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Place and Youth Political Action: How Place Shapes Political Action in Rural Sweden

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Abstract

There are important gaps in the research on youth political action due to a lack of attention to the roles of place and the experiences of young people in rural places. To address these gaps, this article presents findings from intensive interviews with 15 young people (aged between 16 and 29 years) who identified as politically/socially engaged and lived or had recently lived in a rural place in Sweden. Analysis of their responses, based on constructivist-grounded theory, shows that place dimensions shaped three social processes of young people's political action: engaging *in politics in (rural) places*, *finding recognition as political actors in (rural) places* and *negotiating political belonging in relation to (urban) places*. By linking these processes with Agnew's three-dimensional understanding of place, the analysis provides novel insights into how various dimensions of place shape crucial social processes of youth political action.

Keywords

Political participation, rural sociology, space and place, teenagers, young people

Introduction

The social contexts of young people's daily lives play crucial roles in their political actions. Research indicates that they engage in political activities through discussions

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on political matters with parents and peers at home or school (Ekström & Östman, 2013; Loader et al., 2014) and/or with peers via cultural activities (Pfaff, 2009; Sernhede, 2011). They also get involved through civic associations (Baczewska et al., 2018; Coe et al., 2016; Harris & Roose, 2014). However, there is a lack of a multi-dimensional understanding of how place shapes political action. Hence, much of the research concentrates on urban youth, overlooking the role of place in political action while rendering rural youth invisible. Partly for this reason, there are major gaps in our multi-dimensional understanding of how place shapes political action. To address these gaps and elucidate more clearly how place shapes young people's political action, particularly in rural places, the study presented here explores associated processes by addressing young people's views and experiences in various rural places in Sweden.

This research contributes to the field in several ways. First, it offers new insights regarding a previously understudied group, focusing on politically/socially engaged rural youth and their experiences. Second, it illustrates how place shapes social processes of young people's political action. Third, it introduces novel theoretical perspectives by connecting the findings to a three-dimensional concept of place introduced by Agnew (2014).

There is limited knowledge regarding the impact of place on political action and a general lack of understanding of youth political action in rural places. Thus, a broad perspective is adopted, encompassing the experiences, meanings and actions of politically and socially engaged youths in various rural places, rather than focusing on actions in a specific location or those related specifically to rural issues. As recommended by Blumer (1969), when knowledge about a social phenomenon is limited, researchers should seek insights from experts in that field. In this case, the only real experts are politically/socially engaged youths themselves. Thus, the research is empirically grounded in in-depth interviews with 15 Swedish youths aged between 16 and 29 years, who identified as politically/socially engaged in various ways and resided in, or had recently lived in, rural places.

Sweden is as an intriguing case for this study, partly due to a recent history of rapid urbanization. From the mid-20th century to the 1970s, a substantial proportion of the Swedish population moved from rural to urban places and now approximately 85% of Sweden's population resides in urban places (Statistics Sweden, 2015). Sweden also has a strong tradition of political organization outside urban places through civic associations, local trade unions and study circles (Ambjörnsson, 2017), but the rapid urbanization has potentially altered the landscape of political action. Accordingly, recent reports and research indicate that there are significant differences between young people in urban and rural places. Young individuals in rural places are less likely to vote, have lower trust in politicians and feel less involved in society than their urban counterparts (Mucf, 2010, 2018; Öhrn & Beach, 2019). As experiences during early adulthood shape future political behaviour and values (Amnå, 2008), these differences may lead to increased polarization between urban and rural places in the long term. Thus, by examining the multi-dimensional role of place in political action in rural places this study may provide new insights into such disparities more generally. However, before presenting the empirical study and its findings, the next section summarizes previous relevant research.

Previous Research on Youth Political Action

Three streams of research on youth political action are particularly relevant to this study. These focus on socio-spatial aspects, sub-cultures and civic associations and rural places. The first stream concerns relationships between socio-spatial aspects and the political action of young people and children as parts of the general population, not necessarily those who identify as politically/socially engaged (Kallio & Häkli, 2015; Skelton, 2013). In an examination of the political action and thinking of youths aged 15–18 years, Harris and Wyn (2009) found that they primarily engaged in politics through discussing political issues together with relatives and friends, at school, at home and online, while considering the local government council to be adult-centred. More broadly, Skelton (2010) proposed that young people are stuck between the interstices of a generally recognized division between 'capital P Politics' (the state, nation or legal structures) and 'lower-case p politics' (the spaces of everyday life). She argues that this is problematic because it artificially places youths on the two sides of a binary construct, either developing into political subjects or primarily active through their everyday political actions (ibid.). Thus, it may obscure many ways in which youths attempt to influence society in their social and everyday worlds.

The second stream concerns how youths bridge the gaps between 'Politics' and 'politics' through sub-cultures and civic associations (Coe et al., 2016). Studies by members of the Chicago school (Burgess, 1923; Palmer, 1930) and Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies (Cohen & Benvenga, 2019; Hebdige, 1979) highlight youth's political action via sub-cultures. Recently, Pfaff (2009) found that youths in Germany developed and negotiated political symbols and values by participating in punk culture. Similarly, Sernhede (2011) found that young people living in marginalized urban places in Sweden used hip-hop music to challenge territorial stigma and marginalization. Furthermore, using data from a survey of youths aged 18–34 years in nine European countries, Holecz et al. (2022) identified an 'expanded action repertoire' of diverse political activities that young people use to influence society. These included participation in school activities, social clubs and (most prominently) community organizations.

Participating in sub-cultures and civic associations offers opportunities to construct collective identities (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Taylor et al., 2004) for example, joint engagement in gender, sexual or racial politics or with specific issues such as animal rights (Bosch, 2013; Malafaia et al., 2018). They also offer opportunities for youths to engage in political action when confronted with obstacles associated with social hierarchies. Notably, studies on politically engaged youths in different national contexts, including Canada (Baczewska et al., 2018) and Sweden (Coe et al., 2016), have shown that young people face difficulties because older people patronize their ideas and do not recognize them as political actors.

The third stream explores youth political action in rural places. Comparing urban and rural places in the United States, Oosterhoff et al. (2020) found that rural places offered different routes to political action, through stronger social ties and by offering other types of activities. Notably, their study revealed that church attendance and participation in community sports provided pivotal gathering spaces, facilitating youths' introduction to and active involvement in civic activities. In Sweden, a few studies have focused on young people in rural places as a general part of the

population, not necessarily identifying as politically or socially engaged, and concluded that hierarchies related to place influence political awareness and values. Areschoug (2022) argued that young people aged 14–16 years in rural places used politically incorrect racist language to signal political awareness in response to representations of urban superiority, rural inferiority and otherness. In a similar vein, Alemir et al. (2023) studied young women participating in EPA culture, a rural subculture in Sweden (an EPA is a car with a tractor motor that youths can legally drive in Sweden). The authors concluded that music genres and symbols, such as stickers and flags, linked to EPA culture, were utilized as tools for constructing political identities that challenged middle-class, non-white and urbanized identities.

To summarize, one stream of previous research on socio-spatial aspects of youth politics has addressed the socio-spatial contexts of young people's daily lives as meaningful for their political action. However, it has not addressed experiences of young people who identify as politically/socially engaged. Another stream, on young people's political action in sub-cultures and civic associations, has shown that youths utilize an expanded political action repertoire. While this literature has acknowledged some place dimensions of youth politics, such as territorial stigma and social contexts, it has been primarily based on experiences of urban youth, and thus overlooked the experiences of rural young people. A third stream has shown than rural places offer different opportunities and subjectivities that are meaningful for young people's political action but has still not taken into consideration multiple dimensions of place. To address limitations of all three research streams, here I apply a multi-dimensional concept of place in efforts to obtain a more nuanced interpretation of political actions of young people in rural places.

Theorizing How Place Shapes Youth Political Action

Agnew's three-dimensional understanding of place has been applied throughout this study, rather than other theories of place, because it is based on a solid body of previous feminist, geographical and sociological literature, including works by Massey (1994, 1998) and Harvey (1989). Similarly to other place theories used in sociology (Gieryn, 2000; Paulsen, 2004), place is conceptualized by Agnew (2014) as a process operating through three scales or dimensions, including locale, location and sense of place. These dimensions are regarded as collectively constituting a notion of place, 'local social worlds of place (locale) cannot be understood apart from the objective macro-order of location and the subjective territorial identity of sense of place' (Agnew, 2014, p. 28).

The first dimension, *locale*, refers to 'the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional)' and encompasses vehicles or internet chat rooms (Agnew, 2014, p. 28). Through social interaction, embedded in locales, norms and beliefs are set, maintained and challenged. The second dimension, *location*, refers to 'the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale'. It is related to disparities in economic growth, the uneven impacts of government policies, and social segregation (Agnew, 2014, p. 28). The locational dimension pertains to the ongoing process of shaping places through the distribution of resources and development of physical infrastructure. The third dimension, *sense of place*, refers to the meanings,

feelings and emotions that people attribute to a specific landscape, community or moral order within a place. A sense of place is developed through place attachment, participation in place-related activities and relating to the moral order of a place, that is, the ideological meanings and ideas attributed to a particular place.

Agnew's dimensions of place have only been partially considered in the three research streams outlined above. Research on socio-spatial aspects considers political action as occurring in certain settings (including school, at home, online and youth councils), thus acknowledging the importance of the locale dimension, but it neglects the locational and sense of place dimensions. The literature on civic associations and sub-cultures concentrates on the roles of sub-cultures and civic associations, generally without considering any of the three place dimensions, although Sernhede (2011) considers aspects related to the sense of place when discussing roles of territorial stigma and marginalization. Lastly, research on rural places in Sweden (Alemir et al., 2023; Areschoug, 2022) has addressed aspects related to sense of place, showing that young people construct political awareness and values in relation to place hierarchies. My empirical study contributes to the literature by simultaneously considering all three dimensions of place—locale, location and sense of place—in efforts to acquire a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how place influences youth political action.

Methodology

I obtained empirical data for the presented analysis through a qualitative study of perceptions of experts, sensu Blumer (1969), that is, young people (aged 16–29 years) who self-identified as politically/socially engaged and resided in, or had recently lived in, various rural places in Sweden. The research design followed an abductive approach, involving an iterative process of moving back and forth between existing literature, theories on place, empirical data and my own analysis to develop categories based (during all stages) on the data.

The data were collected between May and October 2021 in collaboration with the non-profit organization Rural Sweden (Hela Sverige Ska Leva), which provided partial funding for the research project. I contacted regional-level branches of this organization and received positive responses from three of the branches, which helped me to invite potential participants for the study. I also contacted an organization called Youth Up North, which had ongoing projects aimed at increasing youth involvement and participation in one of the selected regions and an additional region. Hence, I collected data in four regions, all of which encompassed large rural municipalities, according to the classification scheme of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2016). This also aligned with the aim to examine how place shapes political action by enabling study of the focal phenomena in various types of rural places rather than a specific one.

I contacted potential participants, with the help of the mentioned organizations, via e-mail and phone. I also applied a chain referral (or 'snowball') sampling approach (Arcury & Quandt, 1999) by asking each recruited participant to help to find new participants.

To address the gaps identified in the literature review summarized above, I designed a semi-structured interview guide with questions formulated in an open

manner to encourage participants to share their own experiences and understandings. The questions explored three main themes. First, how youths actively engage in political action, including their objectives and motivating factors. Second, the significance and meaningfulness of place for their political action, including the opportunities and barriers for political action in rural places. Third, the influence of power hierarchies on their political action, including place-, gender-, and age-based hierarchies. Analysis of the acquired data started directly after the first interview, involving the addition, and reordering of questions based on the ongoing analytical process.

In total, I conducted 15 interviews via Zoom or telephone with seven women and eight men. They talked about political action in different ways, including involvement in youth projects or organizations, starting youth associations to reduce food waste or arrange social activities for youths, involvement in civic associations and local development groups to affect local decision-making processes, voluntary work through the Red Cross, active involvement in political parties and non-profit associations striving to counter sexual violence, and debating issues related to gender inequality online. The interviews were held in Swedish and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by me, then the resulting transcripts were imported into Maxqda qualitative data analysis software.

The data were subsequently analysed following coding procedures rooted in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). I constructed initial codes using line-by-line open coding and the 'gerund' word form, focusing on how place shaped participants' political action, experiences and meanings. In the next step, I developed conceptual codes that captured what seemed most significant for the data. Then I theorized the material by relating the conceptual codes to one another through the development of sub-categories. Inspired by interactionism (Schwalbe et al., 2000), I theorized the final categories and relationships between them as social processes through which place shaped young people's political action. Lastly, I analysed each process and tied them together using Agnew's conceptualization of place. Next, I present the findings, with illustrative quotations of participants' comments (translated by me). The mentioned ages of participants refer to their ages at the time of the interview.

Findings

The results illuminate how place shaped three social processes involved in young people's political action: *engaging in politics in (rural) places*, *finding recognition as political actors in (rural) places* and *negotiating political belonging in relation to (urban) places*. The first process encompasses the shaping of youth political action by place, involving civic associations in rural places and the strategies youth employ in relation to them. The second process encompasses the shaping of youth political recognition within rural places and in relation to urban places. The third process involves shaping the political belonging of youth in relation to the meanings associated with urban and rural places. Awareness of these three processes can collectively provide an integrated, multi-dimensional understanding of place and its influence on youth political action, as discussed after the presentation of the main findings.

Engaging in Politics in (Rural) Places

As discussed in the following sections, two major features of the first social process (the shaping of youth political action by place and the strategies youth employ in relation to place) were identified: limited access to civic associations for youth and do-it-yourself strategies.

Limited Access to Civic Associations for Youth

The availability and types of civic associations for young people shaped how they became involved in politics. However, their experiences of participating in different groups changed with age. Upon entering adolescence, the young participants described aspirations to engage in social change-oriented activities but expressed views that meaningful opportunities for youths to do so were limited in nearby places. These limitations hindered their political action.

Their comments indicated that youths' political interest and involvement varied, depending on their immediate social networks and available civic associations. They were inspired by family, friends or teachers, and by engaging in diverse associations like sports or religious groups. Such opportunities often emerged during their childhood . For example, Cecilia, aged 18, who grew up outside a rural town of about 4,000 inhabitants and had initiated and managed a youth association to reduce food waste, said, 'When I was younger, up until around twelve, it was lovely. It was a rural idyll, with plenty of organizations like sports clubs and music schools offering a wide range of activities.'

Initially, soccer teams and music schools were for socializing and recreation. However, these experiences became pivotal for youths' political action, fostering skills and a sense of responsibility. Active involvement enabled them to exert influence over decisions that impacted their everyday lives. As they grew older, the participants indicated that they became more aware of (and shifted their focus to addressing) social injustices and influencing local decision-making processes. However, barriers to political action emerged due to the paucity of civic associations, including youth-led wings of political parties, social change-oriented organizations and public transportation to urban centres. This was well illustrated by Henrik, aged 19, who lived in a rural town of about 2,000 inhabitants and was involved in various youth organizations, activities of rural movements and regularly invited to attended various association and community meetings to represent rural youths' perspective:

> Getting around can be tough, meetings are usually in the evenings, but it's a real hassle for me to get there …cos my parents can't drive me, and the bus only shows up every two hours, and it stops at 7 pm.

Participating youths explained that rural places offered different types of civic associations from those in urban places. Instead of large nationwide organizations there were local heritage associations and civic associations related to local affairs. However, these were run by, and oriented towards, older people rather than young people. For example, Cecilia laughed when asked about youth involvement in the local heritage association, explaining that 'There the average age is 80 plus'. I asked whether she knew if they tried to involve young people, and she replied:

> Yeah, I guess they're trying, at least on the national level, like their website, which I've checked. But, you know, they kinda just keep doing things the same way they have for the last 10 years, just updating the date. There might be some chances for you if you're up for it, but you gotta make the move yourself.

Cecilia aimed to establish a local Red Cross Youth chapter but found it challenging. She said, 'It didn't work out because I'd have to handle everything on my own. There's a huge gap between just jumping in on something and actually kicking it off'.

Scarcity of resources and available locales also contributed to the limited access to civic associations for youth. Anna, aged 25, who lived in a town with about 16,500 inhabitants and was involved in politics in several ways (as described later), illustrated this problem as follows:

> So, me and a friend had this idea about starting a kids' theater with a feminist theme. But, you know, it hit me that it'd be super tough. We might've given it a shot if we lived in Stockholm, cos they've got more theaters and resources there.

Do-it-yourself Strategies

While limited access to civic associations hindered rural youths' political action, according to the participants, rural places offered different opportunities to those in urban places by fostering do-it-yourself strategies.

One of these strategies involved intergenerational organization in civic associations centred around local affairs and recreational pursuits, including religious groups, sports clubs, handicraft groups, scooter clubs and study circles. While participants did not explicitly discuss their involvement in such civic associations as being about politics, it revolved around fostering social change through self-initiated actions outside of conventional forms of politics. This was discussed by Fanny, aged 27, a resident of a rural village with about 500 inhabitants. She served on the board of an association dedicated to providing purposeful leisure activities for children and young people. She had also participated in local groups that protested against school closures. She explained:

> Instead of reaching out to the municipality, we tend to create our own associations because, well, asking for their help has never seemed worthwhile. That's how I was brought up—if you want something done, you do it yourself. Relying on the municipality for assistance has rarely worked.

Another do-it-yourself strategy shared by participants involved the establishment of youth associations. Jesper, a 16-year-old living in a rural village with approximately 2,000 inhabitants, initiated a youth association to address a social concern within the local community. Assisted by a youth leader, he founded an EPA motor association designed to engage other youths with an interest in cars and motors. He explained: 'People don't like it when we drive around, play loud music, and make noise. So, I thought we could have a place to hang out without bothering anyone in the village.'

Participants also raised the practice of online political organizing as a do-it-yourself strategy. This allowed them to connect with like-minded peers who shared common interests transcending their immediate geographical context. For example,

Anna was involved in a social movement working against sexual violence that predominantly organized itself through online channels. She said, 'I wouldn't have even known about feminism if it weren't for the internet. They don't teach this stuff in school, and none of my friends have parents who are into politics.'

Participants also spoke about employing do-it-yourself strategies as a typical mode of engagement in rural places. When explaining how she became involved in politics, Anna described it as 'typically rural'. She said, 'I haven't been involved in a political party or a specific organization', instead, she explained that she had been engaged in various ways during her adolescence, such as through associations organizing cultural events, arranging political meetings at school, organizing protests and writing columns in the local newspaper on feminism, anti-racism and rural issues. Some participants even recognized a need for youths to foster do-it-yourself competence in order to be politically involved in a rural place, as illustrated by Cecilia:

> One of the great things about the way I've lived and grown up is that I've had the chance to do stuff on my own from a young age. I might have missed out on that if I'd been in a city cos it's just simpler to go along with what others have already set up there.

Finding Recognition as Political Actors in (Rural) Places

The second identified social process entailed the shaping of youth political recognition within rural places and in relation to urban places. Specifically, youths described feeling invisible as political actors in rural places and this being linked to both place-based and age-based hierarchies, as described in the following sections.

Feeling Invisible in Relation to Urban Places

In their accounts, youths conveyed a feeling of being invisible as political actors in rural places due to place hierarchies. They explained that rural places were generally marginalized in national politics while urban places served as the norm for political decisions. They stressed that living in a rural place meant having different perspectives and experiences, which were rarely recognized in the political debate. Instead, the 'big city perspective' was mainly represented. This issue was raised by Patrick, aged 19, who lived in a rural village outside a town with about 17,000 inhabitants and was involved in voluntary work through the church and local Red Cross association. He explained that some of his friends were not interested in politics [referring to party politics] because 'there's no point':

> I guess it's because living here, you're part of a small population, but you still feel the impact of people in big cities who seem to have a louder voice. It's hard for those in larger cities to grasp the perspectives of rural places.

The need for a rural perspective was also raised by Anna. When asked to clarify what a rural perspective meant, she explained: 'It includes practical issues such as decisions for bus schedules, but it also extends to political issues. We feel frustrated when politicians make decisions solely based on the situation in Stockholm.'

Feeling Invisible in Rural Places Due to Age-based Hierarchies

The young participants also experienced a sense of being disregarded and marginalized, due to the prevailing age-based power dynamics established within their rural hometowns. On one hand, they reported that older people promoted youth engagement in adult-led activities, such as in municipal and civic meetings, but they also encountered obstacles stemming from age-based hierarchies. Henrik, who had actively participated in intergenerational civic organizations for an extended period, illustrated this as follows:

> As a young person, you come in with new ideas, but you often hear responses like, 'We've tried that before', or 'It's not something we can pursue, not worth our time.' It can make you feel like, 'Then it's not worth my time either.'

Similarly, Abdul, a 23-year-old elected representative for a political party in a rural town with approximately 2,000 residents, commented that his participation in intergenerational organizing often seemed unproductive, because of a tendency of older people to perceive him as a 'radical youth'. He explained:

> It's a classic technique of marginalization […] It can be frustrating. I mean, why should my age matter? I'd rather have my views heard. [Older people say]: 'You're just being radical because you're young; your opinions will change with age.' My response is, 'Alright, we'll see, but for now, we're here to talk about … I don't really want to focus on my age.'

Negotiating Political Belonging in Relation to (Urban) Places

The third social process entailed the shaping of political belonging of youth in relation to the meanings associated with urban and rural places.' as outlined in the following sections.

Identifying with Urban Places

Young participants who identified as women expressed a preference for urban places as locations for their political action, influenced by their own identification with moral values associated with urban places. One reason for young people, particularly young women, to identify with urban places was the perception that rural places were linked with leisure, procreation and 'down-to-earth' pursuits. In this context, Cecilia set herself apart from her peers in her rural hometown, suggesting that they exhibited more interest in such 'down-to-earth' activities. She explained that, while she enjoyed living in a rural place, she preferred to engage in political activities in urban places and use rural places for leisure activities, 'I'd like to live in a rural place but commute to a bigger city. So that you get this balance between leisure and work.' In a similar vein, Anna also associated rural places with activities other than political action:

> Now, I may have a bit of a biased perspective, as it seems that many have against me [refering to herself as a rural youth]. But it appears that many people who decide to move

> are also often inclined toward social engagement. It's as if the two go hand-in-hand, almost expected. Conversely, many of those who choose to stay may have a greater ambition to start families and pursue related goals. They might not be as actively involved in broader societal matters.

Klara, aged 28, also spoke about rural places as places for settling down. She currently lived in a rural village outside a town with approximately 15,000 inhabitants. She was actively involved in an internet-based social movement dedicated to combating sexual violence and an association operating in a city close to her home village that offered support to victims of rape and other sexual violence. She explained: 'I truly understand people who choose to settle down in places like this [the rural village where she resided], where you find calmness, a sense of togetherness, and the beauty of nature.'

Another reason for young women's identification with urban places, or at least the sense of societal pressure to do so, stemmed from dominant discourses emphasizing the superiority of urban places over rural places, as conveyed through external expectations. Anna explained that relatives had told her, 'You have so much talent; you shouldn't stay here, when are you going to move?' Similarity, Fanny, who chose to return to her rural home village following high school education in an urban place, reported that other youth asked her, 'Why would you want to return to a tiny village when you could stay here? I mean, why live there at all when you could be in [city name]?'

Contrasting with Urban Places

Young participants also identified with rural places rather than urban places by emphasizing characteristics that they indicated were crucial for political action while presuming that urban places lacked these qualities. More specifically, they recognized rural places as having favourable attributes for political action through the nurturing of a strong sense of community, defined by tightly knit social networks, intergenerational closeness and sharing of place-based experiences and belonging.

The participants expressed views that one of the qualities of rural places was a sense of community, based on tightly knit social networks consisting of intergenerational relations and family bonds, which facilitated political action. Jesper explained, 'We all know each other, and talking to most people is easy. If you ever need something, you can be sure someone knows someone. There are always ways to figure things out.' Similarly, Axel, a 19-year-old resident of a rural village with approximately 17 inhabitants, highlighted the role of family members in the local community as facilitators that motivated him to become active in a local development group. He reported that 'Dad is the chairman and grandma the secretary. I didn't think about it immediately [getting involved in the group], but they asked if I wanted to join.'

In addition, Fanny offered explanation of how the intergenerational nature of social networks in rural places fostered a sense of community, which in turn motivated her involvement:

> I believe it has a lot to do with the atmosphere in our village, where age isn't the most crucial factor. We can all socialize and connect, even if someone is 40 years older. It's because we have a strong sense of community, simply because we've grown up here in this village.

Similarly, Abdul stressed that close social networks, in which people regularly interact, facilitated political action by bringing power closer to the people. He explained:

> People ask, 'How have you thought about the decision?' You can reason and provide input. It feels important to be involved and have an influence on where you live. Having power as close to people as possible is crucial.

Another way in which youth contrasted rural with urban places was through sharing place-based belonging and experiences. Nils, aged 25, who grew up in a rural village with about 200 inhabitants, exemplified this. Although he had moved to a nearby city for work, he remained active in the local sports club in his rural home village, where he served as a secretary, youth coach and organizer of social activities. He stated that he 'wouldn't have felt the same sense of belonging and interest in contributing elsewhere'. Furthermore, Caroline, aged 17, added another dimension to this. She lived outside a town of about 17,000 inhabitants and was actively involved as a young politician in a political party. She contrasted rural with urban places by stressing the value of shared place-based experiences, saying:

> You relate to one another. I don't think someone living in Östermalm [a neighborhood in Stockholm] in an apartment can really understand someone living outside Stockholm. It's like two entirely different worlds. But here, it's different. When there's a political decision about a neighborhood in Stockholm, it could be anywhere. But here, you know exactly where it's happening.

Discussion

My study captures aspects of how place shaped youth political action in rural Swedish places through three social processes, each of which is related to the three dimensions of place proposed by Agnew's (2014). Thus, it offers multi-dimensional insights into the shaping of youth political action by place.

The first social process, engaging in politics in (rural) places, closely aligns with Agnew's (1987, p. 28) dimension of *locales*, which refers to 'the settings in which social relations are constituted'. I found that young people faced barriers to political involvement due to limited access to civic associations perceived as meaningful for their political action. Existing locales were primarily intended for children, families, older people or recreational activities. However, as demonstrated by other authors (Alemir et al., 2023; Harris & Wyn, 2009; Pfaff, 2009; Sernhede, 2011), my study revealed that young people employed do-it-yourself strategies embedded in their daily social contexts. These included involvement in intergenerational organizing, initiating youth associations and online political organizing.

Hence, this study extends previous research by providing a place-based perspective, showing that young people utilize strategies for political action that depend on immediate locales, both online and offline, while also developing approaches to overcome and challenge the barriers they encounter. In this manner, they may develop place-specific strategies and competences to bridge at least some of the gaps between 'Politics' and 'politics' (Skelton, 2010).

The second social process, finding recognition as political actors in (rural) places, closely aligns with Agnew's dimensions of both *locales* and *location*. In the *location*

dimension, which refers to 'the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction … at a wider scale' (Agnew, 1987, p. 28), it was found that power hierarchies between urban and rural places shaped youth political recognition. Young people described feeling invisible as political actors because urban places were perceived as the norm for political decisions while rural places were marginalized. This is consistent with findings by Alemir et al. (2023) and Areschoug (2022). Moreover, at the locational level, it can be linked to findings regarding the first social process, that young people in rural places had limited access to political and social change-oriented organizations for youth. If public investments and organizations are concentrated in urban places this may have practical and symbolic consequences for the political recognition (or lack of such recognition) of rural youth. However, by emphasizing the necessity of adopting rural perspective and employing do-it-yourself strategies, the young participants clearly demonstrated a demand for political recognition. Furthermore, the results show that social hierarchies operating at the locale scale influence youths' political action and recognition. While it is well-known that age-based hierarchies hinder young people's political activity (Baczewska et al., 2018; Coe et al., 2016), the findings suggest that age hierarchies are negotiated at the locale level and thus are place-specific.

The third process, negotiating political belonging in relation to (urban) places, aligns with Agnew's dimension of the sense of place and the moral order, which entails the subjective and ideological meanings and ideas related to a place. As in previous studies (Alemir et al., 2023; Areschoug, 2022; Sernhede, 2011), meanings and moral values associated with urban and rural places were found to influence young people's political belonging. On one hand, young people who identified as women associated urban places with a moral order related to politics, and rural places with a moral order related to leisure. On the other hand, young people favoured rural places by associating them with a moral order related to a sense of community, while perceiving urban places as lacking such qualities, and described a sense of community as a facilitator for political action. These results indicate that meanings related to the moral order of place can provide foundations for building a collective identity, a concept described by previous authors (Bosch, 2013; Malafaia et al., 2018; Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Taylor et al., 2004), which may facilitate or hinder political action.

To conclude, the results show that the social processes involved in youth political action are shaped by multiple-dimensional aspects of place that mutually influence each other. They indicate that young people's political action relies on place as place shapes how politics is done, understood and for whom and what (which activities) the place is for. Simultaneously, places are not static, and place dimensions can be challenged and changed through political action. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that social power hierarchies shaping political action are both consolidated and negotiated at the local level, and that place is influenced by the daily interactions that occur in informal and institutional contexts, which present both facilitators and barriers for youth political action.

Conclusions

My study provides new insights into the perspectives and experiences of young people who self-identify as politically or socially engaged in rural places in Sweden.

In contrast to previous research, which mainly focused on political actions of urban youth without analysing the multi-dimensional roles of place, it contributes new empirically based knowledge of multiple place-related aspects of the social processes involved in rural young people's political action.

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, I conceptualized three social processes, aligned with different dimension(s) of place, that shape political action and may provide foundations for future research in various settings and contexts.

While my study provides potentially valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The empirical material and analysis offer insights into the relationships between (rural) places and various forms of political action, thereby providing foundations for a broader theoretical framework for addressing how dimensions of place shape political action. However, the analysis of the complex relationships between the myriads of factors related to each dimension of place, values and political action is inevitably far from exhaustive. Subsequent explorations may consider, for instance, how class-, gender-, place- and ethnicity-based social power hierarchies intersect and shape the political actions of young people in different places. Numerous individual-level factors (and their interactions with societal-level factors) also have undoubted importance and warrant attention. Nevertheless, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of young people's political action in rural places, and future research could build upon the results by adopting a more situated analysis of how place-based values and moral systems interact with political action.

Finally, my findings have several practical implications. They show that political action and involvement, political recognition, lack of recognition and political belonging are complex, multifaceted phenomena and provide insights into some of the factors involved. They also indicate that challenging age hierarchies may be even more important in rural places than in urban places, due to a lack of a critical mass of young people in many rural places in Sweden (and elsewhere). Lastly, the findings indicate that youth in rural places have a nuanced and diverse political action repertoire, resting partly on do-it-yourself strategies and competences that they develop in response to place-based circumstances. This suggests that young people in rural places may be especially well equipped and possess a broader skillset for addressing societal challenges than their urban counterparts, or at least a different skillset that may equip them for addressing some challenges but leave them at a serious disadvantage in some (but not all) situations. These possibilities also warrant further investigation.

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