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My Village Is Dying? Integrating Methods from the Inside Out

Paul Peters, Carleton University

Dean B. Carson, Charles Darwin University

Robert Porter, Charles Darwin University

Ana Vuin, Charles Darwin University

Doris A. Carson, Umeå University

Prescott Ensign, Wilfrid Laurier University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to confront the notion of “decline” at the village level by illustrating a more immersive approach to sociological and demographic research within rural and remote communities. The research uses case studies of three villages in Australia, Canada, and Sweden, all of which have been labeled as “declining villages,” typified by population loss, an aging population, high rates of youth outmigration, and loss of businesses and services. This paper argues that focusing solely on quantitative indicators of demographic change provides a narrow view of rural village trajectories and ignores subtle processes of local adaptation that are hidden from quantitative data sets. Our research integrates quantitative data from the “outside” with qualitative data from the “inside,” including visual ethnography, to develop a more balanced perspective on how villages have been changing and what change could mean locally. These objectives are accomplished by revisiting a Dirt Research methodology applicable to a broad range of research into rural and remote villages.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to first, confront the notion of “rural decline” at the village level and second, to illustrate how a more immersive approach to demographic research can further our understanding of rural and remote communities. “Rural decline” is typically represented by a series of quantitative trends at the regional level that are assumed as evidence—population loss and aging, closure of services and businesses—whose (negative) meaning and importance is implicit. Significant regions in countries like Australia, Canada, and Sweden have been identified as “in decline” on this basis. In contrast, qualitative research undertaken at the settlement (town or village) level tends to look for social structures that enable towns and villages to revitalize and reverse these negative trends (Li et al. 2016). Settlement-level research, when compared to that focused on “decline,” challenges negative assumptions and can uncover processes and strategies that counter the deterioration of rural and remote villages. This paper proposes that a deeper understanding of local processes that recognizes qualitative experience is required to understand what it means to be a rural village in a

declining region, and that new methods of linked quantitative and qualitative analyses are needed to facilitate this understanding.

The very term “decline” carries both quantitative and qualitative meanings. Quantitatively, there is a process of indicators becoming represented by absolute or comparative decrease in selected indicators. Decline represents a reduced capacity to do something or to be something. Carson and Schmallegger (2011), for example, examined small rural towns which had declined in their ability to attract tourists. In Canada, Ensign (2010) has discussed declining ability to attract and retain entrepreneurs, and others have conducted analyses of difficulties in retaining skilled and professional workers (Fiore et al. 2015). The decline of places might be reflected quite directly in a quantitative sense (population, physicians per capita, number of tourists). There is less attention paid to what these places might decline to. Quantitatively, linear forecasting suggests continued decline of a resident population may ultimately lead to the disappearance of settlement. Mostly, however, even very small villages persist over long periods of time (Ahlin 2015; Robards and Alessa 2004), suggesting decline is likely nonlinear or at least has some end point which is different to disappearance (Banks 2001).

This research explores two somewhat overlapping concepts from rural sociology. The first is the idea of “rurality” itself, and a particular kind of rurality that has been referred to as “extractive” or “northern” in the Canadian literature (Stark, Gravel, and Robinson 2014). The second concept is that of community or village “identity” (Dampier et al. 2014), which is similarly tied to a set of myths about living in small and relatively isolated settlements. The myths are remarkably similar in each of the three countries from which we draw our cases, and, indeed, have a sociological tradition beyond those countries (Freudenburg 1992). At a regional level (the “rural”), these areas are seen as unable to manage the transition from domestic to global economies, subject to “booms and busts” in economic performance, regional population decline, increasing poverty, and a myriad of social problems (Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2008). Within the “rural” are individual places—often referred to as “communities”, engaged in a “battle” against the processes of decline, armed with “resilience”, “capital”, or “identity” (Buikstra et al. 2010). However, these social constructs are varied, with communities and population groups, particularly indigenous communities, having a multitude of means via which identity is expressed, emerging from interactions between individuals, their communities, and the larger regional, national, and global systems (Kirmayer et al. 2011).

Communities are conceived as singularities, with shared goals, spirit, leadership, and actions (Besser 2009), marking the overlap in the literature between community identity and rurality in “declining” regions. On the one hand, the myths are about isolation, limited economic opportunities, dependency on external conditions and decision makers, challenged by climate and landscape, and lagging behind urban areas in terms of education and health status. It has been difficult to overcome the myth of singularity in the Canadian literature on small towns in part because of the historical focus on single industry or company towns (Barnes et al. 2000).

In contrast to the assumed immobility and spatiotemporal fixedness of communities, Randall and Ironside (1996) argued that the case for the historic “isolation” of single industry towns had been overstated. It was more common, they said, that towns were part of regional labor market and other social structures that did allow for certain levels of mobility, and which could lessen the dependence on the declining local industry. Barnes (2005), along with many others, noted that rural communities are often in contact with people from outside who visit not because of the industry, but because of the natural amenity and leisure opportunities. The situating of these towns within systems of leisure-oriented mobilities challenges some of the myths of rural decline, and resolving this challenge from a conceptual perspective is a task that is just beginning to be undertaken (Carson, Carson, and Lundmark 2014; Storey and Hall 2018).

The parallel myths of rural decline and community resilience are reflected in the methods used to examine towns and villages in the extractive or northern rural. On the one hand, quantitative studies

which primarily draw on secondary data sources (in Canada, usually census data) reveal changes in employment, population size, sex composition, and age structures that reinforce the notion of “decline” (O’Hagan and Cecil 2007; Smailes, Griffin, and Argent 2014). On the other hand, qualitative studies look for resilience and social capital typically in communities where the researchers suspect they will find it and lament the “limited vision” of the discourse of decline, which is linked narrowly to population growth (Stark et al. 2014).

The Canadian tradition, however, includes a strong thread of community-level research that combines quantitative and qualitative research in interesting ways, and has indeed been recognized as a uniquely Canadian contribution (Matthews 2014). Perhaps pioneered by Harold Innis with his method of “extreme ethnography” or “dirt research” (Stanbridge 2014), a number of Canadian researchers have sought to validate what they see in the numbers by attempting to experience their communities of interest “on the ground” as far as possible. Lucas’ (1971) seminal work on small towns in Canada, for example, involved visits to communities which he could access to observe life and engage in more or less informal and serendipitous conversations with local people. Where community visits were not feasible, Lucas trawled through media articles, official documents, brochures, pamphlets, and local histories (O’Hagan and Cecil 2007). Historically, such research has tended to focus on the economic and political (Bradbury 1979; Dahms 1995), and upheld by others (Barnes, Hayter, and Hay 2001; Halseth et al. 2014); but, there are increasing calls for “dirt research” to (re-)inform sociological research itself (Stanbridge 2014).

In this paper, “dirt research” methods are used to provide thick description of three small communities situated within declining rural areas of three similarly developed countries. Our aims were to find qualitative evidence of the quantitative markers of decline that apply regionally and locally, and to see how these villages might be transforming themselves and be transformed beyond the limitations of those quantitative markers. Critically, our dirt research does not ignore the quantitative markers, but seeks to align them with some interpretation of the lived experience of people who live in, work in, and visit these villages.

Methods

This research used visual ethnography, observation, and conversations with people encountered in the villages to supplement quantitative understandings of processes of demographic, economic, and social change in three small case study villages: Åskilje (northern Sweden), Terowie (South Australia), and McAdam (New Brunswick, Canada). The value of this approach was in the ability to better capture what is, rather than what participants would like to show (Harper 2000; Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

At the outset, this research included analysis of national census and population register databases in the respective countries. These were used to extract the basic demographic indicators that are commonly used to measure “decline.” Both Terowie and Åskilje have largely incomplete public demographic records. Terowie had insufficient population at each census between 1976 and 2001 to be identified as an “urban center or locality” for statistical purposes, with some data available from the 2006 Census where Terowie was an unnamed census collection district. In Sweden, Åskilje never qualified for public summary records since the two parts of the village (Åskilje and Pausele) were considered as separate entities as a result of straddling the parish border. Digital data for the Village of McAdam are available to researchers from 1971 onwards, with limited information in paper format prior to this period. Publicly, detailed community characteristics are only available from 1991 onwards, with many indicators such as income and education unavailable due to small population counts. Importantly, in each case, there are limited data about components of population change, particularly in and out migration.

Researchers visited their respective case study villages multiple times over the course of the project. The first visit included a “windshield survey” during which the researchers were acquainted with the village and its environment, collecting initial photographs of evidence of population change (Hunt 2012). The purpose of the initial field visit was also for the researchers to develop a “skilled vision” (Grasseni 2007; Pink 2007). Photographs were taken to document visual representations of village life at different times of the year and build a narrative of the village’s visible demographic and socioeconomic experiences.

“Dirt research” is an attempt to produce “thick description” of phenomenon that might be typically represented by quantitative data. Thick description is not only a process of providing detail to qualitative data, but is about seeing beyond the obvious, and making links between different sources of data and different observations (Ponterotto 2006). In seeking thick description, we recognize that small villages research presents challenges for both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative record, as this paper shows, tends to be incomplete at the “village” level, and the impact of small changes on quantitative measures such as migration or fertility rates mean quantitative description alone provides a poor understanding of the population dynamics of small villages (Peters et al. 2016). At the same time, qualitative research methods need to be cognizant of the risks of breaching confidentiality and trust between research and participant. Under the ethical research plan approved for this project, researchers did not record verbatim quotes or conversations with participants and avoided attributing specific observations or statements to participants in ways that made those participants potentially identifiable. The case studies, each used field notes and reflective summaries of conversations that were written down after encounters with local people. In reporting these data, the paper makes distinctions only between viewpoints that appeared to be held by individuals and viewpoints that appeared to be more widely held. Views from participants are then summarized in the words of the researchers, meaning they are not direct quotes, but reconstructions of informant’s contributions interpreted by the researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). While this approach is limited in terms of the extent to which the direct voices of the informants are heard, it attends to the ethical concerns with research at this very local level (Vainio 2013).

Table 1: Demographic Data Points in Terowie, Åskilje, and McAdam

Indicator	Terowie	Åskilje	McAdam
Peak population measured (year)	707 (1911)	277 (1930)	2,803 (1956)
Most recent population measured (year)	136 (2011)	115 (2015)	1,151 (2016)
Population lost since peak	81 percent	68 percent	59 percent
Aged 65 and above at peak population	5 percent	8 percent	8 percent
Aged 65 and above in most recent count	21 percent	31 percent	25 percent
National comparison aged 65 and above	14 percent	20 percent	15 percent
Aged 15–29 years at peak population	24 percent	31 percent	30 percent
Aged 15–29 years in most recent count	11 percent	11 percent	13 percent
National comparison aged 15–29 years in most recent count	21 percent	19 percent	20 percent

Description of Cases

The three villages studied here have emerged in different political contexts and have had different population structures throughout their recent, postcolonial history. McAdam’s peak population (see Table 1) was substantially larger (2,803 residents) than that of Terowie (707) which was larger than that of Åskilje (277). McAdam remains substantially larger. Several locations that had once hosted

villages in each of the regions are now completely abandoned, highlighting the possibility of “decline to nothing.” Terowie is on the notorious “Goyder’s Line” separating viable pastoral land from harsh desert, home to many completely abandoned settlements (Sheldrick 2013). Åskilje is at the north-western corner of the Stöttingfjället, which was the site of a state sponsored agricultural experiment up until the 1970s, with some villages now abandoned (Bolin and Persson 1977). McAdam is situated near the U.S.-Canadian border, with the historically important customs crossing now closed and many abandoned structures along roads in the area.

Åskilje

In Sweden, the northern inland region has been the subject of substantial discussion about rural decline (Nilsson and Lundgren 2015), and, of the 74 villages and towns identified by Statistics Sweden, only eight had experienced any population growth since 1960. The village of Åskilje had its origins in the seventeenth century as a stopping place for forest Sami moving reindeer between summer and winter pastures. The main attraction of the location was the abundant fish stocks in lakes attached to the two rivers that meet at the site. The residential population remained low up until the late nineteenth century when forestry began to become more industrialized. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were three contiguous clusters of houses that had their own names—Åskilje, Pausele, and Trevnaden. Åskilje was one of many stations on the east-west railway line from Umeå to Storuman, connecting with the Inland Railway. Construction of these inland parts of the rail network began in the 1920s and lasted through the 1930s (Norling 1960). By the 1990s, passenger services had been reduced dramatically (Eriksson and Pettersson 2012) and Åskilje station was no longer in service.

Terowie

The Mid North of South Australia has had similar attention (Smailes et al. 2014), and 14 small settlements within 200 km of Terowie identified as urban centers or localities at the 2011 Census had lost population since 1961. Terowie was settled in 1877 as a supply center for developing areas in the north and east of South Australia. In 1881, it became a major transit port on the national railway system as the location where the line gauge changed between different provincial lines (Meinig 1962). Because of its role as a railway hub, a military camp was established there during the period of 1941 to 1946. The main purpose was the transport of the troops and materials to the northern parts of Australia. There may have been as many as 2,000 people in the village during that time, although the resident population had already been declining from a peak of about 700 in 1911. In 1969, nearby Peterborough took over the role of the main railway hub, and services to Terowie were downgraded.

McAdam

The region surrounding McAdam has experienced a long decline in rural population, precipitated in the post-war era (Forbes and Muise 1993). The village of McAdam is perhaps the most emblematic of this, experiencing rapid decline since industrial innovations led to the phasing out of steam trains, and eventual cessation of passenger rail service after the construction of the national highway system. McAdam grew in the early 1900s as an entry point for goods and passengers traveling between the United States and the eastern ports of Saint John and Halifax. The village is located only 15 km from the international border and across the Saint Croix River running between the state of Maine and the province of New Brunswick, and is 70 km from tourist destinations along the Bay of Fundy. The railway station was constructed in 1901 when the population of the village was 714 residents, and expanded again in 1911 to include a first-class hotel, restaurant, and diner. Within the region, forestry became an important component of employment activity and the railway was used to transport logs to mills in cities along the coast. The switch to diesel locomotives for rail transport and increasing use of private vehicles led to decline of local rail services from the late 1950s. By the time passenger rail was cancelled altogether in 1981, the population had already declined to 1,857 people. In 1996, the

ownership of the train station was transferred to the village government after being held by the regionally dominant J.D. Irving Limited.

Results

Quantitative Indicators of (Population) Decline

The starting place for our analysis is the comparison of key demographic data points from the three villages. The three villages differ in that the population of Terowie peaked at 707 people in 1911, the population of Åskilje peaked at only 277 people in 1930, while the village of McAdam peaked at 2,803 people in 1956. The population of Terowie has declined the most, with an 81 percent decline to the most recent census in 2011, Åskilje has declined by 54 percent between 1930 and 2015, while McAdam has declined by 59 percent between 1956 and 2016. At first glance, these numbers appear to differ; however, when the age compositions of the three villages are compared these differences become less apparent.

At peak population, each village had a similar percentage of the population aged 65 years above. By comparison, at most recent count, the percentage of the population aged 65 years and over had each increased between 7 and 10 percent. At peak population, 24 percent of the population in Terowie were between the ages of 15 and 29, as were 31 percent of the population in Åskilje and 30 percent of the population in McAdam. At most recent count, the three villages were nearly identical, with Terowie and Åskilje having 11 percent and McAdam 13 percent of the population aged 15 to 29. This compares to national percentages of close to 20 percent in all three villages.

The comparison of these data points illustrates the quantitative similarities between the three cases. Despite each village being selected separately by project collaborators, and each location facing unique circumstances that led to their decline at different temporal points, there are evident commonalities in their demographic transitions. During the peak “boom” of these villages, the population was very young and below the national averages; conversely, following these peak periods the population aged with fewer young people and a growing share of the population over the age of 65.

These numbers though only reflect those included in official statistics and not transitory, seasonal, or itinerant residents. For instance, McAdam currently boasts 24 camping sites owned by the village, which are leased for four months over the summer to older, often retired, couples. Combined with their visiting families and grandchildren, the summer population increases by as much as 100 people (10 percent) from these camping sites alone. Similarly, in each of these villages, former residents who have left may still maintain close ties within the community and return for lengths of time and invest in the maintenance and growth of the village.

Loss of Services (Commercial and Public)

Each village has experienced the closure of important local social services over time, and continue to experience closures and threats of closure. According to some older local residents, the last school in Åskilje closed in 1975, and in Terowie in 2009. While McAdam has held onto school services, images from local news services as recently as May 2015 question the “sustainability” of the high school, with fear of closure expressed by numerous residents (Shannon 2015). School closures reflect aspects of demographic decline, but also changes in how schools operate, how schools can be accessed, and certain political rationales for a school remaining open or being closed. In Terowie, media reports of the closure of the school suggested that the remaining eight students would be “better served” by

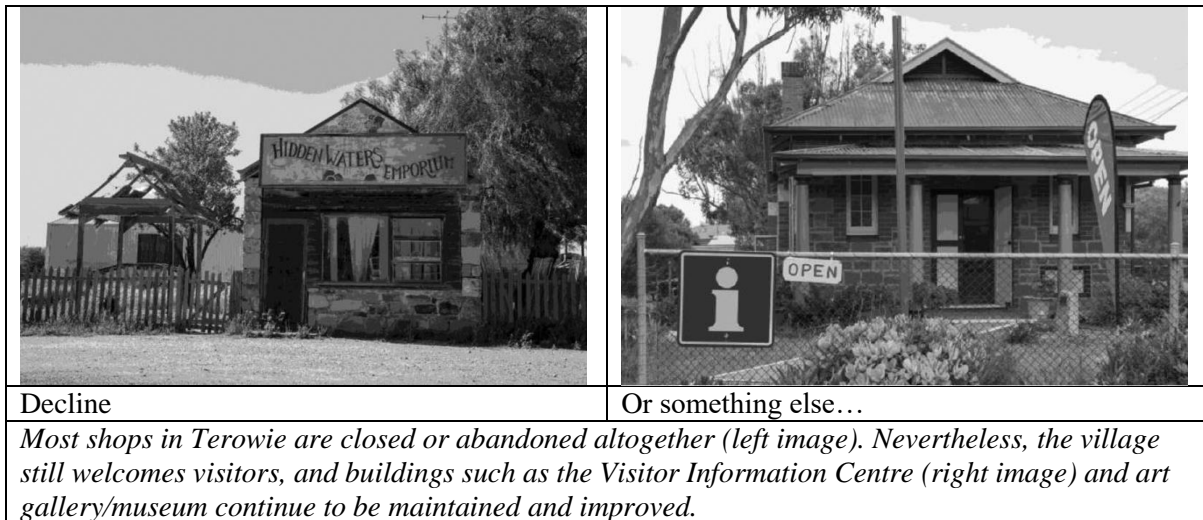
traveling to a nearby larger center Peterborough than being taught in the traditional “single room school” model.

Children in Åskilje travel to the nearby village Gunnarn (about 10 km away) for day care or primary school, and to the municipal center Storuman (about 50 km away) for high school. While some of the older residents lamented the loss of the local school, and reminisce about the “good old days” when the village was more independent and had its own services, the few families with children in town were less concerned about the need to travel to access education. Not only was this described as “just a normal process”, but as a chance for the children to get out of the village and meet other children from elsewhere. Similar comments were made about the loss of the local grocery store, as villagers have accepted the need to be more mobile to access such services and plan ahead for their shopping needs. Many also welcomed the opportunity to do bulk shopping in the larger service centers where they had access to a wider range of goods.

Similar closures and threats of closure have occurred in health services, with none of the villages currently having permanent health services, and only McAdam having a bricks and mortar clinic. However, health services are still visible, with district nurses and other health professionals driving through the village in liveried vehicles to visit people in their homes or to attend the clinic for the day. In McAdam, these professionals provide one-a-week services in the local clinic, driving the hour from the provincial capital of Fredericton (population 60,000). Physical infrastructure related to schools and health services is also still visible, with old school buildings now serving as residential houses, as for example in Åskilje where migrants from the United Kingdom have recently started to renovate the old school as “lifestyle project”.

In some cases, it is not possible to reuse or adapt physical infrastructure associated with closed activities. In Terowie, signs warn residents and visitors of dangerous asbestos in buildings, and poor water quality, which has been an ongoing issue since the railway closed in the 1970s. According to a recent in-migrant, Terowie residents had put up these signs to both raise awareness of the environmental dangers and protest against the lack of action by the South Australian government (who owns the area around the abandoned railway precinct) to clean up the site (Malandris 2013). In McAdam, the sign for the village water treatment facility is missing some of the letters and the chain link fence does not close all the way, and residents note the difficulty in maintaining public services with a shrinking tax base. The disappearance of commercial enterprises and services is obvious in the sight of empty shops (Figure 1) and disused warehouses and factories, with local stories confirming that such businesses had closed years ago. However, some businesses persist, including iconic businesses like the roadhouse in Terowie, the large gun dealership in McAdam, and there are even new businesses like a summer café at the camping ground in Åskilje. Social enterprises are also apparent including the summer market (“loppis”) at the Åskilje church run by a group of older local women, weekly “railway pie” sales at the train museum in McAdam, and the volunteer-run museum in Terowie. According to local accounts, these enterprises do not only aim to raise funding for community projects, but provide an important social platform for local volunteers and visitors to meet and interact. The pie sales in McAdam are known throughout the region, and are promoted on social media with large numbers of individuals from outside the village attending these events.

Figure 1: Decline and Something Else



Discussions with locals have also revealed potential conflicts with change. For instance, the emergence of new “consumptive” uses through seasonal tourism, the investment in second homes and summer houses, and in the case of Åskilje an increasing in-migration of international lifestyle migrants. Such new occupiers of the villages often brought new ideas and business investment with them, which according to them were generally well received and supported by the long-term resident community. Only in one case, an in-migrant who bought the local pub and tried to convert it into a social community club clashed with a group of locals over different opinions and ultimately had to close the business due to lack of local patronage. In McAdam there was conflict when a newly arrived same-sex couple were married, with the outdoor announcement of their wedding defaced by someone claiming to be a local resident.

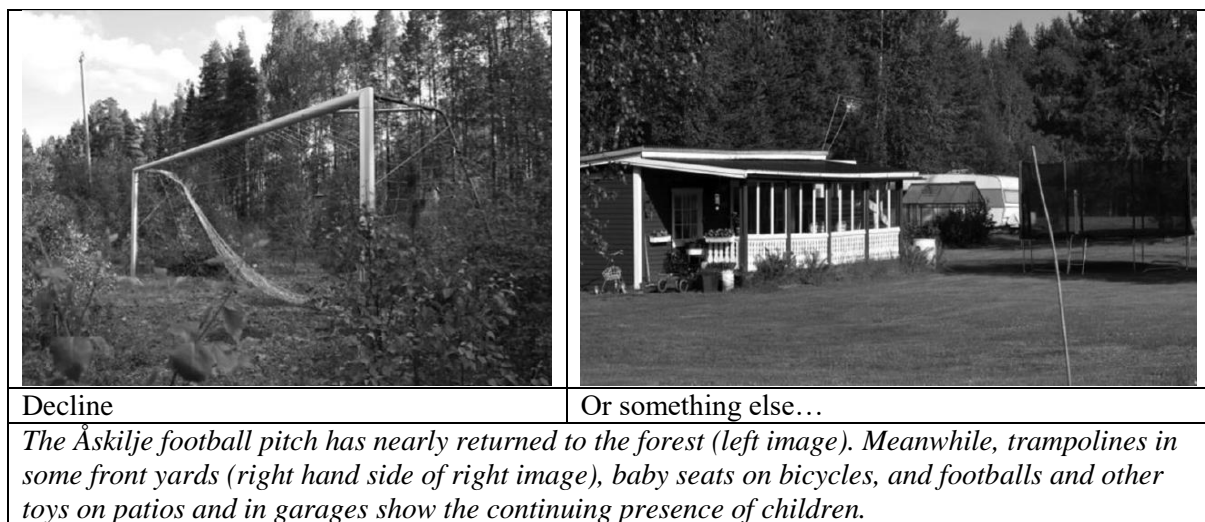
Continuing businesses are also visible, and include mobile enterprises such as a trucking company based in Pausele nearby to Åskilje, which according to the owner employs several staff from nearby areas. In Terowie, the local shop/post office (run by a long-term local resident) and the roadhouse (run by an in-migrant family) remain the only two businesses in the village, and several residents were keen to emphasize that they were trying to support those businesses as much as possible to keep them viable, although some also admitted that they regularly traveled to the nearby town for most of their grocery shopping. The village of McAdam is sustained by some nearby forestry, and the presence of a small gypsum mine. However, the future of the mining operation is in doubt as increased global competition has reduced prices. Local residents note that if these two sources were to leave there would likely be additional losses of population.

Social Life and Demography

Demographic decline is evident in the number of abandoned houses or “for sale” signs in each village. Some “for sale” signs show wear and tear of exposure to the environmental conditions possibly for many months or years. However, some houses are obviously sold quickly, with a recent international migrant in Åskilje explaining how friends and relatives from the United Kingdom were just waiting to snatch up cheap lifestyle properties. There were also a number of construction and renovation activities present during the summer months, with one local in Åskilje explaining that he built a new cottage (“stuga”) on his property to host visiting friends and relatives during the summer. New or renovated houses were reusing parts of old and abandoned houses, as, for example, in the case of a seasonal second home owner who decided to demolish an older and dysfunctional small cottage on his

property, and instead built a new and bigger house, reusing some of the quaint old windows that he had gotten attached to. This indicates that abandoned houses may not necessarily be a sign of decline, but the start of something new and improved. New house owners seem likely to be either new types of people, or to be using the houses in different ways. In Åskilje, Welsh, British, and Norwegian flags on houses show the arrival of new migrant nationalities. In McAdam, skilled migrants from Eastern Europe have also arrived. It was noted that these migrants were attracted given the need for skilled trades in machining and heavy mechanics, where the locals who are skilled in these trades either retired or attracted to other jurisdictions for higher wages. Sometimes these new migrants have come with larger families and have children attending the local school, which was stated by some local residents to be a welcome addition to the community. In Terowie, new in-migrants have come from different parts of Australia (attracted to a large extent by the extremely low housing prices in the village), but there have also been new immigrant families moving into the village and investing in one of the local businesses. This suggests that, while the villages have indeed lost substantial parts of its traditional population, new populations and mobilities have emerged, meaning that instead of absolute, one-directional decline one could rather speak of a more complex and dynamic process of demographic transformation and renewal.

Figure 2: Return to Nature and Enjoyment of the Outdoors



In Åskilje, properties which used to have multiple permanent residences on them now appear to contain multiple seasonal residences (see Figure 2), indicating that new (and existing) house owners are occupying the village in different ways. Nearly one-third of the houses in the main street have a seasonal “stuga” attached or a caravan parked in the backyard (Figure 2, right-hand side). A migrant from the United Kingdom has bought apartments previously designed for elderly care and is renting them out to seasonal visitors and short-term tenants. While one of the older locals has lamented the conversion of his village from a residential into a more seasonal community, others were keen to emphasize that they were glad that such temporary visitors were contributing to maintaining the housing stock in the village and making sure that houses “with lots of history” were continued to be used at least during parts of the year. In Terowie, some houses that had “for sale” signs then had “for rent” signs as people who purchased them with the intent of living in the village “someday” lease the property in the meantime.

Changes over time in who occupies the village and what they do there are apparent from both photographs and stories from local residents. In Åskilje, there is a sign about fishing regulations written in Polish and dated 1999. According to a long-term local resident, Polish people used to come



to the region to pick berries. More recently, Thai people have taken over as berry pickers, and instructions about how and where to sell your harvest now occasionally appear in Thai. This year there were fewer Thai signs because some of the accommodation in a nearby village that the Thais were using is now (according to a notice on the property manager's office door) being used to house refugees from the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan. Terowie, on the other hand, has lost almost all of its railway workforce, but has attracted new in-migrants who either had previous family connections in the village or who sought to escape from the city for lifestyle reasons. Some had ended up in Terowie by coincidence (either because they were traveling through or visiting family) and ended up staying because properties were cheap to buy, allowing them to retreat to the area without having to work full-time and by living off their savings.

In McAdam, as with the other cases, there has been a slow abandonment of facilities and housing as younger residents leave the village and the remaining residents age. Most residents made note of the "human pipeline" between New Brunswick and Alberta, with many families and youth moving to Alberta to work in the oil and gas industry. This migration is newer however, with one resident referencing an earlier migration period in the 1960s between McAdam and Hamilton, Ontario and the steel mill, with several families from McAdam even relocating to the same street in downtown Hamilton and continuing a tradition of regular card games. While empty homes may be the most apparent, the abandonment of other services are perhaps more illustrative of the changing demography and social life of villages. The images in Figure 3 aptly illustrate this narrative of abandonment and revitalization. On the left is the empty Lions Club hall that served Canadian veterans from the World Wars. The building is empty with a "for sale" sign in the front window and former members now meet periodically in the town hall.

Contrasting this decline is the photo on the right in Figure 3, where the village has installed new historic street signs in memory of World War veterans. The replacement of street signs within McAdam shows ways in which villages can work to maintain a relationship with history, while making moves to improve the image and identity of place. Families are able to purchase street signs in memory of a war veteran, with a portion of the proceeds going to the village. The village was home to a large number of World War I and II veterans, who gained employment on the railway and in the station, joining together in clubs such as the now-closed Lions Club. Locals point to the street-sign initiative as evidence of how the community is maintaining its identity.

The absence of children and young adults is apparent in the imagery presented by overgrown sports and playground facilities. But quite a number of houses have their own children's play and sport facilities— trampolines (see Figure 2), bicycles and footballs in Åskilje, at least during summer. From June to August, the main street is bustling with children, particularly when the mobile ice cream van passes through the village on Thursdays. Casual conversations with families in the street revealed that many of them return year after year as they have relatives (e.g., grandparents) living in the village, or they still have strong ties to the place after inheriting the old family home after their parents' passing. Also during the winter, around Christmas and New Year's, one can observe the arrival of visiting friends and relatives, particularly from the United Kingdom with visitors raving over the prospects of experiencing a romantic White Christmas and the Northern Lights. In McAdam, the train station runs a "Christmas at the Station" event once a year, where the building is decorated and food and drinks are available for purchase. This event is very popular and brings "outsiders" as well as former residents back to the village.

Figure 3: Abandonment of History and the Marking of It

	
<p>Abandonment of social clubs</p>	<p>Revitalization and marking of history</p>
<p><i>The local veterans club has been closed and the building is for sale.</i></p>	<p><i>The memory of World War veterans is retained on street signs, complete with steam train imagery.</i></p>

The presence of older people is equally apparent with walkers and other mobility devices visible around the villages. Older people play a key role in sustaining the social life of the village, running the summer loppis in Åskilje and the museums in Terowie and McAdam, organizing occasional activities at the churches and community centers. In Åskilje, signs for where to buy fishing licenses or how to join hunting groups lead you to the homes of retired long-term residents. The 94-year-old license seller explained how young people buy these licenses, but often they live outside the village and return just for these seasonal activities. For example, “hunting week” during the first week of September attracts groups of hunters (many with previous family ties to the village) to the village, filling some of the houses that appear abandoned during the rest of the year.

Older people also make economic contributions, although their income comes not from local work, but from pensions and superannuation funds. In Terowie, there are signs on various noticeboards advising people of changes in benefit payments schemes and where to get housing and other assistance. As explained by one local resident, such information was not just aimed at the village’s older population, but at new residents who had moved to Terowie due to its cheap housing and who were largely relying on welfare support as their main income. Again, while these new residents cannot necessarily be seen as “economically active” in terms of labor market participation, local conversations revealed that these migrants represented an important part of the village’s growing volunteering workforce, thus making important contributions to the local “social economy.” Several recent in-migrants were involved in volunteer work, such as running the local community center, renovating the local museum, helping out at the tourist information center, joining the local fire brigade, or assisting in the provision of local services. Long-term residents mostly seemed appreciative of such activities, and some also emphasized that the in-migration of retired, unemployed, and welfare-dependent residents has actually helped improve community spirit and the social vibe in the village. In McAdam, several older residents volunteer as guides at the train station, with some admitting that they are at the station nearly full-time during the summer months. Without these contributions, the main focal point for the village would not be operating, and officials note that these volunteers are the reason behind the success of this facility.

There are signs that the changing demography is changing the social life in the village, with some “old” local traditions being gradually replaced by “new” social activities. The clearest examples were found in Åskilje, where the international migrant group has introduced new social events that are largely frequented by the migrants, but also attract curious locals and visiting friends and relatives. In



contrast, postings on the local community Facebook site revealed that the latest “sommarfest” (an annual summer event organized by a group of locals running the community center association) had to be cancelled at the last minute due to a lack of sufficient confirmations, while on the same day over 40 people showed up at a party organized by one of the migrant families at the camping café. In Terowie, in-migrants have introduced not only a new volunteering culture, but also a more vibrant “feel” in the main street by becoming involved in tourism and heritage promotion and street beautification programs. With more tourists being drawn to the village, some longer term locals have also noticed a renewed sense of community pride and confidence, which had long been lost in the village. In McAdam, events are regularly posted on social media and spread informally via former residents and those who have visited previously. Some organizers of these events stated that this informal promotion is the primary way of letting others know about events, and no other marketing or advertising is done outside of creating social media events.

Geographic Connectivity

The three villages were clearly geographically important in the context of the railways, which have now been abandoned in favor of private modes of transport. Casual conversations with some parents also revealed that they choose to drop off their children at the school or day care on their way to work, suggesting that public services that were previously regarded as critical for community life may have declined in importance as mobility patterns have changed. Commuting long distances to work is not rare, as revealed by a recent in-migrant in Åskilje, who takes the bus to Lycksele (about 50 km away) several times a week. Similarly, several residents in Terowie explained that they were commuting to either Peterborough (30 km away), Burra (70 km), or even Adelaide (230 km) for work. Several residents of McAdam admitted to working in Fredericton (over one-hour drive), despite the dangers of driving this route in the winter. New mobilities have also emerged as a result of improving technology and virtual connectivity. Telephone poles have long been a sign of virtual connectivity beyond the village. In recent times, mobile telephone towers have been installed, and fiber optic cables for high-speed Internet run alongside the railway line in Åskilje. A few recent in-migrants explained how such improved Internet access has allowed them to settle in the remote village while maintaining telecommute work arrangements to employers in the coastal cities or even overseas, thus making the lack of local employment opportunities less of a problem than it may have been in the past. However, one McAdam resident noted that the culture shift from increased access to the Internet has increased the desire of youth to leave the village, and the Province more broadly.

As with the other villages profiled here, connectivity with surrounding villages and distant population centers is key to the story of settlement, peak population, and change in McAdam. Once an important railway hub with a grand railway station and hotel, factors both local and global contributed to a shift in the emphasis of these connections that left McAdam on the outskirts rather than at the hub (see Figure 4). For instance, while ownership of the train station was transferred to the village, the tracks remain under control of a J.D. Irving subsidiary, with no engines stopping in the community and very few rail cars switching in the nearby rail yard. Furthermore, most residents made note of the consistently poor condition of regional roads, especially in the winter and between-seasons. The village primarily connected via two regional roads, one of which is in very poor condition. Recently however, the village was able to attract an international tour company to visit the community on the way between two other locations, but some residents noted that bringing busses through was difficult as the condition of the roads increased the travel time and made the trip less comfortable for passengers.

Figure 4: Geographic Connectivity Past and Present

	
<p>Train station museum</p>	<p>Railcars waiting to travel</p>
<p>The train station has been gradually restored by volunteers and is now the primary tourist focal point in the village.</p>	<p>Some forestry allows for railcars to be loaded with logs on an infrequent basis. However, the remaining tracks are unused and overgrown.</p>

Discussion and Conclusion

Each of the villages has the quantitative markers of decline—loss of population, population aging, a deficit of youth and young adults, and loss of businesses and services. The very fact that they have at times “disappeared” from the official quantitative records of places suggests that they exist on the margins of “official” legitimacy as population clusters. Nevertheless, on the ground there are few indications that the process of decline is necessarily a decline to disappearance. For each of the clear visual signs of decline, there were signs of adaptation and persistence. Some of these (like bus services, for example) may be fragile because of their reliance on State support, but some (like the continuing process of renovating some houses and public spaces) seem to be quite robust indicators of persistence if not revitalization.

New residents continue to arrive and to make an impact on social and economic life, and new technologies are as present in these villages as elsewhere. People who have moved away from the villages also continue to exert an influence, returning for holidays, maintaining houses, and contributing to maintaining other physical structures, participating in the documenting and communicating of the village’s history and its current activities. In the cases of Åskilje and McAdam, this group is so important that the village must be considered as part of some form of pleasure periphery even though it is largely disengaged from the tourism industrial system. In Terowie, some people have returned both to live, and to rent out houses they may have purchased with the intent of returning to live “someday.” In McAdam, there is evidence of “chain migration” where families that have moved away still return for extended periods, and maintain connections with other former McAdam residents in their new locales. These are examples of emerging and continuing activities resonant with what the literature would regard as “successful” revitalization levers, although they have quite small direct economic impact. Second home owners pay no rent and few taxes and do not stimulate other commercial products. Rents in these villages are very low when they are paid, and go to landlords who sometimes reside outside the village.

Development of new locally based economic activities of any scale does not appear to be an important part of the evolving milieu in these cases. Locally based economic activity might not be as necessary as it once was, given the capacity of the very technologies that are seen as threatening rural villages (improved transport and communications, for example) to allow those who do wish to connect to commercial economies to do so from a distance. Locally based economic activity may also not be

necessary to sustain populations whose income is not from private sources, but from welfare or pensions. Collective activities do not need to be economic in the sense of income producing. Volunteerism and organized participation in hunting and fishing and heritage management is likely to involve both residents and visitors.

The theme of “mobilities” emerges strongly from this research. There is substantial visual evidence of people moving out (“for sale” signs for both commercial and private trade of houses) and moving in, along with people moving around and between. Road signs and maps show connectivity with nearby and relatively distant places, and how those connections have changed over time. In Åskilje and Terowie, previously separate villages have been joined. Road signs indicate where people can or should go for shopping, education, health and other services. Cars and caravans and trucks, along with occasional public transport, reflect the possibility that people can actually go there, and that people from elsewhere can come here. The villages remain geographically important, and in at least two cases are markers of borders between important geographic zones.

It is no coincidence that there is a focus on transport and mobilities for these villages given their shared historical association with railways. Railways have had an extremely important role in settlement making in many rural parts of the industrialized world. Indeed, the “decline” of these villages has been measured from a peak created by the insertion of the railway into an existing social and economic landscape. The railway is still important in the landscape and built environment of the villages, but the diminished economic and demographic role has in some cases allowed assets that were important before the railway (fishing in Åskilje and McAdam, pastoralism in Terowie) to reassert themselves, including in a visual way.

Despite the optimism with which results are presented here, “decline to disappearance” remains a very real possibility. Some neighboring villages in all cases have ultimately lost all their population and functional infrastructure. What is not apparent from this research is how or whether villages that might disappear present differently visually to villages that adapt and evolve. In this regard, this research is limited in the same ways as other qualitative research about “resilience” and “social capital” in small rural villages. In our cases, there was visual evidence of “both sides of the coin”—in Terowie a recently abandoned business sits next to a freshly painted local museum. In Åskilje, a window from a derelict house is being used to renovate the house next door. In McAdam, the renovated train station is down the street from the closed Legion Hall. Without the visual evidence, the complexity of the story and the diversity of possible futures are difficult to evince. Our cases also emphasize the need to consider how much of a village’s future can be determined by internal dynamics. External constraints such as changes in the education system making it impossible to sustain a school that would have been viable two generations ago or industrial legacies such as poor water quality and asbestos may be the critical factors irrespective of internal leadership and entrepreneurship.

While research *in* the village is essential to understanding local processes of demographic, economic, and social change, research *about* the village also needs to consider the wider social and political environment (Stark et al. 2014). Drawing the cases in this research from three similar (high income countries, resource dependent peripheries, regions of demographic “decline”) but politically and culturally different settings provides some insights into the impact of external forces and the relationship between local village identity and rurality and rural development as a social and political construct. The continuing shift toward more mobile modes of occupation of rural spaces (O’Hagan and Cecil 2007; Storey and Hall 2018) is apparent in all three cases. The Swedish case is somewhat distinctive in the extent to which political approaches to rural development have resulted in infrastructure that supports mobilities (broadband Internet, public transport persisting with even little-used bus routes). In this case, local interventions and characteristics may not be as important as political decisions made at a distance. Local data may not provide much insight into why forms of

occupation are supported or not supported in these ways. Nevertheless, what the cases here demonstrate is that local approaches to sustaining the village and the village identities can emerge under different regional or national economic, social, and political conditions. There is something about activity at the local level that sits beyond as well as within those conditions (Dampier et al. 2014).

While decline to disappearance appears an unlikely outcome, consideration of decline *to* some state must also consider decline *of* what attributes. While aspects of residential population decline are apparent in each of the villages in this research, there are also suggestions of demographic “growth” of a sort through the increasing numbers of people that may have albeit temporary or seasonal interaction with the village. The maintenance and even growth of other attributes such as social and spatial connectivity have allowed villagers to access resources that might once have been primarily local (such as jobs, food, education) through other places. When it comes even to economic decline, therefore, the cases raise questions about what a “local economy” might mean in the village context, and how its robustness should be measured. Likewise, the status of social connectivity reflected in volunteerism, community hunting and fishing organizations, and local events may or may not be dependent upon, and may make little difference (as noted above) to the processes of residential population decline.

There remains a question of how representative these three villages are of the experiences of decline in their regions and in other rural parts of the three countries. Many neighboring villages have the same quantitative markers of decline, but we do not know what might be happening “beneath the numbers” in those places. In this regard, ethnography has provided insights to the case studies that were not available from the quantitative data, and which have helped define new ways to examine the quantitative data. It has not been common, for example, to look at in-migration to rural places that are losing population. Nor has it been common to consider the influence of non-resident populations (and mobilities generally) in sustaining and developing the village identity (Carson et al. 2014). These factors can be examined (at least in part) through the quantitative record, but need to be contextualized by the sorts of observations made in the ethnographic work. The process of deep examination of a few critical cases improves the ways in which general experiences can be analyzed “from a distance” by revealing new facets of existing data. This is precisely the process advocated by Innis and others as the ideal for “dirt research”.

There is clearly a need to think more deeply about small villages research, its role and importance, the methodologies and models for analysis. In earlier issues in this journal, Stanbridge (2014) and Matthews (2014) challenged Canadian sociologists (and Sociology more broadly) to elaborate on Innis’s methodology, and to commit to developing new rejoinders to the ideas and institutions under study—in this case, how we approach and understand change in small villages. Here, these ideas have been applied not only within Canada, but within three similarly developed countries, where communities are facing similar pressures. The small village has some primal social importance because people continue to live in and visit these places. Indeed, the rural imagination remains an important part of national identity for each of the countries represented here. It may have some functional importance as policy makers and planners decide where to put schools, health services, roads, road signs, and so on. It may have some economic importance as businesses and entrepreneurs decide whether there are opportunities attached to the village. There is not necessarily an imperative, however, that all small villages must be “saved” from the pressures of urbanization and regionalization. As such, there is a need to better understand how villages evolve and adapt demographically, economically, and socially over time and what this means for society more broadly. The existing dichotomy of “decline” as a negative and “revitalization” as a positive probably conceals more than it reveals about the processes of adaptation and evolution. This article humbly presents an alternative approach that challenges some of the base assumptions about small villages in particular, and the methods employed to confront these perceptions in general.

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