



## Young people's career choices in Swedish rural contexts: Schools' social codes, migration and resources

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Rural schools  
Career choice  
Resources  
Migration patterns

### ABSTRACT

Successful social and economic integration into Swedish society increasingly demands a post-compulsory education, but such education is increasingly centralised, posing problems for rural young people. To help efforts to address such problems, this article considers social codes and resources that may influence rural young peoples' trajectories to post-secondary and higher education. This is done by analysing how codes and resources (social, cultural and material) influenced thoughts of students preparing to leave compulsory education regarding their educational/career choices. The empirical data were gathered using ethnographic approaches (classroom observations, and interviews with students, teachers, heads and study/work counsellors) in six classes in six rural Swedish towns, differing in terms of size, access to post-compulsory education, unemployment and young peoples' trajectories. The theoretical framework is based on Massey's understandings of place and power geometry, i.e. the distinct ways different social groups and individuals are placed in relation to the flows and interconnections of socio-economic and cultural interactions. The results indicate that social resources such as siblings and cousins 'paving the way', or relatives in towns offering possible options, may influence choices of upper secondary school. Cultural resources such as institutional recognition, in the form of academic credentials or qualifications, were also important. So too were financial resources, partly because economically privileged students tended to pick the programme of their choice, without reflecting much about where they would live, while less privileged students had to consider potential accommodation problems. In conclusion, differences in resources seem even more important to rural young people than they reportedly are for their urban peers.

### 1. Introduction

In modern society, sometimes referred to as the knowledge society, there is a strong discourse of the modern individual aspiring to (or requiring) life-long learning. The notion of lifelong learning has also been long promoted by the European Commission (Pépin, 2007), as part (*inter alia*) of efforts to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".<sup>1</sup> A need for knowledge development to centre on, and be built through, critical masses of experts is also widely recognized. This understanding of lifelong learning has at least two major implications for the organisation of education: modern young people have increasing needs for post-compulsory education, and it is argued that post-compulsory education must be centralised. In addition, most employments in western countries require upper secondary education today, while just a few decades ago it was easier to find positions that only required

secondary education (Weis, 1990; Willis, 2004). However, requirements for upper secondary education and that education centralises around larger towns and cities (Fjellman, 2017), might not pose geographical problems for urban young people, it may pose dilemmas for rural young peoples' transitions into further or higher education, which could be summarized by the question 'Should I stay or should I go?' (cf. Corbett, 2013).

If rural adolescents in Sweden decide to continue their education beyond compulsory stages, like more than 95 percent of Swedish young people do (Skolverket, 2016), a move to more 'central' parts may be almost essential, at least for the time of their studies. However, for rural young people the discourse of lifelong learning and the question "Should I stay or should I go?" is intertwined with several other discourses. For example, one portrays many rural places as being in crisis, suffering from decline and depopulation, but as having positive aspects, such as everyone knowing each other and being excellent locations for a retreat, recreation or tourism (cf. Corbett, 2013; Nilsson and Lundgren,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm).

2015; Stenbacka, 2011). However, in terms of prospects for career development and lifelong learning, rural places are seldom portrayed as offering a substantial buffet of employment opportunities. Rather, transnational discourses and discourses of globalisation place inability to migrate as an individualised failure according to standards of success that emphasise the importance of mobility (Farrugia, 2014; Tse and Waters, 2013). In contrast, a strong discourse of ‘the rural idyll’ may enable rural young people to identify themselves as morally superior to urban youth (Farrugia, 2014; Leyshon, 2008), independent and connected to nature (Halfacree, 1995).

Of course, rural adolescents do not exist in a vacuum and are not the only ones affected by those discourses. Family and school expectations are also important, and may strongly influence youths' decisions (Schmitt-Wilson, 2013). In this context, rural youths' career trajectories may often be ‘pushed’ from their rural locations by rhetoric of their families and schools, and/or ‘pulled’ elsewhere by employment opportunities and representations in the media of rural locations as places solely for those who cannot leave (Farrugia, 2014).

Staying or leaving patterns have been analysed in several quantitative American studies (Byun et al., 2015; Meece et al., 2013; Schmitt-Wilson, 2013). General conclusions are that rural youths face various educational and occupational barriers, including geographical isolation, few postsecondary educational and occupational opportunities, and socio-cultural expectations that do not support postsecondary education. Moreover, there are also indications, in both the USA and elsewhere, that social class can be more influential than in urban contexts (cf. Furlong, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2014 for other than US contexts). Several studies have also examined factors affecting out-migration patterns of rural youth, and concluded that females tend to leave more than males, and descendants of in-migrants leave more often than those of rooted members of rural communities (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Kloep et al., 2003; Nugin, 2014; Rauhut and Littke, 2016; Rye, 2006; Thissen et al., 2010). However, few qualitative studies have focused on the push and pull dynamics of rural areas versus ‘the outside’ (e.g. Bagley and Hillyard, 2015; Corbett, 2015; Hedberg and Haandrikman, 2014; Nugin, 2014; Petrin et al., 2014).

According to Plant et al. (2003), most research on career choices has focused largely on psychological aspects, client-centred guidance issues, economic aspects or policy (see also Plant, 2012). However, there are some indications that social resources outside the local community might affect rural youths' horizons of action, at least in the UK (Bagley and Hillyard, 2015; Corbett, 2015) and Canada (Bagley and Hillyard, 2015; Corbett, 2015). Knowledge of these ethnographic phenomena in Nordic contexts is very limited (Karlsen Bæk and Paulgaard, 2012), and there are clear gaps in general understanding of the complex interactions among the economic, cultural and social factors involved (cf. Kirkpatrick Johnson et al., 2005).

Thus, the study presented here focuses on effects of economic, cultural and social resources, and factors affecting the post-compulsory education career decisions of rural youths in Sweden. Using empirical data from six Swedish rural towns this paper explores young people's career choices in relation to schools' social codes, individual resources and migration. The article is divided into five sections. The first introduces the research field, section 2 presents the aims, theoretical framework and methodology of the study, while section 3 summarizes the research contexts. Section 4 presents the results and an ethnographic analysis of the empirical data, in two sub-sections corresponding to the research aims (one concerning schools' social codes and the other concerning individuals' social, economic and cultural resources). The final section draws conclusions from the analysis and discusses meta-level implications of the findings.

## 2. Exploring schools' social codes, migration and resources

As outlined above, the starting point for this study is recognition of the need for greater understanding of factors influencing Swedish rural

youths' decisions to stay or go, associated with the increasing need for post-compulsory education and centralisation of education. A specific aim is to analyse effects of schools' social codes related to migration and resources (social, cultural and material) on thoughts of students preparing to leave compulsory education regarding their educational/career choices. The theoretical framework is based on the understanding of place and power geometry presented by Massey (1994, p. 149). This postulates that different groups and individuals are positioned in distinct ways by “Economic, political and cultural social relations, each full of power and internal structures of domination and subordination, stretched out over the planet at every different level, from the household to the local area to the international” (p. 154). To operationalise the concept of power geometry in relation to rural youths' educational and career choices, field notes and interviews have been analysed in relation to the notions of school social code and resources (social, cultural and economic).

Schools' social codes (cf. Nelson, 2016) refer (in this context) to the degree that staff and peers at students' schools talked about out-migration as a requirement to fulfil future life and career dreams or their rural location as a place to either remain or return to after finishing studies elsewhere. Schools' social codes conceptualise official/institutional practices and how they affect individuals' agency. Established indicators of a school's social code include: the school climate, i.e. if and how the local place is included in pedagogic practices and if out-migration is seen as an obvious step both generally and by career counsellors; extracurricular activities; and composition of the student body (Nelson, 2016). The concept of schools' social code is thus useful for identifying and analysing strong discourses within schools, and an important factor to consider since schools are major mediators of values that influence young people's thoughts about their future in terms of education and where to live (cf. Beach et al., forthcoming).

The term resources refers here to the social, cultural and material assets available to individuals. The analysis of these resources, and their influences, in youths' talk of their future education and/or career in this study is inspired by the operationalisation of Massey's concepts through Bourdieu presented by Dillabough (2004). Bourdieu's concepts explicitly recognize and portray the relationships between culture, materiality and social relations in the formation of, and domination through, space (see Bourdieu, 1997).

## 3. Methods, data and analysis

The analysis presented here is based on data from an ethnographic research project, *Rural youth. Education, place and participation* funded by the Swedish Research Council, in which fieldwork was conducted in six secondary schools, each in a different rural area. In each of the six schools, everyday school work, including teaching content and interactions, were observed in one or two classes (grade 8 or 9) over five weeks (amounting to 150 days of field work in total). In addition, views of 134 students in these classes (68 boys and 68 girls), teachers, heads, career counsellors, school librarians and municipality representatives were elicited in a series of 36 individual or group interviews.

Sweden is currently politically divided into 290 municipalities and 21 counties. They cover both urban and rural areas and by international standards, the rural municipalities particularly are large in terms of area. One of the main towns in each municipality is its seat and the site of the municipal offices. The six rural municipalities selected for the study were chosen with these factors in mind, to provide variation in terms of latitude, distance to the municipal seat, demography, and local labour market characteristics (see also Beach et al., forthcoming). Northern Sweden is more sparsely populated than southern Sweden, so four municipalities in the north and two in the south were included. The contexts of the six rural areas and schools are briefly summarized below (see Table 1), using data from Statistics Sweden (table previously published in Rönnlund et al., 2017). However, no specific information on the research sites is provided, in accordance with rules regarding

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