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# Understanding how place is addressed in research on young people's political action: cases from Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Following recent critiques of the metrocentric nature of global youth studies, this paper explores the role of place in current research on youth political action in Sweden. Drawing on Agnew's [2011. "Chapter 23: Space and Place." In *Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, edited by J. Agnew, and D. Livingstone. London: Sage] concept of place and using qualitative interpretive review as our method, we examined three sets of research publications on three different aspects of youth political action in Sweden. Our analysis found that place was addressed differently in each set of publications: youth political socialization and civic engagement were approached as placeless, street protests were examined as place assumed and urban justice movements were studied as place-based. The first two sets of publications contribute to reproducing a metrocentric understanding of youth political action, where urban areas are constructed as the key settings for political action among young people, while rural or peripheral areas are assumed to work in the same way or are depicted as non-political. By contrast, the publications on urban justice movements offered an alternative by exploring political action as place-based. The need to study the place-specific ways that young people do politics is discussed, with its potential to further the understanding of how young people do politics from where they are.

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## Introduction

Youth political action has been shown to be somewhat similar between rural and urban areas, but also crucially different. While the research on rural youth's political action is quite limited, a few studies from the US explore these differences. For instance, studies show that church attendance and involvement in community sports are more important for youth political action in rural areas compared to urban areas (Elder and Conger 2000; Ludden 2011; Oosterhoff, Metzger, and Alvis 2020). Another study conducted in the US finds that cross-generational interactions and organizing practices are more common among politically active youth in poor rural areas compared to poor urban areas (Lay

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2006). These findings indicate that the *places* where youth live affect their political action, nonetheless, it remains unclear how.

Meanwhile, researchers have pointed to the metrocentric convention of global youth studies. This convention consists of solely investigating the experiences of young people in urban areas and subsequently applying conclusions to all young people, thereby making urban youth the norm and rendering the experiences of youth in other places invisible (Farrugia 2014; Woodman and Wyn 2015). This reflects a broader convention in social theory where rural and other peripheral areas are portrayed as declining and stuck in the past, while urban areas are set as the natural milieu for studying contemporary, modern life (Cook and Woodman 2020). This means that the *places* where social action and interactions occur and how *place* shapes these processes often remain unexplored.

Research on youth political action show that the way young people engage in political issues depends on power structures embedded in social hierarchies, such as age, class, gender and race (Harris and Roose 2014; Henn and Foard 2014; O'Toole and Gale 2010; Pfanzelt and Spies 2019). Precisely because their opportunities to participate are shaped by these power dynamics, young people participate in different ways, mixing different forms of political action across formal and informal spheres. Studies conducted in urban areas in Australia (Harris and Roose 2014; Harris and Wyn 2009), Canada (Baczewska, Cachon, and Daniel 2017) and Sweden (Coe and Rönnblom 2019) find that the everyday networks, embedded in online spheres and in local communities, work as social spaces where young people develop political attitudes and learn to act on social injustices. However, they do not explain how these social spaces are shaped by place.<sup>1</sup>

Because our own research focuses on youth political action, we wanted to know whether and how a metrocentric convention could also be traced in this sub-field, especially within (contemporary) research in Sweden, which is where we work. In this article, we present the findings from a qualitative integrative review that aimed to understand how *place* is addressed in existing research conventions in Sweden on youth political action and to develop concepts that capture these conventions. We examined three questions: how has existing research in Sweden studied youth political action, how has this research analyzed the places where youth do politics and what consequences do these analyses of places have for understanding youth political action. We reviewed publications from three sets of publications, each focused on a different aspect of youth political action: political socialization and civic engagement, street protests and urban justice movements. Our findings show that place was addressed differently in each set of publications, and accordingly, we developed three concepts: placeless, place assumed and place-based, each delineating different disciplinary conventions. Working abductively throughout the analysis, we drew upon the concept of place following Agnew (2011) to interpret our results. In the discussion, we compare our findings to the critique against the metrocentric convention in global youth studies and discuss how using a place-based approach could extend current research on youth political action.

## Materials and methods

We chose a qualitative research design using integrative review as our method because this allowed us to use abduction and interpretation to synthesize publications and

develop new concepts grounded in our synthesis (Dixon-Woods, Cavers, and Agarwal 2006; Snyder 2019). This was because our goal was to develop concepts grounded in our findings that are transferable to other researchers working in other settings and not to produce representative findings. We used purposive sampling to select different sets of publications developed by *groups of researchers* belonging to a research environment. We adopted this strategy based on the assumption that a research group works collaboratively to produce a substantive body of knowledge over time, thereby allowing them to set the direction of a research field regarding continuity or change to disciplinary conventions. A disadvantage of this strategy is of course that it misses publications developed by individual researchers that may also engage with disciplinary conventions.

We began by identifying the largest and most recognized research groups on youth political action in Sweden, those which had received sizable, long-term grants and consistently produced international publications during the previous decade (2011–2021). This was done by looking through the research groups that focus on youth politics across Swedish universities. Two research groups were identified: YeS Youth & Society Research at Örebro University and Civil Society, Social Movements and Resistance Research at Göteborg University. As these two groups represented the main research environments on youth political action in Sweden, we expected to find the most cutting-edge efforts to move disciplinary conventions forward. For our third case, we selected a set of publications by a group of researchers who clearly collaborated with one another in research on urban justice movements but did not belong to a high-profile research environment. We identified this group initially through a special issue on 'Place struggles' or *Platskamp* of the Swedish journal *Arkiv. Tidskrift för samhällsanalys*. This special issue was, in turn, used to select a set of publications by this group of researchers produced during the same period as the first two cases (2011–2021).

We ended up with 3 coherent sets of publications: 10 publications from YeS Youth & Society at Örebro University focused on political socialization and civic engagement; 10 publications from Civil Society, Social Movements and Resistance Research at Göteborg University (CSM-RESIST) focused on street protests, and 7 publications focused on urban justice movements (see Table 1). Although the latter two did not specify a focus on youth, young people typically make up a large proportion of participants in street protests and urban justice movements. It might seem unorthodox to conduct a literature review using only publications from Sweden, rather than international ones. However, Sweden makes an interesting case for researching the role of place due to its long history of popular movements that organized civil society outside urban areas. Because Sweden is a large country with many sparsely populated regions and without large metro-poles, popular movements, such as the labor movement and the sobriety movement, primarily emerged from rural industrial towns during the early twentieth century. The emergence of these popular movements was closely linked to the creation of democracy in Sweden as people participated in study circles and trade unions that were based in local communities and founded on locally elected leadership (Ambjörnsson 2017). Thus, place has historically been very significant for political action in Sweden, suggesting that it should form part of the disciplinary conventions for researching youth political action in contemporary times.

Finally, each of the three sets of publications can be seen as representing different research conventions, having a distinct approach to studying young people's political

**Table 1.** Publications reviewed (order by year published).

## YeS Youth &amp; Society, Örebro University

- 1 Ekström M and Sveningsson M (2019) Young people's experiences of political membership: from political parties to Facebook groups. *Information, Communication & Society* 22(2): 155–171.
- 2 Ekström M and Shehata A (2018) Social media, porous boundaries, and the development of online political engagement among young citizens. *New media & society* 20(2) 740–759.
- 3 Kim Y, Russo S and Amnå E (2017) The longitudinal relation between online and offline political action among youth at two different developmental stages. *New media & society* 19(6) 899–917.
- 4 Dahl V and Abdelzadeh A (2017) Self-Selection or Socialization? The Longitudinal Relation Between Civic Engagement and Political Orientations Among Adolescents. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 46(6) 1250–1269.
- 5 Ekström M (2016) Young people's everyday political talk: a social achievement of democratic engagement, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19:1, 1–19.
- 6 Dahl V and Stattin H (2016) Beyond the limits: involvement in illegal political activities. *European Political Science Review* 8(1): 125–145.
- 7 Amnå E and Ekman J (2014) Standby citizens: diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review* 6 (2): 261–281.
- 8 Östman J (2012) Information, expression, participation: How involvement in user-generated content relates to democratic engagement among young people. *New media & society* 14(6) 1004–1021.
- 9 Amnå E (2012) How is civic engagement developed over time? Emerging answers from a multidisciplinary field. *Journal of Adolescence* 35: 611–627.
- 10 Ekman J and Amnå E (2012) Political action and Civic Engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs* 22:283–300.

## Civil Society, Social Movement and Resistance Research, Göteborg University

- 1 Peterson A, Thörn H and Wahlström M (2018) Sweden 1950–2015: Contentious Politics and Social Movements between Confrontation and Conditioned Cooperation. In F. Mikkelsen et al. (eds.), *Popular Struggle and Democracy in Scandinavia*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology.
- 2 Peterson A, Wahlström M and Wennerhag M (2018) 'Normalized' Pride? Pride parade participants in six European countries. *Sexualities* 21(7) 1146–1169.
- 3 Peterson A, Wahlström M and Wennerhag M (2018) *Pride Parades and LGBT Movements: Political action in an International Comparative Perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- 4 Wennerhag M (2017) Pride anländer till Sverige: En resa i två etapper. In Wijkström F, Reuter M and Emami A (ed.) *Civilsamhället i det transnationella rummet* (pp. 35–61). Stockholm: European Civil Society Press.
- 5 Wennerhag M (2017) Sociala rörelser, protester och politiskt våld – en forskningsöversikt. In Edling C and Rostami A (ed.) *Våldsbejakande extremism: en forskarantologi* (pp. 291–322). Stockholm: Wolters Kluwer Statens offentliga utredningar.
- 6 Wennerhag M, Reiter H and Peterson A (2016) Who Takes Part in May Day Marches? In *The Ritual of May Day in Western Europe: Past, Present and Future*. New York: Routledge.
- 7 Thörn H and Svenberg S (2016) 'We feel the responsibility that you shirk': movement institutionalization, the politics of responsibility and the case of the Swedish environmental movement. *Social Movement Studies* 15(6): 593–609.
- 8 Peterson A, Wahlström M and Wennerhag M (2015) European Anti-Austerity Protests – Beyond "old" and "new" social movements? *Acta Sociologica* 58(4) 293–310.
- 9 Peterson A, Wahlström M, Wennerhag M, Christancho C and Sabucedo J (2012) May Day Demonstrations in Five European Countries. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 17(3): 281–300.
- 10 Thörn H (2012) In between Social Engineering and Gentrification: Urban Restructuring, Social Movements, and the Place Politics of Open Space. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34(2): 153–168.

## Research on urban justice movements in Sweden

- 1 Tahvilzadeh N and Kings L (2018) Att göra kaos. Om förortspolitik som urban styrregim och demokratiskt spel. *Arkiv. Tidskrift för samhällsanalys* (9): 103–128.
- 2 Dahlstedt M, Kings L and Tahvilzadeh N (2018) Platskamp: inledande reflektioner. *Arkiv. Tidskrift för samhällsanalys* (9): 7–25.
- 3 Ålund A and León-Rosales R (2017) Becoming an Activist Citizen: Individual Experiences and Learning Processes within the Swedish Suburban Movement. *Journal of Education and Culture Studies* 1(2): 123
- 4 Schierup C-U, Ålund A and Kings L (2014) Reading the Stockholm riots – a moment for social justice? *Race & Class* 55 (3): 1–21.
- 5 Ålund A (2014) Politics of Belonging: A Narrative on Activism in Sweden. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 22(4): 330–337.
- 6 Sernhede, O (2014) Youth Rebellion and Social Mobilisation in Sweden. *A Journal of Politics and Culture* 56: 81–91.
- 7 Sernhede, O (2011) School, Youth Culture and Territorial Stigmatization in Swedish Metropolitan Districts. *Young* 19 (2): 159–180.

action when it comes to theoretical perspectives and methods, and refers to particular global literature. Because of this, each case is quite different from one another and

instead like their respective international areas of research, e.g. political socialization, social movements and urban justice movement.

Conducting the synthesis began with a close reading of the selected publications, where the second author read the publications of the first two sets and the first author read the publications of the third set. Next, we determined a group of terms that could be used to understand the role of place: setting(s)/context(s), country(ies), local, urban/city(ies), place, location/locality, rural/countryside and geographical. For the papers published in Swedish, we used terms indicating the same meanings: kontext, land/länder/nation, lokal(a), urban(a)/stad/städer, plats(er), rum, landsbygd(er) and geografisk. We then returned to each publication, conducted a search for each of these different terms and recorded the number of times each term was mentioned in the publication in a chart and analyzed abductively how each term was used. To theoretically guide our analysis, we drew upon Agnew's (2011) definition of place. Following Agnew, place can be empirically analyzed according to three dimensions: (1) *Location* which refers to the geographical locations which are constructed in relation to one another; (2) *Locale* that is the material settings in which social relations and interaction take place and (3) *Sense of place* referring to the subjective orientations, feelings and emotions that people assign to place. Using these dimensions, each researcher individually analyzed which assumptions were made about the places where young people do politics, and the conclusions that were drawn about the role of place for political action. Subsequently, we met up to discuss the patterns found across the publications and analyzed the differences and similarities. In the final stage, we developed new concepts that captured the patterns identified in the publications and compared each concept with one another. Following criteria used to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry (Charmaz 2014); the concepts we have developed can be used by other researchers, transferred to other settings and modified for improvement through future research.

## Results

Our results show three patterns, each depicting a specific way in which place was addressed in the publications. Moreover, place was delineated differently in each of the three sets of publications rather than cross cutting them. To capture each pattern, we developed three concepts: *placeless*, *place-assumed* and *place-based*.

### *Political socialization and civic engagement as placeless*

The first concept developed from our analysis captures one disciplinary convention: the depiction of youth political socialization and civic engagement as not occurring in any place. Because place was largely absent in the publications from YeS Youth & Society at Örebro University, we defined our first concept as placeless. In the publications, the terms *contexts*, alternatively *settings*, were used repeatedly as central analytical categories in all 10 publications. Yet, these terms were used exclusively to study social environments or settings. This research demonstrates how youth political socialization and civic engagement develops within a wide range of social contexts such as parental, peer, school, leisure, online and organizational. For example, Ekström (2016) explored the *settings* in which youth engage in political talk, and these included schools and peer interactions.

In no publication were the terms *contexts* and *settings* used to refer to the locales, location or sense of place (Agnew 2011) in which youth political socialization and civic engagement developed or occurred.

Instead, across these 10 articles, the geographical location was found mainly in the description of the sample using other terms. The terms *region*, *city* (alternatively *urban*), *suburban* and *countryside* (alternatively *rural*) were used to report the sample of the study conducted by the YeS research program. The study consisted of a large survey applied over multiple waves among students in secondary schools (grades 7–12) located in and near the Swedish city of Örebro as well as outlying rural communities, as the following quotes depict:

The respondents attended 13 schools in the *region*, selected to represent different housing conditions and income strata. (Östman 2012, 1009)

The sample consisted of middle adolescents coming from a Swedish *city* of 137,000 inhabitants. (Amnå and Ekman 2014, 271)

We have participants from working class as well as middle class families, *living in rural areas, suburbs, and the city center*. (Ekström 2016, 4)

As the first and third quote illustrate, these terms were used to show diversity in the geographical locations of participants. Nonetheless, these diverse geographical locations of participants were not analyzed nor were the implications of these locations given an explanatory value when discussing the results. Only one of the 10 articles explicitly reports a single result from a rural participant:

For Leo, who lived in the countryside in a farming community, working against cruelty to animals meant making sure that livestock was treated in a humane way. However, the organization had rather a vision that humans should not use animals at all, for food, clothing, experimentation, entertainment, or any other reason. The protests and the community online developed in a way with which Leo found it difficult to identify, thus, he chose to quit. (Ekström and Sveningsson 2019, 185)

Despite the depiction of a divergence between Leo and the online organization, place remains unanalyzed and unexplored. Indeed, the term *city* is used far more frequently than the term *countryside* across the 10 articles, most often to refer to the sample from the city participants, as in the second quote above (Amnå and Ekman 2014). Again, what the city meant for youth political socialization and civic engagement is not acknowledged. As a result, the various social contexts studied by this research program, such as parents, peers, school and so forth, are taken to be placeless and thereby decontextualized of the geographical location in which participants live.

Finally, geographical location was found in the conclusions of most of the articles. The term *country* was applied to refer to the country in which the study was conducted, Sweden, and *countries* was used to refer to those countries to which the study results might be generalizable, namely other European countries. The terms *geography(ical)*, *location*, *locality* or *place* were not used at all, and the term *local* was used on a few occasions referring to level/scale or scope of youth civic engagement in contrast to a *national* level/scale or scope. This is a consequence of not recognizing the importance of place; by associating an urban 'setting' with the whole nation, urbanity is transferred as something representing the nation and thus reproducing itself as the invisible norm.

Across the literature, youth were purposively sampled from rural, suburban and urban areas, yet there was no further analysis of how these different places might influence or shape their political socialization and civic engagement. However, at least one early study from the US indicates that these different places matter. Lay (2006) found that low-income students in rural towns had better political knowledge than low-income students in urban areas, and that the social interactions and networks were the main difference between these two types of communities – with poor, rural communities having cross-generational social interactions that improved political knowledge. More recently, Oosterhoff, Metzger, and Alvis (2020) compared the network structure in organized and civic participation among 900 adolescents in the US, half in rural areas and half in non-rural areas. In both networks, volunteering to clean up the neighborhood was the most important activity. In the rural network, church attendance and community sports were important and for the non-rural network, protesting and school arts were important. Such differences found by both Lay (2006) and Oosterhoff, Metzger, and Alvis (2020) are not elaborated in the publications from YeS. Thereby, we could identify one disciplinary convention of how a metrocentric convention is reproduced, as young adults' experiences with political socialization and civic engagement, while depicted as placeless, are based on urban areas and then used to draw conclusions about youth in other places.

### *Street protests as place-assumed*

The second concept developed from our analysis captures another disciplinary convention: the depiction of street protests as occurring mainly in urban areas, yet without places being analyzed or explored. Because assumptions were made about place in the publications from CSM-RESIST at Göteborg University, we defined our second concept as place-assumed. These publications examined recurring street demonstrations, including Mayday, Pride, Anti-austerity and radical Left, using data from the 'Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation' project, conducted in five European countries – Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, Spain, Switzerland and Sweden – between 2009 and 2012 (van Stekelenburg et al. 2012). As with our first case, the terms *contexts*, alternatively *settings*, were used as central analytical categories in all 10 publications. Yet, once again, these terms were used exclusively to study how protests were developed within a wide range of environments, in this case, historical, political, policy, social, cultural and movement/organization. The term *local* was frequently used but without being defined, and implicitly referred to level/scale of government administration to which street protests were directed in contrast to a *national* level/scale. In no publication were the terms *contexts*, *settings* or *local* used to analyze the geographical location where protest movements developed, with the exception of Thörn's (2012) article on urban movements, which we will discuss separately below. In fact, place appears to be conflated with the various contexts listed above as the following quote presented by Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag (2018, 3) describe:

Pride mobilizing strategies vary based on national/local cultural, political/legal, and institutional contexts (McFarland 2012, p. 630). Pride parades have travelled to different political and cultural contexts in which the events have been strategically translated – framed – by organizers to adapt to these differing contexts. As Johnston and Waitt (2015, p. 117) point out, "the politics of gay pride festivals and parades is always located; place matters."

Across these 10 articles, geographical location was found in the description of where the protests had been held and from where data had been collected. The terms *place* and *location* were used to convey diversity regarding where protests had occurred, such as in a public square, main avenues, workplace and university campuses. Meanwhile, the terms *rural*, *countryside* and *geography* were used to capture diversity regarding where data had been collected across a country, to show that a recurring protest was widely dispersed and not concentrated in one place. However, these places were not analyzed further, generating an underlying assumption that the street protests had the same meaning or function for participants regardless of the different places in which these were held. Even though the term *urban* is used over 200 times and the term *rural/countryside* is only used six times, both terms are only used in a few publications. In most publications, neither is used; street protests are studied primarily in urban places without these places being mentioned as such. Lastly, the geographical location was also found to depict where the study was conducted. The term *country* was used to refer to the country or countries in which the study was conducted, including Sweden and other European countries.

In the 10 publications, street protests are assumed to occur in urban places, thereby excluding protests occurring in other public places in- and outside the city, such as in rural places, from the start. This reproduces a wider convention in the international literature theorizing of protests as urban street phenomena (Tilly 1986), while similar protests occurring in rural areas are excluded as they are defined as non-political (Enlund 2020), and the use of other types public places for protest are overlooked (Liliequist 2020). Not making this assumption explicit is problematic in countries, like Sweden, that have a long history of public protests in non-urban areas as mentioned in the introduction, where the earliest experiences with street protests occurred in rural towns, such as the ‘hunger riots’ in 1917 and the deadly street protests in Ådalen 1931. This tradition continues in contemporary times with demonstrations against the closure of the government services, such as the hospital in Söderhamn in the 1970s and the nursery ward in Sollefteå in the 2010s. Simply by widening the concept of the street to public places in general, it becomes possible to find and redefine protests in rural areas, as research on LGBTQ activism has shown both in Sweden (Liliequist 2020) and elsewhere (Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson 2004).

Consequently, in the research publications by CSM-RESIST, we identified another disciplinary convention of how a metrocentric convention is reproduced, i.e. by assuming that street protests are the main public place for demonstrating and that these streets exist exclusively in urban settings, without exploring or analyzing what other public places could be relevant. One exception is Thörn’s (2012) study of urban movements in Copenhagen (Christinia) and Gothenburg (Haga). He conceptualizes the intersection of taking over physical public space and creating alternative public spheres, which he refers to as the *place politics of open space* (Thörn 2012, 157). Unfortunately, this theorizing was not drawn upon or developed in any of the other publications that we examined for our review.

### *Urban justice movements as place-based*

The third concept developed from our analysis captures a third disciplinary convention; the depiction of urban justice movements as occurring in marginalized urban areas,

which in Sweden are called suburbs. Because places are explicitly named and theorized in this set of publications, we defined our third concept as place-based. The publications reviewed in this case focuses on activism developed and led by inhabitants, mainly youth, of marginalized urban areas in Stockholm. An example is the actions of the youth activist organization, *Megaphone*, based in the suburb of Husby that were explored in several of the publications.

Like our first two cases, *context* was primarily used to describe the historical, socio-cultural, social, political and public preconditions at hand when the movements emerged. However, in contrast to the first two cases, these contexts were clearly related to specific places, reflecting Agnew's (2011) dimension of locale. One example of such locales is explored by Sernhede (2011) who found that organized young people gave lectures in schools, youth recreation centers, libraries and community centers to raise awareness and work against territorial stigmatization among younger children. Furthermore, referring to the local area as the context of becoming a political activist (Ålund and Léon-Rosales 2017) or to the political context of Swedish suburban areas (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018). Indeed, one of the papers used *contextualization* to directly convey place by referring to 'places of livelihoods' (Ålund and Léon-Rosales 2017, 124).

Furthermore, different terms were used to describe and indicate place or geographical location, such as metropolitan areas, suburban and urban areas, or by referring directly to the place's name. Reflecting Agnew's dimension of location, i.e. that places are constructed and understood in relation to other places, was also acknowledged by using the term 'urban periphery', i.e. peripheral in relation to metropolitan livelihoods in the inner-city center (Ålund and Léon-Rosales 2017; Schierup, Ålund, and Kings 2014; Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018). Also, in contrast to our first two cases, different terms were used to capture the importance of place in urban justice movements, including place-based (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018), locally based/ urban unrest (Schierup, Ålund, and Kings 2014) or place struggles (Ålund 2014; Ålund and Léon-Rosales 2017; Dahlstedt, Kings, and Tahvilzadeh 2018).

The term *local* was used to denote the scale of space, for instance, local actors, local neighborhood, local community, local youth culture or local municipality. The term *national* was used across all papers to denote Sweden's historical context of suburban areas. *Rural* or *countryside* was mentioned once to describe one of the municipalities that was studied (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018, 110). However, in contrast to our previous cases, these terms were used to indicate specific geographical locations.

The most significant way the publications on urban justice movements contrasted with our two former cases was that it had a theoretical discussion on place. First, place was theorized as a social construct that is constantly being created through a process of social action and shaped by power struggles between different actors. For instance, Dahlstedt, Kings, and Tahvilzadeh (2018, 11) drawing upon critical urban theory, post-colonial theory and Massey's (2005) relational understanding of place, approached the suburb as being produced and reproduced through power struggles between actors. Schierup, Ålund, and Kings (2014, 9) referred to Mustafa Dikeç's understanding of place or space: '[...] that space and place cannot be considered as given but are produced by multiple practices and discourses'. Ålund and Léon-Rosales (2017, 24) defined place as 'closely related to the idea of social "space"; not merely a territorially bounded unit, but a socially produced nodal point of interconnection, filled with power-laden practices'. Consequently, in these publications, place is theorized as political because there is never a single,

stable meaning of a place but rather the meaning of any place is always being contested by the different actors engaging with it. Political action is thereby approached across these publications as a way of producing place, as a place-making practice.

Second, place or *space*, was theorized as a social hierarchy that intersect with other hierarchies, including those based on race, ethnicity, gender and class. For instance, Schierup, Ålund, and Kings (2014, 13) suggest that youth activism and rebellion must be studied through the lens of ‘social polarization in terms of an intersection of space, race, income and power’. In similarity, Ålund and León-Rosales (2017) argue that space, race, income and power interacts and needs to be considered to understand identity formation and resistance among youth. Hence, what these studies suggest is that place is important for constructing shared everyday experiences, belonging and social solidarity. For instance, Sernhede (2011, 2014) discusses how shared experiences of territorial stigma can spark social mobilization and organizing practices expressed through local hip-hop culture. A shared sense of belonging, identifying with and building social solidarity based on place, are processes where place is ascribed meanings and values, which reflects what Agnew (2011) defines as sense of place.

Consequently, while this set of publications does not challenge the metrocentric convention, it represents another disciplinary convention as it approaches political action as place-based. This is done by locating and contextualizing political action in relational locations, by specifying the locales that shape how young people raise their voices and address social inequalities through political action, and by showing that place is meaningful for central social processes of political action, including belonging, identity construction and social solidarity. This set of publications thereby most closely reflects the dimension of place proposed by Agnew (2011).

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have presented the findings from our integrative review of how *place* is addressed within three sets of publications in Sweden on young people’s political action. Based on our analysis, we constructed three concepts: (1) *placeless*, (2) *place-assumed* and (3) *place-based*.

All three concepts illustrate disciplinary conventions within research on youth political action that contribute to reproduce the metrocentric convention of global youth studies in line with the critique by Farrugia and other researchers. Our two first concepts illustrate two dominant conventions in youth studies whereby young people’s experiences and lives are depicted and theorized either as placeless or place-assumed. In both conventions, conclusions are drawn based on young people living in urban areas without considering how place shapes young people’s lives and opportunities. One way to understand our results is to shed light on the concepts that are used conventionally instead of place. In the first set of publications, social contexts were used as a central concept to capture the settings and interactions in which civic engagement and political socialization occurred. A similar pattern was found in the second set of publications, where political contexts were used as a central concept to capture the scale of administrative or governing space, i.e. the local or the national, in which street protests developed. Both concepts have proven valuable to explain and understanding youth political action across time and space. However, they are unable to capture the role of

place for political action, instead rendering them placeless or place-assumed. The third set of publications moves beyond these two conventions by studying youth political action as embedded in specific places, i.e. place-based. Using Agnew's dimensions of location, locale and sense of place, we will now discuss how the concept of place can improve understandings of youth political action in ways not captured by the conventions of social and political contexts.

First, the location where youth political action takes place remains unexplored in our first two categories. Urban areas are assumed to be the 'right' or the 'main' place for understanding political action and other places are assumed to function in much the same way as urban areas. This way of linking explanation across time and space, assuming that places are the same, reflects a dominant perspective in modernist conventions (Agnew, Pringle, and Shelley 2003) that fails to acknowledge how places are socially constructed through interactions between actors, and between actors and their environment. Thus, our concepts of placeless and place-assumed illuminate the conventions of approaching place as empty space and not as relational. Yet, the locations where young people learn and do politics are clearly related. A relational understanding of place means that places are filled with meaning only in relation to one another in a similar manner as the core social categories of gender, race and class (Massey 2005). This means that some places are categorized as superior to other places, for instance, urban places in relation to rural places (Rönblom 2014) or urban centers to marginalized urban areas (Dahlstedt, Kings, and Tahvilzadeh 2018; Kings 2011). However, we argue that in the same way as power dynamics embedded in core social categories of gender, race and class, hierarchically structure young people's political actions (Henn and Foard 2014; O'Toole and Gale 2010; Pfanzelt and Spies 2019), power relations between places have consequences for how young people understand themselves and others, their abilities to act and how resources are distributed. However, this remains hidden when approaching political action as *placeless* or *place-assumed*.

Our third concept, *place-based*, offers crucial insights for advancing a relational approach to place (Agnew 2011). In the third set of publications, urban marginalized areas were approached as peripheral in relation to urban centers, actively created through the power struggles between different actors, such as the local state and youth activist groups. Furthermore, these publications show that the power hierarchies where urban marginalized areas are produced as subordinated or peripheral in relation to urban centers have consequences for how young people experience their opportunities to influence society, and how their efforts to do so is perceived by media and local stakeholders (Ålund and León-Rosales 2017; Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018). However, the fact that it is only the research focusing on marginalized urban areas that approach political action as place-based illustrates another tendency in current research conventions, i.e. the tendency to only approach the peripheral as the place-specific. As shown by Doreen Massey (1994), when local settings are studied, these tend to be associated with the specific or less valued, for instance, the local is linked to the lives of women while general or abstract space is linked to the lives of men. It is important to move beyond this convention and acknowledge that political action appearing in urban and formal settings are also embedded in place. Thereby, moving beyond an understanding of place as the specific or the peripheral, and instead, include place as a central concept for understanding social processes.

Second, the locales where political action takes place is not analyzed in our two first sets of research publications. As our concepts of *placeless* and *place-assumed* capture, the social

settings and contexts of urban areas are understood as the natural milieu for political action. This remark another convention within these disciplines and could be because political action traditionally has been conceptualized from a male and adult vantage point that presumes that urban settings are necessary to do politics: the population is concentrated for mobilization, the streets and plazas are designed for protests, and the centralized authorities are located to be influenced. Yet, research on feminist activism as well as children and youth participation capture other settings and locales where politics is done, including the kitchen table, peer-centered youth activities or community organizations (Enlund 2020; O'Shaughnessy and Kennedy 2010; O'Toole and Gale 2010; Rönnblom 2002; Sernhede 2011; Skelton 2010, 2013). This is typical among social groups when they are excluded from mainstream politics (Massey 1994). Precisely because of this, the political actions performed by women or youth, or/and in rural or peripheral settings have been ignored or depicted as non-political (Enlund 2020; Rönnblom 2002) or problematic (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018). This in turn has implications for the selection of study objects and formulation of research questions (Skelton 2010). Young people that do not have access to formal settings where they can organize in political and social issues, may find alternative ways to influence society, for instance, using Facebook (Svensson 2016).

Again, our third concept, *place-based*, provides some clues on how the locales where political action takes place vary between different geographical locations. Showing that locales matter in terms of whether young people have access to public spaces to raise their voices and discuss social and political issues. For instance, discussing the importance of local meeting hubs that were used to discuss the living conditions of young people living in a marginalized urban area (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018). Also, the locales that are used to discuss and convey political and social issues may vary between different places.

The third dimension of place, sense of place (Agnew 2011), was again missing in the first two cases. As illustrated in the first concept, *placeless*, place was conceptualized as empty surface where social life appears. Thus, excluding the importance of the meanings and values that people attach to these different places. In the second case, categorized as *place-assumed*, the research itself seemed to ascribe urban areas as the only places relevant for street protests, without analyzing how these specific places became meaningful for the protests. By contrast, in the set of publications approaching political action as *place-based*, the specific meanings that young people attached to place were analyzed. Specifically, the experiences of belonging, territorial stigma and shared identity based on place were conceptualized as important prerequisites for building social solidarity and collective action.

The starting point for this paper derived from the critique against the metrocentric convention of youth studies. Our results indicate that a metrocentric convention exists also in research on youth political action in Sweden, at least in the research publications analyzed in this study. Rural areas remain largely invisible in the research publications we examined on youth political action in Sweden, despite Sweden's long tradition of strong popular movements across rural areas. While marginalized suburban areas and rural areas both can be considered as peripheral in relation to urban centers (Vallström 2015), the first have received more attention as spaces where young people engage in local issues and express themselves in local subcultures. One reason for this may be that youth culture tends to be associated to urban areas, while rural areas are constructed as stagnant and as places that young people should leave (Eriksson 2017; Rönnlund 2020; Svensson 2016). Because of this, urban places become the only places where young people's

actions are recognized as political, even if the actions of young people from marginalized urban areas are not recognized as legitimate or as chaotic (Tahvilzadeh and Kings 2018).

Limiting research to the places where politics are assumed to take place, i.e. urban and formal settings, contributes to the exclusion and lack of recognition of young people in rural areas as actors with political agency and power. This is problematic for several reasons. First, because young people from rural areas generally feel less included in society and show lower trust in democratic institutions (Mucf 2019; Öhrn and Beach 2019; Vallström and Svensson 2018), which may in the long term contribute to strengthen political polarization between different areas. Because of this, knowledge on young people's experiences of political action in rural places is crucially needed for strengthening the democratic process. Second, by only focusing on the political action occurring in urban areas, the way that rural young people do politics is excluded from the knowledge production on youth politics. This may send signals to public stakeholders that rural areas are not in the interest or need for resources aimed at supporting and empowering young people.

We encourage future research to use the concepts developed through our analysis to analyze how place is addressed in other research fields and settings. We hope that future research goes beyond current research conventions that reproduce the metrocentric nature, to instead explore the different places and how place shapes young people's political action. This would mean that traditional definitions of political action could be challenged, while also exploring the emerging ways young people act to influence society from where they are.

## Note

1. In geographical knowledge, space and place are used as two distinct concepts. Place is often used referring to space that is ascribed to cultural or material meanings, while space refers to the abstract, the general or to the geographical scale (for instance, the nation state or the local level) (Agnew 2011; Gieryn 2000).

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