

# **”To stay or not to stay?” – That is the question**

## **Rural youths’ views on living in Scandinavia<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

”I want to live and I want to die in the North”. Is this last line of the Swedish national anthem still true for the younger generation in the rural north of Scandinavian countries today?

The rural population is decreasing in both Norway and Sweden. The decline in Sweden is so drastic that adapting existing local public services is difficult, so that in the past 20 years or so, the number of grocery shops has declined by 20 percent. This is combined with a considerable ”brain drain”. Jämtland County, for example, has an urgent need for more than 1,000 highly educated IT technicians (Gustafsson 2001).

Norway’s declared aim of state regional policy, already formulated in the early post-war years, is to secure the development of employment and production in *all* parts of the country, in order to maintain the stability of the national settlement pattern, and to strengthen agricultural production (as Norway is not self-sufficient in food production). Policies include tax reductions for dwellers in the periphery and subventions for farmers (Mønnesland 2001). Earlier, in the 1970’s, the Centralised Planning Authorities attempted to centralise administration, but the local boards resisted. This

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from: Kloep, M., Hendry, L. B., Glendinning, A., Ingebrigtsen, J.-E. and Espnes, A. (2003) Peripheral Visions? *Children’s Geographies* 1(1): 91-109.

has allowed smaller municipalities to develop local enterprises, which fit the needs of their population (Bryden & Brox 2000). However, recently power has shifted to the corporate sector and moved to large financial interests in the South. In the long run this might change the rural policies in Norway and create a similar situation to Sweden.

Nevertheless, the distinctions between what is comprehended as rural and urban are changing in contemporary Europe (e.g. Wiborg 1996). There are closer links between countryside and city because of increasing and differentiated labour market regions, increased mobility and new information and communication technology. Studies of people moving out and people moving back reveal that cities and countryside may be becoming complementary arenas for people's everyday life *in different phases of their life course*, with no distinguishing features between the groups of in-and-out-migrants (Villa 2000). Valentine (1997), amongst others, has suggested that it may be necessary to "unpack" the way rurality is culturally constructed. The complex and contradictory nature of people's experiences, and their reports of rural living, make it clear that places, like people, can have multiple meanings and identities. Thus, differing understandings of rural life co-exist (e.g. Dahlström 1996). How true is this for young people in their transitions from childhood to adulthood, when they begin to consider making decisions about staying or leaving their local community? The present study sets out to examine the ways adolescents in Norway and Sweden look back at their rural childhood and how these perceptions appear to predispose them towards staying in their own community or, alternatively, to consider moving away, perhaps particularly towards urban living.

On the one hand, existing constructions of present social realities, both urban and rural, influence the expectations and experiences of young people. On the other hand, their own experiences, their personal, material and social resources, their gender and age, the challenges and risks they meet in the process of development (Hendry & Kloep 2002) all interact to mould personal narratives of rural living in this phase of the life course.

Over the last two decades many young people have left the countryside for the city. There are several reasons behind this out-migration, ranging from better educational or training opportunities in larger cities, and better perceived employment prospects, through dissatisfactions with rural lifestyles and traditions, to personal motivations, identity formation and social factors.

In the public's mind, rural areas are frequently viewed as offering a high quality of life, with close-knit communities seen as safe places in which to live and good places for children to grow up, with lower crime rates and a better physical and social environment, distant from the problems of urban life. As Aitken (1994: 58) stated:

Rural children often have a different kind of outdoor experience [from urban children], more intimately tied to natural systems. They usually do not have to share their play spaces with other groups of children or with adults, as they get older they can range extensively away from home exploring distant forests and hills.

Nevertheless, set against these conceptions of rurality, Statham & Cameron (1993) commented that other aspects of rural lives might be experienced as difficult and disadvantaged:

The notion of an idyllic rural childhood has helped to obscure the fact that the little research that exists suggests that families in rural areas may experience considerable difficulties ... Including isolation, material deprivation, lack of support and few opportunities for children to socialise ... (Statham & Cameron 1993: 1)

These two descriptions of rural living above are not necessarily incompatible. During the process of growing up, expectations about aspects of rural life (e.g. Jones 1999, Stockdale 2002) can alter or consolidate. For instance, while rural surroundings may provide completely enjoyable experiences in nature for the growing child, the lack of peers may become a key factor in the adolescent's perceptions of the same setting being distinctively different. Thus, social constructions of rural living may shift within the same individual as different needs and wishes come into play at various points in the life course. Aitken (1994) refers to research with a rather optimistic view of rural childhood. The present authors see the rural socialisation process as complex and potentially divisive in that some will love their growing-up experiences in rural settings whilst others will develop a quite different viewpoint by mid-adolescence.

By contrast to children, adolescents living in rural areas have to face a number of psychosocial challenges, such as: limited options for education, employment and training, high rates of youth unemployment, and limited

public transport (e.g. Wallace et al. 1993, Cloke et al. 1997). Despite feelings of community support, significant numbers of young people experience loneliness (e.g. Pretty et al. 1996). A lack of privacy and the gossipy intrusion of adults (Cloke et al. 1994) can lead to alienation and claustrophobic feelings within their community (Pavis et al. 2000). The role played by family and social networks seems crucial (Stockdale 2002), operating to encourage the individual to remain within the home settlement, or alternatively, to leave. One of the identity issues for rural youth to face is whether to stay and adapt their parents' rural identity and lifestyle or to go from their community and seek out a different life in an urban context.

Previous research has mainly focussed on out-migration from the perspective of those *who actually leave*, whereas the emphasis in the present paper is on constructions of rural life *prior to actual decisions being made*.

Hence, the present paper is concerned with rural young people's perspectives on this crucial issue, describing their plans for possible migration, and how these decisions impinge on their views of themselves and their rural community as they have made the transition from childhood to mid-adolescence. What is it like to live as a teenager in rural Scandinavia today? And are there differences between living in rural Norway and rural Sweden? Do young men and young women have differing views? This paper sets out to examine certain aspects of these questions by looking at adolescents' anticipatory views about staying or leaving their local community.

## **Method**

The study was designed to ensure that the quantitative and qualitative approaches utilised in examining rural young people was both inter-related and complementary. The project involved a questionnaire survey administered to 1,584 adolescents between 11 and 16 years of age (mean age = 14.3, gender ratio 50:50) in Norway and Sweden, together with a qualitative essay.

We operationalised "rural locations", using Randall's (1992) definition of rural districts as having less than 100 persons per sq.km., and being located at least 50 kilometres from large urban conurbations. Variability with regard to socio-demographic profiles, such as fishing, farming or

tourism-based communities; geographic location, such as inland, coastal or island areas; and settlement size was taken into consideration in selecting the various catchments to make the sample in both countries as characteristic of its rural region as possible.

In line with the complementary nature of the study's design, the questionnaire survey had its genesis in pilot focus group interviews with young people. The main purpose of the survey was to develop a lifestyle picture of young people in rural locations in Norway and Sweden. The samples were stratified by age (12, 14 and 16 year olds) and clustered by community in each country. The survey was therefore designed to provide a context and backdrop to the qualitative essays that were conducted with subsamples of rural youth from the same locations. The questionnaire was distributed during normal school hours in classrooms and answered under the supervision of a researcher. Among a variety of questions about lifestyle and health, it also contained over 20 items regarding various aspects of rural life, such as privacy vs. gossip, social support vs. surveillance, opportunities for leisure activities and employment vs. "nothing to do" (based on topics raised by young people during the pilot qualitative interviews). Scales measuring self-esteem (Rosenberg 1979), depression (Kandel & Davies 1982), and questions measuring socio-economic status (e.g. parents' occupation) were also included. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate if, after having completed their school career, they would like to *stay* in the area where they lived; *move away* for some years, *then come back*; or *move away permanently* (they could choose to answer either "yes", "unsure" or "no" to each alternative).

On the basis of this, respondents were for the purpose of this study divided into three groups: "leavers", "stayers" and "returners." Sixty-two percent of the Norwegian and 58 percent of the Swedish sample gave a clear-cut "yes"-answer to one (and only one) of the three alternatives. In order to ensure as clear-cut divisions as possible between "stayers", "leavers" and "returners" from young people's answers, all respondents who answered "yes" to *more* than one alternative, or answered "unsure" were classified as "undecided" and excluded from further analysis. It is necessary to add a caveat here, by speculating that these "undecided" adolescents may simply have been too young to make up their minds about staying or leaving at this point in their development.

One of the aims of the project was to draw cross-country comparisons by *quantitative* analysis. Another was to illuminate aspects of rural living

through young peoples' eyes by *qualitative* methods. In Sweden, an essay competition was undertaken in co-operation with a local newspaper. Young people between 13 and 17 years were asked to describe in their own words how it is "to be young in Jämtland". One hundred and thirty-four girls and 106 boys sent in essays varying in length between 1 and 12 pages. In Norway, a sample of adolescents (N=115, 13-17 years old) were asked by field workers to write short essays on their thoughts about what was "best about living in this community".

## **Data analysis**

The quantitative data were coded into the SPSS data programme. Group percentages (nations, age-groups and gender etc.) were cross-tabulated and differences tested for significance by Chi<sup>2</sup> analyses. To enhance readability, given the large sample N, Chi<sup>2</sup> results are *not* presented in Tables, but where significant differences among groups are stated in the text, these differences *were found to be* significant at the 5 % level (at least  $p > 0.05$ ).

Differences between "stayers", "leavers" and "returners" on the basis of Likert-type questionnaire items were calculated using ANOVA.

## **Findings and discussion**

Briefly, the overall findings of the present study reveal close similarities in characteristics, perceptions and motivations amongst the three groupings of adolescents – "stayers", "leavers" and "returners" – in both countries. Further, young peoples' views of rural living extracted from the qualitative part of the study provide valuable insights into their differing social constructions of rurality.

The more detailed findings and their interpretations are presented here in three sections in order to illustrate (a) national differences, (b) gender differences and (c) group differences.

### **Differences between countries**

Norwegian adolescents are significantly more inclined to stay in their rural areas than Swedes (see Table I).

*Table 1. Distribution of girls' and boys' answers (in percent) about future plans to stay or leave their rural community.*

	<i>Norwegian girls</i>	<i>Swedish girls</i>
Stay	26	15
Return	28	32
Move	8	15
Undecided	37	39
Total N	468	342

	<i>Norwegian boys</i>	<i>Swedish boys</i>
Stay	38	22
Return	15	19
Move	7	13
Undecided	39	46
Total N	412	362

There are several tentative explanations for this finding.

- Norwegian regional policy, which for a long time has been aimed at decentralisation, with universities sited in rural areas and an effective road and transport system. For instance, only 13 percent of Norwegian adolescents in the study indicated that it takes more than half an hour's bus ride to get to school. Further, there could be differences in the geographic characteristics of the rural areas studied. In Norway, which topographically is elongated with an extensive coastline, only one of the study regions is situated away from the coast (though close to the main highway running through Norway). By contrast, the rural areas of Jämtland, Sweden, are entirely inland. As Dahlström (1996) suggests, for an area to be defined as "peripheral", it has to be a periphery in relation to a centre. It might well be that young Norwegians, living near the coast and not too far away from university and other facilities, do not feel as peripheral as Swedish young people from a mountainous inland area, hundreds of kilometres from the next large town.
- The explanation could also be historical and traditional: Norwegian provinces have a strong tradition of independence from the cities and pride in their regionality. This fact was reflected in the last referendum about joining the European Community, where the "districts" were shown to be markedly against such centralisation.
- Finally, the reason may be the better economic situation in Norway, with comparatively low unemployment rates and better opportunities for

young rural people to find jobs and a future in their home communities. Job possibilities are indeed one major factor in influencing possible decisions about staying or leaving in the present sample.

### **Gender differences and age differences**

The finding that young women are less inclined to stay in their rural areas is well documented in other studies (e.g. Gunnarsson 1994, Storvik 1996, Waara 1996). This may depend on their limited job opportunities. For young men, there is always agriculture and similar occupations in rural areas, while the labour market for young women, particularly for those with high career ambitions, has fewer options to offer:

It is more difficult to combine productive and reproductive work in rural areas today than in the past. The traditional way of combining these spheres was based on self-sufficient farming... and an economy, when reproduction and production were not spatially separated. There is not much left of this way of life today. The labour market for women is, to a large extent, to be found in the service sector. The majority of service jobs are located in urban areas. (Dahlström 1996: 262)

Male stereotypes are reflected in the limited leisure time opportunities for women, particularly in relation to commercial leisure facilities. The existing opportunities such as hunting, fishing, snow-mobiles, hiking and sports-clubs are male-dominated, and girls have difficulties in accessing facilities for their own interests such as horse-riding and aerobic dance clubs (Kloep 1998). The range of leisure activities for young men may even compensate for the rising unemployment figures: A Swedish study by Näsström & Kloep (1994) showed that young men (between 18 and 25) from Northern Sweden did not suffer psychologically from periods of unemployment, in contrast to young women. Historically, young women are not regarded as belonging to their home locality in the same way as young men. This is revealed in the traditional image of the farmer as male, the prevailing expectation that the son will take over the farm, and that the woman will move to her husband's homestead (Dahlström 1996). It is also presented in traditional gender role expectations. As a consequence, girls see more problems in rural living than boys. In particular, they complain



about gossip, "nothing to do", and lack of opportunities (see Table II, all Chi<sup>2</sup> significant at least  $p < .05$ ).

*Table 2. Percentages endorsing the view that an issue causes a serious problem in the local area (choices were: Serious, minor, no problem, respectively).*

"It is a serious problem that...  
 ...people gossip about everything"

	Norway	Sweden
Girls	48.0	25.7
Boys	31.1	24.6
Total nation	40.1	25.2

"... there is nothing to do for young people like me"

	Norway	Sweden
Girls	54.0	48.3
Boys	36.5	39.3
Total nation	45.8	44.1

Combined with these problems that "push" young women away from the countryside is the fact that they perceive themselves as having higher future ambitions than young men. For instance, young women rate the importance of going to university higher than young men, and as more important than being in love.

Changing gender roles put young women in a particularly difficult position in rural areas. Not only do they find little understanding for their future academic and career plans among their male peers, but they also lack role models of modern women in the rural context. Thus, the only possibility is to move away, leaving the men behind to indulge themselves in an essentially male environment:

Perhaps it is just as relevant to see the selective migration as a "patriarchal effect", that is a result of the traditionally strong patriarchal structures embedded in rural areas. Perhaps women are not just attracted by the opportunities in urban areas but pushed out from a male rural area in which there is little place for them culturally or concerning work opportunities. When the migration of women from rural areas is looked at from this perspective, *men* constitute the problem. (Dahlström 1996: 262)

Additionally, but perhaps not surprisingly, it seems that with increasing age, as career decisions come closer to being made and leisure preferences begin to change (e.g. Coleman & Hendry 1999), the number who consider leaving increases, while the number of undecided remains about the same.

### **Group differences – "stayers", "leavers" and "returners"**

As we have seen so far, both nationality and gender are important factors in explaining why young people see their future life in different ways: Young men, and Norwegians, are more inclined to stay in their rural area. However, there are considerable variations within these groups. To explore the motives behind such decisions, we now consider what makes the groups of "leavers", "stayers" and "returners" different from each other with regard to their perceptions of community values and future plans.

Using data from the questionnaires (Likert-type items used as interval data in parametric analyses), the following differences<sup>2</sup> between the "stayers" and the other two groups were found:

#### **"Stayers"**

By comparison with the other two groups of adolescents, the "stayers" do not see rural life negatively: The lack of things to do, few shops, poor transportation, few places to meet and little privacy are less of a problem for them. With regard to leisure activities "stayers" are greatly involved in home-based – and local area – pursuits, though they spend less time than the other two groups just "pottering about": They have purposeful leisure. They spend a lot of time with their family, and find most of all that their rural area is a good place for young people and for children to grow up. They also believe, more than the other groups, that the future looks good for young people who stay. Of the three groups, the "stayers" have the lowest depression scores. Further, it becomes clear that the "stayers" also are the group with the lowest academic aspirations. "Stayers" are more likely to find it more important to have a family of their own and to start work as soon as possible than to go to college or university.

If they *have* to move away from the rural community after school, most of them want to move to a similar rural area. A range of typical quotations gives us a flavour of the highly favourable views of the "stayers"

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<sup>2</sup> All differences were calculated on Likert-type questionnaire items using ANOVA; only significant results ( $p < .05$ ) are reported here.

about their rural communities. A sense of belonging and security is a strong theme in many of the stayers' narratives:

Once I got lost. It was summer, and I was about six years old. I can't remember what I thought, but then I heard someone call my name somewhere in the forest. I was found! I was carried back home on somebody's shoulders. That is maybe the best of living in the country: It doesn't matter how lost you feel, someone will miss you, find you and carry you home. (girl, 16)

Similarly, another girl analyses her positive feelings towards her community and comments:

It is very calm and quiet here. We have beautiful varied nature from mountains and forests to fjords and sea. It is a cosy little village where everyone knows everyone else, where people talk to each other and care for each other. Those who live here form a close-knit community. Most have been living here all their life and know what's going on. New possibilities have emerged that people take advantage of. It is a relatively short distance to towns and cities so that people can go to shops and other things you find there. (girl, 17)

Nature and the possibility for outdoor activities are other rural advantages mentioned by many young people:

Nature is beautiful here, good fishing waters and good fishing in the sea. Good environment and very good skiing-areas. Fine salmon rivers. Many employment opportunities. Many facilities, and a short distance to towns and cities. (boy, 17)

The descriptions of "their" area are often quite poetic and romantic, and reflect a great deal of what Coffield et al. (1986) have called "localism": A pride in their community and a defensiveness about its future. Several quotes from each country echo the sentiment of a young Swedish woman who proclaimed:

I am a proud "jämte" who will never leave Jämtland, its green forests and snowy winters. (girl, 15)

However, not all "stayers" are unreservedly positive towards their rural area, and are aware of its negative aspects. This can lead to an internal conflict, but where the "pull" of rurality wins eventually.

Nevertheless, the majority of the "stayers" in our sample seem to resemble the "committed stayers" of Ford et al.'s (1997) study, whose sense of "belonging" outweighed the disadvantages of continuing to live in a rural setting. Their perceived quality of life would diminish if they had to leave the area, so they are willing to make sacrifices to remain. This may explain the apparent anomaly between the finding that Norwegians are more likely to be "stayers" than Swedes, and the separate result that they are also more critical about certain social aspects of rural living (see Tables 1 and 11).

### "Leavers"

By contrast to the "stayers", in their questionnaire responses "*leavers*" show a pointedly negative attitude to rural life. They complain more than others that there is nothing to do, that there are no places to go, that there is little freedom to be the way they want to be, and that it is hard to be an individual because rural adults have fixed ideas about how adolescents *should* behave. They deny that it is a good place for young people and for children to grow up in, and they also deny that there are supportive people outside the family to whom they can talk if they need advice. Rather the community is "too visible" and "gossipy". They do not believe that there is a future for young people in their area and think that it will be hard to find a job. Apart from their negative attitudes towards rural life, they also have the most negative attitudes towards school, and most conflicts with their parents, with whom they do not spend much time. Further, they perceive that they do not receive much support from their parents. They spend most leisure time on their own. "Leavers" are most likely to engage in relaxing, passive leisure activities, but are also the most likely of the three groups to be involved in "commercial" leisure such as going to pubs or cinemas in the nearest town (Kloep et al. 2001). When they move away after school, most want to move to a city or abroad.

Though the "leavers" share many common themes about rural life with the "stayers," their constructions, by contrast, are powerfully negative.

For example, the description of the "close-knit" community, which reflected security and cohesion in the narratives of the "stayers", becomes an oppressive picture in the words of the "leavers": Some young people perceive their community as unchanging, feeling that if they were to stay the only option is to accept conformity to traditional social norms and practices or to be excluded and somehow regarded as an "outsider":

I am fed up with all the words, greetings, looks and nods I've seen and heard a thousand times before. All this wears me out and breaks me up. Everything seems hopeless; my clumsy attempts to fit in are not even worth laughing about. It is all too narrow... Next year I will move away. I refuse to adjust my life to people who don't want to adjust to me... I want to be responsible for myself and my life. To start from scratch without routines. And to no longer have to adjust to this confined so-called reality. (boy, 15)

Another declared:

What I hate are these narrow-minded people who are completely intolerant about new things and changes. Life for them is only going to dances and getting drunk. They finish school, move in with the sweetheart of the moment, and make children. Then they are hooked. I refuse to be like that. I want to have an education. I go. Far, far away from here. (girl, 15)

As Jones (1999) has pointed out, the spatial, symbolic and social aspects, which preserve rural community life are essentially relational sources of *inclusion* and *exclusion*, and this process occurs at both community and individual level. Thus it interfaces with another dynamic – the tension between continuity and change, which also occurs at both levels:

There is a tendency for "dissenters" to leave and "conformists" to remain, thus further strengthening, as indicated, the community ties among those remaining... Thus, the individual with ideas for change takes them somewhere else and the process continues. (Jones 1999: 19)

In their constructions of rurality it is clear that, over time, young people have an awareness of the salience of shifting aspects of self development and in their views of rural living, where changing personal needs lead to changing perspectives of the community.

To sum up, the "leavers" do not feel included in their community, rather, they see themselves as restrained and oppressed by rurality, and hope to find a better realization of themselves somewhere else. In many cases, however, it seems as if their negativity is not only restricted towards their local community, but affects all the circumstances of their lives. Thus, we might infer, that these "leavers" are still in the process of identity formation (e.g. Jones 1999), and have not yet found their role or place in the world. The only thing they know for certain is they should not stay in their home community.

### "Returners"

While the characteristics, qualities and attitudes of "stayers" and "leavers" may be seen to be somewhat predictable, the third group, the "returners", are an interestingly ambivalent group. Firstly, they share some of the negative attitudes of the "leavers" towards rural life. Particularly they think it is a problem that there are people who gossip about everything, that there are no places to meet, that there is no privacy and that there are too few shops in the area where they live. They are somewhat critical – but not as much as the "leavers" – that it will be hard to find a job and about the future prospects of those who stay. They are not certain that their home community is a good place to live, and claim that there is nothing to do.

However, like the "stayers", the "returners" have positive attitudes towards the people in rural areas. They agree that there are adults outside their family who care for them and to whom they can turn for counsel. Like the "stayers", they do not have negative attitudes towards school, they have few conflicts with their parents, they take part in a range of activities with them, and they are not often alone. When we look at leisure pursuit, the "returners" are the most active group in peer-oriented leisure.

Like the "stayers," the "returners" often use poetic terms to describe rural life, while the conflicts and paradoxes between staying and going are clearly reflected in their quotes. They understand that they are needed to make a future community contribution, but are not willing to sacrifice themselves at the present time – the future is another matter:

There is so much I like here. The meadow with the forest behind. And the lake we swim in. Violets and letter-boxes... But I cannot stay here. There is so much more to see... And I want to see big cities and meet new people. To see the other side of things and not only to do what you have always done. But then I might come back. Because I shall not forget. Not the snow nor the spring, and most of all I will remember the people who do not want to hurt anybody. And who stay and fight, no matter what – for the school, the post office and road repairs. I do not fight to stay, though I should. Forgive me. Yet I want someone to stay and do it. I want to come back and find that everything remains the same. If I have children, I want them to grow up here. In the end it is all about two things: To stay and fight for what you love, or to leave what you hate. (girl, 15)

These narratives reflect a social construction of the idyllic countryside, and at the same time the (possibly unrealistic?) hope that everything will remain unchanged, so that their children, even a decade from now, could still experience the advantages of unspoiled rural life. Hence, like the "stayers" they want to preserve the local community, but at the same time, they want to find challenges for themselves elsewhere in order to develop and mature:

But now I broaden my perspective: further and further away from my home village, to new schools and new people. I cannot stay and only mark time, without wanting to travel further. When I am older and have children of my own, I believe I want to come back to this. To the charms of Jämtland's freedom. To the pleasures that only our huge frozen lakes and our fairy-tale land can give. I want to come back to the fountainhead of my youth to discover anew that it invites me to drink of its waters. And I can't give a more precious gift to my children than to let them grow up the way I did, and let them drink the clear water that only Jämtland has to offer. (girl, 15)

This conflict between the wish for self realization and the feelings of betrayal towards the home community can be rationalized by the intention of

being more able to actively contribute to the development of their community after having acquired the skills to do so:

When I was small and younger, I felt that I would never be able to leave my little village, where there is neither a post office, a shop nor a gasoline station. Somehow I feel like a betrayer now, when my strongest longing is to leave Jämtland, even Sweden. I refuse to let my life go to pieces by staying here now. I know that I could perhaps change that. But I don't have the energy... I need to get away. See new things, widen my views, maybe then I would be ready to come back to change Jämtland. Maybe. (girl, 15)

These quotations reveal that "returners" experience a range of conflicts, not only "attachment to family" versus "pull of job opportunities" in more urban areas (Elder et al. 1996), but also, as they see it, from a choice between current personal development and the risk of longer term developmental "stagnation" later in the life course (Hendry & Kloep 2002). The possibility of being able to return one day acts as motivational catalyst to this problem as they continue to explore possibilities of identity and lifestyle.

## **Concluding comments**

In this study, we discovered that Norwegian teenagers (by comparison with Swedish adolescents) are least likely to perceive themselves as intending to leave, though they are somewhat more negative about certain aspects of social life in their rural community. This is an important finding, since the loss of human capital resources seems to be a problem of differing degree in the two countries. In Sweden there appears to be a continuing rural to urban drift. In this connection, future investigations of Norwegian characteristics, positive rural policies and the qualities within Norwegian rural life may prove to be fruitful.

Nevertheless, in spite of national differences, the three groups we identified across the two countries are strikingly similar. The various groupings of rural adolescents – "stayers", "leavers" and "returners" – clearly differ from each other in their characteristics and perceptions of



rural life: Not surprisingly, "stayers" are most positive and "leavers" most negative to all aspects of rural life. "Leavers" also differ from the other two groups by having negative attitudes towards school, their parents, and other adults in their local community, while the "stayers" and the "returners" seem to be reasonably well integrated socially within the rural context.

The "stayers" have the lowest academic ambitions and the question is: "Do they (in general) value education less than their more socially mobile peers, or lower their educational ambitions in order to make it possible for themselves to stay in their local community", as Hektner (1995) suggests? Consistent with other studies (e.g. Elder et al. 1996) we also found that they have the lowest mean depression scores of the three groups, perhaps suggesting that they are happy in the security their local community provides for them. They have adopted an early and clear-cut rural identity without experiencing many conflicts in the process of making this decision.

The contentment and stability of the "stayers", however, may have a problematic quality in an ever-changing technological world (Beck 1992), which does not leave rural life unaffected. The "stayers" may be less prepared to adapt to change, and may be more vulnerable to future societal shifts and challenges (Kloep & Hendry 2003). Traditional work and leisure are not necessarily appropriate answers to the challenges of "the risk society". Neither are they successful strategies in terms of modern job opportunities (Dahlström 1996), nor for the changing future prosperity of the rural periphery in Nordic lands. Burnett et al. (2001) point out the consequences of this for rural policies:

The aims of rural development can conflict with those of youth work, especially where "getting on" (through education) is a means of "getting out" (of the restricted options available in local labour markets in rural areas). Perhaps this dilemma can only be resolved through providing both "support to leave" alongside "support to stay". (Burnett et al. 2001: xvi)

While the "stayers" remain for what they love, the "leavers" seem to be alienated and determined to leave what they hate, unable to visualize a meaningful place for themselves in their community and hoping to find a better future elsewhere. As little is attractive to the "leavers" in the rural community, and all their hopes rest in finding a better job and educational prospects in urban areas, it might become detrimental for them if, in the

future, they find that they are unable to migrate or that life elsewhere is equally frustrating. Since our findings are based on young people who are not as yet out-migrants, they may provide important information for rural policy-makers to ponder in terms of social and educational strategies. Further, there is a gender division within these findings. In particular, since young women perceive themselves as much more likely to have their future in the urban setting, yet more likely to return when they have children, future planning may have to take cognisance of this gender issue.

The "returners" are perhaps the most interesting of the three groups. Because they appear to possess a range of personal and social resources, they are prepared to leave the security they perceive in their local area in order to confront the challenges – and the possibilities – of personal development the "outside" world has to offer. In contemporary societies, it may be a wise choice to explore these in order to prepare for adult living in a changing world. With each challenge confronted and successfully met, young people increase their potential for future problem-solving, survival and development, as each such opportunity will result in an expanded repertoire of skills and a heightened sense of mastery (see Kloep & Hendry 1999, 2003).

While the decision to leave is perhaps beneficial to the individual, it places the local community at risk of losing some of its most able and creative young people forever: "Returners" may become "leavers" and never return! So the key question for the future is: How could rural areas develop measures to tempt young people to return? Young "returners" may not be averse to this if local communities had incentives to offer. The challenge, as Dahlström (1996) expresses it, is to "transform the periphery so that both women and men can feel that they have satisfying opportunities to obtain a good life in the rural areas". Alternatively, to take the proposal of Burnett et al. (2001) perhaps the dilemma can only be resolved through providing both "support to leave" alongside "support to stay" and by preparing strategies for both. The present study has shown (to misquote Shakespeare) that the question of whether "to stay or not to stay?" in changing modern societies is closely intertwined with, and crucial to, personal constructs, identity formation and social relationships as well as to educational and occupational considerations.

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