that are reportedly major elements of rural youths’ narratives recorded in other studies (e.g. Sørensen and Pless, 2017).

Students who wanted to stay in the local town in the future emphasized identification with place when justifying staying. However, also students who planned to leave identified with the local place. Thus, there was no simple and straightforward relationship between identification with the local community and willingness to stay there in the future: most of the students identified with home-place, and most planned to leave (cf. Henderson, 2005; Jamieson, 2000). This can be interpreted as paradoxical or illogical reasoning. On the one hand they idealised the local rural life and narrated identification with the local place as essential for wellbeing, confidence and a meaningful ‘good’ life, implying an idealisation of harmony between the experienced identity of the ‘self’ and locality. On the other hand, they planned for a future life in an urban setting that they considered as lacking these qualities and generally did not identify with.

However, the logic behind their reasoning appeared when analysing *how* the students narrated their plans to move away from the local town, as there were differences between the two rural towns in this respect. In Inland town, students talked about moving in ways I interpreted as expressing a feeling that they essentially had to leave, or at least had limited choices (cf. Corbett, 2013, 2015; Kiilakoski, 2016). In contrast, the Coastal town students presented themselves more as active agents and narrated moving as a more open consumeristic and self-actualising choice, in harmony with a societal normative discourse linking mobility,

flexibility, ambition, a global outlook and success (Bloksgaard et al., 2015; Farrugia, 2013; Kiilakoski, 2016; Paulgaard, 2002, 2017). This difference is understood as being partly linked to the places' local structural conditions (cf. Bæck and Paulgaard, 2012) in combination with local and wider discourses about mobility in a manner showing that global discourses always have local dimensions. Inland town was more exposed to the effects of urbanism and globalism in terms of stagnation and outmigration than Coastal town, which had a richer, more diverse labour market, and was substantially closer to a large city. For example, one could live in Coastal town but commute to work in the city, an important difference in infrastructure and geographical location that affects how young people think about themselves and their spatial futures in terms of mobility (cf. Thomson and Taylor, 2005).

Thus, while some students portrayed leaving as rational and 'natural', since the local labour market was limited (Inland town), other students' narratives represented an outlook combining mobility, urbanism and globalism as the norm (Coastal town). The findings complement previous studies (e.g. Jamieson, 2000) by showing that local places' structural conditions (in terms of e.g. job opportunities) and both local and wider discourses about mobility strongly influence young people's reasoning about their spatial futures. They also show how material local conditions, discourses and practices can synergistically create strong norms about life choices, and how practice can conflict with collective narratives about the local place and what counts as valuable in a 'good' life. For example, one could idealise the rural place, but still plan to leave it.

The results challenge the Baumanesque sociological theorising (e.g. Bauman, 1992) that place no longer has a central role in processing identity and people's life paths. On the contrary, the results indicate that place is highly important in young people's identity-processing, and that there is a close relationship between place and identity (Easthope, 2009; Evans, 2016; Massey, 1994). For many students, the local town became entwined with their individual sense of self, as demonstrated by comments such as 'I feel I can be myself here'. Moreover, their identity-processing proved to be an intersubjective process and experience: processing self-identity was interwoven with processing group-identity (cf. Kiilakoski, 2016; Cuervo and Wyn, 2017).

The analysis stresses the influential discourse on urbanism and mobility in everyday life. For example, the urban was present in the students' narratives and used both to emphasise the advantages and deficiencies of rural life. It also shows that processing identity in relation to a place does not mean that people are unaffected by the mobility imperative. Contrarily, the study provides evidence that the dominant discourse about urbanism and mobility has strong local dimensions. Planning to leave did not inevitably mean non-identification with their place. They planned to leave because they had embodied leaving as the 'right' and expected decision or because they *had to* if they wanted to get an education or a job that was reasonably consistent with their aspirations and imagined future. Those who talked most about leaving as an active self-actualizing choice were students in Coastal town, where the discourse on mobility and urbanity was strong and larger shares of students had middle-class backgrounds than in Inland town. In Inland town, the students more often talked about their plans to leave as something they had to do. Those who did talk about the future with a sense of agency, could draw on resources of various kinds (for example, family ownership of land or forest, or access to an apartment in a nearby city). The consideration of several perspectives and dimensions (such as the local places' structural and material conditions, local practices, discourses as well as lived classed and gendered experiences of the local place) in the analysis clearly reveal the material and symbolic production of space (Farrugia and Wood, 2017)—that materialities, practices, relationships, interpretations and narratives etc. *produce* social space—as well as the rationalities underlying the young peoples' apparently ambiguous talk about their present and future lives.

End notes

1 In the classification of Swedish municipalities 'sparsely populated municipality' refers to a municipality with a population density less than 70/km² and more than a 45 minute drive to an urban centre with more than 3000 inhabitants and 'municipality with small-scale businesses' refers to a place in which at least 34% of the inhabitants work for a small business [or enterprise],

2 The project is supported by the Swedish Research Council, grant no. VR 2013-2142.

Findings from the project have been reported in for example articles by Beach et al. (2018a,b), Johansson (2017), Rönnlund et al. (2018), Rosvall et al. (2018) and Rosvall (2017).

3 320p is a high grade in Swedish upper secondary school.

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